

# THE CLASS OF BUKOWSKI: ENGAGING LAGUARDIA WORKING CLASS STUDENTS WITH THE NOVELS OF CHARLES BUKOWSKI

Carlos Hiraldo, *English*

Despite the great diversity of the LaGuardia student population, our classrooms have a predominantly working-class ethos. Clearly, the meaning of the term “working class” is open to contention, its definitions expanding and shrinking according to the politics of the user and the exigencies of time and place. I do not wish to imply that our culturally diverse students are economically homogeneous. In my seven years as an English professor at LaGuardia, I have met students from a range of economic backgrounds, including the very poor and the relatively well off. Still, I believe that by occupation and education, many of our students are connected to the working class. Directly or indirectly, through personal experiences or the experiences of parents and relatives, they are familiar with the struggles of working for wages and securing and retaining jobs that promise economic and social stability. The challenges and triumphs we encounter in the classroom as instructors often come from meeting and overcoming the anxieties of students who exhibit a working-class lack of familiarity with academic culture.

LaGuardia students confront many of the same difficulties that educational experts have found working-class students experience in a college setting. In “Ethical Representation of Working-Class Lives: Multiple Genres, Voices, and Identities,” Nancy Mack argues that working-class students lack “a sense of entitlement about obtaining a college degree” and are “fearful of exposure” (56). I have observed that students in my classes are usually the first in their families to attend college in the United States and they are proud of this achievement. Nevertheless, they doubt their chances of completing their educational goals as well as the significance of their ideas. In English classes, students fear being criticized as poor writers, and they view literature as something lofty, like fine china kept high in the cupboard for a special occasion, seldom, if ever, used.

Because many of our students feel alienated from literature as not speaking to or for them, I am judicious when selecting texts for Writ-

ing through Literature (ENG102). I believe that when engaged with what they read, students write stronger analytical essays and become more motivated to complete research assignments. In the past, when I taught literary texts primarily concerned with ethnic or racial identity, my lessons and assignments met with varying degrees of success, depending upon the makeup of the class. Though I strongly believe in the importance of teaching students the concept of “otherness” conveyed through these texts, I also find dissatisfying the degree to which the lesson’s success or failure rests upon the accidental groupings of identities and personalities that take place through the random process of registration. I have discovered, however, that texts directly addressing economic struggles and the difficulties of the work world engage the majority of students regardless of nationality, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or academic skill level.

If themes of ethnicity alienate some students by touching on personal prejudices or indifferences, discussions of work and economic survival draw many students together, and away from more apparent identity divides. In “Diversity, Discourse, and the Working-Class Student,” published by *Academe*, Janet Galligani Casey states,

While every minority group may stake a claim to its own specialized needs and concerns, [...] working-class students stand apart from students in all other minority categories, even as they cut across all such categories, precisely because of their fundamentally oblique relationship to the entire enterprise of higher education.

In my view, the broader challenge and opportunity of teaching at LaGuardia, where all are in the minority, emanates precisely from the students’ working-class distance from the liberal arts and academic discourse. The students simply do not believe that their lived experiences are relevant to the classroom, and they doubt that what they learn in the classroom can provide any insight into their personal lives.

I teach the novels of Charles Bukowski in Writing through Literature (ENG102) to help bridge the gap that students perceive between their working-class experiences and academic learning. One of the few American writers concerned with authentically portraying work and the working class, Bukowski once criticized inaccurate descriptions about working life in a letter to his publisher, John Martin:

You know the places where I came from. Even the people who try to write about that or make films about it, they don't get it right. They call it "9 to 5." It's never 9 to 5, there's no free lunch break at those places, in fact, at many of them in order to keep your job you don't take lunch. Then there's OVERTIME and the books never seem to get the overtime right and if you complain about that, there's another sucker to take your place.

Bukowski made an effort to get it right and often did so. His narrative fiction details the drudgery and the injustices of low-level employment as well as the fleeting moments of rebellion possible in a working-class existence.

Every time I have taught Bukowski, students have expressed intense interest. During the 2006–07 academic year, I taught two of Bukowski's novels – *Factotum* in the Fall I 2006 semester and *Post Office* in Spring I 2007. Both novels are narrated by Bukowski's alter ego, Henry Chinaski, and are fictionalizations of Bukowski's real-life experiences. These works question the promise of the "American Dream" and its implicit guarantee of upward mobility for those who work hard, regardless of their starting position in society. This critical thrust might seem strange at first to students who look at a college education as a means of upward mobility, and as an escape from their own physically intensive and routine employment. Some students quickly identified with Bukowski's characters and style; others, because of cultural conventions and upbringing, were taken aback by the writer's occasional use of foul words, frank depiction of sexual encounters, and portrayal of petty acts of rebellion. However, the more we engaged in discussions of the ideas about work found within Bukowski's novels, the more the students realized that their own experiences were not that different from the ones depicted in the texts. In the end, the majority of students valued both Bukowski's honest rendering of Chinaski's working-class experiences and the immediacy of his language.

