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Teaching the Truth: Social Justice and Social Class in Graduate School

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Introduction

Nowadays, anyone who wishes to combat lies and ignorance and to write the truth must overcome at least five difficulties. He must have the courage to write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed; the keenness to recognize it, although it is everywhere concealed; the skill to manipulate it as a weapon; the judgment to select those in whose hands it will be effective; and the cunning to spread the truth among such persons. (Brecht 1966, 133)

In the same way that writing the truth entails these five difficulties, teaching the truth or teaching social justice in graduate education entails more than five difficulties. Some of these difficulties are inimical to the act of teaching: How to name and speak back to power (courage); Deciding what to teach and if it can be heard (keenness); Designing learning that can invite questions about truth (skill); Working with students to find out when to speak and when alternatives are called for (judgement); Deciding how best to make our points heard and acted on (cunning). In many ways, it is the vocation of an educator (Collins 1991) to speak truth, call leaders to account, transform society, and facilitate learning. Yet at times we refuse to turn those challenges back on ourselves—to look at what we really do when we teach and when we learn in graduate education.

Our heroes, bell hooks (2000) and Paulo Freire (1970), were champions of speaking and teaching truth—that is, advocating social justice; as a consequence, we herald them repeatedly, though the degree to which we teach and intensify the effects of injustice have rarely been on our radar. Our education toolbox is full of devices to make social justice a reality in our classrooms—and for many of us it comes naturally to question structures (even if we are in a higher education institute); analyse texts (written and otherwise); and teach critical thinking (directly and indirectly). What we are less good at, we argue in this essay, is turning the camera on ourselves and seeing where we—as students and as teachers in graduate school—fail to enact justice and where we perpetuate social class norms and further social inequities. We argue here that

courage, keenness, skill, judgement, and cunning can be operationalized to more closely examine what we do about one of the major inequities in our society—social class, how we do it, and strategize on how it can be better. Like Bourdieu (1986), we see social class as comprised of a combination of economic, cultural, and social resources. Although educators, especially those in North America, have been concerned about injustices related to gender and race (social and cultural), they have been less concerned with how these interact with economic disparities. In this article, we reflect on and analyse our own experiences as graduate students and teachers to understand the place of social class in education.

Social Justice, Higher Education, and Adult Education

We realise that the place of social justice, which we view as societal “assignment of rights and responsibilities” (Sumner 2005, 580), in higher education is not without its critics. Public intellectual Stanley Fish (2008) comes immediately to mind, with his robust argument that there is no place for left wing values (code for social justice) in higher education, and that researchers and teachers ought to demonstrate and rally for causes on their own free time. Others, such as Harold Bloom (1994), argued for teaching the canon and finding a great books curriculum that could keep students sated, the world at heel, and ideas firmly rooted in antiquity. There has never been a shortage of those to resist change and to champion the status quo. Yet it is clear to us and to feminist intellectuals such as hooks (2000) and Thompson (2000), that there is no such thing as a value-free education—it is all political, and higher education is very much a contested space.

Adult educators, by and large, have indeed argued for substantive change. In *Adult Education as Vocation: A Critical Role for the Adult Educator*, Canadian scholar Michael Collins (1991) challenged adult educators to look at their own vocation, to question their assumptions, and to challenge the leaning to professionalism in our field. His concern was the need to examine our own educational work and our motivations. Others, such as Tisdell and Tolliver (2009), have asked us to be more reflective about our field and practice; meanwhile, English and Mayo (2012) challenge adult educators to bring a critical gaze to bear on our deliberations, our analysis, and our teaching. This theme of justice has been stated and restated in numerous publications. Indeed, it is hard to find a writer in education who is not drawing on the critical intellectual roots such as Bourdieu, Habermas, Gramsci, Marx or Foucault (e.g., Clegg 2011, Livingstone and Sawchuk 2000), on the insights of social movement learning (Roy 2004), the inspiration of women changing the world (Thompson 2000), and the practice of those teaching to transform. From the days of Jane Addams and Mary Parker Follett (Mott 2015), there is a constant emphasis on criticality of structures, discourses, and self, and these thinkers all say something similar: teach our students not to accept the status quo and to be active agents in their own lives and in their societies. In our quest to be critical, we have been strong on race and gender, but somehow have forgotten that social justice is also about how these factors intersect with financial disparities.

