It’s 10:45 a.m. on a Tuesday morning and my ENC101 composition class is revved up and in full swing. One of my students, Ramona, wanders into the room, takes a seat, and tries not to make any noise. She’s late for class. Again. I watch her pull out her notebook and carefully place an enormous bottle of water on her desk. She’s pale, and under her eyes are blue shadows. Ramona summons a weak smile as I welcome her, but the exhaustion is obvious. “Double shift again?” I ask. She nods and says, “Yeah. I’m sorry, professor.” “It’s okay,” I reply, “Maybe you can talk about it in your work therapy group,” referring to one of our weekly classroom activities.

Not long ago my reaction might have been quite different from the empathy and understanding I feel today. On the frequent occasions when my students’ lives as workers both intersect and conflict with their roles as college students, my response has sometimes been carefully concealed annoyance because my underlying assumption has always been that when students are in my classroom, academic work should take priority over all other external concerns. In fact, at LaGuardia, where the majority of students lead complicated lives, their time and attention divided among jobs, family responsibilities, and the challenges of cultural adjustment and language acquisition, I have often felt that my writing classes were in direct competition with the many other dimensions of my students’ lives.

Indeed, my ambivalence about the fragmented attention of my students is rooted in ample research supporting the idea that “the more a student is employed the more employment interferes with his/her study time” (Kulm, and Cramer 933). Not surprisingly, most research on undergraduate students in community colleges who work more than fifteen hours per week reveals that there is a direct negative correlation between academic success, as measured by GPA, and number of weekly working hours (Kulm, and Cramer 930). This is true to an even greater degree for foreign students at ethnically diverse urban institutions like LaGuardia, where large numbers of immigrant students are faced...
with various acculturative stressors, the most significant being English language acquisition. LaGuardia’s unique student demographic means that the school/work interface poses equally unique challenges of the kind not generally encountered by colleges in more suburban or affluent communities, where students may indeed work while going to school, but the work is not as time-consuming – or as physically onerous – as that done by most of my students at LaGuardia.

In the case of my Fall 2007 composition class, over three-quarters of my students had at least one job – many had two or more – requiring far more than the fifteen hours per week referred to in Kulm and Cramer. In addition, 23 of the 24 were recent immigrants, and, with one exception, all were taking full-time course loads. Complicating the school/work interface was the fact that so many of them had jobs that required not only long hours, but hard physical labor, and the resulting fatigue often compromised their abilities to focus in class and to study outside of it.

Driven by my ambivalence about my students’ dual identities as college freshmen and immigrant workers, I made two decisions that subsequently framed my pedagogical approach to this particular class. First, I decided to use Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, the college’s common reading selection, for the Fall I 2007 semester. Second, and more consequential, the students’ working lives became the focus of class inquiry, effectively dissolving the boundary between competing interests of class and work in the sense that work life became class work. Structured by a set of course activities, the students’ lives as workers became legitimate sources of critical inquiry, reflection, and narrative.

With *Nickel and Dimed* as the core text of the course, I had an excellent opportunity to develop a writing pedagogy that would integrate the goals of the common reading initiative into the major objectives of ENC101. As described by Dean Paul Arcario, an early supporter of the common reading project, one of its goals is to “create a shared intellectual experience that would immediately establish an academic tone for our new students” and “foster a greater sense of community and connectedness to the college.” I knew that, set against the background of *Nickel and Dimed*, my students’ shared experiences and expertise as working-class immigrant employees would provide them with a rich source of material for critical and reflective analysis. And indeed, they had a lot to say, as suggested in the examples provided below. In addition to becoming technically stronger, more confident
writers, students created just the kind of authentic “intellectual experience” that is an explicit goal of the common reading project.

Reflecting upon Ehrenreich’s social experiment in their journals and small-group discussions, many students in the class demonstrated that our discussions of the school/work trade-offs and sacrifices – and the ways these trade-offs colored their struggles and successes as college students – enriched and informed their lives as writers. During the semester, students were required to prepare critical analyses of Ehrenreich’s text, create class presentations on their working lives, and write extensively about the impact of work on their individual educational processes. Through this integration of the common reading, class work, and work life, students were able to find meaningful connections between their identities as workers and as students. It was both cathartic and empowering for them to find common ground between the worlds of academia and work, as examples presented below will demonstrate.

Four pedagogical components drove instructional design: journal-keeping, small “work therapy” discussion groups, reflective writings, and a final research paper. Each of the parts reinforced central themes, and led students toward making conceptual connections between their identities as workers and as students. In their journals, students recorded thoughts and feelings about aspects of their academic and work lives that intersected with issues raised by Ehrenreich. Journaling also provided a foundation for the “work therapy” discussions that comprised the first half-hour of each two-hour class. In these discussions, students used passages selected from their journals, as well as assigned quotations from *Nickel and Dimed*, to initiate small-group discussions about the interconnections among the central themes of the course. Finally, keeping a journal and assuming responsibility for group discussion ensured class preparation, while participating in the “work therapy” discussions solidified students’ sense of themselves as members within a community of worker-students.

