

SOTL Fellowship Program 2007-2008**Dr. Julia Y. Barlova, Yaroslavl State Pedagogic University (Russia)****Pictures in learning History: from illustrating to constructing interpretations****Yaroslavl State Pedagogical University,****Department of World History****A critical incident**

Two years ago I was giving a lecture to my 3rd year students, the topic being “The War for Independence and the foundation of the USA”. Suddenly someone asked me for “visual illustrations to this historic event”. I showed the class, in sequence, two 18th century pictures. One depicted the famous “Horse America” throwing off “her Master” – British King George III, armed to the teeth, ugly and clumsy. “What does it *illustrate*?” – I asked. “The proud and brave young country throwing off the tyrant!” - most students replied. Then I showed them the second “illustration”: an exhausted woman “Britannia” in ragged clothes, totally distressed, with her legs and arms, symbolizing the former American colonies, cut off. “And what does this one *illustrate*?” – I asked again. One student ventured uncertainly: “That America’s independence could be seen as a disjointment of a “single whole” that British Empire was? But that is quite the opposite to what the 1st picture shows!”. “Yes”, - I replied, and then set up a provocative question: “so which one is *the better illustration*?” After a short emotional stupor, we reached a conclusion: those pictures were NOT illustrations; they were *visually constructed opposite interpretations* of one historical problem. The very fact that two primitive popular prints from the 18th century helped at least half of my class to realize, without assistance and very emotionally, that there was no single truth in history, gave me the necessary impulse for this research.

Introduction

Living, socializing and getting successful in modern society requires from an educated person not mere erudition (in terms of possessing information), but, rather, a set of developed skills of getting information, handling and interpreting it critically, using analytical thinking and creative mind. This explains a considerable change, which gradually takes place in many Russian universities and concerns the approaches to teaching and learning. Precise and accurate *memorization*, with a subsequent *reproduction*, of information provided in the textbooks and lectures, is no longer considered a learning outcome. Educational goals, as well as teaching and learning accents, are obviously shifting towards the so-called *active learning approach*.

This concept, proposed by the educational specialists in the second half of the 20th century, is, however, an “umbrella term”, uniting various didactic techniques concentrated on the learners’ active engagement into a learning process. The other names for such a strategy are “discovery learning”, “cognitively active learning”, and “learner-oriented approach”. But, whatever name it has, in all cases it presumes that students are “supposed to *do* their learning themselves” - including inquiring, discovering, processing, and applying information, because “learning is by nature an active endeavor”.¹

In the sphere of historical education the shifts towards active learning approach were closely connected with two vital 20th - century changes in historiography and methodology of history. The first one concerns the conceptualization of the discipline. “What is History? Is there a single and true story of the Past, which is already revealed by scholars and must be only remembered by students? Or is it nothing more than an interpretation of things which happened in the past, based on the pieces of evidence that are also interpretations?” The famous book “The Idea of History” by Robin Collingwood (1946),² who answered “yes” to the last question, grounded an important tradition, which was continued and enriched by “postmodernist” historiography, and thereby underlay the second alternation, which applied to historical sources. Scholars no more limit themselves to traditional sources (such as official documents), and no more “take a source for gospel”. Historical evidence, in other words, started to be looked upon as a product of someone’s mind, language, discourse, as someone’s communicative message to others.

These changes in historical knowledge formed the basis for the new educational strategies. The last third of the 20th century was marked by attempts to insert into history teaching what I call the “*E.I.I.*” (*evidence-inquiry-interpretation*) method of history learning.

That meant teaching students to *construct their own interpretations of history* with the help of primary historical sources not as illustrations or confirmations of the textbook author's concept, but rather as independent evidences.

In Russia, where historical education has long been dominated by the Marxist methodology, the "E.I.I." scheme was introduced at the regional level in 1990s, mostly in the frames of international educational projects (one of such was launched in Yaroslavl State pedagogical University in 1996). After the collapse of the USSR it seemed extremely important to free teachers and students' minds of the limits of "one-ideology approach to history", but at the same time it was extremely difficult to persuade teachers and learners to do, create, construct their own History, but not remember it or learn by heart. Today history teachers in many regions of Russia try to base their teaching on the pre-supposition that history has far more than one answer to the same question, and that students have the right to handle different interpretations of history for more scholarly learning.

Thus, within history teaching and learning, active learning approach means, above all, the development of students' *skills* of handling historical information critically, of using historical sources independently, and of constructing interpretations of a historical problem instead of memorizing or reproducing textbook material.

According to Nichol and Fines (1997), a teacher can use any original source (evidence from the past) to make students analyze and interpret it independently. The only condition is that the evidence must make them *wonder*, touch their emotional sphere, because wondering emotionally gives the impulse to inquiry. Within my optional courses, which I was teaching every year at the World History department of Yaroslavl State pedagogical University, I have been experimenting with various types of historical sources, when once, giving a lecture on the basic course on Modern History of Europe and America, I came across a "critical incident" described above. I understood that I had found the historical evidence of just boundless potential for teaching and learning, that right up to recent years was *not considered "evidence" at all* – at least, not in our school and university textbooks.

Indeed, visual images have been somewhat underestimated in teaching and learning history, while their role in the formation of human ideas and constructing knowledge has been respected for ages. Locke, for instance, metaphorically called them "the Windows by which light is let into this dark Room" in his famous "Essay Concerning Human Understanding." Hume and Berkley stressed the role of images in the formation of perceptions (as results of modifying a feeling

under the influence of a judgment). Modern culture and society are often (and absolutely fairly) called “image-driven” ones, due to the number and diversity of technologies promoting visual apprehension. The increasing “visualization” of human lives in general, growing interest to visual culture in the wide range of disciplines, a “visual turn” in humanities in particular – all this counts in favor of visual material as a perspective tool for setting and achieving new and challenging educational goals.

