LESSON 2

CLASS SHAMING

WHY TEACH ABOUT CLASS SHAMING?

Class shaming is something all working-class people experience at some point in their lives. Certainly, we have both experienced class shaming, which has motivated us to teach others about it. We have undertaken a lot of primary research for this book by interviewing fellow working-class people; being shamed by more privileged people is a universal experience for them too. In this lesson, we have collated a series of real-life scenarios that we will use to help prepare students for similar situations they are likely to face.

Most working-class adults can identify with being stigmatised and stereotyped. Many of these attitudes are borne out of ignorance or a lack of understanding. The overt classism of television programmes such as *Little Britain* and *Benefits Street* certainly plays into these prejudices.

Our research indicates that shame can be evoked when a privileged person tries to devalue or delegitimise someone whom they perceive to be less important or less entitled than them. Through their words or actions, the privileged can, if successful, contribute to making another person feel unwelcome or unworthy.

Writer Brené Brown defines shame as 'the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging – something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection'.[1]

WHAT IS THE CLASS DIMENSION TO THIS TOPIC?

So, building on this definition, shaming occurs when someone tries to provoke those feelings in another person. One form of shaming is class shaming. This happens when someone from a more privileged background

1 B. Brown, Shame vs. Guilt (15 January 2013). Available at: https://brenebrown.com/articles/2013/01/15/shame-v-guilt.

tries to demean someone who has less income, wealth, knowledge or life experience than them.

Dealing with shame can be very difficult for adolescents. Teaching about shame – and, more importantly, how to deal with feelings of shame – can have a positive impact on mental health. We can and should teach shame resilience in schools to help young people deal with overwhelming feelings of shame.[2] The common mantra 'forewarned is forearmed' is the salient reason for teaching working-class students about this important issue. It is highly likely that they will experience class shaming at some point in their lives, especially in scenarios where they encounter people from other social classes.

In our conversations with fellow working-class people, many cite experiences from settings such as academia, social situations and the workplace. Therefore, teaching students about how they might be shamed, and how they can best respond to it, can help them to develop vital coping strategies which will enhance their well-being.

Of course, class prejudice and snobbery has been around for centuries, and so too have barriers to entry to various professions and cultural pursuits. Some of those barriers are financial: the cost of studying for certain qualifications, having to self-fund through unpaid internships or moving to a more expensive part of the country to find work. Other barriers are non-financial, such as a lack of access to networks of people who have useful or insightful experience of that area.

In Chapter 2, we explained – through sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu – how the privileged often rig the rules within certain fields to make it harder for working-class people to thrive within them. One tactic they use is to try to embarrass or humiliate others. When the privileged are successful, working-class people tend to quit and remove themselves from the field, thus leaving the way open for the elites to further dominate that sphere. Our job is to help prepare working-class students so that these attempts at class shaming fail.

The scenarios we share in this lesson have all happened to real working-class people. There will also be space for other issues to be raised and other scenarios to be created by the students attending the session. Despite the seriousness of the topic, there are also a lot of opportunities for fun. The sessions represent real-life rehearsals and, just like rehearsing for a play or film, there will be plenty of mistakes and outtakes along the way. The main message of the lesson is: don't let the buggers win!

2 B. Brown, Shame Resilience Theory: A Grounded Theory Study on Women and Shame, *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 87(1) (2006), 43–52. https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.3483

HOW DOES THIS LESSON WORK?

This session uses drama or skillstreaming, which are effective pedagogies for dealing with challenging social situations.[3] If you aren't comfortable using drama as a pedagogy to address class shaming, don't worry, the strategies below can also be taught through discussions. Having said that, we do think some role play helps the students to appreciate different ways to respond. With this in mind, we will suggest a lesson format for addressing class shaming using a drama-based approach.

We suggest the following lesson format:

Aim:	To help working-class students build shame resilience
Age group:	14–18 years
Time:	One-and-a-half to two hours
Activities:	Q&A, drama, discussion
Resources:	Flipchart and pad

TO START THE LESSON

Lay out the room so the students can move around and see each other perform later in the lesson. Removing or reducing tables normally creates the space required.

