



## Article

# Power and Precarity: First Generation Students Compose Digital Stories of Class Mobility

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**Abstract:** bell hooks writes that to sustain myths of meritocratic educational systems, college campuses remain silent about social class differences. For poor and working-class first-generation college students, this silence means learning little about structural obstacles placed in the way of aspiring to and then succeeding in college. They commonly graduate from under-financed high schools in economically declining communities, yet internalize shame and silence as they struggle to compete with more privileged peers once on campus. Toward breaking that silence, I facilitated digital storytelling workshops with 78 diverse first and former first-generation students across the U.S. and later interviewed them. Drawing on Bourdieu's analysis of class as both internalized and material, the paper discusses how these storytellers made class inequalities visible in speaking of their daily lives. From an emerging collective identity, they reported a new sense of agency and voice.

**Keywords:** digital storytelling; community engagement; international digital storytelling conference 2023; first-generation college students; social class



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## 1. Introduction

Though many in the U.S. believe that colleges are engines of opportunity, higher education has long replicated social inequalities and campuses themselves are remarkably silent about social class and class mobility (Baum and McPherson 2022; Walkerdine 2021). As bell hooks (1994, p. 177) wrote, “nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class differences than in educational settings”. First-generation students<sup>1</sup>, overwhelmingly from poor and working-class backgrounds, bear the costs of that silence.

In this paper, I discuss a six-year project in which 78 first and former first-generation students created digital stories in workshops across the U.S. Invited to tell any story of being “first”, they narrated themselves navigating power and precarity as protagonists within hierarchical social spaces.

### 1.1. Stacking the Odds against Poor and Working-Class Children

Poor and working class students must navigate complex “architectures of exclusion” (Walkerdine 2021, p. 65) to become educated: most grow up in communities segregated by race and class (Leung-Gagne and Reardon 2022) with uneven access to healthcare, affordable housing, and cultural resources. They attend systematically underfunded public schools with few advanced courses and college counselors (Beattie 2018; Kim-Christian and McDermott 2022). Their teachers are likely to be less experienced and to be teaching outside their expertise (Goldhaber et al. 2019) than teachers in middle-class schools. As Reay (1997) writes, first-generation students are the “ones who got away” from schools that “inscribe failure” (Reay 2015, p. 21) on children like them.

Less likely to even apply to college, first-generation students are more likely to enroll in two-year or for-profit colleges, and even if highly qualified, are far less likely to attend selective colleges (Baum and McPherson 2022; Va Lor 2023). They are significantly less likely to ever graduate from college if they do begin (Center for First Generation Student Success 2018).

### 1.2. Resounding Campus Silences

Few on college campuses learn anything about these structural inequalities that shape very disparate pathways to college or about policies that might stem growing economic and educational inequalities. Relative to (inadequate) campus-wide curricular and co-curricular attention to racism, sexism, disabilities, or homophobia, there are few resources on campus for learning about legacies of persistent educational and economic inequalities (Linkon 1999), or for resisting classist campus policy and practice. Faculty are overwhelmingly from highly privileged backgrounds (Clauset 2021; Morgan et al. 2022) yet rarely self-identify as such as if their experience of the world is neutral (Walkerline 2021). The pervasive messaging on campus is that within the meritorious institution, class background is simply irrelevant (Lee 2017). First-generation students, meanwhile, struggle to pay the rent, to find tutors to learn what their high schools did not teach them, and to navigate friendships when they are working two jobs while peers casually share stories of summer travel. Campus social spaces remain segregated by race and by class (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Benson and Lee 2020; Nunn 2021). Even within activist and identity-affinity groups, poor and working-class students encounter the “hostile ignorance” of more privileged peers who know little about them but retain the power to exclude them (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Ferguson and Lareau 2021).

Within pervasive campus messaging that “we’re all same here” (Haney 2015) many poor and working-class students learn to perform “relational calculations” of class concealment in a bid to evade class-based judgment (Cunningham 2019, p. 14) as they self-monitor accent, clothing, vocabulary, even the stories they tell about family (Aries and Seider 2007; Loveday 2016; Mosier 2020).

