

Alyssa Brennan

Dr. Smith

ENGL 459

4 December 2020

The Relationship between Social Class and Education: Increasing Awareness of Higher
Education's Contribution to Inequality and the Wealth Gap

Humanities courses in colleges today have shifted a great deal of focus to social class, what it means and the struggles or privileges it can bring. Social class is an important factor in a person's life; it can determine what opportunities a person gets in life to a certain extent, and one significant aspect that can be impacted is their education. According to Martin Hyde and Ian Rees Jones in "Social Class, Age and Identity in Later Life," "there are significant changes in class identities over time and that these changes may be related to economic development and generational or cohort effects and across different social locations" (78-79). They define social class as status that is determined by the access one has to money and resources which can be impacted by several factors. Hyde and Jones argue that the identity that one forms due to their social class will have generational impacts, and that is something to be aware of. The social class of one's parents will determine the opportunities and resources available to the child, and these experiences will shape the identity of the child. Students from a low-income background typically start off at an unfair disadvantage which will likely put them behind their wealthier peers academically. Whether the child comes from a working- or upper-class family, these experiences that shaped who they are will be important to analyze which humanities courses will emphasize. College writing courses are one of the places where these major revelations about class, and how life is impacted by it, can be made as Julie Lindquist explains in an article.

“At one level, every conversation about the project of first-year writing – an institutional practice designed to help students acquire academic literacy, and an experience located at the point of entry to higher education – is a conversation about class,” Lindquist said in *Keywords in Writing Studies* (Lindquist 20). While trying to ensure students are on the same page academically, focus still remains on the topic of social class. These conversations are crucial for broadening one’s views of the world and seeing other perspectives which is one of the main purposes of attending college at all. Having those discussions about social class creates an awareness of privilege. Class is given a lot of focus in writing studies; there is a “pragmatic interest in understanding how class operates within educational institutions and in the lives of the students they serve” (Lindquist 20). When coming into the college setting, there are people from all types of different backgrounds: class matters, and race and gender will also have played a huge role in a students’ experiences. Professors of first-year writing courses usually pay extra attention to the fact that students may have had drastically different educations up to that point, so they can work to get all these students to a similar level, on the same playing field and prepared for future courses that will require clear, concise writing that includes analysis, synthesis and critical thinking. It is important to consider the differences that social class can determine on a student’s academic experiences as an educator to ensure that everyone’s needs are met to the best ability. A student from a low-income, lower-class background most likely would not have had the same education as a student from a wealthy, upper-class family, so offering additional resources is important.

In “Class Affects, Classroom Affectations: Working through the Paradoxes of Strategic Empathy,” Lindquist mentions that there should be room for this exploration of what social class is and keep their class experiences in mind to create more “productive understandings of social

processes” which means there needs to be “room for the products of students’ emotional labor in scenes of literary instruction” (189). Social class can be defined by many different types of experiences including the education available and reflecting on those experiences may prove to be emotional to students who had to overcome great obstacles and struggled. In this setting, allowing time for students to react and discuss the issues can be helpful and necessary to help unpack the information. Lindquist argues that these experiences should be reflected on once the student is in a college level writing course because it can lead to a deeper understanding of what class is, how it works, and what it means (187). These reflections allow one to have a better understanding of the social hierarchy and its impacts on privilege. Jessica Calarco elaborates on her definition of class in, “Social Class and Student-Teacher Interactions.” She notes that, “Social class matters in school... research shows that parents’ income and education are the best predictors of a child’s school performance” (Calarco 97). While mobility, of course is a possibility, usually “class-based inequalities are reproduced from one generation to the next” (Calarco 97). Students in lower-class families do not have the same resources available to them as upper-class students, at home or at school. Children who have the privilege of having food, health care, and educational resources to expand their learning beyond the classroom, and who go to schools that are well-funded, have new equipment, technology, books and have enough teachers are going to be in a better position upon graduation and be more prepared for college level work.

