

What is your class story?

by Daisy L. Breneman

“What is your class story?” For many of us, it’s a long, complicated, and possibly painful story, particularly as it intersects with our other identities that may also carry oppression, stigma, and shame. Perhaps, like mine, it feels less like a story than a jumble of conflicting and confusing realities.

Dr. becky martinez, who presented a keynote and workshop at [CFI’s 2022 May Symposium](#), makes the case for examining our class stories, as one way to start the conversation around class in higher education. It’s a hard conversation, in part because we’ve been taught not to talk, [or think](#), about class.

In her book co-authored with Sonja Ardoin, [Straddling Class in the Academy](#), martinez explores class as a socially constructed, subjective, fluid, and complicated web of various markers and types of capital, not just material, but also cultural, social, linguistic, and more (28). The [very meaning](#) is contended and in flux.

We often (willfully) ignore the role of higher education in establishing and maintaining class status. Schools were created by, and for, the elite, with exclusion as a goal (21). Students, faculty and staff from poor or working class backgrounds often find themselves “straddling” class: making decisions about how, whether, and when to attempt to [assimilate](#) to higher ed’s elite culture or to maintain (components of) their own class identities.

We could spend a lot of time talking theory and research—which Ardoin and martinez also do in their book—but martinez also argues that we cannot neglect the affective dimension, or the emotional elements of navigating class in the academy (and beyond). For many of us, and our students, who “straddle” class, class has major implications for senses of [belonging](#)—which, as we know, matters. [Emerging research](#) suggests that talking about class and sharing class stories improves the success of [first generation students](#) and other class straddlers.

Some of the ways we can start the conversation about class, support colleagues and students who straddle class, and incorporate class considerations into our classrooms could include:

- Be part of [a community of care](#) for students, and make sure they have access and support to basic needs. Don’t assume just because students are at JMU that they are comfortable financially. The [JMU Student Support Hub](#) offers resources for food, financial, housing, and other assistance. Consider sharing these resources with students on the syllabus, in Canvas, and in class. While the numbers obviously vary over time and type of institution, [approximately a third of students](#) experience food insecurity and [even more experience housing or other basic needs insecurity](#). Support the dignity of all students by normalizing conversations about accessing resources.
- When possible, make use of Open and Affordable Course materials; the Libraries offer [guides and support for this process](#). Also consider less obvious costs of completing assignments; for example, if requiring or incentivizing attendance at special events, make sure you’re offering free or low-cost alternatives.
- Consider students’ work schedules or caretaking responsibilities when assigning work or planning events, and offer options and flexibility. Use the resources from [Community Service-Learning](#), such as [the faculty toolkit](#), to make service-learning and other engaged learning opportunities accessible.

- Consider casual classism, and avoid making assumptions about how students live, work, or spend their time. For example, sometimes ice-breaker or check-in questions carry unexamined class assumptions (What did you do for spring break/summer vacation? What is your favorite food? What was the last concert you went to?).
- Consider, too, comments you or other students make about [travel](#), [food](#), [clothes](#), or other things particularly laden with class privilege. Assuming everyone has gone to Disney World at some point, for example, can alienate many students. Model [anti-classist language](#) in the classroom, and encourage students to do the same.
- When appropriate, those of us who straddle class might [come out](#) as straddlers, [talking about our journeys](#) and [being vulnerable](#) with students. Sharing stories (especially for us straddlers) can invite empathy from students who don't share our status, and let those who do feel more connected and understood; [students benefit in many ways](#) when we make known this often hidden dimension of faculty diversity.
- Make [transparent](#) the [hidden curriculum](#); for example, be explicit about how/why/when to access office hours (or, consider renaming them “student hours” or “drop by” hours), or other [campus resources](#); based on class status, and other identity factors, students may be reluctant or uncertain about accessing resources.
- When possible, [include class in the curriculum](#), including the ways it [intersects](#) with other identities, and [teach about classism](#), too. For example, in the introductory Justice Studies course, we use [Eugenia Cheng's TED talk](#) to explore how abstract mathematics can help us understand the ways various forms of privilege—including class and race—intersect. CFI Faculty Associate Jessica Del Vecchio notes the value of approaching class from a historical perspective as an entry point into class conversations—for example, in a theatre history course, discussing how popular culture that appealed to working class audiences was denigrated by people of upper classes. Talking about class privilege, or [any form of privilege](#), is hard, and essential, so we need to be prepared to offer scaffolding and guidance. Try, also, to use materials, examples, and stories that represent a wide range of class backgrounds, [especially marginalized ones](#).
- Create opportunities for students to understand and process their own class stories, whether through formal assignments, in response to current events, or in informal check-ins or other [class activities](#). Build space for students to bring their whole selves to the classroom. Because class stories can be uncomfortable to examine, for students from a wide range of backgrounds, offer [resources](#), use strategies for [handling difficult moments](#), and be sensitive to challenges and traumas social class stories can carry.
- In teaching and advising contexts, consider ways that class deeply impacts academic and career planning. For example, class [bias in hiring](#) is real; class impacts access to career networking opportunities; students from certain class backgrounds may have different constraints when considering career choice; and so forth. Because of this inequity, it's even more urgent for faculty to find ways to support *all* students in their career development. The University Career Center offers [resources for faculty](#), such as the [Career Advocates Workshop Series](#), and, of course, for students, such as the [Career Clothes Closet](#).
- Value diversity, including [class diversity](#). While of course we want to address issues of socioeconomic inequity, it's also important to honor the value of individuals, and recognize the ways class diversity offers unique perspectives, insights, and ways of being in the world. Challenge [deficit thinking](#), and don't make the assumption that students or [colleagues](#) *want to or should* abandon their class identities.

While [talking about class](#) isn't easy, it's essential for [inclusive teaching](#), which is, fundamentally, good teaching.

About the author: Daisy L. Breneman holds a joint appointment with University Advising and Justice Studies and is the co-coordinator of the Disability Studies Minor. She is also a CFI faculty associate, and Acting Assistant Director for Fall 2022, in the teaching area. She can be reached at brenemdl@jmu.edu.

To offer feedback about this Toolbox or any others, feel free to use [this anonymous Google form](#) or contact Daisy Breneman (brenemdl@jmu.edu). For additional information about the CFI's Teaching Toolboxes, including PDFs of past emails, please visit [our webpage](#).