



***CREATING EMPOWERED  
COLLEGE READERS AND WRITERS:  
A Core Text in the Linked Curriculum***

Teaching Basic English Students Using  
***Nickel and Dimed: On (not) getting by in America***  
by Barbara Ehrenreich (2001)

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## “Budgets”

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### THE ASSIGNMENT:

### Scenario #1: Serving in Boston

You are a waitress living in Boston or a surrounding suburb. You have one child (4 years old) and receive \$315 a month in support from your child’s father, who doesn’t live in the state.

As a waitress you make \$2.13 an hour plus tips. Working six days a week, three lunch shifts and three dinner shifts, you make \$375 a week total. Because your job is part-time, it does not provide you with health insurance. As part of the CHIP program, your child will be covered, but if you want coverage, you’ll have to pay out-of-pocket (roughly \$250 a month).

**Below are expenses an adult might typically have:**

Rent:

Renter’s Insurance: (usually \$20 a mo.)

Health Insurance:

Groceries (just food) per week:

Toiletries and paper goods:

Car payment: (\$150 a month for an 8-year-old Honda you recently purchased)

Car insurance:

Gas for car:

Child care:

Electric:

Phone: (in this area, Verizon charges about \$40 a month)

Long-distance:

Cable:

Internet connection:

Misc: (clothes, movies, eating out, haircuts, CDs, money for doing laundry)

1. So, given that you make \$375 weekly, you’ll need to make a monthly budget. Figure out what you can afford to spend on the above expenses. In other words, what can you get with what you make? Be realistic. (Think about whether or not you can really get someone to watch your child given the money you allot for it. Can you find an apartment given the amount you allotted for it?)
2. What expenses listed above will you need to cut? In other words, what is now a luxury in your budget that you’ll need to nix?

3. What are programs that you'll need to look into to make your situation more manageable?
4. How can you change your situation? Be specific enough to take into account any additional costs associated with the changes you propose. For example, if you intend to find a way to go to college, don't forget that it may interfere with the number of hours you'll be able to work at your waitressing job, not to mention your added costs for tuition and child care.

## Scenario #2: Holly

You are Holly from *Nickel and Dimed*. You are married and have an elderly relative living with you. Let's also assume that you are pregnant, although this isn't confirmed by the text.

You live in Portland, Maine, where efficiency apartments are roughly \$500 a month. You make \$6.65 an hour—weekly, then, you pull in \$266 (before taxes!) working a 40-hour week. For the sake of this exercise, we will assume your husband was laid off and is no longer eligible for unemployment. However, the elderly relative does collect Social Security, receiving \$600 per month.

### **Below are expenses an adult might typically have:**

Rent:

Renter's Insurance: (usually \$20 a mo.)

Health Insurance:

Groceries (just food) per week:

Toiletries and paper goods:

Car payment: The elderly relative you live with has a car that you can use. It has over 150,000 miles on it.

Car insurance:

Gas for car:

Electric:

Phone: (in this area, Verizon charges about \$40 a month)

Long-distance:

Cable:

Internet connection:

Misc: (clothes, movies, eating out, haircuts, CDs, money for doing laundry)

Savings needed for the addition of an infant: (You'll need to think about getting clothing, formula, diapers, cribs and eventually maybe child care.)

Savings:

1. So, given that you make \$266 per week, you'll need to make a monthly budget. Figure out what you can afford to spend on the above expenses. In other words, what can you get with what you make? Be realistic. (Think about if you can really get someone to watch your child given the money you allot for it. Can you find an apartment given the amount you allotted for it?)
2. What expenses listed above do you need to cut? In other words, what is now a luxury in your budget that you'll need to nix?
3. How has working on Holly's budget changed your thinking about her? Has it given you more sympathy, made you realize what she is up against? Explain.
4. Choose someone from class to read the following excerpt from Ehrenreich's book out loud:

"When someone works for less pay than she can live on—when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently—then she has made a great sacrifice for you, she has made you a gift of some part of her abilities, her health, and her life. The "working poor," as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else." (221)

What do you think Ehrenreich means by this?

In light of this exercise, do you agree or disagree with her?

**THE RESULT:**

**Scenario #1: Serving in Boston**

You are a waitress living in Boston or a surrounding suburb. You have one child (4 years old) and receive \$315 a month in support from your child’s father, who doesn’t live in the state.

As a waitress you make \$2.13 an hour plus tips. Working six days a week, three lunch shifts and three dinner shifts, you make \$375 a week total. Because your job is part-time, it does not provide you with health insurance. As part of the CHIP program, your child will be covered, but if you want coverage, you’ll have to pay out-of-pocket (roughly \$250 a month).

<b>EXPENSES</b>	<b>GROUP 1</b>	<b>GROUP 2</b>	<b>COMMENTS</b>
<b>Rent</b>	\$800	\$750	Both groups realized that to afford rent they’d need to live outside the city.
<b>Renter’s insurance</b>	\$20	\$20	Each group thought this a good investment.
<b>Health insurance</b>	\$250	None	Group 1 thought it preposterous not to have health insurance.
<b>Groceries</b>	\$80 a month!	\$100 a month!	I told students that these figures were unreasonable, but as instructed, they didn’t listen to me.
<b>Toiletries and paper goods</b>	No figure	No figure	One student said that he’d stuff napkins and toilet paper from the restaurant into his backpack.
<b>Car payment</b>	\$150	\$150	
<b>Car insurance</b>	\$120	\$100	
<b>Gas</b>	\$20 a month	\$50 a month	Group 1 thought it wise to save up for a bicycle.
<b>Child care</b>	\$90 a month	\$50 a month	Neither group knew how much to allot for this. Their figures were woefully insufficient. Many students suggested that their parents would watch their child. I noted that this was too large an assumption to make. “Your parents aren’t working? They have nothing better to do than watch your child?” I asked. One student said, “It’s tough having a kid. Daycare is a killer!”