Owing to peculiarities of their perception by the audience (some specialists call it “immediate appeal” – the perception at not the rational, but irrational, emotional level),³ and to richness of their symbolic language, pictures from the past can help a historian to visualize the values, perceptions, stereotypes, discourse of the epoch, to construct the “overall image” of a historical period or phenomenon, - of course, not at first glance. Their details, symbols and codes, the author’s message, the discourse in which a picture was created – all these must be skillfully deconstructed. The mentioned peculiarities of visual historical sources fascinated me so much that I devoted to this problem several research papers that are now available in the local Russian journals.⁴

Thus, it could be claimed that pictures, or visual images, might serve a way of making students *do* their “histories”. No less than documents, they are real traces of the past. Easy and funny enough to look at, but at the same time containing “pitfalls” difficult to analyze, and always very biased. Visual images could be, so to say, “perfect fit” for students’ understanding of what “the interpretation” actually means, as well as for developing an independent, critical and creative inquiry.

Research background

Literature that helped to frame and support this research could be divided into three basic segments. The first one embraces publications on the active learning approach in general, psychological mechanics of perception, communication, and its application in teaching, as well as on “skills-oriented” history teaching and learning, and the “E.I.I.” method of history learning. Active learning in general has been widely discussed in American pedagogical journals (see footnote 1 to this article). Works on the active learning methods in historical education are those by J. Nicol, J. Fines, H. F. Skram, as well as K. Egan, and M. Reeves.⁵ Skills-oriented approach to history learning is being upheld in J. E. O’Connor’s publication on coordinating skill development in history learning with the help of reading, writing, and critical viewing.⁶

In Russian educational space it is also not a novelty. Teaching strategies based on senses, perception and active involvement of a learner into the process of acquiring knowledge were, in spite of Marxist methodology's domination, well developed in Russian pedagogy of the Soviet period. Suffice it to mention the name of Lev Vigotskii, who is cited by active learning proponents all over the world.⁷ Nowadays, one of the three educational systems officially accepted by the National Educational Standard for primary schools – the so called Zankov's system – is positioned as “the system of active learning.”⁸ However, it is still a question if methods that are good for children are applicable to educating university students. Some useful practical experience of active learning approach can be, of course, derived from SoTL publications, the very idea of which is grounded upon active learning principles. Among them, for instance, is the article by Jose Alfonso Feito (2002), who tries to base his teaching practice on Vigotskii's socio-cultural theory of learning and speaks in favour of a discursive system “mutually and actively created by teachers and students”.⁹

The so-called “perceptual learning” concept and perceptual pedagogy was developed in the soviet pedagogical thought by L. A. Venger, in his outstanding work “Perception and Learning” (1969). Venger wrote about “changing perceptions as a result of a purposeful pedagogic influence together with self-learning and self-education”. Writing about the importance of perceptual learning, Venger stressed his modern situation (mid – 20th century), but it is not less topical in the conditions of today's information wars. He pointed at the need to investigate the laws and mechanisms of human perceptual processes, types and levels of proceeding of information and its influence on behavior, the strategies of visual search and perception for constructing ideas and judgments.¹⁰

As a separate source of theoretical perspective, the books on communication studies are worth mentioning. They give an important insight to the necessary terms and concepts of communication theory that were utilized in my course, as well as to the basic schools of analyzing any sort of human communication. The latter are: the “process” school, or, looking at a communicative process “from impulse to response,” and the “semiotic” school, or, going into symbols, signs, details, language (in my case - of a picture), and decoding their meanings.¹¹

The second bibliographic segment is formed by the specific literature on the so-called visual studies and visual turn in historiography. I have also consulted a number of works on various art-based inquiries, and on the “visualization of knowledge” in different spheres apart from history. “Visual turn” is a postmodernist concept that presumes, putting it very simplistically, a tendency

to look at pictures as at *communicative categories* with their specific symbolic repertoire, hidden or explicit messages towards their supposed audience, their cultural or discursive codes. The most influential group of research in the frames of the “visual turn,” which has shaped my personal attitude to reading images, was Abi Warburg’s school of iconology and the works by Warburg himself, E. Panofsky, E. Gombrich.¹²

The second strand of understanding the matter is presented by the works on “art-based inquiries”, on visualizing knowledge in different spheres of science and pedagogy, and on acquiring aesthetic literacy/competence/intelligence. I would like to mention, for instance, K. Baitinger, who puts visualization among the so-called “multiple intelligences,” which learners may utilize to gain knowledge - namely, to form “spatial intelligence” through making use of visual aids, visualization, color, art, and metaphor.¹³ M. McDermott, admitting the role of visuals in constructing knowledge, focuses her essay on an arts-based inquiry performed by sixteen pre-service teachers who created sculptures to explore their teaching philosophies. Through this creative process she reveals their assumptions, expectations, values, and relationships between themselves, their students, and the community.¹⁴ The research work conducted by the SoTL scholar M. Green reveals one more meaning of images for students’ learning – that of getting “awareness, sort of understanding, based in a combination of imagination, knowledge and feeling”, which she calls “the aesthetic literacy”, “a vision of learning that cuts across and through disciplines, and a core value that deserves more attention in contemporary curricula”.¹⁵

The third category of resources refers particularly to using visuals in teaching history or related disciplines. The famous historian and anthropologist Peter Burke, in his marvelous book “Eyewitnessing: the uses of images as historical evidences”,¹⁶ offered a scholarly strategy for applying visuals in teaching and learning history. It is supported by some really excellent visual examples that can be offered to students. Thoughts and reflections on how a historian should read and decode images, backed by the example of popular prints from the 19th century England, can be found in B. E. Maidment’s research.¹⁷ Finally, the concept of “*visualizing the Past*” was proposed by the homonymous project carried out in Stanford University and lead by the archaeologist Michael Shanks.¹⁸ Launched in 2007, this project declared its goals as more “scholarly dealing with pictures”, thinking critically about visualizing the past, exploring the role of images in the formation of the ideas as well as “the history of the culture of images”. According to Shanks himself, “using images as media, ... is a way of articulating people and artifacts, senses and aspirations, and all the associative chains and genealogical tracks that

mistakenly get treated as historical and sociopolitical context”. Pictures, he continues, are “making manifest of the past, aiming to allow the past to manifest itself”. I share Shanks’ general approach to the nature of visual images, as well as to their role in the inquiry. It could be said that we are going to the same destination point by different roads. While Stanford researchers do *modeling and simulation* for “revisiting and reworking the past” and thus builds a *virtual world* with the help of images, my research is focused on *decoding* images as historical sources and thus building up *interpretations* of historical problems.

