Teaching Graduate Students about Social Class

Using a Classifying Activity with an Inductive Approach

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Introduction

Teaching about social class, or socioeconomic status,[1] is an important undertaking, but one that is particularly challenging for a number of reasons. For one, many Americans tend to see our society as having a very open class system, which can lead them to overlook the costliness of the inequality that does exist (Breen & Jonsson, 2005).[2] Second, discussion of social class can be uncomfortable (Davis, 1992) and rife with stereotyping and thus difficult to manage.

Third, conventional wisdom tells us that class consciousness among Americans is underdeveloped if not altogether lacking (Tynes, 2001)—perhaps due in part to the limited way in which poverty is defined (Greenberg, 2007) and also portrayed in the news media (FAIR, 2007)—although this wisdom has been challenged (e.g., Vanneman & Cannon, 1987). Fourth, while scholarship on teaching about human difference and inequality has increased in the past couple of decades, most of the attention has been paid to race, ethnicity, and gender; hence, there is somewhat less pedagogical support in the area of social class (Adair & Dahlberg, 2003).

Teaching about social class holds special significance for students who will work in the fields of education and human services. Students who are preparing to be (or are already) educators or educational administrators, counselors, or social workers, for example, are relatively privileged compared to many of the people with whom they do or will work.[3] The specific unit within the institution where I teach has a stated goal of preparing educators and human services professionals for work in urban settings, primarily in educational and community institutions. Therefore, these professionals will likely work with students who not only differ from them racially and/or ethnically, but also socioeconomically. In order to enhance their ability to be successful in these contexts, these persons need to understand social class in a sophisticated way.

I teach this mix of students in multiple courses, including a master's level course in sociology of education and a doctoral course on the social and cultural aspects of schooling. The majority of the students I encounter, however, are enrolled in a master's course called "Education and Society." This course falls under the category of social foundations of education, which is a subfield that relies on the concepts and modes of inquiry of the "foundational disciplines" of the humanities (especially history and philosophy) and the social sciences (especially sociology, anthropology, and political science).

This type of course is commonly offered in universities across the nation. Foundations courses date back to the 1930s, and even though they have taken many forms since that time, a constant feature has been their dual descriptive and prescriptive dimensions: a focus on "what schools *are* doing and what they *ought to be* doing" (CLSE, 1996: 5; emphasis in original). At my institution, various instructors teach the education and society course. The disciplines from which each one draws depend on his or her academic interests and training; in my case, they are mainly philosophy, sociology, and political science.

A Starting Point

One starting point for teaching about social class is with a definition of the term. Many different definitions exist and there are a number of good ones from which to choose. However, a definition can come across as mere words on a page if the necessary connections are not made to render the definition more meaningful. This is why, instead of beginning a discussion of social class in education with a stated definition, I find it useful to allow to students to work toward a self-generated definition of the concept.

On the surface, this may appear to be an inappropriately elementary point of departure for a class of master's students. Yet it seems to work rather well for a few reasons. For one thing, the activity is designed to be a discussion starter for that day's class session—to invite the students into a deeper exploration of the topic. The lecture and discussion that follow the activity feature a much more detailed and specific investigation of class inequality in education; the assigned readings also offer a greater level of detailed analysis.

Second, the activity is designed to disrupt some of their commonsensical thinking around the construction of social class categories, not to introduce them to the concept for the first time in their lives. Third, the course hosts students from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds, so there is no assumed baseline of knowledge about social class. Some of the students have not by this point in the course thought very much about class dynamics in educational institutions, while others of them have acquired a great deal of professional experience with students of various class backgrounds.

In addition, there are always a number of students who announce that they were undergraduate sociology majors and thus expect the discussion to be familiar territory to them; and on occasion there are even students who are pursuing a master's degree in sociology who take the course out of a particular interest in education. My experience with the course is that each of these types of students has found the activity to be beneficial on some level.

