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Teaching Courses on Gender in Russian Institutions of Higher Education: Investigating Cases of Student Resistance

Abstract

This research is focused on students' reluctance to participate in class work and the impact that reluctance has on student learning. This paper attempts to explore the motives behind this reluctance along with the ways students have to express that reluctance to studying gender issues. In this paper I will look at various student learning "strategies" of open and hidden resistance to course material, and how students' particular ways of resistance affect their learning process. The data has been collected during the 2007-2008 academic year at the History Department of the Yaroslavl State Pedagogical University. This study has reasserted that university discourse reflects and reinforces patriarchal social structures and ideologies. This is particularly visible in classrooms where students study gender issues – the inquiry area that challenges existing social hierarchy and questions the ways of production of knowledge. The classroom being not a gender-neutral site becomes an arena where hegemonic and critical ideologies encounter each other and this often results in students' resistance to the course content, methods of its presentation and message. In these particular cases, reluctant students show their opposition to studying in ways that conform to established models of exercising power, representing dominance or subordination.

Introduction

The trajectory of women's and gender studies in Russia has made almost a full circle during my fifteen years' teaching in the university. "Democratic euphoria" of early 1990s helped with establishing these research fields. A. Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, a pioneer in the discipline, wrote in 1997 about strong need 'to develop a Russian-based body of research, conducted under the auspices of the Academy of Sciences, that can be

the core of women's studies educational programs'.¹ She optimistically spoke about the problem of bringing feminism into the curriculum and proposed a strategy for the promotion of women's studies in schools that she called "go slow". As she put it, 'finding a theory of feminist education seems to be a step that requires a lot of careful thought because the consequences, positive or negative, could be very crucial for the whole agenda of feminism in Russia'.²

Today, the entire social and political environment is not so friendly towards the advance of gender issues while many scholars speak about a patriarchal revival in the country. In her recent book, N. Pushkareva, a leading expert in the women's and gender history, has noted that 'again, gender studies have to reclaim its right to be an acknowledged academic area' and 'gender is not a fashionable topic any more'.³ Although women's and gender studies have become a recognized part of the universities' curricula in Russia, both models of training and content of courses are strongly determined by dominant academic discourses and women's and gender studies play minor role in historical education. Consequently, all attempts of scholarly analysis of gender courses' implementation and teaching strategies in the Russian context have been reduced to examination of various institutional difficulties which impede the discipline's progress (see Shnyrova, Pushkareva, Sukovataya, Trubina).

Being far from the idea to dismiss these considerations, I would propose to shift the focus from the power institutions' politics or university curriculum development to the issues of interrelations between students and teacher in the class, students'

¹ A. Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, "On the Threshold of the Classroom. Dilemmas for Post-Soviet Russian feminism," in Joan W. Scott, Cora Kaplan and Debra Keates (eds), *Transitions, Environments, Translations. Feminisms in International Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 380.

² *Ibid.*, 373.

³ N. Pushkareva, *Gendernaya teoriya i istoricheskoe znanie* (Gender theory and historical knowledge) (St Petersburg: Aleteya, 2007), 7.

perception of courses on women and gender and to the process of learning. As we all understand, sexism, ethnocentrism, other dominant ideologies which R. Ng called power dynamics,⁴ operate in everyday life and affect how our formal authority as feminist teachers is perceived and received by students as well as in actual students' learning outcomes. Such a perspective seems to be even more relevant to the situation when successful development of gender studies depends not on administrative measures but on the efforts and determination of all interested educationalists and researchers (as well as activists) in the field.