Throughout the semester, the most passionate and resonant writing in reflective essays and research papers came from the students’ astonishing accounts of their struggles to inhabit two disparate realms: the world of academia on one hand, and, on the other, the “shadow-land” of the immigrant worker in America. As described by one student, the “shadow-land” is where they spend long hours performing punishing physical labor that often debases, but also sustains them as they move toward their own realizations of the American Dream. For instance, during a discussion in which students critiqued Ehrenreich’s
description of the physical discomforts she endured while engaged in long hours of manual labor, several students matter-of-factly pulled up pants legs or rolled up sleeves to reveal their own scars, burns, and bruises earned on the job. One observed that, unlike Ehrenreich, she had no health insurance or extra money to pay for medical treatment. But there was no self-pity as the students talked; rather, they saw these vestiges of hard physical labor as badges of honor earned on the way to a better life.

The centerpiece of the semester was a carefully structured, eight-page research paper that required students to critically assess a self-selected chapter from Nickel and Dimed and to evaluate it reflectively, from a personal – as opposed to empirical – perspective that drew upon the students’ own experiences as both immigrants and worker-students. Here I wish to make two distinctions regarding the connection between student identity and the required elements of the research paper. As an instructor of worker-students, I thought that it was important to privilege their voices as members of an immigrant subgroup whose primary identification came from work-related experiences. Second, as a traditionalist in my approach to teaching college-level research, I have tended to see the research paper as an exercise in objective analytical writing. Nevertheless, it was crucial that my students incorporate the reflective component into their analyses in order to emphasize the dissolution of the boundaries between Ehrenreich’s text, the world of academia into which they were newly inscribed as college students, and their experiences as workers. In requiring reflection, my goal was to create an intellectually empowering environment in which the students could think critically, discuss, and write about school/work. Most importantly, they were encouraged to do so by contextualizing their writing within the framework of their varied cultural backgrounds, with writing that was not only technically proficient, but also infused with a sense of each student’s voice as a writer.

Their responses were fascinating and profound. For instance, when asked to identify significant excerpts from Ehrenreich – that is, significant from the standpoint of crystallizing Ehrenreich’s larger intentions, and also for resonating with (or against) the students’ experiences as workers – the class agreed nearly unanimously with her conclusion that

... if low-wage workers do not always behave in an economically rational way, that is, as free agents within a capitalist society, it is because they dwell in a place that is neither free nor in
any way democratic. When you enter the low-wage workplace . . . you check your civil liberties at the door, leave America and all it stands for behind, and learn to zip your lip for the duration of the shift. The consequences of this surrender go far beyond the issues of wages and poverty. (210)

Furthermore, most students reacted strongly on a personal level to Ehrenreich’s observation that “[i]f you are constantly reminded of your lowly position in the social hierarchy, whether by individual managers or a plethora of impersonal rules, you begin to accept that unfortunate status” (210). Both excerpts provoked a torrent of heated responses. Yuri, a very bright and cynical Russian student, wrote that while Ehrenreich conducted her social experiment like a scientist, in fact she “doesn’t know how it is to really be in a ‘lowly position’ since she also writes, ‘I set some reassuring limits to whatever tribulations I might have to endure’ (5), and in doing so maintained her true place in the American social hierarchy.” He went on to note the unintentional irony in Ehrenreich’s assertion that “[t]here seems to be a vicious cycle at work here, making ours not just an economy but a culture of extreme inequality” (212). In his written analysis, Yuri pointed out that the author was in no position to truly understand this inequality on either an economic or a cultural level, a judgment echoed by several students in their writing.

Adriana, a vivacious mother of two teenagers, shared details of her fifteen years as a house cleaner, one of the jobs Ehrenreich assumed during her year as a low-wage worker. While Adriana appreciated Ehrenreich’s attempt to convey the brutal physicality, exhaustion, and often dehumanizing aspects of the job, she also pointed out that Ehrenreich always knew that it was temporary, and that if she had to leave any time, she could. And there was a big check waiting for her back home if she did stay. For me and my family, this is not the case. We came here without any English, scared because for our first two years I was illegal, and I was responsible for feeding and housing my children. There was no way for me to leave except to go to another, maybe worse, job.

Yet another student described his experience working as a night janitor in a corporate building in Manhattan as “legalized slavery.” An African immigrant, he wrote that although there is ample oppor-
tunity in America to define oneself and to practice whatever freedoms one chooses, there are, for the newly arrived immigrant, always additional acculturative stresses based on race, ethnicity, and, of course, language.