There are, of course, any number of effective strategies and approaches that can be and have been used to teach about social class in general and class inequality in

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particular (e.g., Parker & Howard, 2009). Both the approach and the specific activity that I describe here are consistent with those other approaches and strategies; it is merely one more addition to the existing repertoire. What is relatively unique to my approach is that it relies upon one model of instruction that is supported by research on teaching—an inductive model.

An inductive model of instruction is intended to accomplish two main goals: "to help students acquire a deep and thorough understanding" of a concept, and "to put students in an active role in the process of constructing their understanding" of it (Eggen & Kauchak, 2001, p. 116). This foundation supports the more involved discussion of social class and education that follows in the course.

The Activity

Before starting this activity, the students read some sections from their main textbook that deal with social mobility and its relationship to education (a past example was Levine & Levine, 1996), as well as a separate book chapter that deals with capitalism and its consequences for schooling (Brosio, 1998). However, since I begin that day's class with the activity, the students are prepared for a more sophisticated discussion of the subject matter explored in the readings.

The activity is comprised of four steps, all of which are conducted aloud and with the participation of the entire class (the maximum enrollment is 30). For the first step, I start by saying that although there are many conceptions of social class, I think it will be beneficial for them to generate their own understanding, informed of course by what we have learned and by their own experience in the world. As an initial act toward creating this definition, I ask the students to enumerate all of the determinants of social class that come to their minds; some of their responses are based on what they have read for the course, and some are based on their own understandings developed outside of the course.

As the students enumerate the indicators of class, I write each one on the board. There are times when a student offers an item whose value as a determinant is not readily apparent (like religious affiliation, for example); when I sense or when a student verbally expresses a bit of confusion, I ask the person who offered the item in question to explain why they offered it in order to aid everyone's understanding of their thinking. Students also proffer items that are unpopular, as demonstrated by their classmates' oral disagreement. In either the case of confusion or of disagreement, I remind students that I will list *all* offered items and that they may ask for clarification but may not challenge any items at this point in the activity.

My reminders are straightforward but lighthearted, and students generally comply with them without needing additional reminders. I allow the students to continue for as long as they desire, but there is usually a point a couple of minutes into the activity at which it becomes obvious that no more items are going to be offered. At this point, I ask the class to take a few seconds to review the list in its entirety, and then I move to the next step.

The second step requires students to highlight what they see as the three or four most useful indicators from the list on the board—the ones that carry the most weight in our (i.e., American) determinations. I conduct this part of the activity by asking the students to raise a hand for each item that should be considered one of the most useful. Any student is allowed to raise his or her hand as many times as desired; the "winners" are determined by the items that receive the largest number of votes. I read each item aloud, and then ask students to raise their hands.

This process moves more quickly than it may seem, because it is not usually necessary to count the hands each time. For example, there are a couple of items that receive an overwhelming majority or a unanimity of votes; this is obvious by eye count, so a formal count is unnecessary. Similarly, there are several items that receive no or very few votes, so those are easy to identify as "losers." As I go through the list, I indicate next to each item whether it is a winner, a loser, or a "maybe." By the time every item has been voted on, the winners are usually apparent; a recount between two items is rarely necessary. I allow the decision whether to select three or four winners to depend on the votes. I circle or underline (or otherwise highlight) the selected determinants so that they stand out visually.

The third step of the activity proceeds quickly, but it is nonetheless rather important. I start by drawing the beginnings of a grid on the board, which at this point consists of three horizontal lines and one vertical line (see Figure 1 for the complete grid). After this, I tell the students that, although there are a host of class demarcations that are used in everyday discourse and in scholarly literature, I want them to name what they think are the most commonly used lay terms in American society.

