

# Alienating students

## Marxist theory in action

*Megan Thiele, Yung-Yi Diana Pan and Devin Molina*

---

---

**ABSTRACT**

Karl Marx's revolutionary call, 'Workers of the World Unite', resonates with many in today's society. This article describes and assesses an easily reproducible classroom activity that simulates both alienating, and perhaps more importantly, non-alienating states of production as described by Marx. This hands-on learning activity gives students the opportunity to experience and process these divergent states. In reflecting, students connect their classroom experience to societal forces surrounding wage labour. A quasi-experimental design implemented across eight sociology classes at two U.S. university campuses – one two-year and one four-year college – points to the effectiveness of the activity. Evidence suggests that students are better able to grasp Marx's theory of alienation, retain the knowledge over time and apply it to their own lives with this experiential learning activity.

**KEYWORDS**

active learning, alienation, experiential learning, Marx, pedagogy, social theory

---

---

Karl Marx was a prolific writer and thinker, and is widely regarded by social scientists (Maghbouleh, Childress and Alamo 2015). Marx's continued relevance is due to the timelessness of his core concepts (Foster 1999). As predicted by Marx, alienation, or the estrangement of persons from important elements of their human nature, pervades capitalism (Marx 1978 [1844]; Shantz et al. 2015). Unpacking and exploring this fundamental concept is important, not only to comprehend conflict theory broadly but also to understand the current plight of workers in contemporary society. Within the postsecondary classroom many students are preparing themselves for a full-time commitment to the labour market. For this new generation of labourers, understanding the concept of alienation is invaluable.





Our activity, Alienating Students, gives students space to apply sociological concepts to their own lives. It encourages students to think critically about the social structure by aiding in the application of sociology to real life (McKinney et al. 2004). By engaging students in two contrasting production and post-production experiences, this activity stimulates the sociological imagination and helps connect political-economic structures – and their influence on the patterns of social experiences, feelings and thoughts (McKinney et al. 2004). Many aspects of this activity not only align with disciplinary benchmarks for sociology internationally, they also transcend discipline boundaries. This activity promotes critical thinking, ‘a traditional academic value as well as a desirable attribute of citizens’ (Welch 2006: 191) and, thus, is appropriate for all settings that discuss Marx or labour and industrial relations, whether in or outside of the classroom.

We argue that the experiential nature of this activity allows students to feel the effects of alienation, increases comprehension of Marx’s concept, improves students’ retention of the material and helps them apply the concept to their own lives. Our goals are simple: simulate both non-alienation and alienation in order to allow students to gain insight into Marx’s conflict theory. In line with a recent resurgence in teaching Marx experientially (Maghbouleh, Childress and Alamo 2015; Parrotta and Buck 2013; Windsor and Carroll 2015), this experiential learning activity provides opportunities for students and instructors to rethink the ways that schoolwork can also produce alienating effects. This activity, which provides students with a ‘lived experience’ of alienation, deepens their learning and serves to complement traditional teaching of Marx’s theory of alienation. Instructors look toward innovative pedagogy to teach social theory successfully – a subject that is commonly known to be dull or anxiety provoking (albeit intellectually stimulating) (Maghbouleh, Childress and Alamo 2015; Windsor and Carroll 2015). Our intent is to add to existing repertoires that engage with the pertinence of theory in everyday lives. We position this article within relevant literature on experiential learning, introduce Marx’s concept of alienation and describe the activity. We also present results from student responses to the use of this activity in our classrooms. We offer suggestions for future development and conclude by emphasising how experiential learning aids in the further understanding of not only Marx’s concept of alienation but also students’ experiences with alienation.



## Benefits of experiential learning

Experiential, situated and active learning are umbrella terms for exercises and activities that require students to engage emotionally and physically with classroom material (Harris, Harris and Fondren 2015; Wills, Brewster and Fulkerson 2005). Experiential learning assignments ask students to participate in activities that replicate real-world scenarios as a way of experiencing, and thus better understanding, what would otherwise remain abstract social science concepts. There are many benefits to this learning style. After all, knowledge is not only accrued through the accumulation of words and symbols but can also be attained through experience (Samudra 2008). Following diverse pedagogical innovations encourages communal learning by stepping away from an asymmetrical relationship between professors and students. In other words, experiential learning departs from the traditional mode of instruction where students are passive recipients of classroom instruction. With experiential learning activities, students are invited to assert an active role within the classroom community. This process empowers students and helps to level the power field in the classroom, establishing a greater understanding, or sense of community, among students and teachers. Students are better able to learn materials when the classroom evokes a community (Hirschy and Wilson 2002). Rather than marginalising students as the receivers of instruction, situated and experiential learning invite students to take on more responsibility for their education: to be a part of the lesson.

Second, students respond well to experiential learning. They better comprehend lessons and report more interest and desire to learn in lessons with experiential activities (Hawtrej 2007: 91). Hawtrej (2007) finds that roughly 60 per cent of 500 undergraduate finance students surveyed preferred experiential learning methods to traditional pedagogy. Similarly, Wright (2000) finds that over 80 per cent of students report positive learning benefits after even short segments of experiential learning.

Finally, experiential learning illuminates the connections between schooling and everyday experiences; it situates classroom content within students' lived experiences (Hirschy and Wilson 2002). Through these embodied sensory-motor learning experiences, content becomes alive: more meaningful, real and memorable for students (Harris, Harris and Fondren 2015; Wills, Brewster and Fulkerson 2005).



