Reflections of a Rural White Working-Class Kid in Higher Education

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If you've not tried writing a family history, I encourage you to do so. The process is enlightening and cathartic. It also inspires reflection and a chance to see how you fit into the narrative of a larger story where you, the author, are a character who appears towards the end; a character whose significance to the plot is uncertain. In April 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying lockdowns left me with a glaring need of a hobby, I wrote vignettes of about my family history. They were an eclectic, and sometimes lawless, group of Appalachian descendants who took up residence in southwest Ohio in the 1930s who, by the 2010s, were mired in effects of deindustrialization, the opioid epidemic, and nativist political ideologies. What I couldn't help but notice when writing these vignettes was that the story grew increasingly bleaker as I wrote towards the present. Lost jobs. Overdoses. Anger. Resentment. Helplessness.

By the time I appeared in the vignettes, nothing about life in Southwest Ohio looked the same. In 1952, by the age of thirty, my great-grandfather had fought in World War II, fathered three children, and had employment at the Champion Paper Company in Hamilton, Ohio, for wages good enough that my great-grandmother was a life-long homemaker. By the age of 30 in 2022, I had a Ph.D., no children, and many wages to be desired. Something seemed off. Or, perhaps, I wasn't viewing the stories I wrote through the correct lens. In writing my family's history, I understood how they came to view things the way they did based on their experiences with, and perceptions of, the world around them, especially their relationship with employment, but I did not have the chance to understand how I came to view the world based on the same criteria. I was trying to understand the past without first understanding my position in the present.

I wanted the chance to reflect on my family's beliefs about how one should work, the value they place on contributing to society through one's occupation, and their hostility to higher education—a place that shaped my identity as a scholar and professor in ways that I never expected. What's different now—why I decided to reflect on my identity at this moment—is my relationship with higher education, both as a first-generation college student and now as a member of the professoriate. The kind of reflective journey that I wanted to take required deep introspection and questioning, which I found through the method of *currere* (Pinar, 2004), during the first year of my Ph.D. program.

In this method, one moves through four moments of critical self-reflection—thinking specifically about their educational experiences and the various historical, social, and cultural contexts that give it meaning (Pinar, 2004). One begins by reflecting on their past educational experiences, then imagines the type of future they wish to build while considering how the past shaped what Pinar (1994) calls the "biological present," before finally synthesizing experiences with education to construct a sense of identity and self (p. 26). To answer the question of who I am as an individual, as a scholar, and as an educator, is to engage in critical self-reflection of my educational experiences, but rather than reflect on my time in school, I want to reflect on and make sense of the working-class curriculum that shaped my identity and the liminality of my identity as a child of the white working-class, a first-generation college student, and as a member of the professoriate through vignettes of inflection points in my life.

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"Egghead Liberals"

Where I feel the most strain between my family and career is over their perception of professors and American higher education, in-general. When I first left for college, my dad encouraged me not to let the "egghead liberals"—the ones who would presumably be teaching my classes—indoctrinate me with their "socialist" and "anti-American" ideas. It came to the point where I stopped sharing with him what I learned in my classes. I distinctly remember recalling to my dad how I'd learned that Abraham Lincoln wasn't much of an abolitionist but nonetheless used the abolition of slavery as a military tool to win the Civil War. His response? Something to the effect of, "Did you look at your professor and tell them how wrong they were thinking the Civil War had anything to do with slavery? It was about the South fighting for freedom against a tyrannical federal government." In other words, my family's view of higher education is colored by a healthy dose of partisan political rhetoric, much less a skepticism of higher education. They're not the only ones, though. Study after study has shown that the working class is quite skeptical of higher education and the benefits of a college education (Jaschik, 2017). Since the election of Donald J. Trump in 2016, that skepticism has bordered on outright hostility—mostly from those in the white working-class (Creel, 2022).

The skepticism my father expressed to me when I first went to college lingered in the back of my mind. I paid attention to every word my professors said, waiting for them to say something—*anything*—that proved my father's point of view. Without even knowing it, I'd subconsciously politicized my own education. I felt trapped. I couldn't share my experiences in the classroom with my family for fear of looking like I was giving in to supposed ideological indoctrination. I couldn't tell my professors that I was secretly waiting for them to reveal their allegiance to international Communism. And I couldn't allow myself to learn for the sake of learning.

