

Untold Stories: Bringing Class into the Classroom

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Authors' Reflexive Statements

Adj Marshall: I first encountered discussions of social class in the classroom while attending a small upper middle class liberal arts college in my hometown city. These discussions, however, rarely moved beyond surface level reflections, despite professors' attempts to have students dig deeper. Very few of my classmates had prior experience with the low-income and working class communities we were learning to organize. As one of only a handful of low-income students at the college, I chose to bring my personal life history of poverty and homelessness into classroom discussions. This allowed me to present a more nuanced understanding of community struggles and raise my peers' and professors' awareness of the social class issues at hand. As an artist, facilitator and educator today, I continue to incorporate my experiences of the social class system into my work in meaningful ways and encourage others to do the same.

Betsy Leondar-Wright: The first time I heard class discussed in a classroom was in a political theory course at Princeton. The topic was abstract Marxist theory, with no connection to my life experience—and of course I had no idea what the professor's class background was. Becoming a community organizer immersed me in the real world of class differences, as my own privileged background made me dissimilar from the grassroots people I organized. I had the good fortune to be trained as an activist by working-class movement leaders, who introduced me to the concepts of classism, class cultures and cross-class alliance-building—the themes I have been writing about, training and teaching about, and attempting to put into

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practice for more than 20 years. This article reflects the methods that the foremost non-profit in this field, Class Action, developed to bring our whole selves into our discussions of class. Adj Marshall and I have been Class Action workshop facilitators for many years, doing classism workshops for schools, non-profits and foundations, as well as teaching class topics in college courses.

Introduction

Students often respond with confusion to questions about social class—not surprising given the common assumption that the United States is a “classless society.” The fog surrounding class stratification makes it difficult to teach about economic inequality. Why is social class so challenging to teach about? Compared with race or gender, class is less obviously inscribed on the body and more poorly understood, with more gray areas and fewer shared terms for social categories, making identity development a slower and more fraught process. Class background profoundly affects an individual’s social standpoint (Collins 2000), but most students have only a latent class identity that they have rarely discussed with anyone.

In our decades of work, both as classroom teachers and as facilitators of Freirean popular education workshops (Freire 1970) for community groups through the nonprofit organization Class Action, we have found it constructive to ground conversations in the lived experience of class—not just workplace experience, but students’ and their parents’ educations, parents’ occupations, type of neighborhood and housing, and so on. Before asking students to disclose their class backgrounds, teachers and facilitators can create a welcoming atmosphere by sharing their own class stories from a subject position (Green 2003). In our experience this mutual disclosure creates an electric learning environment (Adams and Bell 2007).

However, there are pitfalls in educators self-revealing their class backgrounds, as we have each found in our educational practice. We are a mixed-class pair of co-authors, one from a poverty background and one from an upper-middle-class background. In this article, we first describe why class disclosure is worth attempting, then we unpack its risks and difficulties and make recommendations. We offer strategies and insights for readers to adapt these methods into their own personal pedagogical practice, while acknowledging the limited nature of any single teacher’s class background (refer to Table 1 for an example of ground rules).

In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks suggests that education is a “location of possibility,” noting that “we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries to transgress” (207). This liberatory spirit underlies the pedagogical approach in this article. By fostering cross-class dialogue among students from varied class backgrounds, educators can spark a lively interest in economic inequality, and students and educators can together identify and demystify class privilege and oppression. Acknowledging class diversity invites students of varying backgrounds to feel they have a place in the conversation and a responsibility to be engaged and take action for change.

Table 1 Sample ground rules for class story sharing

Ground rules
Listen actively and attentively to each other with respect. Share airspace with everyone. Step up if you tend to be quiet, or step back if you tend to speak a lot.
Speak from your own experience by using “I” statements.
It is okay to disagree with each other respectfully. Commit to learning and dialoguing and not debating. Build on one another’s comments to work towards a shared understanding.
Ask for clarification if something is not clear to you. All questions are okay.
Set your own limits on how much risk to take with your self-disclosure. You have the right to pass
Passing on information, ideas and learning after the session is encouraged, but keep everyone’s personal statements or experiences confidential.

