

## **Group Work and Autonomy: Empowering the Working-Class Student**

THE EXISTENCE OF SOCIAL CLASS DIVISIONS IN THE UNITED STATES IS A TOPIC THAT HAS sparked much discussion in and outside academia. The mythology of our culture is crowded with Horatio Alger stories, with victorious underdogs who in spite of impoverished childhoods have become senators and doctors, CEOs and professors. Many of us pride ourselves on the idea that in America, the land of opportunity, such a transformation is more likely to occur than anywhere else in the world. It is not within the scope of this essay to evaluate the truth of such a claim but rather to analyze the difficulties that working-class students often face while attending college, which is seen as a crucial step on the way to high social status and prosperity in today's workforce. I will elucidate my initial observations as a composition instructor to suggest ways in which we can adapt the teaching of composition to help working-class students develop a proficiency in critical reading and writing that will help them succeed throughout their academic careers.

The fact that freshman composition is a mandatory class places it in the difficult yet advantageous position of reaching the whole student body. Only a portion of our students are genuinely interested in writing while the rest find themselves forced to take a class that may seem pointless or tedious. Thus, composition instructors must go to greater lengths to foster enthusiasm in what they are teaching. Whenever we do manage to elicit enjoyment in writing and reading from our students, however, we are promoting the development of skills that will help them throughout their college and often professional careers. If we accomplish our goal in teaching them to decipher academic texts and to write in a clear, persuasive fashion, they will be more successful in other classes, many of which include reading textbooks and writing papers or essay exams. These are particularly important skills for working-class students who often find the college experience intimidating and struggle to make ends meet while working toward their degrees.

In his article "Returning to Class: Creating Opportunities for Multicultural Reform at Majority Second-Tier Schools" John Alberti explains that "most college students in the United States do not attend elite, selective-admissions four-year institutions" (563). Instead they go to "second-tier, open-registration, regional two-and four year colleges—what I call 'working-class' colleges—that represent the majority of institutions of higher education" (563). The

fact that most of our students are attending working-class institutions lends some credibility to the notion that with effort and dedication anyone can raise their socioeconomic status in the United States. However, just because these students are in college does not guarantee that they will be able to obtain a degree and prosper. As a matter of fact, as Annette Lareau states in her book *Unequal Childhoods*, “[i]n the United States, just under one-quarter of all adults have completed a bachelor’s degree [. . .] Even among younger people, for whom college education is becoming increasingly common, a clear majority (from two-thirds to three-quarters) do not graduate” (29). Many men and women begin their college careers, but an alarming number do not obtain a degree.

A school’s inability to retain students is not problematic for the students alone. It also hinders colleges and universities themselves, especially since government funding for public universities has decreased during the current administration and the burden of financing the schools has been relocated to tuition. The 2007 *New York Times* article “College Costs Outpace Inflation Rate” argues that “[t]he changes in tuition at public institutions closely track changes in financing they receive from state governments and other public sources . . . When state and local support for public colleges declined over the last seven years, tuition and fees rose more quickly” (Glater). When faced with an inconsistent student body, the schools’ funding is also unstable, making retention essential. The question is: Why are so many students going through the enormous expense and time commitment of attending college and not managing to graduate?

Alberti believes that one of the key factors is that “work outside of school, whether for pay or centered in the home, is no longer the uniquely distinguishing feature of the ‘nontraditional’ student; more and more, it applies to the entire student body at these second-tier (and increasingly at first-tier) schools as well” (573). Students who must work, raise children, or attend to ailing relatives cannot make school their first priority. They are often unable to complete assignments or purchase textbooks and other class requirements. As Mary Soliday states in her essay, “Class Dismissed,” “[t]he number of hours worked and various family responsibilities are correlated strongly with both the type of institution that these students attend and their retention rates” (734). While it seems obvious that students with financial limitations and those who with other (job, family) responsibilities would have a harder time succeeding academically, the problems faced by working-class students are more deep-rooted and complex than that. Having their financial needs covered as well as enough time to study would certainly help, but it would only address part of the problem.

In her essay “From Outside, In,” Barbara Mellix discusses her academic journey. As an African American from a working-class background who returned to school after her children were teenagers, Mellix faced many obstacles in her attempts to obtain her degree. She

expresses her frustration during her first college writing classes by stating, "[m]y concern was to use 'appropriate' language, to sound as if I belonged in a college classroom" (264). Mellix was the first person in her family to attend a university. Unlike many middle-class children who grow up with college as their goal, it had not occurred to Mellix until adulthood to consider it an option. She did not feel that she was meant to be in those classrooms, and she feared that at some point her professors and the other students would find out that she was an impostor who should not be there:

Whenever I turned inward for salvation, the balm so available during my childhood, I found instead this new fragmentation which spoke to me in many voices. It was the voice of my desire to prosper, but at the same time it spoke of what I had relinquished and could not regain: a safe way of being, a state of powerlessness which exempted me from responsibility for who I was and might be. And it accused me of betrayal, of turning away from blackness. (267)

In trying to learn the language of academia, she felt that she was abandoning the way in which she spoke to her family, and by rejecting that voice—even if it was only in the classroom and while writing school assignments—she feared that she might be turning her back on them. Her longing for a more rewarding profession and a higher income made her feel divided from her relatives; as if by choosing a path different from theirs, she was looking down upon the way they lived. Attending college did not only make her feel isolated while she was in school but also when she went home to the ones who could not relate because they had not had that experience.

