

Ehren Helmut Pflugfelder: Teaching To A Different Crowd

"Teaching to a Different Crowd: A Working-Class Studies Syllabus in Progress"

Ehren Helmut Pflugfelder

Purdue University

Working-Class Studies spends a great deal of energy discussing the pedagogy of teaching to the working classes. But how do we teach working-class studies to those who largely are not in the working class, who may be ambivalent about the value of the field, and who very well may be antagonistic to the basic tenants of working-class studies? How do we teach to those students who have implicit beliefs in social Darwinism or to those who believe the struggles for racial, gender and economic equality are over? What pedagogy do we have for instructing those who consider Libertarianism the pinnacle of political philosophy and who believe that a powerful global economy, like Thomas Friedman suggests, will flatten the future economic landscape? I was, until recently, an adjunct instructor at a very selective, private research university where there are a number of largely upper class students who come from suburban, frequently private, high schools who hold these beliefs. They principally believe what their parents believe and haven't been challenged to consider the consequences of their still-forming ideologies. Though many of us do not teach entire classes of these students, we have all told stories to our colleagues, relating an incident in class where a freshman student has proposed an idea that has left us nearly speechless and perhaps slightly horrified. I have had more than one student express their concern in class over the degeneration of society from, in all seriousness, "stupid people breeding uncontrollably." While we should always be concerned with these scenarios and equip ourselves with sound teaching techniques available so that we may effectively deal with them, the fact remains that many humanities instructors teaching working-class issues or cultural studies find classes unreceptive and unwilling to consider the value of such inquiry. I currently find myself facing a similar scenario, albeit of my own making, because I have proposed a freshman and sophomore-level class on Cleveland's working-class history. I am betting that using local history in coordination with working-class studies will coerce hesitant students to accept some of the principal tenants of cultural studies and give them the tools to make interventions in their community. I hope to explain my rationale for including certain materials and activities, as well as explain the purpose and context in which the course will be taught.

Judging by the title, it is safe to assume that I am looking toward A People's History of the United States as a model for the kind of thinking and writing students will accomplish and the methodology with which we'll approach the topics. I may have high hopes regarding the level of writing possible in this class, but it is only fair to start with high expectations---from my experience at this university, many students are capable of doing difficult work when they care enough. Though I will refrain from specifics, this particular school presents a unique challenge for the instructor of working-class studies. It is a university whose undergraduate population is comprised largely of engineering and science-focused students. Nearly 70% of the

undergraduate population seek majors in Engineering/Computer Science, Science/Mathematics, or PreMed/PreDent/PreLaw, while just over 10% have chosen a humanities major. The students are exceptional achievers in high school, too, with the average SAT score at around 1340 and the average ACT score around 29. These are remarkable statistics and most students know that they are capable of impressive standardized test scores and high grades. In order to challenge these students more, the university has decided to integrate a new system of intensive writing classes designed to replace English composition classes and place students within a seminar-type environment. Students take several classes on a variety of topics, frequently visiting local institutions, while being taught from a wide variety of university faculty and community leaders. The program, still in its infancy, has received both praise and criticism, but the university is fully behind the project. The class I proposed, then, will attempt to be a seminar-based class---one where students are responsible for much of the conversation and much of the learning environment. The role of the instructor is that of a conversation facilitator and discussion leader; the classroom is frequently de-centered, and students are asked to shoulder some of the workload and lead class, engage in group work, and create informative presentations.

Because many of the students in this university tend toward the science-based professions, many are frequently critical of the humanities and regard the work done in the respective fields as inconsequential and lacking rigor. I could suggest that the logical positivism of science-based professions has increased the difficulty of teaching culturally-based theories, but it may be that these students are goal-oriented and quite focused on their career objectives. Though we have experienced students who refuse to keep an open mind and frequently, though unintentionally, remind us that our classes are low on their priority list, when classes are, for example, over 80% engineering majors, we're presented with unique challenges. How do we convince students that what we're teaching is both worthwhile and useful and that the methods we use for investigation are critical, though these methods may suggest a radical departure from students' current ways of thinking? I believe that a few of the answers lie in how we teach this material. In a science-based research institution with a student population as I have described, few instructors would instigate a full-court press of radical literature and expressly political perspectives. Students would pull away as if they were burned. I have seen colleagues perform similar maneuvers and accomplish little more than the creation of considerable resentment. The radical pedagogies of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux are not as appropriate here as they may be in another context. I would like to incite students to action and give them real-life perspectives upon which they can reflect and change their immediate environment, but I also understand that these students' situations do not have the same political immediacy as working-class students. Far from scorching minds, I would rather educate students to understand the reality of the situation which is occurring in the very same city where they attend school. Giroux does believe that schools, as political institutions, need to employ political pedagogies that give students a grasp on what society has given them and what they can do with such a position. For a cultural studies and working-

