

Class Work: Site of Egalitarian Activism or Site of Embourgeoisement?

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Is the college composition classroom a site where professors offer not just a set of skills to be mastered but also “a form of cultural citizenship and politics,” which aims to reconstruct “democratic public life” so that “subordinate groups [. . .] have the opportunity to govern and shape history rather than be consigned to its margins”? (Giroux 367, 368, 367; see also Freire, Berlin, Bizzell, Shor). For most of us, the answer to this question is obvious. Of course the college composition classroom is a site for such activism: our pedagogy should be counterhegemonic, the literacy our students achieve should be critical, and all of us should seek positive change in our communities, indeed in the world. To be sure, some problems are “now commonly recognized” in putting such Freirean theory into practice among undergraduates in the United States, as Richard Miller points out (11); it is difficult, for instance, for some of us to agree that “basic writers are very much like Freire’s peasants” (Bizzell 133, see also Hardin 103). But neither the problems nor the recognition of them has unsettled the power of critical literacy in the composition classroom. Today, compositionists “focus [. . .] almost exclusively on ideological matters,” as “writing proficiency has dropped from view as a key purpose” (Durst 5; MacDonald 117). Undoubtedly, says Jeff Smith, the various strands of critical literacy are now the “Standard Model” of pedagogy (307), aimed at all students, whether or not they are prepared to engage it.

In the past fifteen years, voices have protested the institutionalization of this “Standard Model”—I have cited several in the preceding paragraph—and they have done so principally, and in my view correctly, by inveighing against the bad faith of the middle-class professoriate while, at the same time, pointing out how deeply critical

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literacy conflicts with the goals of students and of higher education itself. In this essay, I add my voice to theirs, not as a compositionist but as a literary critic interested in the theory and workings of social class, particularly education's role in maintaining and reproducing class distinction. I do so, too, because I am suspicious of standard models, and, like Kathryn Bond Stockton, I wonder why "academics, who trade in fresh views," are content to repeat "set claims" and therefore to establish their students as "the target of political zeal that works by way of mantra" (110, 109). Like Stockton, I want to "restore surprise" to our deliberations by focusing on details (111), in this case, by addressing what seems to me a contradiction in many of the essays in *Teaching Working Class*, a fine collection recently edited by Sherry Lee Linkon. In so doing, I will offer an understanding of "class activism" that focuses less on the putative emotional needs of working-class students, of whatever ethnicity or gender, and more on the ways hierarchy and distinction are reproduced *within* as well as outside of the various institutions of higher education. As a corollary, I would like to suggest that it is possible and even desirable for most people to lead culturally and intellectually satisfying lives without spending four, six, or eight years in postsecondary education.

The contradiction I find in many of the essays occurs in the contributors' responses, implied or explicit, to the question, "Toward what end are we easing our students' transition to higher education by engaging in counterhegemonic pedagogy?" Ann E. Green wonders, "Do we want our working-class students to become bourgeois? Do we want our 'bourgeois' students to drop out of school and experience a less privileged life?" (16). The formulation of these questions assumes that with "school" comes a more privileged, a better life, an assumption I will question, but here I wish to point out that many of the contributors *do* and yet *do not* want their students to become bourgeois—they want to ease their transition and they want them to succeed in the middle-class institutions of higher education (Linkon 6; A. Green 16–17; Greenwald and Grant 29, 30, 35; Adler-Kassner 91–92; Heathcott 114); at the same time, they seem not to want them to accept certain norms of those institutions—standard English, taste, manners, and the like. The latter position is stated most strongly by Caroline Pari, who, in response to her own educationally driven assimilation, has set out "to develop a pedagogy that critically challenges assimilation" into the middle class (125). Challenging the transition cannot make it easier for students to make, however, and in any case the contributors seem to understand that the transition "will never be seamless unless the research university becomes a working-class institution, responsive to (rather than merely sensitive to) racial and ethnic diversity" (Heathcott 114). Many of the contributors join Joseph Heathcott in proposing such a transformation of the academy (A. Green 17, Greenwald and Grant 29, 30; Adler-Kassner 100–05; Heathcott 107, 114), but I do not know how many of them agree with him that it is unlikely to occur (114).

