In the office of an urban two-year college, part of the nation’s largest public university, a student and his professor discuss the improvements he is making in his Basic Writing course. The professor praises the writer’s personal voice but notes that this strength is overshadowed by a weak and informal vocabulary. Pleased by recognition of a writerly style, the student offers to write a ten-page essay in urban slang. The suggestion has appeal, admits the professor; however, she points out, college students need to master the conventions of standard prose. Eager to learn, the student asks for advice; the professor’s solution, a simple one, she believes, comes easily: “You could read the New York Times every day.” “But I don’t read the New York Times,” he responds, with a bit of irony. “It’s too high class for me.”

This student’s response seems significant to our position as educators at an institution with a population of students working for low wages and hoping for increased opportunity and wealth. These students want the education of the middle class, but its signs and symbols are sometimes contained in media that appear intimidating. Thus, they may perceive the language of the class that they would like to enter – or with which they already identify – as a language not their own.

Assumptions about class and the challenges these pose to teaching and learning have led to the cowriting of this article. Instructors of reading and writing, we have often thought about ways to address with our students the concept of class, and its themes and significance. Fortunately, in 2006, several intersecting events provided us the momentum needed to bring class into the classroom. Selected as LaGuardia’s 2006–07 common reading, Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* helped to frame discipline-based and campus-wide activities and discussions about various conceptions of working-class labor. During that fall’s Opening Sessions panel discussion, “Talking about Class in the Classroom,” we discovered that similar interests in the history of class and labor had taken us to different industrial cities earlier that summer: Nancy Berke (English) to Youngstown, Ohio, and Evelyn Burg.
(Communication Skills) to Detroit, Michigan. In both cities, shifts from local, industrial economies to global competition had left once-thriving communities in ruin.

In fact, while Evelyn’s study group at Detroit’s Henry Ford Community College was in session, General Motors, in a single action, laid off over 52,000 workers. For the workshop facilitators, the historical urgency of the threat posed to the American worker by the decline in manufacturing and the unemployment crisis required immediate classroom analysis. At the same time, at Youngstown State University’s Center for Working-Class Studies Summer Institute, participating educators posed a number of questions, two of which concern us here: How can the concept of class be taught? What do we want students to learn from reading and writing about class and labor?

Our summer seminars inspired us to return to LaGuardia Community College ready to examine attitudes towards labor and its history in America. Our classes would be constructed around lessons that included discussion of, in particular, the terms “class,” “middle class,” and “working class,” terms that are inherently slippery, their usefulness more or less context-dependent. “Working class” may refer to strict definitions developed in Marxist theory – i.e., that group of individuals who must sell their labor in order to meet their everyday needs. Or its definition may reflect post-Marxist, late-capitalist, high-consumer culture in which the definition of “everyday needs” has certainly changed and expanded.

But the current meaning of “working class,” at least as understood by our students, may be more provisional still. Students have middle-class aspirations for the future and may have had middle-class experiences in the past in their native countries. However, a majority of LaGuardia students are workers, but, like many of us, they may not see themselves as such even if they labor in ways that the average white-collar professional would not associate with middle-class employment. Our students may be stockers at Walgreen’s, cashiers at check-cashing establishments, waiters in restaurants; sometimes they fold clothes at the Gap, or change diapers and bedpans in nursing homes. At the same time, these stockers, cashiers, and waiters, some of whom are single parents in their thirties and forties, are also college students with the desires and aspirations of the middle class, laying claim to an identity displayed in advertising, promised in the classroom, and reflected in personal values. This mix of work, attitude, aspiration, and possession creates an identity more flexible than fixed. Given a fluidity of identity,
we ask the following question: Is the middle-class ideal – the American Dream and its conceptual architecture – so ubiquitous that thinking in terms of class difference and class categories has lost relevance?

Our summer workshops in Detroit and Youngstown reinforced the real social and personal consequences of taking the concept of “class” out of use. At LaGuardia, in our teaching of reading and writing, we found that, for students, concepts of class are unfamiliar or perplexing. The same discomfort is reflected in the absence of notions of class from the stories of workers recounted in Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed*. As she describes her own low-wage employment, Ehrenreich observes her coworkers’ disinclination to construct even a provisional working-class perspective as a form of either solidarity or critique. Hence, in the following discussions of two different classrooms, our concern is not about the ways the concept of class is currently configured, nor about how economic structures of American society affect learning outcomes. Our aim is more basic: we offer ways to introduce concepts of class as demonstrations of how reading and writing students might learn to see through a class lens – their own, a character’s, or even their professor’s.

