

The National Teaching & Learning FORUM



Volume 7

Number 5

1998

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Social Class and Student Learning

James Rhem, Executive Editor

Social class remains the poor relation in the family of diversity issues. As universal as race or gender, class hides in the shadows. Working-class students feel invisible, proud, and ashamed all at the same time. Upper-class students feel exposed, vulnerable to attack because of their privilege and uncertain just what to do with it. "Class," Noam Chomsky once said, "is the unmentionable five-letter word."

How important is class in the context of education? In the process of teaching and learning? Very, say the handful of academics who've studied class issues in academe and their implications for teaching and learning.

For the last five years Lee Warren of the Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard has been exploring class as an aspect of diversity in a series of workshops she's led at educational conferences across the country. "Nobody wants to talk about it" in academe, says Warren, but when they do, she finds, they feel relief. "It's there; let's acknowledge it," she says. "It's the pretending that causes the problem."

While class differences are felt everywhere, definitions of class remain elusive. "Ask a group to divide itself according to class," says Warren, "and chaos ensues." Does

class depend on income level or on education? On having a rural background or an urban one? Does the neighborhood or family or kind of work your father or mother did define your social class? And how important is one's inner sense of one's class compared with these

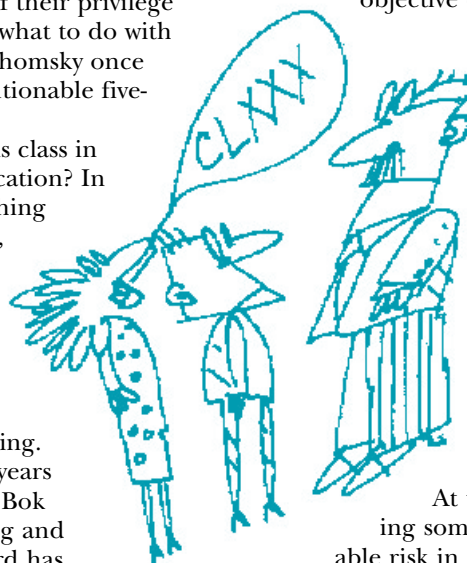
objective descriptors? For

some, the difficulty of defining class, together with the widespread (though largely discredited) idea that the United States is a classless country, reinforces the tendency not to want to talk about it. Not for Warren.

At the risk of offending someone—an inescapable risk in talking about class—she draws rough cuts between lower, middle and upper classes, cuts guided largely by income level.

(In her workshops, Warren asks participants to "self-identify" their class and gather in groups. Generally the groupings follow these rough cuts, though self-identification sometimes leads participants with middle-class incomes to join the working- or lower-class group.)

From her work, Warren makes the following generalizations:



Lower Classes

Students from working-class backgrounds often lack confidence. They may have as much intelligence as students who come from wealth, but they see the world differently. They may, in fact, be more likely to lack academic skills and sophistication. They have less practice playing with ideas, conceptualizing and sometimes less practice in reading and writing. But even when they don't lack skills, they often remain uncertain of themselves, stay quiet in class, pick low-risk courses, and settle on very practical majors without allowing themselves to dream of more.

These students don't know how to "work the system," says Warren. "They don't know how to find their way around the rules and regulations," she says. They don't expect help, don't know how to ask for it or where to seek it. "They feel unwelcome," says Warren. "They are afraid of being found out," she says.

At the same time, working-class students tend toward high levels of motivation based on their own clear idea of what an education can and will do for them. They have a strong work ethic and strong values, but the values often put them in a dilemma. They associate their values with their class origins, and as they begin to change as people, they fear an erosion of self and values and a sense of disloyalty, as though they were betraying their class in going to school.

Upper Classes

Students from wealthy backgrounds show up on campus well-prepared. They assume success. They understand the system and know how to work it to their advantage. They have confidence. Since they have never lived without a safety net beneath them, they feel free to take risks. They don't turn away from courses because the required books cost too much or abandon a dream of majoring in medieval French because it isn't practical.

Ironically, upper- and lower-class students have one thing in common: class consciousness. Many students from privileged backgrounds stand

as intensely aware of class and as embarrassed about their advantages as poor students are of their disadvantages. Like working-class students, they often try to hide their backgrounds, even as they take their privileges for granted. This commonality between upper and lower classes doesn't create a bond between them, but it does underscore the problem and the attraction of the middle class: it's so comfortable.

Middle Classes

Warren finds this group "the least aware of class." Their preparation for college varies more widely than that of upper-class students, but they come generally well-prepared. They, too, assume they belong in college and that they'll succeed. While they

Ironically, upper- and lower-class students have one thing in common: class consciousness.

show more confidence than lower-class students, they're also more naive. Like upper-class students, they know how to play the game, but they have a less global perspective on it. For example, upper-class students easily imagine themselves in summer internships in Europe. Middle-class students tend to think of finding something in the United States, often in their home state. By contrast, working-class students are more likely to imagine going home to work in a factory to help finance the next college year.

