Teaching History of Masculinity in Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

In the last twenty years scholars in different branches found out that “masculinity” took different forms and representations in different historical periods and regions. Many ideals were constructed according to different social, cultural and political contexts. Internationally, masculinity has fast become a scholarly endeavor in academic circles. However, Bulgarian media and university environment are still full of politically incorrect language. In the last decade some traditional notions of masculinity were strongly publicized and they are part even of the university environment. Moreover, gender history or history of masculinity was not present in the curriculum of my department. This paper is based on the record of teaching and learning in my course “Masculinity in Bulgarian Politics 1879-1944” created and taught during the academic years 2004-2005. It is going to make an attempt at some contextual analyses how and to what extent this course change students’ vision of society, their thinking on gender issues and their vision of masculinity as a phenomenon in historical and contemporary perspective.
Introduction

"Manliness" resounded through decades as an expression of essential masculinity. For a long time it has served to designate something that is given and biologically determined. However, in the last twenty years scholars in different branches found out that “masculinity” took different forms and representations in different historical periods and regions. Many ideals were constructed according to different social, cultural and political contexts. Internationally, masculinity has fast become a scholarly endeavor in academic circles.

However, Bulgarian media and university environment are still full of politically incorrect language. In the last decade some traditional notions of masculinity were strongly publicized and they are part even of the university environment. Moreover, gender history or history of masculinity was not present in the curriculum of my department. That is the reason why there was no overlap between my course “Masculinity in Bulgarian Politics 1879-1944” and other courses. The course had to provide students with some basic notions about “masculinity” as an object of analysis. It had to introduce the historical analysis of masculinity and to demonstrate different methods and approaches for doing it. Moreover, it was supposed to provide common knowledge about history of masculinity in Europe and about history of masculinity and intersections between masculinity and politics in Bulgaria in the mentioned period. In the end of the course the students were to obtain skills to analyse different forms and dimensions of masculinity and other gender issues within the topics they were going to cope with in their future professional or research activities. It was expected that they will be able to recognize and analyze different means of representation of masculinity in the public space; to research and study masculinity in broader historical, social, cultural and political perspective. And last, but not least, the course was supposed to contribute to possible change of the value system of the students and their vision of society in the Bulgarian academic.

This paper is based on the record of teaching and learning created during the academic years 2004-2005. It is going to make an attempt for contextual analyses how and to what extent this course change students’ vision of society, their thinking
on gender issues and their vision of masculinity as a phenomenon in historical and contemporary perspective. I cared most about braking the stereotypes my students have as a result of their university education and as a result of being “product” of a particular culture. I wanted them to stop thinking imprisoned within the perspective of Romanticism, essentialism and nationalism. I wished for them to know that knowledge is not to create identity but to encourage critical thinking. I was concerned for them not to remember the facts but to be convinced that the subject of the course is new, but legitimate; that the accumulated knowledge could help them to live in a “postmodern” world, to change their vision of society. In this regard, this paper will be focused more on students’ critical thinking on gender issues exploring their questionnaires, class participation and reactions, their presentation at the interim test examination, “open book” exam and final written exam. It is also important to discuss different barriers I encountered in introducing innovations and the ways I tried to overcome them.

My intentions could be put within a perspective already well established in the scholarship of teaching and learning. As many authors emphasize, we can treat our courses and classrooms as laboratories or field sites for inquiry.\(^1\) Moreover, it is learning that is seen as an essential activity of life in contemporary democratic society. That is why we should meet the challenges that we all face as learners and citizens in the twenty-first century.\(^2\)

I concentrated on student learning and understanding because, - as Mick Healey emphasizes, - in order to promote the scholarship of teaching we should identify and disseminate important practices for certain teaching situation (I would say educational contexts). He also stresses that the effort should be centered on immediate benefits for students and in the long run it has to facilitate the learning process.\(^3\) In this regard, my choice tries to avoid what was defined long ago as one of the pitfalls of teaching

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portfolios to be all about what teacher did, not to keep student learning in focus. Nevertheless, more precisely I am interested in - as L. Shulman puts it - not that much on what my students know, but what is more important, to try to help them to believe, to question, to develop new appetites and dispositions. Randy Bass addresses a similar point, paying special attention to the relationship between students’ prior understanding, on the one hand, and their capacity to acquire new understanding, on the other. Moreover, I am interested in what Caroline Kreber defined as how our teaching contributes to the university’s societal and cultural role.

I would say that my teaching philosophy in this case had some disposition from different schools of thought in teaching. From Liberal education I would subscribe to liberating students’ minds. Following behaviorist tradition I am looking for desirable behavioral change. Moreover, according to the Humanist tradition I try to encourage the personal growth of the learner. Besides, following the Progressive school I would like to give the learner practical knowledge and problem-solving skills. And last, but not least from the Radical Reconstructionist tradition I took the desire to bring about social, political, economic, and environmental change, the reconstruction of society, to encourage students to question and to be questioned.

**Plans and designs**

When deciding on the organization of the course I drew upon the concrete situation in the Bulgarian history education, the situation with the curricula at my department, the achievements in the field of masculinity studies all over the world and the
considerable lack of research on history of masculinity in Bulgaria. I took into consideration the first students that had definitely subscribed to the course, their profile, university carriers, the subjects and disciplines they had followed before during their studies at the history department. In that way, I was able to organize the course syllabus and topics having in mind their demands and their previous knowledge. However, in the traditional Bulgarian political history the topic of masculinity has never been open to research, nor has the subject of masculinity been a central priority for the Bulgarian feminist studies born in 1990s. There is much empirical work to be done. As a result, what I ended up with was a hybrid syllabus that took into consideration all of the above mentioned factors.

My main concern was to find the optimal balance between theory and empirical material. I decided to start with more common theoretical and historical introduction on “masculinity(ies)” as a topic/s of inquiry; the last contributions and achievements in this area in different scientific disciplines; with a historical overview of the development of masculinity in the modern period as well as the establishment of modern ideal of masculinity in Europe (together to constitute the first three lectures).

As far as teaching methods were concerned when a unit was introductory and did not have more common links with the previous knowledge of the students, I usually chose lectures. Most of the themes that concerned the Bulgarian case I decided to be taught as seminars. I planned primary sources from the Bulgarian case to be used by students in their preparation at home or in their future writing of essays. That was the reason why I planned detailed essay questions that should stimulate and direct students in their future process of reading, thinking, planning and writing their essays.

In this regard, the reader was supposed to fulfil the function of a real course guide. It consisted of a course overview; a short and extended (detailed) syllabus; reading assignments and requirements for every class (topic, theme). The texts were ordered following structure of the topics. Moreover, following contemporary trends and the way of socialization of the last generation of students the reader is accompanied by extensive visual material about masculinity in historical as well as contemporary
perspective. The visual material was a very good introduction and it justified the course concept and its importance at the very first pages of the reader.

As a result, during the whole course design process I achieved a new approach to higher education and what it needed as far as curricula and teaching were concerned. Moreover, I was able to find how we can introduce new disciplines, topics and themes in the curricula before having many researches done on these topics. In this regard, we can rely on some excellent studies on the topic covering other European cases, combining them with primary sources that reflect on the situation in our own country. In this way, one can also rely on students’ abilities to do the very research, thus converting the classical process of learning into the process of more engaged academic study.

The beginning or the ‘great expectations’

The course was taught in the second semester of the academic years 2004-2005. There were 35 students from the Department of History who subscribed to the course. Most of the time, about 25-27 students attended the classes. The anonymous questionnaire I did in the first weeks of the courses has shown how unprepared the students were for the course problematic, with some students simply stating “I don’t know [what to expect], I will share my impressions in the end”. Many students decided to subscribe to the course because they expected to have fun and for pure curiosity as far as the topic had sounded very unusual. (“Perhaps, as a beginning, it will be funny, we will learn about politicians and some not that known facts from their lives.”) It was evident that secondary education and the first three and a half years left in students’ mind just nineteenth century type of Romanticism, nationalism, essentialism etc (“I hope we will study the virtues of Bulgarian politicians, their morality, their military qualities.”). In this regard, there was not any difference between the answers given by males and females. In a common essentialist perspective in their answers “masculinity” was seen as a virtue and this virtue was seen as very crucial for the society. They had not the slightest idea that the notion of “masculinity” could be problematized in some way.
Moreover, from the Bulgarian media they had taken the idea of “degeneration” of the contemporary Bulgarian politics and the Bulgarian politicians. As a result, their expectations were connected with the possible representation of real images and examples of past masculinity that could be counterposed to the contemporary Bulgarian politicians. In this regard, most of them have seen the need to revive past examples of “masculinity” as very essential for the Bulgarian future: “I hope we will learn more about the political leaders in the past that should be examples for contemporary politicians.” “Perhaps we will have some comparisons with contemporary politicians. Is there any masculinity in them?” What they had expected from the course could be described very much as a narrative about the great historical figures from the past remaining within nationalist and romantic approach.

It was evident – as I expected – that the topic of masculinity is hard to introduce and hard to teach. In the Bulgarian academic community there is no comprehension what we are talking about. Among the Bulgarian historians, there are a few who deal with gender studies, feminist studies and cultural studies, and therefore aware of the content of masculinity studies. I will give a very telling example. It was about an year ago, when a very established Bulgarian historian (with international experience) writing about nationalism stated that it was a “masculine phenomenon” and that saying this he would “enrage the feminists.” It sounds as if someone who states that saying that society is divided into “classes” would enrage the Marxists. In this regard an important barrier to my teaching plans is the underdevelopment of topics in courses that are similar or have any intersection with masculinity, gender studies, sexuality etc. It is therefore not surprising, that the very expectations of the students were totally against the course content, not to mention its message of relativism and tolerance.

**The first encounter-the lectures**

The course began with theory of masculinity studies. As I expected, students were scared and even visibly annoyed. I started to give them very concrete examples from everyday life in order to be clearer what I was talking about. After that, I passed to the general overview of some contemporary developments of the study of masculinity. I
paid special attention to the “crises of masculinity” in the end of the XX and the very beginning of XXI century. Meeting my previous expectations, the more historical narrative was much more interesting for them. However, the new nature of the course problematic made students a bit afraid of it. They were not ready still to participate very actively.

The second lecture covered the topic of historiography on masculinity in the last twenty years. There was no element of boredom anymore. Students were a bit scared only by the amount of scholarship produced in the history of masculinity. However, some theories, concepts and terminology introduced in the first lecture became much clearer. It seemed that students were getting more and more convinced that “masculinity” was culturally constructed and it changed over time and space. We had questions and answers exchanges that referred to the first lecture and showed that the more theoretical and conceptual knowledge about masculinity was not that abstract for them anymore. Moreover, first small signs of obtained sense of “political correctness” appeared in their answers and in the small debates and discussions. I was able to see that among some students a sense of relativism of culture, of context, of change over time and space appeared on the surface of the “masculinity” phenomenon that a week ago was taken for granted. Their interest was growing. The knowledge was new but it was already within the students’ paradigm concerning history and historiography. On the other hand, it was the first time for them when politics intersected with gender, body, sexuality, every-day life, masculinity ideal, masculine dimensions of nationalism, male personal experience and uncertainty over gender roles etc.

There were several ways in which I received information about how students began finding out masculinity in broader historical, social, cultural and political perspective. I was interested to see how step by step different stereotypes were broken; to what extent they were encouraged to think critically; how did they develop new appetites and dispositions and acquire new understanding; how their value system and vision of society began changing; how did they develop a sense of “political correctness”. The first one was during the first lectures when using control questions and other tasks I was able to gauge to what extent students had grasped and assimilated the knowledge. The second way was the interim test. It was the first very
crucial point of the course that was going to say definitely to what extent I was successful in conveying the knowledge and new way of thinking to my students.

In this regard, it is interesting to analyze the student answers not from the point of view of the assessment procedure itself but exactly from the angle of the learning process and the achievement of new understanding and vision of gender and society. In my opinion, it would have, as a self-reflective procedure, very important repercussions on the future possible elaboration of the course.

First signs of learning and persistent problems

On the eve of the test examination my great preoccupation were theoretical issues and topics as well as new terminology coming from masculinity studies and gender studies. It was salient especially from the final results of the test as far as theoretical issues and concepts were concerned. On the theoretical issues the answers of the students at the test were generally successful. The questions covering functionalist theory of masculinity, the positivist vision of masculinity, and the definition of gender were answered correctly by most of the students. The students appeared to be also very well aware of the whole poststructuralist perspective (at least on the level of guessing the right answers) involved in cultural history, gender history and history of masculinity. I must admit that my students showed also a great success in learning the key terms and concepts as “hegemonic masculinity”, “machismo”, and “patriarchy” where most of them gave the right answers. In my opinion, it was a result of their participation in the class in the first three weeks and also an active and responsible participation in the extra consultation I had organized to help prepare for the test. Paradoxically, students invested so much energy in learning the material concerning the theoretical background, key concepts and terms that they were even less successful on other questions that were, I was deeply convinced, very easy for them simply by relying their own academic experience. It could also be my fault as far as my own anxiety about the theoretical and terminological topics somehow brought negligence toward other easier facets of the teaching material that were badly formulated or not very well stressed by me during the introductory classes.
Nevertheless, many answers during the test examination were a clear indication that the gender essentialism was still very strong. Moreover, students hardly acquired a sense of political correctness and tolerance as far as masculinity was concerned. It is true that the majority of students chose the correct answer indicating that in the last decades the academic studies on masculinity regarded homosexuality as “one of the varieties of masculine identity and masculinity” (17 out of 30). However, there were some that chose wrong answers and even worse answers articulating prejudice and homophobia. To a certain extent, I was happy that the majority of those who chose wrong answers articulating prejudice were those who usually had not attended the classes very often. The other group consisted of those who were coming from very traditional background. Nevertheless, even some students with very active participation in the classes, very good and even excellent total results in the test exam chose at least once a wrong and “politically incorrect” answer.

In the next week I organized collective second sitting of the test. It helped the students to fill the gaps in their knowledge. They were informed and, in my opinion, convinced that it is not just important that one had not chosen the right answer. They were able to see that there were wrong answers that show just insufficient reading and another ones that were a signal of complete misunderstanding, bad sense of “political correctness” and going out of the rules of academic discourse. In the next classes they were able again to see how great was the potential for a new reading of historical sources with which they were familiar so far.

**Further provocations and developments**

In the next weeks the students were able to see how we could address new questions and apply new approaches of study towards the Bulgarian past. They were also able to see how we could read our sources in a different way and how the scope of historical study could be broadened. Moreover, in the same classes I was able to see once more how new interpretation of gender and the sense of tolerance about different topics was not that easy to be internalized.
It was especially evident in students’ attitudes towards homosexuality. It became very clear that this topic was not an easy one especially within the Bulgarian and larger “Balkan” context. Many students knew already the “politically correct” answers, but at least a significant part of them were not ready yet to internalize them as a part of their value systems. That is why I tried to present as much as possible many provocative examples that would make students rethink what they have learned. I invited a foreign professor, (T. Ashplant from Liverpool John Moores University), a specialist on history of masculinity, to speak as a guest lecturer. Although the significant part of the course had already passed the effect of this lecture was clearly a complete shock. There were many things in it that were “striking” and “devastating” for the Bulgarian ethnocentric point of view. The character under study was overtly pro-Turkish, anti-Bulgarian, pro-Muslim and openly anti-Christian. And what was more he was a homosexual. During the discussion following I believed we have the next moderate step towards tolerance.

In the next seminars, some of the students’ comments still could not go beyond the essentialist perspective and some romantic notions. However, it was evident that the course had started a definite trend and students were not “the same” as in the beginning. Later in the lectures covering the crises of masculinity, the possible intersections between masculinity, feminism and women’s suffrage in Bulgaria, most of the student presentations confirmed my conclusions that students begun obtaining some critical skills, and some ability to use new concepts and terminology.

In the fourteenth week, an open-book exam took place. I gave the students some extracts of the book written by the late Bulgarian historian Nikolai Gentchev. It was a book dedicated to the Bulgarian national revolutionary against Ottoman rule Vasil Levski. In the submitted extracts the historian analyzed the popular memory and imagination about the Bulgarian national hero. I carefully selected those pages where N. Genchev had reflected on the notion of Vasil Levski’s masculinity completely unaware about any gender or masculine studies perspective at that time. But those pages at least described popular notions about Levski’s masculinity and they also conveyed the notion and the limits of the historical analyses at that time of 1970s and 1980s.
During the class, students were supposed to read these extracts and write an essay using all the materials they would like to use (lectures, books, course reader, other materials from the library). In their analyses they had to deconstruct the masculine element in the popular memory about Levski and the function it plays. I gave the students several questions. What ideals about masculinity were embodied in the imagination of Vasil Levski’s image in popular memory? To what extent and in what way the popular notions and ideals about masculinity influenced Levski’s popular image? What kind of new dimension of analysis could one discern as a result of the course? In what directions the study of popular memory about Vasil Levski or the study of his life could be made more profound as a result of the knowledge accumulated during the course?

Many students really managed to locate the notion about Levski’s masculinity within the context of the knowledge they had accumulated about European XIX century and post-Ottoman decades in Bulgaria. Some of them made even very interesting and striking comparisons with earlier periods in human history. It was a great personal pleasure for me to read what students produced. These had been people completely unaware about the gender problematic two months ago. However, now they were able to use the relevant concepts, new terminology and language that came from the masculinity studies and history of masculinity. They spoke about “spiritual masculinity”, about “sex roles” and “gender roles” and they successfully distinguished between “biological masculinity” and “cultural forms of masculinity.” Students even emphasized how masculinities are “not innate but susceptible for change.”

It was a good sign that some students managed to reveal Levski’s case not only within modern nineteenth century ideal of masculinity, but to discern in the popular notion about Levski the contradiction between the “spiritual man” as an embodiment of non-violent masculinity, on the one hand, and the “revolutionary” man, on the other. Moreover, one student wrote about the “overlap” between some masculinities and the availability of “common patriarchal model.” Many students also emphasized some possible directions of future study of Levski’s life. The way they argued their answer was very encouraging to me. They stated out openly that there are some “taboos” and other topics that are “silenced”. One of the students supposed that after 20 or 50 years
other generations perhaps would have different perceptions about Levski’s masculinity. Some students definitely argued for Levski’s “private life” or his “sexual orientation” as possible directions of future studies. Some students openly discerned how the “sexual orientation” and private life are taboos because of his function as a “saint.” It was clear that even in a different way and extent, the students had learned a lot within the last months. I hoped that perhaps they would never be the same. They were already aware of new possible dimensions and directions of future analyses.

Nevertheless, although some students managed to go beyond traditional analyses there were many others who did not manage to do it. For them it was just a historical study written by a professional historian and therefore saying the ultimate “truth” about the subject. They supported their analyses with some elements or features that proved their thesis.

As far as it was an “Open Book” exam, I evaluated highly those students who managed to relate in a convincing way the material they learned, the key concepts and terms to the problems they had been supposed to discuss. On the contrary, those students who just opened “the book” and write down some information they had read received very low marks.

**Witnessing partial change of attitudes**

The final seminar of the course continued over two days. It was organized as a roundtable and students were able to make before their colleagues the presentations of their final papers. I even asked the university to use one of the main session halls in order to create an atmosphere more appropriate to the job that had been done by the students. I must admit that students took this final seminar very seriously. It even turned into something like a student conference on the topic of Bulgarian masculinity. As authors of the papers they really elaborated very much what they have presented during the previous weeks. Every paper was also followed by discussion on its topic. The students commented on the way and extent to which the presenter was able to grasp the topic.
I would not say that all my goals had been fulfilled. However, there was something in which I was deeply optimistic. Students did not manage to overcome all the traps that the final papers could offer them, but I was sure that I had not the “same students” in front of me that I had had in the late February or in March. Students developed much more critical thinking and they also respected what their colleagues had done but it did not mean that many of them did not give them hard questions. It was also evident for them that there were some students who had not approached their topics in a serious and responsible way. Even many students were furious about this and in this case they said it openly to their colleagues. It seems that students liked very much this final part of the course. They were proud of what they had achieved.

The initial plan in my course portfolio was exactly to reflect on and study 1 transferable skill in the course (to reflect on students’ critical thinking on gender issues). At the time when students made choice of their topics as well as when they prepare their first presentations I tried to explain what did it mean “critical thinking”. I emphasized several aspects like asking questions, evaluating, making judgements, finding relationships, demonstrating understanding of the content. I underlined how they should be able to make comparisons, to evaluate, to support their argument with evidence, examples, and references.

I think the great majority of my students in the end of the course really obtained this critical thinking on gender issues. Some of the answers from the final anonymous inquiry in the very end of the course have shown that it was already a matter of prestige for them to know that “masculinity” had not an eternal essence and it had its own history etc. Male students also did not show any annoyance or self-defense when these issues were discussed in the class. I should even add that they really showed a new comprehension. As far as male attitudes towards suffragist movement and feminism were part of the curriculum there were no signs of incomprehension especially after the middle of the course. Moreover, in the end of curriculum and during the final seminar that turned into a workshop, it was more than comprehension. It was, in fact, a real academic argument. I even ask myself whether I was with the same students in the same university. It seems, yes, I was.
Critical thinking on gender equality was successful but it was not the same with homophobia. In this regard, I supposed that despite the anonymous character of the final questionnaire some students tried even unconsciously to “hide” something, to somehow reconcile their general positive view about the course with perhaps a total disregard towards people with different sexual orientations. However, they were really intrigued by the fact that many famous for them historical figures were homosexuals.