Why It’s Important for Educators to Share Their Class Stories

By sharing their personal experiences with the class system, educators can encourage students to see classist behavior and inequitable class systems as directly linked to themselves and those they interact with. If student disclosure follows educator disclosure, then the pedagogical tool of story sharing creates space for student introspection that moves beyond the textbook, making visible the often imperceptible realities of classist systems. As students combine discovery of empirical knowledge of the wider world with dialogue and self-discovery, they come to more fully understand the U.S. class system.

When the educational goals include generating commitment to work for social justice, the immediacy and humanity of discussing first-person lived experience is essential to raising empathetic awareness of *any* system of oppression. But, this is especially true for social class inequality. In teaching gender, we’ve found it easy to draw out students’ experiences with gender-binary socialization. In teaching race, it may be a touchy subject, but once reluctance is overcome, students do in fact have racial identities and experiences to share of racism and cross-race interactions. But with class, most undergraduates and adult learners have not been categorizing their life experiences and relationships in class terms, and are not conscious of having a manifest class identity. As a result, when educators attempt to ask evocative questions to generate class-related memories, learners frequently report confusion. Many conflate race and class, for example using the terms “black and white” to refer to the class makeup of their hometown, which renders invisible both professionals of color and white working-class and poor people.

Talking about class is often fraught with deep emotions. Shame, guilt, and fear of being judged often inhibit learners from revealing their class stories and fully understanding the experiences of others, particularly for residential college students, who may be experiencing a mixed-class social situation for the first time. In addition, because class identities shift over time as workplace, financial and family

situations change, it can be difficult for students to fully identify with one particular class.

Because of these difficulties in teaching about social class, it's important to teach it in a personal way, based on lived experience. The multidimensional and intersectional approach taken by the Working Class Studies Association (Zandy 2001; Russo and Linkon 2005) and Class Action encompasses class dynamics in workplaces, schools, families, neighborhoods, unions, activism, culture, psychology, literature, and among other areas of life. However, this approach is rare within the field of sociology. Most "race, class, and gender" textbooks include only economic topics in the class section, or in some cases have no class section at all, making the word "class" serve the grammatical function of a conjunction connecting race and gender. Critiques of neoliberal capitalism are not the only valuable class analysis. To broaden learners' class awareness beyond economic inequality to the other dimensions of class and classism requires educator creativity in seeking readings, videos, and exercises that bring the topic alive for learners. Because class indicators besides money are unfamiliar to most learners, the educator's prepared personal stories can inject the needed human element into discussions of class, classism, and economic inequality.

We see three main purposes served by educators sharing class life experiences with learners: deepening bonds across roles, illustrating main points, and modeling disclosure to invite student sharing. The first is recommended in most learning situations; the second can be used, as needed; and the third presented only under certain limited circumstances. Each is described below with examples of personal stories one of the authors has shared in an educational setting.

First, educators can break down barriers between themselves and learners by humanizing themselves and by revealing their social standpoint to be similar to or different from each learner's life experience. Students are already making assumptions about who their educators are—sometimes true, sometimes false—and relating to them as similar or different from themselves. Many of us were taught by distant teachers, presumed to be professional-middle-class, and as a result we have an unconscious expectation that classroom relations will be cool and impersonal. Educators' social class story-sharing can create a warmer classroom atmosphere that invites open discussion, which can result from educators' class story-sharing. Since personal storytelling is a more prominent mode of expression in many working-class cultures, this warming effect can be especially meaningful to first-generation college students and others from working-class and poverty backgrounds (Leondar-Wright 2014). Frankly sharing one's class indicators, as well as putting other identities into words, engenders deeper dialogue and often increases mutual respect between educators and learners. Depending on what the educator's class background is, for each student this disclosure invites either a feeling of solidarity about similarities or a bridge across differences that have lost their taboo by being spoken.

