



Deposited via The University of Leeds.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/239306/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Mottershaw, S. (2026) Class in session: discussing social class in the university classroom. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 45 (2). pp. 374-381. ISSN: 0729-4360

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2026.2617304>

This is an author produced version of an article published in *Higher Education Research & Development*, made available via the University of Leeds Research Outputs Policy under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

Class in Session: Discussing social class in the university classroom

Stacey Mottershaw

Management and Organisations Department, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

s.mottershaw@leeds.ac.uk

Stacey Mottershaw is an Associate Professor (Teaching and Scholarship) at Leeds University Business School and trustee of the National Educational Opportunities Network (NEON). Her research predominantly seeks to understand the needs of marginalised groups in higher education, with a particular focus on equitable and socially just career development work.

Class in Session: Discussing social class in the university classroom

This piece explores the benefits and challenges of discussing social class in university classroom settings. It emphasises the importance of recognising social class as a form of lived experience, which significantly influences both students and educators. The paper highlights how education systems can perpetuate social inequalities, favouring those from privileged backgrounds. By drawing on their own lived experiences, educators can promote empathy and inclusivity in their teaching practice. The discussion of social class can enhance critical thinking, awareness, and empathy among students, preparing them for careers in diverse fields. However, the paper acknowledges that the complexity of the topic can make it difficult to cover comprehensively within educational settings and staff may experience feelings of vulnerability in drawing on their own lived experience. Classed discussions can also lead to discomfort for students, potentially leading to feelings of alienation and conflict, irrespective of class background. Ultimately the paper aims to encourage higher education practitioners to reflect on their own classed experiences, to advocate for incremental changes in practice and emphasises the importance of thoughtful facilitation to create respectful and inclusive environments.

Keywords: social class; lived experience; vulnerability; empathy; inclusivity

Introduction

While the education system ostensibly rewards the most capable individuals, research suggests that it can reproduce, magnify and legitimate social inequality, favouring those from privileged backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Goudeau and Croizet, 2017; Goldstone, 2021; McCaig, 2022), awarding them the “prize of meritocracy” (Goldstone, 2021, no page). This paper explores the benefits and challenges of discussing social class in university classroom settings, asking how educators can use their own lived experiences of social class to foster inclusive, empathetic, and critically engaged learning environments. It aims to encourage colleagues across the sector to consider their own

classed experiences as a pedagogical resource, and to act as a springboard for changes in teaching practice, however incremental these might be.

Social class as lived experience

Before exploring the benefits and challenges of discussing social class in university educational settings, it is important to contextualise social class as a form of lived experience.

The very existence of social class in modern society is often brought into question (Van Bueren, 2022) and even where it is accepted as a real fact of everyday life, some question the existence of working-class academics (see e.g., Wakeling, 2010). In some cases, colleagues make use of Carole Binns' (2019) term 'academics of working-class heritage'¹ (e.g., Davis et al, 2024), as a way of acknowledging their change in circumstances, from growing up working-class, to residing in the middle and upper-class spaces associated with academia. Even for those academics who no longer feel working-class, many acknowledge that "the material conditions in which [they] grow up may have a lasting impact on one's identity" (Crew, 2020, p.22). This definitional complexity and the ways that academics of working-class heritage may experience class liminality – a sense of cultural dissonance, where they might feel disconnected from both the communities they grew up in and from the academic environments they now occupy (Francis, 2022) - may impact to what extent they feel able to draw on their lived experience (Crew, 2024).

¹ The participants in Binns' study (2019, p.40) describe their working-class heritage as encompassing the social and cultural dimensions of their upbringing, including parental occupation and the frequent experience of being the first in the family to attend university. This suggests that 'class heritage' refers to our own lived experiences and those of our immediate family, rather than distant ancestors with whom we share little connection.

Despite the complexity of social class, academics from working-class backgrounds suggest that social class has been an important and influential aspect of their lived experience and their professional identity (Crew, 2024). It goes beyond socioeconomic status to include cultural identifiers, such as “language, leisure activities and community [...] values and beliefs” (Crew, 2024, p.16). So even where (arguably flawed) socioeconomic metrics suggest they are no longer working-class, academics can still *feel* working-class (Beswick, 2020). It influences their perspectives, interactions, and their approaches to teaching and research (Crew, 2022; 2024). Working-class practitioners can bring a unique understanding of the challenges faced by students from similar backgrounds (Crew; 2020; 2024a), with their lived experience fostering a “strong sense of empathy” for working-class students (Binns, 2019, p.100). Through this shared heritage, they might be more attuned to the financial, social, and academic barriers that working-class students encounter, and thus advocate for more inclusive policies and practices. The social class background of higher education practitioners is a critical aspect of their lived experience, informing their course content and teaching methods (Crew, 2020), their approach to student engagement, and their advocacy for institutional and sector-wide changes.