Silence about class extends to campus support programming for these students. Services for first-generation students are most often located within academic support or counseling offices, student struggles framed as personal, not structural (Ardoin 2018a, 2018b; Martin and Ardoin 2021; Orbe 2004; Schwartz et al. 2018; Whitley et al. 2018). Much of this “first-gen” programming is coordinated through national professional organizations that sponsor specialized journals, conferences, and national campus events. A recent “landscape analysis” of national first-generation student programming published by the Center for First Generation Student Success exemplifies this framing of a legacy of unequal access to resources framed as personal struggle. The report does not mention social class. The term “inequality” appears once in 84 pages (Whitley et al. 2018). A major bibliography of research on first-generation students published by the Center does have a section on social class, but class is framed as a personal attribute related to family background, not an ascribed position within social hierarchies of power and powerlessness (Baldwin et al. 2021). Work cited in this section speaks of positive attributes of “working class culture” such as a strong work ethic, as if today’s working class of immigrants, refugees, rural and urban residents, the daughters of laid-off factory workers cleaning hotel rooms, the gig workers, call center operators, migrant farm workers, restaurant workers, meat packers or people packing boxes in Amazon warehouses still form homogeneous communities organized around workplaces of masculinized manual labor.

First-generation students may be featured on campus websites as inspirational role-models of resilience, yet the students themselves—and those holding power over them—have little access to analyses of why children like them had to be so resilient in the first place. While it is understood that the support of students of color, women, or LGBTQ students requires engaging all campus actors in recognizing, naming, and resisting racism, sexism, and homophobia, there is little coursework on social class or working-class studies, few campus events designed to deepen understanding of class inequalities. On most campuses, poor and working-class students are denied the spaces for individual and collective critique, anger, or activism around class inequalities in their communities and on campus (Gill and Orgad 2018; Hurst and Warnock 2015; Wildhagen 2015). Few college students learn about the depths and consequences of economic and educational inequalities in the U.S. (Bañales 2019; Mijs 2023; Parkhouse and Arnold 2019) and all students are likely to

graduate deeply naive about their own class positions (Aries and Seider 2007) and about policy debates around addressing growing inequalities (Haney 2015; Lee 2017; Lehmann 2014; Rice et al. 2017; Smith et al. 2016).

A generation ago, Janet Zandy (1995) called for the development of a “critical class consciousness”, both individual and collective, “with its myriad possibilities for acting on and in the worlds we inherit”. I know of no first-generation support programs working to support such a consciousness or to advocate for historical, political, or cultural study of how persistent economic inequalities are normalized. Students are encouraged to instead trust that others on campus stand ready to welcome and embrace them, once they catch up with peers who benefited from the very inequalities that disadvantaged them.

And the inscribed pain rooted in structural inequalities that Reay (2015, 2017) writes of is framed instead as temporary personal psychological “struggle” that will be healed with academic success. In denying them knowledge of the political and historical roots of their pain, first-generation students are also denied the agency to “act on and within the worlds [they] inherit (Zandy 1995).

### 1.3. Sociological Understandings of Educational Inequality and Class

While I fully acknowledge the value of academic and personal support for poor and working-class students, this digital storytelling project is grounded within sociological analyses of student “struggle” as rooted in pervasive class conflict, with higher education being but one institution that serves the interests of the powerful while working against the aspirations of others. Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1984, 1990) and those working within his theoretical frameworks describe how inequalities are normalized as the elite set the standards for success while also limiting access to the resources that others need to meet those standards, all within cultural discourses of opportunity and reward for hard work and talent. Poor and working-class people then internalize economic struggle as evidence of individual failure within a fair game (Bourdieu 1984, 1990); wealthier people understand that they have earned their material advantages and competitive academic success. Social class is then both external access to material resources and an internal sense of place in the social order.

As Reay (2015, p. 924) writes, educational institutions are central sites of these powerful struggles “in everyday interactions, in institutional processes, in struggles over identity, validity, self-worth and integrity, even when it is not acknowledged” as all actors play out class scripts.

