

“ABOUT ME”: THE WORKING CLASS AND ePORTFOLIOS

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“Working to me means responsibility, independence and effort,” wrote a student in an essay describing her view of work, her response to an assignment which encouraged Basic Writing students to analyze the “worker” part of their identities. I created this assignment when LaGuardia’s Common Reading Committee chose Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* as the 2006–07 common reading. The selection of *Nickel and Dimed* suggested that I might guide students in exploring a very important part of their lives: work. Still, I was not sure what form an analysis of identity with a focus on work might take, or how I might encourage students to talk about themselves in a very particular way, especially when that way would involve exploring class issues, something that Americans are not comfortable talking about. Fortunately, ePortfolio became a way shape the exploration.

In LaGuardia’s ePortfolio, I have found a tool that mirrors my own approach to guiding students to develop their writing and critical thinking skills. According to LaGuardia’s ePortfolio website, “The ePortfolio provides LaGuardia students with a tool for collecting their academic work and their reflections on their learning, and for sharing their portfolios on the World Wide Web” (“History”). The ePortfolio provides a larger audience with whom students might share their lives and offers students an important way to be seen and heard. I would argue that, because the ePortfolio provides a wider audience for students, it becomes a way to authenticate what students have accomplished and who they are.

Just as the ePortfolio can be used by students for many purposes, the “About Me” section allows students remarkable freedom in deciding how they want to represent themselves to an audience of their choosing. And I have found that “About Me” becomes a means for Basic Writing students to begin or continue exploring their identities as well as a way they can learn to construct a well-developed argument with the necessary evidence – themselves and their life experiences.

I regularly teach ENG098, the course into which students with the lowest ACT writing scores place. ENG098 is a pre-Basic Writing

course that allows students to practice the process of writing for an entire semester before facing the pressure of again trying to pass the ACT writing exam – a high-stakes test that determines whether or not a student can take credit-bearing Composition I (ENG101) – at the end of Basic Writing I (ENG099). The key difference between essays in an ENG098 class and those in ENG099 is development. Students in ENG098 have a harder time summoning ideas and reasons for their arguments and struggle to support their points with sufficient examples and explanations. I have found ePortfolio, and in particular, “About Me,” to be a useful way to frame writing assignments because they move students beyond the personal essay. A personal essay without a means for critical reflection can often feel like a personal journal entry. Using “About Me” in a specific way can narrow student focus until students can look analytically at their lives.

For example, for the first writing assignment in ENG098, I ask students to tell about themselves as writers in an essay I call “About Me: The Writer.” Since, in the past, most students who place into Basic Writing classes have not been successful with writing, they often do not like writing, and they certainly do not think of themselves as “writers.” The purpose of the assignment, therefore, is to challenge students to begin reassessing their own ideas of what a writer is and does, and, I hope, to see writing as a process they can work at and, therefore, get better at. The confluence of the personal and persuasive develops greater critical thinking skills for students as they try to assess their own identities.

For the second essay, I follow the same pattern: I look for other ways students might examine their own identities and use their life experiences as evidence in an “About Me”-type essay. Most LaGuardia students have worked and most continue to work while attending classes. I found this to be true of the more than 70 students I taught in three sections of ENG098 over the 2007–08 academic year; only three said they had never worked outside of their homes (and one of the three got a job during the semester he wrote his essay). With an assignment that asks students to articulate who they are as workers, I encourage students to honor their life experiences by surfacing the meaning of class as it relates to Ehrenreich’s text.

In the “About Me: The Worker” assignment, I first ask students to think about what work is: how they would describe the kind of work they had done so far in their lives. Next, I ask questions to make it easier for students to think about their own identities as workers: Why do you work? What kind of worker are you? I also suggest that students

compare their experiences with those of Ehrenreich. In the 2007–08 student essays, several themes developed: work is a necessity and can give a person greater independence and responsibility; work teaches a lot of hard lessons; and work is a means to an end. For many of the students I have taught in ENG098, the end is a better job.