Initially, I solicit labels for the three main levels, which students of course identify as lower class, middle class, and upper class; I write these labels next to each of the three rows. Next, I tell them that I would like to subdivide the three categories into six substrata in order to give us more flexibility for the activity and to reflect better how we label people in our society. I draw three more horizontal lines to create six rows, two for each major class category. This part usually requires some prompting on my part to move it along. I strive to gain consensus on the substratum labels, which

Figure 1.
Grid for Steps 3 and 4

		Person 1	*Person 2*	*Person 3*	*Person 4*
UC	*Label for substratum F*				
UC	*Label for substratum E*				
MC	*Label for substratum D*				
MC	*Label for substratum C*				
LC	*Label for substratum B*				
LC	*Label for substratum A*				

means sometimes negotiating strongly-held objections to certain labels. I move to the next label when the class has agreed on one label or when those who do not agree are only weakly opposed to what has been supported by the majority.

In the fourth step, I ask students to use the determinants identified earlier—with particular emphasis on the three or four major ones—in order to classify well-known figures in American society within our six-stratum grid. I suggest to them that this part of the activity should be relatively easy since "we" in our society seem to label people with social class markers very easily and definitively. Indeed, by this point in the course, students have already made a number of generalizations about certain social classes without any hint of uncertainty.

To begin this step, I say something like, "Based on what you know about the following people, and using the determinants you just identified, especially the major ones, how would you classify them?" I draw four vertical lines to create four columns, one for each person that will be classified. Prior to the very first time I conducted this activity, I gave a lot of thought to the persons I would ask my students to classify. I wanted figures who might seem easy to label on the surface, but whose characteristics upon reflection would complicate the process and make students think more deeply about how class identification works. I have used the four people I settled on almost every time I have conducted the activity.

The first person I present is myself. I tell them to use whatever knowledge they have about me (but I refuse when asked to give them additional information on the spot). I assure the students that I will not be offended by their labeling of me. I ask them to call out where they would place me. After that, I call on a few students who placed me in each category and ask them to explain their respective classification of me. The second person is Bill Clinton; I ask students to classify him according to what they perceive to be his current class status and I repeat the process described above. The third person is actress Pamela Anderson, who has both Canadian and American citizenship. The fourth and last person I use is Mother Teresa, who was made an honorary citizen of the United States in 1996. Since she is no longer living, I ask students to consider her status at the point before her death.

As I facilitate this step, I make sure to point out when students, in their explanations, mention new determinants that do not already appear on the list generated in steps one and two; I then add them to the list. This is a meaningful element, as it draws attention to those determinants that they overlooked or did not think of earlier.

This fourth step in the activity consistently generates lots of excitement, debate, and reflection. When I decide that students have struggled enough with the classification of the last figure, I announce that we will conclude the activity by moving to a post-activity discussion of what we have learned and what conclusions we have reached. In this discussion, I encourage them to appreciate the complexity of social class. I use the debates over the examples to point out the lack of agreement around what determines class status, and I highlight the importance of the determinants that were added as the activity progressed. Finally, the discussion ends with a group-generated, redefined explanation of the dimensions of social class.

Outcomes

As one would expect, during step one the students always mention income, occupation, and level of educational attainment as determinants of class. Family background, place of residence, material possessions, and manner of dress—or some variant of these terms—are always offered as well. Frequently but not always mentioned are wealth, type of school(s) attended, linguistic practices, habits or manners, associations, and leisure activities. Finally, there are a number of determinants that are offered infrequently: race, gender, religious affiliations, and goals or aspirations. As for the indicators that are deemed most useful, it probably comes as no surprise that the three most common ones are education, occupation, and income; the fourth one (if there is one) is usually wealth or family background.

The subcategory labels chosen during step three have varied a little from course to course, but the combinations are not very numerous. For the lower class category, the "lowest" substratum (A) has been labeled (in decreasing order of frequency) poor, impoverished, or underclass; the higher of the lower class subcategories (B) has been labeled working class or working poor. The middle class labels have been the easiest around which to reach consensus, with students almost always unanimously naming subcategory (C) lower middle class and subcategory (D) upper middle class. The upper class labels, on the other hand, have been the most difficult for students to agree upon and have required the most facilitation from me.

