

Gary Tate, John McMillan, and Elizabeth Woodworth

## CLASS TALK

*The panel "Confronting Class in and out of the Classroom," put together by three colleagues from Texas Christian University, was the first out of the gate at the CBW workshop. And the first speaker was Gary Tate. Author or editor of such works as Teaching Freshman Composition and Teaching High School Composition (with Ed Corbett), An Introduction to Composition Studies (with Erika Lindemann), A Writing Teacher's Sourcebook (with Nancy Myers and Ed Corbett), and Teaching Composition (a collection of 10 bibliographic essays revised and enlarged to 12), Gary can be said to be the writing teacher who taught us all how to teach writing, so it is both heartening and thought provoking to find him finding himself—and his field—exploring largely unmapped territory, making discoveries both personally and professionally significant. Joining him in this endeavor are two doctoral students: John McMillan, a "rhet/comp" specialist and co-editor (with Gary Tate and Alan Shepard) of Coming to Class: Pedagogy and the Social Class of Teachers (forthcoming from Heinemann/Boynton-Cook), and Elizabeth Woodworth, whose research focuses on the challenges late Victorian women writers posed to representations of women but who has also had a hand in directing both the composition program and the writing-across-the-curriculum program at TCU. What follows gives a sense not just of what the panelists did and said (and how they interacted with the workshop participants) but the thoughts all this provoked.*

Gary Tate

### Thinking About Our Class

*When I walked into the meeting room at the Hyatt in Phoenix where the basic writing workshop was to be held, I saw a room filled with round tables and chairs for participants and a microphone and lecture stand for the speakers. Because it seemed to me inappropriate to "lecture from above" on the topic of social class, I suggested that John, Elizabeth, and I just sit at one of the tables near the middle of the room so that our voices could be heard and so that we would be a part of the workshop. This worked well. And the presence of several workshop participants at our table as we talked gave me the feeling that a conversation was taking place. I began by pointing out that I would talk for a very few minutes about social class generally and about our feeling that teachers must attend to their own social class before bringing class into their classrooms, that John would talk, again briefly, about the power of storytelling in discussions of class, and that Elizabeth would then act as our teacher and give us all a writing assignment, the responses to which would be discussed later as the core of this portion of the workshop. Here is what I said:*

Elizabeth and John and I are here today to propose four theses for your consideration:

1. that social class—the perennial third item in the familiar trio, gender, race, and class—has been largely ignored in composition studies and in the academy generally,
2. that there are signs that this neglect is ending,
3. that the neglect of class must end if we are to understand our students as fully as we must if we are to teach them well,
4. and, finally, that before we can bring class into our classrooms in a meaningful, productive way, we must try to understand and come to terms with our own individual class histories, complex as these may often be.

Let me say just a few words about each of these points. Our neglect of class is not difficult to demonstrate, although it is difficult to understand. It has grown, I suspect, out of that peculiarly American feeling—a feeling praised by those who profit from it—that we are a classless society and that matters of class are, thus, insignificant, even embarrassing. Many of us have an easier time talking about sex than we do about social class. Whatever the cause, we have not attended to social class in the way we have attended in recent years to matters of gender and race. One searches in vain through composition journals for anything more than an occasional reference to the subject. And the books in the field do only slightly better. The names of Mike Rose, Jim Berlin, Ira Shor come to mind, but beyond that, very little.

Fortunately, and I move to our second thesis, the situation is changing. Let me mention some signs. At the meeting of this organization in Milwaukee last year, there were, if I count correctly, three sessions devoted to issues of class: two roundtable discussions and one special interest group. All three of these sessions were packed—people sitting on the floor, standing in doorways, and so on. A good sign, we thought. And we were right. This year, there are twenty-one panels and roundtables, two special interest groups, and this workshop. (Let me add, parenthetically, that the number of sessions on race has increased even more dramatically. Last year there were five; this year there are forty-five: this workshop, three special interest groups, and forty-one panels, roundtables, forums, etc.) More evidence of this new interest. Last October's issue of *College English* (1996) featured an article by Lynn Bloom on "Freshman English as a Middle-Class Enterprise" and my review of two books about working-class academics. A few issues before that Lynn Bloom had also reviewed a book about working-class women in the academy.