<b>Electric</b>	\$25 a month	\$40 a month	
<b>Phone</b>	\$20 a month	\$30 a month	Both groups decided they'd purchase a cell phone. They knew quite a bit about cell phone and long distance plans.
<b>Long distance</b>	Included in cell phone plan	Included in cell phone plan	
<b>Cable</b>	\$10 a month	Too big a luxury	Group 1 thought they needed cable to get any reception at all. They argued about the \$10 a month allotment.
<b>Internet</b>	Nixed from budget	Nixed from budget	A luxury they all agreed they couldn't afford.
<b>Misc. (Clothes, movies, eating out, haircuts, CDs, money for doing laundry)</b>	\$190 a month	\$120 a month	One student commented on how fast children grow and bemoaned the amount of money allocated to the miscellaneous fund. Another said they didn't need that much because their weekend would be provided courtesy of the men they dated.
<b>Savings</b>	\$40 a month	\$255 a month	Group 1 figured out the math (total budget of \$1815). Group 2 did not.

## WR100 LAB “I AM AN ADJUNCT” ASSIGNMENT

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by Kristen Kidder

### PART I: WORKING WITH THE TEXT:

In this piece, we see that many of the problems that we credited as the sole experience of Ehrenreich’s low wage workers affect Americans with education. Consider this quote from M. Theodore Swift:

I bought the bag of lies we call the American Dream. I was intoxicated on the Nitrous Oxide idealism forced upon me in graduate school. I believed caring, working hard, doing a good job mattered and would add up to something concrete. Instead, I find myself on a wheel that turns but goes nowhere. I don’t expect that situation to change” (9).

Read back through Swift’s entire essay and in a solid, three paragraph response answer the following questions: What does the author mean by this statement? In what ways is his experience different from the low wage workers Ehrenreich encounters? If education is not necessarily the ticket out of poverty, then what, in your opinion, is? Do you think that Barbara Kingsolver (“Household Words”) would agree with the adjunct writing this essay? Please include one quote from her essay to support your opinion.

### PART II: CREATING YOUR OWN TEXT:

The style of “I am an Adjunct” is unique – the author begins each paragraph with the title phrase and then develops that paragraph into a new thought or aspect of the experience. In a one page creative essay, please do the same with one of your *work-related* roles in your own life. You can pick *any* role (I am a student, I am a Wal-Mart employee, I am a parent, etc.) After you’ve chosen your role, brainstorm all the different aspects of it and develop your thoughts into concrete paragraphs.

Try to accomplish what M. Theodore Swift does with his essay – use your everyday experience to make a statement about the nature of your work and the role that it plays in your life and in society in general. If you’re comfortable doing so, we can share the results at a later date with the rest of the class.

## ALABANZA: IN PRAISE OF HIDDEN AGENDAS

By Tracy Mendham

### THE ASSIGNMENT— A PRACTICE ESSAY EXAM:

**THIS IS NOT A REAL TEST...BUT IT IS A REAL ASSIGNMENT. (That means do it, but don't be discouraged or worried if you can't do it perfectly.)**

You have 50 minutes to write a response to the question below. Write your essay by hand in one or more of the bluebooks provided, and turn it in at the end of lab. (Students who have arranged in advance for extra time due to issues such as speaking English as a second language or learning disabilities should use the test time and the additional time before or after lab as previously arranged.)

**“How does working for a living ennoble our lives, and how does it demean us? Answer the question using references to the poem “Alabanza” by Martin Espada, and Barbara Ehrenreich’s book Nickel and Dimed.”**

You may use your book Nickel and Dimed and your copy of the poem “Alabanza,” and whatever notes or markings you have made on those texts. Otherwise, no notebooks or other books may be used. Since we are simulating actual timed writing conditions, no talking and no discussion. Complete the essay to the best of your ability without assistance.

**This is not a “real” exam**, in the sense that you won't be graded on it any differently than you are for any other lab assignment. Since it is for the practice exam, I'll be more interested in **technique than content**. **It will be like a real exam**, however, in that **you have to come in and complete the essay on your own during lab**. We won't have a discussion, and I won't come around and help you other than with very basic questions about the day's assignment.

**Usually, content (your actual ideas) is the most important thing in writing essays.** However, that's something that you're covering more thoroughly in the classroom part of WR100 with your faculty instructor. **For next week's practice exam, concentrate on the mechanics. Come up with a real idea and a real answer to the exam question, but some things that are crucial for completing this lab practice exam are:**

**Using sources.** Refer to (talk about) both "Alabanza" and Nickel and Dimed and how they relate to, or support, your ideas about whether work ennobles and demeans us. **Use paraphrases, quotes or summary, including at least one quote.** At least **one of your paragraphs must mention both texts**, and connect the two texts together somehow. If you can write one sentence that talks about both texts (and which makes sense), you're probably on the right track.

