

**Combining Active Learning and Reflection: WGST219 Gender and the Workplace**  
Proposal to the Andrew W. Mellon Grant for Evidence-Based Teaching Innovations  
Nancy L. Marshall

## **1. Description of the Project and Pedagogical Goals**

*This proposal seeks 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. When teaching, I find that the great range of student's quantitative skills makes it difficult for them to understand some of the research available on wage gaps and the economy in their readings and in my lectures. 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 have been teaching this course with a combination of lecture, documentaries, and student-led discussions. However, student SEQs suggest that classroom discussions, while engaging for some, do not work for many of the students. In addition, students report that other students are not always engaged in the in-class activities I currently use, and instead are on their laptops or phones, or discussing topics not related to the class.

*Pedagogical goals.* My goal is to increase student engagement with, and mastery of, core concepts, as well as the development of quantitative literacy skills. I'd like to revise the course to incorporate active learning exercises into each class so that students are 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. In addition, I'd like to revise the format of each class session to end with what James Lang 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 will use these Connection 10 reflections to create individual Zines that illustrate their learning over the semester.

*Expected improvements.* As a result of this project, students in WGST219 should be better able to understand tables and charts on the labor force and wage gaps, and use this understanding in their occupation project. Students should also be better able to discuss the connections between the classroom and the real world, and among individual experiences, social interactions, and social structure.

## **2. Research Evidence**

Research has found that active learning is more effective than traditional lecture-formats because it requires metacognition, problem-solving, and the student's reflection on their own learning, and is student-centered rather than one-way from instructor to student (Coulson & Harvey, 2013; Kay, MacDonald & DiGiuseppe, 2018; Freeman, Eddy, McDonough, Smith, et al., 2014). Lang (2019), draws on research on learning that has found that part of learning is drawing multiple connections among facts and ideas from a variety of sources, emphasizing the importance of activities that foster students' experience in making these connections.

- Coulson, Debra, and Marina Harvey. "Scaffolding student reflection for experience-based learning: A framework." *Teaching in Higher Education* 18, no. 4 (2013): 401-413.

- Kay, Robin, Thom MacDonald, and Maurice DiGiuseppe. "A comparison of lecture-based, active, and flipped classroom teaching approaches in higher education." *Journal of Computing in Higher Education* (2018): 1-23.
- Freeman, Scott, Sarah L. Eddy, Miles McDonough, Michelle K. Smith, Nnadozie Okoroafor, Hannah Jordt, and Mary Pat Wenderoth. "Active learning increases student performance in science, engineering, and mathematics." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 23 (2014): 8410-8415.
- 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>.

Within Sociology, experiential learning has long been an important part of pedagogy. Recent articles in *Teaching Sociology* argue that active learning, sometimes described as classroom-based experiential learning, is useful in teaching complex concepts, such as the following articles on teaching about the workplace (emphasis added in bold).

A. Adkins, Angela M. "Gendering Occupations: An Introductory Exercise for Teaching Reproduction of the Binary Gender System." *Teaching Sociology* 46, no. 4 (2018): 324-334.

“Teaching complex concepts (links among micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis; interplay between agency and social structure) is difficult. **“To this end, active or experiential learning is a useful way to help students meet the crucial sociological goal of “making the familiar strange” and developing the sociological imagination (Mills 1959).”**

“Teaching strategies that attempt to create personal relevance while demonstrating an everyday process may yield better retention and understanding of material (Greenblat 1973; Murphy and Ribarsky 2013; Sobal et al. 1981)... **active learning exercises may be particularly fruitful in the teaching of theory and stratification patterns** associated with gender as well as other related variables such as class or race (Bohmer and Briggs 1991; Curry and Clarke 1983; Hartung 1991; Kleinman, Copp, and Sandstrom 2006; McCabe 2013).

B. Giuffre, Patti, Cynthia Anderson, and Sharon Bird. "Teaching the sociology of gender and work." *Teaching Sociology* 36, no. 1 (2008): 66-78.

“Instructors report that many students have a difficult time understanding the effects of gender inequality in the workplace (critically and personally) because many do not have adequate or lengthy work experiences (Bell and Bradburn 1996; Corrado et al. 2000; Misra 1997) and are "naive about the impact of inequality on their lives" (Misra 1997:278; see also LaBeff and Clark 1986; Petrzalka 2004). **They encourage faculty to use active learning techniques in order to increase student awareness, learning, and critical thinking.**”

*Teaching Sociology* is a particularly valuable resource for the proposed project as the articles it publishes include full materials and instructions in the appendices. I propose adapting the following activities for WGST219 to address some of the learning challenges described above (emphasis added in bold). In addition, I will identify and adapt, or develop, additional active learning activities.

A. 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.

“Sociologists often rely on games, simulations, and active learning strategies to engage students when discussing sensitive topics (Coleman et al. 1973; Fisher 2008). Using a game or simulation can improve student learning (Bramsfeld and Good 2015; Davis, Dukes, and Gamson 1981; Dorn 1989) and effectively bring sociological concepts to life for **students who may not have relevant life experiences** (Brislen and Peoples 2005). These teaching strategies may be more effective (Coleman et al. 1973; Petranek 1994; Randel et al. 1992), especially since students often

enjoy games and simulations more than traditional teaching methods and retain the information longer (Fisher 2008).”

B. Sweet, Stephen, and Kimberly M. Baker. "Who has the advantages in my intended career? Engaging students in the identification of gender and racial inequalities." *Teaching Sociology* 39, no. 1 (2011): 1-15. “This article describes and assesses two learning modules designed to make students aware of gender and racial inequalities present in their own intended careers. Students identify their intended occupation in respect to the Standard Occupational Classification system and then use that code to determine the composition and earnings in that occupation with data provided. Analysis of student papers shows that this assignment contributes not only to the awareness of inequalities, but also to the **development of quantitative literacy skills**. Panel survey methods reveal substantial changes in students' beliefs about the extent of gender and racial inequality.”

### 3. Assessment Methods

I will use two methods to assess whether students have developed quantitative literacy skills and mastered core concepts, such as the relationship among individual experiences, social interactions, and social structure, or the interplay between individual agency and social structure. Over the summer, I will develop rubrics for these assessment methods.

1. I will adapt Sweet & Baker’s learning modules, adding in an interview with a Wellesley alum who works in the selected occupation, using The Hive (Career Education) for contacts. Students will prepare a final paper for this project. I will analyze the paper for evidence of quantitative literacy skills (selection and interpretation of data) and for understanding of the links between individual experiences (from the interview) with social interactions (from the interview) and social structure (from the quantitative data and other course content).
2. I will adapt Lang’s Connection 10 exercise to include students’ creation of individual Zines based on their Connection 10 reflections. I will do a content analysis of their Zines for evidence of understanding of core concepts and other course content.

### 4. Basic Information about the Project

WGST219 is an existing course that I have taught for several years, but have not significantly revised in that time. I will teach the modified version of the course in Fall 2019, and repeat that version of the course in the following years. Enrollment has ranged from 11-14 students per year. However, the impact of this project is broader than this one course as many of these students become WGST majors or minors and take their knowledge and skills into other classes. In addition, WGST faculty regularly share teaching methods with each other (the use of a Zine in this course comes from such a meeting).

### 5. Availability to Develop the Project

I will next teach WGST219 in Fall 2019, so plan to revise the course over the summer of 2019. The revision will include identifying and adapting, or developing, active learning exercises, as well as revising my plans for each class to incorporate Lang’s “Connection 10.” In addition, I will revise reading and out-of-class assignments, as well as course assessments, to align with the revised content and in-class activities.