My own experience has forced me to think about these problems. I started teaching various courses on women's and gender history about ten years ago; then such courses had been placed into the curriculum as elective ones. Therefore, for quite a long time, I had been meeting in my class many students highly motivated to study the advertised topics. Only recently I faced the problem when some students demonstrate lack of understanding or even unwillingness to accept the course material. Indeed, sometimes we are too certain that the ideas in the core of our teaching are so attractive that it would be no problem to convert students to our beliefs, which, of course, is not true. Some cases in the class which I immediately identified as my professional fault stimulated my interest in the nature of students' learning. This research is focused on students' reluctance to participate in class work and the impact that reluctance has on student learning. This paper attempts to explore the motives behind this reluctance along with the ways students have to express that reluctance to studying gender issues. In this paper I will look at various student learning "strategies" of open and hidden

⁴ R. Ng, "'A Woman Out of Control': Deconstructing Sexism and Racism in the University', *Canadian Journal of Education*, 18:3 (1993), 190.

resistance to course material, and how students' particular ways of resistance affect their learning process.

Theoretical framework

There is a body of scholarly texts and educational literature devoted to reluctant learners and various ways of handling difficult situations in pedagogical practice. Many look as practical guides aimed at providing teachers (especially of high schools or colleges) with tools and recipes for classroom success.⁵ Another, reflective approach differs by its close attention to a variety of expressions of students' oppositional behavior, contextual analysis of the motives behind their reluctance and its effect on their learning.⁶ The concept of resistance has been emphasized in the framework of critical theory, poststructuralist and feminist theory and has constituted an essential line of argument within critical pedagogy. The study of that many-sided phenomenon in North America, for example, has helped to develop the resistance theory which initially had been applied to the experience of minority students who, as the theory asserts, actively or passively resist and reject the implicit and explicit messages attacking their ethnic identity.⁷

There is no consensus today on whether feminist pedagogy is conceived as having strong ties with or even being an example of critical pedagogy in action, or being an autonomous trend opposed to "paternalistic" critical pedagogy in general, and

⁵ See, for example, Billie Donegan, *Coaching Reluctant Learners, A Practical Framework for Classroom Success: Engaging the Brain & Heart of Today's Student*, Greenleaf & Papanek Publications, 2006. For the most part such a literature originates in North America. In Russia, there are some translations of that sort of writing.

⁶ Arleen Lyda Pare, *Attending to Resistance: An Ethnographic Study of Resistance and Attendance in an Adult Basic Education Classroom*, MA Thesis... Retrieved 27.09.2007 from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/attendng/PAREV3.pdf>

⁷ Trainor, J. 'Resistance Theory and Classroom Dynamics: What Research Tells Us About Students' Responses to Critical Pedagogies', Abstract of the paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association. Retrieved 27.09.2007 at http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p105707_index.html

Paolo Freire's version in particular. However, for the purpose of this study, it is important to accent some prepositions common to the practice of critical and feminist pedagogies as these teaching principles I have been trying to put in the center of my own educational activity. According to Kathleen Weiler, "Feminist theory, like other contemporary approaches, validates differences, challenges universal claims to truth, and seeks to create social transformation in a world of shifting and uncertain meanings.

In education, these profound shifts are evident on two levels: first, at the level of practice, as excluded and formerly silenced groups challenge dominant approaches of learning and to definitions of knowledge; and second, at the level of theory, as modernist claims to universal truth are called into question".⁸ Obviously, critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy share the assumptions about oppression and the vision of social transformation and about "women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world".⁹ Among other characteristics of the feminist (and critical) approach to teaching one must name the understanding of education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination, cooperation between class participants, power-sharing, negotiation and conscious-raising activity – all that can provide an academic environment stimulating meaningful learning.

P. Freire was convinced that "students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus

⁸ Weiler, Kathleen, 'Freire and a Feminist Pedagogy of Difference', *Harvard Educational Review* 61: 4 (November 1991), 449-450.

⁹ Freire, Paolo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum Books, 1993....

constantly less alienated. Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed".¹⁰ In this context "resistance" appeared to be first of all a way of self-expression or an identity construct reflecting a personal, moral or civic stand.