**Reading the Other**

Robert Scholes has characterized the willingness to develop alternate lenses as “imagining the other” (167), an essential critical reading skill that he has observed lacking in beginning college students (165). In Scholes’ context, to omit another’s point of view raises larger questions about the difficulties facing students making the transition to college. The inability to read closely, to subordinate one’s personal opinions so as to better hear the writer, is a “problem of massive proportions” (167), and Scholes undertakes to trace some of its causes as well as some of its solutions. He cites a letter from his colleague at Brown University, Tamar Katz, who sees part of the problem rooted in a tendency among new high school graduates “to read every text as saying something extremely familiar that they might agree with” (qtd. in Scholes 165).

In other words, developing college students are often more comfortable when textual meaning conforms to a finite set of possibilities, a version of reliable cultural truisms in which they have been coached, such as the need for tolerance or respect for others, the existence of equal opportunity, or the invariable rewards of hard work. However valid, these values are not necessarily those expressed on the page; and inexperienced readers might, as Katz writes, “substitute what they
generally think a text should be saying for what it actually says” (qtd. in Scholes 165).

Eventually, Scholes writes, with training and discipline, developing readers will learn that texts “say things that many students will not, in fact, agree with and that we may not agree with either” (168). Managing the relationships among potentially incompatible ideas is a skill that students should possess as they leave college, along with mastering an author’s position and making critical judgments based upon textual evidence. For the writers of this article, one way for our students to “imagine the other” is to understand the concept of class and its various representations in our society – in a work of literature, an op-ed piece, a film, or their daily lives.

Experience has shown us that the larger conversation about who does minimum wage work and why workers sometimes have so little control over the conditions of their labor may be a delicate one; individual students may personalize and be offended by the critical content of the discussion. Additionally, because we no longer live in a time of union dominance and have long passed the heady days of the civil rights movement, students often see topics related to class and labor as irrelevant to their own experience. Still, we believe that a thoughtful discussion of class in class can serve higher-level literacy. The descriptions below show how we have emphasized attentiveness to “the voice of the other” in our exploration of the concept of class. Sample lessons used in our reading and writing classes appear as appendices.

Reading Class: Evelyn Burg
The following is a brief overview of the visual images and readings used to frame the concept and discussion of class in Essentials of Reading (CSE099) in spring 2006, and Literature and Propaganda (CSE110) in fall 2007. As described in the introduction, my emphasis is upon teaching activities originally motivated by the Ehrenreich common reading and my professional development study opportunity in Detroit in summer 2006.

In spring 2007, in conjunction with college-wide common reading events, I hung “From Nickels and Dimes to Dollars,” an exhibition of classic labor photographs curated from the Walter P. Reuther Library’s Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University in Detroit. My goal was to present these images for interdisciplinary classroom instruction, and, of course, to integrate them into my course work. The exhibition remained up until October 2007 so that I was
able to use it for two semesters. I reprinted the black-and-white images in large scale, 17 by 22 inches, and added captions and a historical introduction. Among the thirteen photographs, several were famous. For example, “The Battle of the Overpass” shows Walter Reuther and other United Auto Workers (UAW) union organizers set upon and brutally beaten by Henry Ford’s “servicemen.” Another image depicts injuries sustained by Richard Frankensteen, a UAW organizer. Other photographs were of women factory workers, others still of children picketing on behalf of their fathers. In a photograph of the famous Memphis sanitation strike of 1968, a worker holds a sign bearing the message “I Am a Man.” As students viewed the exhibit, they considered critical questions about the perspectives of the subjects, the photographers, and the curator (See Appendix 1).