Not much, but certainly better than in years past. A Center for Working-Class Studies has been established at Youngstown State Uni-

versity in Ohio, and, in 1995, Youngstown State hosted a conference entitled Working-Class Lives/Working-Class Studies. They will host another such conference this coming June. To many of us, the '95 conference was a revelation. As I have said many times, it was the most exciting meeting I have ever attended, reminding me, as it did, of early 4C's meetings, where small groups of enthusiasts, not much honored back home, gathered together for support, education, good talk, and, indeed, inspiration. If you are free the next time this conference is held, find your way to Youngstown, Ohio. You will never regret it. Or go to Omaha, Nebraska, the next time the University of Nebraska at Omaha holds its Pedagogy of the Oppressed Conference. Both of these conferences are good signs that the landscape of class studies is changing.

Another positive sign is that at least three collections of original essays on issues of social class and teaching are being prepared for publication: one by E.J. Hinds of the University of Northern Colorado, one by Sherry Linkon at Youngstown State, and the one that Alan Shepard, John McMillan, and I are editing at TCU. Finally, a sure sign that the neglect of class is ending: Benjamin DeMott has just edited a reader for first-year composition courses, entitled *Created Equal: Reading and Writing About Class in America* (HarperCollins, 1996). When publishers of textbooks for first-year composition classes take an interest in a topic, I think we can say with some certainty that that topic has arrived, late though it may be.

Our third thesis, that we must attend to social class if we are to understand our students as fully as possible, makes sense to us and we hope that it will to you. Just as our lives and the lives of our students are profoundly affected by gender, race, sexual orientation, and so on, so they are profoundly affected by social class, be that working class, middle class, upper class, or whatever categories you choose to think in. Although the primary focus of the work I've mentioned—and of much of the important work being done today—is the working class, certainly the attitudes, linguistic habits, behavior patterns of all our students are influenced, in part at least, by their class histories. If we believe Lynn Bloom when she says that Freshman English is a middle-class enterprise, then we must assume that students and teachers from middle-class backgrounds will feel more at home in the course than will others. Be that as it may, there is a rapidly growing body of testimony about the difficulty that working-class students—and teachers—have adjusting to the demands of the academy. And there is some evidence that students from the upper classes have similar difficulties. One of the contributors to our book writes eloquently of her difficult transformation from her life of wealth to her life as a graduate student in English. Here are her words: “[I]n preparation for graduate school, I sold my Mercedes, put my Rolex watch in the vault, and boarded a private Lear jet [her father's] with one suitcase and my cat, headed for

a different life." Now I suppose that most of us would have trouble seeing *her* difficulties as equivalent to the difficulties of a working-class student struggling to survive, but my point is that we should not—as some of my colleagues seem to suggest—ignore all class difficulties not associated with the working class. The tricky thing about class is not just its fluidity, its complexity, but that it is so easily hidden. Just as the woman I quoted tried to hide her upper-class upbringing—not successfully, I can testify—so working-class students can hide their identities—or try to. The right clothes, the right hairdo, will hide much. What can often *not* be hidden, however, are the bad teeth, bad skin, the too-loud voice or brash manner (or silence), the struggle with “standard” English, and a host of other signs that will not escape the observant, caring teacher.

And so we would urge you today not to ignore the class positions of your students, because we are beginning to understand more and more about how these positions influence their lives in school, their learning styles, their behavior, their choices. Some of you here today, especially those of you from working-class backgrounds, could, I am certain, join me in remembering the pain and estrangement *we* have felt, as students and teachers, as we have attempted to “fit into” this strange and often hostile world of higher education, a world that has caused many of us to deny our past and to resort to coping devices of a sometimes dangerous kind. Drugs became my favorite coping device for many years, the dirty secret behind a career that has looked, on the outside, to be moderately successful.