The growing literature on supporting first-generation students on campus rarely cites this sociological literature<sup>2</sup>. Campus silences about class struggles then place the “heavy psychic costs” of educational inequalities on the shoulders of first-generation students (Reay 2015, p. 13). Learning little about how they have been disadvantaged at every stage of their schooling, they instead internalize “structurally generated shame” (Sayer 2005, p. 154) as they try to stay in the game.

The storytellers in this project, denied scholarly perspectives on the contexts of their “challenges”, were still far from finding a narrative arc through all of these contradictions and complexities when they came to the workshops. Yet as Jones et al. (2019, p. 16) write, it is possible “... to know in your body the classed realities of the world we live in and even perform them with precision, yet to be unable to speak them with words”. I therefore sought methods through which they might speak to one another and to others about lives shaped by class inequalities, even if they had not yet been able to access scholarly perspectives on those inequalities. I intentionally chose multi-media authoring as a means through which participants not yet finding their voice within the conventions of academic writing might be heard through creative authorship. This project explores two questions:

1. Invited to tell and compose any multi-media story about being a first-generation student, what might their stories convey about students' embodied knowledge of themselves as classed beings navigating unequal social terrain, even if they may not yet have learned to "speak . . . with words" (Jones et al. 2019, p. 16) of the power and precarity they have navigated all their lives?
2. Within campus silences about social class inequalities, what might first-generation students and others learn from the collaborative creation in these workshops about how inequality is normalized and sustained within educational institutions claiming to be meritocratic?

## 2. Materials and Methods

Between 2013 and 2019, seventy-eight storytellers participated in 9 workshops across the U.S. I later interviewed participants from 7 of the workshops (53 interviews as some participants in these workshops did not schedule follow-up interviews when I contacted them several weeks after their workshops.).

Their classed experiences were deeply intersectional. The storytellers were Black, white, Latinx, Asian, disabled, queer, straight, traditional-aged and older students, immigrants, refugees, and native-born<sup>3</sup>.

Three of the workshops were for undergraduates, two for graduate students, two for faculty and staff who had been first-generation students, and two were "open call" and included students, faculty and staff. Workshops were in New England, the Midwest, the Southwest, and the Pacific Northwest. Two were at small private liberal arts colleges, three at regional state universities, three at state flagship campuses, and one in a community setting.

The workshops were built upon the three-day workshop model developed by StoryCenter (Lambert 2013), specifically StoryCenter's mobile workshops. In addition to the story circle, script writing, supported editing, and celebratory screening common to StoryCenter workshops, we also took "photo walks" to capture metaphorical images around campus. To ensure digital equity, I traveled with a "mobile story lab" of iPads and peripherals for the workshops<sup>4</sup>.

Only five of the participants had ever spoken of their classed backgrounds on campus before, within the relative privacy of scholarship applications or close friendships. Though they, like most students, had been invited to do reflective writing and to explore identity in coursework and within first-generation support programs (Orbe 2004), none had spoken openly about their class backgrounds, in part because of norms of campus silence about class and because they had been denied the language to speak about class and classism that campuses do provide (though often inadequately) around other "isms". Nearly all the participants reported that they had no idea what story they might tell when deciding to do the workshop: most came to learn more about video editing or to meet people and then were startled by their own tears on the first day as they recognized their own struggles in others' stories. Within the workshop, stories begat stories as students began to talk about frustration and anger, pride and exhaustion, accomplishments and a pervasive sense of isolation. Sharing metaphorical images taken on a photo walk to capture illustrations of "adjectives describing first-generation students" that we had developed together early in the workshop generated yet more engaging conversations about common experiences that participants had been assuming were simply evidence of personal failure. In these metaphorical images, the participants creatively translated campus landmarks and familiar campus locations into barriers, obstacles, and symbols of exclusion and their inclusion in the digital stories deepened the affective power of the stories.

Then, over three days of intensive work and through hundreds of creative decisions (Gubrium 2009; Leon 2008; Oppermann 2008), the participants worked intensely with family photos, images of campus spaces, pacing, layering, sound, music, color, and the creative juxtaposition of all these to convey to audiences of their choosing what they cannot

(or will not) speak with words as they explore “multiple, conflicting, developing identities” (Mack 2019, p. 59) at the borders of class mobility.

