Coming to Class:  
Establishing a Working-Class Consciousness at the Two-Year College

Introduction

To begin my talk today, I want to start with a quote from Working-Class Studies scholar Janet Zandy: “let us imagine what it would be like if the history and culture of working-class people were at the center of educational practices” (Common xiii). This, to me, is an appropriate starting point because, for many working-class scholars, this is perhaps the goal that we most hope to obtain—to bring working-class culture to the center of academic study rather than having it exist on the margins.

It is interesting because in the triad of race, class, and gender that we hear acclaimed in the academy, socioeconomic status is often an invisible and ignored entity. It is not unusual to see college courses that are focused on issues of race and gender, yet it seems social class is an issue that is rarely discussed, perhaps because Americans are so accustomed to thinking that we live in a “classless” society. Nevertheless many academics have made important strides in focusing on issues of socioeconomic status, and the field of Working-Class Studies is rapidly growing in many disciplines. Many scholars realize the importance of interrogating socioeconomic issues in a variety of contexts—history, politics, literature, sociology, art—and many are working to chronicle, recover, study, and value the lives of the working class. Beyond just academic interrogation, though, Working-Class Studies presents important opportunities for us to better understand our very diverse student populations. This is why I have undertaken a project at my two-year institution, Collin College, to raise class consciousness among students,
faculty, and the community and help situate working-class culture at the center of academic study. Today, I will discuss the specifics of this project.

Collin College is located in Plano, Texas, a suburb just north of Dallas. When many think of Plano, images of McMansions, large, well-funded suburban schools, and gas-guzzling SVUs often first come to mind, and that is certainly part of Plano’s demographic. There is the assumption that Plano’s residents are overwhelmingly wealthy and, in fact, the median income of Plano in 2011 was $80,184 (“Plano”). It frequently tops lists such as “Top 100 Cities with the Highest Median Income,” “Best Places to Live in America,” and “Top 100 Best Educated Cities” (“Plano”). However, these numbers and accolades do not tell the whole story. While much of Plano is certainly a wealthy community, there are still large portions of the population that are working class. And, in fact, as the population of Plano and Collin County continue to grow, the number of people living in poverty has increased substantially: according to the North Central Texas Council on Governments, the population of “Collin County grew by 44% from 2000 to 2007 while the number of persons living in poverty increased by 100%” (“Justice”). At our college, particularly, we have a large working-class and first-generation student population. And, even for those students who may come from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, it is important for them to realize the importance of social class issues in our society and their hometown particularly. Therefore, situating class studies more prominently within my institution provides ways for us to shape the narrative about class issues and better assist our working-class students.

The Lebrecht Project

My interest in Working-Class Studies stems from my own background. My social class and family background is representative of the city where I grew up: Fort Worth, Texas. Historically, the city was known for two major industries: cows and planes. The Fort Worth
Kirby

Stockyards and the local packinghouses, Swift and Armour, helped fuel the economy for many years. Fort Worth was the end of several cattle drives, and the stockyards and packinghouses arose as a way to support this industry. Fort Worth is also representative of the shift from rural, farming life to urban industrialization, and the growth of airplane manufacturer Consolidated also contributed in significant ways to the Fort Worth economy. Coincidentally, these two industries are a large part of my family history, in that one of my grandfathers worked as a sheet metal worker at Consolidated and the other worked in the packinghouses at Swift and Company. My parents, meanwhile, continued in working-class positions for many years as well. My father was a machinist for an oil company for two decades before working for Xerox as a technician; my mother was a licensed vocational nurse for twenty-five years, before attending a two-year college herself to become a paralegal. Having come from a family with working-class roots, I both identify with my students from working-class backgrounds and see the importance in placing working-class culture at the center of academic study.

My working-class background directly led to my project of establishing a class consciousness at Collin College, which is part of my role as the Lebrecht Endowed Chair for Scholarly and Civic Engagement. The Royden L. Lebrecht Endowed Chair for Scholarly and Civic Engagement “was established in March 2005 to recognize Lebrecht’s commitment to education and the community” (“News Release”). This position, awarded to one Collin College faculty member every two years, is based on a proposal submitted for a project the faculty member seeks to undertake. As the current Lebrecht Endowed Chair (2013-2015), I proposed to create a space for establishing conversations and consciousness about work and social class issues at Collin College through The Work and Class Studies Project [show website: http://iws.collin.edu/lkirby/index.htm], an initiative that will provide opportunities for
students, faculty, and community members. I am currently halfway through my appointment as Endowed Chair. The goals of the Lebrecht project are multifaceted and will address three different demographics: students, faculty, and community members. [see handout]

Community

I’ll begin with the community stage of the project. Though my composition students are involved in civic engagement through their class writing, as I will discuss in a moment, my project will also provide workshops to guide community members in writing about their experiences with work and social class. Drawing inspiration from “Kindred Voices: The Workers’ Writing Project” at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, this component will provide writing workshops as community outreach. The workshops will offer opportunities for area workers to chronicle their experiences and capture the spirit of the work they do. These narratives will also become part of a digital archive established through the project website. This digital archive will both establish a significant web presence for the project and serve as an important opportunity to provide voice to those workers who are so often silenced. This stage of the project will begin this fall.

