In “Making Things Our Own: The Indigenous Aesthetic in Digital Storytelling,” Candice Hopkins describes how Zacharias Kunuk, an Inuit screenwriter and film producer, introduced the Sony video Portapak to document Inuit culture. Inspired by the similarities video shared with Inuit oral traditions, Kunuk argued that video could provide a perfect medium to capture the tales, customs, and traditions of the people who lived far removed from “the outside world.” It would also serve as a countermeasure to the “non-Inuit television programming that had begun to infiltrate their communities in the early 1980s” (342). Hopkins also cites the Hopi filmmaker and videographer, Victor Masayesva, who wrote that it is “the accumulative experience (all the experiences, traditional or not, that inform our lives as native people today) that ‘refines and defines the indigenous aesthetic’” (342). In other words, using video to record and preserve the folkways of indigenous people “upholds the importance of community, acknowledges how much the past continues within the present (in Inuit culture the past and the future can coexist . . . ) and recognizes the vital role of oral tradition” (342).

For the purposes of this essay, I will also define aesthetic as “accumulative experience,” but will apply it to LaGuardia students. My primary objective is to demonstrate how my students develop into a community that preserves diversity and integrates “outsider” and “insider” approaches to learners. Finally, I draw attention to the classroom as a community of shared experience in which patterns of meaning may be observed, perceptions and discriminating judgment made and shared, and ways of seeing self and world reflected upon and changed.

I am an ethnographer by training and practice. As a consequence of Hopkins’ observations, I mused: Is there an aesthetic of work that applies to LaGuardia College students? Is there an accumulated collection of shared experiences informed by their upbringing, their work history, and their academic lives that gives them a particularly rich college experience – one that is perceptibly different from the experience of the average American “Joe College”? What elements of experience specific to LaGuardia Community College students contribute to their work aesthetic?
Academic Culture at LaGuardia

Each semester, I make it my charge to find the best means of eliciting an evocative narrative from my students. I want to know how they feel about their college experience in light of their daily circumstances. I want to understand the coping and time-management strategies that they employ vis-à-vis their “out-of-class lives.” I know many, many of their stories anecdotally – how they “are juggling child care with a spouse or mother,” how they “are stealing time from their workplace to do homework,” or how they “really cannot get the assignment in on week nights because they don’t get home until after 11:00 p.m. and they are up and out the door by 6:00 a.m., so can they please give it to me after the weekend?” There is every reason to believe that our students have a work ethic, but the coping mechanisms and time-management strategies that they utilize, especially evening students, lead me to believe that this population also develops a work aesthetic that allows them to thrive and succeed in an unforgivingly difficult work environment.

With its 155 nationalities and 110 languages, LaGuardia is uniquely regarded for its diversity in the world of community colleges. Almost without exception, the students I teach are in their first semester of American college, are non-native English speakers, have families of their own to manage, are older than the average American college student, and are working full time during the day. In addition, those who are working are not often working in the field in which they aspire to major; in fact, most are working as day laborers, cab drivers, or house cleaners, or in other hourly-paid, nonprofessional jobs. Some of the students have had some college in their home country, some have even completed degrees, and it is particularly frustrating for them to “start over” again in terms of money and time expended and disruption of their lives.

I teach “Vocabulary Enhancement” (CSE105), a three-credit course designed as a developmental reading-skills class to improve the vocabulary skills of incoming students so that they can more successfully read their textbooks in their major subjects. CSE105 is most often offered in a learning community, clustered with CSE095 (Fundamentals of Reading I) and ESL097. These students, initially grouped according to their ESL placement scores, quickly bond into a community whose lowest common denominator is their progress along the ESL continuum: from 097 to 098 to 099. From there, they can qualify for required ENG101/102 courses only after they have satisfactorily passed the
Reading and Writing Compass tests and Basic Writing (ENG099). The path to college-level English is, thus, a five-semester sequence.

During this time, the group may be seen as a distinct subculture within LaGuardia, a subculture whose boundaries – home, work, and school – create a dynamic tension. The French have an apt expression: *metro-boulot-dodo*, subway-work-sleep, to describe the endless cycle of daily life. LaGuardia students are united by the common goals of academic achievement, finding a job in their chosen field, and improving their financial status. To help them along this path, I teach them how to fine-tune their multiple cultural repertoires, enabling them to move easily among their homes, their workplaces, and their classrooms, effortlessly switching between spoken languages; voluntarily switching between roles (e.g., boss to student); or momentarily switching between formal and informal language (e.g., e-mail, texting, IM).

