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Learning from “Dirty Jobs:” Reflection on Work in the Classroom

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### Abstract

This article will examine how the work environment presented through popular culture can enrich and extend ideas of work in a community college curriculum. The article presents the context and pedagogy of utilizing notions of “dirty jobs” in the classroom and highlights the discoveries made about theories of work in the process. Students documented these discoveries using three writing assignments. These scaffolded assignments created individual ethnographic responses to the key question: “What is Work”? By using meta-cognitive teaching practices and popular culture, students were able to use the guided writing activities to explore their individual notions of work, career, and passion. The article captures both the journey of the instructor and students as they make these discoveries through intentional writing activities premised on bell hook’s “pedagogies of engagement.”

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The dilemma of work as a means to an end or as an expression of one's life passions is an issue exacerbated by class and social status. All social groups struggle with conceptual ideas of work, material needs, and how best to align those ideals and needs with the constraints of work. Alain de Botton in the *Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* grapples with whether work should be based on passion, purpose, pleasure, or a combination of all these ideas. And if we look to pop-culture for examples, we see someone like Sean Aiken in *One Week Jobs* wrestling with notions of work and purpose. Passion, or rather following one's passion, is integral to iconic figures like Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Arianna Huffington, or Warren Buffett, who give the impression of tap dancing to work every day.

In opposition to these examples, in Discovery's *Dirty Jobs*, Mike Rowe argues that people who follow their passions end up broke. The program *Dirty Jobs* highlights careers seen by society as invisible or not warranting aspirational pursuits by those seeking a career or career interest. These jobs usually entail manual labor and are often not presented as work fueled by passion or creativity. Rowe wants work (regardless of the nature of the work) to be a place of innovation, but he sees passion as something more useful if we use it as a catalyst for innovative thinking rather than an end goal: the pursuit of passions cannot be merely for the pursuit. Introducing Rowe's *Dirty Jobs* to my freshman Ethnographies of Work class, a core required general education course at an urban community college, was a pivotal moment in our semester of thinking about what comprises work. Contextualizing the reality TV show *Dirty Jobs* within sociological thinking about work, we questioned what appeared to be Rowe's lighthearted attempts at various jobs and developed more substantive readings of his showcasing of unsung

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and hidden jobs integral to our everyday lives. This article presents the context and pedagogy used to examine “dirty jobs,” and highlights the discoveries we made about work in the process.

Ethnographies of Work, part of the College’s core curriculum and a required course for all students, invites students to interrogate their notions of work through sociological, anthropological, philosophical, and concrete ways of knowing. The official course description states:

The course introduces students to sociological and anthropological perspectives on work as they investigate a range of careers. The course approaches work as a cultural system invested with meanings, norms, values, customs, behavioral expectations, and social hierarchies. Students pose key questions through the lens of ethnography in order to investigate workplaces, occupations, and career pathways in an urban context. Guided by the ethnographer's assumption that there's "always more than meets the eye," students are encouraged to uncover myths and stereotypes about the work world and gain appreciation of how and why work matters to individuals in a range of occupations. Students explore dimensions of work life in the context of contemporary dynamics of disruption, uncertainty, innovation, and diversity, and draw connections between the self and work through readings, films, interviews, and fieldwork. The centerpiece of the course is for students to compose and present ethnographic accounts of workplace relations and vocational pathways as they contemplate their own career journeys. (Guttman Community College Course Catalog, 2014)

The students who take this required course are primarily first generation college students.

Approximately 58% of the students at the College are female, 42% male. 52% of the students are Hispanic, 25% Black, 16% White, 7% of the students are Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1% of the students are American Indian or Native Alaskan. 76% of the students in the College are 19 years or younger. Students live in all 5 Boroughs of New York City and 77% of them receive financial aid (Guttman Community College Fast Facts 2013). The classroom was reflective of the demographics of the College.

