Work is a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash . . . in short, for a life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.
– Studs Terkel, Working

Introduction
At LaGuardia Community College, we are often faced with the complex task of teaching students to be literate and effective in American society – work culture included – while at the same time creating and implementing pedagogies that are student-centered, student-driven, and student-empowering. Teaching in the tradition of Paulo Freire, we place value on teaching students to think for themselves, to stand up for their ideas, and to engage in creative and collaborative problem-solving. However, we are well aware that the dominant culture often gives students different messages that can undermine our work. Those messages are often most pronounced in the workplace where workers – and LaGuardia students are often workers – learn that cheeriness, helpfulness, and ready subservience to those in power reap the quickest rewards. Another message, which may appear contrary to the emphasis placed on subservience, concerns the route to power: Disregard the rights and interests of other workers. Often, the messages workers receive pool in a mix of “keep your chin up” and “look out for number one.”

It has become harder and harder for educators to cut through these rhetorics and teach in such a way that school is not perceived as a stepping stone to becoming the exploiter instead of the exploited. Nevertheless, we believe that we must keep educating to assert the rights of students and workers and to generate the transformative power of collaborative discourse and collective effort. As writers and writing teachers, we recognize the power of the writing classroom – with its demands for reflection, analysis, and the development of complex, risky ideas – to intercede. We see the topic of work as worthy of student writ-
ers’ reflection and analysis because the subject is complex and points to shared experience. As the poet Kit Robinson says, “The limits imposed by work represent not simply an obstacle but an opportunity for writing – not least because the workplace is the site of common activity and therefore enables writing to bear witness to our common experience” (n.pag.). Therefore, we both regularly emphasize exploration of work through writing. By using, on the one hand, the new concept of labor in Michael Hardt’s 1999 essay, “Affective Labor,” and, on the other, Erving Goffman’s concept of “dramaturgical analysis,” as presented through excerpts from his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, each of us strives to create a student-driven dialogue about work that leads to independent thinking, expressed in writing.

**Kristen’s Story**

In graduate school, I had a job in a call center taking classified ads for the *Buffalo News*. Many of my coworkers at that job had little placards with sayings pinned or taped all around their cubicles. Under the guise of “inspirational messages,” these placards usually contained commands about how to behave in a friendly and helpful manner at work. One placard read: “When you think you have been nice, be nicer; when you think you have been helpful, be more helpful; when you think you have done the job, ask what else you can do.” On the face of it, such office decor may seem ordinary, maybe even good. We are all accustomed to these kinds of messages in our culture: “work hard,” “always be professional and courteous,” “the customer is always right.” But there is a more insidious message here, one about our national work culture and its effect on our constructions of self and our connections to others. The workplace often requires us to present a certain affect, a certain outward appearance. Those placards and the requirement they signaled were to become significant, years later, in my writing classrooms.

I became interested in teaching writing using the context of work after the first time I taught Creative Writing/Urban Studies (ENN198) at LaGuardia in fall 2006. At the end of the semester, I asked my students to fill out a questionnaire that I had made to assess the course in relation to their needs and concerns. One question I always ask is “What, if any, obstacles do you see impeding you from continuing to write?” One of the most common answers was some variant of “work,” “my job,” “my boss,” “too much to do.” It became clear that, if I were really to teach students to be poets, playwrights, fiction writers, or documentarians, I was going to have to teach them to write in conjunction with,
as a part of, or in the middle of working at a job – and sometimes the job would not be one that the writer desired. When I was a call center operator, I used the occasion of the job to write a series of poems about telephone operation. This project gave me a new angle on my work at the Buffalo News and brought a lot of pleasure to a job that I otherwise did not enjoy.

Because of my experience and the feedback I received from my creative writing students about writing about work, I put together a lesson on writing and work beginning with Hardt’s essay in which he examines the passage from a manufacturing to a service economy in terms of changes in work behavior. In a manufacturing economy, workers had to punch in on time and work the machine efficiently. The manufacturing economy had its own problems, of course, but one’s personality or facial expression certainly was not a major feature of why bosses hired and fired people in, say, factories. Hardt observes that many of the goods now produced are primarily immaterial “such as a service, knowledge, or communication,” or what is often referred to as “an experience” (94).