Michèle Lamont corroborates Mellix's sense of alienation from her loved ones in her book *The Dignity of Working Men*. For her study, Lamont interviewed working-class men who had finished high school but were not college educated (2). One of her subject's girlfriends had left him when she began attending college because she felt that he was not ambitious enough. He described her newfound school friends as "very cold, shallow people . . . concentrating a lot on finances and not that much on personal needs" (108). Another worker complained about his brother who held a job at a corporation: "I feel that I'm more sensitive a person. He's in a business atmosphere, where he has to be tough. He acts sometimes, you know, 'corporate' when he's talking to me, so I get upset . . . He doesn't show any sensitivity to some things that I would like him to show" (108). Alfred Lubrano's *Limbo* examines the way "Straddlers," people who make the transition from working to middle class, deal with the duality of their lives. He

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argues that “[t]he academy can render you unrecognizable to the very people who launched you into the world. The ideas and values absorbed in college challenge the mom-and-pop orthodoxy that passed for truth for 18 years” (8). Not only are parents and relatives unable to understand their newly educated children, the students themselves may begin to question the way their family lives. Their beliefs and customs may seem antiquated or even illogical to students who have been urged by their professors to embrace multiplicity of thought and meaning, to examine, evaluate, and critique themselves and their surroundings.

This constant questioning of our assumptions is not foreign to students with a middle-class upbringing, whose teachers and college-educated parents often involve them in conversations that follow that pattern. However, as Patrick Finn shows in *Literacy with an Attitude*, working-class education is more concerned with the retention than the dissection of information: “Students wrote notes in their notebooks exactly as directed by teachers. They were later tested on the notes and if they passed, they got credits. . . . The routine allowed students no ownership of knowledge, nor did it include any opportunities to engage in analysis, synthesis, or evaluation of abstract, theoretical, high-status knowledge” (70). It is no wonder then that students who receive this kind of education find their composition teachers’ requests for deep analysis of a subject challenging, if not altogether unreasonable. If they manage to learn what we are trying to teach them, though, they may end up being at odds with their family and friends, a chasm that can be extremely detrimental. Their sense of isolation both from the university, where they do not fit in, and from their home support system contributes to students abandoning their careers, and as such, it is an important problem to address in the teaching of composition.

During my first semester as an adjunct faculty member at The University of Akron, I taught four freshman courses, two sessions of English Composition 111 and two of English Composition 112. The University of Akron is primarily a working-class institution, where about 80% of the student body comes from blue-collar homes. The students I will discuss in this paper are part of the working-class majority in my classrooms. They were the ones I had to reach out to the most because their struggle with the college experience seemed deeper and, at times, paralyzing.

There is no consensus about the definition of class. As Paul Fussell states in “A Touchy Subject,” “[a]lthough most Americans sense that they live within an extremely complicated system of social classes and suspect that much of what is thought and done here is prompted by considerations of status, the subject has remained murky. And always touchy. You can outrage people today simply by mentioning social class” (39). Though the today Fussell is referring to is 1983, his statement still holds true. Social class is not a topic Americans generally like to discuss. Not only because as a society we celebrate the belief that we

are all equal but also because it is a slippery, labyrinthine topic. As Lubrano explains, "a plumber with an eighth-grade education can command a higher salary than a college professor with more degrees than fingers. The plumber is in an elevated economic class, but is he in a superior social class as well? The permutations are many and . . . well, confusing" (3-4). For the purpose of this paper, I will define class not on an economic basis but through education and occupation. I will adopt Lubrano's interpretation of the working class as "people [who] don't have college degrees and perform manual labor" while the middle class "are college educated and work at professional-type jobs" (4).

Lubrano uses Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to deepen his definition of class. Bourdieu claims that children who grow up in a middle-class environment become acquainted with art and literature, with the different requirements of white-collar professions, without even realizing it. This knowledge becomes "a sense of entitlement that will carry them through their lives. This 'belongingness' is not just related to having material means; it has to do with learning and possessing confidence in your place in the world" (Lubrano 9). Working-class students often hear about Dalí, Fellini, and Tchaikovsky for the first time in college, and though they can certainly learn to enjoy and understand them, Lubrano claims it is "never as well" as those who grew up being aware of them since childhood (9). While it would be difficult to assess this latter claim—after all, many scholars of working-class origin specialize in the high culture to which Lubrano is referring—it is certain that understanding the value of studying these artists and thinkers is easier if students have been acquainted with them before arriving at school as middle-class children often have.

I began to distinguish my working-class from my middle-class students during the first week of class. I gave them the following writing prompt: "Why are you in college and what do you expect to get out of this experience?" and then asked them to read their responses out loud. The original goal of the assignment was to make the students aware of their purpose in school and to analyze that purpose and how English composition could help them achieve it. The prompt had a second, unintended effect, however, as it revealed the students' backgrounds. While some students said they were at The University of Akron because they were following in their parents' footsteps, the majority of them wrote about being the first in their families to go to college, some even the first to graduate from high school. As the semester progressed, they used their childhood experiences and their parents' blue-collar or middle-class lives to make points during our discussions, becoming more and more comfortable with interpreting their own past both in class and in their writing.