This brings me to our last thesis: that before we can make productive use of our knowledge of students’ class positions, we must seek to understand and to come to terms with our own. And that is not easy to do, especially for those of us who have been hiding our past—from others, and, more important, from ourselves. *Or* we have been fooling ourselves into thinking that we have left all that behind. As my ten-year-old granddaughter is fond of saying, airily, when I ask her if she still likes a certain kind of music or a certain kind of jelly, “Oh, I’ve moved on.” The question is, can *we* move on? The answer, I think, is only a little. I very much like the way Janet Zandy puts it when writing about the working class in her anthology *Calling Home* (Rutgers UP, 1990): “If you are born into the working class and are willing to change your speech, your gestures, your appearance—in essence, to deny the culture of your home and the working-class self of your childhood—then you might ‘pass’ as a member of the dominant culture. But you will never *belong* there” (2).

So the question is: Where *do* we belong now? Where *have* we belonged? Who *have* we been? Who *are* we now? How we answer these questions depends, as Carolyn Steedman points out in her brilliant book *Landscape for a Good Woman* (Rutgers UP, 1987), not so much

on what has actually happened to us in our lives as on the stories we tell ourselves about what has happened. As I have begun to try to come to terms with my working-class past and to see how it has influenced my life, I realize that I have suffered not so much from the actual circumstances of my life, but from the stories I have been telling myself about those circumstances, stories, that in my case, left out entirely anything about social class, stories that had me struggling alone, the victim of my own personal weaknesses, my own ignorance, my own loneliness. Slowly, I have begun to tell myself different stories and it has made an enormous difference—in how I think, how I teach, how I live.

And so, this morning, it is to narrative that we must turn, to storytelling. Back to our very beginnings.

**John McMillan**

## Silos in the Suburbs

When I think about my own social class, the best I can do is approximate. It is this about social class-talk that I particularly like, that it is overtly what perhaps every other kind of talk is covertly—a best guess, a shot in a dimly lit dark, a story. Of course, according to some definition of “common sense” you could quite easily say that I am middle-class. Certain stories of mine fit well with this common sense vision: I grew up in the suburbs, my dad has an MBA, I graduated from a private university.

But class is a sticky thing, and as there are problems in saying “men are like this, women are like that,” etc., it seems to me that there are also some problems in resorting entirely to a kind of class-talk that says “middle-class people are like this, working-class people, that.” Class talk can as quickly degenerate into overgeneralizations and proclamations as any other talk, I imagine. That is, it can morph into those kinds of declarations that are attempts to end conversations and to explain existing power relationships according to first principles. Nevertheless, class is sticky, and perhaps, above all, what I mean by this is that class-talk resists depersonalization; and personalization is about approximation, which is the best I can do. And so I am arguing that, more than a place for proclamations, social class is an occasion for stories. And so it is in the spirit of Jesus’s reply to the young lawyer’s “and who is my neighbor?” that I offer the following collage of tales, or, you might say the stories that are the beginning of my theory about my own social class.

*Where it all began:*

Once, early in my undergraduate days, I was in a sort of church meeting where the preacher asked, "Did anyone here grow up on a farm?" Of course he didn't really ask it. He was trying to make a point about "real" work. He was talking about the loss of certain values. I raised my hand. I was the only one. There were two hundred people in that crowd.

I don't know why I did it. I'd done it without reflection. The preacher cocked his head and focused in on me. His look screamed that nobody was supposed to have answered that question affirmatively. It messed up his point. "You grew up on a farm?" he queried. "No," I stuttered, "I didn't." My voice was quivering. If I'd been standing I'm sure I would have fallen over. His face screwed up somewhere between a scowl and a snicker. He turned his head back and went on with his sermon.

Years later, older and tired of being embarrassed, I allowed myself to reflect a bit on that event. It was from that reflection that my theory grew. It is sufficient to say that, as random as my answer to the preacher was, I'm not so sure it was entirely wrong.

*A Theory:*

There are silos in the suburbs. There are church pews from tiny Pennsylvania Baptist churches in the office buildings of the city. Pre-dawn milkings and prayer meetings give shape to our days. The best I can do is approximate. So I'll say it again, There are silos in the suburbs; and, of course, they're in my classroom too.

*Allow me to explain myself. Let me tell you a story... or 3 or 6:*

My father was raised on a farm in Ohio; my mother was the oldest daughter of a Baptist minister who, over the course of her growing up, pastored congregations in rural parts of New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio--places called Black Creek, Wellsville, Pavillion.