Hardt discusses at length how caretaking labor and even the production of sociality itself – the “affective labor of human contact and interaction” (95) – have become central forms of capital production in many of what we used to call the industrialized nations. I give students a quotation from Hardt and his collaborator, Antonio Negri, in which they argue that we “can recognize affective labor, for example, in the work of legal assistants, flight attendants, and fast food workers (service with a smile).” One indication of the rising importance of affective labor, and also its power to narrow the field and import of human experience, “is the tendency for employers [in all fields] to highlight education, attitude, character, and ‘prosocial’ behavior as the primary skills employees need” (Multitude 108).

Based on Hardt’s ideas, I ask students first to discuss, then to write about how different jobs and work environments produce different feelings and allow or repress free expression. Students often engage in vibrant conversation, both in small groups and then in sharing from those groups with the larger classroom; the conversations evoke stories and questions about freedom, emotion, and power in the workplace. Many students discuss having to smile while being treated as if they are stupid, having to smile while enduring sexual harassment from customers, having to speak cheerfully and enthusiastically while repeating inane sales lines over and over as a call center operator, or having
to appear busy while sitting in a cubicle stamping envelopes for seven hours a day. With these stories in mind, we discuss the ways some work stifles writing, or, in some cases, subtly coerces individuals into conformity with codes that, though they may serve companies perfectly well, do not always serve workers. We also discuss work situations that trust, support, and encourage workers. At this point, students often become curious about my experience with regard to these issues. Knowing that I am an active, publishing poet, they wonder how my writing has influenced the kinds of jobs I have taken and how I have managed to continue to write. I share my own stories – the best and the worst – and explain why I became a professor. I also tell them about other writers who have worked hard and managed to write prolifically at the same time.

With the goal of preparing students to write stories and poems based on their work experiences, I show them some of my writing from the period when I was an operator and I have them read Local History, a book of poetry by Erica Hunt, based on Hunt’s experiences as a social worker in New York City. One moment of particular excitement comes when I show them copies of the little slips of paper on which Emily Dickinson wrote much of her late work. Dickinson was in charge of her household’s baking and for years spent hours a day in the kitchen. Much of her late work is written on torn brown paper – the kind the flour delivery typically came in – with grease stains and poor penmanship. She was writing while working. Like a jazz musician who plays while listening, a good poet is always at the ready for the right word, the phrase that strikes the imagination like lightning – even if it’s in the middle of kneading dough.

Next, I present the students with a medieval tradition best described by the French: la perruque, defined by Michel Anteby in 2003 as “factory production of items for personal use, made on working time” (454). The literary point of access to this idea that I provide is John Ashbery’s poem, “The Instruction Manual” (14–18). On the job, in a tall building in New York City, the young poet-satirist must write an instruction manual. He seems positively depressed by the task. The poem starts with the main character looking out a window, down on the small figures below, wishing he didn’t have to write an instruction manual on a subject he seems utterly disconnected from: the uses of a new metal. However, of his work Ashbery tells us little more. The occasion of the poem is precisely the mundane task, but the poem posits this mundane task as an occasion for the human imagination. Looking
down from the window at the sidewalk, watching the tiny figures below, he is suddenly reminded of Guadalajara, and the poem and its reader are transported to a scene more vibrant and alive than the office and the instruction manual. The bulk of the roughly three-page poem narrates Ashbery imagining himself entirely elsewhere, in Guadalajara.

Ashbery’s poem introduces the concept that periods of boredom at work may be used for the exercise of personal creativity. This idea is the key element of *la perruque* – that the worker exercises personal power to allot her own time and creative energy. We discuss the value of “downtime” at work, the fact that it can, if used creatively, be replenishing, even soul-nourishing. Students come to appreciate the title of Ashbery’s poem in a way they had not before; it becomes clear that Ashbery is offering instruction to his readers, to young poets, possibly even to these students. In the end, Ashbery’s “instruction” turns out to be encouraging. Not only does the imagination rush in to save us from the boredom, but boredom and disaffection can provide an opportunity – an opportunity for writing.

Students who see themselves as writers must choose either work that will grant them enough time to write, or work that will provide them with enough intensified contact with reality, and, therefore, with something urgent to write about – all the better if the job allows the writer always to be seen with pen and paper, or puts the writer in an environment with a lot of windows.