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In this iteration of Ethnographies of Work I, the class engages academic concepts and grapples with the question of what constitutes work by sifting through the narratives of everyday workers. Students investigate personal stories of work presented through their own experiences and debate the lives of workers in publications such as *Gig: Americans Talk About their Jobs*, a compilation of first-person stories of work edited by John Bowe, Marisa Bowe, and Sabin Streeeter. Critical reading and analysis lead to questions about the value of lifelong pursuits and engaging passions and whether or not work can be a place of daily innovation and transformation. Students write short responses to probing questions such as: if you could do one thing, what would that be? Can work, and the pleasures of work, be sustainable? These sorts of self-reflective questions force participants – students and instructor alike – to think about passions, dreams, and talents, and how these align, or fail to align, with careers. As an instructor, I absorb students’ narratives about their dreams, expressions of anxieties, and pessimistic declarations that they will never get to their dreams. Producing such anxieties was never my intent, and it did not occur to me that a semester that started off with excerpts from ethnographers such as Margaret Mead and William Wright would end up in a deeply personal place, a place where I felt as vulnerable as my students. bell hooks refers to this place and space in a teacher’s development in *Teaching to Transgress*. hooks writes, “teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own wellbeing if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (hooks, 1994). In what follows, I outline the course’s sequence of reading, writing and research assignments, and describe the semester’s most important moments: from traditional, academic sociological readings, contrast with ethnographic, personalized pieces from *Gig*; middle (reality TV, interviews, op-ed pieces from the *New York Times*); to the messy dichotomy set up when students began to use the materials to

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investigate their own goals and where they see themselves entering the workforce post AA and AAS degree and beyond.

The semester began with excerpts from Mitchell Duneier's *Sidewalks* and long discussions characterizing homeless booksellers on the streets of New York's Greenwich Village as workers with their own social codes and protocols. Next, we read excerpts from *Gig*, profiles of nurses, social workers, CEOs, poultry workers, crime scene cleaners and systems administrators, among others, along with excerpts from the *New York Times* series "Corner Office." Through essays on work excerpted from *This I Believe*, such as "A Goal of Service to Human Kind" and "Unleashing the Power of Creativity," we considered the repetitiveness of assembly line jobs, the abuse and harsh conditions faced by undocumented workers, and the hidden world of underage labor. We also considered the marginalization of certain types of jobs and questioned why students' aspirational goals shunned the notions of dirty jobs. Dirty jobs, such as shrimper, pest controller, sewer inspector, strawberry harvester, asphalt paver, car wash attendant, sanitation worker, road kill cleaner, portable toilet cleaner, crab fishermen, coal miner, embalmer, and crime scene cleaner were relegated to work classified as a means to an end; the students noted that these jobs had limited room for innovation or engaging passions. The class grappled with the idea that some socioeconomic groups are confined to this sort of work. However, many students pointed out that a dirty job could be high paying or gratifying. One student spoke of her father's job as a fishmonger in the Hunts Point Fish Market in Bronx, NY and how that job sustained her family or a the story of a daughter who through the class interview assignment never understood why her father became an electrician or another student grappling with her mother's job as a sidewalk vendor harassed by the police where the sales of the day directly impacted the monthly income for the household. As students began to share their

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own stories, our collective construction of what work is began to take into consideration how dirty jobs complicate the early readings introduced in the class; that is, from the more traditional, sociological to the more personal narratives shared within the classrooms. hooks assertion that “linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material” and the design of the course assignments took this assertion into consideration (hooks, 1994).

Three key writing assignments provided a scaffolded way of thinking about and researching the problems of work.<sup>1</sup> The assignments were planned as entryways into a culminating assignment that asked students to define work through their own experiences and the materials covered in class. The first preparatory assignment asked students to observe a worksite for 30 to 45 minutes, focusing on what people do as they work, how they dress, the physical environment of the workplace, the diversity of the workers, the types of verbal and nonverbal communications engaged by the workers, and power or role stratifications evident through behaviors. Students had the option to choose a site of their own or, if they did not choose, a local café was assigned. Most found their own sites, including hair salons, dentist and doctor’s offices, hospitals, bus drivers en route, Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) workers, sanitation workers, social workers, teachers, educational directors, finance managers, housekeepers, babysitters, local bodega owners and a variety of retail stores and restaurants. The rich details students included in their observation reports revealed that students had begun to think about the