Of course, if one cannot transform the research university into a working-class institution, a proposition to which I will return, one can attempt to transform the bourgeoisie, what the university produces. It is possible, therefore, to argue that when the contributors say they want their students to become bourgeois without acceding to certain bourgeois norms, what they mean is that they want them to form a new kind of bourgeoisie, one that is culturally different from the WASP bourgeoisie of the United States, but a bourgeoisie nonetheless. Some evidence of this position emerges in the essays. In addressing working-class students, says Green, “[M]y biggest challenge and responsibility in the classroom [is] to insist that ‘wholeness is possible,’ that it is possible for working-class students or African American students or Latina students to maintain connections with their home cultures and languages while still learning the skills that will bring them success in the academic world” (16–17). In this, Green might be seen as promoting language instruction that, as one of the anonymous readers of this essay puts it, recognizes “the contextual legitimacy of [students’] home dialects” and teaches “them not to be ashamed of them.” An important yet modest goal, the encouragement of such bidialectism should not be difficult to accomplish in the college classroom, since, as Richard Miller suggests, undergraduates are already well aware of “these competing spheres” of linguistic competency and their differing valuations (24). Many, like me, figured out the difference in elementary school, and, as I have explained elsewhere (“Class Matters” 203), this awareness led me to the kind of agency promoted by Janet Zandy in *Liberating Memory*, in which upward mobility does not extract “as its cost familial and historic memory,” and in which the newly bourgeois can “trace the inscription of class on their lives and on their work” (1).

But this goal is not quite what Green has in mind; for Green herself, “wholeness” is a bigger project, “a feminist pedagogy that critiques classism and racism and sexism and homophobia and accounts for class, race, gender, and sexual preference, without denying either me or the students subject positions, without reducing or losing anyone’s multiple and varied subjectivities” (17). What Green does not consider, however, is the possibility that classism, racism, sexism, or homophobia may be promoted and valued in her students’ “home cultures,” and that in critiquing such biases, she may be encouraging the kind of alienation from family and culture she purports to abhor. We might concede, for example, that many Muslims and fundamentalist Christians are strongly sexist, or that many fundamentalist Christians and African Americans are homophobic. “Homosexuality is the greatest sexual taboo within the African diaspora,” writes Delroy Constantine-Simms (76), a taboo enforced institutionally by Afrocentrist *and* Christian teaching and expressed popularly in rap music and film. The taboo has resulted in “deep” antigay feelings among African Americans, particularly among the religious, the less affluent, and the poorly educated (Hutchinson 5), but also among the intelligentsia, who tend to “excuse

black homophobia” by relegating it “to the domain of hegemonic whites” (McBride 367). According to black lesbians Cathy J. Cohen and Tamara Jones, “[H]omophobia within the black community” is a “problem” of sufficient magnitude that years will pass before “black communities are transformed” and homophobia eradicated; “there remains much more work to be done” (97, 100; see also Clarke).

If sexism and homophobia characterize many “home cultures,” so, too, does classism. Many working-class families are classist, and not just in the putatively normative sense of looking down on those below them on the socioeconomic scale. As sociologist Michèle Lamont argues persuasively, workers “are very aware of the distinctive disadvantages of their position,” but such awareness is not the only element of their class consciousness, which is formed as well by a morality that produces “workers’ sense of *worth*” and allows for “a detailed critique of the moral character of upper middle class people [. . . including] their lack of personal integrity, lack of respect for others, and the poor quality of their interpersonal relationships” (148, 245, 147). Working-class families revel in such moral critique, as I can attest and as Laurel Johnson Black suggests: as a child, she devoured the stories her father told, in which “the ‘stupid rich bastards’ almost always ‘got it’ in the end, outwitted by the poor little guy” (15). My mother often expressed her dislike of the professional middle class—the physicians and educators who told her how to live and raise her children—even as she pushed me to join it, and her conflicted attitude, like Black’s father’s (17), is not uncommon among workers, whether black or white, according to Lamont’s research: “[M]iddle class people have a position that deserves to be emulated, but their values are not always to be respected” (129). These examples suggest, therefore, a possibility Green does not consider: that a respect for others’ values or for “multiple and varied subjectivities” is part of bourgeois good taste, like Jazz at Lincoln Center, and therefore that the “wholeness” she seeks for her students is, in fact, to be achieved by persuading them to subscribe to a set of values identified in particular, though not exclusively, with the professional middle class.