In a unit of Literacy and Propaganda that focused on racial stereotyping, my objective was to relate and dissociate the two concepts of race and class. Previously we had explored how embedded cultural assumptions can be easily exploited by propaganda to produce a range of emotions. Students had read “‘Nigger’: The Meaning of a Word,” Gloria Naylor’s essay on the use of that significant term. To introduce the class issue, I assigned a New York Times opinion article by the cultural critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in which he considered a Pew Research Center finding that class divisions had not merely sharpened in the black community but had overtly begun supplanting race as a personal identifier.

To stimulate a discussion that required drawing relationships and distinctions between concepts, we began by breaking down my provocative – if leading – question: “Is ‘class’ a dirty word in America?” As usual, we started with an analysis summary of Gates’s view – that forms of solidarity once considered reliable might be dissolved in the mixture of attitudes, education, and material situations that we call “class.” Bracketing their own views, and following Gates, the students traced the origins of a troubling class difference emerging among blacks. In the end, two of the sharpest students argued that class was an unmentionable in American society, one student tracing the reluctance to speak openly about class identity to feelings of personal failure and of blame and shame within a culture of equal opportunity. Grasping the argument when presented by their peers, other students agreed.

After analyzing the Naylor and Gates readings, students took the “Class and Poverty Awareness Quiz,” designed by Paul Gorski for the education website EdChange.org and the Multicultural Pavilion.
Encouraging connections among concepts of poverty, class, and education, the quiz asks questions such as: Which variable most closely predicts SAT score – race, region, income, or parental education level? How many children die each year from causes related to hunger? Engaged by the topic of poverty, students quickly saw direct connections between the realities of economic differences and the various ways in which class is represented, institutionalized, and transmitted. After taking the quiz, students were required to question the quality of Gorski’s statistical sources, as well as the aura of validity and precision communicated by any multiple-choice format.

Several responses to the above classroom activities suggest that students are ready to grapple with questions of class. One woman approached me in surprise at the violent history of American organized labor, comparing it to the labor violence that she knew in Latin America. Another student was amazed that labor had a “history.” In fall 2006, during a common reading Speaker Series lecture on the future of labor in a global economy given to a broader group of LaGuardia students, many of whom were familiar with low-wage labor and illegal labor practices, a student in the audience was startled to learn that statistics were available on so many aspects of what he had thought were the forgotten sorrows of the poor. These students had begun to respond authentically to ideas and texts, finally hearing the “other.”

Writing Class: Nancy Berke
My illustration of how class is overlooked by students comes from a College Composition I class (ENG101) taught in spring 2007. I teach the New York Times, and sometimes find myself agreeing with the student whose sentiments open this article: on occasion, the pages of the New York Times are too “high class” for me as well. But the writing is excellent, and I want my students to learn to write well. That semester, my students read and wrote about essays that expressed different views of contemporary immigrant life in New York City. Edwidge Danticat and Junot Diaz, for example, underscored the difficulties immigrants in New York face, largely owing to the immigrants’ own desire for social mobility. I asked students to critique these essays by comparing their own feelings about New York City with those expressed by the authors.

Students were not directed towards a class analysis of each essay, so I was not surprised, though still intrigued, by their lack of attention to the class differences inherent in the authors’ narratives. Instead, students identified only the more familiar struggles the writers faced as
New Yorkers. Some shared Danticat’s optimistic view that class differences could be erased in a place like New York with its “penny-gilded streets.” Her parents came with nothing, worked hard, and eventually were able to purchase a home that they struggled day and night to keep. By way of a Puritan metaphor, Danticat describes New York as her “city on the hill.” Many of the students’ written responses to Danticat’s story deemed its result axiomatic: if you work hard, you can purchase the rewards of the American Dream – career choice and home ownership. Our in-class conversations further highlighted students’ connections to Danticat’s and Diaz’s stories of upward mobility; a few students admitted that the first years in New York “can be tough” – but they quickly returned to more generic and less painful concepts.

In the final paragraphs of their essays, students were to compare their personal experiences with those of Danticat and Diaz. Yet, most of their concluding paragraphs made little reference to the specific issues important to the authors and, most troublingly, their own authentic voices disappeared as they reverted to clichés or vague responses: “New York is my ‘city on the hill’ because of the diversity,” “because I have always lived here,” “because you can get anything you want here,” or “I enjoy the opportunity here.” Their responses made me wonder: Might an analysis of class, begun as a classroom dialogue, help students to locate the voice of the other, to recognize class inequality as a subject worthy for their essays, and to regain the authenticity of their own voices? Was there a connection between the voice of the other and learning to write authentically?

