I was the first person in my entire working-class family to go to college. My parents, cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and even my brother never attended an institution of higher learning. My father was a machinist with a second job at a gas station, and my mother was a waitress who later worked at Walgreen’s. They were proud of me, but when I called home after a week of college to learn the difference between a “bursar” and a “registrar,” my parents quietly replied that they just did not know.

Eventually, I came to realize that although my blue-collar family could offer moral support, they could not help me find my way through the academy. And so I struggled with the college experience on my own. In short, I taught myself to be a college student. Later, as a graduate student, I tried hard to assimilate into a milieu that seemed to equate intellect with money. Later still, as a young professor in Rhode Island and then in New York, I worked just as hard – socially, professionally – to learn the codes of the academy. Now, in my fourteenth year of teaching at the college level, I am increasingly aware of the ways my demeanor in class and the dynamic of my classroom are nonetheless driven by blue-collar roots that, in many ways and for many years, have been at odds with my upper-class education.

Fortunately, over the past two decades, higher-education professionals from working class backgrounds have emerged to tell their stories about conflicting ways of knowing. In my own experience as a graduate student in literature, many of my classmates could name a favorite book or a trip to Italy as a way to knowledge; but reference to a relative’s trailer home was risky. I have attempted to address these gaps, silences, and shifting allegiances of working-class experience in the first part of this essay, by reflecting upon my personal history and the ways it has influenced my classroom practice. The second part of this article offers observations, based on my teaching experiences in recent years, of the effects of the gradual relinquishing of working-class roots in favor of a middle-class paradigm. From my perspective, a significant way to inhibit the erasure of our students’ backgrounds and the emotional isolation that ensues is by creating community in the classroom.
As this discussion of teaching will show, my pedagogy is firmly connected to a constellation of memories that begin with my experiences as a working-class undergraduate and conclude in the present with my life as an English professor at LaGuardia. In other words, my personal journey charts a course from blue-collar learner to white-collar professional; my desire to nurture, challenge, and support the particular needs of students who share my background is part of this journey and its pattern, too. Of course, not all LaGuardia students are from working-class backgrounds. But many are, and those students may have concerns, questions, and ambivalence about college life that their families are not prepared to address.

To set the stage for these issues, I will start with my days as a journalism student at Hofstra University, a private four-year institution with tuition and room and board currently approaching $40,000. While not ranked with the “elite” colleges, Hofstra often advertises its ambitions to join the ranks of the Ivy League. In both my social and academic interactions, the reality of Hofstra’s predominantly upper-middle- to upper-class milieu hit me with sudden force. Before my first history of music class, for example, I had never heard an aria or a symphony. The conventions of opera and classical forms are basic to general education in music, but when I first encountered them, I felt dislocated, out of step with the class, my professor, and my peers. In my family, opera was reserved for “rich people.” In most of my liberal arts courses, I felt the same way: professors spoke about theater, classical literature, and museums – all foreign to me. My parents had never taken me to these worlds, not out of laziness or neglect, but simply because my mother and father did not belong there. My parents’ world was blue-collar; our people played bingo and joined bowling leagues.

At school, the more “high” culture and ideas opened my eyes, the more awkward I felt. Sometimes, with a mix of bravado and scorn, I resisted “snobs” and their “upper-class” tastes, identifying instead with *Caddyshack* and *Trading Places*, movies that portrayed smart, wealthy people as fools. At other times, I used self-deprecation to deflate “elitism” and the intellect. With my parents, I joked that our family life resembled the sitcom *Roseanne*; and I recounted funny college anecdotes that pictured me as the fish out of water.

The emerging awareness that my class was “lower” carried over into dormitory life. My roommates were well off, but the three of us bonded and became best friends, class differences seemingly overlooked. Yet, there were moments when the gap silently widened. They
had ATM cards and access to cash; my mom slipped a ten-dollar bill inside a card every so often. They shopped in Manhattan; I wore the same clothes as I had in high school. Most painful was the return of my best friends from a secretly planned spring break, corn-rowed and tanned. I confronted them: Why hadn’t I been invited, too? Their piercing reply: “We didn’t think you could afford it.”

But while feeling excluded and disconnected from classes and friends, I was aware that something crucial was happening: I was evolving. I was young, yes, but I recognized the signs of a substantial and positive transformation. I began to embrace the culture my professors offered. I forgave my roommates their unintended slight; our friendship blossomed and remains intact. I heard the words of Theodore Roethke in my American poetry class, as if spoken directly to me: “This shaking keeps me steady” (line 16).

My entire universe had turned upside down; I was outgrowing my working-class family and my ties to my background were steadily loosening. At the same time, I was becoming a more open and intellectually curious young woman who no longer sneered at ideas and art as “upper-class.” I finally understood that college offers growth, and to maximize this growth, I experienced transitions that were unsettling, even frightening. To gain the benefits of change, I had to lose some of the world that I knew best.