Even a casual appraisal of North American adult education literature shows that our guild has not been greatly interested in studying and writing about social class, especially with regard to in-class teaching and learning. There are, of course, some exceptions (Malcolm 2005), but certainly we are nowhere near the UK’s level of attention to social class and the need to “widen participation” (e.g., Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010; Thiele, Singleton, Pope, and Stanistreet 2014). The absence in North America may be explained by the dominant cultural narrative that this is not a classed society and that anyone can succeed if only he or she is willing to work hard enough. North American educators might rightly be accused of not “having the courage to write the truth” (Brecht 1966, 133) since the statistics on the links between class (especially with regard to finances) and participation are significant, both in Canada and the United States. For example, the Canadian Council on Learning (2009) reports that,

Students from low-income families are less likely to pursue a post-secondary education. Only 58.5% of 18- to 24-year olds from families earning less than \$25,000 annually participated in PSE in 2006, compared to 80.9% of youth of the same age from families with an income over \$100,000. (9)

Furthermore, “corporate capitalists and professionals are ten times as likely to have a university degree as industrial workers” (Livingstone and Sawchuk, 2000, 133). So, our participation studies are still consistent—the better the parents’ level of education, the higher the educational and occupational levels of children (Lehmann 2007). Yet adult educators have not been discussing these figures, perhaps because of a lack of expertise and skill in quantitative research.

Social Reproduction

Here, we might turn to social reproduction theorists such as Bourdieu (1986, 1996) to further an understanding of what we do in higher education, and how we can be agents of transformation or of reproduction. Bourdieu looks at how we reproduce ruling relations, privilege the social ways and values of the middle and upper classes, and how we prepare elite students for even more elite jobs. Bourdieu’s (1986) focus is on how that upper echelon makes the world better for itself and how education supports this implicit goal. Bourdieu contributes to a recognition that we tend to replicate forms, desires, ideas, and practices, in our hiring, in our writing, in our teaching and in how we think and act.

Bourdieu’s notion of reproduction sheds light on how it is that the 1% get more and more. He also helps us understand that economic capital is but one form of advantage; in his view, there is also social capital (networks, friends of influence) and most importantly, cultural capital. Cultural capital includes the advantages of “knowledge, skills, education,” as well as speech (linguistic capital), clothing, etc., that are often passed on in families and that provide access into worlds of privilege. For Bourdieu (1986), this cultural capital is accumulated over time through a process of socialization and acclimatization, and it becomes part of one’s habitus

(dispositions, expectations, ways of thinking). His insight here is into the ways that our schooling habituates us into a social system that reproduces itself, and his idea of habitus explains the disconnection of working class expectations, life, speech, and norms, from middle class and higher education ways of being.

Bourdieu (1986) further distinguishes three forms of cultural capital: *embodied* capital, which is written on our bodies through speech and ideas, *objectified* capital which includes our possessions, and *institutionalised* capital which includes our qualifications, diplomas, and educational level. All of these forms of cultural capital reinforce each other; indeed, embodied capital may be translated into economic capital when it helps us gain employment or entrée into a world of finance. It is through cultural capital that by and large we are socialised into that which allows us privilege in higher education. It is recognizable and fulsome, and our job as teachers and learners is to understand it more fully. Writer Peggy McIntosh (1998) brings these ideas one step further when she speaks of the cultural capital of white skin. Clearly, capital, race, and class are very complicated matters: they include more than money, though they are wrapped up in money. And they all intersect with each other to create an unjust system of hierarchies and exclusions.

We would say, cum Bourdieu, that working class citizens, though they may aspire to the middle class, are largely at a disadvantage in schooling as they do not have the cultural capital to gain ready access to the middle class in terms of expression, voice, and the ability to just fit in. If we use Bourdieu as a lens, we see how our experience of schooling either reinforces or negates our ability to gain access to success. Indeed, we see how schooling reproduces class through a system of rewards and recognition. According to Lehmann (2007), the disconnection and lack of access to rewards causes higher rates of attrition for working class undergraduate students. That, however, does not explain the experience of those who have negotiated undergraduate class hurdles and landed in graduate education, which may also negate their experience or force them to acclimatize to middle class norms. Bourdieu also does not help us understand how working class scholars and students actually succeed and how they use their own forms of capital to negotiate a challenging educational system (see Livingstone and Sawchuk 2000).

Social Justice/Class Difficulties

In developing this article, we not only consulted the social class, social justice, and sociology literature, but we also drew on our own experience of teaching in graduate school (28 years combined) and being a graduate student (13 years combined) to understand how graduate school education reproduces social class and fails to adequately address the key issue of social class. Following Brecht (1966), we tried to “write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed” (133).

