An accidental sociologist

A reflection on working-class education and becoming an adult learner

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Abstract

Higher education should be a social good for everyone and, despite the intentions of university policy on inclusion and diversity with schemes on widening participation, the truth is that for working-class students, university is still a place where they encounter prejudices and feelings of exclusion. This article uses the method of autoethnography and personal experience to show and to argue that class inequality and the education system are still connected. It argues that policies relating to inclusion or exclusion are not adequate and instead the working-class lens, the experiences of working-class learners and teachers should be valued pedagogy rather than devalued 'baggage' that should be left behind.

Key words: class; working class; sociology; ethnography; pedagogy

I did not go to university as a young person. In fact I left school on my 16th birthday. It was 1984, the miners' strike had started, and there was simply too much to do at home. My family were a striking family in Nottinghamshire. Legally I was not allowed to start work until June, but I had already got a job in a factory and was just waiting for the start date. There was simply no point in continuing secondary school education in Sutton-in-Ashfield, especially when my family, my community and my class was at the time, and as we believed, in an existential fight. I believed at the time, along with my family, that we were under attack from Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party, and that if we were to lose that fight our community, our families and our understanding of what being working class meant would be ended – we would not exist.

My family and my community and my class have always been important to me; the stories that are told in my community and within my family have situated who I am. I know who I am and where I belong because of those stories. I had little interaction with middle-class people until I went to the University of Nottingham as a mature student at the age of 33 in 2001.

As educators and researchers within the social sciences, the concept of 'lens' is important. It is the way we interpret what is happening in the social world. Understanding 'lens' and having the reflexivity and time to think through what we mean and what knowledge we want to convey – some may call that our pedagogy, and often

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it is skimmed over, not properly thought through. Yet how we see the world, and from what vantage point, and then how we experience the world, is how our knowledge is formed. As researchers, it shapes how we collect our own research data, how we decide what should be researched, how we disseminate it, and what frames our teaching pedagogies. It is common for academics and teachers to think through their pedagogies as statements of intent, or even as mission statements.

I want to take that argument on as a working-class woman, and a working-class academic who continues to be a working-class adult learner. In this article I try to think through what 'lens' is legitimate and what is not, when we are teaching working-class students, especially those returning to education as adults. Their 'lens' as learner is important and legitimate, but it is mostly lost in the pursuit of 'academic rigour'. I draw on my own experiences as a working-class child, working-class adult learner and working-class academic through a methodology we call 'autoethnography': a way of storytelling which is built to form an understanding of power relations from a personal standpoint – and in this case from below.[1]

Autoethnography as a political plea

The method I have used over 20 years of sociological research has been ethnography. I am an ethnographer, interested in what people do in their communities, what they make, what they use, how they connect and also how they belong. Ethnography focuses on the personal narratives of people and communities, but it also looks at where power lies – ethnographic research exposes the subtleties of how embedded power works. I am practised and experienced in ethnographic methods, but I am a beginner in autoethnography. The difference is broadly explained by the definitive feature of autoethnography: the researcher uses themselves as the subject of enquiry. Autoethnography has been used by minorities and those wishing to decolonise language, research and narrative; and it can be used as testimony of how power works against the storyteller, or the subject being studied – and how power can often be unseen.[2]

I have spoken about my life or parts of it when I have felt it useful for over 20 years and although it has been received well, I have often felt that I have not been taken seriously as an academic. My past, my background, my appearance, my family have been referred to as 'baggage'; my use of language, and of course the way I hold myself, tells any middle-class observer that I am working class. Autoethnography enables me to account for the personal and the political, and to provide an individual and a class-based narrative of becoming an accidental sociologist and academic.