The activity described in this article applies experiential learning techniques to juxtapose the states of non-alienation and alienation. In providing these contrasting experiences, we aim to deepen students' understanding of the differences between the two states, as well as allow students to apply sociology by more fully integrating their schooling and life experiences. In what follows, we describe the sites of this research, the activity and the findings. We conclude by reflecting on how this activity further demonstrates the importance of experiential learning and conflict theory given the state of advanced capitalism and labour the world over.

## **Alienation**

Alienation occurs as a separation between the labourer and his or her labour. According to Marx,

The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him; it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien (1978: 72).

Alienation occurs as a separation: a fractured, improper, distanced or estranged relationship (Woodfin and Zarate 2009). This separation is not only manifest between a worker and the object of his/her labour, but can also occur at various points of work. For example, this division can be present between the worker and his/her own creative abilities, and between the worker and other labourers.

Alienation can take several forms, including alienation from one's labour product, alienation from the production process, alienation of the labourer from him or herself, and alienation of the labourer from other labourers (Marx 1978 [1844]). Alienation from the labour product occurs when a worker invests time and effort into crafting a product and then has the product taken and sold in order primarily to benefit another. The worker is further alienated from his/her labour as the worker completes routine, mindless tasks where human workers increasingly invoke the functionality of a machine. Engagement in routine tasks to complete an objective determined by an employer, not by the worker, further separates workers from their



creative abilities and what Marx termed their ‘species-being’. Finally, workers are forced to compete against one another for higher wages, thus alienating them from their shared interests as a class. Alienation from one’s labour product, alienation from the production process and alienation from the self (species-being) are highlighted in this article, though the activity can also be effective in reproducing the fourth feature of alienation, alienation of the labourer from other labourers.

Transnational corporations, which employ a large sector of the workforce, standardise production and service processes. This ‘McDonaldisation’ combines with Taylorism, or the scientific management of the workplace, to produce alienating forces, which extend throughout the labour market (Buroway 1979; Edwards 1979; Ritzer 2004). As examples, many service workers are given a script and have quotas and/or time standards to make. Ideas for improvement are often top-down and external to the daily, lived experience of labourers. As a result of these practices, the daily lives of many labourers are governed, monitored and controlled by those with little experience on the job. Under these work conditions repetition, uniformity and consistency become paramount and unique human attributes such as personal creativity are depressed and sometimes are lost altogether.

In sum, alienation remains a crucial component of capitalism. Heavy reliance on low skill and low paid labour characterise industrial relations in the United States, Europe and other parts of the world. The decline of unions (Western and Rosenfeld 2011) and the continuing global financial crisis suggest that despite the global massification of higher education, the current job market is defined by depressed wages and worker insecurity (Maghbouleh, Childress and Alamo 2015; Kalleberg 2009; Silva 2012). For the majority of labourers, autonomy and creativity are increasingly obsolete (Bartik and Houseman 2007).

The concept is no longer solely applicable to workers. Students are increasingly alienated through competitive and objective measures of aptitude. Critics of capitalism and social reproduction theorists argue that this devaluing of creativity and autonomy serves to promote capitalism and begins as early as elementary school. Working-class students are more likely to be given mechanical and routine tasks than tasks that require creativity or independence, preparing these students for subordinate careers, where their job performance will be predominately based on task fulfilment. The school system trains working-class students to be complacent and passive receptors



of instruction, rather than creators. Conversely, children at more affluent, bourgeois schools are given tasks that develop a high degree of autonomy, inculcating skills, including confidence, which will enable these students to negotiate various terrains of the labour market, and potentially serve as societal leaders (Anyon 1980). In this way, the educational system reproduces a divide between dominant and subordinate classes, and schooling processes perpetuate the societal class divisions (Bowles and Gintis 1976).

Further, higher education has continually become more bureaucratic and corporate (Maghbouleh, Childress and Alamo 2015; Meier and Wood 2004; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). How can one-size-fits-all accountability, teaching to the test *and* student differentiation all be realised (Brimijoin 2005; Meier and Wood 2004)? Increased attention to exam outcomes is coupled with classrooms that do not require students to produce subjective knowledge: students must produce ‘nothing’ of individual substance (Sidorkin 2004). The focus on objective achievement does not end at the college gates. Postsecondary students are expected to produce reports, essays, papers, exams and presentations that have no exchange value beyond the immediate assignment and little to no application beyond the classroom. In sum, many students experience alienation in education on a daily basis. In contrast, our classroom activity provides classroom space for students to process both non-alienating and alienating experiences. In so doing, we enable students to centre their own experience – their species-being – in the learning process.

## **Data and methods**

### *Setting*

The data derive from a quasi-experimental design implemented in Fall 2014 in a total of eight classrooms across two public colleges (a two-year college and a four-year college) in New York City, U.S.A. (Trochim and Donnelly 2007). The four-year college, herein referenced as New York Teaching College (NYTC), enrolls over 16,000 students. NYTC has an overall retention rate of 84.2 per cent, and a four-year completion rate of 24.4 per cent. The two-year public college, herein referenced as New York Community College (NYCC), enrolls approximately 11,000 students. NYCC’s first-year retention rate of 58 per cent is slightly higher than the national average at two-year colleges. Both schools are urban colleges where most of the students are non-white, and the first in their families to attend college.



Students self-selected into each of the eight classes (fewer than forty students per class) through normal campus registration processes and we designated four classes as ‘experimental’ and four classes as ‘control’. All students in the experimental classes were informed about the experiment and took part in the activity during a classroom lesson. During the assignment process, we kept the control and experimental classes as similar as possible. The experimental and control classes at both institutions were similar in terms of student demographics – class level, gender, race/ethnicity and final grades – as well as institutional characteristics, such as class size and classroom location. This project received exempt status approval from the Institutional Review Boards at all schools involved, and was supported by department chairs.

