



Class and the College Classroom: Essays on Teaching

Rosen, Robert C., ed.
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Book Review

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These essays, reprinted from *Radical Teacher*, analyze class in the classroom. Editor Robert Rosen recognizes that, in teaching about race, class, and gender, class often receives the least nuanced attention. With the 2008 economic downturn, class reemerged strongly: in the extreme inequalities in capitalist society; in the recognition that college is no longer the guaranteed “path to upward mobility” (1); and, in recognizing the functions of class in education’s many facets, from colleges to for-profits. Often, for poor (30-39) and immigrant, particularly undocumented (19-29), students, we are failing. This is true, as Susan Jhirad points out, even in community colleges, which have been the open door to college for many “non-traditional” students (40-48; 67-71). The book also gives voice to the working poor in the academy itself: alienated adjuncts (67-71; 78-86).

We perform class as well as live it. Richard Ohmann writes about his students’ arguments against Jane Austen’s sense that one should strive to marry according to or up in class. His students, nevertheless, will enact her class vision. They come from the “professional-managerial class (PMC)” (12), and college, Ohmann suggests, lets them engage diversity, “for a while” (13), as they move back to the PMC. Class, he argues, is complex and powerful: an identity, “a script you act out daily, a bundle of habits and feelings and ways of relating lodged deep in your psyche and broadcast by your talk and conduct...[that] is [neither] easy to revise [nor to] conceal” (13).

Erin Smith demonstrates this truth as she tells her current, less privileged, students about a white, male student from an elite university who refused to accept inclusive language, announcing “that when he was out in the *real* world, he would *make* all of those *women and*

minorities working for him write the way he told them to” (113, emphases mine). While her less privileged students thought the young man was wrong, his example did not lead them to analyze class as a factor. Smith suggests, “a reliance on experience can effectively locate individuals *in* history, but it cannot – by itself – enable individuals to see history in themselves” (115-116): how they perform class.

This book offers many teaching strategies, framed by the awareness that a classroom encounter with otherness often “‘substitutes’” for the real thing (147), “sanctioning,” as Ohmann writes, “all kinds of nonthreatening nonconformity” (147). The strategies unsettle class assumptions, such as Janet Casey’s teaching literature in terms of how it is marketed and Ohmann’s having his students write about their “imagined” best and worst jobs and whom they imagine works those jobs.

This volume is valuable for its unflinching look at the current academy and for its warning that higher education, even as it works to be inclusive, can reproduce “class structures and relations” (146) appropriating “lower” class artifacts and making students confront class only within safe boundaries, changing nothing but the items on our syllabi.

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