Resources

Feminist Practices and Experiential Pedagogies

Student Learning at the Commission on the Status of Women's Annual Meeting

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Abstract

This article describes an undergraduate experiential learning course based at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The course introduces students to the evolution of global women's rights movements and gender equality efforts at the United Nations (UN) while simultaneously preparing them to engage with human rights leaders and policymakers during the annual CSW session in early March. Prior to participation in the CSW, students learn about the history of women's rights as human rights campaign alongside essential governing documents, meeting outcomes, and global resolutions on gender equality. Students trace ongoing challenges to human rights mechanisms and consider how feminist leaders and movements have shaped and continue to influence human rights work today. In this article, I explore the ebbs and flows of the course, delivered across five semesters, offering critical insight on the ways in which changes to the CSW environment and student learning outcomes inform pedagogical progressions in course delivery, assessment, and design. I spotlight one scaffolded assignment, as illustrative of experiential learning as feminist praxis, where students collaborate to create and distribute advocacy materials at the CSW. Drawing from student reflections and course evaluations,

the article interweaves discussions of lessons learned with the value experiential education provides to the related interdisciplinary fields of clinical sociology, and women's and gender, or feminist studies.

Keywords: experiential learning course, feminist education, political advocacy, pedagogical progression, human rights, United Nations, clinical sociology

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions across the United States encourage high-impact learning practices to enhance student learning outcomes in college level coursework. Studies show undergraduate students involved in experience-driven courses report increased knowledge acquisition and confidence, improved interpersonal skills, and deeper appreciation for the ways classroom-based learning applies to professional spaces (Moore 2013; Orr 2011; Yamada 2025). This "learning by doing" approach empowers students to practice course concepts in real-world settings, enhancing their problem-solving and critical thinking competencies (Raddon et al. 2008, p. 141). Moore (2013, p. 5) writes, however, that while "most institutions appear to have accepted the premise that experiential learning is a legitimate, valued element of their educational programs," high-impact learning practices demand considerable time, effort, and commitment on the part of faculty and students alike. Experiential learning, for example, requires meaningful connection and exchange both within and outside the classroom or university setting, particularly when the experiential practice involves community-based, nonprofit, or otherwise external organization partners. For students enrolled in courses with off-campus community partners, Boyd and Sandell (2012, p. 260) remark "[it] can feel like it demands more time than other courses." Faculty too describe holding regular meetings with community partners to ensure positive outcomes for students and external partners, adding to the instructor's course preparation and delivery (Yamada 2025, p. 171; Parisi & Thornton 2012).

Clinical sociology and women's and gender studies, as related interdisciplinary fields, offer a valuable set of resources for understanding how to build effective experiential pedagogies in

our coursework. According to Fritz (2022, p. 1), clinical sociology is "a creative, humanistic, rights-based and interdisciplinary specialization that seeks to improve life situations for individuals and groups in a wide variety of settings." Practitioners of clinical sociology assess and interpret existing systems of power with the intention of creating new, more just and equitable structures that benefit us all (Fritz 2022; Vissing 2022; Yamada 2025). The field of women's and gender studies is rooted similarly to an "epistemology of collaborative, community-based, engaged pedagogy" (Costa & Leong 2012, p. 171) with a "mandate for social justice" (Orr 2011, p. 5). These shared commitments surface across feminist coursework urging students to recognize and then transform interlocking systems of local/global power, privilege, and inequality. Feminist pedagogies emphasize experiential reflection grounded in communities of relational solidarity and mutuality across and without borders (Mohanty 2003; Villaverde 2008). It is in these ways the experiential feminist classroom offers students "an opportunity to enact and embody some of the feminist principals and theories with which they have grappled in their other coursework" moving beyond the boundaries of the university, writ large (Boyd & Sandell 2012, p. 252).

This article explores an undergraduate experiential learning course I developed where students participate in the events surrounding the Commission on the Status of Women's (CSW) annual meeting at the United Nations (UN); the course is housed in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at Pace University in New York City and titled *Gender and Human Rights: An Introduction to Transnational Feminist Activism.* I designed the course to prepare students to conduct political advocacy with human rights leaders, feminist activists, and policymakers across two weeks of diplomacy among UN Member States, intergovernmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and civil society leaders at the CSW in early March. In the next section, I offer a short history of the CSW followed by a detailed overview of the course materials, including student learning objectives, instructional design and course delivery, and thematic content organization. I interweave student feedback with my pedagogical observations to offer the reader a deeper understanding

of the challenges and opportunities associated with this form of high-impact learning practice.