**Table 1.** Selected demographic characteristics

	NYTC	NYCC
<b>Enrolment</b>	16,000	11,000
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	62%	57%
Male	38%	43%
<b>Race</b>		
White	41%	3%
Non-White	58%	97%

*Activity Part I: alienation from the labour product*

In the experimental classes, students prepared for this experiential activity by reading about Marx’s concept of alienation. All classes across the two sites were responsible for reading Dalton Conley’s (2013) discussion of alienation.<sup>1</sup> After the reading was due, and prior to the activity, we administered a quiz to test reading comprehension. This pre-test was later compared with their post-activity comprehension (post-test and methods are discussed below). At the start of the activity, we asked students to take out a sheet of paper (preferably one with as few lines as possible) and at least one writing utensil. Next, we asked the students to imagine that they were amazing artists. The paper in front of them was not an ordinary sheet of paper. Rather, it was a large, empty canvas of the finest quality. The writing utensils at their disposal were not ordinary pens and pencils; rather they were artists’ tools, especially designed for their particular craft. In other words, students could be as creative as they wanted to be with this assignment.

Loss of creativity stands at the core of Marx’s critique of capitalism. According to Marx, ‘free, conscious activity is man’s species-character’ (1978 [1844]: 76). Art transcends cultures and time, and captures the ability for



humans to be creative and expressive. Throughout history, art represents human potential and is thus a fundamental illustration of our species-being. Human ability to reflect on our life activities, including the creation of art, differentiates us from animals and, according to Marx, defines our humanity. By asking students to be creative with their artistic expression, we ask them to tap into their species-being.

We provide some guidelines by instructing students to create a work of art for someone or something they care about deeply. This can be a person, an animal, a place or a cause. They could draw a picture, a portrait or engage some other art form. Sometimes students will ask questions, such as 'Can I draw a slogan?' or 'Does it have to be to just one person?' We reply that they can set their own rules. In so doing, we highlight the divide between this activity and the normal routine in the classroom where students are less autonomous. Students will often take this instruction to heart by creating works of art for their siblings, parents and other loved ones. The goal is to liberate students to experience non-alienation and express themselves through artistic endeavours that are personal, creative and meaningful for them.

Some students may display opposition to drawing at the outset of this activity. For these students, we suggest writing a poem or a letter, or possibly manipulating the paper into a shape. They can envision themselves as poets, crafters of fine art or even papier-mâché artists. After all, the point is not about what they produce – rather it is to allow students to tap into their 'species-being'. In the main, students were responsive when we implemented this activity at our field sites, but where students resisted we used deflection as teaching moments. By being 'forced' to comply with an activity in which they have no interest, resistant students experienced at least one component of alienation – being forced to do something they do not want to do.

We do not set an initial time limit and if students ask we avoid giving objective measurements of time. We walk around the classroom to appraise student engagement. Hovering over them replicates aspects of Taylorism and we find it helpful to do so, in part, to get a sense of the student's investment in the activity. After about twelve to fifteen minutes, when a substantial portion of students appears to have a near finished product, we move to sharing and discussing.

### *Discussion*

During this part of the activity, we ask volunteers to share their artwork with the class. We ask them to explain what inspired their particular piece of art. We permit as many students to share as they desire. After this period, which can last from five to ten minutes, we thank the students for their time and energy. We then tell them we appreciate their work, particularly because we are capitalists and they have been labouring for us. We state that we will collect their works of art and sell them at a profit. At this point, students are experiencing alienation from the product of their labour, and they start moaning and groaning. Some will even articulate that we are ‘stealing’ the fruits of their labour. We tell them not to worry because we were impressed with their work and want them to return the next day. We then explain that we will provide them with just enough compensation to get a bit of food and shelter for the night.

We now pause the simulation and ask students about their perceptions of and experiences with the activity to this point. Do they think it is fair for us to collect their artwork? Why or why not? How did they feel when they were working on the projects? How do they feel now? We ask them to relate this initial part of the activity to Marx and the concept of alienation from the labour product. Can they think of ways that the economy could exist without this alienation?

### *Activity Part II: alienation from the labour process and the self*

After the discussion, we ask students to take out another sheet of paper. This time, we tell them that while we are impressed by the profits generated thus far, we think they can do better. We then ask them to divide their new canvas into six mini-canvases so they can make six smaller replicas of their original work. If students complain about the limited space, we tell them to do their best. Finally, we add that they only have three minutes to complete this task. We start the timer, and instruct the students to begin. Students are now experiencing alienation from the labour process. Walking around the classroom, we witness changes in the students’ demeanour. Some students will say aloud to themselves, ‘I am so stressed!’ and others appear visibly upset, while others, recognising an impossible task, express their desire to quit. On more than one occasion, we caught students staring at us, waiting to make eye contact, then shaking their heads. No doubt the students are



stressed with the time limit and increased quantity of production. Additionally, their relationship to their instructors also changes, as we essentially force them to disconnect from the labour process.

We also begin to notice a change in the interactions between students in the second part of the activity. Whereas during the first part of the activity, students typically talk to each other, share materials, and socialise, students are now narrowly focused on replicating their works and meeting the deadline. They no longer share their work or work materials, nor do they engage in conversations with one another. Students experience alienation from their 'species-being' and each other. The time limit disproportionately burdens those students who produced highly intricate and creative originals, rewarding replicability rather than creativity and meaning. Indeed, students are now rewarded on their ability to follow directions, work efficiently and fulfil their employers' demands rather than their own.