Several studies reveal that for the immigrant college student who is also a worker, the challenges of coping with a dual identity as both learner and earner are magnified by the social isolation experienced as a new American, particularly if the student is undocumented:

Undocumented students who may be highly motivated, as evidenced by their willingness to attend college despite their financial situation and uncertain immigration status, may be working long hours with little time for studying. Some may not have easy access to needed tools, such as computers and school supplies, and some may not be able to buy the texts that are required for their courses. (Dozier 50)

Several of the students in my class recorded their lack of documented status in their work-life journals. In fact, I was surprised to learn that, from the students’ perspectives, the most effective learning tool of all the components and activities in this course was journaling about work, school, and life as new Americans. In their journals, they could think and write freely about the more profound aspects of their experiences as immigrant worker-students. Many wrote extensive and poignant entries detailing some truly harrowing situations in their lives. One student described running low on supplies needed to treat a serious medical condition and lacking resources to pay for the medication she needed because of her “ineligibility” for medical coverage. Another wrote vividly about being interviewed by Homeland Security without the presence and support of either a relative or a lawyer; he ended the entry by writing: “I was more scared than I ever was in my life, but I knew that I would do whatever I had to do to stay in the U.S. because going home means no more college.” While students often wrote of crushing fatigue, lack of financial security, and the Herculean effort they frequently put into simply getting through work and school every day – usually while simultaneously trying to master a second language – none of them wrote about leaving college.

After a semester spent exploring the working lives of my students, I can point to several interesting outcomes for students and teacher alike, the results of pedagogically triangulating Ehrenreich’s text, the class-
room environment, and the students’ lives as workers. First, a Marxist ethos was established in our classroom grounded in shared struggles stemming from race, class and immigrant status. My students were able to explore their difficult, often heartrending, experiences as immigrant worker-students, and this opportunity resulted in richly textured and insightful writing. Engaging Ehrenreich’s text provided students with a provocative flashpoint that allowed them to bring their expertise as workers to their work as learners, as they simultaneously discovered the authority of their own voices as writers. Deeply nuanced and complex depictions of their working lives emerged, documenting an astonishing diversity of experiences and work-life configurations that, nevertheless, revealed several shared aspects: poverty, social and financial vulnerability, acculturative stress, as well as courage, perseverance, and a strong determination to educate themselves beyond the new-immigrant underclass. Time and again, the students in my class expressed a deeply held belief in the ability of a college education to save them from becoming, in the words of one student, “low-wage slaves.”

Finally, my participation in the exploration of my students’ lives beyond the classroom was self-instructive, allowing me to step outside my role as teacher. In the process, I found myself redefined as a worker whose job is to teach. Through the insight gained into my students’ working lives, and into the complex challenges they faced just to be in class every day, I was irrevocably altered in my understanding of the influence of work on the lives of my students. This class was a reminder of the inherent artificiality of the boundary between what I do in the classroom and what my students do outside of it. Moreover, I realized that it is important for us to identify with our students, and not to submerge our humanity in the process of meeting the pedagogical demands of our roles as teachers.

With this new awareness, I was able to enter into the class discussions in a meaningful way. I, too, have been an immigrant worker-student. I spent my childhood in Africa and the Bahamas, then moved to New York for graduate school, where, as a non-American, I experienced the grueling pressures of completing my academic work while scrambling for jobs that kept me within the boundaries of what my visa allowed, and dealing periodically with the complex, often intimidating, bureaucratic issues of compliance with Immigration and Naturalization Service regulations. It was meaningful to me and to my students that I could understand many of their struggles, having found the part of my identity that I share with them.
From a pedagogical point of view, the results of the school/work integration were increased trust from my students and a greater freedom to share stories and challenges. That freedom was expressed in the depth of their critical thinking, as well as in the tone and details of their reflective writing. Reading their deeply personal writings about their experiences as immigrants who were workers who were college students, I was challenged to redefine my students; in the process I, too, was redefined. If I had once perceived their working lives as incompatible with their lives as learners, I now saw, via a shift in perspective – a wider lens – that bringing their experiences as immigrant workers into the classroom created a unique learning environment. Here they were free to explore their identities not just as urban workers, but as a specialized subgroup: what one student termed “immigrant worker-students.” I was fortunate, too, that as in many classes at LaGuardia, the majority of my students that fall were full-time workers, so that there was a rich field of work-life information and experience to explore as they brought their stories, their own “texts,” to the writing process. The result of this interplay between their “texts” and Ehrenreich’s text about working was that the students’ lives outside the classroom were confirmed as legitimate sources of inquiry and study.

Perhaps the last word is best given to Ramona, the exhausted night clerk introduced at the beginning of this article. In the draft of her work-life research paper, she reflected on the challenges of being a full-time worker and college student: “It isn’t easy for me to come to class, and even harder to concentrate when I do. I’m tired all the time. But I don’t want to be in this job forever, and a college education is the only way out. There are better things in life and by coming to school every day I’m moving closer to my dream. It’s tough here in America, but at least I have a chance to succeed.”

Note
All student names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Works Consulted


Class Acts: How a Blue-Collar Professor Teaches at LaGuardia

Reneé Somers, English

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.