2. Experiential Learning Site: A Brief History of the CSW

In June of 1946, the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established the CSW as the "principal global policy-making body" dedicated exclusively to the advancement of women's rights and promotion of gender equality (UN Women 2025a). The Commission prepares recommendations and reports on pressing issues related to the realization of women's human rights in the realm of politics, economics, education, society, and culture. Each year UN Member States gather for two-weeks in March at UN headquarters in New York City to evaluate "progress on gender equality, identify challenges, set global standards and formulate concrete policies to promote gender equality and women's empowerment worldwide" (UNFPA 2012). A total of 45 Member States serve on the Commission at any given time with each member elected to serve for four-year terms. CSW members always represent "equitable geographical distribution" (UN Women 2025c): meaning the Commission consists of 13 members from Africa, 11 from Asia, nine from Latin America and the Caribbean, eight from Western Europe and other states, and four from Eastern Europe. Five members of the Commission serve two-year elected terms as Chair and Vice-Chairs of the CSW Bureau; the primary function of the Bureau is to facilitate preparation for the annual CSW session and ensure its success (UN Women 2025c).

According to Commission mandates, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as individuals and networks may submit recommendations, research data, complaints and appeals, or petitions to CSW members. Members traditionally "consider such communications as part of its annual programme of work in order to identify emerging trends and patterns of injustice and discriminatory practices against women" (UN Women 2025b). Submitted reports from civil society thus assist Commission members in assessing progress made and specifying ongoing challenges to global gender equality. Throughout the Commission gathering, attendees learn from expert group meetings and panels, attend high-level plenary

sessions, government sponsored side-events, and NGO-facilitated parallel events hosted by the NGO Committee on the Status of Women in New York (NGO CSW NY).[1]

Each year the Commission considers one emergent issue known as the CSW primary theme. In addition, attendees reassess the CSW theme from five-years prior; this second component of the session is referred to as the CSW review theme. The goal of the Commission is to reach what Member States call an agreed conclusion or outcome document to help guide state action and implementation across often contentious areas of debate and negotiation that result in a series of recommendations emergent during each annual session. Whereas Commission members endeavor to "accelerate progress and promote women's and girls' enjoyment of their rights in political, economic, social fields," the ECOSOC provides the mechanisms necessary for governmental compliance, tracking individual state progress across all negotiated CSW agreements (UN Women 2025a).

3. Gender and Human Rights: An Introduction to the Course

Course Overview. The *Gender and Human Rights* course describes introducing students to the evolution of women's human rights and gender equality efforts within the international human rights system through a 10-day intensive learning experience at the CSW. The course gives students an understanding of human rights and gender equality mechanisms designed to address systemic inequalities across different identity categories such as gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexuality, nationality, age, and ability, among others. Throughout the semester, we investigate the shifting terrain of human rights thinking and practice while giving added attention to how critical gender analyses and transnational feminist activism has shaped and continues to inform human rights

1 Approximately 13,000 people attended the Commission's annual meeting in March 2025 as representatives from UN Member States, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and civil society leaders. Over 300 official sessions, meetings, and side events were held inside the UN building. NGO CSW NY, additionally, hosted over 750 parallel events related to the primary and review themes both online and in locations surrounding UN headquarters (NGO CSW NY 2025; UN Women 2025a).

policy today. Students gain essential feminist leadership, advocacy, and professional networking skills during their CSW participation. This immersive experience permits them to attend high-level debates, meetings, and events, engage with other CSW delegates and human rights leaders, and learn how to *do* political advocacy inside the UN.

To complete the course, students focus on seven learning objectives. These include: 1. fulfilling 30 to 35 participation hours at the CSW; 2. attending advocacy training and networking sessions organized under NGO CSW NY's Youth Leaders and Young Professional Series; 3. articulating the history of the UN, women's human rights, and gender equality efforts vis-à-vis the CSW; 4. demonstrating intersectional and transnational understandings of gender, culture, and identity as categories of analysis; 5. explaining how transnational feminist advocacy reframes (or can reframe) the boundaries of human rights paradigms; 6. building critical pre-professional skills desired in the social impact sector; and 7. applying feminist ideas and practices to a shared student-led advocacy project. Students receive official CSW delegate badges as registered members of the Commission under Pace University's ECOSOC accreditation. During the semester, students complete assigned readings and online learning modules, participate in class discussions and lectures, attend guest speaker workshops and advocacy trainings, develop individual and team participation schedules, and contribute substantial research and writing to their Advocacy Team project.[2]

Instructional Design. The first time I taught the *Gender and Human Rights* course at Pace University was in spring 2016 with 21 undergraduate students; since the initial term, I have offered the class four additional times with enrollments of 18 – 23 students in spring semesters every other year. Course delivery has been revised often coinciding with changing institutional patterns reflected across social distancing protocols and online learning expectations during the height of COVID-19 pandemic and in the period thereafter. Prior to the pandemic, the course was delivered entirely face-to-face on-campus and at UN headquarters during the 60th Session of the

