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# Working Class in the Library

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Bob works at PSU library and instructs, and learns from, a lot of students, who like himself might be considered non-traditional or first-generation college students. These students inspire his research, and the more he researches, the more he seems able to encourage these students to see themselves as academics—to find their own voices, ask their own questions, and build a future aligned with their own visions of what might be.

Portland State University is an urban, access university. This means that students don't face nearly as many academic barriers, such as entrance exams, in order to attend PSU as opposed to other colleges. Nevertheless, students do encounter many hidden barriers that affect their chances of getting into, staying at, and graduating from PSU—barriers associated with race, gender, citizenship, abilities, and the topic of this article—socioeconomic status. We need to acknowledge that all of these characteristics intersect and play out differently, so it's hard to look at just one of these characteristics at a time. "Working class" isn't the same experience for students who identify as black or queer or immigrant or differently abled. By pulling on the thread of socioeconomic status, we can begin to unravel how many of these other characteristics weave together to form the warp and weft of students' experiences in college. We have to start somewhere, and starting where you are is just as good as anywhere else—but while keeping in mind that we have no way of knowing where our journey might take us. For example, I am from a working class background, but I started off from a much more privileged place because of my race—white—and my gender—male—than many other working class students. But urban access universities that have lower barriers to admission, like PSU and the ones I attended back in Michigan, do seem to be a magnet for working class students. When working with all students in the



library, but with working class students in particular, it is incumbent on us to understand, and perhaps even use in our own practice, critical theories and critical methods.

At PSU we also have various programs that support non-traditional students who come from groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Programs that I liaise with, such as Summer Bridge and McNair Scholars, are similar to programs that probably exist on your campuses to support these students. I've written about my involvement in these programs in an earlier issue of *OLA Quarterly*, so I won't detail that involvement here (Schroeder, 2014). Being involved with the students in these programs has been one of the most enriching and satisfying relationships I've had in academe—one that has helped me unravel my own journey through the education system over the last (almost) 60 years. It's those relationships and what they've taught me that I wish to concentrate on in this article. As I am an Instruction and Reference Librarian, those relationships have been forged in classrooms, in student consultations, and at the reference desk. I want to focus on the internal and reflective work that librarians can do that will help us create meaningful relationships with working class students—habits of mind and habits of practice that help instill agency in working class students.

A quote from an Aboriginal activist group in Queensland Australia from the 1970s really gets to the core of what I'm trying to say about relating and working with working class students:

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting our time.  
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Critical pedagogues such as bell hooks and Paolo Freire discuss and model this kind of relationship in their teaching. They offer to us that education is more than students just gaining the tools for success in a profession. Though of course we must realize that helping students to reach economic stability and success as they see it in their own terms is essential. We must validate those motives but also realize that those motives exist in constant conflict and dance with other, more liberatory and transformative goals of education.

One thing this mutual relationship means to me is that we try not to start our projects with working class students with a “deficit” mindset. Certainly, many of these students may not have had many of the economic and academic privileges and advantages of other students, but they also have many different skills and advantages going for them—they did make it into college after all! We need to trust the wisdom in all of the students in the classroom and enter into dialog with these students from the very beginning, rather than helicoptering in and colonizing them with only what we think might be useful. While we are certainly a resource in the classroom, we represent only one voice—and we need to constantly reflect and bring meta-cognition to bear on our actions and reactions in the classroom. We need to constantly ask ourselves—is what we are doing meeting the articulated needs of these students, or are we acting in our own best interests and merely replicating the power structures that exist in the academy and in the world?

How can these ideas really work in a classroom? I'll offer up a few examples. When you meet with students to teach them about the library and academic research, do you come in with a tightly scripted lesson? Or do you also create a space for students to teach you what



they need to know? I'm not saying that, as librarians, we don't all have expertise from what we've learned, and at some level we need to trust our own knowledge and position. Rather, I'm suggesting that in order to keep current and really know the questions that exist in the room, we need to invite students into dialog. If we only dialog about the ideas that I want, then dialog itself will not ameliorate the situation. It's only to the extent that student voices and questions surface that paternalism will be weakened and power will be shared—not perfectly, but more equitably. Emily Ford, a colleague of mine who read an early draft of this article, pointed out a contradiction in what I was suggesting here. Is my plan for my classes just another paternalistic way of helicoptering in and colonizing these students? Am I really acknowledging the unequal power dynamic between teacher and students in a classroom? I agree that I do have to be aware of my place of privilege and power in a classroom—this is undeniable. But what I'm attempting here is opening up my classroom to as large an extent as possible in order to share some of this power with students: getting students to see themselves more as active agents in the creation of the class. I'm not going to offer up a full course of challenging the system in 50 minutes, but I hope to be able to at least show glimmers of what might be.