And, even if lower-class students are in the same schools as their middle- and upper-class peers, it is likely that their status will impact the treatment they receive from their teachers. When looking at a student’s social class, it tends to be determined by “parents’ income, educational attainment, and occupational status” which are “closely linked to differences in class

cultures” (Calarco 98). Calarco provides explanation on how to determine the different social classes of students; we look at what resources they had available to them from money and food to education. Teachers also examine the knowledge students already have including “academic curriculum” and “the hidden curriculum” of socially acceptable behaviors (Calarco 99). Because hidden curriculum is not usually explicitly taught at school, lower-class students are, again, in a position to be at a disadvantage. Students who have more privilege are more likely to learn these socially acceptable behaviors at home which means they are more likely to be well-behaved and more prepared for school. This leads to privileged students getting more advantages than lower-class peers in their classes such as “better grades, higher praise, and more opportunities for learning” (Calarco 99). Lindquist says that these experiences one has due to their social class then need to be evaluated for greater understanding once these students enroll in college level writing courses; this is where they will be able to unpack their experiences if they have not already, so they can “be aware of their class positions” which is the goal of critical pedagogy: to “replace faith with reason, belief with knowledge – to equip students to come to rational understandings of oppressive structures” (Lindquist 190). These revelations are necessary to make people aware of the impacts social class has on a person’s life and for changes to occur in society. Becoming aware of oppression and acknowledging the issues that come with it, are critical for the evolution of a progressive society.

As Wendy Bottero mentions in her chapter titled, “Two Social Class Structures and social mobility: the background context” in the book, *Social Class in later life: Power, identity and lifestyle*, “the link between social class background and educational attainment has strengthened over time” (19). Lower-class people are still at an extreme disadvantage against the wealthy these days when it comes to hoping for upward mobility. Bottero also describes this newer

approach to class that has been inspired by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu; saying that “post-industrial societies provide a very different landscape for ‘class’ processes to operate, but insist that affluence and cultural differentiation are themselves mechanisms of class inequalities” (Bottero 22). In modern society, the social-class achievement gap has continued to widen, and the classes continue to grow more distinct as they have drastically different cultures which the wealth gap has contributed to.

The shift from industrial to the post-industrial period changed the culture, changed the markets and available jobs. Being successful these days not only requires financial resources but “cultural competences and social connections” and “cultural knowledge and educational credentials are valued” as well in this struggle (Bottero 23). In our world, the working-class are at a complete disadvantage when it comes to the possibility of upward mobility. In order to move up, access to these resources is typically required and without them the chances are slim. While there is this “massive gap” in opportunity between classes, it does not seem that many people are “fully aware of how such inequalities persist and continue to affect their lives” (Bottero 19).

However, some are aware of the impacts it has. Hyde and Jones discuss the relationship between social class and identity, explaining a study that confirmed “the relationship between household income and class identity was stronger in countries with high income inequality” and that “researchers argue that people do locate their class positions on the basis of income” despite what others have said (78). The larger the wage gap between classes is in a country will result in those people having a strong sense of class identity because of how apparent the differences between the classes are. For instance, research done in the United States “indicates that individuals recognize and can locate class labels and class categories clearly and that these have

meaning for individual lives” (Hyde 74). In the US, social class stands out so clearly to Americans because of the huge role it plays in nearly every aspect of life.

This brings us back to Lindquist’s argument in “Class Affects, Classroom Affections,” of the importance of teaching social class in writing courses. She explains that while social class is understood as “a problem of distribution of resources,” people experience it as “an emotional process,” specifically referring to working-class students here (192). Generally, when thinking of what social class is, one thinks of unequal distribution of wealth and resources, but does not always consider the way the issue mentally impacts the lower-class. As Lindquist mentions, Peter Elbow has been a major advocate for allowing students to express emotion in the academy because it can still lead to powerful, significant, and valid conclusions (193). Lindquist provides an example written by a working-class student. The anger she felt while writing her response to a reading done in class was a “form of resistance to the idea that the lived complexity of her class experience could be captured within the one-dimensional domain of rational critical activity” (194). In her response, there is evidence of the emotional toll that was mentioned before, that a lack of resources can have on working-class students. She assumed that a discussion about white privilege had meant that she had never had to work for anything and thought it somehow invalidated her experience as a member of the working-class. Regardless, she had the opportunity to express her opinion and share her experiences as a working-class student in a college class where she has the chance to expand on them and learn more about society and her place in it. College courses provide the opportunity for all students to be able to make those revelations and connections regarding the inequality in society and their personal experiences.

Kate Poe Alexander writes in “From Story to Analysis: Reflection and Uptake in the Literacy Narrative Assignment,” her agreement that narrative writing is important in uncovering

who one is; and the goals being reflection and self-awareness (43). However, research has found that these assignments might not be so simple for everyone. There has been research done that indicates that “working-class students might be less equipped to make the kinds of ideological reflections that instructors value” (47). Higher-income students are more likely to have had the resources that increased their college readiness and prepared them for more advanced and critical assignments, while working-class students are typically behind in that area. These students usually end up struggling to understand the “language of the university” as they did not have the best resources to prepare them for college available (47). Therefore, they have to do what David Bartholomae refers to as “inventing the university,” where the student tries to “learn to speak our language, to speak as we do” without really knowing how to do so, in his article, “Inventing the University” (4). These working-class students may not have the skills and or not have had access to the resources necessary to be proficient in the language of the university but are required to use it anyway once they begin college. However, Bartholomae argues that requiring the students to learn by writing in the required discourse even without prior knowledge is the best way to achieve fluency in it.