Cultural Capital Shock

Leona and Carole have different stories to tell about social class in graduate school. Both are from working class backgrounds (Leona, rural Newfoundland; Carole, small town Quebec) and both are tenured faculty members in a largely middle-class institution. They clearly have accumulated a great deal of undocumented capital that has been a strength and not a deficit for them. Both Carole and Leona spent many years as graduate students at elite universities in Canada and the United States.

Leona: *I remember the first course I took in my master's program, at University of Toronto. I had “chosen” to attend a regional university with mostly working-class peers for my undergraduate education, many of whom became nurses and teachers. I was used to sitting in huge class, taking notes, studying and passing in papers, pretty much anonymous and unknown. When I went to graduate school in Toronto I found myself surrounded by mature, articulate women who voiced opinions more eloquent and often more informed than the professor's. Their suave confidence to speak at length on complex social issues such as feminism, patriarchy, and global conflict was completely alien to me and to the culture of “speak when you are spoken to” in my undergraduate years. I realised I was expected to have an opinion and to voice it. It took some time before I could find my voice, preferring as I did, though years of acculturation, to sit back and listen. Looking back, I realise my own resilience and determination in those years were quite remarkable.*

Carole: *I was so excited when I was accepted at York University in one of the best master's programs in my field. But exhilaration quickly turned to alienation. I remember listening to women who talked incessantly, and with great confidence, in obscure jargon that made them sound smart but unclear. I recall having done the reading but not recognizing the topic during class discussion, thinking I missed something important. After class, a student who had monopolized the discussion confided that she only read a few pages in the middle of the book! Honesty was clearly not important but pretending and “taking charge,” even if based on deception, were the skills valued.*

The stories, though different, speak to the ways in which voice is constructed and affected by those around us, in these cases by the institutional habitus (Clegg 2011) of an elite school for Leona. The social class, the embodied cultural capital that we carry (think clothing, vocabulary, and accent) is also carried through our experiences and our lives. Social class calls us back to acknowledge the ways in which lives are built, repressed, or celebrated. In these early days of graduate school, we learned that even though social justice–equity, feminism, and theory–were being named, we as women of working-class backgrounds were largely ignored and we found it enormously challenging to resist the oppression of our social betters. We wonder what would have happened if the professor in each case had “read” the room in a different way and had invited different kinds of participation that might have acknowledged what people brought (for instance, seeing resilience as capital and not a deficit, Clegg).

Dispositions and Habitus

For some reason, it is difficult to find extended discussions in adult education on the social class origins of students in North America. This is in contrast to the UK where discussions of class are far more available (Clegg 2011, Jackson 2003, Malcolm 2005) and where statistics on social class are readily available. A casual look at North American academic journals shows that our skill in large-scale studies is largely non-existent, so focused are we on the minutiae of the daily-lived experience. Though the turn to the qualitative paradigm was much needed in our field, it may have resulted in a dearth of information on our students and our field. The baby has been thrown out with the bathwater.

Leona: *One of my clearest moments of class consciousness occurred when I started my doctoral program at Columbia University in the early 1990s. I had completed my first degrees in Canada and then pursued further graduate education in the US. For the first two months of the program I kept being asked, "What college did you go to?" I was baffled, wondering, "Why are people always asking me that question?" In mid-October, I realised that in the US, college was the social class question and the right answer was Ivy League or women's colleges. In Canadian graduate school, the social class question was more likely to be, "Where are you from?" with rural and eastern Canada being the wrong answer. It was at Columbia that I realised the intricate ways that class played out and how it is actually sought out in everyday conversations. I saw my lack of institutional capital as a deficit, which I suppose was what they wanted me to think.*

In Canada, when government student loans became largely available in the 1960s through the mid-1980s, the government was subsidizing higher education to a great degree; during this period, at least financially, students like Leona could access higher education at an affordable rate. These days, with declining government support, increased tuition, and loans that no longer keep pace with fees, the issue of access has become more problematic. Of course, family income is not the only indicator of class—the ability to see oneself as a professional or as a student—habitus—is also part of it. In this story from Leona's graduate school days, class was not determined by financial resources only: it was determined by the cultural capital of attendance at an elite college.

Carole: *Although I was accepted to university at age 18, I did not go. I later realized that no one from my extended family or social milieu had gone to university. It took years to name my hesitation. My undergraduate degree was wonderful; graduate school was initially dreadful. In the second week, nine students in a class presented an article. The order of presentations was left to students and did not follow seating arrangements but reflected privileges each woman had: all white women, except working class, went first; the white doctorate holder was first followed by white upper class women from Toronto and Edmonton, two women of colour who had master's, and two working-class women from small towns. Privileged white women openly negotiated with each other across the classroom for who would go next, ignoring the rest of us. The teacher spent 1 1/2 hour of the 3-hour class engaging the first 3 women—white, PhD holder, from Toronto's upper class, and positively commented on the next two white upper-class women from urban centres, but had no*

comments for two women of colour with a master's or for the two working-class women. She apologized for mismanaging time but the same thing happened the next week despite naming time as an issue at the beginning of class.