The literature overview demonstrates the obvious gap that needs bridging. We see, despite the availability of methods and approaches, the lack of a research focused on practical teaching and learning experience, investigating the effects of interconnection between modern methods of visual studies and active learning approach, with particular reference to history learning by the university students.

Research objectives, context and strategy

The central question that drives this research is:

How does visualization of the past help history students learn history and view it more critically, construct independent interpretations of historical problems, use and further develop their critical thinking and creative minds?

When I was setting up the project, I was aware of a very specific meaning it had in the context of practical teaching and learning. First of all, I had to introduce an entirely new and somewhat unexpected mode of learning history and – what was even more important – to think of the evidence of student learning that would persuade me and others. So what did I have, as a teacher, at my disposal? I had an optional course titled “Using visual sources in teaching and learning history”. I had a group of 20 students about to attend my optional course. They were the 3rd year learners, being in the middle of their university studies. At this learning stage history students are, first, supposed to have got some basic skills of dealing with historical sources; second, they must know general historiographic and methodological approaches to history; third, they must be acquainted with the very basic methods of teaching history, because of the

pedagogical bias of the University. This was, to my mind, a good starting point. But, on the other hand, achieving the set objectives required some important shifts in students' perception of *learning* in general, and of *History* as a discipline, in particular. To put it more precisely, it required breaking down two kinds of deep-rooted stereotypes: towards history as a "single story told by a teacher or a textbook", and towards historical sources – in our case, visual sources - as mere illustrations of this single story. Besides, students had to be somehow persuaded and motivated to construct their own process of learning history material - an investigative, inquiring, constructive and creative process. All this presupposed stepping away from getting knowledge to acquiring skills.

The course consisted of 8 hours of lectures and 16 hours of practical training, including seminars, written reflective exercises, oral discussions, and, of course, creative activities.

The conducted research has produced a set of data, which can be estimated as *evidence of students' learning*. Generally speaking, the major role of any evidence gathered in course of teaching is to show if there are any *traces of shifts* in students' learning, which can be judged as "learning progress", or "better learning".

I have defined these expected markers of progress in a following way:

1. There must be evidence of whether students' stereotypical views on history as a single story told in a textbook and on visual sources as mere illustrations to this story are shaken, or not.
2. There must be signs (verbalized by students) that students wonder about pictures and wish to investigate their content, decode their symbols and read their messages.
3. There must be evidence of students' application of abilities (skills) to decode the image and verbalize the ideas about historical episode (case, problem) that the image bears or hides.
4. Finally, there must be evidence of whether students can build independent interpretations on a selected\given historical problem that are based on visuals and must be: source-based, emotionally involved and involving, logical, integral, valid (backed by arguments), independent and critical.

Types of evidence of students' learning

The evidence may be divided into two major segments: main and supportive. The main segment, and the central part of all the evidence, is formed by the products of learning activities, aimed at visualization and visual interpretation. These are presentations on “visualizing” the historical problem, each completed in the form of a MSPower Point presentation of the visual line (row) consisting of images that reflect the learners’ vision of a historical problem. At the outcome of the course I’ve got two sets of such presentations:

- a) Presentations on a selected topic,
- b) Presentations on a given topic.

Under the supportive evidence I mean, mostly, various creative and reflective exercises that helped interpret the nature, peculiarities and results of students’ learning:

- a) “A strange and striking picture” learning episode results – pictures plus interpretations;
- b) Students’ “reflective questionnaires” conducted at the beginning and in the middle of the course;
- c) Written or drawn reflective narratives on the concept of “visualization of the Past”.

Within the supportive segment I also have to mention my “Teacher’s diary” - personal observations and reflections about the course, in the form of personal notes that I made while teaching the course, after each class. They reveal my own attitudes and interpretations, as well as students’ voices and conclusions about their learning that I was able to record in the form of notes.

Evidence of students’ learning: interpretation

First I planned to interpret all the data in the chronological order – or, one might say, “in order of appearance” in the learning process. The reason was simple - the research is aimed at revealing the *progress* in learning, and is focused around the *process* of teaching. But when I looked at the whole body of gathered data again, I changed my mind and decided to present the supportive evidence first, because it provides a detailed practical insight into the learning environment, and thus prepares and enriches the understanding of the main data body.

The supportive evidence:

1. “Strange and striking pictures” learning episode as a “pilot” study

“Bring for us the most strange, curious or striking picture!” - that was how I formulated the first creative task for my students. “Strangeness” and “curiosity” are the conditions that proponents of active learning consider crucial for motivation to learn intentionally. So the aim of the activity was to reveal if students *wished* to work with visuals in practice, if they *could* do this intentionally and if they were *capable to decode the message* of a biased picture. The visual image that volunteers had to find and demonstrate to the others ought to:

1. surprise the others,
2. contain a message on some historical event, personality, problem, that was “unusual”,
3. be an *authentic* historical source.

Additionally, students were asked to write 3 sentences about the picture according to points 1 – 3.

Half of the class said “I will not find such a picture”. They were ready to analyze what they got from the teacher – the “reproductive stereotypes” are hard to get rid of. That is why everyone was allowed to seek for the picture he/she liked in my personal computer, and thus got an additional stimulus to learning (it is always interesting to open the door to the teachers’ ‘private’ space).

Only five students wished (and had time) to share their findings with the group. Three of them took pictures from my collection, but two brought their own ones. One picture was a Chinese postcard of 1950s depicting Karl Marx with children. “Strange” was that he was depicted with a typical mongoloid face, slanting-eyed, and surrounded by pagodas. Another one was an upside-down Australian world map. We also had a school-supply illustration – “French peasants are burning down feudal castles in 1793” (“curious” there were the inspired, spiritual faces of peasants and spiteful, disgusting ones of feudal lords). One student brought a picture by the unknown 19th century artist depicting Charlotte Corde killing French revolutionist Marat. “Striking” was that we got used to pictorial representation of the event created by J. L. David - the jacobinist “court” artist and the apologist of Marat; but here we got, on the contrary, Corde as a noble lady and dead Marat as a malicious ugly man. Finally, one boy has brought 2 pictures but said that they were “a single whole” – a photo of the famous kiss between Soviet leader L. Brezhnev and DDR’s leader E. Honecker, and a agitation placard with a soviet woman-worker,

sponging down her bare bosom with ice-cold water (with the words “Take care of your future children, temper your bosom!”).