Each of these three themes reflects the underlying, yet unspoken, issue of class – a significant part of any identity but one that we, as members of our American society, resist discussing. As Sherry Lee Linkon writes in her introduction to *Teaching Working Class*, “Defining [working class] has always been difficult in the United States, where our cultural faith in upward mobility and an idealized version of equality have led us to insist that class does not really matter here” (3).

Working during college does not necessarily mean a person is a member of the working class, but more than half of my students wrote that work is not just for “extra” money. For example, one student wrote, “Work to me is not an option, it is a necessity. In order for me to continue school and not struggle with acquiring necessities like clothes and books, I have to work. I am 18 years old I need to start supporting myself.” Another said, “The reason I work is because I have a lot of financial responsibilities. I am a single parent of a seven-year-old son. I have also been supporting my parents in Trinidad for several years. I have to work twice as hard in order to meet my expenses. Working is very essential to me because a lot depends on my income.” These are students for whom working means the difference between surviving on a daily basis or not, a situation which is a characteristic of the working class.

In their essays, students did not use the term “class” or address labor politics when referring to their experiences. Perhaps students hesitated to discuss class overtly because they had no apparatus, no terms to use to describe it, or perhaps they were reluctant to identify with the “working class” because of the negative stereotypes associated with the term. Still, they wrote about work and their experiences related to work, surfacing an important part of their lives that often remains buried. In the United States, everyone wants to believe that, if we just work hard enough, we can be rich and not subject to class restrictions.

The essays written by students in my ENG098 classes indicate that students hold this concept to be true. Students explained that they were in college because they believed a college education would give them better jobs and, therefore, better lives than their parents had. Students wrote about their current jobs as a way to earn money immediately, not

as a permanent part of their future. Few wanted to discuss their current lives in terms of the “working class.” It seemed that the working class was a status they wanted to leave behind.

By encouraging students to write about who they are as workers, I ask them to recognize the roadblocks class puts before them, so they may be better equipped to get past those obstacles. In *Nickel and Dimed*, Ehrenreich focuses on life for working class women specifically, and the difficulty of getting ahead in low-wage jobs. Students understood very well the difficulty of “moving up.” As one student expressed it, “By working for four years, I have gotten a taste of what the real world is like and I have realized that it is tough to get a high paying job without a degree.” This student demonstrated an understanding of the importance of education in escaping a limiting, low-wage job. Another said, “[E]mployment is what I seek to better my life and social status for upward mobility in order to reach that pinnacle of being gainfully employed, however sometimes I endured all types of set backs in the workplace.” This student wrote about a job as a way to achieve “social status” and “upward mobility,” portraying employment as part of an upward process, but with painful elements.

While Ehrenreich suggests that the working class is not escaped simply by working harder, in their essays, my students supported the belief that they could escape the working class by working harder. College students like the ones in my ENG098 classes may feel differently from Ehrenreich because they are generally young and hopeful about their futures and because the classes they are taking make them confident in their ability to make change. In their first semester of college, students in ENG098 who wrote about themselves as workers were much more optimistic than Ehrenreich about moving out of the working class. I appreciated and continue to appreciate that optimism. I want to encourage students to find practical ways to channel hope and confidence.

The “About Me: The Worker” writing assignment is also designed to encourage students to find meaning in their work for their lives outside the college classroom. Asking students to compare their experiences with those Ehrenreich describes in *Nickel and Dimed* allows them to find greater meaning in their work; as a result, they can write about their work more powerfully. In asking students to write about their working lives, I hope to create a place that might “include working-class students in college life” (Linkon 7). Linkon explains how this can be accomplished: “One central way ... is by teaching about social class,

especially about working-class culture. The easiest way to teach about social class is to include students' experiences in the classroom" (7).

In writing about their lives as workers, students begin to see the role class plays in their lives and how class affects them. Using "About Me" as a frame through which students examine different aspects of their identity allows them to think critically about who they are and who they want to be. Moreover, as they publish their writing in their ePortfolios, they make public the choices they have made and the identities they have created. With these important steps, students develop identities through writing and capture key moments in their academic and personal lives.

WORKS CONSULTED

Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. New York: Holt, 2001. Print.

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