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<sup>1</sup> The three major assignments in the course are linked to five learning outcomes: 1. Identify and apply fundamental social science concepts and methods to explore the relationships between the individual and the world of work; 2. Use ethnographic methods to research and compose well-reasoned written and oral presentations on the behaviors and experiences of individuals in diverse work contexts; 3. Analyze and evaluate ethnographic texts and data about work through the lens of social science perspectives and concepts; Identify work trends and organization in the larger society and within the New York City context to understand their influence on occupational choices and pathways for individuals and social groups; 4. Examine how an individual’s place in society affects experiences, values, and choices, identifying how one’s own life story promotes and constrains vocation and career decisions and 5. Articulate and apply responsible work habits in academic and field projects.



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cultural implications of workplaces, such as how race and gender are articulated at a worksite, and to discover that each worksite has its own language and codes of conduct.

One young woman wrote about a day in the life of a housekeeper. Her descriptions were shrouded in anonymity: the housekeeper enters a building with a doorman, collects the keys, and is almost invisible as she rides the elevator to the large apartment she will clean. She glides gracefully from room to room, cleaning the apartment, stacking dishes, and folding clothes, all the while never complaining. In a personal turn, my student reveals that the cleaner is her mother, noting her mother's beauty. The mother experiences a sort of freedom during her cleaning work: when she is alone in the quiet of the apartments cleaning, her daughter reports, her movements are unrestrained.

The description was memorable not only because of the beauty of the student's prose, but also because, in an instant, the student redefined work and challenged stereotypes typically attached to menial labor. The narrative was a celebration of her mother's working life equally as sensitive and compelling as the student who described her mother working in the private banking sector of a large financial chain. One could argue that the student's descriptions idealize her mother's "dirty" work rather than critically engaging questions of exploitation and justice. However, the student indicated that her mother was well paid and was happy with her chosen line of work. Another student described a day in a fish market. Because her father couldn't quite get the smell off him even on the days when he was not working, he had only taken his daughter to his workplace once. He did not want his children to see him at work or partake in that sort of work. These vignettes allowed students to critically engage the individual and collective notions of work that had surfaced thus far in the course.

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It was in the thick of exploring the observation reports that we sat as a class and watched Mike Rowe talk about what he learned from the act of doing dirty jobs. Rowe’s TED Talk ignited debates in class about whether one should pursue a career out of sheer passion or whether it is more prudent to choose a career that would be a secure option regardless of passion. Rowe’s familiarity to my students as a figure in pop-culture helped them to concretize these issues – or perhaps it was his vivid description of castrating sheep while placing his mouth on their scrotum? In any case, something about Rowe’s approach to work, challenging viewers to see work as a place of transformation, resonated with students and led them to question the role of following one’s passion in building a career. In a moment Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway would have savored, Rowe’s talk flung open the doors of our classroom as students pulled away the hinges of issues on race and class and labor market trends.

Two camps formed around deeply held ideologies of work: roughly half of the students insisted that passion was a necessary ingredient in a successful career; the other half argued just as vehemently that financial stability should determine all career decisions. Very few of the workers that the students observed had acted as if their jobs were places of innovation and transformation, so the question of passion had only infrequently come up before we watched Rowe’s talk. His moments of anagnorisis and peripeteia broadened the students’ sense of the value of “dirty” jobs and the workers who do them. At its core, Rowe’s argument is that our society “has declared war on work” in the ways we stereotype workers. Asserting that clichés like “life would be better if we could work a little less, or end up on Madison Ave, or retire a little earlier” are deeply problematic, Rowe remarks that assembly line work is just as valuable to society and to workers as the more intellectual tasks of designing products and coordinating the assembly line. While Rowe concedes that following your passion is not applicable to “dirty”

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jobs, he cites examples of workers who found energy and conviction to assess “where everyone was going” and then go “the other way,” transforming their work and their lives in the process.

