

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Class in the Classroom

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Class is an often invisible form of difference. Yet it is there all the time, affecting how and what students learn at every turn. It pervades the values and the purposes of colleges and universities. It contributes to determining the courses offered and the books read and discussed. Still, it is a diversity issue rarely acknowledged.

Class is also very difficult to define. Ask a group to divide itself according to class, and chaos ensues. What is the difference between rural and urban poor? What about professionals who make very little money? What role does education, neighborhood, or kind of work play in the definition? For the purposes of this essay, I am going to draw the roughest of cuts between working class, middle class, and upper class, recognizing the inexactitude of the division and assuming that most people have a general sense of what is meant -- even though this is discomfiting.

The descriptions offered here represent what people have said in workshops on the subject, in which they have discussed their own experiences as students.

How does class affect learning?

Lower Class

The biggest factor affecting learning for lower class students is a lack of confidence based on real or perceived weaknesses in preparation. These students often come to college with a lower level of academic skills and sophistication than their middle and upper class peers. Not surprisingly, this affects their performance in the classroom. It also

affects their perception both of their ability to do well and of their place in higher education. Although many are just as well prepared, uncertainty can lead them to be quieter and less visibly engaged in classroom encounters.

In addition, these students tend to be less able to work the system. They often have more difficulty navigating rules and regulations and finding the right people to help them; they don't always know what should be available to them. Moreover, many have trouble finding courses and majors that address their interests and needs and acknowledge their experience. Most of them need to work while attending school, which limits the amount of time available for study and can impact their program of study.

So these students often feel unwelcome. They are very aware of class and of place and position, and often feel a need to hide their background.

On the more positive side, working class students are keenly aware of the value of higher education, tend to be highly motivated, and know how to work hard. They are often characterized by a fierce determination and goal-orientation. They have a strong work ethic and often manage hair-raising schedules of work, family, and college, pulling off the demands of each with grit and a clear sense of purpose. Confusingly, they are both loyal to their class background and often in the process of moving to the middle class. This sometimes creates difficulties for them at home.

Middle Class

Middle class students are the least aware of class. They assume a place in the university, and they come fairly well prepared for higher education, although there is a wide range in their preparation. They are more protected than the lower class students, and somewhat more naive, as well as more confident. They assume they will succeed and are prepared to work hard. Many work outside of school (though not as much as lower class students), and they see working as both an advantage and a disadvantage. They know how to play the game, but not quite as broadly as their upper class colleagues. Often they need some help with academic skills but usually have the basics in place.

Upper Class

Upper class students generally come to college best prepared. They are also often skilled and sophisticated in the ways of the system. Their assumption that the system is there for them enables them to work the rules to their advantage. Because they are confident in their place, they are likely to speak up in class and to assume that their ideas will be heard; and they feel free to take risks because of their social and economic safety net. They experience a wide choice of careers and significant exposure to the world of travel, education, and art. They tend to be ambitious and value success, community responsibility, hard work, and excellence.

Many upper class students, like the lower class students, are intensely aware of class and may be embarrassed about their advantages. They often try to hide their class background, while at the same time taking their privileges for granted. They feel at a disadvantage in understanding and communicating with people of other classes and feel they have a limited perspective that can leave them insensitive to others' issues.

How can we recognize class differences in the classroom?

Class differences are not always easy to detect. However, some signals do exist. Even listing these signals is risky: for every example, there is likely to be a counter-example. Nonetheless, it is important to have some suggestions of what to look for if we are to become more sensitive to class differences and thus more inclusive pedagogically.

Language: In many parts of the country, class differences are sharply defined by accent: people talk like the neighborhood they come from. In addition to accent are varying vocabulary levels, which can signal levels of academic preparation and sophistication, often class-related.

Academic readiness: Differing levels of preparation and academic sophistication can sometimes be attributed to class background and the quality of previous schooling. They can also affect levels of participation. Quiet students are sometimes quiet because they are

not confident of their mastery of the material or of their ability to compete in the classroom with sophisticated verbal and conceptual gymnasts. It is a question of ease in the world of ideas.

Choice of examples: The choice of examples that students (and teachers) use in academic discourse can be very revealing of class background. One story is told of a student who stated that the reason pianos had been such an important social feature in this country is that everyone has one. Another student's eyebrows shot up: clearly pianos were not in every household that he entered. This story is relatively benign; others can be hair-raising.

Academic interests and perspectives: Students from different class backgrounds can have very different reactions to material presented and very different interests in the material. Asking for students' perspectives or reactions can reveal a great deal about students, and, as well, enhance everyone's understanding.

Dress: This is a deceptive category, because many upper class students dress down, but often the quality of clothing and of jewelry can reveal class background.

Pedagogical Implications

The first implication is the rule for all matters of diversity:

Learn as much as you can about all groups, but NEVER make assumptions about an individual student based on the group you think he or she might belong to.

This is the way out of the dangers inherent in listing signals of class difference. A student's accent or silence does not necessarily mean he or she comes from the lower class, for example; and that he or she comes from the lower class does not necessarily mean a lack of academic preparation or sophistication. Similarly, an upper class background does not guarantee intellectual sophistication. One must never make assumptions, but must always check out the situation with the individual student.

But beyond this caveat, what can we do to help level the playing field and include all students to the greatest extent possible in

learning? Some suggestions are institutional, some curricular, and some pedagogical.

Institutional suggestions: Institutions might engage in college-wide discussions about what it means to be educated, about the purpose of the institution and the values it embodies and promotes, using class as one of the factors for reflection. They can develop better student support systems, safety nets, and specific strategies for welcoming students who come without the requisite academic background so as to provide them with the learning and system skills they will need not just for survival but for success in higher learning.

Curricular suggestions: At most institutions, more attention can be paid to class experiences both in courses offered and in the content of many syllabi. Is there a place for students to learn about class backgrounds other than their own, as well as about their own? Is material included from every class? Is the absence of material from some classes discussed?

Pedagogical suggestions: Modes of classroom operation can be developed to enhance the learning of all students, regardless of their background. Specific suggestions applicable to many courses, and in some instances all, follow.

Be very explicit about classroom norms and rules of operation. Let students know how to play the game, and help those who seem uncertain.

Include readings from a wide variety of class perspectives.

Use examples that come from every class.

Acknowledge class differences and make class a topic for discussion. Look for class-based perspectives. Note value-laden language.

Ask about student experience and about personal reactions to material; include these in content discussions.

Get to know your students and their individual strengths and weaknesses. Teach to both.

Vary the kinds of assignments, to include a variety of learning styles.

Vary classroom activities, to include collaboration and small group work.

Provide the opportunity for rewriting papers, as a way to teach students still learning to work in that mode.

Protect the student who makes an unsophisticated comment.

Model the acceptance of various class backgrounds.

Conclusion

Class distinctions are difficult for everyone in this country. Our national belief is that we are a classless society and that class should not matter; but class is evident everywhere and matters immensely. The disjunction between our held belief and reality makes this a difficult area to understand and accept. We need to be sensitive to the embarrassment discussion of class differences almost inevitably involves. Lower class people are often embarrassed about their position, upper class people about their privileges; the middle class often isn't aware of class at all. When talking about class, both tensions and triumphs arise. This is difficult work, but critical to the creation of an academic environment open to all its members.

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