After we study some of the nuanced ways in which writing and working life are intertwined – and could be more intertwined in our own lives if we wanted – I ask students to write a poem or story in the spirit of Ashbery’s poem. We do what Kit Robinson suggests: take the limits imposed by a bad work situation and review that situation as an opportunity for writing – “writing to bear witness to our common experience.” I suggest they think of their writing for this assignment as a way to examine a part of their “work past” that they would prefer not to repeat, one that demonstrates a kind of affective labor they do not want to perform in the future.

In reading and discussing Hardt’s essay and Ashbery’s poem, students prepare to write and share detailed stories that represent their real experiences, feelings, and desires. The readings and discussions of Hardt and Ashbery also move students towards understanding the social and political dynamics of the postmodern worker. That understanding is crucial to an understanding of how choices of work can keep us from writing, or provide us with material for writing.
Christopher’s Story

My conversations with students and the materials that students bring from their lives into their writing have taught me that, particularly in evening classes, the proportion of working people in Composition I: An Introduction to Expository Writing (ENG101) approaches one hundred percent. I have learned that most students in my evening classes work in the “service industry,” or at the service end of the corporate sector, frequently as clerical workers and in other “office support” positions, staffing the phones at call centers, pulling shifts in restaurants, retail stores, or hotels. A few work as “light industrial” laborers, or in the public sector, as postal carriers, forklift drivers, packers, or delivery personnel.

Arriving at the college at 5:45 p.m., students often speak of the classroom as a hiatus in the work day or an interval between work and their personal lives. Some have just arrived from their places of work, with only the train ride as “personal time” for processing the events of the day; a few will be heading off to their jobs after class, with only the train ride to prepare mentally for the transition. In response to this situation, I have recently begun to develop a unit in my ENG101 classes that allows students to reflect on the experience of work, with a focus on the performance of social roles and sociality in the workplace. As part of this unit, writing is an essential tool for articulating and sharing reflections. I encourage students to recognize the common threads that connect their varied work experiences and to see work as a collective experience – the work culture of the contemporary American. Student efforts are structured by assigned readings and small-group discussion using a variant of the “problem-posing” method (see below, p. 121). Those discussions lead to informal group presentations that form the basis of individual essays in which students analyze their work experiences.

The work unit begins with a bit of sociology using brief selections from Erving Goffman’s 1959 book The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, which introduces the technique of “dramaturgical analysis.” Goffman divides personal experience into a metaphorical “front stage,” on which an individual tries to negotiate social norms and rules of behavior as well as idiosyncratic “audience” expectations that he or she believes inform a social situation, and a “back stage” which represents that individual’s interior life or behavior when no audience is present. In this way, Goffman is able to show us social interaction as a site for performance, shaped by the environment and the immediate audience, in which actor-participants attempt to manage
the impressions others have of them. Goffman’s highly-specific use of terms can present a challenge to composition students. Students work in small groups to come up with their own definitions of Goffman’s terms, then we come back together as a whole class, compare definitions, and work out together what we think Goffman is saying and how it relates to our lives as workers. This allows students to quickly move from “dramatur-wha??” to showing their understanding of Goffman’s basic point: Everyone in a given exchange is playing a role. From there, students go on to use Goffman’s theory to analyze their own work experiences.

In order to ensure that the dialogue remains student-driven, I use a variation of the “problem-posing” method first introduced by Elsa Auerbach. Kristen and I have been working to develop our own version of the problem-posing method based on Auerbach’s work as well as work by Paolo Freire and Sarah Nixon. Our five step problem-posing assignment is as follows:

• Articulate the concept. In your own words, define the specific question posed by our reading.
• Identify a quotation to support your definition. Keep it textual! Show us that you know what you’re talking about by connecting your definition of the concept with a quotation from the reading.
• Personalize the concept. Relate the idea under discussion to your own working life. Share workplace problems, past or present, that serve as examples of the concept. How does this concept help you to see the problems in a new light?
• Possible responses to the problem. What alternatives to your example problem have been tried and failed, or were tried and then abandoned. Why did those solutions fail? Should any of them be revisited? (This is also an opportunity to voice doubts or frustrations with the difficulty of solving the problem.)
• Alternative responses to the problem. Using Goffman’s concept, imagine new and different possibilities for solving the problem. Key word: IMAGINE. Seize on the ideas of your fellow students, no matter how impractical or far-fetched they seem at first. Eliminate the voice of criticism. Solving problems requires the free exercise of creativity!