If this unacknowledged possibility accurately describes reality—and recent scholarship concerning students’ resistance to critical literacy, such as Miller’s, Russel Durst’s, and David Seitz’s, suggests that it does—then what the contributors seem to be talking about is not the construction of a culturally different bourgeoisie, such as that envisioned by Zandy, in which upward mobility does not require the loss of “familial and historic memory” (1), but rather, in a move that must strike us as familiar, the moral transformation of aspirants to that status, an age-old function of the academy. For this reason, the professed desire of many of the contributors to transform the academy into a working-class institution strikes me as nonsense. For two other reasons, that desire frightens me. First, those who propose it do not describe the bases on which such a working-class university might operate or what such a working-class university might be. For example, the recommendation that the re-

search university be “responsive to (rather than just sensitive to) racial and ethnic diversity” (Heathcott 114) offers no blueprint for change, but, more fundamentally, its terms do not match any sociological definition of class that I know. Second, those who propose it do not describe what might be the costs of such a transformation. This seems an especially important question, as Stanley Fish points out with respect to the politicization of literary criticism:

[W]hen you exchange one activity for another, you lose something, and although you might mask the loss by calling the new activity by the old name, the phenomena that came into view under the previous dispensation will have disappeared in your brave new world. Maybe they should disappear, maybe the pleasures particular to close literary analysis are too esoteric and over-refined in a time of great social urgency, but we should at least have a clear idea of what would be at stake were we to think of ourselves as politicians first, and literary critics second, if at all. (*Professional Correctness* 69–70)

In this time of great social urgency, perhaps literary critics and compositionists should not be concerned about standard English, the intricacies of logical argument, or even the writing process; perhaps they should think of themselves as politicians first, and literary critics or compositionists second, if at all. But like Fish I think we should have a clear idea of what is at stake if that is what we do, if that is what we become. And what seems to be at stake here is not just literary criticism or a fine writing style but also the value of intellectual accomplishment and distinction. How far do we go in promoting egalitarianism in the academy? How many students who require remedial instruction in English and mathematics should we admit to undergraduate study—40 percent? 60 percent? More? Should we confer master’s degrees in English on students who demonstrate an inability to punctuate or to construct subordination? In striving above all to give our students voice, should we change our job titles from “literary critics” to politicians, or, as Susan Peck MacDonald puts it, to “newspaper reporters, tabloid TV hosts, social workers, or psychological counselors” (115)? Should we concentrate our professional lives on what Stephen North calls “academic consciousness-raising” (132; see also Elbow, “Pedagogy”)?

I see myself as a literary critic and an intellectual, and the job description I read when I set out upon this career did not include teaching composition to first-year graduate students or leading a consciousness-raising group composed of first-year undergraduates. But before you dismiss me as an uncaring, neoconservative elitist—or even as just a garden-variety elitist produced by a literature program, as described recently by Peter Elbow (“Cultures” 540–43)—please consider how working-class students might judge our apparent desire to abandon our expertise and distinction in the name of egalitarianism or the attempt to create a vaguely defined working-class university. I suggest that they would judge us fools. As Durst, Miller, and Seitz make clear, and as many of the essays in *Teaching Working Class* make clear—indeed,

as we all know—the vast majority of working-class students are in college because they want better occupational opportunities. They perceive higher education as a way to achieve such a goal, and that perception is rooted in their understanding that higher education will help them gain access to and perform better in the weird bourgeois or professional worlds they wish to enter. That perception may be somewhat hazy, and they may not grasp, for example, that a degree in and of itself is no guarantee of better occupational opportunities or that standard English is the lingua franca of bourgeois and professional life—but when they do grasp those facts, they will feel cheated when they recall that their composition instructor purposefully decided not to initiate them into academic discourse but instead to value the language and knowledge they already knew (Pari 129).

I do not question the motives or good will of instructors like Caroline Pari; I do not, for example, wish to claim that such instructors fail to help their students master standard English because they want them to remain working-class. I think such instructors are caught between a rock and a hard place, between their commitments to egalitarianism and their commitments to intellectual discipline and achievement. Because they are given students who have not been taught that, in this society, standard English is useful in gaining access to the professions or to business, as well as in communication generally, and because their commitments to egalitarianism trump their commitments to the intellectual norms of their discipline, such instructors opt for the delaying strategy evident in many of the essays in *Teaching Working Class*. Rather than provide crash courses in English grammar and usage, which many if not most of their students might fail, a situation that would not contribute to egalitarian outcomes, instructors reconceive their goals for the composition classroom, which becomes, ideally, a site to pursue personal and political transformation, “education as a form of activism” (Linkon 9), and, in reality, a site to ease the transition of their working-class or minority students into the academic and middle-class worlds by trying to accomplish two or three tasks at once: therapy, activism, and language instruction.