The students were all volunteers invited by campus mentors or who responded to open announcements. Some participants reported that faculty announced the workshops in class, others said that a support staff member had specifically suggested that they attend. Some were recruited by friends who planned to attend. Faculty, staff, and graduate student participants primarily responded to open calls on email listservs or posted on social media.

Interviews were all transcribed verbatim and the transcripts and stories were inductively coded through multiple rounds of reading, listening, and ongoing refinement of analytical notes (Miles et al. 2014).

### 3. Stories of Being First

From this analysis, I developed cases of three storytellers as illustrative of what transpires in these workshops: an undergraduate, a graduate student, and a faculty member from a working-class background. I selected these three stories from workshops across different campus types (a private liberal arts college, a flagship state university and a regional state university) and geography (both coasts and the Midwest), gender, ethnicity and race. While almost none of the storytellers created stories about the issues that are centered in the Student Affairs literatures (academic struggles, adapting to a “foreign” middle class culture, learning “social capital”), these three cases are representative of common themes across the stories: agency in the face of formidable “architectures of exclusion” (Walkerdine 2021, p. 65) as storytellers made poor and working-class families and communities visible on campuses where they are otherwise largely invisible.

#### 3.1. *The Right Fit*<sup>5</sup>

Luciano, a college senior at a private liberal arts college, had thought he would create a thank-you video for family coming to his graduation in the spring. But over the first day, he shifted his focus to instead address someone interviewing him for his first professional job. His story opens with a very young Luciano confidently taking orders in his family’s restaurant, surrounded by family trust and support. We see images of him within a large extended family as he names relatives who have shaped his intellectual, moral, and political perspectives. He casually rattles off theory from across his courses as we see a high pile of textbooks on the screen. He then calls out experiences unavailable to him (golfing and vacation homes in popular locations) that he expects other candidates will invoke in interviews to establish common social bonds. He states emphatically that he is in college to support family who have long supported him, not merely for himself.

In this short digital story, Luciano challenges middle-class assumptions about success and the goals of education as he also challenges stereotypes about working-class Mexican-American families. An image of his hands folded on the table during an interview transitions into a second image of his hands at that same table, crumpling paper in tight fists. Having accomplished all that he has academically and all he has learned from extended family, he is clear that he is still subject to the power of others to arbitrarily judge him as less worthy. He closes with an image of him confidently standing in an office, asserting his place there.

Even within this final triumphant image, Luciano makes clear that while he understands that he belongs in that office, he will have to continue asserting his worth as he navigates ongoing intersectional class antagonisms regardless of how much he has accomplished. In telling his story that names the arbitrary power that others hold over him, he refuses a “structurally generated shame” (Sayer 2005) rooted in more powerful others’s refusal to recognize his worth and dignity.



### 3.2. *Migrando*

Elizabeth, a Ph.D. student at her state's flagship campus, left Mexico on her own as a young woman. In her story, she recounts how she then spent years cleaning hotel rooms before she could find her way to college. She later found work in a non-profit that supported others in her community. With the very generous support of immigrant co-workers (she names each and their home countries, bringing them into visibility within academic spaces where they are otherwise invisible), she finally enrolled in college and graduated. She then speaks of the heartbreak of being required to "abandon" this community for the isolation of a full-time graduate program.

Through her chosen images, we witness her as an adolescent within her large birth family, her invisibility behind the facade of a characterless chain hotel, as a smiling undergraduate surrounded by supportive others, and as a partner and mother near the end of graduate school. The only visual representation of her as a graduate student are the objects of her college ID placed atop an academic text about decolonization.

Elizabeth spoke later of how powerful the workshop had been as a turning point in her graduate work. Taking the space to remember the deep support of her chosen family of immigrants made the taken-for-granted academic isolation from such communities more apparent to her. In making her community's support the center of her story as a first-generation student, she refuses academic myths that attribute success in college to individual talent and hard work. Successful now as an emerging scholar within academic culture while also critical of its norms, she ends her story declaring that she will find community again after finishing her Ph.D. As a working-class immigrant first-generation student, Elizabeth refuses to fully embrace "the very power structures that have oppressed us" (Reay 2017, p. 1842) as she tells her story of the layers of oppression she has navigated since coming to the U.S. to finally begin college years later as an adult.

