Using Experiential Learning to Teach about Gender Bias

Jessica L. Cundiff¹, Matthew J. Zawadzki², Cinnamon L. Danube², & Stephanie A. Shields³
¹Missouri Univ. of Science and Technology, ²Univ. of California-Merced, ³Penn State Univ.
Contact: cundiffjl@mst.edu

INTRODUCTION

• Teaching about gender bias can be challenging because information about bias can be threatening and elicit reactance.
• We tested whether these challenges could be overcome and whether better learning outcomes could be achieved by using experiential learning methods rather than passive learning methods to teach about bias.
• We implemented experiential learning by using the Workshop Activity for Gender Equity (WAGES-Academic version)

WHAT IS WAGES?

WAGES engages participants in a game-like simulation where they experience first-hand the cumulative negative effects of subtle gender bias in the academic workplace.

• The object of the game is to be the first person to reach the end of the academic career ladder and become Distinguished Professor.
• Players are divided into two teams (White and Green) and advance by drawing team-specific cards that describe scenarios of academic life, based on empirical research.
• Both teams face identical scenarios, but outcomes differ to give slight cumulative advantages to the White team.

A senior faculty member congratulates you on your skill in completing a big grant proposal on time.
Earn 2 credit chips as you await your reviews. Move 1 space forward.

A senior faculty member congratulates you on your good luck in completing a big grant proposal on time.
Earn 2 credit chips as you await your reviews. Move 1 space forward.

• Over the course of the game, players discover connections between the game and real-world experiences of women and men.
• Game play concludes with a facilitated discussion about subtle biases faced by women in the workplace and strategies to address bias at the individual and institutional level.

METHOD

Participants
Undergraduates (139 women, 36 men, 2 unreported) participated in the intervention phase and then 1-2 weeks later participated in the application phase. Most participants (86%) identified as white.

Intervention Phase
Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions:
• Experiential Learning: Participants learned about gender bias via experiential learning, i.e., playing WAGES.
• Passive Learning: Participants received identical info as WAGES, but in a passive learning format (i.e. read a handout).
• No Info: Participants did not receive any info about gender bias, but instead played Chutes & Ladders.

Afterwards, participants completed the following Measures:
• Perceived Harm of Everyday Sexism: 9 items (1=not harmful, 7=very harmful): “[How harmful is it when] someone makes stereotypical comments about women?”
• Intentions to Learn More about Bias: 15 items (1=not at all, 7=very much): “I intend to find additional info about bias”
• Reactance: 4 items (1=not at all, 7=very much): “Much of the info given today seemed exaggerated”
• Self-Efficacy: 7 items (1=not at all, 7=very much): “What I heard today provides opportunities for me to overcome obstacles”

Application Phase
1-2 weeks later, participants completed an ostensibly unrelated study on student impressions of the Promotion & Tenure review process. They read a review of a female professor, which was either blatantly sexist, subtly sexist or nonexist.

After reading the reviews, participants completed the Measures:
• Detected Bias: 4 items (1=not at all, 5=very):
  “The reviewer was sexist in his evaluation of the candidate”
• Reported Bias: 1 item (yes/no): “I have concerns that this review was unfair and want to officially report my concerns”

For more information on WAGES, visit http://wages.la.psu.edu/
Intervention Phase results are reported in Cundiff, Zawadzki, Danube, & Shields (2014) Journal of Social Issues.

RESULTS

Intervention Phase Outcomes
Note. Bars with different letters significantly differ, p<.05.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Experiential</th>
<th>Passive</th>
<th>No Info</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Harm</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intent to Learn More</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactance</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Application Phase Outcomes
As expected, differences emerged only for the Subtle Sexism condition, shown below. Note. Bars with different letters significantly differ, p<.05.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Experiential</th>
<th>Passive</th>
<th>No Info</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Detected Bias</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported Bias</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSIONS

Our results suggest that information about sensitive topics such as gender bias can elicit negative reactions when the information is simply conveyed via passive-learning techniques. By contrast, active learning techniques, such as experiential learning, have the potential to reduce reactance, facilitate learning outcomes, and increase application to real-life situations.