Let us look whether the learners could – or could not - explain in a written or oral form what *message (interpretation)* their pictures contained. “Chinese” Marx was fairly connected with the wish of Mao’s China to build up the association with Marxist’s heritage. The bringer of the upside-down map couldn’t explain “what it really interprets differently, but you see – it perhaps change our visual perception of countries’ domination”. That two next images were connected with the French revolution is explained by the basic course of Modern History, which they had that semester. However, both students - though somewhat awkwardly – explained that their pictures were the interpretations *not* of the 18th century events, but of the time and country that produced them – 19th century England, with its hatred to all that was connected with French revolution, and – as an opposite pole - Soviet Russia, with its apology of the “revolutionary terror”. Finally, one student came with a set of two pictures defined their message as “*the cultural politics of that time presumed that there must be no sex in the USSR – at least, in peoples’ minds*” and backed it quite reasonably: “*such pictures were not made public in the other discourse, a “sexual” one - they would be considered...indecent*” .

All chosen pictures puzzled the audience, 4 contained a message on some historical event, personality, problem, or epoch, that was “unusual” (first I wanted to dismiss the picture of Australian map as “not historical” but then thought that it was still an attempt to interpret), all were authentic sources (including a school supply). All participants *tried to be* independent from, at least, traditional way of seeing this or that problem. All tried to *interpret*, “*to think about the image critically*”, as one student wrote.

Thus, the pilot creative activity showed the intentional, emotional attitude to visual sources, less obvious stereotypes and more independence and critique in judgments and interpretations among those students who dared to bring and analyze “a strange and striking picture”. On the other hand, it showed that the major part of the audience was uncertain and unprepared to operate with visuals critically. But at least they were puzzled and made to wonder by the volunteers!

2. Reflective questionnaires

This was were the first reflective activity students engaged in. Their analysis may help clear up and specify the general impression of the learning context. The activity was held twice - after the first lecture and before preparation to visual presentations. Its meaning was to provide

the evidence on how fastened students' stereotypical views on history and on visual sources were. I also continued to look for the signs of interest towards pictures, and impulses to decode them.

The group was suggested to write their thoughts on the following questions:

- 1) What do you think is a "visual source"?
- 2) What is more reliable: a text or a picture? Why? (a provocative question, as the course was aimed at understanding that there could be no "reliable" evidence because they all were products of minds)
- 3) Where can a visual source be of help for a historian?
- 4) How would you use visual images if you were to assemble a school textbook on Modern History? Give one or two examples.

The answers provide a curious material about students' attitudes to pictures, historical sources, and history in general. In common for the whole group was the connection between pictures and emotions. Twelve students mentioned "emotions" referring to images while answering the last question about using a picture for a textbook. They, in particular, stressed "*more emotional perception*" of (as a variant - "*more feelings awaken*" by-) a material when involving pictures. The rest of the group have just mentioned the words "emotions", "emotional", "emotionally" throughout the questionnaire.

The second common feature was the presence of the widespread stereotypes about visuals as "illustrations" and about history as a "description of how it was in reality." Some stereotypic phrases seemed to echo (or have been "cut" from) the 20th century soviet textbooks – for example: "*a picture is the illustration, the reflection of the objective reality existed in the material Past*" (2 answers). Such answers must be, certainly, considered not as students' thoughts, but, rather, as the imprints that they have got from the textbooks. The most widespread definitions of visual source among the learners were: *illustrations, various pictures backing documents, pictorial rendition*. "Reliability" of a picture was – with two exceptions - estimated *lower* than that of a document. Spheres of research where visuals could help historians were also named in a quite traditional way, as "*epoch as a whole*" (4), "*culture*" (5), "*costumes, fashion, armament*" (6), "*everyday life, leisure*" (5), "*architecture*" (5). All this can be judged as taken from the school textbooks and the post-soviet university textbooks on historical sources.

But, on the other hand, this was not so with the whole group. There were exceptions. One answer seemed to differ markedly from the others as it showed the understanding of the biased, communicative character of a picture: “*a visual source reveals thoughts, mood and values of its author*”. Two answers were close to such understanding, as they connected the picture with the “*mentality*” and “*people’s values*”. Two students, comparing the reliability of the text and the picture, “*had to conclude*” that “*both are biased*”. Finally, in their answers to the last question many students expressed assurance in the specific character of a picture in comparison with the text, in terms of “*telling different information*”. Reflecting upon this question, only 5 of all students suggested using pictures as *addenda* to texts. One student wrote that “a picture allows to *interpret* its context *more freely* than a text does”, one supposed that a picture “could both back the text and *argue* with it”, and one wrote that “a picture can help schoolchildren to *feel* and *perceive* (may be!) the information from a textbook that its author *didn’t want to tell them*”.

If to summarize the above listed “exceptions”, we shall get nearly half of all students that expressed more or less *independent judgments* at least in one answer. “Independence” here means an attempt to write something different from the stereotypical views on the pictures, and at the same time different from the lecture they had heard a week before. What exactly does it prove? Was it a breakthrough? Perhaps, this demonstrated their ability “to step away” if they are “allowed to” – the ability that always seems a promising sign for the further learning stages. In other words, those first reflections formed a more or less resolute step towards students’ wish to *interpret* visual images. For nearly everyone this was due to linking up the emotional sphere (or, the immediate appeal), but for some students the step was also made towards more scholarly view on the specific nature of visual images as independent “black boxes” with important information.

3. Students’ reflective papers and a drawing on the concept of “visualization”

This was an optional exercise and a second reflective activity held in the middle of the course, at the stage of constructing visual interpretations. It was aimed at enhancing students’ thinking and their capacities to implement *analytical* skills in the *creative* process.

Everybody was suggested to reflect on what he/she meant under the visualization of the Past, or draw a picture of this concept. At the outcome we had 8 writings and 1 drawing. What I tried to detect were the verbal indicators of “integrity” in interpreting the term “visualization” – in terms of proper balance between emotional and rational levels of interpretation.

“This is the *expression of your opinion* on History, the attempt to show your *mentality* but under the condition that you are *imbued with the spirit* of the epoch. You *must make understandable* what the author of the picture really *wanted* to show”. This answer was, perhaps, the only one having combined indicators of understanding of both levels (see italicized words). The other reflections looked like interesting mixes of stock-phrases from the textbooks, as well as paraphrases from my own lectures, and a clear wish to express some “unusual”, independent judgment, or verbalize new thoughts that came to their minds during the first half of the course. The concept was defined as “*the representation, reproduction of some ideas, may be mentality or stereotypes, with the help of the visual sources or some visual metaphors,*” “*a penetration into the epoch with the help of visual images.*” One student described visualization as “*an account of the historical material in the form of schemes, pictures or movies.*” Another one called it “*the visual expression of some point of view on something that happened in the Past.*”

The “separate story” was told by the one and the only drawing that I’ve got. It was a scheme consisting of symbols - “a head,” “a heart”, and a written word “the Past”. The elements were connected with arrows, one going from “the Past” to “the heart” and another one – from “the heart” to “the head”. The scheme was simplified, but, however, there *was* an interpretation, grasping something that the author thought the most important for her in the concept. It emphasized the emotional side, as “the head” was obviously passed over.

So, the results of the activity clearly demonstrated that possible “mistakes” or “failures” in students’ visualizations of the past might be as well determined by *their individual assumptions about the concept of “visualization”* that needed delicate correction by the teacher.

Main evidence – visual presentations:

1. Visual presentations on a selected problem

Presentations were to be titled “*An Interpretation of a historical problem (phenomena, event, personality...) through visualization*”. For their preparation students were given special “helping forms” that also provided an easier and more structured evaluation of the activity. In those feedback forms students were to write about:

- the visualized topic,
- the types of visual evidence that the group had used in the presentation,

- the verbalized message of the visual presentation,
- and those visual sources that seemed the most talkative, emotional, persuasive.

Such a form was filled both by the group that constructed the visual presentation, and by those who watched it (in the course of watching). The first were informed that, though they filled in the form *before* presenting their interpretation publicly, they would still read it out loud *after that*, so the public comparison between *what was meant to be said and what was really heard* might serve as a perfect demonstration of how readable, *visible* the interpretation was, how talkative the selected visual sources were, how clear the argument was visualized, and whether the presentation really reflected students' *vision* of the problem.

At the outcome, for further analysis, I had 4 presentations, and, as a supportive research tool, my teachers' diary, where personal reflections, observations and comment, as well as students' remarks from class and after-class discussions were taken from.

The general body of information for analysis is provided by the chosen topics, types of applied visual sources, and the messages of presentations. Let us go through these details. Group 1 presented the topic "Huguenot wars in France" and built a visual row of kings' portraits, engravings, maps and easel paintings. Their "message" – i.e. the summarized and verbalized message of visual sources they presented – was, in the group's wording, that "Catholic leaders were to blame in the wars; their handsome faces contradicted with their disgusting deals". Group 2 visualized the topic "The witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe," using popular prints and engravings, portraits and easel painting for persuading the audience that "witch-hunt was a gender-biased enterprise". Group 3 chose the topic "Cold War" with a vast variety of sources from cartoons to graffiti. Their message was: "USSR and USA were equally responsible for the cold war". And group 4 claimed to show "Napoleon through the eyes of Britain" using mostly cartoons and comic strips demonstrating the message that British propaganda of the 19th century wanted to be seen by the audience: "Napoleon (Boney) was an upstart, "a nobody" that would soon be down!" All four topics, thus, were interesting, and at least three of them – disputable in historiography. To what extent the interpretations were *source-based* (the source being involved not as illustration but as a tool, its features being used to the full extent, and textbook estimations being avoided)? Only group 1 made a "crucial" mistake when tried to pass a school supply picture for an authentic easel painting of the 16th century. The others coped well and used the authentic sources of various types. However, in each presentation there were from 10 to 15 images, and thus an impression was created that, instead of decoding the images thoroughly, students tried to

include into their presentations as many pictures as possible. One student noted: “There’re so many sources on each topic! If to use each of them to the full extent, we’ll get the several hours of presenting...”. This remark may as well demonstrate some mental reluctance to go deeply and critically into the interpretation of the source if there is a possibility to avoid this, or to persuade the audience in some other way.

As for the presentations’ messages, the audience agreed to admit as “readable and visible” only the messages of groups 3 and 4. This corresponded with my personal observations, as I also saw the communicative impulses of the third and the fourth groups as the most “visible” ones, because I understood them correctly even without words. Message of group 2 was identified by the audience in the following simple way: “there was a witch-hunt in Europe.” That differed from what the group wanted to say (see above). Message of group 1 was read as “there were kings, and there were battles in France,” that had also nothing to do with the message intended by the group. In course of discussion we tried to reveal the reason of such a “misunderstanding”. Some students supposed that the first two presentations “were unemotional” (group 4, jointly). But the authors of the latter didn’t agree. They insisted that “they cared” about their topics (“we generally choose what we care about”, - a student remarked, group 1), and tried to “depict it in the most persuading way” (a student from group 2).

The reason, as we finally elucidated it, lay, rather, in the unavailability of the first two presentations from the point of view of *lacking integrity*. Interpretations by groups 1 and 2 were, so to say, over-simplified, and though they had an inner logic, this was not valid for the audience. To make it valid, students had to use not only emotions, but also their critical thinking and their abilities to synthesize.

The last problem, also connected with the “emotional” nature of interpretations, was the *lack of self-critique* in all four presentations. The authors didn’t argue the existence of the other points of view on the same problems. But they tried to persuade the audience that “they were telling a true story” (with an exception of a fourth group who told “the British” story of Napoleon and didn’t insist it was “a true one”). Partly those attempts may be judged as an additional reason for involving too many images as “proofs” of that story. Participants’ remarks: “We all were somewhat dependent from what we thought on the topic”, and “Of course I see our drawbacks, but aren’t we dealing with interpretations?”— show, however, that they were aware of their bias. That’s why, I think, only group 4 managed to avoid any text in the presentation (it

was not *their*, but “British” bias), while the first three presentations were backed by the authors’ remarks at 10-20%.

