Identifying Gendered Agency:

Our daily lives are intricately shaped by gender. In order to get students to interrogate the various ways gender norms—or students’ resistance to such norms—permeate and structure their lives, I experiment teaching Introduction to Women’s Studies in a different fashion than many instructors in the field. Most instructors take what is known as the “add-women-and-stir approach.” This approach encourages instructors to teach a survey course, wherein students are taught the role of women across the traditional disciplines, such as history, English Literature, cultural anthropology, sociology, and psychology. In my teaching, I diverge from this survey approach because I believe what makes the interdisciplinary field of Women’s and Gender Studies unique is its ability to teach students how to connect macro-level social structures, such as our capitalist economy, with their micro-level daily-life choices and actions, such as how and from where they consume goods and services produced in a capitalist economy, and how their consumption patterns differ depending on their social positions within the categories of gender, race, and socioeconomic class.

My aim with this rubric is to measure students’ diverse perspectives concerning what constitutes agency across a variety of different historical, social, economic, and geopolitical contexts. In Women’s and Gender studies, agency has a dual-meaning: (1) to act, and (2) the social and cultural conditions within which one acts. Agency is theorized by feminist scholars as a more sophisticated understanding of political action and empowerment. Agency designates how our freedom of choice (something highly valued in the United States) is always limited by the choices given us. (If there are thirty brands of cereal in the grocery store, however much we may want to purchase the thirty-first option, we can only choose from the thirty preexisting options. This is true for all decisions we make, big and small.) Agency also demarcates a view of action for feminist scholars that sees the actions of women in the context of their particular societies and cultures. This is important because if an Iranian woman moves to the United States and decides after a month or so after living here to remove her burqa, many persons in the United States might not think much of it. If anything, many U.S. citizens may applaud her decision. But, if she chooses to remove her burqa in Iran, she could be severely punished. Thus, the successful student understands that actions carry different political weight and meaning in varying social and cultural contexts.

Profile of an Agency-literate Student:

- An agency-literate student has a more sophisticated understanding of agency than simply action by itself. Actions taken always need to be understood in the social and cultural context of their emergence.
An agency-literate student is able to identify that in differing geographical contexts, the same action can have a different meaning and a different level of political force. Identifying these differences is crucial for developing a more accurate interpretation of the action.

An agency-literate student is able to find the value in any action geared toward empowerment, however small and inconsequential that action might initially appear. (For instance, in a particular export-processing zone in Honduras, where there are a lot of sweatshops that employ women, it is considered a sign of status and empowerment for women to go to work in the factories with tight dresses and high heels. It is usually the first time in these women’s lives that they are able to afford something they like with their own money; thus, their decision to wear what we would consider to be highly uncomfortable work clothes, especially for factory work, can be interpreted as an empowering decision for them. Again, this interpretation of empowering action is contingent upon cultural context. Here, in the United States, the same decision made by factory workers may be viewed as impractical.)

**Student Learning Outcome to be Assessed:** *Students will analyze multiple perspectives on agency in varying historical, social, economic, and geographical contexts.*

In Introduction to Women’s Studies, students watch three films: *Iron Jawed Angels*, *China Blue*, and *Stolen Childhoods*, each of which portrays profoundly different forms of inequality and oppression throughout the world. *Iron Jawed Angels* details the challenging work of Alice Paul and Lucy Burns in the suffrage movement. *China Blue* details the inner-workings of a particular sweatshop in China that sews jeans for multinational corporations headquartered in the United States and Western Europe. Finally, *Stolen Childhoods* features multiple illegal forms of child labor existing primarily in the Third World, including sexual slavery.

**Questions to be assessed (Students provide written responses to these questions):**

1. Do the protagonists in each film display any form of agency? If so, in what ways do they display agency? (Keep in mind their demonstrations of agency may shift throughout the course of the film as they become more aware of their circumstances.) Compare and contrast the various types of agency, if any, displayed in the film.

2. In which film do you think the protagonists displayed the most agency? Why? (Reference the other two films to support your answer.)