2 I describe the details of the Advocacy Team assignment later in this article.

CSW in 2016 and 62nd Session in 2018. During the 65th Session of the Commission, I offered the course in a virtual format which mirrored Pace University's COVID-protocols as well as that of the UN and CSW in March of 2021. Then lastly, the course has been available to students with virtual and in-person components for the 67th and 69th Commission sessions in 2023 and 2025. The hybrid model allows me to blend some of the best elements of face-to-face and digital learning where students encounter learning modules designed to enhance their understanding of the course content via the flipped classroom along with in-person instruction, lecture, and workshops to solidify knowledge acquisition. The hybrid version of the course also parallels recent CSW participation practices as Member States, UN agencies, NGOs, and civil society leaders encourage broad scale engagement from all over the world via Zoom. Whereas prior to the pandemic it would have been rare to attend a virtual or hybrid meeting of community leaders and activists, today, the Commission regularly incorporates virtual panels that feature political actors from different parts of the world simultaneously. This practice facilitates increased participation among feminist leaders and organizers located in rural or otherwise marginalized communities and regions, expanding civil society access to the Commission.

For students enrolled in *Gender and Human Rights*, the hybrid CSW model fosters new opportunities for building connection and feminist solidarity across borders as students encounter transnational movement building "in a way that does not [necessarily] reproduce and reinforce current systemic inequalities when participants occupy very diverse social locations" (Parisi and Thornton 2012, p. 215). Technological utilization has expanded global participation, promoting dialogue among attendees irrespective of their location inside the UN building or on a Zoom call. Given this new reality, I revised course expectations for student participation, allowing them to attend up to 10 hours of virtual events in addition to 20-plus-hours of face-to-face meetings. This blended approach provides greater flexibility when scheduling their time at the CSW while maintaining the experiential networking opportunities and learning processes in the course. Lastly, and perhaps most practically, virtual participation hours have made it easier for students to schedule their

time when the CSW schedule overlaps with Pace University's Spring Break where students may have more or less time available to them.

Enrollment. Student enrollment in the course has changed quite a bit since I first offered the class. During the pre-pandemic years, most students held majors in political science, peace and justice studies, international relations, or women and gender studies and tended to be third- and fourth-year students. Most expressed an interest in working for the UN or a politically oriented not-for-profit whereby the course offered an opportunity for them to build their professional network before graduation. Pace University students on the New York City campus represent local, national, and global diversities across race and ethnicity, nationality, and socioeconomic status with one in four being first-generation students (Pace University 2025). Most students enrolled in the course identified as female, non-binary, or gender fluid. Depending on the semester, between fifteen to twenty-five percent of the class were classified as international students from a range of countries including Brazil, Canada, Jordan, Mexico, Peru, Poland, Philippines, Turkey, Sweden, and Uzbekistan among others.

One time I offered the course to first-year students involved with an on-campus women's leadership program exclusively; from my perspective, this iteration of the class was the least effective as the students described feeling overwhelmed, unprepared, and/or too intimidated to engage in the CSW processes beyond basic observation. It was an ironic outcome given that these students sought to develop their leadership skills.

More recently, enrollment has reflected a cross-section of students with interest in global politics, gender equality, and/or human rights coupled with those seeking to complete the civic engagement requirement from Pace University's core curriculum. I have found this enrollment mixture challenging both in terms of students shared interest and preparedness for the course. To address certain knowledge gaps, I started to incorporate supplemental learning modules for students without previous exposure to feminist or women's and gender studies content, or for those seeking a refresher on disciplinary boundaries; modules examine important

terms and concepts like global development, intersectionality, decoloniality, transnationality, and global north/global south, developed/developing, first world/third world, and western/non-western designations. Together, the modules establish baseline knowledge evident in the conversations and tensions throughout the CSW negotiations and in this way serve to clarify global feminist politics and practice for students.