When students seem to be struggling, I offer a few possible labels for them to consider, but I try hard to avoid giving suggestions since I want the definitions to be as self-generated as possible. For this class category, students have occasionally expressed dissatisfaction with a particular label that has been offered, but then have indicated their acceptance of that label for lack of being able to come up with a more satisfactory one. The names for the lower of the upper class substrata (E) have been rich, upper class, and lower upper class; for the higher substratum (F), they have been wealthy, elite, superrich, ruling class, and upper upper class.

The classification process has always gotten off to a good start. Students have placed me almost always in either the upper middle (D) or, much less frequently, the lower upper (E) substratum (on only two occasions was I placed in substratum C). They say that they base their classification on my level of educational attainment, occupational prestige, presumed income, and, usually, on the way I dress and on the way I speak. Not surprisingly, the students tend to find me easy to classify.

When we move to Bill Clinton the widespread agreement always begins to fall apart. Clinton has been placed in the highest substratum, in the next to highest substratum, and in the lower middle class category. In defense of the highest placement (F), students argue that the status of his former occupation alone explains their choice. The students who place Clinton in substratum E generally say that his former occupation, education, income, and wealth certainly locate him as upper class, although students have usually been rather uncertain about Clinton's income and wealth.[4] But the fact that he does not have the wealth of, say, Bill Gates, keeps them from placing him in the highest level. When those who place Clinton in category C explain their choice is when newly identified determinants begin to come up (discussed below). Typically, they claim that his indiscretions in the White House were not "classy" and thus besmirched his reputation and weigh heavily in their evaluation of him. Their reasoning appears to be that, while it would be absurd to categorize him as lower class, he should be placed as low on the class ladder as possible—hence lower middle class.

As for Pamela Anderson, the mere

mention of her name often prompts laughter, at which point I encourage them to take her seriously for the activity. There have been only a few instances when international students were not familiar with her. Again, new determinants are often mentioned. Some students place her in substratum F, arguing that her fame, visibility, and influence, not to mention her income, put her there. Many students vote to place her in substratum E because they see her income as being high but not at the highest level, and see her occupational prestige as being high but her specific path to getting there as a bit distasteful. Lastly, a few always place her in category C and even B because of her level of education and also for the same reasons for placing Clinton in category C.

Invariably, Mother Teresa presents the biggest challenge to students' classification efforts. She typically ends up being categorized in almost every substratum, with most of the votes being for categories B, E, and F. Students mention, for example, that she had few material possessions but a great deal of influence, which complicates their ability to classify her. Interestingly, more students have refrained from voting in this round than in any other.

Pointing out New Determinants

In considering Bill Clinton, students almost always state that power and influence were determinants they used in assigning him to a class category; however, in the numerous times I have conducted the activity, only two or three students have thought to mention either power or influence when we compile the list during step one. With Pamela Anderson, when students have commented that she is "low class" or "not classy," I have pushed them to name a determinant that could be connected to the sentiment they have expressed; they have identified the determinant as either tastes or values (or both). Only rarely have students named either of these during step one. And the example of Mother Teresa frequently leads the class to identify another new determinant: availability of choices. They insightfully observe that although she could be thought of as having been in poverty, she remained there as a result of a set of conscious decisions. Also, they mention that her "poverty" was different in that she had the institutional support and resources to meet all of her needs, which is not characteristic of being in an impoverished state.

There are many "lightbulb" moments that occur during the activity, but perhaps the most profound one is when the students try to classify Mother Teresa. In each course in which I have used the activity, some student has declared that she "doesn't fit" or "transcends" the classification grid or that she is "off the chart." This signals an important turning point, for it underscores for them the limitations of any simple attempt (or even not-so-simple attempt) to define a construct such as social class and the fragility of some understandings of class. This is the reason why I use her as the final example prior to our discussion of the entire activity.