When I entered graduate school, some of my old demons came along, too. By then, I was aware that my working-class origins were at odds with almost everything and everyone around me. During seminars in literary theory, my peers talked about growing up in homes with libraries, raised by parents who were academics. They traveled to Europe and drove nice cars; they used patronizing terms like “disenfranchised,” “underprivileged,” and “marginalized” to describe the conditions of people that I recognized as my own family. The discomfort – and enlightenment – of this socio-economic fissure continued for years, through graduate school and the completion of my doctorate.

Degree and identity anxiety in hand, I entered the academic job market with little knowledge of its conventions, no money, and over $100,000 in student loans (hats off to Barack Obama for paying off his loans; mine still stand). It was during this period that, forfeiting monthly bill payments and vintage clothes, I bought The Suit. An Ann Taylor number that I tried to “accessorize,” it was the same suit I wore to all my interviews, my very own working-class albatross. My fear was that, somehow, the faculty members interviewing me would see
through my appearance to my working-class reality, and that I would be discovered as a *poseur*. However irrational, my fear was born of the conflict between class identities: daughter of a machinist and waitress *and* earner of advanced degrees, the earlier identity less acknowledged, less public than the newer one.

Over the years, it would be up to me to balance these divided parts of myself. In the end, the introspection and determination to understand and reconcile these internal stand-offs made me stronger, more self-assured, and, I hope, more sympathetic toward my students. My point is simply that my transformation from working-class student to an academic at home in the classroom did not happen easily. As a teacher, how can I expect my LaGuardia students to be different, to transform suddenly before my eyes?

Each time I step into my classroom, I am reminded that my students are experiencing the same kinds of transitions that rattled me twenty years ago. The educational challenges I put to them are enormous: not only to alter their perceptions of reading and writing, but also to rethink the world around them, perhaps to relinquish cultural and socio-economic roots, and to take on new ways of being and seeing. Like many of my colleagues, I am conscious of nudging students, whether native-born or immigrant, out of their comfort zones, convinced that Roethke’s “shaking” is for their own good.

But while I am challenging and nudging and convincing, I am also keenly aware of presenting myself in a particular light, as representing their story. Although there are exceptions, I assume that most of my students are where I once was, and I hope that, someday, my students might be where I am now. As a first-generation college student from a working-class family, I remember feeling clueless and lost. Fortunately, the New Student Seminar (NSS) provides an invaluable service in orienting students; and I know that many faculty are also aware of the need to expand upon the orientation that the Seminar offers.

Leaving nothing to chance, one of my first teaching actions is to reinforce or review academic policies and practices from office hours to classroom conduct to how to read a syllabus, basic information that I see as necessary to ensuring the full inclusion of all students in the classroom. Indeed, for those who have not attended the NSS, such information is foundational. On the whole, some of my students are confused by the same collegiate experiences and expectations that confused me in my day. *Do I have to ask permission to use the bathroom or do I just leave the classroom? Can I use highlighter pen to mark my*
texts? Where is the financial aid office? Rather than being frustrated by their confusion, I find that it is easy to be patient when I remember that, in their situation, I, too, longed for a mentor who could guide me. Consequently, I am a mentor as much as a teacher; my assuming both roles improves my students’ chances of success not only in my classroom but throughout their academic careers.

But perhaps my most important contribution as a teacher is my commitment to creating a sense of community in my classroom. I lay the groundwork by engaging students in familiar interactive assignments: on the first day, students interview and introduce each other, and throughout the semester, group work, class discussions, and group presentations provide structure. But beyond these basic methods, I have additional techniques. For instance, on the first day of class, I ask students to write letters of introduction to me. These are not assigned or evaluated as diagnostic essays; rather, they are informal compositions that permit students to write about themselves as individuals, divulging as many intimate details as they wish. In this way, before reading their first formal writing assignment or hearing them speak in class, I have a clear sense, based on their letters, of who they are. When I create group or paired activities, I purposely place students alongside those with whom they have something in common. Not limited to driving student writing or creating a pleasant camaraderie, this atmosphere of community teaches my students how to be “whole learners,” how to be part of something larger. In my view, classroom community constructed in this way is especially important in creating the support necessary for students who are forging a new path on their own. Breaking down isolation, working together can inspire students to accomplish the tasks at hand not only in my writing class but in all their classes.

Finally, I present myself both as a member of a shared community and as a role model to my students, often referring to my own blue-collar background and joking about some of my frugal habits. I tell my students that I am the first person in my working-class family to attend college and I share with them some of my undergraduate fumbles. My openness seems to put the students at ease and creates solidarity between us. The atmosphere in my classroom is one in which students have no need to fear disrespect or mockery from me or their peers. They know that they can tell it like it is without being judged; their openness carries over into their writing. My students feel that they can truly express themselves without repercussions; consequently, many compose
essays that contain intimate details about their lives that they might have otherwise withheld.

I present myself to my students as a blue-collar comrade not to win my students’ approval or admiration, but to let them know that I have taken the path they are now exploring. According to Janet Casey, my method is rare; she points out that faculty members – “the single most likely avenue of support for working-class students” – are “subject to the class-based pressures of the academy . . . that inhibit public acknowledgement of their roots.” Casey continues, “Add to that notion that what college teachers are supposed to model is intellectual engagement – not the journey, but rather the point to which students should aspire” (36). As described, my methodology is quite the opposite: Far from presenting myself as a “final product” of success, I place myself as a kindred spirit who once embarked on a similarly tumultuous journey, honest about the obstacles and challenges that I encountered on the way. Thus far, my students have responded positively to this approach, telling me privately in my office and publicly in my classroom that it is pleasing to relate to each other in this manner.