The accidental sociologist

I started work in the Pretty Polly factory in Sutton-in-Ashfield Nottinghamshire at the

beginning of June 1984. I was 16. I took two unpaid half-days off to do my O-levels: English literature, language and history. I was also entered into a few CSEs (childcare, housecraft, physics, maths), none of which I thought worth losing money over. I took the O-levels but I never collected the results: I had moved on by the time they were released. I was an adult, earning money and helping my family survive. Over that year my family, my community, my class changed – we lost the strike and the coal mines closed. Within a very short time factories also closed as commerce started looking for cheaper labour options: all over the industrialised communities in the UK, hundreds of thousands of people lost jobs.[3]

For the next 14 years I worked in the factory making tights, alongside other female members of my family, three aunties, two cousins and many school friends. I thought little of what I had done at school: I had hated school and was glad that it was over. But I continued reading – a pastime I had been obsessed with for as long as I remember. The book, and then the local library, were sources of sanctuary. I especially enjoyed stories of posh kids and families I had no connection with: C.S Lewis's *Narnia* books drew me in, and *The Railway Children* by E. Nesbit, and Enid Blyton's *Faraway Tree* stories all offered other worlds, fantasy, magic and optimism. Things might be bad but there was always magic. I knew these books were not meant for me, they had not been written for me, and the children in them were not like me. But before I entered further and then higher education, reading as an adult was all that I had from 11 years of compulsory schooling.

In 1999 my mum died. My identity became unstable, the loss to my whole life, where and who I belonged to, and the grief were overwhelming, and I became ill and unfit for work. I left the retail job I was working in by then – selling T-shirts for a big American company (work that I could fit around picking my son up from school) – I have never been so lost as I was working in retail, such a petty and pointless job. I found myself in what used to be the 'job shop': there was a computer you could use, and a program on it where you answered a few questions and the computer told you what job you would be suited for – mine came up as 'social worker', so I went and talked with one of their advisors. A course was starting that week, I signed up and two days later I was on it. I had no idea of how colleges and timetables worked. I wasn't working so there was no fee – I had nothing to lose really. (Today access courses can cost £3000 and you must apply for the finance, though if you go on to higher education and complete an undergraduate degree the access loan will not need to be paid back. There is no easy access or funding now for adult learners, which is a massive obstacle.)

I'd ended up on the access course because I wandered into the job shop when I was vulnerable and desperately needed help – not unusual for adult learners. The whole class of 30 had their own stories of why and how they were on an access to social work programme at a Nottingham FE college. There were women like me who were

desperate to 'do something with their lives'; there were men who had had relationship breakdowns, or recently left prison and thought they might have something to offer, to 'give back'; there were 25-year-olds – that was the age bracket in 2000 for an adult learner – who had worked in shops, warehouses and factories and thought they might be able to do a bit more with their lives. It was a room full of broken working-class people who still hadn't given up on the 'hope' that something good might happen to them – a bit of luck and bit of magic might come their way if they worked hard and perhaps had a little talent or experience that could be useful and earn more than minimum wage.

Every day I went to the college and every day I thought I would leave at the end of the week because I would get a job and that would be more important – earning money, paying rent and buying food takes priority. But I didn't. I scraped by on the wages I had left – I hadn't applied for benefits. I couldn't face it at the time: I had been on benefits before and I really didn't have the energy to go through the humiliation at that point. After a month I saw an advert in the local newspaper's jobs section for a night worker in a homeless hostel; I applied and used my status of student on the access course to add some leverage to a CV that otherwise had factory work and part-time work in retail. They offered me a couple of shifts a week and I stayed there right the way up until my PhD was almost finished 10 years later.

The University of Nottingham was not the place I had intended to study, and sociology was not my initial choice of subject. During the access course we were visited by several local university lecturers telling us about their social work courses. However, one afternoon a lecturer from the University of Nottingham, Roger Cox, visited: he talked to the class about sociology and social policy at the university. He captured my imagination when he talked about a piece of research done by adult learners at the University of Nottingham's Adult Education Centre. Focused on the St Ann's area of Nottingham when one set of housing (terraced two-up, two-down) was being bulldozed to make way for the council estate that we know today, the research – conducted by members of a university/WEA adult education class led by Bill Silburn and Ken Coates – looked at how working-class communities, despite the welfare state and despite 'full employment', were still suffering from the effects of poverty.