**Structure.** Show that you know how to use paragraphs, and your essay as a whole should have a beginning, middle, and end. Your essay should be several paragraphs and more than two blue book pages in length.

**Focus.** Each part of your essay should have something to do with your main idea.

**Development.** Your essay should go somewhere; the middle and end shouldn't be exactly the same as the beginning. Have a plan for how you're going to prove or illustrate your main idea, and then get there.

## ALABANZA: IN PRAISE OF HIDDEN AGENDAS

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### THE ASSIGNMENT— A PRACTICE ESSAY EXAM:

#### Excerpt from “Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100”

by Martín Espada

Alabanza. Praise the cook with a shaven head  
and a tattoo on his shoulder that said Oye,  
a blue-eyed Puerto Rican with people from Fajardo,  
the harbor of pirates centuries ago.  
Praise the lighthouse in Fajardo, candle  
glimmering white to worship the dark saint of the sea.

Alabanza. Praise the cook's yellow Pirates cap  
worn in the name of Roberto Clemente, his plane  
that flamed into the ocean loaded with cans for Nicaragua,  
for all the mouths chewing the ash of earthquakes.

Alabanza. Praise the kitchen radio, dial clicked  
even before the dial on the oven, so that music and Spanish  
rose before bread. Praise the bread.

Alabanza. Praise Manhattan from a hundred and seven flights up,  
like Atlantis glimpsed through the windows of an ancient aquarium.  
Praise the great windows where immigrants from the kitchen  
could squint and almost see their world, hear the chant of nations:  
Ecuador, México, Republica Dominicana,  
Haiti, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh.

Alabanza. Praise the kitchen in the morning,  
where the gas burned blue on every stove  
and exhaust fans fired their diminutive propellers,  
hands cracked eggs with quick thumbs  
or sliced open cartons to build an altar of cans.  
Alabanza. Praise the busboy's music, the chime-chime  
Of his dishes and silverware in the tub.

Espada, Martin. Alabanza: New and Select Poems 1982-2002. Norton: New York. Not yet published.

## ALABANZA: IN PRAISE OF HIDDEN AGENDAS

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### SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE:

#### Working for a Living

There is a lower class in any kind of society is consisted of unskilled, low education, therefore low income people. They scrub floors, wait tables, and straighten the rack at discount stores; they are waiters and waitresses, dishwashers, homekeepers...in the sight of middle class, their lives are not only kind of miracle--how can they survive through such a low income--but also a tragedy. Seldom do we think more about the significance and value of their exstance, neither of their sensation and emotion under hard conditions.

Working for a living is a hard stage of life. But it doesn't the people living in this class are more harsh or cooler. In the "Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100," a poem written by Martin Espada, the author describes the workship like "Alabanza, Praise the dish-dog, the dishwasher/who worked that morning because another dishwasher could not stop coughing..." Also in the Nickel and Dimed (which is written by Barbara Ehrenreich), the author, who is doing a survey about the lives of poor people and she herself practices the same level life, refers to her experience of working in a hotel called Jerry's. She says, after a period getting familiar with each other, "we form a reliable mutual-support group: if one of us is feeling sick or overwhelmed, another one will 'bev' a table or even carry trays for her. If one of us is off sneaking a cigarette or a pee, the others will do their best to conceal her absence from the enforcers of corporate rationality." (37) It's good description of the workship: the natural emotion hasn't been run out even under the torment of life. In a sense, working class ma classes may be warmer and care for each other more than the higher class. Their behavior ennobles their life.

Furthermore, the low income work may not be as horrible as we imagine. In "Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100," the author depicts the work in a kitchen like "Praise the kitchen radio, dial clicked/even before the dial on the oven, so that music and Spanish/rose before bread. Praise the bread. Alabanza." Or another version, "Praise the waitress who heard the radio in the kitchen/and sang to herself about a man gone. Alabanza" Simple but real happiness rises up from these sentences. Who said that only enough money can bring happiness and pleasures? Who said workforce is too naive to understand the essence of life? Work is always being respectful.

But it doesn't mean that working for a living is ideal and good enough for middle class who pursue the simple lives. In Nickel and Dimed the author tells us they are being told that "the lockers in the break room and whatever is in them can be searched at any time." (P 23) That rule will cause big-trouble if it is thrown on the middle class group but it seems so natural toward them. Maybe it is too common to them and they don't regard it as a big deal. Maybe they just don't have the time and money arguing with the manager. But in a country having a glorious history of human right, is this kind of violation of privacy a mistreatment toward working force? Working for a living can't demean anyone, the attitude toward working-for-a living class demeans us really.

Therefore, working for a living ennobles our life in the sense of creating warmer emotions and ample work itself. Meanwhile, it may demean us if we are being treated in wrong way.

## ALABANZA: IN PRAISE OF HIDDEN AGENDAS

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### SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE:

...Concerning the values of work, we cannot just put our value on money. Self-satisfaction or a sense of achievement through working is a valuable thing that makes our lives important. Barbara recalls the moments of glory when she got her own tasks finished fast enough that she was able to lighten the load on other, and Barbara says she felt good about that. Feeling good is worthy to work for.