Discuss with the class the need to set some ground rules, including participation, confidentiality and so on to create a safe environment. Prepare to model the strategies you want the class to adopt or use drama students to assist you with the modelling. Note: some young people may be reluctant to get involved. Don't pressure anyone to perform but encourage as much active participation as possible. At the very least, they should all be active observers – meaning they will be expected to contribute ideas and scenarios.

Explain to the students that skillstreaming is a form of role play where skills are practised in a safe environment to prepare participants for potential real-life situations. Inform them that they will be expected to participate in the session in the following ways:

- Be an active role player – get up and take part in a scene.

3 See A. P. Goldstein and E. McGinnis, with R. P. Sprakin, N. J. Gershaw and P. Klein, *Skillstreaming the Adolescent: New Strategies and Perspectives for Teaching Prosocial Skills*, rev. edn (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1997).

- Be an active observer – offer feedback and ideas for role players.

Explain that skillstreaming involves four elements:

1. Modelling – where the trainer/teacher demonstrates a particular skill.
2. Role playing – where participants experiment with using the skill.
3. Group performance feedback – where trainers/teachers and observers give feedback and share ideas and opinions.
4. Transfer training – think about how you can use these skills in real-life situations.

Ensure these steps are displayed and explained.

A warm-up/icebreaker is always a good idea when preparing students for this type of session. One icebreaker you could use is called 'double wheel'. Here, the class form two circles of equal numbers, one inside the other. The circles rotate in opposite directions until the teacher says 'Stop'. Then each person introduces themselves and asks whoever is opposite a question, which could be as innocuous as, 'What's your favourite television programme?' Each interaction should last between thirty to forty-five seconds, and the process is repeated three times. Starting the session with a lively activity creates good energy and can be used to generate questions and scenarios.

Repeat the double wheel, but this time ask the students to question their partners as follows: 'How might someone be shamed by others?' or 'How might someone be shamed for being working class?' Again, repeat this three times, then ask them to retake their seats.

At this point, encourage the students to share some responses from the last question. Some of these could be turned into scenarios for role playing later in the lesson. Possible answers might include things such as accent, not knowing certain knowledge, not having the best or most fashionable clothes and so on.

Explain to the students that this lesson is about class shaming. Ask them to speculate how a more privileged person might want to shame someone from a lower social class.

Question: How might someone more affluent try to shame a working-class person?

Possible answers:

- Ridicule/make fun of their accent.
- Ridicule/make fun of their clothes.
- Ridicule/make fun of their lack of knowledge around …

- Ridicule/make fun of their lack of money.
- Ridicule/make fun of their lack of experience.
- Ridicule/make fun of their lack of connections.

You might add: In certain situations, people from a privileged background may try to make you feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. Sometimes this is accidental, but sometimes it is deliberate.

The rest of the lesson could take the students through a series of modelled responses. Explain that the lesson will look at some scenarios in which the students may find themselves in the near future. Indeed, it is worth asking if they have already encountered such situations. Explain that the modelled responses are tactics or tools: you use them when you need them.

The five modelled responses or strategies that can be used across multiple shaming situations are:

1. Being awkward, not feeling awkward.
2. Being stoic in the face of insults.
3. Responding with pride.
4. Responding with information/knowledge.
5. Using humour as a shield.

Note: it is possible that the students might suggest some violent responses to the scenarios. Responding with violence should not be considered as an option, however tempting! Even physicality should not be entertained. Responsible teachers will get the students to consider the possible consequences of any physically aggressive response.

Explain all five strategies before allocating a group to each one. Either in front of the whole class or with each small group, model an example of how this strategy might be used. Explain to each group that their job will be to demonstrate that strategy in an upcoming scenario which will be presented to the class shortly. Now go through each of the strategies in more detail.

STRATEGY 1: BEING AWKWARD, NOT FEELING AWKWARD

Write the word 'awkward' on a flipchart pad, whiteboard or screen. Ask the students, 'What do you think when you see this word? What is it to *be* awkward? How is *being* awkward different from *feeling* awkward?'

