

Combining Active Learning and Reflection: WGST219 Gender and the Workplace
Report on the Andrew W. Mellon Grant-funded Innovations
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Description of the Project and Pedagogical Goals

This purpose of this project was to investigate the use of active learning and reflection in a social science course, WGST219: Gender and the Workplace. WGST219 explores the experiences of workers in the changing U.S. workplace and addresses key issues related to gender, race and class in the workplace, including wage inequalities, gendered organizations and processes of gender discrimination, and the relation of the U.S. workplace to the global economy.

Teaching and learning challenges. Because many students have limited experience in the labor market, central course concepts remain abstract and therefore more difficult to remember and apply. In addition, the class draws students from multiple majors; I find that students without a WGST or sociology background have trouble understanding foundational concepts, such as the relationship among individual experiences, social interactions, and social structure, or the interplay between individual agency and social structure.

I had been teaching this course with a combination of lecture, documentaries, and student-led discussions. However, student SEQs suggested that classroom discussions, while engaging for some, did not work for many of the students. In addition, students reported that other students were not always engaged in the in-class activities I used, and instead are on their laptops or phones, or discussing topics not related to the class.

Pedagogical goals. My goal was to increase student engagement with, and mastery of, core concepts, as well as the development of quantitative literacy skills.

Implementation and Results

I revised the course to incorporate active learning exercises into each class so that students were in the position of constructing their own ideas about gender, race and class in the workplace, and then connecting this discovery to concepts and frameworks provided by the readings and by me. Each class began with “reading groups,” adapted from Parrott & Cherry (2011). The class was divided into 3 groups of 4-6 students. In each group, students were assigned specific roles and preparation requirements (details are available on the course [website](#)). I intended for reading groups to be 45 minutes long (in a seminar-format course), but students wanted more time to discuss the readings with their peers, so we extended reading groups to 60 minutes.

After a break, each class included an active learning exercise. In the first class, we played Intersectionopoly (Paino, May, Burrington, & Becker, 2017) so that students could experience the compounding of gender and race differences in wages. In another class, they played an online simulation, PlaySpent, in which they try to live on low wages while raising a child. In a class on the global assembly line, students had to organize their labor to manufacture three objects from clay, followed by a class discussion on their decision-making and experiences in different roles (owner of the clay, workers, etc.). In other classes, they analyzed the types of