Meanwhile, teaching the courses based on critical or feminist theories has demonstrated all the complexity of the reality and generated new questions and concepts. J. Trainor recently showed that "resistance theory has been used to describe privileged or mainstream student responses to critical educational practices – practices aimed at critiquing dominant power structures and inspiring students to work toward social change and social justice".¹¹ The scholar also stressed that such resistance labeled as "counter-strategic" attempts to foil critical aims of the education while "traditional" resistance of minority groups forwards critical goals through attempts to protect ethnic identities or to cope with a subordinated social position. Thus, both concepts, resistance and counter-strategic resistance, reveal the specific setting and specific discourse of North American society. It is time to pose a question whether such models can be applicable to the Russian context.

General context description

While reluctant behavior is quite widespread among students in Russian institutions of higher education, there is no documented practice of systematical reflection upon this problem there. To explain this, I should emphasize again that active learning methods have been introduced as preferable ones only recently and have not yet become a dominant model in the Russian university culture. And it has to be pointed

¹⁰ Ibidem

¹¹ Trainor, J. 'Resistance Theory and Classroom Dynamics...

out that if students are not induced to learn and use critical thinking and communication skills, teachers are not inclined to wonder about the nature of students' learning process. Simply speaking, students can remain quite passive and therefore unseen. It is obvious that students' learning strategies depend on how they expect to be evaluated,¹² so when they are expected to memorize lectures and reproduce them at oral exams, it does not imply any emotional involvement from either side, teacher's and student's, and the only thing a teacher cares about is the quality of their lectures.

It is interesting that when gender studies programs were included into Russian universities curriculum, and Russian academics began teaching courses on gender, again, the focus was on the content of the courses rather than on methods of training, and principles of critical pedagogy have not become the inseparable part of teaching gender. As I have already noted, the community of scholars initiated lively discussion on obstacles that impede successful implementation of this discipline. At the same time, the problem of courses' perception in the class and students' response to the teaching of gender studies as a discipline have not been raised. Noticeably, this important issue eludes attention of my colleagues even today; that means the inertia of traditional standards of education and passive learning is still powerful.

In fact, the analysis of students' feedback could be both a valuable source for research on gender relations or gender order in today's Russia and a basis for improvement in teaching methods and, as a result, learning outcomes. At a recent conference devoted to the anniversary of one of the oldest centers of gender studies in Russia, this question evoked an interesting dispute which showed that the problem of students' resistance exists and there is a need to make some things that happen in the

¹² Anne Clift Boris, *Teaching History in Belarus: Differences in Teaching & Learning Strategies*, in *American Studies International* XXXVI/2 (June 1998), 44-57.

class visible. It was agreed there that students' perception of the courses on gender depends on many factors. One of the most important is the learners' motivation to study the subject; another favorable condition for successful learning is the group's gender homogeneity. Finally, the role of mentality, cultural and political traditions are of crucial importance in the learning process. Many made remarks that students' understanding of women's movement and feminism is very biased, based on common stereotypes and prejudices, and gender theory is often perceived as feminist propaganda.

As Russian social science and humanity have not developed sufficient theoretical framework for analysis of various behavioral models, it seems acceptable to adopt the concepts of resistance theory described above with one substantial emphasis. Providing the role of patriarchal stereotypes in Russian society is very significant (and is even reinforced during the last years), the critical gender discourse does not have a solid social support. In the class, open or hidden resistance to course material may indicate a reluctance of some students to take on ideas and principles that contradict their credo, and such a line of behavior is generally encouraged in the community. Obviously, this resistance is "counter-strategic" as it does not help to overcome gender hierarchy; in terms of learning outcomes, it prevents students from success.