What is not considered, however, is how long this process ought to continue—one semester? two? three? more?—or, more fundamentally, whether the continued delaying of the students’ transition to the academic and middle-class worlds is not, in fact, irresponsible and antithetical to their ambitions. Empirical evidence—what we have of it, since composition studies, driven by postmodern theory, has largely abandoned empirical research (MacDonald; Wallace and Wallace)—suggests that a student’s writing “will get somewhat better whatever the teacher does”; a student, concludes J. Hillis Miller, “learns to write by writing” (52). Accordingly, argues Fish, in the composition classroom “practice has nothing to do with theory, at least in the sense of being enabled and justified by theory” (*Doing* 355). And therefore, if “practice makes perfect [and] you learn to write by writing,” then a pedagogy justified by

“normative notions of correctness” (355, 353) is just as useful to the development of literacy—and even, perhaps, of critical literacy, for one can only be critical if one is literate—as is a pedagogy justified by activism, for example, one that “critiques classism and racism and sexism and homophobia” (A. Green 17) or that offers “a form of cultural citizenship and politics” (Giroux 367). To the extent that the former offers more time to read and write than the latter or more effectively than the latter acculturates working-class and minority students into academic discourse, the former is, arguably, better pedagogy than the latter.

Recently, Howard Tinberg concluded that “composition [. . .] does not know what to do with the working class” (353). Noting, as I do here, that compositionists are split “between a conviction that first-year composition remain a site for critical literacy and social action and the conviction that it be the place to acculturate students into the academy,” Tinberg offers two solutions to this contradiction, only the latter of which, I believe, offers much promise to compositionists or their students:

[I]n arguing that such a split exists in composition [. . .] we forfeit the possibility of a third way: that critical literacy can serve both purposes. Cannot students serve both community and the academy? Is it not possible to be thoughtful citizens in both the classroom and the world beyond the classroom? Having said as much, we might also consider this possibility, although many of us will find it uncomfortable to acknowledge: four years or more of college may not be the best option for everyone—and a productive life awaits others who choose to bypass that experience. Is obtaining an undergraduate or graduate degree a prerequisite for a good and satisfying life? (354)

Tinberg’s description of “a third way” is formulated to garner quick assent from his audience; the rhetorical questions do not admit of a negative answer. But it seems to me that critical literacy cannot serve both purposes, because, as Andrew Levison argues, a “vast cultural chasm” exists “between college-educated and blue-collar America,” one that is “created not by differences in knowledge or intelligence but by the fact that the two groups live in fundamentally different worlds” (31, 32, 31). Like standard English, critical literacy is part of the cultural world of the college-educated, and mastering it requires of working-class students as much acculturation—or, we might say, submission to authority, our authority—as does mastering standard English. Indeed, writes John Michael in a recent critique of counterhegemonic pedagogy, an instructor’s “egalitarian principles are largely irrelevant in the classroom,” a site where “differentials of knowledge, of authority, and of institutional power may be useful tools in persuading students and opponents to see the error and ignorance of their ways” (53, 56)—the error and ignorance of, for example, the sexism of fundamentalist Christians, the homophobia of African Americans, or the classism of the working class. As Michael suggests, counterhegemonic pedagogies like critical literacy are like any other pedagogy: “ineluctably violent (though the violence remains verbal) and intrinsically elitist” (56). Critical literacy is

thus activist insofar as it actively promotes the judgments of the professoriate and of the cultural world to which they belong, a cultural world that is recognized to be superior to the cultural world of the working class. And, as I have argued recently in *Class, Critics, and Shakespeare: Bottom Lines on the Culture Wars*, what principally constitutes the superior cultural world of the middle and upper classes are the legacies of higher education. Or, as I might amend Levison, what principally constitutes the superior cultural world of the college-educated is *college*.

For those of us interested in equity and justice, the question is how to ameliorate the invidious distinction between these two worlds. For the past forty years or so, the answer has been to increase access via formal education to the world judged superior. Higher education, which in 1945 offered a place to only one in five Americans aged eighteen to twenty-two, now can accommodate four out of five Americans in that age-group (Fischer et al. 152). According to Claude S. Fischer and his associates, as well as to Michael Zweig, this expansion has reduced inequality among those who actually hold bachelor's degrees; for this group, "there is *no* connection between the occupational status of their parents and their own" (Fischer et al. 153, Zweig 44). Unfortunately, fewer than 25 percent of Americans over age twenty-five actually hold bachelor's degrees, and college graduates are disproportionately drawn from middle- and upper-class families (Gitlin 225, Zweig 44–45). The latter is a trend that has *not* decreased as higher education has expanded, according to Todd Gitlin: in 1979, a student whose family's income fell in the top quarter was four times as likely to earn a bachelor's degree by age twenty-four as a student whose family's income fell in the bottom quarter. By 1994, such an affluent student was nineteen times as likely to do so (225). As Zweig concludes, even today, after all of its expansion, higher education "mostly helps to stabilize classes and reproduce them across generations" (45).