### 3.3. *Making It*

Danielle, a white faculty member at a regional state campus, opens her story with the joy she felt as a child as she helped her parents deliver newspapers from the family car, "owning" the streets of their town in the dawn silence.

She tells of only later learning that her parents held "crap jobs" and that getting out of that town would be her best option. We see her in college and graduate school, traveling, and then with her name on an office door thousands of miles from home. We see her own decrepit elementary school juxtaposed with beautiful schools that she has seen elsewhere.

Then, visiting home many years later, she feels deeply at home in the natural landscape of her hometown, even as she shows images of decaying infrastructure within that landscape. While she visits her father in his blue-collar workplace, both she and her father's co-workers recognize a gulf between them that they are all ill-equipped to navigate.

She explained that in composing her story, she worked to integrate her academic knowledge of decimated working-class communities with her own narrative of leaving such a place. As a scholar, she questions how it became normalized that distances between educated working-class students and their communities would be celebrated as a triumph of personal ambition when instead, the highly educated could be part of reimagining social policies, policies that now abandon working-class communities like hers and drain once-vibrant communities of young people.

From this vantage point as a scholar, she also powerfully conveys that she is also a daughter, now navigating social spaces where she sees that everyone "know[s] in your body the classed realities of the world we live in and even perform them with precision, yet to be unable to speak them with words", though the norms of higher education through which attained economic stability deny the very salience of the class inequalities that have shattered her home town and that now underscore her relationships with her family and home community.

#### 4. Discussion

On campus websites, first-generation students are often portrayed as smiling beneficiaries of the meritocracy, grateful for the campus support they needed to overcome temporary setbacks. The storytellers in this project told far more complex and nuanced stories. They told “subversive stories” (Ewick and Silbey 1995, p. 220) that make visible what is otherwise rendered invisible in much campus discourse: exploitive jobs, the dignity and wisdom of less-educated family members, the fragility of social safety nets, deeply under-resourced schools in economically segregated communities, and the deeply flawed belief that structurally unequal playing fields will be leveled one individual success at a time. As counterstories to the inspirational success stories that campuses tell about them, their stories quietly refuse to frame social mobility as a moral victory (Adair and Dahlberg 2003; Sayer 2005). In telling these stories for the first time, they understood that they were engaging in “risky exposure, a view that the bourgeois world would rather not see” (Zandy 1995, p. 167). And at the end of each workshop, the collective screening of the stories was equally celebratory and sobering. I heard the word “vulnerable” over and over in interviews as participants described sharing their stories with others.

Yet invited to tell any story, the participants did not focus on the experiences that are centered in the Student Affairs literature about them. Very few students spoke of academic struggle or of growing distant from families. Instead, they wove stories of power and powerlessness in their lives before, during, and beyond college, struggles that shaped their sense of themselves and their purpose as students. Only graduate students and some faculty spoke of being able to draw on theoretical understanding of those class struggles to frame their stories. Undergraduates instead drew upon the embodied knowledge of which Bourdieu writes, deploying creative visuals and sound to convey what their scripts alone do not.

Invited to tell any story in a collaborative and creative space, they recognized, often for the first time, that their stories were collective stories and not simply evidence of shameful personal failure (Sayer 2005). While much of the literature on these students reports only their responses to the interview questions formulated by others, these workshop participants instead told stories that begin to fulfill hooks’ (hooks 1994) powerful vision of campuses in which poor and working-class students are visible and vocal as they address the questions of their lives, and where the ideas and experiences of the privileged are routinely examined and criticized.

While the participants all reported learning more about their own stories and about the common experiences of first-generation students during the workshop, their stories go beyond the reflective self-knowledge that is often attributed to narrative writing.