### *Discussion*

After three minutes, we tell students the time is up. Without instruction, most will instinctively begin to pass their artwork to the instructors, a further indication of how thoroughly they have experienced alienation from their labour. We then ask students to share their reactions to this latter part of the activity. What happened to their connection to their product? How did they feel this time when they were working on their art work? How do these feelings compare with the time before? How is the new system different from the old system? Students often describe feeling less connected to the work. They mention feeling rushed to replicate their artwork six different times. Some express feeling their hearts beating faster as they neared the end of three minutes, while others express embarrassment over the degraded quality of their work. Then we ask them to relate this second part of the activity to Marx and the concept of alienation from the production process. Specifically, we ask: can these processes exist without the experience of alienation? How did it feel to have the work process externally regulated? We also ask students to discuss how their relationship to their work changed. When they reproduced their work for sale by their instructor, how did this change the meaning of the work, and their relationship to it? These follow-up questions allow students to connect Marx's alienation to their own experiences inside and outside of the classroom. Overall, this activity took between 30 and 45 minutes of class time, inclusive of discussions.



## Results

In Spring 2013, forty-one students from the NYTC *Introduction to Sociology* and *Classical Social Theory* classes were tested on their understanding of alienation without using the activity.<sup>1</sup> The results from these classes served as the control counterparts for two Fall 2013 classes by the same name, taught by the same instructor Pan, at NYTC. Classes in both the spring and fall semesters met twice per week. Experimental and control classes enrolled the same number of students – 35 for *Introduction to Sociology* and 20 for *Classical Social Theory*. While the *Introduction to Sociology* class was comprised of mostly non-majors, there were mainly sociologists in *Classical Social Theory* as the course is a requirement for their major. Slightly more women than men enrol in introductory classes at the university and the sociology majors at NYTC are predominately women. There were no noticeable differences in the student demographics (race and/or ethnicity, gender, class level, final grades) between the control and experimental classes.

Marx's theory of alienation was also taught in four *Introduction to Sociology* classes by Molina at NYCC during the same Fall 2013 semester. Two of the classes took part in the activity, while the other two served as controls. *Introduction to Sociology* is a lower-level course with no prerequisites or prior courses required for enrolment. All classes met twice per week and enrolled 35 students each. Students enrolled in *Introduction to Sociology* majored in a variety of subjects though most students were Liberal Arts majors. Demographically, the students reflected the overall makeup of the college, with no significant differences between the control and experimental classes in terms of race and/or ethnicity, gender, class level or final grades.

### *Learning outcomes and assessment*

All students took a quiz on alienation at the beginning of their respective classes; afterwards, the experimental classes took part in the activity while the control classes received instruction only. Roughly one week after the lesson, all students were given an exam with questions on alienation. The following open-ended questions were asked of all students on the quiz prior to the lecture on alienation (or lecture and activity for experimental classes), and again on the exam: (1) Define alienation from the labour process, (2) Define alienation from the labour product, and (3) Explain how labour alienates the worker from him/herself. On the exam, we included



a fourth applied question, ‘Describe a time when you experienced alienation’.<sup>2</sup> We expected that students who participated in the activity would better be able to answer questions 1–3 since they experienced those forms of alienation during the second part of the activity. We also expected that some students would refer directly to the activity when describing a time that they experienced alienation, either as the sole example, or as a way of making sense of their real-world experiences.

We draw on data from the first three questions for our quantitative analyses. Students either answered correctly or incorrectly on questions one to three in both the pre-activity quiz and the post-activity exam. In order to receive credit, students had to demonstrate not only an understanding of alienation and its applicability, but also correctly differentiate alienation from the labour *process* and alienation from the labour *product*. As the questions were open-ended, we permitted the students to express their understanding of the concepts with definitions and/or examples. A right answer for each of the three questions would reflect an understanding of alienation as discussed in the reading and in class. For instance, a correct answer for ‘define alienation from the labour product’ would include discussion of how workers have an incomplete knowledge of what they are producing. A correct answer for ‘define alienation from the labour product’ could include a discussion about how modern workers must work to survive with little to no input as to how, when or why they work, or the appropriation of a product by and for capital, as examples. Finally, a correct answer for ‘explain how labour alienates the worker from him/herself’ would explain how labour restrains our inherent creativity. The instructors used a relatively rigid standard of correct/incorrect to assess comprehension on both the pre- and post-tests. To foster inter-grader reliability, Pan and Molina met before administering and grading the exams to establish grading rubrics. The data presented here include the aggregated scores for each question on the post-tests (comparison of both groups), and the pre- and post-tests for experimental groups only.

Beyond grading or marking student’s work, we also analysed anonymous responses from the applied questions on the post-test. While a full qualitative analysis is beyond the scope of this article, we include these findings in the results below to illustrate how students interpret and apply Marx’s theory of alienation to their own lives. Further, this qualitative material evidences how the activity meets sociological learning goals and discipline benchmarks, and demonstrates the potential depth of this activity for bridging between education and students’ experiences on and off campus.

*Results: NYTC*

Quantitative results comparing the exams between the control and experimental classes indicate the activity’s effectiveness across both campuses. From Table 2, we see that 73 per cent of the NYTC students who took part in the activity answered Question 1 (Define alienation from the labour process) correctly compared with 49 per cent of the students that did not participate in the activity. Eighty-three per cent of the students in the experimental classes also answered Question 2 (Define alienation from the labour product) correctly compared with 49 per cent in the control classes. Finally, 85 per cent of the students who participated in the activity answered question three (species-being) correctly. Significance tests (two-tailed Z-tests for differences in proportions of answers correct) indicate significance at the .05 level for Question 1 (Labour process) and, at the .01 level for Question 2 (Labour product).