In-Class Examples

In the classroom, class differences show themselves most dramatically in the kinds of examples students give. For instance, imagine asking a class studying Edgar Allen Poe to think of examples of "terror" in their own lives. An upper-class student might earnestly begin describing a scuba gear malfunction off Cancun while a lower-class

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4041 North Central #700
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Phone: 1-800-279-6799 or 602-265-2651

The National Teaching & Learning Forum (ISSN 1057-2880) is published six times during the academic year by The Oryx Press in conjunction with James Rhem & Associates, Inc. – October, December, February, March, May, September.

One-year individual subscription: \$39.

Periodicals postage paid at Phoenix, AZ.

Postmaster: Send change of address to:

The National Teaching & Learning Forum
P.O. Box 33889
Phoenix, Arizona 85067-3889

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An E-mail edition of the Forum is \$32.00 for individuals. Significant discounts and site licenses available to entire institutions.

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September

Editor's Note:

Back when videotaping meant bringing in a large, reel-to-reel, black and white machine, an era before VCRs in half the homes in the United States, I had my teaching videotaped. My hands flapped about my face like wet sheets as I lectured to 350 undergraduates on why Jim's telling Huck about his daughter's deafness is the emotional key to *Huckleberry Finn*. But I was more proud than ashamed of the performance, and when my father made his one trip to Madison before he died, I wanted him to see it. I'm unclear on whether or not he finished the eighth grade, and for most of my life we lived uneasily with our differences, education and attitudes toward it being a major one. Things *can* change for the better, and as we both got older, they did between us. He was willing to watch the tape even though by then it was hard for him to walk and watching it meant going to a media lab on campus and sitting in an uncomfortable chair for an hour. He never took his eyes from the screen, and when it was over, he said what he'd always said about anything I'd done well: "That's good, Jim."

It meant the world to me that he would go and watch it. I think it meant a lot to him that I wanted him to. In bridging differences, we understood our common footing, that all-important bedrock beneath the river of time.

This issue of the *Forum* begins and ends with pieces on bridging differences and reaching bedrock. It ends with a report on **Renford Reese's** Colorful Flags program which shows how a little knowledge—just a few phrases in a "foreign" language—can make a world of difference. It begins with a discussion of social class. **Lee Warren** of Harvard and **Ester Kingston-Mann** of UMass–Boston share ideas about the implications of class differences for more effective teaching. No one wants to talk about class; few can agree on how to define it. In the relationship of teaching and learning—as in any intimate relationship—it may be that the things we don't want to talk about end up mattering most.

The articles in between have something to do with bridging differences as well. **Megan Sullivan's** piece on modelling collaboration rather than just prescribing it shows the importance of practicing what we preach. **Mara Donaldson's** article on using popular culture to illustrate powerful, abstract concepts about cosmology reminds us just how many worlds we all inhabit simultaneously, and how much richer each becomes when we feel their interconnection. **Tom Hart's** piece on John Dewey proves the rule by recalling one of teaching's most revered exceptions. Dewey may have kept to the podium rather than the practicum, but his passion and the power of his ideas continue to influence thinking in and about American higher education.

Ever practical and ever in the vanguard, technology editor **Tom Creed** offers another rich example of using the Web and other, lower-tech technology to improve teaching effectiveness. This time, he focuses on ways to extend and enhance the classroom assessment techniques (CATs) popularized by **Cross** and **Angelo**. As usual, Tom has also assembled a [Virtual Companion](#) on the [NTLF Web site](#) that pulls together examples and additional information. Further, this time Tom invites you to contribute reports on what you're doing and help demonstrate one of the very useful feedback loops he's talking about.

A new school year begins, another chance to make a difference, perhaps a chance to bridge one.

— James Rhem

student is recalling the night his father was arrested for drunk driving. "Not everyone goes skiing in Switzerland on vacation," says Warren, "or has been to the Louvre or the Met."

Why should faculty concern themselves with social class? "When you are blind to the

students in front of you, you blunder badly," says Warren. Faculty need to be as filled with awareness and as devoid of assumptions as possible because "teachers always have a big responsibility to their students as individuals."