Rowe’s criticism of the marginalization of workers through negative representations of their work in popular culture resonated deeply with my students because they recognized their communities and their families in his presentation. Rowe’s dirty jobs, and the insight students gained by debating his assertions, contextualized later discussions of academic research articles such as Barbara Garson’s “All the Livelong Day: The Meaning and Demeaning of Routine Work” and Robin Leidner’s “Over the Counter: McDonald’s,” which presented different ideas about routinization and the place of innovation in low-skilled work. Throughout, questions introduced by Rowe about whether routine work could be a source of pleasure and whether one’s passions could be activated by routine work stuck in students’ minds. Looking through the lens of “dirty jobs,” students gained a sense of decision-making about passion over salary base.

The second preparatory assignment drew students deeper into the questions they had developed after watching workers work in person and on screen. Focused on using interviewing skills as a research tool, the assignment required students to ask workers about their work and the sense of its value. The assignment was introduced along with segments of *Unsung New Yorkers*, a web series of profiles of “dirty” jobs in various industries across New York City. Discussions of individual workers in the series, informed by Rowe’s critique of stereotypical representations of low-skill work, led students to develop hard questions for their interviews about whether work could be a place of pleasure. For example, some thought Khadija Garrett, a young woman featured in *Unsung New Yorkers* for her work in Grand Central Terminal’s Lost and Found department, epitomized a strategy for finding pleasure on the job, namely, changing her mindset. Students built an interview guide they hoped would generate answers from their subjects that

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provided the sorts of detailed information they would need to write three-to-five page narratives of their research. The full guide, included below, showcases the range of questions students asked:

### **Possible Interview Questions**

1. What is your profession or field of work?
2. How long have you been in this line of work?
3. How did you get started and why did you choose this career?
4. Were there any requirements for this position?
5. What kind of work does this job entail?
6. How many hours do you spend working per week?
7. Do you work individually or as part of a team?
8. Describe your relationships with other co-workers?
9. What attributes or skills are needed to be successful at this job?
10. Are there any perks from being in this line of work?
11. What are some challenges?
12. How does your profession impact you as a person?
13. If you could change one thing about your career, what would it be?
14. If you could do any job, would you still have chosen this one? If no, what would that career be?
15. Is there anything specific you would like to say about your job that we haven't covered today?

### **Alternates:**

- a) What motivates you to go to work?
- b) At the end of the day, what types of results do you look for in your job?
- c) What excites you about this job?
- d) What does a typical day look like at your workplace?
- e) How do you contribute to the work place?
- f) How is good work acknowledged at your job?

Questions 12 through 15 and the alternates struck at the heart of in-class debates about why people do the jobs they do and what benefits they derive from their work. To my surprise, and to the surprise of my students, most of the interviewees reported that they would choose an alternate profession if given the opportunity and most indicated that their jobs were merely a means to an end. The interview assignment deepened students' understandings of work and

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provided opportunities to confirm and contradict what they discovered through their observation of worksites and the discussions sparked by *Dirty Jobs*.

After eight weeks of research using methodologies from Reimer, Gobo, Geertz, Whitehead, Fetterman, and Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, the doors of the classroom were finally fully torn from their hinges in what would become a great debate. The spark was the consideration of race and culture in Moss and Tilly's "Stories Employers Tell: Employer Perceptions of Race and Skill." Moss and Tilly illustrate how race or cultural identity determined employers' expectations of workers. Moss and Tilly contend that there is a cultural gap in how employers perceived workers and their work. The researchers noted that in "differences between blacks, whites, Latinos, and Asians," most respondents zeroed in on the distinction between blacks and whites. [...]. When managers did speak to Latinos' and Asians' skills, positive comments outnumbered negative ones – the reverse of the situations for blacks" (Moss and Tilly, 2006). Students began to process what these findings meant in relation to the disparity between socioeconomic groups working "dirty" jobs and the barriers that may exist in the workforce, even for those with college degrees in hand. Although striking, these findings by Moss and Tilly were not a deterrent to how the students perceived their aspirational goals, especially for those who had specific career goals in mind. By the end of the debate, a third of the class claimed one should pursue only those things they are passionate about, a third felt constrained by parental or familial demands to choose a career that would offer stability, and a third were still undecided or unsure about the role of work.