From what I can make of it, it went like this: when my father graduated from high school, he wanted to go to college. No one else in the family had ever considered such a thing. A few of them were even opposed to it. He enrolled at Ohio State University in Columbus, paid his way working as an R.A. during semesters and by raking asphalt in the summers. Got a job at Kodak upon graduation. They funded his MBA. I know less about my mother. The oldest daughter in a family of seven children, after a year of business school in Olean, New York, she went to work as a secretary at Kodak. They met and married, I was born three years later.

I grew up in a suburb in upstate New York. I lived in the same

house until I left for college. When my brother was born, rather than moving to a bigger house, my parents decided to add on. With the help of relatives (my mother's father built a fieldstone fireplace in the new addition, peppering it with "stones from the holy land," I was told, gathered from a recent trip to Israel.) They built the addition off the back and cut out of the attic a room for my sister. My brother moved into her old room, downstairs, next to mine.

I started delivering penny papers door to door when I was eleven. You could work that young if you had a permit, signed by your parents. I graduated to the city paper a couple of years later and remember something of the excitement I had at the prospects of a real job where I collected money and got Christmas tips, where someone actually read what I was delivering. Eventually I passed the route off to my little brother. Later, in high school I could be found working at the local pizza joint six days a week.

My dad retired at age 49. He and my mother bought an old farm house out in the country. They have a barn across the street. My mom works as a secretary at a real estate office in the city. My dad reads a lot and keeps up the yard, works on the house. They both tend to the garden.

I tell these stories because somehow they help explain me (me explain?) when I am confronted with questions about my own social class. In a world marked by commercials and Cliff's Notes, stories are terribly inefficient. They are long, slow, and, at their core, are in opposition to the illusion of exactitude we've all become addicted to. Jim Corder, in an unpublished manuscript, has said that his best guess is that even the most orthodox academic paper is really only the very end of a long, personal narrative ("On Argument, What Some Call 'Self-Writing,' and Trying to See the Back Side of One's Own Eyeballs"). And Wayne Booth has suggested recently that "authoritative" discourse, whatever that might be, derives its power from its ability to conflate a reader's "narrative" and "authorial" audiences ("Where Is the Authorial Audience in Biblical Narrative— and in Other 'Authoritative' Texts?" *Narrative* 4 [1996]: 235-253)—that is, if I understand Booth right, it could be said that a text's power comes from its ability to un-story itself, comes from its success in erasing and effacing the storyteller. I want to say that class-talk resists this erasing— which might explain why social class has been talked about so little in the academy. The personal narratives of class are written in permanent ink. To un-story class is to cease to talk about class.

From my own class stories I see characteristics I name "self-reliance," "discipline," "simplicity," "confidence," and "tempered defiance," the last term being a kind of encapsulation of the previous four. I'm not sure if I like it yet, but I see myself trying to engender

these characteristics in my students in invitations to negotiate grades and assignments, in requiring self-assessments, and in my recent grappling with contract grading. These are the cells around which my stories of myself as a teacher grow. So that, finally, any account of the effects of my own social-class upon my teaching is double-deep in narrative: It is making sense of how the stories I tell myself about my class affect the way I story my teaching. Which is why I say that there are silos in the suburbs, and that they're in my classroom too.

**Elizabeth D. Woodworth**

## Chat and Write: Write and Chat

During this “teaching” portion of the workshop, I offered participants this plan: “I’ll talk briefly and generally about social class and me, and then I’ll ask you to write a bit about your reflections on social class and you. Then we’ll have a brilliant, lively, and illuminating discussion.”

### *Chat: Preamble*

Any time we want to talk about social class as an issue in a writing classroom, we have to first explore our own perceptions of our class. There are so many questions we can ask ourselves when we approach the issue of class it seems a monumental, even insurmountable, task. What is social class? Is a definition of class dependent upon our economic situation? Our race? Where we live? What we do for a living? What sex we are? Should all these factors be considered in a our exploration of social class?

In fact, right when we start asking questions about what class might be and what that means, the topic of social class wriggles out from under the lens of our microscope and defies demarcations and categorizations. It’s just two short words, “social class.” It ought to be a simple thing to discuss, to explore, to contemplate, but no, the connotations intrinsic to these two short words depend so much upon the individual (despite and because of cultural, racial, sexual, tribal affiliations). This difficulty, this reflection inward to the one and outward to the many, at the same time, necessitates a circular, an open and en-folding, connective approach.