In "Alabanza," Martin praises holiness of working. He praises the working people such as busboy and cook with tattoos. Here I could feel active and vibrant atmosphere in working. These are the essential things that make our lives beautiful.

### SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE:

After nineteen years of life I have worked for four different organizations with jobs ranging from waiter, to community service, to hardware retail. Work gives me a sense of self-accomplishment, knowing that I've worked hard and done something positive with my day. Whether I've enjoyed my time at these establishments or not, I always feel a sense of pride when I take the boots off my tired feet at the end of the day. I cannot think of any other aspect of my life that has the ability to cause me so much pleasure or pain without the feeling of regret associated with it. In both "Alabanza," a poem by Martin Espada, and Nickel and Dimed, a book by Barbara Ehrenreich, the reader can see a similar sense of pride amongst workers who do not have typically enjoyable jobs.

...The poem "Alabanza" reminds me of experiences I had working at a restaurant three years ago. This poem is a salute to the workers in the restaurant on the top of the World Trade Center who were killed in the terrorist attacks. These people maintained their origins and pride no matter what they faced in their everyday lives. Martin Espada writes "Praise the dish-dog, the dishwasher who worked that morning because another dishwasher could not stop coughing, or because he needed overtime to pile the sacks of rice and beans for a family floating away on some Caribbean Island plagued by frogs." The human spirit and desire to survive and prosper amongst these people is truly inspiring. My co-workers at Vinny Testa's, who were mostly foreign, came in everyday and worked their hardest all day to support loved ones. These types are the truly noble people, though they may never get acknowledged.

I attempt to live my life free of regret by trying to do my best to be content with whatever I'm doing, wherever I'm doing it. I try to incorporate this into my worklife as well. The people we've read about in both Nickel and Dimed and "Alabanza" seem to share this with me. They all take pride in what they do and they all have a sense of motivation behind them. Their work ethic and approach to life are truly noble.

## “Selling in Minnesota” Anger and Influence

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“Respect for the individual” is where we, the associates, come in, because as vast as Walmart is, and as tiny as we may be as individuals, everything depends on us.

*Nickel and Dimed* (2001); p. 144

There is a natural progression that takes place in developmental writing courses in which the essay topics and way of assessing finished pieces of student writing undergo noticeable changes in the last third of the semester. We are looking for more complete developed essays that reflect careful planning and multiple revisions, as well as a more sophisticated understanding of the texts that have been read and discussed throughout the class. It sometimes happens that students who have been “cruising along” with relative ease and making progress in revision of their earlier drafts may suddenly stop improving, and even seem to slide backward. I wonder if we as teachers are partially at fault in this pattern of backsliding, because we do often feel a rushed sense of urgency and concern to finish the “serious work” that by necessity happens near the end of our courses, and we may transmit this to our students in the form of stress or “cracking down” on our stragglers.

I observe the same sense of stalled progress and the force of change becoming overwhelming in the last major section of Barbara Ehrenreich’s self-imposed writing assignment in *Nickel and Dimed*. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that she really starts to doubt whether it will possible to finish the month that she spends working at Walmart in Minnesota. Working in a very low paying job at Walmart and searching almost endlessly for barely safe, tolerable housing in a major urban area are fundamentally different from the other jobs and living places she took on in the previous sections of the book. The pressure is much more intense and the conditions at the store are completely dehumanizing. Walmart symbolizes for Ehrenreich and for me as a reader the “guts” of our destructive post-modern service economy. It leaves almost everyone who touches it feeling weak and tainted in a very pervasive way.

As I prepared to discuss *Nickel and Dimed* and particularly “Selling in Minnesota,” with other college faculty members who bear some responsibility for teaching “the core” of a general education curriculum, I was forcibly reminded that there is no real “undisputed territory” in American higher ed today. What brings this to mind is the way in which many students become enraged and disgusted when they read *Nickel and Dimed* but NOT at the callous employers or the sometimes brutal workplace inequalities; instead they HATE the book itself and its author:

This book was a load of crap and I hope that more people will realize that. Barbara was trying to make herself look good by doing this "experiment" and I don't buy one bit of it. Why doesn't anyone else see how stereotypical and ludicrous this book is????

The reason I will not have such misfortune is that I am not a whining, parasitic, perpetually defeatist nincompoop like many of Ms. Ehrenreich's apparent fans. You are probably all fans of the mendacious Michael Moore, too, I would venture to guess. I feel pity for all the stupid people who hang on his every word.

I agree this book freaking sucked. I'm tired of this ultra liberal bullshit about the rich oppressing the poor. In addition to all of this, she is a terrible writer, who does not deserve any of the credit she has been receiving. She thinks she is better than the rest of us because she spent a few weeks in a low paying job. I'm a busser at a restaurant and I make a hell of a lot more than the numbers she's been spiting out in the book, and servers make a lot more than me. There's nothing wrong with working toward a living wage, but doing it through a half assed undercover report is not going to help anyone. Another thing is the fact that many of the people in these jobs slacked off in school and did not put the time and effort into it. I work hard at my job and at school and its not my fault that you were too busy getting drunk off your ass all of the time to do a little work. Next thing you know you've failed all of your classes and people call you a dumb ass behind your back. So shit, now its your own fault that you suck at life.