This openness, however, did not come naturally to most of the students. Some of them, especially my working-class students, found class discussions and the writing over-

whelming and intimidating at first. One of my students, Sheila,<sup>1</sup> failed to turn in the first assignment and sent me an email a week after it was due explaining that she did not give it to me because she knew that it was an F paper. I invited her to my office, where I learned that Sheila had been an avid member of "Power of the Pen" in high school and was extremely fond of reading, but she did not think she could write research papers. She felt uncomfortable using academic language and found the research aspect of writing a paper daunting. After discussing ways in which to get over her fear of writing critical, persuasive papers, we turned to her class participation.

Sheila had never voiced her opinions in class, but during our conference I realized that she had comprehended the readings and retained them impressively. She could recall details from passages we had read weeks ago and talk about them in a perceptive manner. I asked her why, if she was reading, she was not participating. She replied that she was intimidated by the class, especially by another student named Anna who lived in the Honors Dorm. Sheila said that Anna was so smart that Sheila knew that whatever she said would sound stupid to Anna. I explained that in a reading discussion all participation was welcome, and that the wider the range of the opinions expressed, the better off we would be as a class. Furthermore, Anna was a kind and open-minded student who welcomed her classmates' input. She often dialogued back and forth during reading discussions, but even if Anna had been annoyed by Sheila's comments, it did not matter. They had both been admitted to the same university and had a right to say whatever they pleased in class as long as it did not insult anyone and referred to the topic at hand. Sheila promised she would try to get over her fear, and each class after that she began to participate more and more, until she became one of my most outspoken students, spearheading many lively discussions. The more she participated, the more confident she became and the more complex the ideas she expressed.

Like Barbara Mellix, Sheila had felt apprehensive and isolated. She was intimidated by a few other students who exhibited great ease when expressing their opinions in class. They exuded an undeniable sense that they belonged in college, while she was an outsider who could not use academic jargon the way they did. Once she realized that her participation was welcomed by the class, however, she was able to challenge herself and experiment with more intricate notions. Sheila had not realized that while five or six students were like Anna in her class of twenty-seven, the rest of them were as afraid as Sheila was to speak up. Not everyone was as quiet as Sheila had been, but during the first few weeks, most students did not volunteer to participate unless I called on them. I felt, though, that putting students on the spot to answer my questions would only intimidate them even more, worsening the problem.

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1. Students' names are pseudonyms.



At the beginning of the semester I went through three weeks of semi-successful discussions in which the same students raised their hands and intelligently answered my questions about the readings. I wanted to get everyone involved, however, so I asked the class to divide into groups of three or four students and assigned each one of the groups a different concept to examine in the reading. The groups were asked to figure out what the thesis was or to evaluate ethos, pathos, logos, audience awareness, language, what the author had done well and what he or she could have done better. I would give them about four minutes to discuss their part and then call on one group at a time. Whoever had the thesis always went first so we could agree on what the reading was about before we began dissecting it. Although the members of the group were the first to expound on their particular task, the discussion was then open to anyone else who wanted to add something, which was usually the case.

The first time I asked the class to divide themselves into groups, the discussion changed radically. It was lively and the reading was scrutinized in a thorough, dynamic way. When I told the students that I was pleased with how well the discussion had evolved that day, Naomi, one of my brightest students, replied, "That's because we like to be in groups." The rest of the class nodded in agreement as she said this. The reaction was the same in all of my other classes. The tenor of my classrooms changed dramatically. Suddenly half the students were eager to share their opinion, not just the usual outspoken few. I decided to keep the system as long as it worked, and since it continued to yield involved discussions, it became a permanent fixture in our routine.

Not only did the group system make the discussion go more smoothly, it also allowed for the key concepts we were learning to become part of everyone's thought process and vocabulary. The concepts rotated from group to group, and I would hear students ask their group mates, "What's pathos again?" and one or two would reply, "That's the emotional response," which would lead to an exchange about what emotional response meant and finally end with whether the essay had succeeded in eliciting one from them.

One could argue that having the students discuss the readings with each other before we addressed them as a class would allow those who did not read to pretend like they had by simply repeating what their classmates had talked about. While this is certainly true, open classroom discussions where students raise their hands and participate voluntarily present the same problem. If anything, dividing the class into groups puts pressure on at least one of the group members to do the reading so they can comment on their particular task. During the whole semester, I never came across a whole group that had not done the assignment. Though no doubt there were always some students who had not read, I addressed this by sporadically using in-class written responses in which I asked for a reaction to specific issues presented by the text. Furthermore, I believe that the fact that our discussions were much

livelier after the group system was introduced inspired some students to read so they could be part of something engaging and enjoyable.

Another benefit of group work is that it leads to discussions on how to improve writing. While in their groups, the students felt free to express their frustration over how hard to understand or boring a piece had been. When they realized that others in the group agreed, they were more willing to admit their dislike to everyone else, and this led to useful discussions on how to write in a way that will be clear to the audience and help them relate and want to keep reading. Group work removed me, the authority, from the space in which the students were organizing their thoughts, giving them freedom to say what they pleased, however they pleased. They did not have to express their opinions about the reading in an overly coherent fashion. Rather, they would state their first impressions however they came out, gather them together, find places in the text that supported them, and then summarize them in a more eloquent way when it was their turn to speak. At times students within the group disagreed, so they would explain their differences and start discussions in which parts of the class supported each side.