Nevertheless, it is widely assumed that to succeed in the twenty-first century, it is imperative to hold a college degree; we live in the world Martin Trow predicted thirty years ago, in which "going to college" is deemed appropriate not just "for people of wealth or extraordinary talent or ambition" but also "for youngsters of quite ordinary talent and ambition, and increasingly for people with little of either" (3). Among the many reasons for this shift in expectations, including some breakdown of class cultures and a concomitant increased emphasis on egalitarianism and equal opportunity (Trow 3), perhaps the most important, as Fischer and his associates explain, is economic: "those who do not graduate from college—and even more so, those who have a high school education or less—face bleak prospects" (155). According to former president Bill Clinton, "every American needs more than a high-school education [. . .]. A college education is not a luxury" (Lords). Even students in high school recognize the existence of a "B.A. premium"; in 1992, according to the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, fully 84 percent of

all graduating high school seniors expected to obtain a bachelor's degree, and, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics, 59 percent expected to become professionals (cited by Gray and Herr 5, 8–9).

Yet, according to Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and John Schmitt, of the Economic Policy Institute, the explanation for the perceived financial benefits of the bachelor's degree may not be quite so simple as the oft-repeated suggestion that the new economy needs a better-educated workforce and is willing to pay more for it. Mishel, Bernstein, and Schmitt report that while the average number of years of schooling among all workers increased from 12.0 in 1973 to 13.4 in 1994, there was “no growth in the hourly compensation paid per year of schooling” and, therefore, “all of the growth in average hourly compensation since 1973 can be attributed to more schooling” (25, 24). For Mishel, Bernstein, and Schmitt, this situation is not rosy. It is

analogous to earning a higher annual wage because one works more hours at the same hourly wage—working harder at the same pay. While it is certainly a good thing to be able to work more hours, it would be a far better situation if annual wages grew primarily because of higher hourly wages (and one might even voluntarily reduce hours). Similarly with education, it would be far more preferable if hourly compensation grew beyond the growth caused by more schooling, as was the case in the early postwar period (26).

What “the B.A. premium” reflects, perhaps, is as much the result of credential inflation as of the actual skills certified by the degree in question. In any event, the sociologists and economists cited above make it clear that higher education offers upward mobility only to a small portion of the working class; the expansion of higher education in the postwar period benefited primarily the middle and upper classes.

Colleges and universities have been and continue to be part of middle-class culture. And even if former President Clinton, the high school seniors cited above, or the contributors to *Teaching Working Class* are correct in their assumptions that access to higher education will become universal, colleges and universities will continue to be part of middle-class culture. Or at least the colleges and universities that produce the middle and upper classes will continue to be part of middle-class culture. If some colleges and universities produce degree holders destined for jobs as janitors, bartenders, and retail clerks, then perhaps we will be able to say we have achieved a “working-class university,” one that is part of working-class culture and thus offers a seamless transition to working-class students. Such an achievement, however, may not be worth shouting about, although I am sure many will disagree. Many think a degreed janitor an excellent outcome; a person who has been trained in critical literacy will be a better and more responsible citizen. Yet, like Renny Christopher, also writing in *Teaching Working Class*, I am skeptical that such an outcome is likely. Such an outcome cannot occur when high schools graduate 70 per-

cent of their students without adequate academic preparation for college (Gray and Herr 54–58) and when universities such as California State University, Stanislaus, where Christopher has taught for many years, do not do much better, graduating many of their working-class students “without giving them basic skills (particularly the ability to write standard English and to do mathematics beyond prealgebra),” much less the kinds of abstract, analytic skills that lead them to become “autonomous thinkers with a sense of their intellectual worth” (220, 219). What we have in the degreed janitor is not a critically literate janitor, but a janitor whose skills approximate those his grandfather possessed after finishing high school. In this case, the degreed janitor will have as little use for composition, critical or otherwise, as Daniel Green’s students at “Service U” have for “literature,” works they find entirely unconvincing and, indeed, useless (283–85).