Conversely, practitioners from higher socioeconomic backgrounds might have had access to more opportunities and resources, shaping their expectations and assumptions about student capabilities and needs. Their lived experiences might not include the same struggles, potentially leading to a gap in understanding. However, irrespective of class background, all staff have the ability to develop a more nuanced perspective that appreciates the varied backgrounds of diverse student groups (Cavigioli, Mottershaw and O’Connor, 2025, p.183).

The benefits of discussing social class

There are a range of benefits to discussing social class in university classroom settings, which are explored below.

Promoting awareness and empathy

Conversations about social class might help students to understand the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their peers, reducing the impact of disadvantage (Goudeau and Croizet, 2016). By discussing social class, students can gain insights into the challenges and privileges associated with different socioeconomic and cultural statuses. This understanding fosters empathy, as students learn to appreciate the complexities of their peers' lives. Additionally, such conversations can help to dismantle lazy and problematic stereotypes related to social class (Cavigioli, Mottershaw and O'Connor, 2025, p.13). Openly discussing classed experiences can offer a form of counter-narrative to dominant homogenising demographic-based stereotypes, challenging preconceived notions of social class and promoting a more inclusive environment (Davis et al, 2024). Ultimately, such conversations can contribute to a more empathetic and socially aware student community, where diversity is understood, valued and respected.

Encouraging critical thinking

By discussing complex societal issues and reflecting on their own role within classed structures, students can develop critical thinking skills. This process helps them understand how societal norms and power relations shape individual experiences and perspectives. Moreover, class discussions may help to foster a sense of community and collaboration, as students share diverse viewpoints and learn from each other, leading to

a more informed and socially conscious student body, better equipped to navigate and contribute to the world around them.

Enhancing inclusivity

Openly addressing social class in teaching and curricula can help to create a more inclusive environment, avoiding what Van Bueren describes as the “devaluation of working-class culture” (2022, p.225). Goudeau and Croizet (2017) found that making all students aware of where others have an advantage has no detrimental effect on those with the advantage but has a tangible and positive effect on the outcomes of those who experience disadvantage in the classroom. Such discussions might help to mitigate the impact of microaggressions, imposterism and stereotype threat (Nadal et al, 2021) and may even help to initiate or consolidate friendships, something which Rubin (2012) notes working-class students desperately need.

Preparing students for the future

Understanding the dynamics and impact of social class can be crucial in many fields, including healthcare, education and politics. Just 5% of UK medical school entrants are from the lowest socioeconomic background (Latham et al, 2025, p.5), showing how even at this early stage, the profession is not representative of the population it serves. Similarly, Ramlackhan et al (2021) acknowledge how the increasing diversity of students in public schools in the United States is at odds with the demographics of the relatively stable teaching workforce. Correspondingly, Devine et al (2025) note that UK politicians are “substantially different to the rest of the population on almost every metric” and that this is the case across “most or all established democracies” (p. 1). By providing students with the space to reflexively discuss and understand social class and its impact, we can

equip them with the knowledge to manage, address and help to dismantle real-world inequalities in their careers.

The challenges of discussing social class

Whilst there are significant benefits to discussing social class in higher education settings, there are also challenges to doing this, for both staff and students.

Complexity and relevance of the topic

Social class is a complex concept that encompasses multiple and layered dimensions of society (Davis et al, 2024), which can make it challenging to cover comprehensively in a classroom setting. It is not merely about economic status or income levels; it also involves cultural, social, and political factors (Crew, 2024; Binns, 2019).

This complexity is further compounded by the dynamic nature of class. Social mobility - the ability to move between classes - can be influenced by factors such as education, economic policies, and networks (Sutton Trust, 2025). Successful social mobility can also be an alienating experience, where beneficiaries of social mobility feel distanced from their communities, both old and new (Crew, 2024, p.20). Understanding social class requires a holistic approach that considers all these interrelated factors, making it a deeply complex and nuanced topic.

Social class influences every discipline by shaping access to knowledge, resources, opportunities, and power. For example, just 4% of doctors are from working-class backgrounds (The Sutton Trust, 2024). In the legal sector, the number of working-class lawyers is continually decreasing (Solicitors Regulation Authority, 2025, no page) and those from privately educated backgrounds are over-represented in media and broadcasting (Bradshaw and Merryfield, 2025, p.6). Thus, exploring and understanding

the ways that class is represented within their discipline is an important and relevant activity for all students, providing them with a critical lens to understand the social and genetic makeup of their discipline.