This appears far-fetched but it is true: I lived in St Ann's from 1988 until 2013 and in 2000 I heard for the first time that you could go to university and study the places where I lived. I had no idea that you could go to a university and study this as a subject. I remember coming home from the college that day with the book, *Poverty: the forgotten Englishman,* and a video of the film *Poverty in St Ann's,* which had been made based on their research.[4] I'd run down to the college library immediately – I thought everyone in the class would be looking for them – but they weren't. Going home on the bus I read the book, at home I watched the film: I was overwhelmed. That may seem an over-the-top response, but I can't overstate how important it was that I was reading about working-

class people in the community where I lived. I found that Bill Silburn was still teaching social policy at the University of Nottingham and applied for the sociology and social policy joint honours course there. I didn't even know what social policy was, but I knew I wanted to be taught by Bill Silburn. I also knew that the kind of work that Bill Silburn and Ken Coates (later, while working on my PhD, I also met Ken) had done was what I wanted to do. I wanted to write that story but from my lens: despite my naivety, I knew that my voice and my lens would be important.

I was accepted at the University of Nottingham. My naivety about education had led me there. I had never been on the university's campus before the day I was interviewed for a place on the course (in 2000 the university interviewed all access course applicants). Walking on that campus felt like I was in another place, a very foreign place; despite its being only three miles from where I lived I had no connection or point of reference to this place. My identity – my knowledge of who I am and the experiences I had until this point – was set, and I took all of this into the university – along with the Access to Higher Education Certificate that allowed me literal access.

On reflection, I know that as a younger person I would not have been able to cope with the strangeness, the unfamiliar language, the rules that I was constantly aware of – but knew I was getting wrong all the time. My first essay got a 42 out of 100 (I think my lecturer was being kind): despite having passed the access course it was a massive leap from further to higher education. I was the only mature student in the class, I was the only local person, I was the only mother, and I was the only working-class student. I had accidentally got myself into a place that I knew was totally alien to me. 'Luckily' my life had never been easy: as a small child I lived in poverty, the threat of homelessness loomed over my family (both grandparents had died when I was five and they were my primary carers); by the time the miners' strike ended in 1985 – and we had lost – I knew I needed to leave the mining community where I had been brought up. I moved to St Ann's in Nottingham's city centre. I had become a mother when I was 19, and at 33 I had lived on council estates my whole life. A year after my Mum died in a car accident, driving from a union meeting to talk to the girls in the factory, I found myself walking past the statue of D.H. Lawrence that stands outside the social sciences building at the University of Nottingham.

Higher education and a working-class lens

The higher education system in the UK has seldom been structured for those who have not had the right amounts of cultural capital, either from their childhood institutes of education or from their homes and personal life. This is neither controversial nor new in its claim: the British class system still uses education as its indicator and tool to maintain itself, despite many interventions from government agencies and research by

academics calling for greater mobility, and hand-wringing policy documents on diversity and inclusion.[5] Over the last 15 years, as university fees have soared, the cost of living has risen to eye-watering levels, and working-class people and their families have borne the brunt of decline and destruction of our public services, students from working-class families are questioning whether they can seriously engage in higher education.

The greatest impact of rising tuition fees and declining public services as a barrier has been on working-class adult learners who are now having to work, study and care. What we call 'mature student' numbers at many Russell Group universities have declined on average by 46 per cent since the rise in fees from 2013, although the numbers of working-class students and working-class mature students have remained steady at 'post-92' universities, many of which are seen as local and embedded in their communities.[6] This suggests that for working-class students, and especially adult learners, there is still a demand for a continued and lifelong learning but in learning spaces which appear less elite, and where they are more welcomed.