This method allows students to digest Goffman on their own in small groups, connecting his concepts with problems from their own working lives.
Once small-group presentations are under way, students analyze their work situations using Goffman’s language and theory. Their presentations offer responses to these questions: What are the performance pressures we encounter at work? What are the institutional rules of the “front stage,” the various codes of workplace propriety (appropriateness of dress, manners, behaviors, activities)? What values do they encode or reflect? Usually students are able to introduce a number of problematic or culturally loaded examples. For instance, during one particularly fruitful session, a student brought in photocopies from the employee handbook at her place of work, which included the following:

Nail polish is not permitted in any food production area of the restaurant. Employees working in non-food production areas may wear clear polish. Nail ornaments and artificial fingernails are not permitted in any area of the restaurant.

We strive to maintain a “Family” restaurant image. Employees must remove all visible pierced jewelry while at work. Exception: Females are permitted to wear two small earrings in each ear if working in a non-food production area. Visible tattoos must be covered while working.

These two rules alone provided us with half-an-hour’s discussion: What are the cultural and class associations of artificial fingernails? of nail ornaments? What does it mean to say that some cultures are more “appropriate” than others? What is a “‘Family’ restaurant image”? Whose family? Why is the word “Family” capitalized and in quotation marks? What about the word “image”? What is the relationship between “Family,” “image,” and the covering of visible tattoos? What is the nature of this performance (“front stage”), and what is being concealed (“back stage”)? Who is the audience for this performance? What do we know of their actual expectations? Who is the “We” in “We strive”? Who are “we” being told to be?

Goffman is very useful for analyzing work situations, and my students, many of whom are entering new working environments and new labor conditions as a result of attending LaGuardia, usually have a lot to say about the “drama” of work. Goffman is particularly good for thinking through service industry labor, where the idea of creating an experience for the customer and of managing impressions is explicit.
and paramount. Goffman enables students with similar as well as vastly different sets of work experience to see commonalities.

In the wake of students’ informal presentations, students write individual essays using the problem-posing rubric to structure their papers. In the resulting essays, they draw on their small group discussions, presentations, and subsequent class-wide discussion for inspiration and material. Looking over these essays, I have generally found that students arrive at a solid understanding of Goffman’s basic ideas, and that the complexity of those ideas provides a useful challenge in the development of their composition skills, notably the use of summary, paraphrase, and quotation as tools for explicating a difficult text. The essays show evidence of genuinely engaged discussion, close listening, and synthesis. Although the interaction is not explicitly required by the assignment, in these essays it is remarkably common to find students citing classmates’ comments.

Typically, the next writing assignment follows the same contours. I ask students to describe a work situation and then to analyze that situation using the terms and concepts of dramaturgical analysis. In this subsequent assignment, we turn to Jill Sprecher’s 1997 fictional film Clockwatchers, a close look at four women working as office temps in Manhattan in the ‘90s. We observe the subtle contours of the power relations between the full- and part-timers, and how they create and move the drama, and we discuss them with a view to honing students’ analytical skills. “Dramaturgical analysis” of the film makes a good follow-up to the first assignment, and makes a good semester-ending assignment for ENG101 because it provides an introduction to concepts of literary analysis, which students will encounter in ENG102, Writing Through Literature.

Conclusion
If affective labor can be defined as the production of knowledge, attitudes and dispositions, it should be clear that teaching is itself a form of affective labor, a relatively privileged form, since it retains a self-directed, creative aspect. In an attempt to generalize this freedom, student-centered and Freirean pedagogies have been developed that work against the idea that the teacher prescribes affect for his or her students (for example, by limiting classroom attitudes to appreciation, mere comprehension, or position-taking within an established “pro-anti” discourse). Instead, these pedagogies place the teacher in the role of facilitator, assisting students in the exploration of their problems as they
discover and refine their own approaches to those problems. Understood this way, teaching has long had the power to raise consciousness about how received social forms are both created and reproduced, and how they may be changed. Given the increasing fragmentation of the global labor market and the increasing shift toward the production of affect (an experience, a knowledge, a feeling, an impression) rather than of material products, this kind of teaching may be more urgently needed and also more powerful than ever.

WORKS CONSULTED