The post-activity discussion is quite fascinating, especially as students offer conclusions about how we think about and define social class. For the sake of discussion, I make sure to mention that their initial identification of the major determinants (again, usually income, occupation, education) is consistent with how many in scholarly and non-scholarly discourses define class. At the same time, I applaud their efforts to think beyond how the construct is frequently defined.

To this point, students generally offer the following insight in some form or another: that money and education and occupation matter, but sometimes they can be trumped in importance by another criterion—and that power matters as well. This reflects a more nuanced understanding of class, and I believe that they are able to articulate it as such as a result of the activity. We end with a working definition that the students generate. It varies from course to course, but what is usually different from the definition they started with is that it makes reference to power in some way, which I see as a major accomplishment.

Even if students come away with a more sophisticated understanding of class, it is important to heed the caution raised by Brezina (1996) so as to warn students of the problems of seeing class as merely a characteristic of individuals. To do this, I follow the activity with a discussion of course readings that take a more institutional perspective by focusing on stratification in society, the role that schooling plays in this stratification, and the influence of capitalism on schooling.

Discussion

I have used this activity 25 or so times with over 600 students in my master's level courses on education and society. As I indicated earlier, the activity may appear to be better suited for an undergraduate audience. However, the relative maturity of the students in the master's courses makes a difference, I think, and helps the activity to work especially well at this level of study. Virtually all of these students have been over the age of 23 at the time of the course, and the large majority of them are either already working as educators or social service professionals, or are career changers who have worked for some years (even for decades) in another field.

The greater likelihood of them having work experience, and also life experience as heads of households, informs their responses throughout the activity in a way that yields a very rich experience. However, undergraduates could easily benefit from the activity as well. Actually, their respective experience and level of knowledge could lead the activity down a quite different and equally interesting path.

As another modification, other American figures could be used instead of the ones I have identified. They would only need to be chosen carefully so that the students' attempts to classify them would likely yield a variety of views that would open up and not close down discussion.

I have not used the activity in classes larger than 30, but a few minor adjustments could make it work in such a setting. The students could still offer individual responses aloud during steps one, three, and four, even though a smaller percentage of the whole class would get to participate. And all of the students could participate in the voting during steps two, three, and four—by a simple show of hands, or, if the instructor is sufficiently inclined and equipped, by using the "clicker" technology that is increasing in use on many campuses.

The most important adjustment, however, is that the instructor would have to work harder to keep the environment from becoming unmanageable. Because of the excitement and differences of perspective, the discussion could get out of hand or could devolve into numerous sidebar conversations among students; constant instructor attentiveness and facilitation would be even more crucial in a larger setting. Another option for a large lecture course that meets multiple times per week would be to employ the activity in the smaller recitation/discussion sections.

The classifying activity is one means among many of expanding students' thinking about social class. As indicated earlier, it is designed around an inductive approach to teaching. This approach

promotes student comprehension and involvement through the careful selection of examples that clearly illustrate the topic being taught and the skilled guidance of their thinking as they construct their own understanding of the topic (Eggen & Kauchak, 2001).

My limited yet strategic guidance throughout the steps of the activity is intended to lead students to develop understanding without me telling them directly. At the same time, this exercise is a starting point for the class session; it helps a group of students from a variety of academic disciplines to understand the concept of social class, yet it also prepares them to explore branches of the topic more deeply.

Notes

[1] I prefer the term "socioeconomic status," but I use "social class" throughout this article for the sake of consistency because it is the more commonly used of the two.

[2] By "Americans" I mean those who are a part of the population that resides in the United States of America.

[3] They are likely to be more privileged with regard to educational level, household income, occupational prestige, access to power or networks of influence, access to health care, or some combination of these.

[4] These observations have all occurred prior to Hillary Rodham Clinton's release of tax data during the 2008 presidential campaign indicating that she and Bill Clinton earned $109 million over the previous eight years. It will be interesting to see if students' perceptions change after this disclosure.

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