Example 1: How and Why Adj Talks About Welfare Office Lines

When I worked as a college success counselor, many of my students were documented and undocumented immigrants, refugees, and recipients of social support programs. They hailed from the Dominican Republic, Cambodia, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Cote D'Ivoire, Guatemala, Cape Verde and other places. Since I am a white woman with the professional status of educator, my students often assumed that we were from completely different worlds, and in some very important ways we were. My family has been in the United States for a few generations now, and I do not face the racism that many of my students deal with on a daily basis.

Where my childhood experience mirrored my students was in the grueling struggle that is life in poverty and the experience of pursuing college as a first-generation college student. Angelika, a young Latina student of mine pursuing her studies in community college while pregnant, was sheepishly providing what she felt I would view as an unacceptable excuse for why her coursework had been suffering that term. She noted that lines at the welfare office and other social service offices were interfering with her ability to complete her homework. In that moment a compassionate smile appeared on my face, one she would later tell me was a surprising response.

I shared with her my experience of standing in the welfare line each month with my own teen mother, waiting some days for hours on end. I described my intuitive childhood knowledge that we were somehow involved in an unfair trade. That of food stamp booklets for bank account statements, dating history and more intimate life details than we would have liked to share. While Angelika and I had established a good working relationship, it was completely altered that day. Our shared social class background became a cementing force in our relationship over the next two years. My sharing earned me Angelika's respect and buoyed us through our frustrations with one another, reminding us of the humanity in each other. Angelika's knowledge of my upbringing allowed her to see me as an elder, someone she could share her struggles with and seek advice from. My deeper understanding for her experience allowed me to see her more fully as a whole person.

Second, educator class stories can be used to illustrate the content being taught. Few examples are as compelling as a crafted narrative told in the first person, especially by someone usually in an authority role. Crafting a story to make a point takes time and effort. Through years of trial and error and seeking out feedback, the two of us have each unearthed and polished many snippets of our past experiences that have served as powerful catalysts in specific educational situations, as the two examples below show.

Example 2: How and Why Betsy Shares Her Childhood Crush Story

In courses about inequality in the US education system, the idea that high-cultural-capital class cultures are not actually superior can be a tough sell to undergraduates imbued with the educational meritocracy myth (McNamee and Miller 2004). Even after I have them read excerpts from counter-hegemonic class-culture texts that are affirming of the strengths of working-class cultures, such as Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods*, (2003), Heath's *Ways with Words* (1983), and Delpit's *The Skin That We Speak* (2003), many students persist in assuming middle-class superiority, for example referring to "bad English," "bad parents," and "bad neighborhoods." Here's a story I have told several times to contradict that classist assumption that working-class cultures only have downsides.

If I had to sum up my upbringing in one word, it would be "sheltered." I was a nice middle-class, Protestant, white girl with no exposure to hardship and who feelings were easily hurt.

In 6th grade I had an intense crush on a Catholic boy named Marc who lived with his mother in an apartment over a store. Marc had a toughness and verbal agility that filled me with longing. When I was picked on, I just stood there silent. I could write with perfect grammar, but I couldn't come up with a witty comeback to save my life. Marc met every put-down with a worse put-down, and went up into a bully's face.

By the rules of our town I was the fortunate kid, and he was the disadvantaged kid. And in material ways there was truth to that. I went to college, Marc didn't. The odds are good that my net worth is now higher than his, and that I get more respect for my work than he does.

But in human terms, Marc and I both had something to give each other. He could have used some of my knowledge about how to get into college. But I needed his thick skin, his assertiveness, and his ability to trash-talk—and I still need it today.

The truth is that my over-privileged class and ethnic upbringing gave me severe limitations that no-one named.

Students tend to enjoy this story because it's about a youthful crush, and afterwards some of them seem to remember the concepts of asset-based and deficit-based depictions of working-class cultures.