The numbers of working-class people (especially mature students) are not dwindling exclusively in academia and higher education. Many spaces have become off-limits to working-class people. For example, journalism and the arts and the creative industries are becoming ever more elitist.[7] Many before me have argued the unfairness and the inequalities in these elite spaces make them beyond difficult for working-class people to get into – and even when they do, the space, the rules, the norms and the people within them can be unwelcoming. While this may not always be intentional, these spaces (where 'interesting work' happens) are becoming fiercely guarded by the middle class as their positionality becomes more precarious.[8]

Consequently, we do not fit: our 'lens' and embodied selves are 'not natural' to the game of academia.[9] The sense of belonging – or in this case not belonging – looms large over working-class students and academics. Pierre Bourdieu questioned this process of becoming an academic, fitting in and having a place:

> My trajectory may be described as miraculous, I suppose—an ascension to a place where I don't belong. And so to be able to live in a world that is not mine I must try to understand both things: what it means to have an academic mind—how such is created—and at the same time what was lost in acquiring it.[10]

What Bourdieu argues is that in order to get into and remain in a space that has not been made for you, and where you have seen yourself as alien, you must lose something of yourself or trade-off who you are. This is important because it suggests that the space will not change but it will change you. This is why a working-class pedagogy is necessary, important and crucial if we care about equality for people and diversity of ideas. The acknowledgment that 'lens' is important, and should be valued, practised and legitimate, especially in academia where ideas, structures and narratives can and

should be challenged, should not be a mission statement but a practice.

We can draw upon the work of Raymond Williams and his insistence in particular that the adult educator cannot and should not behave as a missionary ('the fortunate should help the unfortunate'). Williams knew that without structural change it will always be the case that the lucky few will be picked out from the working-class mob as if they had won the Willy Wonka Golden Ticket.[11] There are many examples where working-class students and academics have discussed and talked about their 'exceptionalism', knowing they have been picked out, yet also that they have in some way been forced to leave their communities, families and what has sometimes been referred to as working-class 'baggage' behind.

The methodology of autoethnography enables me to tell my own story of how I became an accidental student in sociology, and an accidental academic, and at the same time to make my own lens (as author) central in a critique of power and structural inequalities. Sharon Clancy expressed this well after reading Williams' open letter to Workers' Educational Association tutors.[12] He reminded them that their role was not that of a missionary, neither was it to act as saviour of the working class. She wrote:

This had a deep resonance with me, at the time grappling with the concept of adult education as variously a radical emancipatory and democratising force, a means of supporting reform and 'missionary' activity or as a way of promoting 'social mobility' and employability. Williams argued that education should act as a form of public pedagogy, in which he recognised the democratising potential of education which escaped the elite-controlled schoolhouse and found its expression in the family, churches, libraries, museums, radio networks, and so on, echoing earlier working class learning experience in the reading libraries, in pubs and kitchens.[13]

Recognising that in spaces of education there have been winners and losers, those whose backgrounds have advantaged their educational journey, and those whose backgrounds mean they are disadvantaged is far from new – many have highlighted this over several generations.[14] Consequently this paper is not a plea for those with privilege who are at home and comfortable in academia to do anything other than what they normally do. They do not concern me. My goal is not to teach the privileged how to 'understand' or be able to 'get in' to places in order to research or think downwards; like Raymond Williams I am asking for a change in our theory of knowledge, to legitimise a working-class lens.

In conclusion

I have often thought about not only how I came to be in that place, the University of Nottingham – but how did I stay there, how did I get through the undergraduate degree, how did I win the prize of an ESRC 1+3 grant, an award that allowed me a

small bursary and my fees paid for the master's degree, and the PhD that followed? I had help and I had support: there were academics at the university who saw what I was trying to do, who actually saw me and supported me right through the 10 years I was there. After the PhD was finished I won a further grant from the Leverhulme Trust and continued the research in St Ann's – and wrote the book that I naively thought I might after the visit from the University of Nottingham lecturer when I was at the FE college. My book, *Getting By: estates, class and culture in austerity Britain*,[15] focused on the women of St Ann's, working-class women whose voices are seldom heard in their own right. Women like me.