Explain that awkwardness can be viewed in two ways. It can be something you *feel* or something you *are*. A common insult to working-class people (and others who are oppressed) is that we have 'a chip on our shoulder'. Quite a few people we interviewed certainly play this card when they sense that someone is trying to put them in their place. Having a chip on your shoulder isn't necessarily a bad thing. It is the very epitome of being awkward; it can be used as a tactic to signify that you aren't going to simply take the abuse or insulting behaviour.

Allocate one group of four or five students the challenge of representing 'being awkward, not feeling awkward' in a scenario. This means that the group helps the main actor to be awkward (difficult) in the face of someone trying to shame them, not feel awkward.

STRATEGY 2: BEING STOIC IN THE FACE OF INSULTS

Stoicism is an ancient philosophy that has a lot of modern-day admirers. Indeed, we recommend a few books on Stoicism in the further reading at the end of Lesson 5 on emotional regulation. One of the main Stoic philosophers, Epictetus, wrote, 'we ought not to yearn for the things which are not under our control' (*Discourses*, 3.24).[4] He and other Stoics believed in the importance of undertaking daily thought exercises that can be rehearsed over and over. This rehearsal can happen in your head, through discussions or through journalling.

These daily practices can help to reduce the possible fallout from situations such as when another person tries to shame you. For example, Epictetus counsels that your initial response to something apparently bad or undesirable happening, such as a more privileged person trying to shame you, is to tell yourself that this was not unexpected. Effectively, expect it and shrug it off, just as you would a rainy day. Preparing for

4 Epictetus, *The Discourses as Reported by Arrian: The Manual and Fragments*, vol. 2, tr. W. A. Oldfather (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and London: William Heinemann, 1925).

adverse events such as class shaming is known as *premeditatio malorum* by the Stoics. It is like a pre-mortem – preparing for things to go wrong.

In the lesson, the main character can also display stoic body language and be genuinely unbothered by the abuse that is raining down. They could even smile in the face of the insults as they have probably played out most of them in their head already. They have prepared for this moment, and they have responded with quiet, controlled calmness. Stoics train themselves to not be concerned with things outside their control. The behaviour of others falls into that category.

In the drama lesson, the main character can choose to ignore the insults, perhaps imagining the words bouncing off them and into space. Their internal monologue should be: what this person is doing is nothing to me.

Allocate a group to explore and rehearse a stoic response to attempted shaming. One member of the group will need to come forward as the main character who models being stoic in the scenario.

STRATEGY 3: RESPONDING WITH PRIDE

We think there are lots of reasons to be proud of coming from a working-class background. Allocate one group the challenge of preparing the main actor to be shame resilient because they are proud of their background, what they own, what they know and the people that provided this for them.

Many of us use class as part of our identity. Knowledge of where we have come from and the sort of lives led by our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents can help us to appreciate them and their struggles. In recent years, there has been a growth in interest about genealogy and heritage. Television programmes such as the BBC's *Who Do You Think You Are?* attract millions of viewers. Learning about our families, their occupations and the times they lived through can provide insights and be the source of much pride and gratitude at an individual level.

A key strand of this session is celebrating working-class culture and achievements. There are many ways to elicit pride in being from the working classes. We could easily focus on working-class heroes to celebrate and study. Learning about these icons and what they stood/stand for will help to counter many of the negative stereotypes that surround the working classes. Being proud of our roots can galvanise us when encountering those who try to demean or patronise us. Make clear to the students that those who try to demean others are the ones with the problem – just as racism is a white person's problem, not a Black person's problem.

Working-class history is often framed through the lens of struggle. Although many things that we might currently take for granted in society have been achieved through working-class struggle – such as the universal franchise, the welfare state, paid holidays, bank holidays, employment laws and so on – there is much more to the working-class, including creative achievements in fields such as music, literature, the arts, business, sport and so on.

The working classes are people who have historically built things, created things, fixed things and maintained things, so that everyone in society can live their lives more easily. Remind the students that the room they are sitting in, the vehicles they travel in, the streets, drains, shops, sports facilities and so on were all built by working-class people.