Example 3: Why and How Adj Shares Her Checkout Line Memories

When teaching about the effects of poverty, I struggle to find texts for my students that speak beyond the structural elements of oppression: lack of opportunity for educational attainment, vocational possibility, income earning potential, or access to health care. Rarely are there materials from which my

students can learn about or understand the deeply personal and psychological effects of poverty, particularly told from a first person perspective.

To bring this element alive for my students I share a story from my adult life exploring how my upbringing in poverty has inscribed itself on my worldview and still permeates my unconscious.

My partner and I were on our weekly pilgrimage to the supermarket, something I could have only dreamed of as a child where shopping occurred once monthly in parallel with the arrival of food stamps and a well-timed bus.

We navigate to the checkout counter where we begin to place the fruits, vegetables, and dairy products, on the belt. My partner places the Tom's Toothpaste on the belt amongst the other food items. I immediately move the toothpaste to the back of the belt. This happens repeatedly with the deodorant, laundry detergent and toilet paper while emptying our shopping cart.

While we wait for the cashier to finish ringing us up, my partner asks, "Why did you keep moving the household items to the back?" He sounds a bit annoyed as if my moving them is a form of judgment on his choice of placement.

I respond quickly with "I don't know exactly. I like similar things to be grouped together"—but before the sentence fully escapes my mouth it occurs to me that I was sorting our groceries in accordance with government benefits requirements.

By the age of seven or eight I knew how to identify items that could and could not be bought with food stamps. It was essential to separate items or run the risk of being chastised by the cashier who might announce loudly that "you can't purchase toothpaste with food stamps".

While I know that being poor did not make me less of a person as a child or today, somewhere deep down I still hold the fear of embarrassment that comes with being called out as poor.

When telling this story I hand out copies of food stamps from the era of my childhood. I talk about how visible people on food stamps were with their colorful booklets and the regulations that required one to rip coupons from the book in front of the cashier. For many of my students, who have only known EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) cards, this is illuminating, and can lead to discussions about other ways the poor are put on display as the result of policies.

Third, educator stories can encourage learner self-disclosures of class background experiences, which is eye-opening for story-teller and listener alike. Student sharing of personal class stories is a potent but high-risk activity for certain settings only. If the teacher or facilitator goes first, he or she can model deeper ways to share experiences that learners may then replicate, for example by revealing emotions, avoiding stereotypes, adding race or gender intersections, and drawing lessons and conclusions from stories. By introducing nuance, these moments of personal

sharing serve as a guide for students on how to share reflections on class that are grounded in lived personal experience.

In higher education settings, the default assumption is that everyone is or soon will be a college educated professional. The discovery that some students and/or the professor come from a working-class or poverty background shakes up those assumptions, disrupts the middle-class norm and the othering of class-disadvantaged people. Sharing their personal stories, educators can reassure students that their experiences are valid forms of expressions within the classroom. On the other hand, it can also raise discomfort in others whose class story is different, leading to the difficulties discussed in the next section.

Example 4: Why and How Betsy Describes Her Teenage Affluence

Sometimes the most valuable thing I do at classism workshops or during classroom social class units is to describe my teen years factually and in a relaxed tone. When I say calmly, “When I was 15, my dad hit the jackpot in the bond market, so my parents moved to a 15-room house, took us to Europe, and sent me to prep school and an Ivy League college,” it gives the message that ‘we can be real about class differences here’.

I make it very clear that that my family’s upward mobility didn’t make us better people than others—and it didn’t make us worse people either. It’s just where my story happens to fit into a terribly unjust system that I’m not to blame for, but that I can work to change, as everyone can.

Sharing that part of my story creates a space that’s welcoming for other very privileged people in particular. I watch their shoulders lower and their faces brighten up, and they become more open to honest disclosure and cross-class dialogue.

