Brief Description
This classroom exercise was embedded in a course for graduate students on “Gender and Social Inequality” that I taught at Humboldt University’s Institute of Social Sciences in 2002/2003 in Berlin (2 hours over 16 weeks) (see as attached course outline). At the beginning of the course, we read and discussed literature on the relationship between gender and social inequality, on the intersection of gender and other dimensions of inequality, and on the multiple levels on which gender operates. After the initial weeks, the students were well-equipped to take on the challenges of the classroom exercise presented below. Active participation in this exercise was one of the requirements to get credit for the course.

Explanation
Students’ task that they carried out in small groups (3-4 students) was to critically assess how “gender” as a social category was addressed in mainstream sociology textbooks. Inspiration for this exercise came from the 1996 piece in American Sociological Review by Myra Marx Ferree and Elaine J. Hall (see below). In this article, the authors show how in US sociology textbooks stratification analysis is applied to class, race, and gender in profoundly unequal ways. They argue that those different dimensions of social inequality are wrongfully treated as operating at distinct levels of society.

At the classroom exercise that was held as a colloquium in two consecutive weeks, the students presented and applied knowledge they had acquired in the first sessions of the seminar. Students were asked to examine the existence and the depiction of the category “gender” in textbooks on sociology that had been published in Germany over the last 10 years. Of course, here one could introduce variation over space, time, and content (e.g., by using textbooks published in other countries, by contrasting older and more recent publications, by addressing other dimensions of social inequality and their interrelations with gender). Students were provided with a list of 10 titles and the class was split up in groups of three or four students each. Two books were assigned to each group in a way that made them overlap across groups (see figure below).
Each group of students addressed a common set of questions (see: Instructions for Students) based on the book sections they had studied. In answering these questions, they were quite creative and sometimes even contacted the book authors to learn more about their motives in treating “gender” in the way they did. Each group prepared a 10-minute presentation which was supposed to be comprehensible also for students who had not read those particular book sections. Using handouts was encouraged. Each presentation was followed by a classroom discussion that was led by a student. The notes on which the presentations were based, together with a concise account of how they proceeded, had to be turned in afterwards.

I provided a list of 10 titles of recently published mainstream sociology textbooks about three weeks in advance (the number of books can be changed according to class size). Those books were assigned to groups of students as follows:

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This exercise worked well in many ways. It was an excellent way for everyone who participated to get first-hand information on the multiple dimensions in which gender is attended to or neglected in contemporary sociology textbooks. It was a great opportunity for a lively debate. This was facilitated by the fact that two groups shared the same assigned books. For the students, it was a good exercise to apply and refresh the theoretical knowledge that they had gained during the first few weeks. For me as a teacher it was a convenient way to realize and evaluate what had been learnt. In addition, the colloquium served to strengthen the ties among students and their self-confidence as well as to encourage those who had been rather quiet in the past. This classroom exercise was well-integrated in the syllabus leading over to the more easily accessible parts of the course (see as attached course outline).

**Assigned Readings and Necessary Materials**

In addition to the relevant book sections, all students were required to read the following article:

Reading Reference

Useful background readings would be:


Instructions for Students

The exercise’s aim is to apply knowledge that you have acquired during the first two main parts of the course. Based on more recent mainstream textbooks on sociology that have been published in Germany, your task is to assess how “gender” is being conceptualized. A list with relevant literature is available from me and I ask you to form groups according to the book titles about three weeks before the exercise takes place. Please read and critically evaluate all the passages on gender in these books. In doing so, address the following questions and discuss them in your group:

- Is the category “gender” as a principle of division in modern societies in the same way a subject of discussion as for instance “class” or “race”?
- Is a relationship drawn between gender and social inequality?
- What mechanisms of reproduction of gender inequality are discussed? (please give examples)
- At which levels of society is gender inequality discussed? (please give examples)
- Do you find that gender is being addressed in thoughtful and theoretically or empirically meaningful ways? (please give reasons)

Please prepare yourself with your group for a concise presentation of your main results at the colloquium. Your presentation needs to be very clear so that students who have not read the same books as you can follow your argument. A handout would be helpful. The paper by Ferree and Hall (1996) gives you some general insights into the analysis of textbooks and also an example of how you could structure your argument. The notes your presentation is based on are due at the time of colloquium.
Appendix

Course outline:

Seminar 1: Introduction and Overview

*On the relationship between gender and social inequality*

Seminar 2: Gender as a central dimension of inequality – conceptual frame

Seminar 3: Theoretical models to explain inequality between women and men in the labor market

Seminar 4: Mechanisms of reproduction of gender-related inequality

*Levels of gender inequality*

Seminar 5: Interaction

Seminar 6: Organization I

Seminar 7: Organization II

Seminar 8: Society

2 weeks: *classroom exercise on “gender” and “inequality” in contemporary textbooks on sociology*

*Gender and inequality in context*

Seminar 9: Inequalities in vocational training and higher education

Seminar 10: Inequalities in the labor market and across occupational careers

Seminar 11: Division of labor at home and differential career chances

Seminar 12: Income inequality

*Research perspectives and outlook*

Seminar 13: A life course perspective on gender and inequality

Seminar 14: Final discussion „Where are we heading?“