Allocate a group to explore and rehearse responding to attempted shaming with pride. Allocate one member of the group to be the main character who models showing pride in being working-class in the face of potential shaming.

STRATEGY 4: RESPONDING WITH INFORMATION/KNOWLEDGE

This is when the person being shamed comes back with information that humiliates the person who is trying to humiliate them. The following clip is from the film *Good Will Hunting*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIdsjNGCGz4. It illustrates how someone who tries to belittle others can be belittled themselves by someone with a superior intellect. This could be shown to the students at any time within this scenario.

Knowledge not only acts as a shield against fake news and misinformation, but it also acts as a weapon against those who seek to denigrate us because we aren't wearing the right clothes for the occasion, or we have made a faux pas with a fork at the dinner table. That is why, like all educators, we are great advocates of encouraging students to stretch themselves in terms of what they read, listen to and watch.

Allocate a group to explore and rehearse responding to shaming with facts and knowledge. Allocate one member of the group to be the main character who models responding to insults and shaming with facts, knowledge and information that destroys the whole premise of what the shamer is trying to achieve.

STRATEGY 5: USING HUMOUR AS A SHIELD

Humour can be a great coping mechanism. The group using humour can use it in a variety of ways – to belittle, to confuse or to correct the aggressor in their ignorance.

The working classes have a rich history of creating humour. Certainly, many comedy writers are proud to call themselves working class and create comedy about working-class people. We can also use humour to laugh at privilege and deal with stressful or challenging situations. In fact, there is a long tradition of lampooning the upper classes in Britain that you can lean on in this strategy.

Now to the tricky bit – creating a set of rules around how we use humour but not stifling engagement in the process. Any adult will be aware of the huge controversies around the guidelines and boundaries for humour. Here are some rules that you are welcome to take off the peg or adapt to suit your own context:

> Rule 1: Have a go at trying to appreciate and create humour.
>
> Rule 2: Don't judge others harshly if they share different views to you about what they find funny.
>
> Rule 3: Don't use humour deliberately to try and put someone else down. For example, avoid material that is racist, misogynistic, classist or designed to deliberately hurt someone. But do use humour as a shield when someone is trying to put you down.

There are several types of humour that students can use: witty wordplay, imitation or even physical comedy.

Allocate a group to explore and rehearse responding to shaming with humour. Allocate one member of the group to be the main character who models humour as a shield. As with the rest of the anti-shaming strategies, the group should help the actor to generate ideas and rehearse them. At the very least, the main actor should show how they can use humour to protect themselves from shame, and even humiliate the shamer.

Now introduce the first scenario to students.

SCENARIO 1: THE FIRST DAY

Remind students of the four steps to skillstreaming, and then introduce them to the scenario. Using the theme of 'the first day', prompt the students to use one of the five strategies within the scenario.

Example: It is your first day at college. You are nervous, and you overhear someone from a more affluent background make a negative comment about you to others. Speculate what you might do in this situation.

Each of the five groups are then set the task of demonstrating how this scene might play out. Characters will need to be chosen to represent the shamer(s) or the teacher can play this role.

The main character should try to model an excellent response to the given scenario (chosen from any on the recommended responses list). At the end of the scene (or throughout), the observers can suggest alternative or improved responses. The main character can freeze the scene at any time, have another attempt or interact with the audience to seek feedback. Once the main character freezes the scene, the co-actors should remain still and silent while the main character (or teacher) thinks through the following skill steps aloud:

1. Stop and identify the decision that needs to be made – for example, what should they say to this? What should they do now? Could they do this better?
2. Invite ideas from the audience.
3. Identify the potential positive and negative consequences of each option.
4. Choose what is agreed as the best response.
5. Start the scene again, using the strategy decided on in step 4 to create a 'better' response.