Although at first each group had its spokesperson, every few classes I would request that someone new express the group's opinions, and as a result the spokespersons began to rotate. While not everyone took the lead, most of the students related their group's findings at least a few times during the semester. However, some students, like Sheila, felt intimidated by the class discussion even while in their groups. This was minimal, though. Most students seemed comfortable, respectfully joking around with each other and me. This technique also played on the strengths of the working-class students. As Lamont explains, "[s]ocial psychologists have shown that those groups that are in positions of dependency or with limited access to power most often value morality and/or collective over individualistic aspects of morality" (246). She argues that "because their market positions do not allow them to aspire to high socioeconomic attainment, they redirect their energies toward the pursuit of other, more attainable, goals, and these are found in the realms of family and interpersonal relationships" (115). This diverges from the middle classes' own values, in which wealth and education are emphasized as signifiers of success. Lubrano concurs, listing "[t]he need for close contact with extended family" and "loyalty; a sense of solidarity with people you live and work with" as characteristics of the working class (17).

In "Rhetoric on the Concrete Pour," Dale Cyphert reiterates the importance of community to the working-class culture. He writes that "[p]revious studies of groups that cope effectively with 'nonroutine' events (or perhaps more accurately, with 'routine trouble') find them to be thoroughly social with a dense web of interrelationships, less reliance on the talents of single individuals, and a strong collective memory of specific, material applications"



(155). Group work helps working-class students feel more comfortable with the learning process by recreating in the classroom the values of the collective over the individual that they grew up with at home, thus, making their transition into college life a smoother one.

Another way in which I tried to aid students in their transition to academia was by providing them with readings that mirrored the struggles many of them were experiencing. They read texts like the essay by Barbara Mellix, which many found inspiring. I wanted them to look beyond their own problems, however. I looked for texts that would motivate them to become engaged with society and discuss ways in which we can improve it, so the new generations will not be faced with the same difficulties. At first, in-class writing prompts like, "If you could change anything about the way our country is governed, what would it be?" were met with incredulity and resistance. Some students claimed they did not know what they wanted to change; others said that it did not matter since they had no power to change society anyway. I reminded them each time that soon they would be the generation in charge of the world and that then they would not only have the power but the obligation to change it for the better. As the semester went on and we read about topics such as global warming, outsourcing of jobs, and affirmative action, they became more involved and, at times, even enraged. When one of my students brought up the treatment of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay, a group of his classmates asked me to assign an article about it for classroom discussion, which I did.

The fact that they did not simply want me to tell them where they could find the information but requested that this topic become part of our curriculum shows that they valued our class dialogue. They wanted to read the article, but they also wanted to talk about it in the atmosphere we had created together, where all opinions were welcome as long as their proponents were willing to let their classmates question them. The discussion of the article was one of the most polarized we had during the semester. While many of the students were appalled at our nation's treatment of the prisoners, some of them defended the use of torture as a way to keep us safe. They felt that the other side was torturing our soldiers too, and that as long as it helped halt terrorism, they were willing to accept the fact that guilty, as well as innocent, prisoners were suffering unspeakable pain and humiliation. Through the discussion of something as extreme as torture, the students on both sides were becoming aware of their own moral code and they were learning to speak of it in an eloquent fashion while defending their views from impassioned opposition. The students' ability to orally argue and sustain their points is crucial since it helps them develop techniques that they can also apply to their writing. Cultivating this oral proficiency, as I will show below, is part of the middle-class upbringing, but it is not something that working-class parents tend to focus on while raising their children.

In her book *Unequal Childhoods*, Annette Lareau examines the difference in upbringing between middle-class, working-class and poor families, and the way that each group's parenting methods prepare children for education and the workforce. She interviewed 88 families from different social classes and conducted involved observations of 12 families (8). While she found little difference between the upbringing of poor and working-class children, the divergence between them and the middle-class was vast. One of the main gaps she found was in the amount of conversation that took place in each household. In working-class and poor families, "[s]hort remarks punctuate comfortable silences. Sometimes speech is bypassed altogether in favor of body language—nods, smiles and eye contact" (146). On the other hand, middle-class homes are characterized by constant conversation in which the parents expect children to logically support their opinions (110–111). As Lareau says, "Parent-child dialogues can boost children's vocabulary, preview or deepen knowledge of subjects taught in school, and familiarize children with the patterns of verbal interaction that characterize the classroom and other dealings with adults in organizational settings" (110). This confidence in their ability to express and support their thoughts is what many of my students were lacking before I introduced the group setting.

One of the reasons why the group approach worked may be that, as Lareau found, while working-class and poor children do not usually have prolonged discussions with their parents (159), they enjoy bantering back and forth and having involved conversations with their peers (150). By allowing my students to react to the readings among themselves before presenting their opinions to the rest of the class and to me, I may have invoked the childhood space in which the exchange of ideas was pleasurable and uninhibited.