Faculty

A second phase of this project, which is already underway, will provide professional development opportunities for faculty to think about the role of socioeconomic class in their pedagogy and consider how social class impacts our students. The professional development phase allows for a series of interdisciplinary guest speakers, roundtables, and workshops, called the Lebrecht Speaker Series that provide opportunities for faculty to think about how they might incorporate a consideration of social class issues into their curricula.
The starting point of this phase was a presentation I gave at Collin’s Faculty Development Day conference in January. I discussed Working-Class Studies broadly and introduced the specifics of my project. I was amazed at the response I received. It was interesting that not only did my colleagues raise many insightful questions and discuss how they teach issues of social class, but many saw this as an opportunity to discuss their own social class backgrounds. It became clear to me that social class really is an issue that rarely receives the attention it should.

We had our second event in this series in April when some of my colleagues in history presented a roundtable titled “Understanding Class in American Politics and History.” Again, the reception was very positive and our District Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, who was in attendance, suggested we do the roundtable again during the fall semester. Since then, I have also lined up a similar roundtable of sociologists, and we will also host an outside speaker, Dr. Donna Dunbar-Odom, a professor at Texas A&M—Commerce and author of Defying the Odds: Class the Pursuit of Higher Education, in November.

Another important aspect of this professional development will be not just discussion how a class-centered focus can inform our assignments, but equally important, how students’ socioeconomic backgrounds can factor into the classroom experience and our pedagogy. These professional development opportunities will allow for collaboration among faculty to discuss the possibilities and challenges of raising class consciousness at the college.

Students

The third stage of this project, and the one that I will discuss the most today, provides opportunities for students enrolled in my ENGL 1301: Composition I classes to engage with work/class issues and think critically about their own socioeconomic status. In ENGL 1301, I
have created a curriculum that provides students opportunities to explore issues of class and work, while also developing their writing and rhetorical skills, as well as meeting the state-mandated Student Learning Outcomes for the course. Students engage with a variety of readings and films that help them consider more fully work and class issues, as well as producing writing on these topics as well [see handout]. Essentially, ENGL 1301 is a course that focuses on rhetorical literacy, critical thinking, and academic writing, yet it does so through the lens of social class and work.

The semester began with students writing personal narratives of their experiences with work and/or class. Focusing on a specific experience, perhaps a job they have worked or a moment when their social class became evident to them, students drew upon their own knowledge to think critically about issues of work and class. For many students, these personal narratives were the first time they had really fully considered their experiences with social class. One student wrote of her experiences driving from her home in a working-class neighborhood in Plano to her parents’ place of work in Dallas: “it was on these drives that I really understood where we were labeled and how different we were from the community here” (Cho). Others wrote about working minimum-wage jobs and, often, how they realized the need for education after working these positions. One student, who was working a job detailing cars, had an epiphany when his supervisor announced to him: “you’re so good at this; you may have found yourself a career” (qtd. in Ramirez).

The student continued:

It hit me! What hit me, you ask? Reality. Reality hit me hard when those words seeped out of his mouth. All of a sudden it was like I saw a montage of memories flash right before my eyes. I remember my mother having to take me and my
sister with her to her job because more often than some she could not afford to hire a sitter. Often getting mocked or made fun of at school for not having nice clothes amongst other things. I remember the 27 year old trailer that I lived in that my mother and two uncles were raised in. I remember countless times going to bed hungry or scrounging up something with my sister. [ . . . ] I remember being homeless. Like waking up from a sudden sleep, I snapped back from my quick journey down memory lane. He was leaving with his cars. I was left thinking how I can change my outcome. How can I make things better for myself? (Ramirez)

For many of these students, they wrote about defining moments in their lives—when a career path became clear or a realization about social class came sharply into focus. These personal narratives were some of the most powerful writing of the semester and, as many students proclaimed after their essays were complete, they had never really considered their social class status before.

The second and third essay assignments were more research oriented. The students first wrote a critical review of the film, *Waiting for Superman*, which addresses issues of inequality in the education system. They then composed argument essays on particular topics related to work or social class. Some explored representations of social class in popular culture, others explored issues such as healthcare access, immigration, or student loans, and many considered issues related to the American Dream.

For their fourth assignment, students completed interviews and observations to write profiles of about a particular worker. These workers could be in a profession that a student might want to one day pursue, a co-worker, or a person who has a job that the student finds particularly interesting. The final assignment, which is a reflective writing inspired by the “This I Believe”
project, asks student to consider their views on labor and class issues in the United States. These were perhaps some of the most insightful essays of the semester because they reflected the evolution of the students’ views.