I reached the breaking point of living between two different social identities. My liminality—that competition between being a college student and a loyal adherent to the white working-class creed—was stretched to the limit. There is an immense pressure within my white working-class community to stand by your beliefs, to not let the views of the outside world influence what is referred to as "common sense" thinking—the idea of always being able to listen to your gut instincts over academic knowledge. Then, in the classroom, especially in the undergraduate seminar, professors encourage students to challenge their preconceived notions, to think critically about why we stand by certain beliefs. How could I be a good college student without feeling like a traitor to the world that raised me? That sounds dramatic, but it was a real dilemma for me.

One conclusion that I've come to is that I made the situation more difficult than it had to be yet lacked the cognitive tools to improve the situation. First-generation college students, especially those from the rural, white working-class, are entering higher education with cultural and social beliefs that do not always serve them well in academic settings that necessitate critical thinking. From my experience, the curriculum of the white working-class life is much more black-and-white, if you will, than your typical open-ended term paper or democratic dialogue in search of meaning. For example, my grandfather was a big fan of the 1950s TV crime caper *77 Sunset Strip*. Regardless of which episode we happened to be watching, my grandfather knew who committed the crime. Being young and not considering that he'd had decades to re-watch every episode, I asked him how he always guessed who committed the crime that was trying to be solved. His response really stuck with me. "Chances are, the right answer is the one that makes the most sense, so I try not to overthink it."

I would venture to say that my grandfather's remark about sensible answers is a key pillar of how most folks in my community view the world. It's how I was raised to view the world. But that kind of thinking only went so far when considering complex academic, theoretical, or conceptual problems. The missing link between the curriculum of the white working-class and the curriculum of the college campus is that there may not always be a right answer, or any answer at all, to some of life's most complicated problems. Sometimes, overthinking a topic, question, or problem is the only way to think about it. I did not understand that when I got to college. I assumed any answer past the most obvious answer was the result of overthinking a topic, making things more complicated than they needed to be—that any complex answer should be received with skepticism. There I was, in college to receive an education, but had no idea how to allow myself to be educated.

Luckily, a sharp-eyed professor sensed that something was off and asked if I'd stop by his office for coffee one day after class. I'd just received a terrible grade on one of his writing assignments, and I assumed the conversation would revolve around why I wasn't a good writer. Instead, and to my utter disbelief, we sat down in his office and talked for nearly an hour about everything but the assignment. He asked where I was from, what I wanted to do after college, and about life in rural Ohio. He shared about his upbringing in New York City and how he came to study politics. He seemed so down to earth. Nothing about him made me think he was an "egghead liberal," or trying to conscript me into the Legion of Doom.

After the conversation reached a lull, though, my professor finally brought up my paper. "I wanted to talk to you about the paper because it seems like you may not have understood the prompt," my professor told me. I asked what he meant. "Well, you were asked to make an argument, but you didn't really have much of an argument, so I figured there might be some confusion." The prompt in question asked students to analyze George Orwell's short story "Shooting an Elephant," about British-ruled Burma in the 1920s and explain what the story represented. To me, it was obvious what the story was about: The British had control over Burma due to Imperialism and could do things like shoot an elephant. Problem solved. I reiterated as much to the professor sitting across from me. He looked a bit exasperated, like I was putting him on, but he sensed that I was serious. Then he said something that, to this day, I still find to be profound. "Have you ever considered that the most obvious answer may not be *the* answer?"

The obvious answer may not be *the* answer. It seems like a simple enough statement, but in the context of my upbringing, news like this was paradigm shifting. My professor explained to me that "Shooting an Elephant" was an allegory for British imperialism in Asia, and my job in the assignment was to argue why Orwell would write the story in the first place. Suddenly, things started to click into place in my head. Thinking critically about an argument wasn't wasted energy overthinking a "common sense" answer but was instead a way of processing and understanding complex problems. I'm not sure how long it took me to fully comprehend the paradigm shift, yet I do remember exactly how it made me feel. Some questions are just too big and too complicated and too interwoven with other complex issues that a simple answer cannot be the only answer, or the *whole* answer, for that matter.

I realized that my professors were not advocating for me to hold different opinions or bend to the beliefs that they believed were correct. No, my professors were encouraging me to think about all the possible ways to answer a question; they wanted me to learn how not to hastily accept the easiest answer and to work my brain to seek all the

information on a topic before answering. If somebody had explained that whole concept to me prior to entering college, I think I would have been saved a lot of grief. Instead, the curriculum of my upbringing taught me to view higher education and my professors in a specific way. I believed I'd cracked some code. I'd found a way to understand how to find success in college without feeling as if I'd been swept away from any connections with my community.

The Trouble with the "Workin' Man's Ph.D."