class pedagogy to be effective, it needs to conduct work on identity formation within multiple contexts and needs to take on an affective pedagogy, one that deals with the material existences and popular realms in which students find themselves. In short, though some of the more radical pedagogies may not be appropriate, there are tenants to their philosophies which are highly useful for my own project and for those in like teaching environments.

Sherry Lee Linkon's *Teaching Working Class* promotes taking classes off of campus and investigating sites of working-class culture; Lawrence Grossberg and Henry Giroux are highly concerned with creating contexts for students so that the reality of the cultural situations are represented and students are encouraged to engage in enacting real change. Though my focus is slightly different than what these authors have suggested, I feel it is equally valid and perhaps more digestible for students who are learning what it feels like to be part of a disempowered culture and have an immediate need for social and political change. The general scope of this class is to evaluate the transition of a region, in this case Cleveland, and explore competing narratives of history and change. We will be investigating the general theme of "from rust belt to rock hall," because Cleveland is portrayed as a working-class town that is growing up and facing the challenges of new industry. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, with its big glass pyramid, is marketed as symbol of a modern Cleveland--- one that recognizes tradition, but also stands as the gleaming example of the city's potential. Not represented in this narrative are the workers that make Cleveland into what it currently is, both good and bad. I hope that through our class discussions and analyses of context, history, and cultural sites, we'll be able to complicate this narrative and perhaps develop alternative ones.

A major part to challenging students' assumed narratives and opinions lies in teaching the areas of conflict and welcoming conflict in the classroom. A working-class studies pedagogy should not be wary of investigating conflict, but should embrace it, which is why I front-loaded the syllabus with texts that should challenge students, not with radical ideologies, but with opinion pieces (Ehrenreich) and well-researched analyses (Loewen). I do not want students to carry beliefs in social Darwinism or "achieved universal equality" too far into this class, because such beliefs could disrupt their ability to receive more complex theories and investigate local history. Hopefully, performing Cleveland history will help students grasp a clearer understanding of the reality of disenfranchised groups, because the history and context are literally in their backyard. Reading, analyzing, and doing local history will create immediacy without shocking students with (what they may perceive as) radical ideology. I want to make the context of the working classes my student's context as well, so that they may be encouraged to perform interactive community involvement. I am not sure whether this pedagogical move is too subtle or whether students will be encouraged to care about an environment which may be far removed from their home, but I am banking on the power of the history, the immediacy of the locations, the dynamics of the institutions we'll visit, and my own excitement about the project. I may also be treading a thin line between repulsion

and attraction as well; I do not want to coddle any grotesque opinions, nor do I want to repel students with insistent rhetoric.

Of course, this class is further complicated by my own outsider status; I am not from Cleveland and have only lived here for about two years. I think rather than presenting a problem, this creates an opportunity. Like many of the students, I will be confronting these contexts and histories for the first time. The analysis that I use to investigate the sites of working-class culture will not incorporate any special knowledge of Cleveland history and I will not have a great store of knowledge from which to draw; I should be in the same boat as the students using the same methods of investigation. With any luck, students will perceive this situation as a lively experiment and understand that we are creating knowledge together, as a seminar class, rather than, say, being lectured to about the importance of class difference. Along with the context of the investigations, students will be responsible for bringing their own contexts into the classroom. And because of my deficiency in Cleveland history and culture, I will rely on students from the areas as well as experts within the community to fill in some of the missing information and act as guest speakers. Local authors, journalists, history professors, community leaders, and cultural studies professors have agreed to work with me on this project and have lent their support and assistance to the class. Without their assistance, the class would certainly lose a measure of personality and interaction.

Doing Field (Trips) Work

Included in this class are a number of outside field trips to community institutions and neighborhoods. We will visit institutions as scheduling permits, but I doubt we can accurately discuss some of the locations of Cleveland's history without visiting where the history took place and is still being formed. These visits will be more than just field trips, because students will be gaining exposure to the critical background of working-class and cultural studies and will carry out small assignments in the field. We'll also integrate the trips into our class discussion and I will encourage students to use the institutions as research sources for their essays.