My students' vulnerabilities were clear; their fear was raw. At times I quivered as I listened to their stories of parents whose forgone dreams had allowed for opportunities they themselves had never had, sacrifices that allowed their children to sit before me. Their wounds

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were gaping by the time we began the third assignment. The key question the students attempted to answer in the auto-ethnography assignment was “what is work?” In an initial discussion, one student remarked that though work consumes a large portion of our lives, many experience a deep sense of loss or shame when they compare what they do as adults to what they thought they might do growing up. “Careers are things you dream about as children doing chores,” the student wrote in his auto-ethnography, describing how thinking about work is something we begin to do at an early age. In the same way, our later years are filled with questions from others about where we work and what we do, questions that can make for great conversation at a dinner party or lead to deafening silence. The general sense of the class by the end of the semester was that we are defined by our work, especially in others’ eyes, and yet there is a deep divide between what we end up doing and the secret desires and deferred dreams that reside in our hearts<sup>2</sup>.

There were days when I left the classroom dismayed, days when I prodded my students to consider the benefits of throwing it all away in pursuit of the things that stir within them, even when those things are not fully identifiable. The throwing away of a parent’s dream of a certain type of employment or the vague instability of pursuing a career not listed as one that affords a livable wage. Thinking of Moss and Tilly’s claim in “Perceptions of Race” that conceptualizing work as a sort of meritocracy is not true for all groups, my tongue often grew leaden as I spouted clichés like, “dream big, make plans, and begin to do the work” and “true labor comes with wanting something more” to my increasingly sophisticated students. They had been affected by the stories of underage workers and undocumented immigrants, their own observations and interviews of parents who worked in fish markets all day, and of parents and friends who could

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<sup>2</sup> *New York Times* reporter, Anand Giridharadas, did a feature article on my Ethnographies class and interviewed nine of my students in December 2012. This article attempted to capture some of the debates we had in class and the palpable emotions stirred by the deeply personal stories and dreams we shared together over the 12 week semester. The article can be found at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/15/us/15iht-currents15.html?smid=tw-share>.

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not find work after years of searching. They had discovered that the social formulas we often hear about work like the bootstrap theory or meritocracy are not applicable to them and, in particular, that the trajectory of dreaming, planning, and achieving a successful and well-balanced career was more complicated than they had been told. With the classroom doors now off their hinges, my wish that more of my students would take risks in the pursuit of a convergence between work and passion began to seem superficial given the stories of the forgotten and child laborers and the countless invisible groups working “dirty” jobs, toiling with blistered fingers. Given the complexities of ideologies about work and the powerful socioeconomic constraints we had identified and debated, defining work as a way to access the future – what I had expected to teach – was no longer simple.

This is the funny thing about teaching. Instructors often go into the classroom thinking that we will transform lives when, in fact, we are the ones who leave transformed. Students asked of me the same questions I asked of them. They asked me if I loved my job and if teaching was my “one thing,” and if I left the College each day gratified. It was evident in their questions that they had seen me struggling with the same anxieties they were feeling. The course had changed me. As I listened to their stories and the dreams they maintained in the face of an impossible job market and the socioeconomic and political conditions they would face after leaving college, I began to question whether I was capable of giving them honest answers. I began to understand that they were asking for guidance from me, not just on assignments.

Bringing a familiar, popular television show into my teaching helped my students explore the culture of work and reflect on their positions within it in a manner that would not have been possible if I had stuck to academic articles and textbooks as material. My students related to Rowe’s critique because it felt familiar to them rather than estranging. These students – my

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social workers, stylists, cardiologists, police officers and firefighters, artists, physicists, occupational therapists, bankers, bakers, environmentalists, lawyers, musicians, architects, and the undecided – make diving in<sup>3</sup> worth it. And while I will not divulge all the answers I have given them, I am glad that my students are holding me accountable to my own notions of pursuing life to its fullest, of making sure that, at the end of the day, my place of work is a meaningful place of innovation and transformation.

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<sup>3</sup> **Shaughnessy**, Mina P. "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 27.3 (October 1976): 234-39



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