Unlike any academic product they had created, the stories were easily shared with others and were compelling to audiences. In sharing their stories, the participants acted as “lay sociologists”, locating themselves within institutions “that both enable and constrain action” (Ewick and Silbey 2003) even when those social locations are not yet understood theoretically. Polletta (2006, p. 215) writes that such storytelling is inherently political as stories build group identity that is critical to social action. They spoke intentionally of publishing the stories on the project website to support other students in recognizing a collective identity that they had been denied.

The storytellers began to experience the power of those new collective identities.

##### 4.1. Testing Voice

As such, the storytellers spoke of the power of the workshops in part because in their individual and collective stories, they acknowledged “outlaw emotions” from which seeds of critical perspectives can take root (Jaggar 1989, p. 167). Stories such as these provide a “counterpoint to the myths promoted by the powerful” (Polletta 2006, p. 150) as a step forward in the work of social change.

Nearly all the storytellers placed their stories on their phones and then showed them to peers, faculty, and co-workers when before, they had carefully self-monitored stories about

their backgrounds to avoid judgment. Knowing now that there were others on campus like them, more began speaking up in class about their lived experiences when before, they had ceded class discussions about justice and equity to more privileged students. Seventy-one published their stories on the project website.

#### 4.2. Testing Agency

Beyond personal voice, the collective stories also challenged policy and practice. On one campus, undergraduate storytellers held a panel and public screening of their stories. A financial aid officer at this screening who had declined to increase grants was stunned to learn of the depths of family sacrifice depicted in several stories and restarted conversations with staff advocates about meeting students' financial needs. A professor at the screening asked a sophomore storyteller to work with him to make his courses more welcoming for students like her who were academically prepared but blindsided by hidden norms and expectations.

On another campus, faculty and staff who had been first-generation screened their stories for peers and spoke openly about their collective sense of vulnerability to judgment as they revealed their classed backgrounds, challenging those more privileged professional peers to recognize their own classist assumptions.

Graduate students at another campus screened their stories for a large gathering of other first-generation graduate students and each spoke of the power of becoming visible and vocal as poor and working-class students in their programs and in their professions. Many of the graduate students began incorporating digital storytelling as pedagogy in classes they taught, striving to bring more diverse voices to campus deliberations.

### 5. Conclusions

The stories in this project are quiet acts of resistance to the stories that campuses tell about first-generation students. The stories complicate prevailing literatures about first-generation students that offer support for overcoming personal "challenges" without inviting students to talk back to those who would normalize the persistent obstacles in the way of so many students like them. Individually and collectively, these storytellers have denied their campuses the power to reduce them to inspirational evidence of fairness and opportunity in higher education. In making their families, their communities, and the exhaustion of marginalization visible on campus, they also cast light on the power that others have long wielded to simply wave away the structural inequalities that create very divergent pathways to college as somehow the fault of those being excluded.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was approved by the Institutional Review of The University of Washington (#44675, 7 April 2018) for studies involving humans.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Signed informed consent was obtained from all storytellers in this project.

**Data Availability Statement:** Stories that creators have chosen to make public are published at <https://firstinourfamilies.net/stories/>. To protect privacy, full interview transcripts are not public.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Though other definitions are sometimes used, in this paper I use the most common: "first-generation student" as someone who will be the first in their immediate family to attain a bachelors' degree.

<sup>2</sup> The introduction to the "social class" section of the first-generation student bibliography mentioned above in fact deeply misunderstands and distorts Bourdieu's work and cautions readers against relying on his frameworks in first-generation student work. While this paper is not the place to review the many ways that Bourdieu's work is erroneously described in this literature, it is common for scholars from other disciplines to use such terms central to his work such as "social capital" in ways very different from his use.



- 3 Data on the demographics of the storytellers and interviewees can be found on <https://firstinourfamilies.net/the-storytellers-2/>.
- 4 Equipment was purchased via an academic crowd-funding platform that my campus asked me to pilot. I charged no fees for these workshops but campuses that could afford to contributed to an equipment replacement fund and paid my travel expenses.
- 5 Stories that participants chose to make public can be found at <https://firstinourfamilies.net/stories/>.

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