



Defying the Odds: Class and the Pursuit of Higher Literacy

Donna Dunbar-Odom

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Examines why some working-class students pursue higher literacy while others don't.

“For me, literacy is … like trying to open a locked door with the wrong key … I don’t always see the meaning at first and usually I have to have someone … let me in with their key. I tend to think that being in college is enough, but it still isn’t going to guarantee higher literacy for me. It is something I am trying to grasp, but I am going about it slowly, simply because I am not so sure of how important it is to me.” — Rachel

According to key literacy research, working-class students are far less likely to pursue higher literacy than their middle-class counterparts, yet there are countless examples of those who have defied the odds. In this thoughtful look at why some determinedly pursue higher literacy against all expectations and predictions, Donna Dunbar-Odom explores the complex relationships people have with literacy, paying particular attention to the relationship between literacy and class. She shares the personal and often poignant literacy narratives of writers, academics, and her own students to reveal a great deal about what motivates desire for higher literacy, as well as what gets in the way. Bringing together these reflections with current literacy, composition, and class theories, Dunbar-Odom provides a better understanding of how to tap that desire in writing classrooms. Ultimately, the author argues that teachers need to focus less attention on how students should read and more on why they might want to.

“Dunbar-Odom’s overall message is an important one, encouraging educators to approach the work of students from working-class backgrounds without shaming them or making the field seem any more hostile than they may already feel it to be. Clear concern for the needs of such students permeates this work and makes it a valuable contribution to the field.” — South Central Review

“Because of a steadily increasing enrollment of working-class students in higher education, Dunbar-Odom’s work is important to educators in terms of understanding the important and complex cultural distinctions that form the gap between the working-class majority and the middle-class academy. For those of us in the writing classroom, this book … is timely and necessary.” — Composition Studies

“Defying the Odds … will give hope to scholars in rhetoric and composition who have been laboring for decades trying to raise social class on the disciplinary radar screen.” — JAC

“Defying the Odds offers an insightful look at the struggles of lower-class students and encourages its readers to find ways to overcome the barriers that prevent too many of these students from achieving higher literacy.” — The CEA Forum

“The topic of educating working-class students is dear to my heart, and this book gave me much to think about. Dunbar-Odom offers some sobering insights about the problems of convincing working-class students of the intrinsic value of the humanities aside from job qualifications. She also challenges some of the old chestnuts such as the ‘writing community’ and the ‘classroom community’ in thought-provoking ways.” — Patrick J. Finn, author of *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in Their Own Self-Interest*

Donna Dunbar-Odom is Associate Professor of English at Texas A&M University at Commerce and author of Working with Ideas: Reading, Writing, and Researching Experience.

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