While attending LaGuardia, my students also work hard to gain the necessary cultural capital to shed their outsider status as speakers of a language other than English in order to overcome the odds of failure in mainstream American society. By right of participation in their LaGuardia subculture, they learn what they need to succeed both academically and culturally. Over several semesters, they work individually and in small groups to reach their version of “the American Dream,” which, in American parlance, really means self-transformation. For most LaGuardia students, achieving the American Dream means acquiring the tools for upward mobility and job stability based on a combination of education, work, and socio-cultural skills.

**Work Ethic**

The exploration of the high value accorded work in American culture was introduced in Max Weber’s 1904 theory that the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) is in part responsible for the creation of our capitalist economy (Severinsen 111). The PWE leads to the expectation that the rewards of post-educational job placement are more than worth the delayed gratification or financial hardship of a college education. The traditional work ethic required that students view the college experience as a utilitarian goal, as a career path. In the post-World War II era, men went to college and then began their careers, and women perhaps completed a “finishing school” with the likelihood of marriage and family foremost in their minds. After the socio-cultural changes of the 1960s and ‘70s in the United States, college and careers became more widely acceptable and obtainable for women.
As the baby-boomer children reached college age, universities began expanding their professional programs, particularly for law, business, and medicine, not only to accommodate the influx of students but also to capitalize on the booming United States economy. These expansions mirrored the work ethic in terms of encouraging a utilitarian career path but raised important questions at the same time. According to Maddock, this new post-industrial era of work brought into question the assumptions of the Protestant work ethic (qtd. in Severinsen 112). Career counselors, especially, began to “examine the existing alternatives to the traditional work ethic” (Severinsen 112). Morris takes this idea one step further by saying that post-industrial students have taken on an existential perspective of career . . . . [C]hoice of life work is decisive in defining oneself. [Less a reflection of] how much one can accomplish, one’s career becomes a “human project” placing not our work, but ourselves on display (italics in original). (qtd. in Severinsen 112)

By the 1980s and ’90 s, career counselors and educators had learned that there were multiple pathways to career and success, and that not all of them required strict adherence to the PWE, although, in truth, the PWE has never been completely abandoned. This era was a transcendent moment in American education, and marked what Thomas Kuhn called a “paradigm shift” in thinking about careers (Kuhn 1962). For, if we fast forward thirty years, we find that the traditional work ethic – “work hard and you shall be rewarded” – becomes metamorphosed, for my LaGuardia students at least, into an academic work aesthetic – “I will undertake this academic work because, through this process, I can be more fulfilled as a person.” The potential to earn more money or to advance in one’s job is a secondary motivation.

Work Aesthetic
Here I find myself back in my undergraduate Aesthetics class reading John Dewey’s essay, “Having an Experience,” for the first time. Dewey defines the aesthetic narrowly as a vivid experience, and likens the lived experience to an aesthetic state. Initially, he makes the distinction between things that are experienced, and having an experience. Accordingly, we might remember a particularly wonderful meal or surviving a nasty storm by saying “that was an experience” (italics in original) (172). But the totality of that experience is not demarcated by the sit-
ting and eating, or by the running helter-skelter into a safe haven. The dining experience may have begun with the trip to Paris, and the storm may be an unconscious childhood memory, forgotten until a particularly violent storm waited out in adulthood. These experiences are not final or complete, but become part of a larger life narrative which we revisit and revise and reconstruct as we have other more or less meaningful experiences which may or may not share common patterns; an experience is the totality of the relationships between the doing and the undergoing (178).

Through reflection, experiences become part of an aesthetic whole. Here Dewey says that “esthetic [refers to] perception and enjoyment (180),” and is “inherently connected with the experience of making” (182). To that end,

[a] drama or a novel is not the final sentence, even if the characters are disposed of as living happily ever after. In a distinctly esthetic experience, characteristics that are subdued in other experiences are dominant; those that are subordinate are controlling – namely, the characteristics in virtue of which the experience is an integrated complete experience on its own account.(187)

I have learned, after many years of teaching, that the intellectual process of reading or writing is void of meaning in isolation. For my students, the intellectual experience becomes complete with the aesthetic reflection on a semester-long assignment that is ostensibly about words, but is, in reality, about themselves and the worldview they hope to create by attending LaGuardia Community College.