And, of course, getting the degree is only one part of it (Reay et al., 2010); future fit in an academic world as a professor is yet another giant step. In the case of Leona and Carole, the fit, or lack of cultural capital, was a continuous issue. Again we wonder if the professor or the institution might have opened up the discussion, shared readings on class or discussed his or her own class and cultural capital, how these situations might have been.

Teaching Class and Resisting Capital

There is no doubt that the North American field of adult education has become more split between those who focus on the individual and those who focus on social justice (Butterwick and Selman 2012). By the time students get to graduate studies, economically challenged and culturally challenged graduate students often have drunk the Kool-Aid of the middle classes—refined speech, nice but not too-nice clothing, reasoned and considered opinions (not emotion), and leaving troubles/work and kids at the door. Their focus may be on justice but it is often in the form of reproducing what they have been taught and how they have been taught.

Leona: *In the master's program in which Carole and I teach, most students are part-time, a large percentage are women, and many have undergraduate degrees earned through accumulated credits from community college and portfolio assessment. For many, the leap into a master's program is a challenge, as they have not been socialised into middle-class ideas of graduate school. A great number struggle with writing and have multiple financial and other issues. The institution sees them as less than capable and penalises them when they can't complete on time. They have horrible things happen to them (cancer, divorce, death in family, job loss, sickness, accidents), through no fault of their own, yet the school (and indeed society) blames non-completion on lack of willpower and commitment.*

Carole: *Though the so-called truth is that we are all born with skills and abilities, those of us who have worked hard to acquire these know they can be taught and that we can catch up. It is our job as professors to demystify success by telling our stories of privilege and challenge, and to let them know they are not alone. Instead of blaming themselves, we encourage them to write their own stories of class, of their own lives. We refuse to hide the fact that our expensive undergraduate school has a lot of underprivileged students. Here in our graduate school, there is a table and a cupboard in a hallway that are used as a breakfast program for post-graduate students in education. In the interests of protecting identities, we are not supposed to look down that hall or comment on food shortages, and we have to pretend that there is no problem. There are problems with access, attrition, and persistence and they do not occur because of lack of effort. Some of it is really a problem and we are willing to name it.*

As Reay et al. (2010) point out, there is an institutional habitus, or effect of being in a particular school, at a particular time, with a particular set of conditions. Our university, with the exception of the graduate programs in education, increasingly draws more elite full-time undergraduate

students. In our graduate program, we feel we have a particular duty to help deconstruct this habitus, to help students name their own narratives of class and cultural capital, and to help question the given notion that universities are places that must reproduce behaviours, dispositions and ways of thinking. We have a duty, as professors, to resist this notion of conformity and class reproduction, and to help students think about the ways they have accumulated sufficient capital to succeed.

A Way Forward

Perhaps one truth is that though working classes may be at an initial disadvantage, they are not obliged to continue in this place. Livingstone and Sawchuk (2000) found that the working classes have their own ways/cultures of learning and resisting, which are often not acknowledged. It seems that a duty of adult educators might be to investigate this further to see if it applies in higher education settings, especially for graduate students in adult education. What might this mean if it were true for working class students?

There are others who have made suggestions for who we might bring the discourse of social class into academe in a deliberate way. Most notably, Irene Malcolm (2005) suggests we can make class more visible by encouraging students to “study both educational history and their own educational history” (49). She points to the rich reservoir of information and insight from our history—everything from working class history to history of social movements and union education. In North America this might include education of women and natives, and education in rural and remote areas. This suggestion is quite a challenge at a time when there are few to no courses in history of adult education offered. We have in effect wiped out our collective memory and in so doing have conveniently begun to think we are all alike and there are no differences. Similarly, Mechtild Hart (2005) sees it as her responsibility in higher education to expose her students, mostly women who are part-time students, to stories of those marginalized by ethnicity and class. In sharing a variety of experiences and in reading diverse texts together, students learn that others have experienced some of the same things—they too may have been sidelined or stereotyped in ways that have to do with class and racial expectations and norms.