The Perils and Pitfalls of Sharing Educators’ Class Stories

In a culture where speaking about social class is taboo, teaching students to look at the world through an anti-classist approach can be a difficult and emotionally fraught process, one full of pain, fear, and embarrassment. Despite what’s difficult about social class story sharing, we believe that the extra effort needed to bring educators’ personal experiences with the class system into the classroom is worth the benefits.

Through our many years of sharing personal class stories, we have discovered some potential pitfalls. Here we identify the pitfalls and provide advice on avoiding and counteracting these potential hazards. These include being clear about your purpose; taking steps to mine and assemble a story; anticipating difficult learner reactions; scaffolding and timing stories well; and, lastly, taking care in preparing to invite self-disclosure.

Knowing Your Purpose, Being Explicit, and Strengthening the Container

Being explicit about the goals of story sharing is one of the simplest ways to avoid pitfalls in the practice of story sharing. Educators should be explicit about the end goal for class story sharing with themselves and their students when choosing to employ this learning tool. We have both had classes and workshops veer far from the intended path because we were not clear about the reasons for sharing our personal stories.

When the two of us share a personal class story to make a point about a reading, we often preface it with our intention: “The author speaks about X in her text; one example from my personal life that illustrates X is ”.

If your purpose is to invite students to engage in self-disclosure, it is important you are clear this is what you are asking of students. We have both started classes by stating “In sharing my story here, I have modeled how I hope you will share your own stories, if you choose to.” Because class stories are quite personal and students may be wary of sharing them, it is important to set up a strong container of safety and confidentiality (Lakey 2010). For example, state explicitly that students are not required to share and that students may specify if their stories may be repeated outside the classroom.

Preparing Your Stories

While educators can never be fully prepared for the myriad potential student responses, there are things you can do to prepare yourself. Failure to prepare sufficiently for telling a personal story can result in fizzling, backfiring, or veering off track from the intended aim of the course. We have found that sharing and responding to students in a powerful yet inclusive manner requires a well-crafted story that has been vetted by others.

One’s own emotions about childhood memories can be triggered by sharing them raw and unprocessed. It’s important to do your own work first before bringing class stories into the classroom. Start by writing down your own social class memories. Participation in a cross-class dialogue group (Koch-Gonzalez et al. 2009) is an ideal way to work through your own memories and emotions and find the nuggets of your history that could serve educational purposes. Then we suggest sharing your story with fellow educators, ideally two or more from distinctly different class backgrounds, to solicit feedback before bringing it to the classroom.

Seek out feedback and comments from colleagues about how students from different class backgrounds at your institution might respond. When you build up your network of collaborators, they may be willing share their own class stories in your classroom, providing students with a broader view of the class system than can be provided through your story alone.

Anticipating Difficult Reactions

When sharing our stories, we have encountered widely different reactions from our students and participants, including some difficult or negative reactions. Students may shut down, get confused, be triggered, or become too defensive for dialogue or learning. We have observed that educators may be viewed as antagonists by students from differing class backgrounds than that revealed by the educator. Educators of all backgrounds may lose some credibility after sharing their stories; and those from working-class or poverty backgrounds may encounter a classist lowering of status in the eyes of some students.

While educators' stories about a childhood of poverty are often deeply meaningful to students from similar backgrounds, and eye-opening to students from more privileged backgrounds, such stories have also been met with incredulous responses by students.

For example, Adj has heard, "See, the system works, *you* were upwardly mobile" from low income students. First-generation college students in particular can see themselves as at the beginning stages of upward mobility, and as a result may be especially attached to the American Dream ideology of rising social mobility through education. Deconstructing this ideal can be a hard sell, threatening to students' personal hopes. Adj also notes,

As someone who has 'made it out' I have to be wary of becoming the unscathed poster child for escaping poverty. When starry-eyed middle- and upper-class students ask 'how did you do it?' I speak frankly about the painful reality of transcending my class background and what I lost in the assimilation process of becoming upwardly mobile. I point out to students that everything is not perfect now that I am part of the professional middle class. In fact, in some senses it is so much more complicated to straddle two class realities (Lubrano 2004).