Table 3 shows the pre- and post-test scores for the experimental classes. Twenty-four per cent of the students answered Question 1 (Labour process) correctly on the pre-activity quiz, and 73 per cent answered the same question correctly after taking part in the activity. The students showed similar improvements in performance for Questions 2 (Labour product) and 3

**Table 2.** Four-year college: exam results (% correct)

	No activity N = 41	With activity N = 50
Question 1: Labour process	49%	73%*
Question 2: Labour product	49%	83%**
Question 3: Alienation and self	--%	85% <sup>NA</sup>

\* Significance level  $p < .05$ , (two-tailed) Z-test for the difference in proportions

\*\* Significance level  $p < .01$ , (two-tailed) Z-test for the difference in proportions

**Table 3.** Four-year college: pre-test and post-test (% correct)

	Quiz (pre-activity) N = 46	Final exam (post-activity) N = 50
Question 1: Labour process	24%	73%**
Question 2: Labour product	22%	83%**
Question 3: Alienation and self	28%	85%**

\* Significance level  $p < .05$ , (two-tailed) Z-test for the difference in proportions

\*\* Significance level  $p < .01$ , (two-tailed) Z-test for the difference in proportions



(Explain how labour alienates the worker from him/herself) with 22 per cent of the students answering Question 2 (Labour product) correctly pre-activity, and 83 per cent correct post-activity. Further, 28 per cent answered Question 3 (Alienation and self) correctly pre-activity, and 85 per cent answered correctly after the activity. All three results were significant at the .01 level.

### *Results: NYCC*

Students at NYCC who participated in the activity showed similar improvements on all questions compared with the control students, and also compared to their pre-activity quiz. As seen in Table 4, 58 per cent of students who participated in the activity answered Question 1 (Define alienation from the labour process) correctly, compared with 33 per cent of students that did not. Sixty-seven per cent of the experimental classes answered Question 2 (Define alienation from the labour product) correctly compared with 44 per cent from the control classes. The difference in proportion of correct answers between the experimental and control classes for Questions 1 and 2 was significant at the .05 level for a two-tailed test. More students answered Question 3 (Alienation and self) correctly in the activity class (56 per cent correct) than the non-activity classes (52 per cent correct). However, this difference was not significant.

After taking part in the activity, students' answers to all three questions improved compared with the same question on the pre-test. From Table 5, we see that 58 per cent of the students answered Question 1 (Labour process) correctly after the activity, compared with 38 per cent who answered correctly prior to the activity. Sixty-seven per cent of the students answered Question 2 (Labour product) correctly after the activity, and 66 per cent answered the same question correctly before the activity. Finally, 56 per cent of students answered Question 3 (Alienation and self) correctly compared with 36 per cent before the activity. The difference in performance was significant for both Questions 1 and 3, but not for Question 2.

It is impossible to know exactly why students did not improve on Question 2 (Labour product) at the same rate as they did for the other questions, but we underscore that the post-activity scores across all three questions are similar. And, although the exam scores at NYCC are lower than we would like, and there were insignificant score increases across all questions, we should appreciate two contextual elements. First, the grading for these questions was particularly nuanced. To receive full credit for Questions 1 and 2,

**Table 4.** Four-year college: exam results (% correct)

	No activity N = 52	With activity N = 55
Question 1: Labour process	33 %	58 % *
Question 2: Labour product	44 %	67 % *
Question 3: Alienation and self	52 %	56 %

\* Significance level  $p < .05$ , (two-tailed) Z-test for the difference in proportions

**Table 5.** Two-year college: pre-test and post-test (% correct)

	Quiz (pre-activity) N = 50	Final exam (post-activity) N = 55
Question 1: Labour process	38 %	58 % *
Question 2: Labour product	66 %	67 %
Question 3: Alienation and self	36 %	56 % *

\* Significance level  $p < .05$ , (two-tailed) Z-test for the difference in proportions

students had to demonstrate proficiency in both alienation from the labour process (Question 1) and alienation from the labour product (Question 2). Understandably, some students conflated these dimensions of alienation on the exam and thus did not receive full credit. If we simply tested students for their understanding of *alienation*, the scores may have been much improved. Second, this was the first time that the instructors implemented the activity. As educators, we know that our prowess with teaching modules improves with time, practice and experience. Given these circumstances, we are pleased that a majority of the students at both schools were able accurately to describe alienation from the labour product and process after the activity. Through repeated renditions, we expect to see improved scores for all three questions – we suspect that if this research design were repeated, the changes in scores across all questions would be significant and positive.

The data consistently show improvement after the activity for students at both institutions, which suggests that the activity was well received. Although we cannot infer causality, we endeavoured to keep constant the experimental and control classes. As discussed earlier, there were no noticeable differences in the gender, age, exposure to the labour market, race/ethnicity, class-rank or socioeconomic status composition of the student body across the experimental and control classes. In sum, our quantitative results indicate that this activity is an effective tool that can complement



traditional classroom methods for teaching alienation. Further, and particularly pertinent, given the topic, we encourage this activity because of its experiential, non-traditional approach.

*Results: qualitative*

The activity's effectiveness is further supported when we turn to student answers to the fourth, applied question. This question, administered as part of the exams, required students to 'describe a time when they experienced alienation'. We focus on the experimental classes' results to corroborate this activity's impact. On both campuses the majority of students (NYTC 64 per cent; NYCC 78 per cent) received full marks on their responses to this prompt.