Along with studying historical and other texts, Irene Malcolm (2005) encourages adult educators to engage students in writing their own personal educational history as a way to see the family classed and raced. In writing our stories of class we can identify historical conditions that can help us see why things are the way they are, and that we are not lazy, dumb, or unmotivated. Indeed, Leona and Carole encourage their students to do this. Similarly, Australian Griff Foley (2005) says we have to recover the category of class, define it, name it, and call it when we see it. Whereas there has been heavy investment in closing ranks around class, by saying that we are all the same, Foley says that teachers need to validate the existence of class and to acknowledge the various types of experience people have, just as Myles Horton and his colleagues did for groups at Highlander Folk School. Of course, adult education’s premise that the learner’s personal

experience is a good starting place is very important in this regard. We can challenge students to uncover their own class experience and we have a prime opportunity to allow that experience to count.

A second piece of advice re class in higher education comes as a response to our reading of Stanley Fish (2002) and other supporters of the status quo, who purport to be neutral in their teaching. Fish says that teaching is not a political act—“only bad teaching is a political act” (70). On the contrary, we cannot help but advocate “interests, belief, and identities” (11); if we don’t, we are reproducing the norms of middle-class society. Indeed, it is hard to think that Stanley Fish, a prominent public intellectual, isn’t advocating middle or upper middle-class values and reproducing his own cultural capital. Once an older, white male of privilege pronounces his views from a university press, people listen. Fish is teaching middle-class norms with his voice, his body, his clothes, his right to lecture, and his access to millions of readers. In placing the academy above the fray, above the political, he is further inculcating the notion that the academy and the everyday world are unconnected. Our students live in that fray, and we do too, so it is impossible not to engage and critique it.

A third piece of wisdom comes from Leona and Carole’s ongoing conversations about social class and privilege in academe. They suggest that permanent faculty in adult education might also turn a critical eye to their own status as middle-class professionals, many of whom have come from working-class backgrounds. This is often the case in entry-level professions, such as teaching that draw working- and lower middle-class students. Knowing this, we find it strange that social class—turned on ourselves—is not our focus in our field. While we discuss the environment, sustainability, and educational attainment, we often perpetuate middle-class norms: spend money, talk about sustainability rather than practice it, go to conferences that junior colleagues and graduate students cannot afford, and reproduce ourselves in faculty hiring. We would do well to see the class hypocrisies in our everyday activity that ought to be unearthed for discussion. Anyone who has taught in higher education has only to look at those who are hired to “replace” departing faculty to see that the degree of reproduction is simply staggering. The student only has to look at who we hire to know where we are in the system. It is important to ask ourselves critical questions of what kinds of professors we have teaching, if they represent various classes—social, economic, and cultural—not just gender mixes. The proverbial clause “we are an equal opportunity employer” might be understood to include not just race and gender but also social class.

A fourth idea is to question the curriculum and how we present it in higher education. In preparing this essay, we examined the curriculum of the largest institution of adult education in Canada OISE/University of Toronto). Its program description is worded in this way:

We make links between global policy interests in lifelong learning beyond schooling, and its practice... This catalytic learning, which is often

informal, forms the bedrock of vibrant, engaged communities which in turn creates opportunities for growth and facilitates equity for all individuals and groups, including those who are marginalized or disenfranchised. (OISE/University of Toronto 2015)

What isn't here is an acknowledgement that there is race, class, gender, age, and ethnic diversity in the classroom and that equality will be hard won until we recognize the role that class plays in that university. While creating "vibrant engaged communities" is an important perspective, we might do better to have courses on statistics and quantitative research so we can increase our proficiency and understanding of this learning, who participates and why, and how social class affects our progress. Talking about social class in our classes will require us to have a few more skills, including advanced numeracy and quantitative abilities; to study the issue it will also require the courage to say that in a great democracy we have a lot of people living in poverty. Who gets in and who gets out of our schools is an issue. We not only have to teach about race, class, and gender but also have the courage to talk, in an informed way, about class in our schools and not pretend it does not exist.

Conclusion

Being teachers of adult education, we need to expand the toolbox to include social class awakening so that we can teach the truth despite the difficulties. We can learn from our UK counterparts about being overt in our discussions about class, in speaking truth to power, and in naming what is often hidden, the reality of social class and how it plays out in graduate school. The stakes are high, especially since it is in graduate school that ideas about academic culture and practice are articulated and formed. Given the number of years it takes to complete a graduate degree, there is the possibility that we can resist the reproduction of class and given ways of being an academic (Linkon 1999). So careful have we been to keep scholarly traditions cemented that we don't dare discuss the biggest social justice factor of all, social class. We need to change that.

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