A linear approach—suggesting one definition of social class or

another, one narrative for all — must be impossible — because how can we be precise when we talk about class? How can we talk about class without talking about everything else we believe ourselves to be? How do we sort this out then? If this is a topic that concerns us, and it does or we wouldn't be here now, we have to start somewhere. And to begin, you begin with yourself.

I have, like both Gary and John, looked to the stories I tell myself, have told myself about where I come from. I've looked to the stories others have told me about where I come from: my grandmother, my mother, my father, other family members, my friends, my neighbors. I've looked to the stories I tell others about me — and how that might differ from what I tell myself. Then I've looked at how these stories determine the person I am in the classroom. How have I presented myself to my students? Has my behavior somehow subtly or boldly declared what I believe about my social class?

When I began to dissect the narratives which fill my life — the stories about who I am, my gender, my race, my class, I began to see how all my perceptions about me affect who I am as a teacher. I wasn't surprised, really, or unhappy to find that, as a teacher in a writing class, I'm deeply influenced by my, and my family's, past and profoundly influenced by who I think I am at present, and the stories I tell myself and others about who I'll be in the future. By just knowing that I can somehow begin to grapple with myself and the slippery issues of social class, this knowledge of my confused state regarding social class helps me to begin finding new ways of attempting to reach students, no matter who they are, or where they come from, or where they're going, no matter what they believe, or what they look like. When I can begin to untangle my many narratives about me, then I can begin to unravel who I am as a teacher — keep the parts I like, discard what doesn't work, and even experiment a little. But most importantly, I can begin to ask my students to consider what "social class" means to them; I can ask them to write about such reflections; I can give my writing students the opportunity to talk about what has so rarely been discussed openly — but, I believe, so clearly needs open discussion.

### *Write: The Initial Assignment*

At this point I concluded my chatting and asked participants to take twenty minutes or so to write about themselves and class. The prompt below was announced and the "write" portion of our presentation began:

How do the stories you tell yourself and others — about yourself and your social class — influence your teaching and your

life in the academy, especially in the basic writing classroom?

At the end of twenty minutes, I asked participants to share what they felt comfortable sharing, as little or as much as they had written.

Following this are two sections, responses and reflections: a response from one participant to the prompt, and my reflections on this and other's responses.

### *Chat Again: Response*

One of the participants kindly offered us his text to include with this written version of our presentation. It is largely a reconstruction of what was written during the twenty minutes allocated (with some extra commentary where needed). The difficulty Gary wrote of earlier—that it's hard to talk about class, is evident here in my writing and in that of our volunteer participant/writer. But we did it anyway, difficult or no; we had a conversation about class and teaching and who we are and can be—contributing, in our own way, to the emergence of class studies as an important field of its own and an important part of composition studies.

Earlier John explained his notion that we “story” our teaching by using our own narratives to tell ourselves about ourselves as selves and as teachers. John says, “I tell these stories because somehow they help to explain me (me explain?) when I am confronted with questions about my own social class.” The sample response works this way too: it is an explanation of self, self trying to understand social class, self confronting social class histories. These are the stories that must be told so that we can, as Gary puts it, “bring class into our classrooms in a meaningful and productive way.”

*Before I came to graduate studies, I was a bus driver in New York City for twenty-one years. After about thirteen or fourteen years, in the midst of a personal crisis, I decided I was living someone else's life, that I needed to make a drastic change of some kind.*

*I am now a grad student and a teacher. Because I am a nontraditional working-class entrant in academe, I view my students differently than my colleagues who have traveled the traditional academic path. I used to think of the teacher/student exchange in terms of “otherness”: I am their Other, and they are mine. I am now what they aspire to be, and they represent for me my past. But, increasingly, I think of this exchange less in terms of difference and more in terms of likeness. I am more like them, and less like other graduate students, than I was formerly aware. I can no longer ignore the elite*