John Alberti further explores this issue of classism in education in his article, “Returning to Class: Creating Opportunities for Multicultural Reform at Majority Second-Tier Schools.” Alberti brings his focus to the downsizing of the humanities and the need for multiculturalism in the college setting and begins explaining the typical models people look at regarding higher education come from elitist schools creating “increasingly misleading images” and “discursive representations” that have made these “almost stereotypes” appear to be the “norm for higher education” (563). Many have come to associate the idea of college with the wealthy, upper-class due to elitist schools, such as the Ivy League schools, making the idea seem out of reach for the

working-class. The problem with that, of course, is “most college students in the United States do not attend, elite, selective-admissions four-year institutions” and by ignoring that fact, we are unable to acknowledge the fact that there is “major class division in American higher education” (563). So, Americans seem to accept the college experience of the wealthy who are getting into these prestigious and selective schools as typical when the majority of students are not having that experience. The majority are attending “second-tier, open-registration, regional two- and four-year colleges” or what Alberti refers to as “‘working-class’ colleges” (563). He claims that if Americans adjust their perspective and accept these second-tier schools and working-class students as the norm, there would be room for expansion in the humanities.

This is significant because the humanities and English studies are the most likely place for college students to unpack what social class means and analyze their experience. The first-year writing course a college freshman takes is where these revelations typically begin to happen, and for those lower-class students, these college courses in the humanities may be necessary for them to catch up to the level their upper-class peers are already on and develop their writing and critical thinking skills. As Calarco mentions, working-class students do not receive the same educational experiences or teacher interactions and it has been discovered that “class-based patterns of student-initiated interactions with teachers continue even into college” (102). According to Calarco’s research, it is not as likely that a lower-class student will initiate interaction with a teacher or professor, and if they do, they are not as comfortable doing so as an upper-class student is. Social class puts a student into a position to either be at a large advantage or disadvantage when it comes to their experiences in education. Being born into a certain status can determine the resources available, the interactions between students and educators, and the education they will obtain.

Having these conversations about social class in the classrooms is essential, especially at the college level. The status of working-class students puts them at a disadvantage from the start in terms of resources, education, and the opportunity for upward mobility. This unequal distribution of resources contributes to many deep-rooted problems, but also plays a part in forming one's identity, even if they do not realize it right away. In places such as the United States, however, people do tend to notice the different classes because of how large the gap is therefore, Americans tend to strongly identify with a social class status. University English courses assist students on their journey to finding an understanding of what social class is and why it has such a huge role in society. These classes help students that may be behind due to their past experiences in school catch up with their peers and prepare for the next level. They also allow students to reflect on their experiences, what they meant, and how social class has impacted their life. This alone makes the humanities essential. This type of reflection is the type that inspires change and forces the world to progress. It is also what creates the awareness of social class which is needed in schools. Awareness and discussion of the impact a working-class background can have on an education and college readiness level can set lower-income students up to be better prepared for the university level. Many factors play a role in ensuring working-class students have the opportunity to be successful at the college level; assisting and educating as much as possible along their journey is one way to increase their odds of being successful.

Humanities courses put a special focus on social class issues. Social class must be accounted for when thinking in regards to education because it impacts every aspect of it. Many first-generation students come from working-class backgrounds and are likely to be behind once they reach the college level. Terry Ishitani examined a study that indicated "that first-generation students were exposed to higher risks of departure through college years than their counterparts

and were less likely to complete their degree programs in a timely manner” (Studying Attrition and Degree Completion Behavior). One of the reasons being working-class students do not have the same financial resources as other students. Studies find that students coming from a “higher level of socioeconomic status [have] a positive effect on academic and social integration, and ultimately influence one’s enrollment decision” (Ishitani). It can be extremely difficult for lower-income students to come up with money to attend universities. To begin, low-income students are more likely to not had access to the best education or schools, to have had a lack of resources and tools, and to have received worse treatment from their educators which all results in lower grades than they potentially could have earned. Taking that into consideration, it would be more difficult to earn scholarships. Without scholarships, that leaves the options of paying out of pocket or taking out loans, both of which can be difficult for working-class students to be able to afford. If college was made more affordable, it would be more accessible to low-income students, which would ultimately lead to a higher enrollment, retention, and graduation rates.