I'm not foolish enough to expect that college students will all gratefully embrace Barbara Ehrenreich's passionate narrative, or take the facts of her harrowing odyssey at face value. The Walmart portion of *Nickel and Dimed* is frequently the least popular with these angry students. Of course, just as Ehrenreich is told that her sole focus must be on pleasing customers, ironically we teachers must also negotiate the sometimes bizarre expectations of our "customers" or students. Many episodes of narrow carping and sullen disinterest have marred my hard-won sense of classroom community over the years, and challenging, disturbing reading selections have a way of driving less engaged students into a frenzy of anti-"PC" vituperation.

When we ask ourselves honestly what we are about in teaching (especially in community colleges), we sometimes claim that we are in the business of actually transforming the lives of our students. It is an audacious mission, and I shudder to imagine what it would really require of us. This is because close to 50% of the students at Mass Bay leave after one or two semesters. In this context, the backlash against *Nickel and Dimed* is predictable and depressing. Apparently, it is still not OK in 2004 America to think that working 50-60 hours a week should earn you enough money for housing, food, health care etc.

Developmental reading and writing students asked to describe their experiences in high school sometimes say that it was a "joke." We could say the same of the working conditions that Barbara Ehrenreich found in the minimum wage jobs that she briefly held while writing *Nickel and Dimed*. In reading the book it becomes clear that employers make strong efforts to eliminate independent thinking and efforts by workers to empower themselves. This intentional quashing of employees' spirits and intellect is similar in many ways to the increasing standardization and "teaching to the test" of most public high school curricula. The blatant discrimination, routine harassment and random violence that characterize many workplaces are also tragically present in both high schools and colleges.

This is a big problem, for which all of our talk about "transforming lives" suddenly seems ill-suited. *Nickel and Dimed* won't magically make our students more understanding about poverty and inequality. They already understand a lot about them, sometimes more than we do.

But the furor aroused by *Nickel and Dimed* goes well beyond the "This book sucked" brand of criticism. Many articulate students are convinced that it is a con or a vanity project whose writer is simply mocking her "subjects," while others apparently believe that being poor is in itself proof of diminished mental capacity or moral worth. And of course, the fact that this book is ASSIGNED in their college writing courses becomes a huge symbol of how liberal academics are trying to

brainwash their victimized free-market-believing students with discredited socialist dogma. How Ehrenreich's honest self-criticism and reflective portraits of her complex relationships with her co-workers fit into these cartoon-like schemas has never been explained to my satisfaction, but that hasn't stopped the relentless bashing of many message board posters and David Horowitz-esque pundits.

Do poverty and injustice not shame us as Americans? Are we blind to clear evidence that our national myths of self-reliance and opportunity are a hoax on the most vulnerable in some cases? Going back to the early 1980's, what made Americans ready to accept the slapped-together anecdotes about welfare queens told by Ronald Reagan? I have lived through many years of "conservative" propaganda, culminating in the Bill Clinton impeachment, Enron, the phony search for WMD in Iraq, and the Catholic church child molestation scandal. At every turn, I have been astounded and appalled at the lack of interest in the public for real, grounded reform of our corrupt institutions. This includes colleges and universities, of course. I know that *Nickel and Dimed* has actually broken through some of these conceptual and socially constructed (but very real) barriers, because I have read the heart wrenching messages of agreement and affirmation from readers whose life does now or has before resembled that of Joan or Holly or Alyssa. But the young and the uneducated (especially males) often still angrily deny that the book offers any truth or value at all.

We professors seem unwilling or unable to directly attack these warped perceptions. It is presumptuous to say to a lower middle class white male, "You are uninformed and unable to recognize that this IS reality for millions of your fellow citizens." We don't relish being accused of elitism or liberal utopian daydreaming. Just wanting to be an effective, unbiased teacher is a worthy goal. But here's the rub: the politics never go away, whether we admit it or not. Teaching is both a job and a vocation, so there is pressure to conform to "progressive" norms within the academy. This is a curious place where most opinions should be respected and marginalized voices given a chance to be heard, but indeed where the term "marketplace of ideas" has acquired ominous new meanings. We are in the business of changing lives, and there are many angry, fearful people who bitterly resent this possibility. Moreover, many gargantuan cultural mouthpieces in the background absolutely do not want this boat rocked anymore. Their manipulation and insincere sympathy for the outraged "common man" forms the hard box in which both teachers and learners often find ourselves trapped, arrows drawn, advancing at shadows.

## “What *was* the point?”

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### **THE ASSIGNMENT:**

In the following two pages, you will see first the assignment to which students are responding, and then selections from several of the letters. Since I can often already see what students have gained in skill, I am usually more interested in what they perceive they have gained. It is not unusual for me to discover that they have learned something entirely different from what I thought I was teaching. It is this space—between what I thought I taught and what they thought they learned—that teaches me the most every semester about how to teach my students, really, and why. Miguel is an example of that in the following pages, when he writes “Solving budgets for different characters from the Nickel and Dimed book for me was fun. It made me think about a budget for myself.” My intent for that exercise was first to give students practice in managing a group discussion—which they did admirably—and second to provide a means for them to understand some of the background work Ehrenreich undertakes in this project (and, by extension, the sort of work they might undertake themselves for a research project, for example). Certainly, their personal budgets do not ordinarily enter the realm of possibility as a goal for my lab, but the fact that at least one student considered applying the lesson to his own circumstances must be counted as a benefit.