Across the river at the University of Massachusetts–Boston, an urban commuter

school very unlike Harvard,

Ester Kingston-Mann agrees intensely: "Good teachers pay attention to the reality of who the students are, not some mythical group that existed in the 1950s." Director of the Center for the Improvement of Teaching and Professor of History, Kingston-Mann goes much farther. For her the dynamics surrounding issues of social class reflect some of the most troublesome and most exciting aspects of modern knowing. "It's like women and heart disease," she says. "For a long time universality claims were made about heart disease that didn't apply to women. It was assumed the disease operated the same in men and women. No one had cross-checked until recently. It's the same with social class. Since class is not integrated into the larger base of knowledge currently, understanding it should get special attention. Universality claims in our knowledge can't be sustained if they are based on assumptions that didn't cross-check these issues."

Who's Left Out?

This passion for inclusion and questioning exclusion offers Kingston-Mann a means of dealing with class and other diversity issues



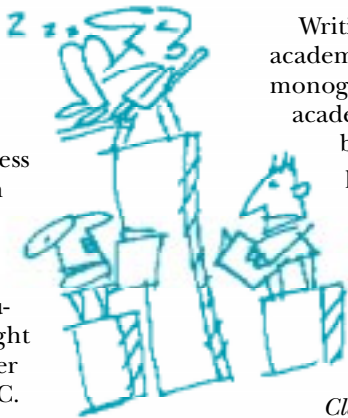
as part of intellectual engagement with subject matter in her history classes. "My courses have been turning more and more toward 'methods,'" she says. "I ask 'How do we know what we know? What's in the chapter and what's not in it? Were the voices left out of the story important? Vital? And why or why not?'"

"This method holds up to honest intellectual inquiry and draws in everybody. Middle- and upper-class students are as open to it as lower-class students," she says. "For some, awareness leads to changes in their thinking, but not for all. I don't force students to come to my conclusions. I let them fight it out and I've never been accused of P.C. [political correctness]. This all simply comes back to being realistic."

A specialist in Russian history, Kingston-Mann sees an analogy between Russia's dilemma in trying to figure out the West in the last century and working-class students trying to figure out academe today. "While working-class students believe in their values, they hold back. 'Who am I to question a learned man?' they say; so, they don't speak up even when they see the lie. They quickly see that common sense doesn't count here."

"I had a student in a workshop one time say to me 'Everything is like being on a ladder,'" Kingston-Mann recalls, "but what if it were like adding rings to a tree?"

"When it comes to diversity issues," says Kingston-Mann, "social class is one of the few categories where success means getting out of it. . . . Repudiation of the past shouldn't be a prerequisite of change, but it is what we ask in higher education," she says. "People would see how crazy that is if you project it into other contexts." If race can't change and gender doesn't (normally), understanding what should and shouldn't change



about class may go far in defining what the good of a college education really is—or could be. Surely aping the next group up can't be the point.

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Further Reading

Writing about social class in academe has evolved slowly. Two monographs of memories by academics with different class backgrounds have been published: *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class* by Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey (Boston: South End Press, 1984) and *This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*, C.L. Barney Dews and Carolyn Leste Law, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995). While these build on recollections of having been a student, they speak from a faculty member's perspective. An article by Elaine Mar in *Harvard Magazine* ("Blue Collar, Crimson Blazer: Recollections of Class on Campus," November-December 1995, 47-51) offers a rich experience of student and alumni voices. Through the kind permission of Ms. Mar and *Harvard Magazine*, her article (part of her book *Paper Daughter*, forthcoming from HarperCollins in May 1999) and the letters to the editor that followed are posted on the [NTLF Web site](#).

Also to be found on the NTLF Web site are citations to [additional materials](#), including two books by Ester Kingston-Mann that carry ideas about the importance of class and learning farther (*Achieving against the Odds: Teaching and Learning at an Urban Commuter University in the New Millennium* and *In Search of the True West: Culture, Economics and Problems of Russian Development*) and, from Lee Warren, a [check list of suggestions](#) for increasing classroom effectiveness.

—J.R.



Submitting Manuscripts

The "scholarship of teaching" embraces a wide range of thoughtful writing. Your experience, your reflections on more effective teaching have a place in the conversation. Faculty of all kinds have begun to feel the importance of thinking more concretely about their teaching and writing about it. Insights from one discipline often have cross-disciplinary implications. I encourage subscribers to consider drafting a manuscript for the *Forum*.

Articles may address any aspect of college teaching and learning, and may be discipline-specific or general in nature.

Submissions may not exceed 1500 words

(six ordinary typed pages), except in extremely unusual circumstances, and should be

whenever possible. Submissions in electronic form are highly encouraged. Indeed, submissions through E-mail are welcome.

Remember, too, that now with the synergy we have between the printed newsletter and its Web site, we have room for more elaborate presentations, a repository for detailed supplementary material to expand the compact presentations printed here.

Share what you've learned in teaching. Send your manuscripts to the *Forum*.

Editorial submissions should be sent directly to

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