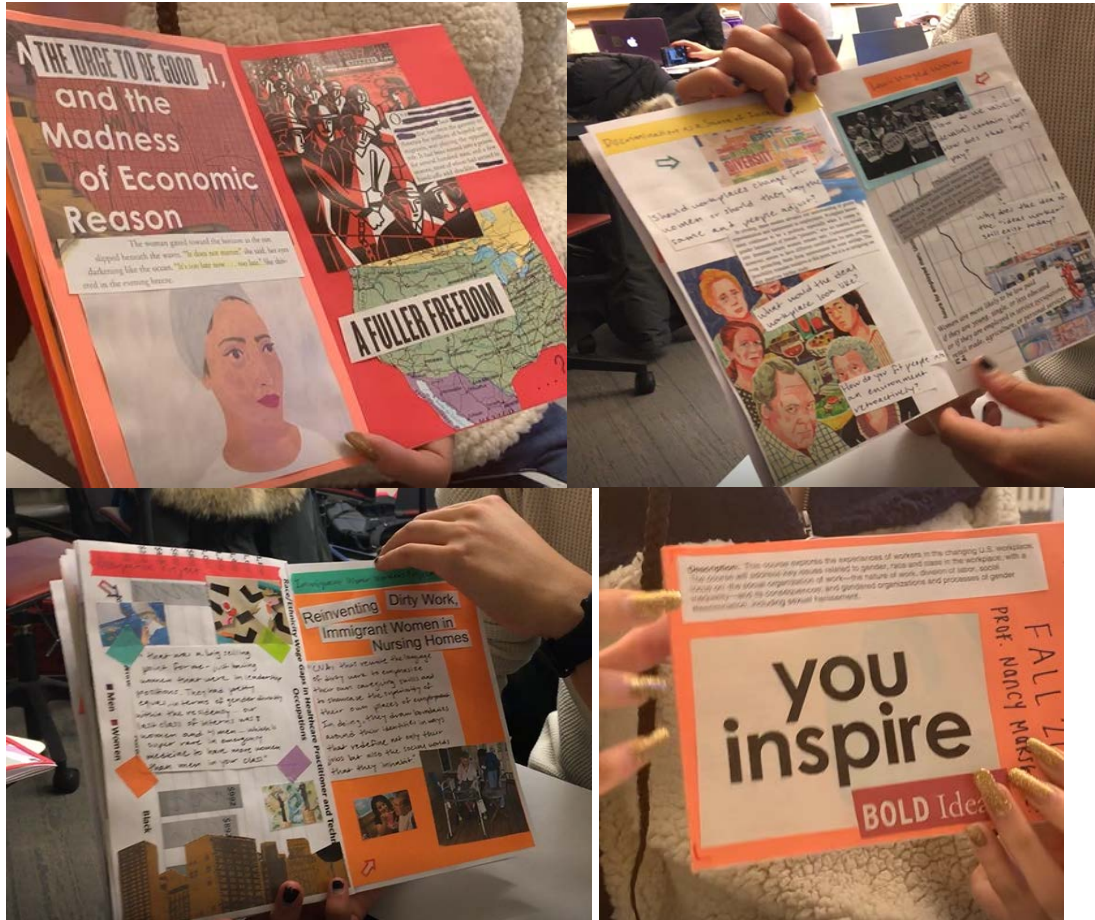
Figure 1. Playing Intersectionopoly

discrimination found in actual EEOC cases, developed policy options to address work-family issues for hypothetical communities, or researched the lived experiences of immigrant women workers in specific communities.

At the end of each class session, we ended with what James Lang (2019) calls “Connection 10,” a reflection exercise that encourages students to reflect on the day’s activities, connect this week to last week’s class, and make connections to the real world. At the end of the semester, students used these Connection 10 reflections to create individual Zines that illustrated their learning over the semester.

Students presented their Zines to their reading groups, and videotaped each other’s 20-30 minute presentations. The screenshots, below, provide an overview of the content. Students also wrote reflections on their Zines. The students used the Zines to deep-read the assigned readings, connect the course content to their own lives and to larger societal issues, and show their own process of learning as reflected in their Connection 10 from individual classes. I was impressed with the level of engagement in the course and the mastery of central concepts that the Zines reflected.





These Zines, and the reading groups and Connection 10 reflections they incorporate, showed more learning and growth than did the more traditional final paper. The assignment was to write a paper about one occupation, incorporating library research, an interview with an alumna in that occupation, and analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data on that occupation. Many of the students struggled with combining those three elements and often resolved that struggle by writing a classic library research paper with minimal incorporation of the interview or the BLS data. I had envisioned the use of the BLS data as an activity to support quantitative literacy, but I saw better quantitative reasoning in their use of data in their Zines – where the data was organic to the story they were telling, instead of something required by the professor.

When I teach this course again, I plan to break the occupation paper into two separate elements – a short library research paper and a separate reflection essay based on an interview with someone about their work life and occupation – so that they can engage more fully with the interview analysis. However, I will continue to use the rest of the innovations – reading groups, active learning exercises, Connection 10 and the Zine. Based on my review of the Zines, these seemed to promote engagement with the course and each other, and to foster learning of core concepts. As one student wrote at the end of the semester, “I have learned and grown so much in your classroom – thank you for providing the perfect environment for that to happen. In addition to learning about the issue of gender discrimination, I also discovered a lot about myself and am excited to continue exploring!”

References

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- Paino, Maria, Matthew May, Lori A. Burrington, and Jacob H. Becker. "Intersectionopoly: A simulation of the wage gap." *Teaching Sociology* 45, no. 2 (2017): 177-186.
- Lang, James M. "Small Changes in Teaching: Making Connections." Chronicle.com. February 8, 2016. Accessed April 29, 2019. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Small-Changes-in-Teaching-/235230?cid=cp44>.