## **“What was the point?”**

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### **Letter Writing Assignment**

You have spent 15 weeks in lab (if you haven't missed any time), so you can consider yourself a pro at WR100 labs. The following assignment requires you to use the knowledge you've gained and reflect on the course.

Please type a letter addressed to next semester's WR100 Lab students. The letter must be a minimum of 250 words, which is at least one full page, typed, double-spaced. In thoughtful, well-written paragraphs, please address **all questions in at least 3** of the following categories. You may choose to do more (great!), and you may also address any other aspect of the course you do not see listed below but wish to write about.

#### **If I Knew Then....**

- What do you know now that you wish you knew before you started?
- What would you do differently, if you had to take the class again?

#### **Reading and Writing Advice....**

- What would you tell a new WR100 lab student about the reading assignments? (In general, since they may not have the same ones you did)
- What advice would you give for a student who's just been handed a first writing assignment (again, not necessarily the same one you had)?

#### **Classroom Atmosphere and Instructor Expectations....**

- What would you suggest to a new student concerning their conduct in lab? (Any advice about attendance, tardiness, participation, classroom materials, etc.)
- What did you perceive the instructor expected of you?

#### **A Balancing Act....**

- How much time outside of lab do you think new students should expect to spend on their assignments? Explain.
- If you have taken WR100 and WR100L along with other courses this semester, has it been easy/hard for you to balance your course load?

#### **Other Resources....**

- If you have been to the Reading/Writing Center, please explain what it is like. What should a student expect from going there? Is it easy to get an appointment with a learning specialist? Should next semester's students consider checking it out?

**I learned....**

- What did you learn from this course? Be specific.
- What skills do you expect to be able to take to other courses after this? (Don't limit yourself to English and Writing, here! If you need a reminder, here's a list of several of the skills/strategies/techniques you may have gained from this lab: reading and annotating skills; summarizing; writing scratch/backward outlines; working with audience and voice; finding your focus/thesis; timed writing strategies; practicing and evaluating timed writings; and all those wonderful group-work skills!)
- What would you wish for next year's students?

## “What was the point?”

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### Student Responses

**From Miguel**, who treated everyone in the class respectfully, even, or especially, when disagreeing (his was the sole voice of reason on rent costs during budget discussions):

“To the class of the following semester, heed these words of advice that I am going to give you....

If I knew then what I know now, I would read more than is expected of me. You’re reading to learn from these books. There is some sort of lesson to be learned or experience to be shared from reading these books. You don’t understand how some people live their lives struggling to just get by with the wages they make in America today. I work in a restaurant, and compared to how most of these people were working, I realized how grateful I should be with my job, because the most I could say about them is maybe about their medical benefits. *Nickel and Dimed* was a really good book for me because working in those kinds of situations myself I can say sometimes they can really stress you out. ...

As for your conduct in class, it’s very important for a student to speak in class discussions. It helps open the door for discussion amongst students. They can share ideas, and maybe point something out to someone which that person didn’t see in the beginning or vice versa. Another thing I liked about our class were the critical thinking worksheets. Solving budgets for different characters from the *Nickel and Dimed* book for me was fun. It made me think about a budget for myself. ...

In ending this, I leave you, the student, to a final thought. Be very open to discussion in this class. Read your book. Participate in class. Show up on time and just be ready for class and everything else will be fine. You will be surprised how much you can accomplish in this class.”

**From Sheree**, who suggested WIC for Holly during the budget discussion, and then explained to the rest of the class (mostly young men) what exactly that was:

“... It may be hard sometimes, but you have to speak up. You can really help out your group that way, and probably your grade too. You can’t think that what you know doesn’t matter,

because you could be the only one who has the answer. I found out that people didn't know as much as I thought they did about different things, even if they were better writers than I was...."

**From Tim**, a self-identified former football player who surprised himself as much as anyone else by liking the book—and passing it along:

"...The reading assignments are not as horrible as you think they will be. The book was so good that I got my father to read it, and he loves it. ... If I knew before I took this class that creating a thesis statement is easier than it seems, then I probably would have written some great papers. ... For your first writing assignment, don't get discouraged. Just relax and let yourself flow, but not without starting off with a strong thesis statement...."

**From Joe**, whose conservative tendencies probably made me as nervous as my liberal tendencies made him:

"I know when you enter this class you'll be a little nervous, as I felt when I first started here. In fact, the first day of class gave me a breath of relief as I learned I was going to be fine....Most of the work is done in class, so class attendance is crucial to getting the material done and passing the class. Some of the material worked on in here can actually be fun. It takes some creativity to establish a good paper, and this class brings out an entrepreneurial spirit in people. ... The book is good, and if you like it you can talk to the instructor and find other things to read too. ..." (Joe and I had many conversations about education, economic conditions, politics, and policy. By semester's end, he had begun outside readings on his own, including *Invasion: How America Still Welcomes Terrorists, Criminals, and Other Foreign Menaces to Our Shores* by Michelle Malkin, and one of my recommendations, *Coyotes: A Journey Through the Secret World of America's Illegal Aliens* by Ted Conover.)