Course Outline and Pedagogical Process. The course is organized to prepare students for CSW participation, which in practice means that their learning is structured across three phases: 1. knowledge acquisition and professional skill development; 2. political advocacy and participation; and 3. critical reflection and assessment. Reading materials include articles and chapter excerpts from feminist scholars about global women's rights (Abu-Lughod 2001; Chesler & McGovern 2016; Patil 2013), gender equality politics and practices at the UN (Engle Merry 2006; Ferree & Tripp 2016; Jain 2016; Snyder 2006), select transnational feminist theories (Anzaldua 1987; Mohanty 2003; Narayan 1998; Sandoval 2000; Schutte 1998), and other literatures that examine political processes and feminist resistance from critical perspectives (Ahmed 2023). I also incorporate materials developed by the UN, UN Women, and NGO CSW NY to support student learning about the CSW; items include guides to intergovernmental negotiations (Sidhu 2007); in-depth histories of the CSW and women's rights negotiations (UN Women 2019); and advocacy guides and toolkits developed by NGO CSW NY (NGO CSW NY 2021; NGO CSW NY 2023). Because each Commission identifies different priority and review themes to guide their annual work, I integrate digital materials and reports compiled by UN Women and NGO CSW NY to familiarize students with chosen thematic issues and their relevant histories.

During the first half of the semester (Weeks 1 – 7), we cover a wide-breadth of information ranging from basic expectations for student engagement and participation, effective political advocacy practices, greater understandings of global feminist movements and debates, and ways to navigate the politics of the CSW. Students often

reflect on the intensity of these first few weeks together; Gabriella[3] for example recalls, "we had a short period of time to learn all of the material, but even in this limited timeframe, I found that I felt prepared when I went to the UN and applied what I had learned in the class." Disha similarly observes, "the beginning of the class felt rushed because the CSW [was] coming so quickly. In some ways, I wish I had taken a class before this one to prepare more for the experience as an individual." High-impact learning courses with external community partners obligate student learning about the ins and outs of their experiential site. For the *Gender and Human Rights* course, this process of understanding CSW politics and related professional practices is indeed a heavy lift for most at the start of the course.

Feminist scholar Engle Merry (2006, p. 37) characterizes the CSW as "a transnational social space where actors come together simultaneously as locally embedded people and as participants in a transnational setting that has its own norms, values, and cultural practices." The complicated dynamics of CSW political culture generates rather stressful experiences for those unfamiliar with the space. As Engle Merry (2006: p. 36) recalls,

> The first time I went to a UN meeting, I was completely lost… I didn't understand the process of drafting documents, nor did I know how to find the documents under discussion. I was puzzled by the apparently tense relationship between NGOs and governments. And I was overwhelmed by all the acronyms – UNDP, WFP, WHO, UNIFEM, CEDAW, CRC, ICCPR, and many more – and the catch phrases, such as gender mainstreaming, capacity building, best practices, gender focal points, and political will, that I heard all around me. Everyone else seemed to know what was going on, how to find her way around, and what all those letters stood for.

3 All student names have been anonymized. Data used in this article includes excerpts from student assignments in the course, course evaluations, and personal email correspondence. Data was approved for use under Pace University's research ethics review board.

Whenever I consider the structure of the *Gender and Human Rights* course, I return habitually to Engle Merry's vivid assessment of her CSW experience. I find it helps me consider what students need to understand to be comfortable in Commission sessions, and it further challenges me to be critical and reflexive about how I scaffold experiential learning in an environment with compellingly complex political obligations. Many years ago, I started to describe the class to students as a domestic study-abroad course. I found the language of study-abroad illustrative of how I approach experiential learning opportunities at the many Commission events; I believe it furthermore assists students to anticipate the wider scope of their learning in the class. Conceptualizing the Commission as a foreign country, in other words, encourages them to consider their willingness to learn new languages, cultures, norms, and practices inside the UN building and to appreciate how or why Commission members might foreground certain gender-based politics and human rights legislation in their work. One of the course materials we develop together, for example, is a shared document of common acronyms, phrases, resolutions, terms, and ideas that students can use during the CSW as a referential cheat sheet. This class document assists students with decoding language which signifies important inflection points and political commitments within the international human rights community. It also supports their sense of being knowledgeable in an otherwise unfamiliar place. Additional pedagogical practices involve incorporating a CSW participation contract with clear guidelines on student expectations, holding regular one-on-one meetings with students during office hours, using in-class quizzes to assess learning, providing dedicated class time for students to build their CSW schedules together, and creating scaffolded assignments that build student confidence, facilitate experiential engagement, and build relational accountability among students in the class.

Throughout January and February, course readings and discussions structure a cohesive narrative about key moments and concepts undergirding global women's rights movements at the UN. Together, we explore the concept of gender equality and campaigns for women's rights as human rights through an examination of significant global gatherings including the UN World Conferences on Women held in

Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995) as well as critical resolutions and agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, among others. Students gain appreciation for the historical context and local-global political conditions leading to the establishment of UN Women in 2010, consolidating previous operations of the Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, UN Development Fund for Women, Division for the Advancement of Women, and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women.