The *Western Reserve Historical Society* will be a major source for research in local history, and currently provide a tour entitled, "**Millionaires' Row: The Legacy of Euclid Avenue,**" which we'll use to examine both the wealthy and the working-class perspective. The film *Will Work for Food*, filmed entirely in Cleveland was shown in 2004 at the *Cleveland International Film Festival*, which typically features home-grown films---if scheduling permits, we'll attend a locally made film. Near the end of class, with some help, I will attempt to give a walking tour of our university and the surrounding neighborhoods. We are lucky enough to have more than one small community enclave within walking distance, so we will map out a route and see what signs of working-class culture we can unearth and analyze.

Straight from the Source

In getting students to confront their own perceptions of working-class culture, and culture in general, I have also included what I'm calling "Peer Poll" assignments. These assignments will ask students to go out into their peer community and ask a number of people a question that relates to the work we are doing in any given week. The questions are shaped in order to give students an understanding of how their community considers issues of class, economics, history and politics. Students will also be asked to confront their own work histories as well as the communities they knew while growing up. After students accomplish an assignment, they will share the results in class, and where necessary, tabulate responses. This information will be used as a class database, from which we can draw information for future assignments. The Peer Poll assignments will also frequently have a writing component in the form of a journal entry which asks students to confront their own beliefs about the topic. The rationale for this work is twofold: students will gain valuable experience collecting fragments of information, something they will do on a larger scale in their research papers, and they will be doing a miniaturized version of ethnography while preparing to do oral history work.

The Outsider Critics

With each larger piece that we read, we will also examine what others think of the work. We will take time to read some of the more scathing reviews of the books on Amazon.com and address the conflicts that arise. The rationale for reading lay-reviewers' opinions on Barbara Ehrenreich and Raymond Williams is that many students are likely going to have the same response to the readings as those who post on Amazon. Students who dislike a work read by the class are sometimes vocal about their displeasure, but just as frequently they choose to remain silent about the text and feel as though their concerns are not addressed in the class. If our class is going to teach the areas of conflict, we will also have to acknowledge conflict within the classroom. The anonymity of online reviews brings out the most potent, emotional, and sometimes untenable positions, but by ignoring the opinions of real people, we do our students a disservice. The same rationale applies to some of the more unusual readings I have chosen. Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* is not revolutionary, but we will examine it for glimpses of rural Ohio history, the urban/rural dichotomy, the psychological injuries of class, and the geography of class and culture. Harvey Pekar is perhaps "the" Cleveland celebrity of working-class fame; his now-famous expression, "ordinary life is pretty complex stuff," paraphrases some of the major concerns of this class. While Pekar is an outside voice, William Upski Wimsatt, Al Burian, Aaron Cometbus, and D. A. Levy are practically off the map. Though we're not reading revolutionaries in this class, outsider opinions can be valuable for their candid perspectives and harsh initial impressions. Appearing toward the end of the class, these readings will challenge students to think about the complex nature of their surroundings and what they can do to interact with and intervene in the contexts that they have come to own.

Owning Your Work

The class will culminate in a research project which will ask students to draw upon the skills that they have gained over the course of the semester. The 10 to 12-page essay will have several requirements. Essays must: confront a topic from Cleveland area history, distant or recent; make use of an oral history, preferably from a direct source; use some of the research museums, libraries, or other institutions from the area; and provide hyperlinked topics. The linked topics are necessary because I'm currently working with the Western Reserve Historical Society to post the essays online once the students have finished. No two essays can be on precisely the same topic, because we want to provide the community with a resource for local history and show that freshman and sophomore-level students can meaningfully contribute to the academic community on issues of working class. The construction and publication of these projects will also give students' work a sense of importance, both as an academic challenge and as a way to contribute meaningfully to the community in which they live, thereby providing community involvement.

A People's History of Cleveland

Syllabus:

In this course, you will find out the true, hidden history of Cleveland---the history suppressed by "The Man." Well, that's only somewhat true. Cleveland is frequently depicted as a working-class town, but what does that really mean? In order to find out, we'll investigate local histories and draw on local resources to discover stories and cultures that aren't always discussed in textbooks. In order to do this type of investigative work into history and culture, we'll equip ourselves with the tools of the trade: a background in historiography, cultural studies, working-class studies and, of course, Cleveland history. We'll take advantage of local writers and historians, make trips to local neighborhoods and museums, read books and watch movies that depict Cleveland's working-class culture. We probably won't find any easy answers and will be encouraged to analyze contexts and information in new and challenging ways. You'll be responsible for writing papers as we go and you'll prepare a formal presentation and a research paper in the form of an online class project on Cleveland working-class culture and history.