When I told my dad that I was accepted into a Ph.D. program, he congratulated me and said he was excited that I'd soon join him in the ranks. That confused me. My dad didn't have any college degrees. He saw the confusion on my face, chuckled, and said, "I have a working man's PhD." His response, while clever, wasn't original. It's the hook from country music singer Aaron Tippin's 1993 song, "Workin Man's Ph.D.," wherein Mr. Tippin explains how the lessons of life learned through a career in a working-class occupation—namely manual labor—should earn the laborers a Ph.D. for their expertise on living in "reality" and building "the things that really make the world go 'round" (Tippin, 1993). Consider the lyrics that comprise the song's chorus:

> Now, there ain't no shame in a job well done
> From driving a nail to driving a truck
> As a matter of fact, I'd like to set things straight
> A few more people should be pullin' their weight
> If you want a cram course in reality
> You get yourself a Working Man's Ph.D.

My dad's response—as well as Mr. Tippin's song—highlights a long-standing cultural touchstone of white working-class America: that they do the hardest, most meaningful jobs,' and, by extension, are the most productive members of society. And I've had one hell of a time trying to explain to my family how I'm productive and contributing to society as a professor. My parents, my siblings, and grandmother have, in one way or another, politely asked about what *exactly* I do daily. Since I do not have a typical eight-hour, shift-work schedule like everyone else in my family, it's often assumed that I'm not, well, working. The assumption is that I'm only working when I'm on campus teaching—that everything else is unmitigated free-time. Despite currently teaching six courses a semester, I've had more than one family member ask recently, "When are you going to get a *real* job?" To my family, working is leaving the house, putting in the hours, and then leaving work behind at the end of the day, having something to show for their work.

As a result, I often think about the lack of value my family puts on the work I do every day. As a PhD student, I struggled to even convey what I was studying or working on. My family struggled to affirm the value in what I was working on. I distinctly remember writing a term paper on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and how it applied to working-class college students coming into higher education while sitting at my grandmother's table as I was caring for her after a surgery. After about two hours of endless typing, my grandmother asked me what I was working on.

I told her, without thinking much about my response, "Oh, it's a paper where I'm using a theory to explain how college is sometimes out of reach for poorer students." I regretted what I said as soon as the words left my mouth.

My grandmother tilted her head a bit and asked, "What's the point in that?"

As a teacher-scholar, it is difficult to produce physical, tangible results of your daily work. When my family asked what I did all day, I thought about writing new lessons to use in the classroom, or doing research for my next manuscript, or responding to a steady stream of emails, or spending hours hunched over a computer grading. And yet, to me, the days where I can produce a physical manifestation of my work are reserved for days that I teach or when a publication goes to print. Nonetheless, the product of my labor is only reaching a select few. Even if I graded work for multiple classes and typed words into a budding journal article, it all went away when I closed my computer. Whatever sense of accomplishment I felt was weak and riddled with insecurity. Despite my work feeling intrinsically important, it outwardly had little value to my community or family.

I also had trouble coming to terms with the atypical schedule of a graduate student and, eventually, professor. For my family, any time not worked after the sun came up was, in their mind, time wasted. Mr. Tippin had something to say about that, too. Of early working-class risers who go and get the job done each morning, he sings, "You get up every morning 'fore the sun comes up/A long hard day sure ain't much fun/But you got to get it started if you want to get it done" (Tippin, 1993). My working-class parents wear their hours-worked and early-rise times like badges of honor. My dad never misses a chance to let me know the hour he had to wake up for work that morning to service a crane, and my mom proudly discloses that she's had her alarm set to the same time for 30 years—5:15am. As a teenager, if I woke up after 10:00am on the weekends, one of my parents would eventually quip, "You slept half the day away!" As a result, I've felt that if the sun was up, I should be doing work. Even today, I still feel the need to work—grading, reading literature, writing, responding to emails, teaching, whatever—during the typical working day hours.

What I had trouble understanding was how my family's view of work acted as an ideological curriculum that trained my mind to view my professor—and self-worth—through the paradigm of how much effort I put into my occupation. As a faculty member, that way of thinking is a slippery slope to being overworked, as scholars have recently noted as a phenomenon among "blue collar scholars," or those in the professoriate from a working-class background (Pifer et al., 2022). I'm constantly reminding myself to step away from work when I have the chance, to be more intentional about rest. But the curriculum of my parent's beliefs surrounding work cannot be made to disappear. I've accepted that it is part of who I am.