Major themes emerged from the students' narrative responses that related alienation to their experiences as workers who lack knowledge of the labour process (including alienation from product and process), and/or as workers who are unable to, and/or discouraged from using their individual skill and creativity (alienation from self/species-being). Overwhelmingly, student responses evidenced how the activity facilitated students' ability to use their sociological imagination to connect sociology to their personal lives. Likewise, a majority of the sample evaluated their tasks as workers in society. Across both campuses, almost all of the students identified alienation in their own lives. In all cases, students demonstrated their ability to think critically. One such student wrote:

When I used to work at a wedding hall as a bus boy, my job was always the same. I would pick up people's plates, clean up tables, set up for desserts and dinner, and even clean up the wedding hall when the party was over. I was alienated from other things like how the food was made, or what is inside the food or even how it is cooked ... I would have to run to a waiter to answer a question that a customer asked me.

And, another student relays,

When I worked at a shipping company, I would make the paperwork that was needed either to pick up, deliver, or ship something overseas. I knew what the item was, but I never saw the item. It became a repetitive process where I wouldn't even really [think about] what I was writing ... I didn't make the product. I never even saw it.



Akin to a factory, service workers have no personal connection to the end product. Lacking this knowledge, student workers like the aforementioned did not feel connected to their labour product. Here, the students were not bound by regurgitating definitions. Rather, the students connected their lives to the concept of alienation.

Aside from tangible products, some students work in environments where their end product is new knowledge or a new experience. The ‘product’ cannot be seen, but can be impactful. One student wrote of his/her experience working with children,

I worked at an after school/summer programme for about three years with children ages six through 10. Every teacher had a set schedule we had to follow in the classroom every day. I wasn’t allowed to do anything spontaneous with the children. My first year there, I would constantly suggest new ideas to the administrator and she would say ‘no’. Eventually, I stopped bothering and just stuck to the schedule.

Although this student had creative ideas to share with the administrator, s/he had to keep to the standards of the programme. Another student, who works in a doctor’s office says,

In my office, we have to see about fifty patients a day, and it’s only with one working doctor. I am a technician, [and I] have to get patients ready to see the doctor. Sometimes I don’t have time to give patients thorough exams because I have other patients waiting. Doing this routine every day, I feel like a robot who just has to do things very fast! This makes me less interested in my job.

For the first student, the excitement of working with children was soon replaced by rote tasks, and s/he ‘just stuck to the schedule’. Similarly, the second student felt like ‘a robot who just has to do things very fast!’ Stifling creativity at the expense of maximising profits created workers who were uninterested in their jobs. They became automatons, as they were discouraged from tapping into their species-being.

Beyond connecting theory to their lives, students also discussed how they lacked personal connection to the labour product or process. Similarly, many students complained that their jobs did not make use of their previous knowledge or creativity. Here, a student described his/her job as a room attendant:



I just started a new job as a room attendant in a hotel. As a room attendant, I must clean the room, fix, and dress the bed neatly. I know how to dress a bed, but not to dress the bed the way the hotel wanted it to be. I wasn't trained during that time and didn't know any of the requirements I needed to know ... So, even though I knew how to dress a bed, I didn't know how to dress it in the orderly fashion that the hotel required.

Often, labourers are rewarded for their ability to follow directions and orders. In this example, the student illustrated how his or her knowledge was not valued, or wanted. In short, this student felt 'forced' to be in a place with which s/he was not familiar. The student reflected the achievement of learning goals by identifying how structure impacted on his/her individual behaviour as a worker and how knowledge intersected with and was influenced by economic structures (McKinney et al. 2004; The Australian Sociological Association 2012; The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2007).

Students did not limit their applicability of alienation to the workforce. Roughly one-quarter of the sampled students explained how their school-work produced alienating effects. One student wrote,

I used to go to art school. My teacher asked me to create something unusual – something I've never seen before. She gave us two weeks to complete the painting. I worked on it every chance I had. After stressing for two full weeks, I handed the painting to her. I never heard anything about it after that. I never received my grade, and I never saw the painting again. I was alienated from the labour product as the painting was taken away from me, and I felt that the labour was controlled, and I lost the species-being – my passion and individuality. I never went back to painting.

The alienation activity described in this manuscript may prompt students to process some of the negative and alienating situations they endured. These trigger moments are not easily gleaned from simple definition-based quizzes. In the above example, the student's experience of alienation paralleled the classroom activity. The alienation from his or her painting/labour product was so profound that the student disconnected from an important element of his/her species-being and stopped painting altogether. These reflections imply comprehension of the concept and, importantly, convey the relevance of the activity by showing how students are able to use this activity to link sociology to their lives in very personal ways.



Ten students specifically referenced the classroom activity to explain a time that they experienced alienation. One such student wrote:

When Professor Pan asked the class to create any drawing we wanted and then told us to give it in so she could sell it, it was an example of alienation from the labour product. I worked so hard on my product only to have it taken away and exploited. I no longer felt any personal tie to my drawing or how I created it. Professor Pan had labelled it a product, not a creative drawing I did my best in making. Then, Professor Pan asked us to recreate the same product six times in three minutes! This was an example of alienation from the labour process. I no longer put creative expression into my drawing because it wasn't a personal experience. I felt pressured by time, and did a horrible job with each drawing.

Another student wrote, with regard to the activity,

Initially, we were given a fair set amount of time to do as we pleased, whether it was a drawing or poem. Later, we were told the rights to our products belonged to the professor (manager/boss), and we had to replicate the work several times with a time constraint. The objective of this activity was to replicate the feeling of alienation that the proletariat/wage workers faced. During the second portion of the activity, we no longer felt enlightened by our own craft, which we worked on from start to finish. Instead, we were mere cogs in a machine. Under a quota and time limit, we felt alienated, robotic, stressed, and exploited.

Not only do these two examples illustrate how the activity aids student comprehension of alienation, they also demonstrate students' ability to identify different alienating states. The second student in particular poignantly summarises the experience: 'we were mere cogs in a machine. Under a quota and time limit, we felt alienated, robotic, stressed and exploited' – an answer that we feel would have pleased Marx himself.