Once students understand the landscape of gender politics at the UN, we shift to discussions of culture, identity, geopolitical location, race and ethnicity, gender, generation, socioeconomic status, nationality, and sexuality and the contestations embedded across neoliberal development regimes that reify Western, orientalist, imperialist, and capitalist empire. These discussions draw from transnational feminist scholarship and serve to challenge normative practice "rooted in a neutral and universalizing language that reinscribes forms of democracy and citizenship that erase difference, conceal power, and perpetuate social injustice" (Costa & Leong 2012, p. 171). Following this intellectual exercise, students shift to concrete professional skills development and networking techniques for effective political advocacy. This point echoes an important pedagogical shift in the semester moving from theory to practice, and "provide [students] with the historical knowledge and theoretical tools necessary to critique local and global systems" of power and then empowering them to facilitate change directly (Costa & Leong 2012, p. 175; Boyd & Sandell 2012; Parisi & Thornton 2012).

To foster student confidence and build advocacy skills, I couple scholarly content with hands-on workshops and trainings led by human rights leaders and feminist activists. Guest speakers lead simulations of CSW negotiations, for instance, to help students follow the diplomatic process in real-time during Commission member debates or in civil society interventions. Students attend

virtual advocacy trainings organized by NGO CSW NY's Young Leaders and Young Professionals Committee gaining exposure to other young activists preparing for the CSW and learning how youth organize during the Commission. I share regular announcements about planning meetings and events hosted by NGOs, Member State representatives, UN agencies, and civil society organizations in the weeks leading up to the CSW. Students will sometimes volunteer with NYC-based NGOs with which I have a longstanding relationship, and each semester, we travel together to conduct a private tour of UN headquarters with a hired guide. Prior to the CSW, students receive business cards from Pace University with the student's contact information, and Career Services meets with the class to share networking and resume preparation tips. These practices collectively encourage students to take full advantage of the CSW experience and of their potential as impactful changemakers. The course scaffolds student learning and professional skill development in the weeks leading up to the CSW; it is then followed by two-weeks of hands-on experiential participation in the CSW, and concludes with individual student journaling, team meetings, self-assessment exercises, and an analysis of session outcomes inclusive of the CSW Outcome Document otherwise known as the Agreed Conclusions. The next section explores the Team Advocacy Project in detail.

4. Building Student Advocacy Teams: A Scaffolded Learning Assignment

In this section, I describe the contours of a scaffolded learning assignment called the Advocacy Team Project, which I developed to better structure student participation in the CSW. The assignment consists of several integrated tasks designed to build upon student learning and encourage their effective political praxis; some elements of the assignment occur prior to the CSW while others happen during and after the session. Students work in teams of three or four to complete each component of the Advocacy Team Project which guides their learning experience. This approach means students are responsible for: 1. selecting a gender equality or women's human rights issue; 2. conducting research on how said issue has or has not been addressed under the Commission or within the UN more

broadly; 3. drafting an advocacy brief to distribute during the CSW; 4. creating a digital impact package which translates their advocacy brief into visual advocacy materials; 5. choosing and attending topic-related CSW events and meetings; 6. tracing changes or revisions to their chosen issue in the CSW outcome document; and 7. doing self- and group-reflexive assessment exercises to evaluate their political advocacy experience. In the following discussion, I offer contextual justification for how I determined to include this scaffolded project in the course. Drawing from student reflections and course evaluations, I illuminate how their experiences of professional growth and personal challenge inspired me to reorient course expectations to better facilitate learning in a charged political environment. As I offer additional details on each element of the assignment, I explore the ways that the Advocacy Team assignment addresses core experiential learning competencies and then conclude with an analysis of the extent to which the assignment proved successful.

Professional Growth. Students demonstrate professional growth across their experience of the Commission. At the start of the CSW, students cite early enthusiasm for the opportunity which is then followed by critical reflexive analyses in the latter half of the session. For example, at the opening of the Commission meetings, students frequently share similar levels of excitement, as exemplified when Christine states,

> Today was the first day that the CSW madness really began and I am so excited! It was the first time I actually enjoyed or felt good about something I was doing… I loved interacting with everyone at the orientation. I could already tell that these next two weeks would challenge the ways I think.

Mira likewise comments,

> Oh my gosh… I am so FREAKING excited! THIS IS THE FIRST DAY OF CSW!!! I am on my way to the United Nations! It is going to be my first time at the UN, and I get to be a geek about all things UN. I think you can say I am one of the most excited people to go to the CSW.

Despite initial enthusiasm during the first few days of the Commission, students often begin to express some sense of disappointment

and/or critique of the political processes with which they begin to witness. Isla for instance starts to question the effectiveness of the Commission to address different forms of global injustice. She remarks, after a few days of attending,

> I am still not sure about my feelings about the CSW… I do know that I am really grateful to have been able to take part in this class and to experience how the UN actually works, but I have mixed feelings about the UN and its effectiveness now.