At any stage in the process, the teacher can stop or review a scene and ask questions. This can be done both when the small groups are performing or when the whole class are together. For example:

- What are characters A, B, C and D feeling at this stage? What does the scene teach us about the values or intentions of each character?
- What choices does the main character have at this point – for example, laugh off the insult, come back with a comment, remain silent?
- What are the implications of each choice (especially for the main character)?

Repeat the strategy and change the actors so that other students get an opportunity to practise it.

Try to rotate the actors as much as possible. It is helpful to get the actors to play both being shamed and doing the shaming. Remember, the primary aim of the lesson is to help the students to become shame resilient.

Another more subtle aim might be to get more affluent students to consider their own behaviours and prejudices.

The final part of any skillstreaming session involves getting the students to transfer what they have learned to real situations. Admittedly, some of these may be way into the future, but it is essential that you find some time for talking about transfer.

Ensure that each of the five groups have performed and then allow a few minutes for a talking or stretching break before the next scenario.

SCENARIO 2: I CAN'T AFFORD TO …

This scenario is about affordability. Others from a more privileged social class say something sneering to the main character, such as:

- 'What do you mean you can't afford a laptop or better laptop?'
- 'Why do you have to have a part-time job at uni?'
- 'Did you get to university on a scholarship? How can someone like you afford it?'

As with scenario 1, the students should help the main character to develop the best response to this situation. What might they come back with? What could they say to the shamer(s) that would potentially shame them in return? Again, use the five modelled strategies, and encourage the groups to swap over and model a different strategy. Again, support each group with advice and feedback before, during and after the performance.

After (or throughout) each performance, the main character may freeze and seek advice or feedback from the audience. This means that no performance must be polished; the groups can simply show what they have produced in the time they have been set.

Finally, transfer. After all the performances, ask the students to once again speculate how they might transfer this skill to real-life situations. Ask the whole class to consider which of the five responses was the best or most suitable. Does working through a different skill change their preferred response from scenario 1, or will they keep to the strategy they indicated that they would be most comfortable with earlier? Allow a few minutes break before the final part of the session.

CLOSING MONOLOGUES

Both scenarios used in this lesson help the students to react to class shaming situations that they may face years in the future. Therefore, there is a good chance the students might have forgotten them if that moment arrives.

In a way, the last part of the lesson is a third scenario. Here, the students work again within their groups and suggest ways of getting others to remember that class shaming isn't the fault of the victim. Ask each group to devise a short monologue on why it is important not to feel shamed, and to remember that the problem lies not with you but with the aggressor.

Once again, the students can perform these monologues and, if time permits, the class can discuss any issues that arise. It is essential to make clear that although certain social spaces can be hostile towards working-class people, the best way to deal with this hostility is to challenge it. We are just as entitled to be in that place or space as more privileged people.

FINALLY

Explain that this lesson has provided the space to rehearse different responses to being shamed. Hopefully, it will build the students' confidence. Many working-class people suffer from imposter syndrome – a feeling of not deserving to be in certain places or to be in receipt of accolades. Nevertheless, emphasise to the students that millions of people around the world fight forms of discrimination such as classism on a daily basis. They do it because it makes the world a better and fairer place. Encourage them to support others, not just friends, who are being shamed because they are different in some way.

There are a few other lessons in *The Working Classroom* that might prove to be a good follow-up to this one: Lesson 3 on the power of story and Lesson 5 on emotional regulation.

FINAL THOUGHTS

- Where in your school's curriculum are the students taught about class shaming?
- When does this take place?

- How much time is allocated to it?
- What types of pedagogies are used to teach about these issues and concepts?

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING FOR THIS LESSON

Brown, B. (2008). *I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn't): Telling the Truth About Perfectionism, Inadequacy and Power* (Sheridan, WY: Gotham Books).

Emunah, R. (1994). *Acting for Real: Drama Therapy, Process, Technique and Performance* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge).

Hauck, P. (1991). *Hold Your Head Up High* (London: Hachette UK).

Holiday, R. (2015). *The Obstacle is the Way: The Ancient Art of Turning Adversity to Advantage* (London: Profile Books).

Rutherford, A. (2021). *How to Argue with a Racist: History, Science, Race and Reality* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson).