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REVIEW OF GENESEA M. CARTER AND WILLIAM H. THELIN'S
CLASS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

CHRISTIAN AGUIAR

ABSTRACT

Though community colleges enroll the majority of working-class college students, research on how to best serve the interests of working-class students at our institutions is limited. In *Class in the Composition Classroom: Pedagogy and the Working Class*, the contributors tackle the issue of supporting working-class students in college composition classes from several angles, offering practical pedagogical advice, guidance on college-wide initiatives, and research into common challenges faced by working-class students. While the text will be most valuable for those who teach writing, its insights apply to anyone who serves at a community college.

Carter, G.M. Thelin W.H. (2017). *Class in the Composition Classroom: Pedagogy and the Working Class*. Utah State University Press.

REVIEW

It's no secret to those working at a community college that social class plays a significant role in the lives of our students, from the programs of study they select to their level of preparation for class to their ability to graduate on time. Despite the enormous impact class has on our students, very little scholarship in the field of college-level teaching makes class its focus.

Genesea M. Carter and William H. Thelin's edited volume *Class in the Composition Classroom: Pedagogy and the Working Class* steps into that void for composition pedagogy, offering a range of reflections on the role of class in college composition. While their focus is of course on the composition classroom, there are implications here that apply more broadly to any instructor teaching working-class and first-generation college students – in other words, to us all.

In their introduction, the authors make a case for the value of rethinking our teaching strategies in order to better account for the experiences of working-class students. While their focus is certainly on problems in English composition – the disconnect between academic writing and students' experiences, goals, or expectations, for examples – the issues they raise are of concern to those who teach in all disciplines. For example, they raise the issue of deficit-based models, which are particularly damaging for working-class students who tend to be “perceived by what they lack” much more so than “their middle-class and upper-class counterparts” (7). Building on a list of seven characteristics of working-class learners developed by Boiarksy, Hagemann, and Burdan, they present the core argument of the collection: that it is our responsibility as instructors to have a critical, honest look at both our individual biases and, more importantly, the systemic biases that pervade our institutions and our pedagogy, biases that contribute to the alarming failure rate of working-class and first-in-family college students (9).

In a particularly insightful chapter, Aaron Barlow and Patrick Corbett, two instructors at CUNY's City Tech, a four-year technical college, discuss approaches to bridging the gap between institutions that operate on middle-class assumptions and their working-class college students. First, they note that working-class experience often functions as “hidden subjectivit[y],” meaning that the assumptions students have, and their expectations of how things work, are typically not explicitly stated (65). This fuels the disconnect between instructors, who may find

their working-class students decisions and behaviors puzzling, and students, who may be equally frustrated by all of the unstated expectations instructors bring to the classroom. While shying away from any sort of one-size-fits all answer, the authors argue that instructors must find ways to productively “cede control” to students so that students are able to make it clear what they need (72). One approach to this might be allowing students to determine elements of the syllabus, set classroom policies, or influence course goals.

One of the consistent arguments made across the articles is that working-class students need more help than their middle- and upper-class peers in “settling in” to college. This is in part due to a tension between many (though not all) working-class communities and academia, which results in many students understanding the value of a college education primarily as “a means to an end” (283). The solutions offered are varied: Aubrey Shiavone and Anna V. Knutson encourage instructors to, among other things, more actively encourage working-class students to bring their own experiences into the classroom, perhaps by designing assignments that engage life beyond the college (21). Genesea Carter makes the case for having students write about their communities, tying working-class identity into an essay dealing with discourse communities (284). Rebecca Fraser invites students to write about their lives as workers (127). The common element here is that, to better serve and retain working-class students, academics must seek out ways to make the knowledge these students already have – whether that’s knowledge of work, of their own communities, of different languages – as valuable as we make the default set of middle-class skills, approaches, and behaviors that shape our institutions.

While most of the chapters focus on better accommodating students intellectually, socially, and emotionally, the essay “Rethinking Class: Poverty, Pedagogy, and Two-Year College Writing Programs” considers what the authors term “poverty effects”: the educational

impacts of either episodic (short-term, counted in months) or chronic (long-term, counted in years) poverty on student learning (231). The authors argue that students experiencing poverty often struggle to balance “the physical expectations for course attendance and the intellectual habits of learning alongside childcare, family responsibilities, inconsistent housing, and unreliable transportation” (235). Their research data, a dialogical analysis conducted through interviews with instructors at four community colleges ranging from high-poverty (39%) to low (11%), highlights several helpful trends. First, working-class students tend to deal with a common set of barriers: unreliable transportation, lack of childcare, unstable housing, and the long-term effects of childhood poverty. Second, instructors almost always struggle to disarticulate personal responsibility from poverty effects: the authors note that participants often vacillated between concerns about students’ poor time management skills to an acknowledgment of factors beyond their control, such as homelessness. They trace this issue in part due to the stigmatization of poverty. If instructors are, as the authors found, generally unwilling to use the word poverty, it may exacerbate a deeper problem: “instructors seemed to lack a shared vocabulary for discussing student poverty...and its effects on learning” (245). This is in keeping with a broader trend they identified: attempts to alleviate or accommodate poverty effects were almost always individual efforts by instructors rather than college-wide programs or policies. The authors thus conclude that the most effective path for faculty going forward is to demand institution-wide discussions of programs, policies and procedures that can help identify, address and alleviate poverty effects.

This volume takes important steps forward in helping us all – as faculty, staff, administrators and scholars – make our colleges more welcoming to working-class students. It is a helpful reminder that paying too much attention to what we think students don’t have – the old

deficit/banking model – does little more than drive students away. However, it also provides a helpful reminder that institutions serving primarily low-income communities themselves struggle from chronic underfunding and instability. The irony that runs through the collection is that the institutions created to serve the most vulnerable populations of our society are themselves the most vulnerable to funding cuts, drops in enrollment, and economic shifts. The change may begin in the classroom, but it certainly cannot end there.