Vulnerability, discomfort and alienation

Working-class staff may feel vulnerable discussing their lived experiences of social class in higher education settings. Many educators, myself included, might fear judgment or stigmatisation from colleagues and students who come from more privileged backgrounds. This fear can stem from concerns about being perceived as less credible (Brookfield, 2015), tying in with the imposterism that working-class academics often report feeling when navigating higher education (Crew, 2021, p.53; Kilby, 2022). Academia often values credentials, qualifications and theoretical knowledge over personal experience. As such, working-class staff might worry that their classed insights, rooted in lived experience, will be undervalued or dismissed as anecdotal rather than being sufficiently scholarly in nature, which can in turn lead to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt.

It is equally likely that staff from middle or upper-class backgrounds might feel vulnerable sharing details of their upbringing and may be too embarrassed to share the structural privileges that they have enjoyed in accessing and succeeding in higher education. This might go some way to explaining why some privileged individuals misidentify their origins as working-class, to deflect privilege, and to instead position their stories as ones of heroic meritocratic efforts (Friedman et al, 2021). However, there should be no shame in acknowledging privilege, and those who have arbitrarily benefited from societal structures because of their class background must own this journey and proactively choose to facilitate equitable and inclusive educational environments,

modelling this as a form of activism for privileged others (Cavigioli, Mottershaw and O'Connor, 2025).

Staff will not be the only people who may feel uncomfortable discussing social class in higher education settings. Students may also struggle to connect with the topic, particularly if they feel that their own experiences are being scrutinised, dismissed or demonised. If not handled carefully, such conversations can inadvertently alienate or stigmatise students from different social backgrounds. As such, it is the role of staff from all class backgrounds to facilitate and manage such discussions sensitively.

Potential for conflict

Building on the discussion around vulnerability, discomfort and alienation, differing opinions and experiences may lead to conflict, which needs to be carefully managed and facilitated, to maintain a respectful and productive learning environment. Students come from diverse backgrounds, and their personal experiences with social class can vary greatly. Those from more privileged backgrounds might not fully understand the experiences of those from working-class backgrounds, leading to misunderstandings and tension. Similarly, those from less privileged backgrounds may believe that others have “had an easy ride the whole way through” (Friedman et al, 2021, p.727). Individuals may have preconceived notions or stereotypes about different social classes, and these biases can surface during discussions, causing friction and discomfort among students. Social class is a deeply personal and often sensitive topic, and anecdotally, these discussions can evoke strong emotional responses, such as anger, frustration, or defensiveness, especially if students feel their experiences are being invalidated or misunderstood.

Conclusion

Balancing the benefits and challenges of discussing class in higher education settings requires thoughtful facilitation and an intentional commitment to creating respectful and inclusive classroom environments. This paper has argued that recognising and discussing social class as a lived experience in university classrooms can promote empathy, inclusivity and critical thinking. Drawing on educators' own classed experience – whether of privilege or marginalisation – can enrich teaching practices and foster more equitable learning environments.

Suggestions for how to do this may include:

- Set ground rules: Establish clear guidelines for respectful discussion and uphold these with compassion and understanding.
- Encourage empathy: Promote understanding and empathy among students by encouraging them to listen to and validate each other's experiences. Model this in how you listen to and validate the discussion.
- Facilitate open dialogue: Create opportunities for open and honest dialogue, where students feel safe to share their perspectives without fear of judgment. Consider sharing aspects of your own lived experience, where you feel able to do so.
- Provide support: Offer support and resources for students who may feel overwhelmed or distressed by the discussions. Consider giving them opportunities to pause or leave the class; sending follow up emails with links to institutional or sector-wide resources; making office hours available for students to discuss any concerns with you.

By carefully managing discussions of social class in university settings, educators can use their lived experience to help students navigate the complexities of social class in a way that fosters empathy, inclusivity and mutual respect, whilst simultaneously giving them the tools needed to realise a more equitable society via their future careers.

Future research might explore how students respond to class-based discussion across different disciplines, or how institutional policies can better support educators in drawing on lived experience. There is also scope for policy development that acknowledges the emotional labour involved in such teaching and provides frameworks for support and recognition.