Although the first reaction of many students when they read Bukowski was enthusiasm, my goal was to focus their energy on the discipline of literary analysis. The number of students who told me they had completed *Factotum* before we started discussing it was unexpected. They were surprised to realize that the experiences of a common worker could be the raw material for powerful literature. In addition to informal and excited conversations about how fast they had read the novel and how eager they were to read more of Bukowski,

students also put their feelings into writing. Reflecting on the author, one student wrote, “I like him because he pulls no punches and makes sure his reader understands what he’s going through [...] the scary part about his work is he uses actual situations that can happen to you and me.” I welcomed the student’s sense of camaraderie with Bukowski and his alter ego, and realized that this feeling could serve as an entrée into deeper literary analysis.

My writing assignments required that students analyze the literary mechanisms put into play in *Factotum*. One student keenly noted that, though Bukowski elicited strong emotions, his language was straightforward and descriptive: “It’s funny how he describes things to the most precise detail, but he doesn’t necessarily express excessive emotion about that certain subject. He is detail oriented. I like how he paints the whole picture, the whole scene, with his words.” Here the student taps into the commonly held critical observation that, as a twentieth-century author, Bukowski does not invest much time in describing scenery. His settings are spare; as the student noted, his language is precise and to the point. A quick sketch of the surroundings – a messy room, an ugly factory – is enough to portray the inner lives of the inhabitants.

Later, when I assigned *Post Office* to a different group of Writing through Literature students, I was not surprised by one student’s report that, on her own, she had started reading other works by the author. Bukowski’s first novel and the one generally accepted as his best, *Post Office* recounts his twelve years in the United States Postal Service, first as a mail carrier and then as a clerk. The autobiographical novel humorously follows Chinaski in his travails as he makes his deliveries, battles superintendents and co-workers, and endures the troubles of a low-wage public servant. But behind the humor there is seriousness. Chinaski’s relationship to his supervisor, Jonstone, whom he calls “the Stone,” demonstrates the petty unfairness that can infect any work environment, unfairness particularly insidious in blue-collar settings where economic insecurity threatens workers’ rights. Chinaski, who receives daily wages as a part-time letter carrier, files a formal complaint against Jonstone, who in turn retaliates by refusing to give Chinaski more work. The imbalance of power between boss and worker is not lost on students, one of whom offered the following observation:

Chinaski is being punished by his manager for complaining about him. Jonstone is deliberately not giving Chinaski jobs so

that he will quit. Obviously, there are jobs because all the other workers are out there working. “At 7 a.m. Jonstone swiveled again. All the other subs had been assigned jobs or been sent to other stations that needed help. ‘That’s all, Chinaski. Nothing for you today’” (16). The injustice occurs when Jonstone refuses to give Chinaski work when all the other workers are getting jobs. The job of a manager is not to be petty. Jonstone needs to talk out the problem and not be a baby about it.

*The job of the manager is not to be petty:* the student-critic succinctly locates the insight in Bukowski’s portrayal of the relationship between Chinaski and Jonstone. Chinaski is by no means an ideal worker, but it is Jonstone who escalates the tension, arbitrarily assigning the best routes to his favorite letter carriers and punishing with the longest and most difficult routes those whom he considers insufficiently subservient. Students understand this petty abuse of power – they have seen it in their own jobs, and have gone through it with their own managers.

I do not mean to imply here that students should only be taught works that speak openly to their previous experiences. Like many other instructors, I believe that there are certain texts that educated Americans should be familiar with. However, if we insist on introducing working-class students to literature and literary analysis exclusively through texts they “should” know, we run the risk of further distancing them from the academic process. Furthermore, I would argue that intellectual development, like the process of creating a powerful metaphor, comes from finding previously unexpected connections between our messy lives and texts previously made stale by decades and centuries of stodgy canonical worship behind the air-sealing glass of a “gentlemen’s academia.” In order for the educational process to be truly meaningful, students need to feel comfortable finding connections between what they already know and what they are learning in the classroom.

Bringing our own experiences to the interpretation of a text creates a fuller and more honest environment for students and professors. Sometimes, when it was necessary to explain Bukowski’s more confusing passages, I described my own working-class experiences. Reading *Factotum*, my students objected to Chinaski’s elaborate schemes to steal from his employers. Why didn’t he simply walk out the front door, they asked, hiding what he stole in a bag? To illustrate, I shared my childhood memory of my mother’s indignation about the random and humiliating searches that occurred when she and her coworkers

ended their shifts at Madame Alexander's doll factory, a practice that I also encountered when I worked there the summer after my freshman year in college. The students came to understand that some employers, assuming without evidence that their underpaid workers steal, institute "preventive" measures.

My openness about my own economic background, coupled with our critical analysis of Bukowski's novels, created a classroom environment in which students learned that knowledge drawn from their "outside" lives was not only valid but was indeed crucial to acquiring necessary academic skills. During the 2006–07 academic year, as students became more engaged with the works of Bukowski, the perceived divide between the classroom and the real world faded. Because they felt that their working-class experiences were vital to the classroom and to the overall academic process, they were more focused on improving their writing and more willing to seek and heed my assistance. Student writing, like our classroom discussions, was no longer a distant academic exercise, but came alive with vigorous insights produced by the connection between the experiences depicted within a literary work and the lived experiences recalled by the engaged reader.

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