*and snobbish attitudes which constitute too much of the discourse of grad students about their own students. They can't wait to be rid of them and get back to their "real" work, their literary research. However, I try not to throw the baby out with the bath water; I condemn their attitudes and not their love of literature. Why? This is my love, as well. But I have learned that I am never more comfortable than when I am among other "nontraditional" students (grad students or composition students) because it is at these moments that I feel that I have come home.*

Leo Parascondola, The Graduate School, CUNY

Leo's response is an important one as it raises the issue of class within the academy, within English studies: the literature major vs. the composition major. Literature vs. rhetoric and composition—a rivalry that has long been a source of tension and also, as Leo suggests, split allegiances. A hierarchy exists in English studies which allocates rhet/comp studies to a second-class position. Talking about this class struggle is as vital for teachers of composition and literature as talking about their own social class histories, for by entering the profession of teaching English, they embark upon another journey in which class distinction is critical to self-perception, self-fulfillment. This is an issue that must always be part of our "class talk."

### *The Last Chat and Write: Some Reflections*

I can only give impressions now of other responses, but the impressions have stayed with me long after the experience, long after the actual words shared by the participants. Part of this lasting sense of what happened has to do with me personally—a personal class history thing that needs explanation, perhaps.

Every time I talk with someone about class issues and we exchange stories, I feel like I'm at one of those 12-step meetings: "Hi. My name is Elizabeth, and I'm confused about class—mine, yours, the definition of class." But the more I talk about class and writing, the more I listen to other's stories, the better I feel. I come from a strange place of mixed race, mixed class, mixed gender-role messages. I was raised in a German-Irish family but am of Hispanic descent (as I recently learned just before my adopted mother died). My mother's family were impoverished upper class from Chicago. Dad's family were dirt farmers and railroad workers from North Dakota with so many kids they shared shoes, and each kid only had one good set of clothes, one set of everyday clothes. My parents insisted that I get a good education, prepare for a career, be the ideal wife when I got married, be an ideal mother, the perfect super woman. Of everything I felt like I had to be, "edu-

cated" was the most important. My mother never finished college, despite several attempts over a twenty-year period, because she would not commit to school, but she insisted I totally commit to my education. Yet I also needed to know how to organize the perfect dinner party, how to garden, build shelves and such handy stuff, change a tire or an air filter, throw a baseball, cook tasty and nutritious meals, look great, be witty, be at home with a plumber or a CEO as my dinner partner, and throw a spiral pass (and when I wanted to grow up to be an NFL player, I was told ladies don't play football – huh?). My scattered sense of self, no doubt, contributed to the length of my undergraduate career – nine years, seven universities, six declared majors. I couldn't decide who I was – how could I possibly decide what I was going to do? And all along I feared that I would never graduate, or impossible of all dreams, get to graduate school and succeed.

Fortunately, John McMillan and I met the first day of graduate school and bonded over our shared fears that we somehow didn't quite belong. We confessed to each other that we felt uncomfortable in grad classes – just waiting for the elitist goon squad to come and knock on the door of the classroom: "Excuse us, we've come for Elizabeth and/or John. There's been a mistake. You don't belong here. You must come with us." What happened after that neither of us was sure – but we were convinced about that much. In some ways, even before we started to think seriously about class studies, we were talking about our class backgrounds, sharing our stories, sharing our fears about who we were according to who our families had been, what they had done, who they knew, how we valued work.

Last year at 4Cs, I listened to Gary Tate confess similar feelings about his class and fears of belonging – or rather, not belonging – and how such fears, when repressed, could profoundly affect a life. I felt, with some variations, he was telling the same story John and I had told to each other several years before. For me, he crystallized what it was I had struggled for years to understand – my self-doubt came from my inability to talk about my class, from my unknown race, my mixed view of gender roles, my sense that somehow I might not belong to the academic set.

Listening to the workshop participants, many of whom confessed fears of inadequacy in academe, was like listening to myself. And their stories have stayed with me – melting into my own stories – the ones I tell myself, the ones I tell others, helping me to further explore the way my social class history has molded my present and is molding my future self.