References

- Beswick, K. (2020). Feeling working class: affective class identification and its implications for overcoming inequality, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 40:3, 265-274, DOI: 10.1080/14682761.2020.1807194
- Binns, C. (2019). *Experiences of academics from a working-class heritage: Ghosts of childhood habitus*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Bradshaw, G., and Merryfield, A. (2025). Let's Talk About Class: Appealing to the UK's largest TV audience. *The TV foundation report*. https://www.thetvfestival.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Lets-Talk-About-Class_v5.pdf
- Brookfield, S. (2015). What students value in teachers. In *The skillful teacher on technique, trust, and responsiveness in the classroom* (3rd ed., pp. 85-102). Jossey-Bass.
- Bourdieu, P., and Passeron, J. C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. Sage.
- Caviglioli, N., Mottershaw, S., and O'Connor, R. (2025). Supporting Working Class Students in Higher Education: Developing Your Class-Conscious Practice. Routledge.
- Crew, T. (2020). *Higher education and working-class academics*. Springer International Publishing.
- Crew, T. (2021). Navigating academia as a working-class academic. *Journal of Working-Class Studies*, 6(2), 1-15.
- Crew, T. (2022). Classed markers of a working-class academic identity. *Journal of Class & Culture*, 1(2), 129-144.
- Crew, T. (2024). *The intersections of a working-class academic identity: A class apart*. Emerald Publishing.

Crew, T. (2024a). Exploring student support, class solidarity and transformative pedagogy: Insights from working class academics. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 45(7-8), 1042-1058. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2024.2392146>

Davis, C., Matthews, A., Mihut, G., Mottershaw, S., Hawkins, J., Rivlin, P., and Matthews, B. (2024). Co-producing composite storytelling comics: (Counter) narratives by academics of working-class heritage. *Qualitative Research*, 25(2), 350-373. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941241245954>

Devine, D., Turnbull-Dugarte, S. J., and Ryan, M. (2025). A class of their own: Parliamentarians are less likely to be perceived as working class. *West European Politics*, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2024.2434795>

Francis, R. M. (2022). Them and uz: Harrison and me. *Journal of Class & Culture*, 1(1), 13-30.

Friedman, S., O'Brien, D., and McDonald, I. (2021). Deflecting privilege: Class identity and the intergenerational self. *Sociology*, 55(4), 716-733. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038520982225>

Goldstone, R. (2021, February 11). Is social class relevant in higher education today? *LSE Blog*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/highereducation/2021/02/11/is-class-still-relevant-today/>

Goudeau, S., and Croizet, J.-C. (2017). Hidden advantages and disadvantages of social class: How classroom settings reproduce social inequality by staging unfair comparison. *Psychological Science*, 28(2), 162-170. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797616676600>

Kilby, L. (2022). Social class matters. *The British Psychological Society*. <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/social-class-matters>

Latham, K., Woolf, K., Medisauskaite, A., and Boustani, S. (2025). Unequal treatment? Access to medicine for socio-economically disadvantaged students. *Sutton Trust Report*. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/unequal-treatment/>

McCaig, C. (2022). Power, corruption and lies: Fighting the class war to widen participation in higher education. In I. Burnell Reilly (Ed.), *The lives of working-class academics: Getting ideas above your station* (pp. 35-52). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Nadal, K. L., King, R., Sissoko, D. R. G., Floyd, N., and Hines, D. (2021). The legacies of systemic and internalized oppression: Experiences of microaggressions, imposter phenomenon, and stereotype threat on historically marginalized groups. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 63, 100895. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2021.100895>

Ramlackhan, K., Cranston-Gingras, A., Catania, N., Brobbey, G., and Rivera-Singletary, G. (2021). Re(framing) identity: teacher educators' experiences with marginalization. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41(3), 852–866. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.1877632>

Rubin, M. (2012). Working-class students need more friends at university: a cautionary note for Australia's higher education equity initiative. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(3), 431–433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2012.689246>

Solicitors Regulation Authority. (2025). Diversity in law firms' workforce. <https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/equality-diversity/diversity-profession/diverse-legal-profession/>

The Sutton Trust. (2024). 'Diverse, but not equal: Inequalities in medicine'. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/diverse-but-not-equal-inequalities-in-medicine/>

The Sutton Trust. (2025). What is social mobility? Redefining Opportunity in Britain. *Research brief*. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/What-is-Social-Mobility.pdf>

Van Bueren, G. (2022). Enriching universities and scholarship by prohibiting class discrimination. In I. Burnell Reilly (Ed.), *The lives of working-class academics: Getting ideas above your station* (pp. 223-227). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Wakeling, P. (2010). Is there such thing as a working-class academic? In Y. Taylor (Ed.), *Classed intersections: Spaces, selves, knowledges* (pp. 35-52). Taylor & Francis Group.