Josie similarly comments,

> I am very disappointed with the contributions of the UN agencies… [there was] little information on how to address the issues [and] I ended the day feeling disappointed in the work being done at the CSW because of the lack of information on solutions.

Others like Maggie point to the quality of CSW meetings, asking "did we really spend 90-minutes listening to panelists market their non-profit organizations without addressing the issues they advocate for?" Whereas Christine insists, "I understand panelists come to CSW to support a specific cause, but it was very discouraging to have them blatantly disregard any questions from the opposing side. I learned that this occurs during most of the Q & A times" at the end of an event. Isla too shares Christine's assessment of how human rights leaders interact with Commission attendees. She argues,

> Unfortunately, many of the panels consist of only vague words and not words about direct actions that the panelists, their organizations, or the audience could take to create change. These panels were very disappointing and mostly consisted of speakers talking around the subject and being very imprecise… about halfway through the CSW, I started calling this dancing around the subject "UN Speak" and it was surprising how many people did it.

Comments like these reflect students' disenchantment with the CSW process, yet they also signal how students learn to position themselves as civil society participants engaged in the CSW session. Rather than

describing everything at the UN as fantastic and wonderful, students begin to think critically about the UN as an experiential learning site. It is here that I suggest students shift from passive observers to political actors with the capacity to move beyond declarations of uniform celebration to instead demand concrete solutions, complex debate and discussion, and/or greater forms of accountability and representation at the CSW session.

I concurrently interpret students' critiques as evidence of their professional growth and as a pedagogical opportunity from which to provide greater structure to their CSW engagement. From my perspective, the Advocacy Team assignment encourages students to approach their time at the CSW with a specific goal in mind, namely tracing how their topic of interest intersects with the broad gender equality agenda at the CSW. This shift in focus asks students to consider the purpose and quality of the information shared in sessions without getting bogged down by organizational challenges apparent in poor agenda setting, time or resource allocation, or audience participation. Students, in other words, concentrate on gathering data and evidence from each panel, presentation, and speaker to learn more about how different communities, countries, and organizations articulate and/or address their chosen human rights' concern. The Advocacy Team assignment, moreover, urges students to familiarize themselves with the documents and instruments available to human rights leaders and policymakers before entering the CSW. This knowledge acquisition affords greater confidence in their ability to follow conversations and debate during the Commission, making it easier for students to participate in the political process more directly.

Difficult Dialogues. CSW attendees ascribe to a diverse set of global and local politics that do not always align with student expectations of the human rights community. Commission sessions endeavor to build global consensus, encouraging difficult dialogues about longstanding gender inequalities, power, and privilege to move the human rights agenda forward. Yet, for several Pace University students, the process of encountering policymakers and human rights leaders with opposing viewpoints proved challenging.

Students shared feeling shocked, confused, and sometimes paralyzed when pushed outside of their comfort zones. Josie elaborates on her experience, for example, stating,

> Being at Pace University and in the Women's and Gender Studies environment, it is easy to forget that there are people who are homophobic, transphobic, sexist, and many other things. It seemed confusing to me why groups like this would decide to be present at a conference focused on women's and girls' rights. Another important lesson for me was understanding that spaces within the UN are very conservative… by the end of the day, I felt hurt and hopeless because I felt as though I could not change the minds of several people in the room.

Maggie echoes similar expressions of despair, asserting,

> I feel POWERLESSNESS and am left wondering what I was even doing at the UN. I didn't feel that my experience mattered, and I began to question if I had any rights in this 'international safe space.' I face a constant battle of thinking, it is a privilege to be here, but then why does it also feel as if I am wasting my time?

I initially approached the experiential component of the course as an opportunity for students to envisage global women's rights politics through their CSW engagement. Prior to incorporating the Advocacy Team assignment, students were able to customize their CSW schedules based on their own political motivations and self-interests. However, as the student population enrolled in the course changed, and with increasing moments of political polarization, I found that the more structured expectations for student participation proved vitally necessary. Hannah, for example, reflects on this politic when discussing reproductive rights during one CSW session. She explains,

> I was talking about the importance of comprehensive sex education to women in different countries. However, I did not know I was discussing this to a room full of conservative girls and women from Latin America. It was clear within ten-minutes… that my classmates and I were in the lion's den because the majority in the room was conservative women who believed passionately against everything we wanted to advocate for.