I definitely come to class “prepared” with ideas I think might be useful to discuss, but I also start many of my lessons with questions. I ask the students to talk with their neighbors or in groups about what they want to know more about today: anything about using the library or its resources, about the research process in general, or any other thing about the university that *they* want to know more about. I give them four or five minutes, then I ask the group to tell me their questions, and I write them up on the board, letting the students know that this will be our lesson plan for the day—this is what we'll learn more about. I think this process begins to set the tone that I am valuing their input, and I'm modeling the idea that learning, for both the students and me, is a mutual and constructed thing. And truthfully, many of their questions are exactly what I had planned on talking about, though I find that they raise many new ones each term—and this is great! I'm learning with them at the same time; as Freire says, we are both teacher-students and student-teachers (Freire, 2000, p. 80). I make sure to validate students' questions and comment when they have ones I've never thought about, thanking them for teaching me more about their research needs. This method is especially helpful when working with traditionally underrepresented groups such as working class students, and it begins to validate for them, in a public space, the notion that *their* questions are valid academic questions—that they should feel empowered to ask them, and they should expect to get answers.

I've also done similar modifications to the traditional “library tour.” If you're like me, you mostly cringe when asked to provide one for new students. Maybe it's just me, but the students I've taken on tours look like they want to be anywhere else but trapped in the library with someone who can talk incessantly about the glories of microfiche and the map room! So I created a “student lead library tour.” I prompt groups of students to go out to a different floor of the library and take photos of anything they think might be helpful with their research, or things they find strange or weird and email me the photos (working in groups insures that at least a couple of students in each group have a cell phone). When the students return to the classroom, I pull up their photos and have them talk about what they found interesting or strange, and I chime in, too. This method validates their points of view and




interests and sets us up for another creative and dialogic learning space. By inviting them to find “strange” or weird” things I show them that finding things strange or weird in a university is normal—none of the systems of academe are natural or necessarily easy to understand.

Having, at least in part, a “critical” lens can be important when creating learning experiences for working class students. By critical lens, I mean some understanding of class, gender, race, or diverse abilities that comes from perspectives like Marxism, Queer Theory, Feminist Theory, or Critical Race Theory. I’m not saying one must accept a critical stance *personally*, but I think we need to understand them as valid ways of knowing, just like other ways of knowing in academe, in order to serve all of our students. This can be important for a variety of reasons. One is that these theories support asking critical questions in the classroom, such as questions about power. Questions like, “Why do we privilege peer-reviewed articles in school? Who benefits from paywalls, and who doesn’t? Who gets to make up subject heading to describe *other* people? Why doesn’t academic writing sound like how I talk? Why do textbooks cost so much?” These are valid questions and ones that will resonate with most working class students. If we don’t support really hard questions in the classroom, then what are we modeling for our students? Do we show them that there are questions, perhaps ones close to them, which they shouldn’t ask in the university? Are we really saying our teaching is about social replication of inequalities, rather than the possibility of transformation? The way we choose to approach issues of class in our classrooms or at the reference desk class ripples out into the university and society at large.

I have an example of my critical lens supporting a minority and working class student. I was consulting with a student, showing her databases to use for her research. I can’t remember exactly how we got on the subject, but as we were talking she mentioned how she was noticing a change in her thinking and how she related to her family and friends since she’d been in college. She was struggling with the idea of how “becoming academic” meant, for her, becoming “something else”—accepting values and ways of knowing and being that were from a different class and from a white perspective. She was very uncomfortable with being in this liminal space and was even mulling over the idea of moving to a different state in order to not feel like she was being pulled by these opposing cultural forces while in school. Understanding a bit about class and race in academe, I was able to talk with her and help her find some research on this very subject that she was deciding to research as well. She was able to surface some issues from her own life and enter into an already extant scholarly conversation on a topic of personal relevance.

I’m not saying that just because you are a working class student we should track you into a certain critical mode of research. Many working class students will have assignments and research that align more with traditional modes of inquiry. But sometimes students are researching a question that arises from their lived-experiences as working class or a question that resonates with a critical theory. I think we would be doing students a disservice to not know about and not show them one of the more interpretive ways of researching used by Marxist, queer, feminist, or critical theorists. As librarians who do reference and instruction work, we need to be cognizant of how much the university is really a “multiversity”—a multiverse of different ways of being and doing. Many disciplines that reply on feminist or queer or post-colonial theories utilize more than just plain vanilla, qualitative or quantitative, methodologies; methods such as participatory action research or autoethnography



or Indigenous research. Knowing about these different theories and methods allows us to connect to many of our teaching faculty colleagues and their students who are already looking through critical lenses. Most importantly, for working class students, whenever their questions revolve around issues of class, we will be in a position to support and validate them and their diverse and wonderful and needed research that is also truly academic. With this deliberate and conscious support, we are helping to reinforce students' agency and the possibilities of transformative education. 

*This article is based on my part of an ACRL University Library Section panel discussion in the Webinar, "Library Services for Students from Disadvantaged Socio-Economic Backgrounds," August 1, 2017. Recording available at:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amSXjtERutg&feature=youtu.be>

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