Is it possible to summarize the results of this learning activity into one more or less clear picture? Yes, if we see what’s in common with all of them. Each visual interpretation demonstrates, first, some skills of handling with visual sources as independent evidence, secondly, logic in each treatment, as each contains the obvious (though more or less readable), message, and, thirdly, all presentations are emotional and emotionally involving. These are the common positive features. On the other hand, common “drawbacks” are, in two cases, the lack of integrity and weak argumentation for the general message, in three cases – the “illustrative style” of involving part of the sources, which was, as I wrote in the diary, “very close to the notorious “scissors and glue” history that we tried to keep off from the very beginning of the course”, and in all cases - the lack of self-critique.

So, it seemed that, having given my students freedom in choosing the topic for visualization, I enhanced their emotions, but they couldn’t organize that “immediate appeal” sufficiently for constructing integral and valid interpretations. Let us look at what happened when they made their visual presentations again, but in the modified learning context.

2. Visual presentations on a given topic

In order to understand in what way the modification of the learning context would influence the outcomes, I decided to alter the conditions for the next creative task. The students were to construct their group presentations again, and the evaluation criteria remained unchanged. The topic, however, this time was mutual for everyone and was given by the teacher. I asked them to illustrate the chapter “French Revolution” in a school textbook. This was the final task at the course and sort of a “final exam” for the participants. As the “helping forms” also stayed the same, this evidence must be analyzed in comparison with presentations on a selected topic.

Let’s follow the same logic that had been used for the analysis of the presentation on selected topics. First, let’s look at the chosen aspects within the common topic and types of utilized resources. Group 1 (those who had previously done “Huguenot wars”) named their presentation “The fate of one king”. They used a portrait, popular prints, engravings, coins, a cartoon and a placard – all sources depicted Louis XVI. Group 2 (those who had done “witch-hunt”) presented visually “the female appearance in the French revolution.” In their visual row there were contemporary book illustrations and engravings showing revolutionary symbols –

liberty, fraternity, equality and republic – as allegoric women, but also paintings and cartoons depicting real, common women. Group 3 (those who had done “the Cold War”) showed “Just the chronicle of the French Revolution.” They assembled together easel painting, popular prints and engravings, portraits, cartoons, placards from “two sides of the barricades.” Finally, group 4 (those who had dealt with Napoleon’s image) presented “the British picture of the French revolution” in comic strips, maps, cartoons, popular prints and portraits.

What is noticeable from the very first sight is that even on the given topics most students have chosen something contextually close to what they had chosen for their previous presentations. Simplistically speaking, group 1 dealt with “kings”, group 2 – with “women”, group 3 compared contrary interpretations, and group 4 dealt with British sources. Even if they preferred to keep to what was more or less familiar to them, such selection speaks in favor of motivated, intentional learning.

Were the interpretations source-based? Yes, all of them were based on contemporary visual sources. No illustrations from modern books. Words were pasted only in the titles, and sometimes under the images to indicate authors. That’s how one of the students commented on this: “We don’t need textbook estimations as we esteem ourselves”. This statement reveals the attempt to look *critically* – both at the pictures and at the interpretations. “Case-studies” of the French Revolution history this time presented *contemporaries’* points of view, visually expressed, and often opposite.

Now let us go through details and reveal the messages of presentations, their integrity and validity. Group 1 used different images of Louis XVI, created by the court artists and counter-revolutionary engravers (the image of a dignified monarch and paternal leader), by the foreign artists and cartoonists (the image of a manipulated fool), by the pro-revolutionary and Jacobinist engravers (the image of a tyrant and enemy that deserved death). As a whole, this presentation did show that there is no single truth in history. It also clearly conducted the group’s message that “Louis XVI was a common man with a tragic fate, who became a pawn, a change coin in this complex play.”

The second group’s presentation consisted of two parts. The first one consisted of jacobonist allegoric “admirable” images of women as Liberty, Fraternity, Equality, Republic. The second one was composed of engravings and cartoons, depicting women as a part of the crowd, as vicious creatures, or as real prostitutes ready to sell themselves to those who got money and power. The presentation reflected the conflicting attitude to female images: “from

admiration for, and worship of – a female allegoric figures – to disdain and defiance to real women.” If we recollect that in the previous presentation the group had “lost” the gender bias of the witch-hunt, then now that aspect seemed to become visible. The message was read by other groups as follows: “all republican symbols were shown as female figures, but it was nothing to do with “real” women shown differently (if at all!) from allegorical ones who were just symbols above politics”. It differed little from what the group wanted to say. As for the third group, their comparative visual survey was this time not so striking or surprising. They felt “at home” already - their previous presentation about Cold War was also based on the comparative approach to pictures that created opposite visual images, reflecting “two sides of one coin”. New was the attempt to *complicate* the message and formulate it not in terms of “who was to blame” but rather in the more scholarly language: “There are many stories in the French revolution that was a complicated mix of layers, events and opinions. Every visually described event has at least two faces, as it communicates certain political meaning”. And they really showed that. They took events – e.g. taking the Bastille, or the execution of the royal family, - and showed two opposite images of each event (just like I myself had formerly done with the case of American war). Group 4 this time, on the contrary, gained much critique. They decided to repeat the familiar approach and show how Britain viewed the French events. However, it didn’t work the same well. They had, indeed, complicated the message and made it more scholarly, in comparison with the previous one - “Britain was the earliest to recognize all dangers of the revolution and the seamy side of its abstract ideals.” Still, they were fairly pointed out by the audience: “Now it is for the textbook, and that means wider treatment”. Other comments were: “...But does it show that the group fully agrees with the British view on the revolution?”, “The group is certainly not aware that there are other treatments – they showed only cartoons, i.e. propaganda, we know for what it works, even today!” (group 3, jointly). It’s obvious that these comments show more critical approach both to pictures and to historical interpretations.