LaGuardia Experiences: Pedagogy of the Work Aesthetic
The Vocabulary Enhancement class challenges students to spend the semester researching their chosen major using databases, books, journals, and the Internet in order to find keywords and operative terms relevant to their profession. Then they must write and publicly present a narrative about why they have chosen that major or career. This metacognitive exercise – essentially an exploration of “What do I want to be when I grow up, and why?” – gives LaGuardia students an early look at the career choice they are pursuing and helps them to make further judgments and choices, and, ultimately, to see the shortcomings of the unexamined life.
And so it is with the rest of their education. The “college experience” is a long series of smaller experiences: the students respond to these experiences, then reflect upon them, and then use these pristine experiences as a foundation to inform their future experiences. Students actively make the value of the “college experience” qua experience come fully alive by their ongoing perception and aesthetic evaluation of their classroom experiences. To value the aesthetic experience, one must be discriminating – choosing those parts that will enhance and further that experience and ignoring that which will distract from achieving one’s goal. Thus, the notion of education for education’s sake is akin to drudgery. Unless an experience is interesting and meaningful in and of itself, there is little impetus to continue that endeavor. In other words, the absence of aesthetic judgment of the lived experience, or the neglect of placing a value on that experience, means never examining it critically and missing the forest for the trees.

LaGuardia students willingly accept the delayed gratification of pursuing their career goals in the classroom. For many, the biggest handicap is overcoming a language deficit and that requires an investment of years. They also understand that they have much to gain from a process of socialization that promotes linguistic fluency as well as socio-cultural competency. Yes, they all willingly undertake this academic course of action for the potential jump in job status from cab driver or nanny to professional. When asked in a questionnaire given at the beginning of the class why they are in college, many respond that they would like to earn more money, but a majority of my students also add that their true motivation for attending LaGuardia is more altruistic: they emphasize the experiential component of their achievement; they know that it is the doing itself, with others in community, that enhances the value of their education.

Similarly, in a recent study at Hostos College (CUNY), Santos researched the incentives of 179 first-semester Hispanic students in an effort to determine why they would choose to enroll in a two-year college. The motivational factors, in rank order, were knowledge, self-development, job enhancement, social status, and improving social life (24). This study correlates closely with what I have found among my LaGuardia students. The Hostos students had, foremost, a desire to learn more about the world around them and to improve themselves, and then they wanted a career, rather than merely a job for work’s sake.

Although my own classes are not statistically significant as research samples, LaGuardia students’ responses to “Why are you really here at
LaGuardia?” are somewhat analogous to the work of Kunuk and other Native American community activists and may represent an indigenous LaGuardia aesthetic. Just as Portapak video recording stimulated small underrepresented communities to band together for self-preservation and protection of their heritage, so do LaGuardia’s learning communities bring together small groups of students of differing languages and cultural backgrounds in such a way that they build upon their native language and heritage and become proficient in the academic and career folkways of mainstream America, gaining “insider” status while struggling to maintain their “native” selves in a new environment.

Academic achievement is not the thrust of my research. However, there is at least anecdotal evidence that LaGuardia college students’ abilities, as measured by placement tests, combined with their zeal and the support of the college learning communities, are potential predictors of student success and persistence. My role as cultural moderator encourages the process of making the communal experience part of the aesthetic experience. I can use the differences in language and culture to foreground the importance of the learning community environment but the success of that experience has to originate from the students themselves.

The fact that LaGuardia evening division students are motivated to learn is evidenced by the workload they voluntarily take on – 30- to 40-hour work weeks and 20 to 25 hours of nightly classes – not to mention the primary impediment to their success: they must first learn English before they can progress! Adding to this mix, note that the majority of LaGuardia students are here because, first and foremost, they want to improve themselves and only secondarily because they want to find a suitable career. It may just be that the aesthetic motivational factor, enhanced and supported by a variety of educational experiences in LaGuardia learning communities, contributes to their eventual success.

**Note**

1. 2007 figures (LaGuardia 1).

**Works Consulted**