**The end of the course-conclusions**

Bulgarian education system is still based on reproducing knowledge and this fact influenced students’ learning process in my course dramatically. After taking notes during the lectures and seminars student were successful in retrieving new theories, insights, terminology and concepts during exams. It was also easy for them to follow and learn data from any historical narrative. That is why they are usually less successful in their written analyses. In the three years and a half of their studies their writings had been full of plagiarism but they had never been “punished” for that. Nobody ever had explained them how to write academically, what the structure of a paper should be, how to organize their argumentation, how to avoid the language of the source and avoid the terminology of the contemporaries. The very essence of historical craft, even in a most traditional notion, was not very clear for them. Moreover, their final exam at the bachelor level was designed also on the level of pure memorizing.

The second obstacle comes that Bulgarian history education, which is still imprisoned in the romantic, essentialist, positivist and nationalist perspective. This factor was demonstrated conspicuously. The majority of students had many problems with the “deconstruction” of historical sources until the end of the course. Very often they were incapable of going beyond the very language of the document. Here, there is a big trap especially when students should analyze a text coming from some scientific discipline from the past which from the gender perspective somehow legitimized inequality, prejudices and stereotypes.
Nevertheless, even the moderate success we have during the classes demonstrated that if the course content is on the level of the latest scientific achievements and the teacher chose the right teaching methods, invested energy and enthusiasm, it was impossible not to have positive results. I can definitely say that my students have been introduced to the study of masculinity. I created in them awareness about masculinity as a subject. I provided general knowledge about history of masculinity and more specific one about the intersection between masculinity and politics in Bulgaria. Moreover, I examined different approaches to the study of masculinity as well. In the end of the course, majority of students were able to find out masculine and/or gender dimensions in many different topics. They could distinguish the ways of representing masculinity in public discourse and Bulgarian media coverage. In fact, many students were able to demonstrate that the accumulated knowledge on the topic and all the different approaches to the study of masculinity have been converted and transferred in a number of skills for analyses of masculinity in the wider social, cultural and political structures, in ability to reflect critically on contemporary gender issues. Many students acquired a sense of “political correctness” and tolerance as far as masculinity was concerned. Perhaps, to a certain extent, I managed to convince many of them that this sense of political correctness and the rules of scientific discourse were good barriers against intolerance and prejudice.

However, I am self-critical about part of the learning outcomes. I am not pleased of the extent to which some students managed to convert and transfer knowledge into analyses of masculinity in wider social, cultural and political structures, or into an ability to reflect critically on contemporary gender issues. They did not always manage to convey this knowledge in their practice and study on primary sources. In this regard, I did not succeed to overcome sufficiently the prevailing trends for pure reproduction of knowledge in our universities. The same could be said about plagiarism in writing. Furthermore, I must admit that very often I was very desperate how some of them knew definitions, theories, key concepts, but they left them out there without applying them in their actual analyses. I did not manage to convey to a number of students the general sense and message of the course for relativism and constructivism. I did not succeed enough in my attempts to contest the prevailing essentialism and romanticism accumulated trough their previous education. Perhaps, I
did not managed until the end to convince many of them they should think about homosexuality in a calm and tolerant way.

I am still wondering if I was very ambitious? For example, the topic of the “Open Book” exam about masculinity in the popular cult towards Vasil Levski was very hard for deconstruction in the Bulgarian context. Even some students were absolutely aware about the possible shortcomings of their job because of unavoidable conscious and unconscious limits of their analyses. Moreover as T. Mills Kelly emphasized - referring to Samuel S. Wineburg and his research on historical thinking in general and to Howard Gardner and his vision of the “unschooled mind” - how as children we develop certain ways of thinking that become so firmly ingrained that they are rarely shaken off in high school or at college. Notwithstanding, in this regard, I believe that my efforts can lead to significant improvement of the course itself and the program from which it is a part. Like another portfolio author, Marry Ann Heiss, I concluded that perhaps I should have provided students with more guidance, both orally in class and in the form of study questions or important ideas to look for in the literature or in the primary sources published in the reader.

Nevertheless, I managed to overcome the initial barriers and in the end of the course many of them were able to discuss, ask questions, comments, and share opinions on the topic. The whole class was actively involved in elaborating the future final structure and content of every student paper. That is why I could remind myself what Bernstein wrote in 1998: “No, I don’t think I can tell whether my course transformed their life. But I can evaluate whether it at least gave them some new intellectual skills.”

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11 Quoted in Huber, 2004, p. 62
References


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