One of the most unnerving processes that occurs at many institutions of higher learning is the erasure of the blue-collar experience. As institutions of higher learning set students up for white-collar jobs, and working-class culture and ideology are gradually erased, the ways of life that many students know disintegrate before their eyes, and the ways of knowing taught by their parents are replaced by what the experts teach them. Supplanting the values learned from their blue-collar community are the academy’s valuation of achievement, prestige, and success. Suddenly, the familiar world inhabited for most of one’s life is no longer “good enough.” Becoming a truck driver or a janitor is now too low an ambition – even if truck drivers and janitors were – and perhaps still are – friends and neighbors. Instead the push is to aspire to be “better,” to aim higher. As Geraldine Van Bueren observes, “Universities, which by definition focus on prestige and mobility, cast working-class students’ experiences as irrelevant.” This casting away of my background happened to me when I was in college; I assume it is happening to many of my students.

To maintain the relevance of their backgrounds, I encourage my students to share their life experiences through writing and discussions. For example, the first assignment of ENG099 asks that students compose a personal narrative about a mental or physical illness endured, while a first essay in ENG101 centers on race, identity, and culture. I
share with my colleagues a belief that students who appear to have a difficult time adjusting to college life, as evidenced in their classroom conduct or academic performance, might be in the throes of a crisis in identity brought on by their sense of “irrelevance.” Sometimes it is easier to misinterpret a student’s behavior as uncooperative or immature when the core of his or her problem is actually tied to the feeling that everything familiar is vanishing.

As my own story illustrates, once admitted to college, I began to let go of my blue collar in favor of a white one, taught by my peers and my professors that I needed to embrace the constructs of a middle-class world – its language patterns, culture, histories, and values – if I wanted to succeed. I embraced this paradigm but not without struggle, torn between a fierce loyalty to my family and a fervent desire to “make it” in the world. I was proud of my social class, but, like Dr. Janet Casey, an English professor at Skidmore College who grew up in a working-class neighborhood of Boston, I had sometimes to hide and even eliminate those feelings because I could not “afford to be disdainful of the middle-class culture [I was] joining (“Class,” 21). Dr. Casey articulates the dilemma further this way:

[T]o celebrate working-class roots is problematic for students. I was one of those kids myself. I would have sooner died than admit my parents didn’t go to college . . . [the process] involves losing part of that blue-collar background or distancing yourself from it in a way that’s very painful. (“Class,” 21)

I see this painful “distancing” quite often among my writing students at LaGuardia, many of whom, in my experience, are also caught between letting go of their working-class lives and accepting the middle-class expectations of the college community. I vividly recall a young woman from Bangladesh who wrote that she had an uneasy relationship with her parents because they were illiterate. On one hand, she loved and cherished her parents; on the other, the secret shame she felt was in part a catalyst for wanting to surpass them in both education and opportunity.

As this example suggests, it is the psychological effect of giving up one’s past that is most devastating. Unlike other forms of diversity studies, such as race, queer studies, or gender studies, the study of class is still a somewhat taboo subject in American culture. Perhaps as a consequence, its signs are not always identifiable, especially in the classroom,
where class lines and divisions are mostly invisible. This invisibility can be desirable to the extent that blue-collar students do not stand apart from their peers. But the same invisible cloak that sometimes shields them can also cause isolation among working-class students who can feel lonely even when they are among others of the same social class.

A number of factors contribute to this “fish-out-of-water” complex, but one stands out for me. Blue-collar students often receive mixed messages from those closest to them. When I started to achieve academic success, my family was happy for me, applauding my achievements and boasting about me to other family members and friends. But during graduate school, the dynamic changed. As I received accolades and earned high grades, my success was mocked, in jest of course, but with an insistence that was hard to ignore. Although I never spoke with an advanced vocabulary or in a patronizing tone, my family perceived me as “high-class,” a snob. For my family, reading books and preparing for exams, activities that consumed my days, were not considered “work.” If I had been a super-star one day, the next I was a traitor. Looking out over my students, I wonder for how many this rupture exists; for this reason, I believe, my classroom must be a community – one that reconciles these divisions between academy and family, past and future, invisibility and visibility.

Going to college is hailed as the way for the working class to move into the middle class. But “[w]orking-class students may become alienated from their families and friends in direct proportion to their attachment to their new life, and they are often unprepared for the personal chasms which may open up, permanent or temporary” (Van Bueren). When my students at LaGuardia tell me that they are caught in this struggle, I tell them to keep pushing forward, and not let the mixed messages pull them down. As Casey says, working-class students “can’t go back to where they were” (“Class,” 21). To do so would defeat the purpose of working for an education. Students and teachers of similar origins at LaGuardia must know that if the contradictions of working-class backgrounds sometimes weigh upon us in institutions of higher learning, our histories, when brought out into the open, will inspire others to teach and learn.

**Works Consulted**