I've had to be self-critical and reflective, though, when it comes to crafting the curriculum that I use in the classroom. What I learned on my educational journey from being a child of the white working-class to teaching in a college classroom with students who are largely not white, nor working-class, is that my cultural ideas of work are not universally applicable. My curriculum used to reflect my family's beliefs about work. I'd assign students an unimaginable amount of reading and writing assignments per week, believing that higher education—our coursework—was their job, and they had plenty of hours each day to get the job finished. That was a huge mistake.

For as much as I had my cultural beliefs about when and how to work, students also had their own conceptions of work. I learned about the limitations of my family's outlook on work as experience has taught me that factors like neurodiversity and disability influence how and when a student completes their assignments. I had to negotiate between the engrained expectations that I had for myself and the reality of teaching folks from various backgrounds and lived experiences. At the same time, I often wonder

how many of my students are in the same cone of silence with their families about college. Ultimately, I've found myself more in a position to validate students' academic interests and intellectual curiosities because I'm never certain if they're receiving such affirmation from anyone else. For none of us truly know whether a student is from a household where a "workin' man's Ph.D." reigns supreme.

"Why Does That Matter?"

I currently teach African American history and the socio-cultural foundations of American education—two subjects that I couldn't see myself teaching when I initially began my journey from rural Ohio to the halls of academe. Many of my students are, like me, also first-generation. It's exactly what I want. I firmly believe that, without the experience of testing boundaries of my liminality, I would not be doing what I am today. Of equal importance is that, without reflecting on those experiences, I would not be the teacher that I am today. McDonald (2009) argues that a key part of *currere* is learning from the experiences that influence our identities as educators and that the process of sense-making is integral to becoming one's most authentic self as an educator (McDonald, 2020). Such a process of reflecting on my experiences has not only allowed me to fully embody my original self in the classroom but has equally altered my pedagogical approach to teaching.

More than anything, I understand that the care taken by one professor in undergrad led to an important lynchpin moment in my educational journey. To me, what first-generation, white, working-class college students tend to need more than anything else—especially those students who hail from families or communities already skeptical of higher education—is care and patience from their professors. The establishment of care in professor-student relationships is viewed as a key element to recognizing a student's humanity and providing them with a sense of belonging (Monchinski, 2010). And yet, a caring relationship also lays the foundation for epistemological curiosity—a place where professors often must lead white working-class students who feel as if questioning their beliefs is tantamount to treason.

I've taught dozens of students who, like me, were resistant to see any new knowledge as anything more than information delivered with the intent of antagonizing their beliefs. What I've found is that students in this position need the encouragement to view new information out of a place of curiosity, not commitment. Each semester, I'm often teaching controversial concepts like Critical Race Theory (CRT) and hegemony to first-year students who've only heard about those concepts through negative discourse. I can't simply demand that they understand these concepts and take them as fact. I'd lose them in an instant. Rather, I tell my students that I'm merely looking for them to understand a topic, not to instantly agree with it. If professors provide skeptical students with the chance to interact with ideas without the pressure of committing to the ideas, they tend to ask more questions and want to understand more.

Another key takeaway from reflecting on my educational experience is the need to be authentic as a learner and professor. What I mean by authentic is that I try to be the same version of myself in the classroom as I am out of the classroom. I am a child of the rural white working-class who still dresses the part. I still wear cowboy boots and a George Jones belt buckle—even when I teach. I still approach most topics with a sense of skepticism and illustrate that line of thinking when I teach. I want to show my students that one can still hold onto their identity and engage in intellectual curiosity. I want to illustrate that critical thinking is not partisan and asking questions like, "What does that

mean?" or "Why does that matter?" or "Why does somebody think that way?" is an acceptable, and encouraging, intellectual exercise. I want them to know that taking the time to overthink and understand is not a bad thing. That there is never such a thing as too many questions. Presenting my authentic self to my students has created a sense of trust and comfort in our classes together. And it provides me with the ability to draw on my past experiences to create a level of empathy and understanding with my students—something that I wouldn't be able to do without first engaging in deep reflection about who I am as an educator.

My experience of taking a working-class curriculum into higher education and then making my career in higher education while still living daily among the working-class has led me to embrace the whole ordeal as a key part of my identity. I do not want to separate myself from the culture in which I was raised, yet I found ways to break free from the constraints of viewing the world from one perspective. I am at peace with my liminality because it now feels as if it's a gift, a way to bridge two institutions separated by an increasingly sizable gulf. I'm at peace with the fact that my family still has no clue what I do and that they never really try to seek a better understanding of what I do. So long as I'm at peace with who I am and can use my educational experiences to be a better educator, I know that I'm in the right place between two worlds.

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