Another result of middle-class emphasis on conversation that the group approach does not address, however, is the problem of vocabulary. As Lubrano explains, in a middle-class home family members speak three times the amount of words on average than in their blue-collar equivalent (9–10). My working-class students often complained about being unable to understand the readings. I found myself defining words for them, and only then were they able to grasp the author's message. After a prolonged campaign about the importance of improving their vocabulary, I managed to inspire a few students to look up words in the dictionary. Others circled unfamiliar words and asked about them in class, where everyone could benefit from the meaning. Nonetheless, the problem went beyond the readings.

At times, they could not understand the words I used in class. On rare occasions they would ask me the meaning of a word while I was talking, though mostly they said nothing. Whenever I gave them prompts for in-class writing, however, they let me know what words were confusing to them, for otherwise they could not complete the assignment. The first time they did not understand one of the prompts, we were discussing technology. The prompt was:

"If you could invent a new machine, what would it be? What ramifications do you think it would have?" Only a few students began writing as I read it. The rest stared at me blankly until Taylor raised his hand and asked what a ramification was. Being an etymology enthusiast, I explained that the root of the word was the Latin *ramus*, which means branch, so if they pictured a tree, they could see ramifications as that which resulted from something else. Taylor's eyes were wide with confusion until Janine, an avid reader, raised her hand and said, "Consequences. Ramifications are consequences." A number of heads nodded in understanding and everyone began to write.

When developing the prompt, it did not occur to me that such a word might perplex my students, just as when I spoke I used the words that came naturally to me, some of which they did not understand. And yet, I could not change my vocabulary to suit them; because as the semester progressed, I realized some students had problems with words I generally considered simple, such as the verb "to alter." Moreover, if I did not expose them to "big" words, I was not fulfilling my job as a writing and reading instructor, since they would encounter advanced vocabulary in many of the texts they would read during their college career and might be expected to use them in future essays.

I tried to undermine the intimidation that resulted from their limited vocabulary by reminding them that I myself had to look up words all the time and by creating an environment in which they felt comfortable admitting that they did not know something. Furthermore, since the class saw itself as a community in which they figured things out together, students like Janine were free to help me explain the meanings of words, sometimes doing so in ways to which her peers could relate better.

Vocabulary played an important role in another divergence in upbringing encountered by Lareau. She found that while working-class and poor parents could be very assertive when they needed something from landlords and customer service providers, "they do not define this approach as appropriate when dealing with school or medical professionals, perhaps in part because they lack the requisite vocabulary to effectively challenge such individuals" (199). Parents were intimidated by their children's teachers, and thus could not make the school system cater to their particular needs the way middle-class parents did. This resulted in a sense of alienation from the school, as well as mistrust:

Mothers who nod in silent agreement during a parent-teacher conference may at home, and within earshot of their children, denounce the educator as unfair, untrustworthy, or mean. Particularly in the area of discipline, working-class and poor parents are likely to regard the school's approach as inappropriate. Many encourage their children—in direct violation of school rules—to hit peers who harass them, specifically including the advice to take their retaliatory actions "when the teacher isn't looking." (199)

Instead of presenting their complaints to the teachers and explaining why they felt their children were being treated unfairly, working-class parents tended to tell the children to take matters into their own hands and defend themselves. While this approach may help children

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develop a sense of self-reliance, it also complicates our relationship with working-class college students, many of whom did not grow up seeing teachers as their allies in learning, but as authorities with unjust rules that needed to be broken. While the group discussion system addressed some of

these issues by removing me from the time they used to gather their thoughts, my attempts to empower the class as a whole were crucial in easing some of the inherent antagonism many students felt.

In his book *The Working Class Majority*, Michael Zweig defines class as being "in large part based on the power and authority people have at work. The workplace engages people in more than their immediate work, by which they create goods and services. It also engages them in relationships with each other, relationships that are controlled by power" (3). Those who have no independence in the system have good reasons to resent those who control their time and actions, and thus autonomy and being one's "own boss" are some of the most prized characteristics in a profession. Since instructors need to develop syllabi and design and grade assignments, we are forced to assume a certain level of authority. Moreover, in freshman composition, where we often agree as a department on how many papers must be written and what texts will be read, the instructors themselves are working within a rather rigid format.

At the beginning of the semester, the director of composition suggested that I allow my students to choose what themes they wanted to write about as a way to empower them. For the first two papers they were to select the topic from those presented in our class texts, and for the third they would come up with their own topic for which I would find pertinent readings. We had an open vote for choosing the topic of the first paper. Each student told me her or his selection, and I tallied them on the board. There was great excitement in the class over this, the last few votes evoking screams of joy from some and disapproval from others. Quarters were passed around to buy votes—a practice I mildly reproofed—and tension surfaced in the classroom, a sense of playful yet steep competition we had not experienced before. While some of the students did have a strong sense of what topic they wanted to explore, the level of involvement went beyond it. This was their chance to have control over what they would be studying in a college class, and they relished it. The fact that they could

choose what they would read and write about made the assignment theirs, not mine, and as such, something they cared about.

For the second assignment some students approached me with concerns about our voting system. They wanted to have two votes: the first to choose the two most popular topics and the second to decide between the two winners. The students had never questioned my teaching methods, never suggested that I alter anything, but since they saw the selection of the assignments as their jurisdiction, they felt entitled to amend it. They proposed another change for the last vote. They noticed that people who voted towards the end felt compelled to select the topics that were already popular so their vote would count, since they could see that their actual choices had no chance of winning anymore. Their solution to that problem was that we implement a two-tier, blind-voting system, which we did.