3. In which film did the protagonists display the least agency? Why? (Reference the other two films to support your answer.)
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<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Novice (1 point per film)</th>
<th>Basic (2 points per film)</th>
<th>Proficient (3 points per film)</th>
<th>Advanced (4 points per film)</th>
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<td>Awareness of agency</td>
<td>Student interprets all actions through the same value system, usually the one with which he or she enters the classroom. He or she fails to see why actions in different social, cultural, economic, and geographical contexts may carry dissimilar political weight or demonstrate differing levels of empowerment on the part of the doer behind the deed. Student fails to make a thoughtful distinction between the fight for women’s equality (the politics of U.S. feminists) and the politics of survival and the fight for basic human rights (the politics of third-world women).</td>
<td>Student begins acknowledging that actions taken in different social and cultural contexts have different meanings, but he or she adheres to a value system that maintains the U.S. model of minority politics (The Civil Rights Movement and Second Wave Feminism) is the standard to which all other forms of politics should aspire. The student continues to devalue actions that cannot easily be coded as a part of a larger political movement for equality.</td>
<td>Student is able to clearly articulate which actions in each film count as agency and how the interpretation of those actions varies according to historical and geographical context. Student is able to set aside his or her preexisting value system concerning what counts as the most constructive form of political action and identify actions existing outside of formal political movements as potentially being politicized and empowering for those performing the actions.</td>
<td>Student is not only able to identify different types of actions in varying historical and geographical contexts as politicized or empowering, but he or she is able to view the significance of those actions in the context of the historical period or geographical area studied. Student is able to use this newly acquired knowledge to interrogate his or her preexisting value system concerning the optimal or most effective modalities of political action.</td>
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Assessment Results:

Per the rubric, I’ve organized the results as follows: There are four ranges: the novice range (wherein a student scores between 3 and 5 points); a basic range (wherein a student scores between 6 and 8 points); a proficient range (wherein a student scores between 9 and 11 points); and advanced (wherein a student scores a perfect 12).

Although there were 38 students registered for the course, only 34 completed the assessment. 6 scored in the novice range: 18 percent; 9 scored in the basic range: 26 percent; 12 scored in the proficient range: 35 percent; and 7 were advanced: 21 percent.

I asked three questions that were aimed at gauging how well students could interpret and evaluate agency occurring in diverse social, historical, and cultural contexts. Many students tend to evaluate women’s political actions in either an anachronistic manner—using today’s standards of what counts as a politicized or empowering action to evaluate actions occurring a hundred years ago—or in a manner that utilizes the U.S. model of the twentieth century new social movements (i.e., the Civil Rights and Second Wave Feminist Movements) as the standards of measure for evaluating the politics of women in other countries.

My hope was that through watching the films students would develop a more sophisticated relationship to what counts as an empowering or politicized action for women and other oppressed peoples around the world. I was trying to measure whether students could identify how constrained these women were by social norms around women’s rights and intellect in the early twentieth century (in the case of Iron Jawed Angels); by a neoliberal globalized economic system that forces the poorest individuals in the Second and Third World to work increasingly more hours for lower pay and in harsher working conditions (in the case of China Blue); and by structural adjustment policies administered by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that render it impossible for poor families to send their children to school because the income from their children’s labor is compulsory for the family’s survival (in the case of Stolen Childhoods).

In the very least, by the end of the assessment, most of the students understood agency. This is the first time I have been able to get students in an introductory-level class to develop more than a preliminary understanding of the concept’s meaning. (When I say preliminary understanding, I mean that in my other “Introduction to Women’s Studies” courses, students seemed to only understand agency enough to write out its definition on an exam. They could rarely apply it to empirical realities, especially the empirical realities of diverse cultures.)

The assessment taught me that I need to spend more time detailing the specificity of women’s status in the historical period (early–twentieth–century United States for Iron Jawed Angels) and cultures (China, Indonesia, India, Kenya, Mexico, and Guatemala for China Blue and Stolen Childhoods, respectively) engaged in each film. It was almost impossible for the students to accurately evaluate the actions of individuals in the films—and not take recourse to American standards for politics and empowerment—bereft of an accurate sense of what women could/can and could not/cannot actually do in those time periods and cultures. Without doing the assessment, I would have never identified the need to spend
more time extensively detailing women’s changing statuses across historical periods and geographical boundaries.