In one of our class-reflection meetings after the CSW concluded, we processed several students' feelings of being 'in the lion's den.' For most, it was the first time they had encountered explicit resistance to their ideas and perspectives in what they assumed to be a friendly feminist-space. Students had anticipated the CSW would mirror their educational experience of the Women's and Gender Studies classroom and expressed feeling personally unprepared to meet conservative opposition inside UN headquarters. I took their experiential struggles seriously and in subsequent semesters incorporated the Advocacy Brief to the Advocacy Team assignment to provide students with an effective means from which to learn about and appreciate how human rights leaders and feminist activists negotiate ideas to collaborate with the Commission and inform global policymaking irrespective of political viewpoint.

Advocacy Brief and Other Forms of Assessment. The Advocacy Team assignment, implemented in spring 2025, tries to reinforce for students the democratic processes of consensus building and encourage them to envisage greater purpose to their CSW participation and experiential learning in the course. I task students with creating a shared Advocacy Brief and corresponding digital advocacy materials to advance their capacities for conducting effective political advocacy with Commission attendees. Advocacy briefs offer relevant information about human rights violations with governmental representatives and NGO partners. The one to two-page document provides a short summary of an issue; cites appropriate research data to demonstrate the scope of the problem; directs the reader to pertinent UN documents, resolutions, and/or offices responsible for addressing the problem; and concludes with a specific request or proposed set of solutions that Member States are urged to act upon.

During the 2025 semester, I invited a former student and recent graduate of New York University's Global Affairs program to facilitate an in-class workshop on creating advocacy briefs. Students review several examples of effectuate briefs and describe core elements to their effectiveness. We debate persuasive versus weak language

together, identifying common phrases and organizational structures necessary to the document.

Following the interactive training, students gather in their Advocacy Teams to craft briefs for use at the CSW. I provide several rounds of review before students finalize their advocacy document, and once complete students prepare a visual version of their advocacy brief known as the digital impact package. This portion of the Advocacy Team assignment requires students to develop visual eye-catching versions of their advocacy brief, infusing creative elements to an otherwise text-driven assessment. Student teams, for example, prepare digital fliers which encourage viewers to act and/or seek out additional information about the topic highlighted in their Advocacy Brief.

The first four components of the Advocacy Team assignment (i.e. selecting a topic, researching said topic, crafting an advocacy brief and set of visual fliers) scaffold the latter portions of the project by assisting students with structuring their CSW participation as well as providing an issue-driven focus from which to evaluate challenges and progress in the CSW negotiations. Students utilize their Advocacy Team topic to select events to attend during the Commission; they gather regularly with other members of their team to coordinate schedules, distribute advocacy materials, share notes from events and meetings, and compare experiences across the different facets of the CSW. Students in the Advocacy Team, for instance, might divide their time across the official work of the Commission, Member State hosted side events, and civil society meetings hosted by NGO CSW NY. Because each member of the Advocacy Team participates equitably in the interrelated elements of their collective learning, I propose, this team-driven assignment facilitates relationship building and peer support throughout the course. Students shared learning experience remains an effective pedagogical tool in the feminist classroom. As Jenna attests in a personal email,

> I just really want to say thank you and express how grateful I am to have this experience and be part of the Women's and Gender Studies department… I never felt connected [in other classes] but in this course, I feel part of the community, and… it has inspired me so much and has made me a

> better learner. This experience has made me reflect on my education, and despite how much I still have to learn, it feels surreal to be in these spaces having conversations with peers and such accomplished women.

After the CSW concludes, I ask students in the final components of the Advocacy Team assignment to reflect on their experiences of doing political advocacy at the UN. Student teams complete an outcomes assessment of the CSW taking stock of their team's relative successes and challenges with the advocacy project. Each team meets with me for 30 minutes to explore the learning experience in-depth; teams likewise submit a short report examining the outcomes of the CSW (i.e., CSW Agreed Conclusions) as it relates to their advocacy efforts. Team reports include: a review of their goals for the CSW (i.e., describing what student teams wanted to accomplish); evaluation of how well the team accomplished its stated goals; summary of who shares an interest in their advocacy topic at the CSW (i.e., who are the leaders, Member States, agencies, and/or organizations connected to this work and how do they help us understand the issue in new ways); documentation of new agreements, language, or policy shifts evident in the CSW Agreed Conclusions or Political Declaration; and, lastly, exploration of key lessons learned about the Commission.