A young woman spoke about her life, her class, her family, with tears in her eyes, trembling hands shuffling papers in front of her. She came from a working class family who had become increasingly distant from her as she became more formally educated. Both she and

her family were proud of her achievement—a move to a higher class through education—but both wondered if she could really belong anymore. As she spoke, her words shook me—her worries were my worries—her experiences were mine. My dad’s family of high-rise construction workers were pretty well split between pride in all my education and derision for my “useless” knowledge. Did I really belong among them anymore? Clearly we were both (she and I, dad’s family and I) concerned about “class,” status. Even my use of “dad’s family” marks the distance I feel—somehow they don’t feel like my own family, only a family of mine via Dad.

I became distressed, eyes making tears, as I saw her struggle to tell her story. Her courage made me want to jump up and run to her and tell her it was okay—she was telling the story of all of our struggles with class issues, she was telling the story of our shame, our discomfort with the very topic of class. The details didn’t matter in a way. Not one other noise could be heard while she spoke. It was as if she had articulated the emotional and intellectual needs that had motivated the organization of the session, as if she had articulated the emotional and intellectual reasons we were there.

A shy young man shared his writing. He struggled to speak, too, as this young woman had, but was determined to do it. He was clearly shy about sharing, keeping his eyes on the text he’d just written, rarely looking up, pages shaking slightly as he read. His story was another one of fear and inadequacy in academe, exacerbated by his emphasis on composition studies. He had felt like the Other in the academy as a student, now he felt like the Other within his own academic department. Few teachers of composition could not relate. Class markers are everywhere—even in English departments—and it’s a deeply moving experience to talk about what class means to each of us. And while it might have been difficult, it was necessary to the participants to share what they had discovered about themselves through writing.

An older man, brown of skin and with an accent I did not recognize, spoke about class as an issue for the new citizen, or the “alien.” He spoke of the hope of the United States, the apparent “classlessness” of our society as it was perceived in his home country. But he realized after living here that there is a class system, even if not clearly articulated by our culture. He seemed less disconcerted by the class differential than the lack of articulation. And he admitted that this could be (and probably was) a result of other cultural influences. Living in a supposed “melting pot,” concerned with class issues, it seems crucial that we ask how the mix and contact of many cultural ideas of class are brought to bear on our discussion.

A young black woman spoke of the shock on her students’ faces in a heartland college when they realized she would be their teacher. Black, a woman, and teaching college. Wow. For her, she was also

shocked by her entrance into university teaching because of the lower socio-economic background she came from—something the students could not see, but a reality which added to her anxiety about being an authority figure. Her case, her response, her students' reactions are argument for striving to look at class, gender, and race as related issues. Could she possibly separate these in her own life? Can we separate these issues in our own lives? Can we start with class and move to race and gender as issues under discussion in our writing classes? Can we discuss one without the others? I think not.

Many more shared their responses—many ages, many races, many classes, women and men—all concerned with the ways we define ourselves, our class, our race, our gender roles. What was most important for me, many spoke about the ways they connected their “class-talk” with their teaching, particularly about how it encouraged them to reach out to students who are worried about not belonging or not making it. There was a general eagerness to share, despite the difficulty of doing so for some.

Like the first time you taste, do, or see something—there's joy and freedom and the desire to describe, and the fear that others won't understand your special experience. What this part of the day's workshop did (for me and for others) was alleviate the fear that “no one can understand me,” that “no one is like me.” And this conversation about class is exactly where we can start and what we can share with basic writing students who so desperately need to know they are not alone, who need to know that someone can and will understand them. That class markers are not brands that prevent success in the academy, but rather marks of distinction that need not—should not—be negative.

Throughout the remainder of the conference, participants stopped me regularly to say what an impact the workshop had on their thinking, how they enjoyed what had happened throughout the day, but mostly what I heard was that being able to write and talk about social class in a safe place was liberating. Isn't this what we hope to give our students in writing classes—the chance to write in a safe place? Isn't our agenda to give our students a chance to grow as writers? Don't we hope we can help them to places where they can think beyond where they've been before? Don't we hope they will find new ways of seeing themselves and others through their writing?

For Gary, John, and I, the workshop proved to be a fertile ground for further thinking and talking about class and writing, basic writing especially, as we made new friends, shared stories and ideas, learned new strategies for helping the basic writer, and came to understand a bit more about ourselves as selves and teachers.