## Student Essay

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by Edna Duarte

### *Take Me With You Ms. Ehrenreich*

From a philosophy-biological angle I believe that the things that motivate people in general to make the choice they do, are not conscious as much as they are unconscious. Based in “A Theory of Human Motivation” by Abraham Maslow I believe that almost all of the choices made by people are determined by Basic Needs instead of motivated by them, as he wrote, and the things motivate people to choose are unconscious and metaphysical.

People develop and learn based on their needs, and needs are infinite. In a hierarchical pyramid by the psychologist Abraham Maslow, he presents: Physiological Needs, Safety Needs, Love Needs, Esteem Needs and Self-Actualization Needs that are motivation to make choices. From the moment that we need something, the need by itself is a sign that we in some moment of our life we experienced something like it. Even though we do not know the name, there is present in us an idea or feeling of its existence. For example, there is time that we want to eat something but we do not know what it is. We say like: “I want to eat something, but I do not know what it is.” From that point, people might choose and act. It might be conscious or not, the behavior of opening the refrigerator and looking inside; that is why I say that it is determined by needs. This person might be hungry in that moment; giving a book to him/her is not going to resolve the problem. However, what motivates that person to choose whether or not to open the refrigerator to look for food is unconscious.

Four years ago I decided to drop from University in my country to move to the USA to study English, hoping to do my PhD in an English speaking country later. It took me two months to drop

and to finish a six year relationship that I was in. I was a healthy and dreamy 22 year-old girl, in the fourth year of Psychology full-time course, glad of my results, with a clinic already bought by my boyfriend as a gift. I was full of energy and on the track to achieve many goals. About my hands, they were soft, and delicate, the type that could be confused with a baby's face.

The same week that I got here, I started working two full time jobs. I started working in a restaurant, making a hundred salads per hour during the night and cleaning houses during the day for seven days a week. Thinking back, these kinds of jobs are culturally a job that almost all Brazilians do in U.S. I did not choose to get these jobs, but I chose to leave them. On Saturday afternoon when the restaurant had waiting list of people waiting and I was making five salads at the same time while my order machine was jumping on the balcony and throwing up ordering and ordering, when unexpectedly I stopped to listen. The light was getting farther and farther from my eyes, my voice was not coming out—I was getting crazy. When I regained consciousness, I was being tied up on a medical trolley with a dozen of doctors, nurses, paramedics and firemen around me, and I insistently telling them: “Please do not tie me, I’m a psychologist; that can hurt my inner self.” In the hospital after passing by different doctors a psychologist gave me the diagnosis: confusion and sadness. And after this moment I started asking myself; what did motivate me to move to here and accept this life of sacrifice?

What motivated me to move from my country is still unclear; however, my choice I realized later. I was missing love. My physiological needs were satisfied; for example, I was able to buy food and medicine and I was healthy. The safety needs were satisfied too; the environment that I was living in was safe, no fear of war, disease, crime waves, etc. So, since I was satisfied with my boyfriend, and short time far from my family, the Love Need was gratified too, followed by the Esteem needs that were demonstrated by my results as a successful student. But, something was wrong; I was not happy for some reason. After a couple of years the fourth need, “Esteem Needs”

was dropping. Both the physiological and the safety needs were fairly well gratified, but then emerged the love and affection, and belongingness needs. I was by myself in a far away state with a boyfriend that no longer I was in love with.

Once here (USA) “Love was gratified” by being close to my family, but another need surged in detriment of the job that I was doing, the “Esteem Needs.” Cleaning houses was the most unpleasant job. My sister was going to move to Brazil and she offered me continue to clean the houses. Well, the money was very attractive. Although it was a good salary, my experience of cleaning houses was depressing for me. Barbara Ehrenreich, in Nickel and Dimed, shows a similar experience. In her book she describes how she did as a low-wage worker. As a cleaner, a person is an invisible individual, and almost all the time avoided by the owners of the houses. There were houses that I never saw their inhabitants, they might feel hostile or contemptuous toward the house cleaners as Ehrenreich points out when her workmate answered: “They think we’re stupid” (99). Once I was cleaning a refrigerator when I saw a picture of Sigmund Freud on it. I exclaimed his name, probably I was missing his theory, when somebody behind me started screaming: “Sig, Sig. . . oh my God. . . Sig, Sig. . .” And her Sig got in the kitchen, “What is going on with you Paula, are you ok?” She did not scare me exactly because I was used to her hysterical behavior. But I felt miserable with her comment. She said: “Sig, she knows that he is Freud.” And he asked me how. I told them that I studied “Sig” for just four straight years. And they got so proud. Excuse me, they got proud because by now I know where “Sig” came from, from Sigmund Freud, and that is the name of Mr. Whose house I used to clean. Among everyday situation, once my workmate was cleaning the floor on her knees when Mr. X put the check for the cleaning in her pocket without her knowledge. She told him in her poor English, “Not good. No want. . . me talk to your wife.” She would like to say that he wasn’t allowed to behave like that and if it occurs again she will report it to his wife. He apologized to her and left as if nothing had happened. Her language was not enough to tell him how ridiculous and

unacceptable it was to see a sexually frustrated man touching her because he could not stand behind a woman with her knees and hands on the floor. As Ehrenreich says, “But it is this primal posture of submission—and what is ultimately anal accessibility—that seems to gratify the consumers of maid services” (84). And my workmate cried, this young and beautiful woman cried for the rest of the day. She felt as a prostitute, physically and psychologically affected, and she could not even defend herself. As a result of these feeling and situations that occur everyday in this job, even though the money was very considerable (the house cleaners own the “schedule” I mean, do not work for companies, and clean around three houses per day) I could not take it. It was a punishment; I was feeling depressed, worthless, passive, and helpless, was missing work with my mind. My self-esteem was low, and I was getting very depressed.