In sum, these qualitative examples, representative of student responses, demonstrated students' achievement of a variety of learning goals and benchmarks: demonstrating the relevance of alienation in their lives, engagement in critical thinking and a demonstrated understanding of how social structure can impact individuals' lives. The majority of students who took part in this activity demonstrated an understanding of alienation and were able to apply this concept to their lives, signalling the benefit of experiential learning for understanding oftentimes abstract theoretical concepts.



## **Limitations, future developments and applicability**

Since Thiele originally piloted this activity, we have had over two years to implement it in our classrooms and identify some limitations of our findings. First, the data were collected from two U.S. university campuses with predominantly non-white, low-income, first-generation college students. This is not the 'traditional' profile of U.S. college students, which could have facilitated 'buy in', and the activity's success. However, this activity has been successfully carried out at other U.S. universities with more traditional profiles as well, so perhaps the demographics of the students are irrelevant. What may be important is the role of the instructor. A second limitation is the instructor's enthusiasm for administering the activity. The instructor needs to play the role of a non-traditional instructor and a capitalist. If the instructor displays low interest in the activity, it is likely that students will be sceptical. Moreover, our experience has been that the instructor 'improves' the more s/he uses the activity. There may thus be a learning curve that limits the effectiveness of the activity that could discourage both students and instructors especially if this is the first time that the instructor is using this teaching tool. This activity is also best done when the instructor has established rapport with the students. As with any classroom activity, without rapport, students are usually reluctant to take part. Thus, this activity is most successfully executed after the students and instructors have spent considerable time together in the classroom.

Beyond limitations, there are also ways to extend this activity further. It can be further developed to incorporate other aspects of Marx's theory of alienation. For example, students could be placed into different groups in the second alienating exercise in order to demonstrate better how workers experience alienation from other workers. The skilled labourers could be the only group allowed to use marker pens, the semi-skilled only given pens or pencils and the unskilled group could be laid off and told that they were not needed for the season. This extension would force students to compete with their peers for limited resources. By reflecting on this situation, students may gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of alienation in particular and class conflict more generally.

While the data only reflect instruction that took place in small to moderate-sized classrooms (fewer than forty students per class), we envision that this activity may suit large lecture-style classes, which more closely resemble factories. In such classrooms, the instructors could 'patrol' the 'factory floor'



and act as supervisors during the second part of the activity. While further research would determine this activity's effectiveness in large classrooms, this kind of activity may be useful for educators who wish to break free of the normative lecture model.

## Discussion and conclusion

Although alienation might be nearly ubiquitous in the current socioeconomic system, it is often nameless. Beyond naming alienation, students compared and contrasted two experiences during this activity: one alienating and one not. The quantitative results suggest that this technique was effective, as students in the experiential groups better grasped the concept of alienation compared to those in the control groups and also retained the knowledge over time. Qualitative responses supplement the quantitative findings to demonstrate how students use this activity to connect this concept to their experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Further, our activity meets several of the British Sociological Association, The Australian Sociological Association and the American Sociological Association's (our home discipline) learning goals. As Marx is not exclusively taught in sociology, this activity would be beneficial in other social science classrooms as well. Our findings suggest that the activity may help students understand, retain and apply Marx's concept of alienation.

Our findings further confirm the importance of experiential learning in the social sciences. Students who participated in the activity showed a higher level of comprehension and retention of the concept of alienation and were able to link their classroom learning with their lived experience. The activity provides students with a discrete and memorable moment that we hope will stay with them long after they depart from the classroom.

According to Marx, labour must be voluntary and creative in order for it to be non-alienating. Non-alienated labourers are inspired to tap into their internal needs and desires (i.e. species-being). Labour products are an expression of one's species-being, not an object that controls them. Under alienating circumstances, the worker experiences a separation from his/her labour, the product of his/her labour, from other labourers and ultimately from him/herself. This activity challenges students and instructors alike to consider the kind of work we do inside the classroom, and how it too can produce alienating effects. Understanding these forces may allow students and instructors not only to imagine non-alienating labour and labour rela-



tions but to imagine ways of achieving them. These are important notions to ponder, especially for instructors who care about student achievement in and outside the classroom, and hope that they always have jobs that are big enough for their spirits (Berkman 2004).

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Drs Kassia Wossick-Correa, Kathleen Lowney, Derek Merrill, Nicholas Valdez and the anonymous reviewers for comments on early versions of this manuscript. We would also like to acknowledge the helpful feedback we received from our presentations of this work at the Pacific Sociological Association and the Society for the Study of Social Problems.



---

**Megan Thiele** is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Interdisciplinary Social Sciences at San Jose State University. She received her PhD from the University of California-Irvine. She teaches courses on sociology of education, stratification, the environment and quantitative methods. She conducts research at the intersection of education, inequality and policy.

Email: [megan.thiele@sjsu.edu](mailto:megan.thiele@sjsu.edu)

**Yung-Yi Diana Pan** is an assistant professor of sociology at the City University of New York-Brooklyn College and received her PhD from the University of California-Irvine. Immigrant adaptation, race and ethnicity, professional socialisation and law and society anchor her research interests. She teaches race and ethnicity, immigration, theory, qualitative methods and introductory sociology courses.

Email: [ypan@brooklyn.cuny.edu](mailto:ypan@brooklyn.cuny.edu)

**Devin Molina** is an assistant professor of sociology at the City University of New York-Bronx Community College. He received his PhD from the University of California-Santa Barbara. He teaches courses on social inequality and introductory sociology and anthropology courses. His research focuses on immigration, racial inequality, policing and white supremacy.