Betsy finds that the middle-class part of her life story, through age 15, is often met with boredom. She notes, "Few people are interested in hearing how I grew up in a nice little 6-room house and attended a decent suburban public school." In response she has learned to politicize her middle-class story by speaking about the unfair advantages of her middle class upbringing, in comparison to her working-class peers. For other middle class educators, as well, there may be no dramatic secrets to reveal, and the educator's basic story can come across as uninteresting.

Stories of wealth and luxury tend to hold learners' attention and can counteract the presumption that there is no space for socioeconomically privileged student voices in discussions of class. By introducing three-dimensional stories with human flaws, such as Betsy's stories boxed above, the myth that the upper-middle-class culture is the ideal for all to aspire to can be shattered. And on the other hand, the archetype of the greedy, evil rich can also be shaken up by an actual privileged person's story.

Disclosing a privileged background, however, can sometimes alienate working-class and poverty-background students, and may discredit the educator with students as not having a valid standing to teach about class oppression. After

describing her affluent late teenage years in a calm, factual tone (as in the boxed examples above), Betsy has occasionally heard students infer meanings that are clearly projections of their own emotions: “Why do you feel so guilty?”; “I don’t think you should put down rich people!”; and even “Nice for you, but not everyone got to travel, you know!” Owing-class and top-one-percent educators may get even stronger reactions.

Whereas an educator from a working-class or poverty-class background challenges classist stereotypes simply by their presence in the classroom, a privileged-class educator’s presence may reinforce stereotypes about who can become a professional—an assumption that needs to be problematized.

Productive discussions can grow out of initial negative student responses. The further toward either end of the class spectrum an educator’s background falls, the more time will be needed for discussion and debriefing. We acknowledge the limited effectiveness of any single educator’s class background story and suggest a teaching methodology that allows for a more diverse educator team. Personal class stories work best for student learning when there are two educators with backgrounds at different ends of the class spectrum, with contrasting amounts of privilege or hardship in childhood and adolescence. A racially mixed team is ideal as well.

Hearing a story more similar to their own greatly increases learners’ sense of safety to take risks and the likelihood of ‘aha’ moments. Those from backgrounds of poverty or wealth especially, but others as well, tend to share more deeply after listening to an educator from their own part of the class spectrum. When co-educators model an attitude of warm, respectful listening towards each other it can open a crack in unproductive responses based on stereotypes and unprocessed emotions, such as pity, guilt, envy, and resentment. To see a co-educator from a very different background give rapt attention to the other’s story helps establish learning from diverse class stories as a legitimate use of group time and focus.

In typical classroom settings with one professor, this ideal of co-educators may seem difficult to achieve. A colleague from a different class background can be invited into co-teach a session or module. To know whom to invite means opening up sometimes fraught conversations with colleagues about class life stories, which can deepen relationships and create a more class-aware working environment.

Scaffolding and Timing Stories

If educators’ personal stories lie far outside the lived experience of their students, it is important to consider *when* to share. If such a story is introduced too early it can cause the students to clam up or not speak openly about their views for fear of offending. It is essential that students are practiced with the tools of responding in a productive manner before introducing them to stories from the extremes of the class spectrum. The same is true of introducing personal stories that convey complex social class concepts.

Because students have a particularly limited experience engaging with their class identity and the class identity of others, educators should consider how they scaffold stories and activities, ensuring to the best of their abilities that students have the background knowledge and social emotional readiness to engage with the content presented.

Example 5: Why and When Adj Reveals Her Family's Homelessness Experiences

When teaching courses on homelessness I often choose not to reveal the fact that I was part of a homeless family until well into the semester, or even well into the chosen text. I often assign Donna Haig-Friedman's *Parenting in Public: Family Shelter and Public Assistance* (2000) sometime in the second half of the course. I explicitly choose to do this because I want students to speak openly in an unfiltered way, constructing and sharing their views, and not hiding their biases towards parents living in homeless shelters.