Taken together, I suggest the Advocacy Team assignment facilitates experiential learning while simultaneously building student communication and collaboration skills as they seek to affect change. The assignment serves as an example of feminist pedagogy which deepens students' appreciation for changemaking praxis and encourages them to "perceive transnational flows of labor [and] to see the global working within the local" (Boyd & Sandell 2012: p. 261; Parisi & Thornton 2012). Students like Sophie, for instance, comment on how "the passes to the UN showed me a new world that I now want to be part of. It truly inspired me to be in a place where all I do is work toward the promise of human rights." For me, Sophie's stated sense of purpose speaks not only to the effectiveness of the class but to the ways in which assignments can complement and enhance student learning. As Shana affirms, "the course allowed me to pursue my passions in a space that I otherwise would not have had access to. And while difficult at times, it helped me learn how to

communicate more effectively and to be a better activist and leader." Indeed, even for students with little professional interest in women's rights or global politics, April concludes,

> I wouldn't remove any information from the class. It was a lot to unpack alongside things I am not sure I will need moving forward, but it was all still incredibly interesting and, in some ways, could be useful at any given time even if my professional goals and plans don't change. The topics in this class can come up in surprising ways.

5. Pedagogical Progression: Concluding Thoughts on Experiential Learning in the Feminist Classroom

In a study of high impact learning practices, Moore (2013: p. 11) posits whether "the kinds of knowledge encountered in the so-called real world intersect sufficiently with the kinds of knowledge engaged in college studies to render them mutually intelligible and beneficial." For Moore, the benefits of experiential learning remain tethered to the instructor's ability to organize student engagement in ways that make learning possible. My experience leading the *Gender and Human Rights* course affirms this belief in teaching pedagogies which sit at the heart of effective experiential learning praxis. The discipline of Women's and Gender Studies, like that of Clinical Sociology, "demand[s] that students think critically about what they [are] learning in class and how that new knowledge ha[s] applications in the world beyond it" (Orr 2011: p. 18; Fritz 2022; Yamada 2025).

Throughout this article, I have sought to illuminate how I approach engaged student learning at the CSW with attention given to course development, design and revision, and assessment vis-à-vis the Advocacy Team assignment. Feminist teachers "invite students to attend to what feels familiar as well as to what feels different at their [site]" guiding them through "moments where the smooth workings of ideology continue uninterrupted [and] moments where their prior conceptions were dislodged" (Boyd & Sandell 2012: p. 262). It is in this way the Advocacy Team assignment engenders feminist forms of experiential learning that benefit students in their educational and professional lives through building shared

classroom-communities and solidarity across difficult encounters and dialogues which sustain personal growth.

Several concluding observations from students speak to the power and promise of experiential education in the feminist classroom. Clara, for example, remarks, "I am thankful as a hands-on learner for this course, which really contributed to my understanding and helped me gain so much." Whereas Josie reflects,

> I think that I have gained a lot from attending the CSW. It has clarified my professional goals and expectations. For starters, I am more conscious that there are so many different opinions and viewpoints on issues that I need to be more sensitive about… I think that being exposed to the UN in this way made me realize that doing this work is very difficult.

Alternatively, for Isla, the experience of the CSW made her appreciate life as a full-time student. She explains,

> I didn't realize how draining the CSW would be. Every day when I came home, all I wanted to do was sleep, and I usually did… I think it was the atmosphere. I was completely immersed in the adult, professional world, and I wanted to appear as though I belonged there. That meant I had to be constantly on and engaged, which gets very exhausting after a certain point.

Maggie and Mira, conversely, found themselves invigorated by the CSW experience as their professional lives became clearer after completing the course. As Maggie shares,

> I like to keep an open mind about the future because… I often change my mind, and I don't know how the future will unfold. But I think… I see myself staying involved with the UN [and] deciding to work for a non-governmental organization that strays away from 'conservative' UN practices and that would allow me to have a voice in the organization.

Mira too proclaims,

> I always wanted to work for or with the UN and even though it was frustrating, that is why I love it, and it only makes me want to work for the UN even more! I would love to be able to be a delegate [again] and

> take part in many of the different aspects of the UN… I would suggest this class and experience to anyone because it does truly help one realize the different types of people in this world and how to deal with them. It was an educational opportunity that I will always be grateful that I had.

Courses like *Gender and Human Rights* illustrate the pedagogical potential of experiential learning for students. For faculty interested in offering experiential learning courses similar to the class described in this article, I offer the following advice: consider your time commitments and capacity to mentor students effectively; build in regular student–faculty reflection time where you can gather feedback from the students about their experiences, struggles, and successes; practice radical and reflexive honesty with students throughout the course; and, lastly, develop pedagogical flexibility both inside the class itself and across different semesters. Experiential learning demands faculty and students commit fully to the work required, and this collective experience is not always easy or smooth. In this article, I have offered an analysis of how student learning in the *Gender and Human Rights* course challenged me to progress both as an educator and activist-scholar invested in feminist praxis. It is my hope that the content and discussions shared here might do the same for others.

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