Email: [devinmolina@gmail.com](mailto:devinmolina@gmail.com)



## Notes

1. These courses are both introductory-level courses.
2. We do not have data for the control classes at NYTC for the third or fourth questions.

## References

- Anyon, J. (1980) 'Social class and the hidden curriculum of work', *Journal of Education* 162, no. 1: 67–92.
- Bartik, T.J. and Houseman, S.N. (2007) 'A future of good jobs? America's challenge in the global economy', *Employment Research* 14, no. 4: 1–3.
- Berkman, L.F. (2004) 'The health divide', *Contexts* 3, no. 4: 38–43.
- Bowles, S. and Gintis, H. (1976) *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and Contradictions of Economic Life*, New York: Basic Books.
- Brimijoin, K. (2005) 'Differentiation and high-stakes testing: an oxymoron?', *Theory into Practice* 44, no. 3: 254–61.
- Buroway, M. (1979) *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Conley, D. (2013) 'Karl Marx', in D. Conley (ed.) *You May Ask Yourself: An Introduction to Thinking Like a Sociologist*, 3rd ed., New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 545–48.
- Edwards, R. (1979) *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Basic Books.
- Foster, J.B. (1999) 'Marx's theory of metabolic rift: classical foundations for environmental sociology', *The American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2: 366–405.
- Harris, D.A., Harris, W.M. and Fondren, K.M. (2015) 'Everybody eats: using hunger banquets to teach about issues of global hunger and inequality', *Teaching Sociology* 43, no. 2: 1–11.
- Hawtrej, K. (2007) 'Using experiential learning techniques', *The Journal of Economic Education* 38, no. 2: 143–52.
- Hirschy, A.S. and Wilson, M.E. (2002) 'The sociology of the classroom and its influence on student learning', *Peabody Journal of Education* 77, no. 3: 85–100.
- Kalleberg, A.L. (2009) 'Precarious work, insecure workers: employment relations in transition', *American Sociological Review* 74, no. 1: 1–22.
- Maghbouleh, N., Childress, C. and Alamo, C. (2015) 'Our table factory, inc': learning Marx through role play', *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences* 8, no. 2: 5–28.
- Marx, K. (1978) [1844] 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', in R.C. Tucker (ed.) *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 66–125.



- McKinney, K., Howery, C.B., Strand, K.J., Kain, E.L. and White Berheide, C. (2004) *Learning and the Sociology Major Updated: Meeting the Challenge of Teaching Sociology in the Twenty-first Century: A Report of the American Sociological Association Task Force on the Undergraduate Major*, Washington, DC: American Sociological Association <[http://www.asanet.org/documents/teaching/pdfs/Lib\\_Learning\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.asanet.org/documents/teaching/pdfs/Lib_Learning_FINAL.pdf)> (accessed 4 August 2014).
- Meier, D. and Wood, G. (eds) (2004) *Many Children Left Behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is Damaging our Children and Our Schools*, Boston: Beacon Press.
- Parrotta, K.L. and Buck, A.R. (2013) 'Making Marx accessible: understanding alienated labor through experiential learning', *Teaching Sociology* 41, no. 4: 360–9.
- Ritzer, G. (2004) *The McDonaldization of Society*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Samudra, J.K. (2008) 'Memory in our body: thick participation and the translation of kinesthetic experience', *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 4: 665–81.
- Shantz, A., Alfes, K., Bailey, C. and Soane, E. (2015) 'Drivers and outcomes of work alienation: reviving a concept', *Journal of Management Inquiry* 24, no. 4: 382–93.
- Sidorkin, A.M. (2004) 'In the event of learning: alienation and participative thinking in education', *Educational Theory* 54, no. 3: 251–62.
- Silva, J.M. (2012) 'Constructing adulthood in an age of uncertainty', *American Sociological Review* 78, no. 4: 505–22.
- Slaughter, S. and Rhoades, G. (2004) *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State and Higher Education*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- The Australian Sociological Association (2012) *Sociology: Threshold Learning Outcomes*, Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology <<http://www.tasa.org.au/uploads/2011/12/Threshold-Learning-Outcomes-for-Sociology-final.pdf>> (accessed 1 August 2014).
- The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2007) *Sociology*, Southgate House, <<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Subject-benchmark-statement-Sociology.pdf>> (accessed 1 August 2014).
- Trochim, W.M.K. and Donnelly, J.P. (2007) *The Research Methods Knowledge Base*, 3rd ed., Cincinnati, OH: Atomic Dog Publishing. <<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/quasiexp.php>> (accessed 12 May 2014).
- Welch, P. (2006) 'Feminist pedagogy revisited', *Learning and Teaching in the Social Sciences* 3, no. 3: 171–99.
- Western, B. and Rosenfeld, J. (2011) 'Unions, norms, and the rise in U.S. wage inequality', *American Sociological Review* 76, no. 4: 513–37.
- Wills, J.B., Brewster, Z.W. and Fulkerson, G.M. (2005) 'The stratification puzzle: an active-learning exercise in hard work and success', *Teaching Sociology* 33, no. 4: 389–95.
- Windsor, E.J. and Carroll, A.M. (2015) 'The bourgeoisie dream factory: teaching Marx's theory of alienation through an experiential activity', *Teaching Sociology* 43, no. 1: 61–7.



Woodfin, R. and Zarate, O. (2009) *Marxism: A Graphic Guide*, United Kingdom: Icon Books.

Wright, M.C. (2000) 'Getting more out of less: the benefits of short-term experiential learning in undergraduate sociology courses', *Teaching Sociology* 28, no. 2: 116-26.