As a matter of fact, students’ comments and statements in course of the discussion during this final learning activity provide separate and not less important evidence of their learning than visual interpretations, as such. In particular, they show that students attempted to make progress in understanding concepts of *bias*, *integrity*, and *validity*. An interesting observation could be made about the “integrity” aspect. One student commented: “we could unite all our visualizations and even then we’ll not get the whole picture!” But then the other one remarked, in a form of a question: “But isn’t it possible to give the whole picture, if it is consistent, of some aspect of a big (I mean, general) whole picture?” And the group, again, agreed that yes, it’s

possible. What does this episode demonstrate? That there was a shift in understanding accents, from “wideness” to “logic” as a central condition of integrity.

Another peculiarity of joint discussion was the shift in intentions – from “drowning” the opponent to getting into a problem. For instance, one student offered the second group “to include the revolutionary images of Marie Antoinette – she was, by the way, a beautiful woman, but personifying, for the revolutionaries, all the vices of the old regime, I’ve seen some cartoons where she was depicted so really ugly!” This remark shows a clear wish to enlarge the other group’s interpretation, make it more scholarly. The next remark on the same presentation was of different nature. “Group two seems to believe that every problem has a female face, but there can be no other interpretation if to formulate a topic in this way!” (group 4, jointly). Here, however, we’ve got a critical approach that had much in common with the claims of “traditional” history against gender history. The third instance I want to cite here is a remark about the first presentation. “It seems, - a student said, - that group one is blinded a bit with its sympathy to Louis XVI”.

Generally speaking, all participants commented on the others and on themselves more actively, more emotionally, and their comments show more understanding, in comparison with the discussion over previous set of visual presentations.

The comparison between two sets of presentations reveals obvious progress in several aspects of learning. Presentations on the given topic were less simplistic, they demonstrated more critical approach to pictures; each presentation contained less images in comparison with the same group’s previous one, but the selection of pictures, the integrity of each treatment of a problem, students’ awareness of their own bias in the treatment – all that “told a tale”. The message of each presentation was formulated in a more scholarly way, and was closer to a research claim. Certainly, all the interpretations were biased. But, on the other hand, was it “objectivity” that I required from the course participants?

How must we judge the difference in learning outcomes between two similar kinds of learning activities? To my mind, it can be explained by several factors:

- 1) facts and events on a given topic were familiar to students (“French revolution” was the topic they studied during the simultaneous basic course on Modern History);

- 2) the “economy of topics” lead to “economy of sources” - so that one source could not “degrade” into a mere illustration justifying a concept, but preserved its “respectability” as an independent evidence;
- 3) the students had to pass through *difficulties* looking for “differentness” of a peculiar aspect in the frames of a mutual topic – this is like searching for mushrooms in the same forest, you must be attentive and thoughtful;
- 4) the learning progress was to a great extent due to the gained experience in skills of dealing with visuals – “*repetitio est mater studiorum*” (*lat.*). “Repetitio”, however, was not “repeating” *sensu stricto*. It was, rather, the use of students’ summarized experience assembled by each in course of listening, viewing, emotional perceptions, observations on others’ activities (for those, for instance, who didn’t participate in the “strange and striking picture” episode themselves), reflections (written or oral), and the creative process, as such.

Findings and conclusions

The central research question is not an easy one to deal with, and has no definite answer. It is very simple to write about some new and promising teaching approach, persuading the colleagues to teach history via visuals, and backing your persuasion by theories of perception, laws of human thinking and understanding, and heaps of scholarly literature. But if we want to know *how* our students really learn (and *if* they learn at all), then only thoughtful analysis of practical teaching experience, with a main attention drawn to learning activities and student learning outcomes, can open the window to this answer.

Does visualization of the past, in terms of looking at history through visual images as independent traces and communicative categories from the past, help history students learn more scholarly, view historical problems more critically, and construct independent interpretations, using and further developing their critical thinking and creative minds? Having summarized and estimated evidences of the whole learning process in a group of the 3rd year university students, I can afford to make the following claim:

Using visual material as sources for constructing interpretations did allow students to become more independent and critical in their learning, and, potentially, also scholarly.

The analysis of progress and problems in course of teaching the course on implementing visuals in History reveals, in a most generalized way, sort of a typology of student learning levels – either as a desired outcome, or as a real achievement. They are:

1. Independent learning (personal attitude, emotional involvement)
2. Critically thinking and learning (capacity to analyze and interpret)
3. Scholarly thinking and learning (capacity to synthesize and evaluate)

We can definitely say that course participants have reached the first two levels, which provides opportunities for potentially reaching the third one.

There was an observed change in their perception of the visual source (from the illustration to the tool for constructing an investigation), as well as a wish, an intention and a stimulus to independent inquiry into a problem. Indicative is the very fact that after two lectures and a discussion about questionnaires, in spite of still having and demonstrating stereotypical views on history and on visual sources, the essential part of the group openly expressed their interest to pictures as “something that makes them wonder because they can tell their own stories” and demonstrated a persistent wish for inquiring and “investigating more visual images”.

The second level must reveal the capacities of seeing, decoding, analyzing and valuing visual evidence as historical sources. “Critical” here doesn’t have a negative connotation. Rather, it corresponds with what is generally meant under “critical thinking” in the meaning of *“analytical thinking”* – i.e. processes of reflecting upon the evidence in order to form a solid judgment, that reconciles evidence with common sense. Did the students managed to find, reflect, analyze, speculate, decode, interpret historical images appropriately? I think at least two thirds of the whole group *did*. They see an author’s position behind the picture, its message, its bias, they do demonstrate “the feeling of an epoch’s differentness”, they inquire, and they try to express their own – more or less valid, and grounded opinions on a historical problem.

The third level is the most difficult one. It requires the ability to assemble the acquired knowledge, capacities and skills into a synthesizing process. That means not only feeling, but also constructing the “differentness” of the historical problem and of history in general at the scholarly level. Here I must confess that, showing considerable understanding, the participants of the course could not fully use the acquired analytic skills *to a full extent* for a synthesis. Still, the progress between presentations can indicate, for a teacher, the track, the vector of modifying

learning conditions that can be elaborated for better and more scholarly learning in subsequent courses. One of such possible vectors may lie in adopting the other researchers' experience in similar fields. Thus, Stanford University researchers' strategy (described in the bibliographical review) - namely, their "simulation and modeling" techniques of visualizing the past, can be - why not? - recruited as a follow-up learning stage for the achievement of the third level of thinking and learning, but it must be, of course, a separate research project.