Required Texts:

Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Lunsford, Andrea A. *The Everyday Writer*. 3rd or 4th ed.

Pekar, Harvey. *American Splendor: The Life and Times of Harvey Pekar*.

Week 1:

"Rust Belt to Rock Hall" discussion

Peer Poll Assignment #1: What is your work history?

Ehrenreich, Barbara. "Selling In Minnesota." *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. (w/ Amazon.com reviews)

Zinn, Howard. "Surprises." *A People's History of the United States*. (w/Amazon.com reviews)

Loewen, James W. "'Gone with the Wind': The Invisibility of Racism in American History Textbooks." *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. (w/Amazon.com reviews)

Week 2:

Zweig, Michael. "Introduction"; "The Class Structure of the United States": "Why is Class Important?" *The Working-Class Majority*. U.S. Census data

Peer Poll Assignment #2: What do working-class people earn?

Williams, Robert C. "Doing History: An Overview." *The Historian's Toolbox: A Student's Guide to the Theory and Craft of History*.

Shafer, Robert Jones. "The Nature of History." *A Guide to Historical Method*.

Week 3:

Presentations from:

Miller, Carol Poh and Robert Wheeler. *Cleveland: a Concise History, 1796-1990*.

LeBlanc, Paul. *A Short History of the U.S. Working Class: From Colonial Times to the 21st Century*

Week 4:

Presentations continued.

Week 5:

The Drew Carey Show, Roseanne

(readings from) Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. (w/ Amazon.com reviews)

(readings from) Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. (w/ Amazon.com reviews)

Peer Poll Assignment #3: What is the difference between high culture and low culture?

Visit to the Western Reserve Historical Society w/guest speaker

Week 6:

(readings from) Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*.

(readings from) Thompson, E. P. *The Making of the English Working Class*.
YSU's Center for Working-Class Studies
Linkon, Sherry Lee and John Russo. "Building a Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University."

Week 7:

Jefferson, Tony. "Cultural Responses of the Teds." *Resistance Through Rituals*.
Kahn, Richard and Douglas Kellner. "Internet Subcultures and Oppositional Politics." *The Post-subcultures Reader*.
Peer Poll Assignment #4: What subcultures do you belong to?
CSU's Urban Studies Program/College of Urban Affairs with Guest Speaker

Week 8:

Zinn, Howard. "The Impossible Victory: Vietnam." *A People's History of the United States*.
1910 Murder of William Lowe Rice
Zinn, Howard. "Sacco and Venzetti." Audio.
Leuilliot, Paul. "A Manifesto: The Defense and Illustration of Local History." *The Pursuit of Local History*.

Week 9:

Visit to the Cleveland-Style Polka Hall of Fame with Guest Speaker
Visit to the City Cleveland *International Film Festival*

Week 10:

Finberg, H. P. R. "How Not to Write Local History." *The Pursuit of Local History*.
Thompson, Paul. "The Voice of the Past: Oral History." *The Oral History Reader*.

Week 11:

Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg, Ohio*.
Sennett, Richard & Jonathan Cobb. "Badges of Ability." *The Hidden Injuries of Class*.

Week 12:

Harvey Pekar. *American Splendor*. (w/ Amazon.com reviews)
Wimsatt, William Upski. "A Job Opening in Cleveland (I'm not Even Gonna Talk About the Train Yards)." *Bomb the Suburbs*.
(readings from) Burian, Al. *Burn Factor*.
(readings from) Cometbus, Aaron. *Cometbus Omnibus*.
(readings from) d. a. levy
Peer Poll Assignment #5: How do you define success?

Week 13:

Little Italy, Coventry, and Cleveland Heights with Guest Speaker
Individual Meetings

Week 14:

Walking Tour of Campus
Presentations & Peer Review of Projects

Week 15:

Presentations & Peer Review of Projects
Films: *American Splendor* / *Stranger than Paradise* / *Gummo* / *A Christmas Story* /
Will Work for Food / *Cleveland International Film Festival*