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Notes

1. See L. Mckenzie, 'Over the kitchen table: British storytelling as working-class art, belonging and resistance', *Journal of Class and Culture*, 2024.

2. K. Alhayek & Z. Basileus, 'Decolonizing displacement research: betweener autoethnography as a method of resistance', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 55 (3), 2023, pp548-555: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001071.

3. Between 1979 and 1989, the number or people employed in the 'production sector' (manufacturing; mining and quarrying; and gas, electricity and water) fell by 28 per cent, from 7,469,800 to 5,380,000. See A. Qayyum, T. Zhang, F. Lawrence, J. Yull and J. Marlow, 'Changes in the economy since the 1970s', London, Office for National Statistics, 2019: https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/economicoutputandproductivity/output/articles/changesintheeconomysincethe1970s/2019-09-02.

4. K. Coates & R. Silburn, Poverty: the forgotten Englishmen, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970, was published in the 'Penguin Special' series. St Ann's, a Thames TV documentary directed by Stephen Frears and first shown in 1969, can be seen at: https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-st-anns-1969-online.

5. Social Mobility Commission, *State of the Nation 2023: people and places*, London, Social Mobility Commission 2023: https://socialmobility.independent-commission.uk/policy-papers/state-of-the-nation-2023-people-and-places/.

6. P. Jack, 'Mature students stay away from university amid economic turmoil', *Times Higher Education*, 22 July 2023: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/mature-students-stay-away-university-amid-economic-turmoil; Russell Group, Pathways for Potential, London, Russell Group, 2020: https://russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5858/pathways-for-potential-full-report-may-2020.pdf

7. Policy and Evidence Centre, 'Press release: UK's creative industries would need to employ 250,000 more working-class people to be as socio economically diverse as the rest of the economy', 10 September 2021: https://pec.ac.uk/news_entries/the-uks-creative-industries-would-need-to-employ-250-000-more-working-class-people-to-be-as-socio-economically-diverse-as-the-rest-of-the-economy.

8. L. Mckenzie, 'Cloaking class: making the working class visible', in J. Gohrisch & G. Stedman (eds), *Affective Polarisation: social inequality in the UK after austerity, Brexit and COVID-19*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2023, pp185-198: https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529222289.ch009.

9. P. Bourdieu, 'The forms of capital', in J. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York, Greenwood, 1983, pp241-258.

10. P. Bourdieu & T. Eagleton, 'Doxa and common life', *New Left Review*, 1, 191, 1992, p117.

11. R. Williams, 'An open letter to WEA tutors', London, Workers' Educational Association, 1961: https://weaeducation.typepad.co.uk/files/raymond-williams-an-open-letter-to-wea-tutors-1.pdf.

12. R. Williams quoted in S. L. Clancy, 'Raymond Williams: adult education and the public intellectual', Raymond Williams Society 2018: https://raymondwilliams.co.uk/2018/04/27/raymond-williams-adult-education-and-the-public-intellectual/

13. Ibid.

14. E.g., V. Boliver, 'Expansion, differentiation, and the persistence of social class inequalities in British higher education', *Higher Education*, 61, 2011, pp229-242: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-010-9374-y; P. Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977; T. Crew, *Higher Education and Working-Class Academics: precarity and diversity in academia*, Palgrave, Cham, 2020, pp19-44; R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1958; D. Reay, 'A risky business? Mature working-class women students and access to higher education correspondence', *Gender and Education*, 15(3), pp301-317: https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250303860; D. Reay, *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2017.

15. L. Mckenzie, Getting By: estates, class and culture in austerity Britain, Bristol, Policy Press, 2015.