For the last assignment in which we were not using the book, students nominated the topics that interested them on election day. I sometimes broadened their proposals so they would encompass their specific choice but also appeal to the rest of the class. For example, we went from lowering the drinking age to 18 to the wider topic of legislation in general. After everyone who had something to propose had spoken, we ended up with about ten issues on the board. The students then voted and helped me tally the results, and once we had a winner, they told me what issues within the chosen topic they wanted me to find readings for.

While one could argue that allowing the students to decide what they want to write about might result in shallow or overly simplistic topics, I did not find that to be the case. Their selections were legislation, crime, college life, and raising children—the latter was, to my delight, proposed by the previously detached Sheila. The discussions we had about these readings were the most mature and involved we had the whole semester. The quietest students were suddenly finding their voice and at any given moment there were four or five hands up, waiting patiently—and sometimes not so patiently—to add something to the community we had created. I was still the authority, the agent of the often confusing and intimidating institutional world, but they were empowered, not against me, but rather with me. While this method is not something that would work in science, math or history classes, we in composition have the enormous advantage of teaching certain techniques, not certain content. The students must learn to read academic writing and produce well-argued, critical essays, but there are no particular topics we must deal with in order to impart that knowledge to them. Giving my working-class students the freedom to choose what issues we would discuss eased some of the frustration many of them had felt for as long as they had been in classrooms.

Freedom, as Lareau reports in her study, plays a bigger role in the daily lives of working-class children than in that of their middle-class counterparts. She found that middle-class children's lives were brimming with extra-curricular activities (1-2). Thus, they were very

comfortable dealing with adults, such as their coaches and gymnastics and music teachers. Since everyone had a busy after-school schedule, however, the whole family did not spend a lot of time together and the children rarely saw their cousins or other relatives (39). This ease with adults in a position of authority facilitated their future in the college and work setting, but having their parents organize their time made middle-class children less adept at entertaining themselves. Unlike working-class and poor children, they complained about being bored when they did not have an activity prepared for them (81, 112). Working-class and poor children, on the other hand, rarely had extra-curricular activities, as their parents could not afford them. Instead they filled their own time by designing games they played with other children who lived nearby (81). These children were often their relatives. "[F]amily members spent more time together in shared space than occurred in middle-class homes. Indeed, family ties were very strong, particularly among siblings. Working-class and poor children also developed very close ties with their cousins and other extended family members" (242). Lamont concurs with this assertion, claiming that working-class people "are often immersed in tight networks of sociability, in part because their extended family often resides within a few miles (the children appear to spend considerable time visiting their cousins)" (11).

We are faced again with the fact that while middle-class children are comfortable dealing with adults in positions of power, working-class children are more used to relating to their peers. They are accustomed to having strong ties with those they interact with. Lamont explains that this pattern continues into adulthood. Working-class people:

value responsibility because they are highly dependent on the actions of others. They point out that the physical conditions in which they work and live and their limited financial resources make it difficult for them to buffer themselves from the actions of neighbors, coworkers, kin, and friends. They have no private space at work and live in neighborhoods where houses are set very close to one another. (27)

Not only does group work complement the working-class upbringing, it is a skill that will remain useful to students all their lives. Being able to work effectively with others is valued in many of the professions they are preparing for, and even if they do not manage to reach their goal, that ability would also be useful in blue-collar occupations in which independence is less prevalent.

After studying an Omaha concrete work crew, Dale Cyphert noted that they used "an implicit form of communal decision making that is grounded in the actions rather than the words of a public. This work group is never observed to articulate a choice. Instead it lets 'circumstances' or 'chance' decide the outcome of a decision-making process" (153). Cyphert's use of the word implicit is important, since according to Finn, members of the working and middle-class tend to express their thoughts differently. The middle-class uses explicit lan-



guage in which people "are willing to discuss reasons for rules and decisions when they are challenged" (84). As Lareau also observed, middle-class parents will try to convince their children, to persuade them into obedience with the use of logic (110-111). Working-class parenting takes a more authoritarian approach in which children do what their parents ask them to without questioning them. "Where conformity is expected, where sex roles are rigid, where opinions are dictated by group consensus, there is no need to explain one's thoughts, beliefs, or behaviors. Communication is frequently possible by alluding to shared opinions and beliefs rather than by explicitly expressing them. In such groups communication tends to be implicit" (Finn 83). The problem for working-class students is that explicit communication is what is required of them once they arrive in school. "The language of the school, especially the language of school books, is explicit. The explicit language that more affluent children learn at home prepares them for the ever so much more explicit language of the school, particularly the language of books" (Finn 90). As they move up through middle school and high school they are further affected by their inability to use explicit language, many of them receiving poor grades regardless of effort or intelligence (Finn 90). Those who do make it to our composition classrooms are then expected to imitate the explicit language used in the essays we teach them in their own writing, presenting them once again with the obstacle they have been facing since the beginning of their education.