Lowering the costs of going to college would make it more accessible regardless of social class. This would be a step towards equality, closing achievement gaps, and raising graduation rates. In the article, “Feeling at Home in College: Fortifying School-Relevant Selves to Reduce Social Class Disparities in Higher Education,” Nicole Stephens, et al. go into detail about the struggle of first-generation students and the benefits of interventions; explaining which factors seem to be the most beneficial to working-class students and contribute the most to their successes. Stephens agrees that there is an “urgent need for interventions, or changes to universities’ ideas and practices, to increase working-class students’ access to and performance in higher education” (Stephens, et. al 1). As the practices of universities are now, it is much more difficult for working-class students to be successful and make it to graduation on time, or at all.

The inaccessibility of the university to the working-class contributes to a vicious cycle that encourages the wealth gap and increases difficulty in upward mobility. The wealth gap in the United States is a problem that continues to worsen as “inequality has increased dramatically” (Stephens 2). Many careers now require some sort of higher education, and even if they do not, having one can drastically make a difference the salary offered. These factors all contribute to the growth of class inequality in the United States over the years. The lower-class struggle to find opportunities to move up at all while the upper-class has access to money, education and other resources allowing them to continue to move up even though they are already at the top which leads us to the always growing wealth gap.

Stephens explains a few of the different factors that can prevent a student from reaching their full potential academically. Both “individual and structural factors” can affect a student’s success; individual referring to factors such as academic skills and structural referring to factors such as “financial resources” (Stephens, et. al 2). This reiterates the fact that working-class students will likely not come to college as prepared academically and will not have the same financial assistance as their wealthier peers. Stephens argues for “effective interventions [which] must address these factors,” but believes it should not stop there as “achievement gaps often persist even when students have the academic skills and material resources necessary to engage in the activities that are required to be an effective student” (Stephens, et. al 3). This means the issue persists beyond intelligence level and financial resources and will require more than meeting surface level needs for the student to reach full potential. If universities would all take part in these interventions, students should be able to “fortify and to elaborate [on their] school-relevant selves” which “requires linking the beliefs, understandings, relationships, representations, and activities that are part of the educational experiences to students’ selves”

(Stephens, et. al 3). The college experience includes more than just academics; extracurriculars, socialization, etc. are all a part of this experience that will lead to the growth of the student as a person overall and an understanding of who they are. Working-class students typically have a more difficult time adjusting and feeling at home in a university setting, and the benefit of the use of these interventions is a more seamless transition that allows them to be more likely to have the traditional experience they are hoping for. This difficulty adjusting is a deeper issue than one may think and can have a strong impact on how well the student does academically. Success can largely be determined on a student “feeling at home instead of feeling like an outsider” which means interventions “are likely to be most effective when they address the individual and structural factors that can impede academic behaviors, and simultaneously link school to the self with the goal of developing school-relevant selves” (Stephens, et. al 3). Fitting in and social interaction are important contributors to college success; after all, a sense of belonging is one of the psychological needs of Maslow’s Hierarchy that is essential before one can reach full potential. This is no different in the university setting which is why it is so important that lower-income students see they are welcome, they belong and that they can be successful. Showing working-class students that they belong at the university level just as much as their wealthier peers is just the first step in increasing their chances of success.

In one intervention done by Harackiewicz that aimed to “reduce the social-class achievement gap in the biological sciences,” working-class students were asked to “affirm their values... in the context of higher education” which researchers found to make a big difference in final grades. It was found when “working-class students affirmed their personal values, they received higher final grades in the course and were 20% more likely to enroll in the second course of their biology sequence than working-class students who did not affirm their values”;

they were also more likely to feel prepared and have a sense of belonging (Stephens, et. al 10).

An act as simple as having students remind themselves why they are going to college, what their goals are and what they value can make a drastic difference in the outcome they get at the end of the semester. If educators take social class into account at the beginning of the semester, keeping in mind the disadvantage lower-class students can be at, and have everyone make a list of goals and values, the results at the end of the semester could potentially be changed for the better.

Another intervention which was done by Stephens took a different approach to fighting the social-class gap. A group “specifically...educated working-class students about how their social class backgrounds can matter in college” (Stephens, et. al 11). They did this by holding a discussion panel where students shared their different backgrounds which “influenced college adjustment” and “highlighted how students’ social class backgrounds can shape the obstacles that students are likely to face in college” (Stephens, et. al 11). Holding a discussion panel is a great way to get students involved on campus and educate them about different topics. This type of panel would be great for universities to hold and have as an option as they create awareness of the impacts their backgrounds may have on their experiences, but that success is still obtainable. It was proven in this study that “working-class students who learned about the significance of their backgrounds earned higher GPAs and sought out more college resources than working-class students who did not learn about their backgrounds” (Stephens, et. al 11). Awareness is the first step in preparing for obstacles and how to overcome them which is why students who attended earned better grades and worked harder to find what resources were available to assist them. This particular panel also included their peers which reinforces the sense of belonging; they see that people like them from similar backgrounds are capable which reassures others that they are too.