I decided to go back to Brazil; I was tired of being a nobody. Though I was gratified physiologically, safety and love were not enough. Something crossed my fate and changed my decision to go. A friend of mine invited me to work in a factory which was going to sponsor its employees for green card. That could be a good opportunity to become a permanent resident in U.S.; that would present the opportunity to go to university, get a real job, work with my real and enjoyable skills, and also get my self-esteem back again. I chose to take this job and enroll myself in this sponsorship. I believe that there is a price in life. I have been working in this factory for almost three years, and I cannot leave until I get my green card. Each time when I get inside I pray to God to keep my ears and mouth closed. The factory is a place where whatever leaves your mouth, if is not in the interest of increasing the production, somebody who hears it can use that against you. There are ridiculous rules, such as no chatting with fellow employees even when there was a quiet time or when you were working side-by-side. I think rules like that are to prevent unionization. In this job, you really check your civil rights at the door when you go. But your freedom of speech, forget about freedom. We are assemblers, and any kind of privacy or rights are all gone when you enter there. It is

a totalitarian state where you have rules, where you are being watched, where you are punished for little things, and you never can demonstrate any opinion, because they understand that as disrespect for your “leader.” People there, I believe, are in the general sense good. Most of them are mothers and fathers with no higher education and each one with his own history of suffering. They are low-wage workers, working ten to twelve hours day, using their all strength to do the job without stop. If they answered another person, they have to make sure that their hands are moving. They are not friends; they are afraid of losing their job and as a result that way every one can become an enemy. Some people can only satisfy themselves by making another person unhappy. For example, I work with three women. One tried suicide twice because her ex-husband always was cheating on her; she is 32, fat, and has four kids. The other also is 32, four kids, fat and her biggest concern is if her husband goes out with another woman. The last one, I really like, is a 42 year old sweet woman with many problems. The other two told her a month ago that her husband is cheating on her with the girl from the office who is young, skinny, and beautiful. That lady has been crying all night long, and the other two make sure to start the discussion all over again. They know that my boyfriend is living far from me, and since that time they have been telling me that I’m too skinny, and that my boyfriend is unfaithful,

“ . . . el esta apretando la carnita de otra muchacha porque tu eres muy flaquita y a los hombres les gusta las mujeres así como nosotras.” These situations seem to compare to Ehrenreich’s experience when she says “she’s good to work with but she’ll stab you in the back. [ . . . ] In fact, watch out for everyone, because the place feeds on gossip [ . . . ] ” (64,65).

Why do I not leave? Conforming Maslow’s Theory we understand by knowing that Self-Esteem is missing; probably it is time to make a decision, a choice to leave and do something else. That is the point, I do not take Maslow’s Theory as a motivation, but as a determinant to make choices. But what really motivates us to make a decision, a choice, is beyond the human

comprehension. Baruch Spinoza, philosopher of the XVII century, said that the supreme law of reality is need, but what motivates the human to choose and act goes beyond the reality, beyond the human comprehension. In a confused way of thinking about motivation, I believe that there are many unconscious determinants to make us make a choice, and determinants rather than motivation, are the primary force for our choice. What motivates human to choose is metaphysical; unfortunately I'm not in the position to explain its sort in these short pages, and if I would be I was going to be very close to God.

The author of the book, Nickel and Dime, said in her introduction that she “ [ . . . ] wasn't working for the money, [she] was doing research for an article and later a book” (8). She has a PhD in Biology; why not do research in her field? What motivated her to make the choice she did? I might venture to say that what determined her to have this experience is what Maslow would have considered the sixth need; “The Desires to Know and To Understand.” Since I understood in her book that she was well gratified in other needs even in “The Need for Self-Actualization,” that refers to the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for her to become actualized in what she is potentially good in. She wanted to acquire knowledge. Now, what motivated, or in my opinion determined her this project, may be an unconscious need of experiencing her family history. “My sister has been through one low-paid job after another. [ . . . ] My husband [ . . . ] a \$4.50 –an-hour warehouse worker. [ . . . ] My father had been a copper miner [ . . . ]” (2).

I cannot explain what motivates humans; I have been for years trying to understand this subject, and I do not want to write just to respond to an assignment. My wish to understand what motivates human in their choices is taking me to a metaphysical world that until now has just brought me questions. But I can tell you about my hands that one day were soft, today they look grotesque, old, painful, stressed; I cannot even feel the softness of a baby's face that once I compared my hands

with. Actually, I'm jealous of Barbara Ehrenreich. At the end of her book she explains to her coworkers that it is not her life, that she is a writer and she was doing research, and it was time to go. Someday, I will be saying the same to my coworkers. It is no longer my life, and it is time to go. But, while this time has not yet come, I feel like asking Ms. Ehrenreich, "Please, Ms. Ehrenreich take me with you!"

#### Works Cited

Ehrenreich, Barbara. Nickel and Dimed. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001.