Method and data

My focus here is on students' resistance behavior in the class devoted to gender issues. It is worth to note that teaching courses on gender involves two axes of perception from the students' side – 1) the course content which sometimes undermines traditional deep-rooted stereotypes about human behavior and attacks personal feelings or identity; 2) methods of the course teaching. As I stressed above, it is problematic to

study and master gender theory without applying to the principles of active learning or problem-posed education (as opposition to “banking education”) and appealing to students’ personal experience. While I regard the content and praxis of the course as inseparable and interdependent, for the purpose of this study I need to pull apart these elements to be able to classify the collected data and to detect properly what provoked students’ responses.

I have defined resistance as a negative behavioral or attitudinal response of an individual to studying gender issues that prevent his or her from successful learning. I regarded the major criteria for success at this particular course: a) a student’s ability to operate with main concepts and definitions within gender studies; b) a student’s knowledge of key texts and authors working in the field; c) a student’s ability to make an inquiry on gender issues and find ways of answering it. As a desired outcome of the course I would name a student’s ability to think critically (analytically) about his or her social environment as well, but this quality is difficult to test or measure in this research framework so I omit this perspective from the analysis.

The methods I choose for collecting data reflect my intention to grasp the immediate, “spontaneous” reaction of students to the course as well as changing attitudes to it as the classes were going on. Substantial body of information has been produced by students. Survey methods provided complex information about the students’ cognitive activity while the content of their written assignments reveal enough about their personal views on different issues related to the subject matter. Open-ended questionnaires, different by content and taken several times anonymously during the course have been used in this research. In addition, in the end of each class the students have been asked to write briefly what kind of difficulties they encountered at this class.

Another set of data has been obtained through the participant observation method. A journal of course implementation consists of my notes taken in the class, “thick descriptions” of the sessions where I have been trying to give as many details as possible about what we were doing, students verbal and physical responses to what was happening in the class. These observations helped to grasp the contexts, to distinguish between axes of perception, to understand what students targeted in their reactions – the content or teaching approach. Valuable source of information is the students’ papers which they were to submit in the end of the semester. Finally, some additional information about the motives behind the students’ particular responses to the course has been derived from interviews with students conducted by myself and regarded as case studies. These interviews provide some in-depth understanding of the context and can be used as supporting data. Therefore, I am not so interested in (and have not focused on) quantitative information but on qualitative one.

The data has been collected during the 2007-2008 academic year at the History Department of the Yaroslavl State Pedagogical University. The course on sociology of gender has been included in the curriculum as optional one for the second year students from the sociology track (i.e. specializing in sociology) but in reality they were obliged to take it as it was the only “option” for them. The group consisted of 22 students – 6 males, 16 females, one generational cohort with exception of one male student who is four years older. 20 of them participated in the class actively; two attended classes from time to time for unclear reasons (not related to that particular course) and, as I don’t have any information from them, I construct research only on writings and answers on the questionnaires of those whose work I observed in the class. The conversational open-ended interviews have been conducted with students from this group (two males,

one female) and two from the previous group (males) which had the same course the year before. They have been chosen for the interview because they manifested their skepticism and reluctance to work. The first three conversations have been arranged as consultations on writing a research paper so I did not record them on the tape but was making notes during our talk.

I was relying directly on three groups of evidence that reflect the students' progress in the best way.

1. The students' detailed answers on questionnaires monitor their changing attitude to the course and reveal some persistent problems they faced during the classes.

Sequentially, they filled in the following forms:

I.

- What do you know about the course subject?
- Can you explain what gender means?
- How do stereotypes about sex roles affect a person's status?
- What kind of skills and knowledge do you expect from the course?

II.

- Please, outline arguments for including gender analysis into your research/work.
- Do you see any limitations on employing of gender theory in social sciences? Explain.
- Which side would you take in the discussion about possibility to apply the concept of 'gender' as it developed in 'the West' to the analysis of Russian realities? Develop your point.

III.

- How many classes have you participated in?
- Did you find anything new in the course?
- What kind of skills have you developed during the course?
- What kind of problems or difficulties have you met?
- What else would you like to discuss in the framework of this course?
- What else would you like to say about the course in general?