Another reason why working-class children use implicit language is the fact that as Lareau noted, they often do not have as much contact with strangers as their middle-class counterparts, since they do not participate in extracurricular activities and tend not to socialize with people outside their extended family and close friends. "Where individuals rarely have occasion to deal with strangers, they tend to rely on allusion to shared experience for communication; where individuals must communicate with strangers frequently, they learn they cannot rely on shared experience; they cannot be sure of what the other person knows or thinks" (Finn 85). If we are speaking with people who know our past as well as our opinions, we can hint at something and let them find the context themselves, but we cannot do the same when talking to strangers.

It can be argued that having working-class students discuss the texts in groups before addressing the whole class could lead them to rely on implicit language, since many of them became friends and were discussing something they had all previously read, thus being able to understand each other without having to explain themselves explicitly. I believe this is certainly possible and probably did take place in my groups, but the point of the group discussion is to make the students feel comfortable with the text and their ideas before they have to address the whole class, not to make them speak explicitly. When they were explaining their findings to the rest of us, the other students and I asked questions that

would lead them to express themselves in the specific and direct manner that explicit language requires.

While the group discussions forged a sense of unity within the class, the real bonding came from another proposal by the director of composition. He recommended that I have students write a group paper. Although during the first day of class I had warned them that we would be doing a group project, they were anxious when it was time to begin working on it. Their main objection was the fact that the majority of them worked or had children and they did not see how they would be able to find time to meet. When I explained that they would only be meeting during class, they began to regard the project with curiosity rather than dread.

They gathered in groups of four or five, each of which would write a section of the paper. One member was to administer a questionnaire to at least twenty people about the topic and write his or her part analyzing the results and how they related to their thesis. They worked on the research together, then devised a thesis they all agreed upon and assigned the sections each one would be writing. The sections were divided based on each student's skills and interests.

One of the groups wrote about the negative effect that technology may have on the way we view and interact with our own bodies. The graphic design major in the group looked at the way that pictures of celebrities are altered with Photoshop and other programs to present unrealistic images in ads and magazines. The painting major researched the French performance artist, Orlan, who has undergone plastic surgery various times to transform her face in unconventional ways that challenge our ideas of beauty. Another member examined the history and risks of plastic surgery, as well as the situations in which it is actually needed, and another carried out a survey about how far people would be willing to alter their bodies and why. The last group member explored the psychological repercussions that these practices have in our society and the ways in which we can address the problem.

Once the students had written their parts, one member would take everything home and piece the first draft together, which they would read and edit in class. Then, one by one the rest of the group would take the text home and polish it until it was ready to be turned in. I spent about ten minutes a class with each group, not only making sure that everyone was doing their part but helping them with whatever questions or problems they were facing.

The students had already edited each other's work. They brought in drafts of their papers to class, which were read and critiqued by peer groups. However, their own grades had not been affected, so although they did try to help each another, they had neither the time nor the incentive to read the work as deeply and critically as they did the group papers. The results, although slightly uneven as expected from the fact that some groups contained both

advanced and not very skilled writers, were of higher quality than anything else produced during the semester.

When the project was finished, we held a discussion concerning its pros and cons. The negative aspects were not surprising: some group members did not work as hard as the rest, email messages were mislaid and attachments could not be opened when assembling the paper. They also battled with the difficulty of unifying their writing styles, and some had a hard time dealing with the rigid structure in which the paper was written. However, the majority of the students had found the experience enjoyable and many learned unexpected things from it. Some of the better writers realized that they were not as competent as they thought and still had much to learn. The less accomplished writers said they became more aware of their problems by having others edit their work and show them how to better argue their point or construct a sentence. Tamara, one of my most outspoken students who had turned in her first paper three days late, said she could not believe their paper was ready two days before it was due. She had never done this before and found the lack of stress both pleasant and strange.

The greatest benefit of the paper, though, came with the bonding that resulted from the writing of it. After the group project was over, I told the students that they could leave their groups and join another discussion group if they wanted to, but apart from two or three people in each class, every group remained together, and they expressed distress whenever one of the members was missing. Tamara's group had two seventeen-year-old female members in it. One of them, Angie, was a diabetic, and when she did not arrive for class one day, Tamara said to no one in particular, "Where's Angie? How can we have class when one of my babies ain't here?" The next day when Angie returned, her group expressed worry about her and told her she had been missed.

While not all my groups were as warm as Tamara and Angie's, a sense of unity characterized most of them. A missing student was a source of mild concern and of incompleteness, something that was expressed when they returned. Cherry, another student who missed three classes because of a car accident in which she sustained minor injuries, was greeted with so many concerned questions from her group that she had to ask them to speak one at a time. This sense of belonging may be especially important to The University of Akron students, where as Jane Falk notes, "most undergraduate students live at home and commute from the surrounding tri-county area" (48). For students who do not live in dorms, these connections made in class are crucial, since they often do not get to be part of the university community outside the classrooms.

The sense of accomplishing a paper together, of deciding on a topic, doing the research and polishing each other's reasoning and language had created a visible bond

between many of my students. After the group project, we seemed to have bypassed that sense of isolation Mellix and Sheila had described. Their worry for each other's wellbeing, and their clear sense that they were missed when they were not present, resembled to a certain extent the family relations that both Lareau and Lamont found to be so important to the working class. Each group was a unit that needed all of its members to function properly. Although they were still burdened with financial limitations, work and family commitments, the sense that they did not belong in college or were not as important to the class as other students began to erode as they realized that they were valued members of their groups.