It can be a learning moment for students when I share my story of homelessness, bringing the 'other' that we have spent the semester talking 'about' into the classroom as an individual that students are speaking to. Students can react to the practice of holding back information strongly. Some are upset, others feel embarrassed or self-conscious about things they said, wondering how I might interpret their views. Sometimes students respond with shock having believed this is an issue that affects only 'other people'. Still others express appreciation for the added element of personal insight brought to the class. By choosing to share this story later in the course, I am able to diversify student responses and allow students the context and time needed to process and respond to such information, recognizing that it can sometimes be difficult for students to hear.

As classism educators, we find that simple digestible stories to which most students can relate can be a good place to begin. As we move throughout the semester, we share more complex and nuanced content, as in the example below.

Example 6: How and When Betsy Shares Her Politeness Socialization

Class culture differences are hard to teach in the abstract without stereotyping (Bourdieu 1984). In Streib's book about mixed-class marriages, *The Power of the Past* (2015), she found that the middle-class spouses tended to plan and manage family life, while the working-class spouses tended to value spontaneity. To introduce this class cultural pattern, near the beginning of the module, I say something about myself that will get less resistance than a

generalization, such as: “Growing up middle class, I was taught to quash my emotions and be polite at all times, so it’s still hard for me today to be spontaneously expressive.”

But because class cultures are such an unfamiliar concept, I always wait to offer that self-disclosure until students have already engaged in some basic reading on the topic.

Inviting Self-disclosure

Successful scaffolding involves gradually increasing the risk level of the classroom activities. Inviting self-disclosure of class background from students falls high on the risk spectrum by opening a well of class-based emotional trauma that educators may not be prepared to respond to. In the worst case scenario, judgmental or mocking student responses to someone’s story may devastate the student. Sometimes not encouraging self-disclosure is the best option. For some groups, preparing a class to discuss class identities may take almost an entire semester, while others may spontaneously dive in early. Ensuring your students are prepared and feel safe disclosing is the most essential part of the process.

We have found that questions about other families, not students’ own childhood settings, are low-risk enough to ask at the beginning of a course module or workshop. One starter question we have found works well is “What’s your first memory of a family that had more or less class privilege than your family?” While most students may have only a latent class identity, they can often pinpoint moments when they have noticed having more or less class advantage than others. Thus, asking students this simple question can be a relatively nonthreatening introduction to sharing surface-level, social class experiences with peers. We advise *not* to expect or actively invite personal self-disclosure in any situation where participants could face consequences for not participating. Having adequate time to debrief what students share is essential, so we also do not advise self-disclosure in brief sessions when there’s little time to discuss emotional reactions.

The best possible situation is one in which power dynamics have been mitigated as much as possible and confidentiality ground rules have been set for both inside and outside the classroom. Ideally, students will have been prepared with adequate materials and activities necessary to allow for constructive ways to disclose and respond. In these situations, inviting class background self-disclosure can broaden student perspectives on social class, allow for personal introspection about class advantage and disadvantage in relation to intersecting identities, and turn economic inequality from a dry topic into a subject for heartfelt engagement.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have advocated a high-risk addition to the pedagogy of social class, but one with high potential for student transformation. Even the students who seem to have the least class consciousness do in fact have class-related memories, and they are in fact aware of class stratification. The challenge, which Paulo Freire (1970) took on with Brazilian peasants, is to uncover and politicize that awareness and channel it towards liberatory action. The popular education tradition has provided us with a model in which students and educators share life experiences and unpack them for the purpose of understanding the stratified social world and ideally working to change it. By deeply exploring your own social class stories, crafting them into purposeful vignettes, being vulnerable with your students and inviting them to do the same, you can open a door to powerful cross-class dialogue.

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