The demographics of these classes represented, in many ways, the larger make up of Collin College. We have a great diversity of students: first-generation college students, non-traditional students, veterans, and ESL students, to name just a few. And, certainly, these students had a significant impact on class discussions and perspectives. In the spring semester class, particularly, I had several veterans in this class who shaped the narrative of the class in really significant ways. Their experience clearly reinforced the ideal of the American Dream that we had interrogated, in part because they had the opportunity to pursue their education through the GI Bill. One student, who was working on his degree after several years in the Marines, wrote, “I believe that people determine their own stories and that the American Dream is alive if [they] want it to be” (Frew). He continued:

My own life experience has proved this to me, because I came from what most people think is the lower class. My mother worked three jobs at times and my father was not around. Some people think this spells disaster for a kid like me who lives in a no name town in Indiana. But that did not stop me from so far having a successful story. I graduated high school and joined the United States Marine Corps. There I had a very great career for five years. I had made something of myself and I was the only person who could determine that I would become something. (Frew)

For many of these students, the American Dream is alive and well, and they see their enrollment at Collin College as evidence of that.
One can also hear the echoes of first-generation college students both drawing upon the strengths of their families yet also hoping to surpass their histories. One student, who wanted to become a radiologist and is from a family where most did not graduate from high school, wrote,

I believe in the people of our nation, as we rise to exceed the standards of our ancestors. To relinquish the dirty aprons, go-go boots, and spatulas for a pressed white lab coat, cold stethoscope, and folded scrubs. Cold hospital halls and long nights on call will ensure the stability and passion that is unfamiliar to the descendants of the Bell family. This I believe is the step toward upward mobility that is needed to reach posterity. (Bell)

Again, the narrative of success and achievement was strong in many of these students who felt that their social class background was not going to limit their lives in any way.

Other students, however, did not find such optimism in notions of social mobility and the American Dream. As one student pointed out, “We say it’s a class system, but it really seems more like a caste system, meaning that we say we have the freedom to move up in social class when we really do not” (Purdy). One thing that certainly stood out is that students were able to draw upon their varied experiences to discover their own realities about social class. One student wrote,

When I reached the ripe age of fourteen, and was entering my first year of high school I began to take notice of the horrendous social class system that we have in America today. As weeks passed I noticed the cliques beginning to form. There was the rich popular girls, the not so wealthy boys, the trailer trash people, the nerdy gamers, the jocks, the cheerleaders, […] It was clear that people feel most comfortable around people that they feel are the same as them. People like to
surround themselves with others in the same social class as themselves. In high school all that mattered were what brand of clothes you wore, what type of car you drove, and what your boyfriend looked like. (Burns)

No matter what their perspective on social class, I was impressed by the way these students were able to draw upon their varied experiences to produce rich, insightful commentaries on social class.

Conclusion

Taking all this into consideration, I see developing a class consciousness at my institution as an endeavor that requires students and faculty to reconsider traditional notions of diversity and long-held notions about identity, innovative new pedagogical strategies, and often difficult questioning of our own values of assumptions. In my view, class studies encourage a larger worldview and place value on diverse experiences and, as such, need to be an integral part of the academy; this is why I have undertaken this project at Collin College. We could look at it in this way: as Janet Zandy puts it, “according to the book of success, a working-class identity is intended for disposal” (Zandy Liberating 1). Teaching Working-Class Studies disallows the academy and society to “dispose” of these identities and texts. Moreover, teaching through the lens of social class helps us to re-define and re-envision our notions of what constitutes this “book of success” and how we might reconstruct our traditional notions of culture in order to give voice and significance to the working class.

My hope is that the two-year Lebrecht Endowed Chair position is a starting point for this long-term project, and there is interest in doing so. After discussions with my colleagues, it seems the project will evolve into the North Texas Working-Class Studies Association, which would provide a venue for area scholars to collaborate and share their research. Our hope is to
establish this group, which will continue with the Speaker Series and, eventually, host a one-day conference. Certainly, throughout this project, the Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University in Ohio, the Labor and Working-Class Studies Project in the Havens Center at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, and, of course, the Center for the Study of Working-Class Life here at Stony Brook have served as inspiration for the sort of work I hope to continue at Collin College.

To conclude, I will come back to the quote I opened with: “let us imagine what it would be like if the history and culture of working-class people were at the center of educational practices” (Common xiii). How would our educational system differ if working-class life and culture were the norm rather than the exception, if stories from families like my students (and my own) were at the center rather than the margins? I would assert that, if this were the case, the academy would be a more tolerant, diverse, and richer place. Providing students the opportunity to consider social class more fully will help them understand that there is more than one version of American culture and history, and they will subsequently develop both a greater understanding of the diversity of American experience and a stronger appreciation of that diversity.

Thank you.
Works Cited