We as instructors have little control over what our students go through in order to be in school. We cannot help them financially nor ease the complications of their family lives. However, we can help our working-class students overcome some of the frustrations and difficulties they encounter by adapting our teaching to their specific needs. In her essay "Class Work: Site of Egalitarian Activism or Site of Embourgeoisement?" Sharon O'Dair argues against modifying our classes to suit the needs of working-class students. She tells us that "[w]hat is not considered, however, is how long this process ought to continue—one semester? two? three? more?—or, more fundamentally, whether the continued delaying of the students' transition to the academic and middle-class worlds is not, in fact, irresponsible and antithetical to their ambitions" (598). In other words, we are hindering working-class students by making concessions to them when other professors and their future employers may not be willing to do the same. While that is a valid point and we do not want to create unreal expectations in our students or lower our teaching standards for them, the method I am endorsing does neither. By surmounting isolation and subverting some of the instructor's authority, group work and class empowerment allow working-class students to develop strong critical thinking and writing skills. These abilities will in turn promote their success in other classes and work environments, helping them achieve the ambitions O'Dair fears we may be betraying.

I am not arguing for a lowering of teaching standards, but rather for us to foster a classroom atmosphere in which all students feel welcomed and where their input is always valued. While not all of my students participated in our class discussions or became attached to their groups, the majority of them did take active part in our activities, often with visible pleasure and enthusiasm, and they developed close ties with their group members.

One could argue that steering our efforts towards the specific needs of working-class students may hamstring middle-class students, but I did not find that to be the case. My middle-class students seemed to enjoy and thrive as well as everyone else. As Lareau, Finn and Lubrano showed, the middle-class upbringing is more geared towards preparing students for their college careers so that many of them arrived to class with an advantage. Lamont found

this to be the case as well: "In [middle-class parents'] worlds, paramount are saving for their children's college education and creating the conditions of their self-actualization and growth by exposing them to a wide range of experiences. Self-actualization, 'be all you can be,' occupies a key position in the upper middle class culture as a whole" (31). I did not undermine the advantage that my middle-class students' upbringing imparted on them but rather attempted to enable my working-class students to attain the same level of comfort in class so they could also reach their potential.

O'Dair tries to convince us that college is not for everyone. She argues that "it is time for society to rethink its attempt to ameliorate via ever-increasing amounts of education the invidious distinction between the working class and the middle and upper classes" (602). She supports this claim by arguing that "higher education offers upward mobility only to a small portion of the working class; the expansion of higher education in the postwar period benefited primarily the middle and upper classes" (601). While this is true, it does not mean that we should stop trying to help the working class attend college. It would be catastrophic, not to mention embarrassing, if as a nation we were to give up on our attempt to make higher education available to all who are willing to participate in it after only 60 years of trying. Our attempts to welcome working-class students to our universities are still young and much remains to be learned about how to make them successful. We must keep exploring and experimenting, however, especially if current economic trends persist.

O'Dair believes that working-class people should not want to abandon their origins because "middle-class culture is not superior to that of the working class" (603). She contends that the middle class is "individualistic, hierarchical and consumerist" while the working class, as already discussed in this essay, "places less emphasis on the individual and more on the group, whether clan or, as is the case today, the family" (603). Why should the working class want to abandon their principles for those of the middle class? The answer is simple: the working class would like to have serenity and prosperity. As Lamont explains, however, "the living standards of workers have been steadily declining since the seventies, and they often complained that they have to work more hours to make the same amount of money as before" (27). Our economy has changed in the past forty years, making it very difficult for the working class to make ends meet and still have time to spend with their family, which as we have noted, is one of their main priorities. Thus, a college education and the professional opportunities that it brings is becoming increasingly desirable to them, if not imperative.

We cannot ensure that students will stay in school simply because they feel a sense of kinship in one class. However, if we manage to help them overcome their sense of isolation and their fear that they are not as smart or eloquent as other students, they will be more successful in future classes. There are some marked differences between working and mid-

dle-class upbringing. The American dream then, the promise that any hardworking person may overcome poverty is much more tenuous than our lore would like us to believe. And yet, if we can make working-class students feel like they do belong in college, we will help them attain the economic and social benefits that come with having a degree. There is more to it, however. In her essay "Bourgeois Realism or Working Class Kitsch?: The Aesthetics of Class in Composition" Wendy Ryden argues that "[w]e might conclude that composition, even in current-traditional mode, has been concerned not merely with the composing of texts but the composing of lives—and thus the ethics of that composition" (4). As we try to induce our students to think critically and to write discerning papers, we may also inspire them to become responsible citizens who will attempt to transform our society into one where equal opportunity is more than something we hope for.

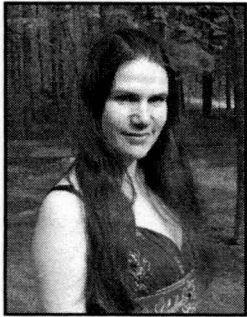
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**Alexandra Hidalgo** was born in Caracas, Venezuela and moved to Ohio when she was 16. She is now a beginning doctoral student in Rhetoric and Composition at Purdue University. Her fiction has appeared in *West Wind Review*, *Bombay Gin*, and *One Less*.