Reflecting on my class and on the distance between the conceptual knowledge that beginning college students have at hand and the levels they must reach to be truly literate, I am reminded of Katz’s observation that students tend to address what an author “ought” to say rather than what he or she actually does say (qtd. in Scholes, 165). Because my composition students made no mention of “working class,” almost no mention of work at all, and expressed no particular sense of class position, I had to acknowledge their difficulty: they did not recognize class differences or apply them to their own lives. Although the word “struggle” and the phrase “struggling to achieve one’s goals” appeared frequently in the students’ writing, there was no coordinating articulation of where the struggle was located, or who struggled, or why.

Without a discussion of what “class” means to students, the Danticat and Diaz texts merely reinforced the familiar image that immigrants struggle, suffer, and maybe triumph. To help their authentic voices to
emerge, developing students need more time to discuss new concepts – social mobility, for example, a key trope in these essays. In order to respond more fully to essays about immigrant life in New York City, they must first “imagine” the factory jobs of Danticat’s parents, or the Section 8 housing in which Diaz lived as a boy.

To reach the goal of moving students past assumptions and preconceived ideas, past clichés and toward unfamiliar concepts, in this case toward concepts of class and its effects on immigrants, educators must give students both the opportunities and skills to analyze why and how these conditions arise in the first place. For an extended lesson in the analysis of images of class in poetry and photography, see Appendix 2.

Conclusion
Like beginning students everywhere, students at LaGuardia need clearly directed and well-scaffolded discussion about unfamiliar concepts. In the case of class analysis, a review of the vocabulary, discussion of concepts, and analysis of historical background are all essential to understanding new constructs. They may give students those important initial jolts that can lead to greater engagement and/or identification with the authors they read and write about. In our classes, we found that introductions to class, combined with conversations about students’ own social aspirations and obstacles, could help students to discern the voices of others – Ehrenreich’s workers, Gloria Naylor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Edwidge Danticat, and Junot Diaz – as both distinct from, and related to, their own.

Our previous teaching experiences and personal interests sent us to Youngstown, Ohio, and Detroit, Michigan. We returned from those cities to our own urban community college with a new conviction that class remains a vital concept for classroom instruction and analysis, and relevant to numerous fields of discourse. Economists certainly continue to use the term, and the disciplines of history, business, communications, law, forensics, sociology, and education, for example, all require an understanding of social structures and analysis of class formation. In this age of race, gender, and sexuality discourse, for a student to be unfamiliar with class constructs is to function at a conceptual disadvantage, especially if his or her intention is to move on to baccalaureate institutions.

To understand the various ways the concept of class functions in society is to open one more pathway toward a larger critical perspec-
tive and a higher level of literacy. Bringing class into the classroom is only one of many different ways to engage students, but one we feel is particularly relevant to their education. Learning to hear the voices of others – and in this particular case, the class of others – helps develop a habit of mind that moves beyond the personal and takes its place in the wider world of civic awareness and responsibility.

Appendix 1: From Nickels and Dimes to Dollars: Images from the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs

Exhibit Questions: Evelyn Burg
Look carefully at the images, read the accompanying text at the beginning and under each photograph, and answer the following questions:

1. How does this exhibit relate to the Common Reading – Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed*?
2. Read the brief history that precedes the exhibit and answer the following questions:
   - What are some of the social changes that occurred at the end of the 19th century that helped to give rise to the labor movement in America?
   - Why do you think the Great Depression of the 1930s served as a spur to the American labor movement in the automotive industry?
3. Why might people involved in the American labor movement of the 1930s connect with the civil rights movement of the 1960s?
4. Research the term “Rosie the Riveter” mentioned in one of the captions. What period in history does this refer to and what is the social change involved?
5. Look at the photograph of Genora Jarvis and her son and the other photo of the children picketing. How do these photographs affect you? What is the significance of the figures in the background? Why are they left in shadow?
6. The photographer of “The Battle of the Overpass,” as it came to be called, became an important activist in the development of the UAW’s influence at the Ford Motor plant and in Detroit. What is
his name? How might history have been changed if his photos had been confiscated successfully? Was the attempt to confiscate the photographs the reason that he became an activist?