What we also have in the degreed janitor, however, is evidence that in the twenty-first century, we cannot talk about class and higher education without talking about class *in* higher education. We can no longer ignore “what is a major class division in American higher education: the gap between first-tier, selective-admissions schools and second-tier, open-registration, regional two- and four-year colleges [. . .] that represent the majority of institutions” (Alberti 563). A discussion about class at Princeton University is different from a discussion about class at the University of Alabama, at Fort Hayes State College, or at Long Beach City College. And a discussion about class at Long Beach City College should not occur without implicating Princeton or the University of California in its construction. Once we do so, we will see that solutions to the problem such as that proposed by John Alberti—to ensure even broader access to higher education (581–82)—can only fail: universal access does not undermine but enhances the prestige, selectivity, and power of elite institutions (see Guillory; O’Dair, *Class*).

Instead, I think, it is time for society to rethink its attempt to ameliorate via ever-increasing amounts of education the invidious distinction between the working class and the middle and upper classes. This strategy fails all but a few, who are absorbed into the middle and upper classes, and it does not achieve its goal of ameliorating class difference, as our postwar history shows. In 1972, Christopher Jencks and his colleagues judged that “the egalitarian trend in education has not made the distribution of income or status appreciably more equal over the past 25 years” (261). By 1984, according to Magali Sarfatti Larson, the numbers revealed far worse: “the postwar tendency toward equalization of educational opportunities has been accompanied by *greater, not lesser* inequality of income distribution” (43). And the past two decades, to put it mildly, have only intensified that correlation, have only intensified both income inequality and the desire to attend college. Furthermore, the expansion of education and of higher education in particular exacerbates class difference by homogenizing and consolidating the cultural world of the middle and upper classes,

among which higher education is already effectively universal, and by reinscribing for the working class the superiority of middle- and upper-class culture. At the same time, and ironically, the expansion of higher education has deformed or diluted the intellectual mission of the university, and threatens to turn English professors into social workers or the functional equivalent of high school teachers. It is time, I think, for us to face the fact that college is not for everyone: the way to ameliorate the invidious distinction between the classes is not by offering a few more people access to the middle class but by accepting that middle class culture is not superior to that of the working class.

Middle class culture is individualistic, hierarchical, and consumerist. As I have argued elsewhere (“Beyond Necessity”; *Class*), the educational system, and higher education in particular, preserves and reproduces that culture, including its consumerist proclivities: *American Demographics* reports that “[e]ducation is a stronger predictor of shopping than income” (Robinson 50) and Juliet B. Schor adds that “controlling for other factors, [. . .] the more education a person has, *the less he or she saves*. Each additional level of education (going from a high school diploma to some college, for instance, or from a college degree to a postgraduate credential) reduces annual savings by \$1,448” (76). Working-class culture, in contrast, places less emphasis on the individual and more on the group, whether clan or, as is the case today, the family, and is thus less competitive, hierarchical, and consumerist than middle-class culture. As Levison puts it in commenting on Lamont’s work, “the values that workers can accurately be said to share as a group”—for example, privileging family over work (which, significantly, is not a “career”) and valuing strength of character more than material success—are “not only not objectionable but are, in fact, profoundly admirable” (27).

Such persons do not need a college degree to enable them to lead good and satisfying lives, but they do need to be valued by society. Seeing positive images in the media of people like themselves would be nice, but more importantly they need to be offered excellent primary and secondary education, as well as excellent secondary and postsecondary vocational training. Indeed, they should be offered the opportunity, as Randall Collins argued in 1979, to be recruited into managerial and professional positions through performance on the job. In addition, they need the opportunity to organize in unions, and they need to be given a share of power in political parties and in the polity generally, in which case they might show that, rather than an educational issue, “the distribution of income is a legitimate political issue,” as Jencks and his colleagues pointed out thirty years ago (264) and as the Great Depression and the New Deal made clear seventy years ago. For these reasons, I would like to propose that the college composition classroom become a site for “class activism” by promoting the value and worth of working-class people and working-class culture. If the college composition classroom is a “slim point of entry

from one world into the next” (360), as Tinberg thinks, then that classroom ought to be a site where the differences between those worlds are clearly expressed, and expressed without privileging the middle-class world of the university. Such frank talk—as well as opportunities for political participation and viable alternatives for training and work, including efforts to decouple occupational opportunity and higher education—would enable working-class students to get out of the university classroom if they do not want to be there, if they are there only because there are no alternatives and because it seems they need a bachelor’s degree in psychology to become a bartender. Such frank talk would enable those who do want to be there to accept our help in teaching them how to become middle-class.

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