Working-class students typically face many obstacles that make it difficult to achieve upward mobility. They do not have access to the same privileges and resources their wealthier peers do. This puts them at a disadvantage in their education; many schools in low-income areas are underfunded without adequate tools and resources, and several other factors along with this will leave them less prepared for college level work. The entire college process tends to be more difficult for working-class students as they also tend to be first-generation. The process is a tough one to navigate, and without guidance, can be very overwhelming. The applications are only the begin. After that, adjustment to college life can be a huge challenge as working-class students are likely to lack a sense of belonging on campus which is crucial to success and achieving their highest potential.

These factors all lead to working-class students being less likely to graduate on time, if at all. This in turn contributes to the ever-growing wealth gap between the classes. The working-class are stuck, struggling to move up while the upper-class has access to an abundance of resources: money, connections, basic necessities, etc. which all contribute to their success and upward mobility. As the resources are passed down from generation to generation, the wealth continues to build only for a small few while the vast majority are left at the bottom as the gap increases.

However, with a bit of effort, college could be more accessible to everyone. Spreading awareness of the issues with the social hierarchy is one way to start. The discussion panels mentioned by Stephens proved to be beneficial for working-class students as did something as simple as listing values and the reason students were there to begin with. English courses have taken matters into their own hands, however, making class issues one of their central focuses where students really have the chance to get an understanding of the influences social class has

and the injustices it causes. Reflection and discussion are the keys to understanding and awareness which is crucial for working-class students to have on this topic. An understanding of their background has proven to lead to better grades and to students taking initiative to look for additional resources when they need them. With awareness and additional help, the number of working-class students reaching success in college would likely increase, allowing them to achieve upward mobility and begin closing the wealth gap.

Works Cited

- Alberti, John. "Returning to Class: Creating Opportunities for Multicultural Reform at Majority Second-Tier Schools." *College English*, vol. 63, no. 5, 2001, pp. 561–584. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/379045. Accessed 18 Oct. 2020.
- Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1986, pp. 4 – 23. Accessed 20 Oct. 2020.
- Bottero, Wendy. "Social Class Structures and Social Mobility: the Background Context." *Social Class in Later Life: Power, Identity and Lifestyle*, edited by Marvin Formosa and Paul Higgs, 1st ed., Bristol University Press, Bristol, UK; Chicago, IL, USA, 2013, pp. 15–32. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qgn5q.8. Accessed 19 Oct. 2020.
- CALARCO, JESSICA. "Social Class and Student-Teacher Interactions." *Education and Society: An Introduction to Key Issues in the Sociology of Education*, edited by Thurston Domina et al., 1st ed., University of California Press, Oakland, California, 2019, pp. 96–109. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvpb3wn0.11. Accessed 18 Oct. 2020.
- Hyde, Martin, and Ian Rees Jones. "Social Class, Age and Identity in Later Life." *Social Class in Later Life: Power, Identity and Lifestyle*, edited by Marvin Formosa and Paul Higgs, 1st ed., Bristol University Press, Bristol, UK; Chicago, IL, USA, 2013, pp. 73–94. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qgn5q.11. Accessed 27 Oct. 2020.
- Ishitani, Terry T. "Studying Attrition and Degree Completion Behavior among First-Generation College Students in the United States." *Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 77, no. 5, Sept. 2006, pp. 861–885. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1353/jhe.2006.0042.
- Lindquist, Julie. "Class." Hielker, Paul and Peter Vandenberg, *Keywords in Writing Studies*. Boulder, Colorado: Utah State University Press, 2015. 20-25.

Lindquist, Julie. "Class Affects, Classroom Affectations: Working through the Paradoxes of Strategic Empathy." *College English*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2004, pp. 187–209. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4140717. Accessed 19 Oct. 2020.

Stephens, Brannon. "Feeling at Home in College: Fortifying School-Relevant Selves to Reduce Social Class Disparities in Higher Education." *Social issues and policy review* 9.1 (2015): 1–24. Web.

Poe Alexander, Kara. "From Story to Analysis: Reflection and Uptake in the Literacy Narrative Assignment." *Composition Studies*, vol. 43, no. 2, Fall 2015, pp. 43–71. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=110619818&site=ehost-live.