7. In the photograph of the spontaneous Memphis sanitation strike of 1968, the marchers all had the same slogan on their pickets. Do you think this slogan is effective in making their point? Why or why not? What tragic historical event happened during this strike? Why do you think the curator ended the exhibit with this image? Does it indicate anything about her perspective?

8. Online task: Go to Lexis-Nexis, Google, Ask.com, etc., and find two recent articles about the United Auto Workers and the large automotive companies (GM, Chrysler, or Ford). What do these articles tell you about the condition of the industry today? What are some challenges the companies and the union face? Do you see any opportunities for these industries?

9. What else struck you about this exhibit and why?

Appendix 2: Reading and Writing about Poetry and Images

Staged Assignment: Nancy Berke
As a participant in the LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning’s Designed for Learning seminar, which focuses on the effective integration of technology and student-centered pedagogies, I took the seed planted in Youngstown and designed a four-part series of staged activities to develop students’ sensitivity to issues of class and to provide the necessary historical background to reveal how class matters. Utilizing poetry, images, and a legal document, engaging students’ critical reading, writing, thinking, and visual interpretation skills, this assignment could be used in a variety of disciplines including literature, history, social science, and the visual arts.
Part 1: Poetry
Read the poem “Golf Links” by Sarah Cleghorn. You will need to consider the poem’s theme and its structure. Use a dictionary to look up words that are unfamiliar to you and write down their definitions in your class notebook.

The Golf Links
The golf links lie so near the mill
That almost every day
The laboring children can look out
And see the men at play

1. Answer the following questions:
   • What is the poem’s subject?
   • How is the poem put together? Does it rhyme?
   • Look up the word “juxtaposition” in the dictionary and take note of its meaning. How does the author use juxtaposition in this poem?

2. Write a paragraph in which you describe your reaction to “The Golf Links.” Do not write a summary; I want to know what you think about the poem.

3. Post your answers to the questions and your paragraph on the Blackboard Discussion Board.

Part II: Photographs

1. What stands out most to you about these photographs?
2. Do they look staged?
3. What purpose do you suppose these photos served?
4. Based on your reading of the poem “The Golf Links” and on what you see in the photographs, give each of these photos a title.
5. Post your responses to the questions above and your titles for the photographs on the Blackboard Discussion Board.
Part III: Legal Documents

2. Write a paragraph in response to this question: Why was the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act created? How does this act reflect what the U.S. government – and U.S. business interests – thought about child labor at that time in history?

3. Post your response on the Blackboard Discussion Board.

Part IV: Writing Assignment
1. Travel back in time to the year 1916. Imagine that you are a member of the National Child Labor Committee and are concerned about the welfare of young children. Using Sarah Cleghorn’s poem “The Golf Links” and Lewis Hine’s photographs of child mill workers as support materials, write a 600-word letter to President Woodrow Wilson encouraging him to sign into law the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act. Wilson (the 28th president of the United States) was a learned man, an intellectual, and a scholar. Show him the power of Cleghorn’s poem and of Hine’s photographs and how they depict the way citizens like you feel about labor practices that exploit children.

2. Post your letter on the Blackboard Discussion Board.

Notes
1. As with any exhibition, this one was a collaborative effort. Tom Featherstone of the Walter Reuther Library was extremely generous with his time in sending me the images, Bruce Brooks and Scott Sternbach organized the use of LaGuardia’s printing facilities and provided materials, Hugo Fernandez patiently assisted in the printing project, and Michael Johnson facilitated. Finally, Cris Cristofaro and his art interns organized the display and hung the pictures in the lobby.

2. For a sampling of these photos and the accompanying historical introduction and study questions, see Burg.

3. As suggested by Michele Piso, faculty could supplement the discussion with a portion of “Everybody Hates Food Stamps,” an episode of the sitcom Everybody Hates Chris, in which Chris’s mother rashly spends the family’s money at the supermarket rather than pay with food stamps for her high-priced items in front of a snobbish neighbor.
Works Consulted