Certainly, this is a case-study research, conducted in a specific classroom context so the results may not be readily generalized to other contexts. We must take proper account of a general learning environment in the particular institution, the specificity of students' age, gender, religion and the vast variety of other factors capable of altering the results of any research.

But even this case-study analysis of the evidence of students' learning in this class, to my mind, provides some findings that can either be applied by scholars for further investigations and practical experience, or stimulate researchers and teachers (or *teachers as researchers*) to make a better insight into some widely-discussed general methodological questions. Thus, the "image-driven" character of today's culture, the increasing "visualization" of human lives in general, that continue to determine the notorious "visual turn" in a wide range of disciplines, - have risen the problem of an enriched understanding of the status of visual knowledge within the humanities. The way by which students were learning to analyze and use visual images in historical inquiry, their progress, difficulties, cases of resistance, the character of interpretations that they had constructed with the help of pictures, - all these details may as well testify to how the increased reliance on visual forms of knowledge changes inquiry. Perhaps there must be more SOTL research up to reveal whether it leads to more interdisciplinary work and creates new types of divisions.

Returning to history as a discipline, it seems promising that in a situation when most History teachers complain on "students getting more and more passive," and express indignation at "the general tendency to simplify the learning process", the conducted and analyzed teaching and learning experiment with students' visualization of the past has, in some way, helped the learners "complicate" History - or, at least, begin moving the mode of learning from "textbook history" to more scholarly vision of history.

Footnotes:

¹ See for instance: Bonwell, C. & Eison, J. (1991). *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom* AEHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No.1. Washington, D.C.: Jossey-Bass; Mayer, R. (2004). "Should there be a three-strikes rule against pure discovery learning? The case for guided methods of instruction". *American Psychologist* **59** (1): 14–19. Sweller, J. (1988). "Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning". *Cognitive Science* **12** (1): 257–285 Gagné, R. (1966). Varieties of learning and the concept of discovery (pp.135-150) In *Shulman, L. S. and Keislar, E. R. (Eds) Learning by discovery: A critical appraisal*. Chicago: Rand McNally and Co. Kirschner, P. A., Sweller, J., and Clark, R. E. (2006) Why minimal guidance during instruction does not work: an analysis of the failure of constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching. *Educational Psychologist* **41** (2) 75-86. See also: the Active Learning Site: <http://www.active-learning-site.com/>

² Collingwood, R. G. *The Idea of History* (1946), revised edition: L., 1993

³ See, for instance, Maidment B. E. *Reading Popular Prints 1790-1879*. Manchester University Press. 1996

⁴ See for instance: Barlova J. Y. Pechatnaya grafika kak istoricheskii istochnik I sredstvo isucheniya istorii (Popular prints as a historical source and a tool for learning History).// In: *Historical education in modernization*. Ed. Dr. A. B. Sokolov. Yaroslavl, 2005; Barlova, J.Y. Ispolzovanije politicheskoi karikaturi kak istochnika na zanjatijakh so studentami istoricheskogo fakulteta (Using political caricature as a visual source while teaching History to the students of historical faculties).//In: *Uchitel Istorii v nachale XXI veka* (History Teacher at the beginning of the XXI century). Yaroslavl, 2004; see also Barlova J. Y. Osobennosti raboti studentov s informatsionnim prostranstvom politicheskoi karikaturi (On the peculiarities of the history students' work with the information space of the political caricature), in 'The A man in the information space' – Yaroslavl, 2005.

⁵ Fines J., Nichol J. *Teaching primary History*. L., 1997, see also Skram, Harold Frode. *Aspects of Students' mastery of History* (translated from Norwegian) – Accompanying document to "Alternative Variant of History Curriculum". – Oslo, provisional version of August 28th. 1989; Reeves M. *Why History?* L., 1980

⁶ O'Connor J. E. *Reading, Writing and Critical Viewing*. Coordinating skill development in History learning, in: *History Teacher*. Vol. 34, #2, 2001

⁷ See, for instance: Vigotskii. L. *Educational Psychology* (1926). St. Lucie Press, Florida, 1992

⁸ Zankov's System. Collection of curricular for Primary School. Moscow, 2008. – http://www.zankov.ru/images/pictures/pdf/Sbornik_Programm.pdf

⁹ Feito, J.A. *Allowing Not-Knowing in a Dialogic Discussion*, Paper presented at the International Conference on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, London, UK.2002

¹⁰ Venger L. A. *Vospriyatie I obuchenie*. M., "Prosveschenie", 1969. Pp. 7, 402

¹¹ See for instance: Beck A., Bennett P., Wall P. *Communication Studies. The essential introduction*. L., N.Y.: Routledge, 2002

¹² See, for instance: Gombrich E. H. *The Story of Art*. Phaidon 1992; Gombrich E. H. *Moment and Movement in Art*, in: *The Image and the Eye. Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. Oxf., 1982. P. 40-62; Panofsky E. *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. NY, 1957

¹³ Baitinger, K. *Making the Most of Multiple Intelligence: Humour in Higher Education*. Middlesex Community College, USA.// *International Conference on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning - Proceedings*, 2005 and 2006

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- ¹⁴ McDermott, M. From Postmodernism to Milk Cartons: Junk Art sculptures and Preservice Teachers' Philosophies of Schooling\\ *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, Vol. 8 , No. 1, February 2008, pp. 88 – 100.
- ¹⁵ Greene, M. *Landscapes of learning*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1983
- ¹⁶ Burke P. *Eyewitnessing: the uses of images as historical evidences*. NY., 2001
- ¹⁷ Maidment B. E. *Reading Popular Prints 1790-1879*. Manchester University Press. 1996
- ¹⁸ Shanks, M. *Visualizing the Past* - <http://documents.stanford.edu/michaelshanks/144> Archaeology and the visual (14/05/2008)

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