In addition to those questionnaires, every student was asked to write in the end of each session a short reflective note about difficulties (obscurities) met at that moment.

2. During the course, students fulfilled several written assignments which show their growing competence and knowing. They were required to write a comment on one of the proposed readings. I offered them a list of texts representing best examples of gender analysis and feminist critic, and class participants were free to choose from it what they liked most of all or what seemed the most provocative to them. Another assignment was devoted to explanation of the topic they had chosen for their final paper. Students had to justify correspondence of this topic to the course subject as well as to demonstrate its relevance to today's social conditions. The last task was to give details about methodology they were going to apply in their small research.

3. All accomplishments the students achieved during the course were presented in their final papers based on independent research. I had elaborated criteria according to which these works were assessed. I have accepted a paper if:

- it expresses the argument clearly and carefully explores it;

- it clearly structured;
- it is based on original data;
- it has clear references to authoritative sources.

I regarded a paper as a complete failure if:

- it is poorly organized;
- it doesn't have references to sources and data;
- it has signs of plagiarism.

Class participants had two weeks before the end of semester (and before the exam) to finish their papers which I declared a mandatory requirement.

The information derived from collected written data has been systematized in the following way. I examined the data from all sources to elicit evidence of resistant behavior. I have extracted all negative utterances from the texts, arranged them chronologically and supplemented with corresponding descriptive notes taken in the class. Also, I have been looking at form, style and size of the students' scripts to understand the level of their involvement into the subject. Thus I constructed a kind of "profiles" of some students whose behavior visibly demonstrates negativity towards the course. Then I detached those statements that deal with the mode of the course presentation and teaching focusing only on the pieces of information revealing the students' attitudes towards gender issues. In the end, I have been operating with data substantially reduced in quantity but quite informative in the view of answering the main research question.

Findings

This study has reasserted that university discourse reflects and reinforces patriarchal social structures and ideologies. This is particularly visible in classrooms where students study gender issues – the inquiry area that challenges existing social hierarchy and questions the ways of production of knowledge. The classroom being not a gender-neutral site becomes an arena where hegemonic and critical ideologies encounter that often results in students' resistance to the course content, methods of its presentation and message. In these particular cases, reluctant students show their opposition to studying in ways that conform to established models of exercising power, representing dominance or subordination.

The data investigated in this study reveal that students oppose the content and the very idea of the gender studies (as well as to models of teaching in this case) in different ways which I identified as four behavior patterns: 1) open aggressive behavior, verbal assaults; 2) irony or sarcasm; 3) ignoring the subject; 4) conformity to the instructor's position without real understanding of the subject.

1) *“The whole stuff is complete nonsense”*

The moments of open negative and even hostile response from students to what is going on in the class are usually so uncommon that such cases cry out to be described first. However I would start with analysis of that behavior pattern for another reason that is it appears to be the most pronounced expression of the dominant sexual ideology.

The example comes from the class where we have been discussing gender as a social construct. Oleg, who is older than his mates, was listening to the talk with growing attention and at one moment he said loudly: “Stop! You can not assert that sex roles are socially prescribed. It even sounds stupid!” My attempts to argue for the

gender theory were interrupted again by his fairly long speech about lessons of history that show stability and naturalness of gender polarization. After such an intervention, it took me some time to restore my 'authority' as a facilitator in the class.

What is remarkable here is that by interrupting and questioning the student took on a role of a carrier of the true knowledge while as a rule students feel more limited in how they respond and what they might say by their relative powerlessness.¹³ Later, in an informal talk, I asked Oleg's group mates whether he had acted in the same way in other classes. I was said that usually he demonstrates independent thinking, may interrupt and take turn in conversations, but has never demonstrated such an emotional involvement into the subject matter.

This case can be supplemented with another occurrence that took place a year before at the same course. During the introductory session while I was presenting the course outline one student raised his hand and said he would prefer to attend another optional course. When I said that this course was the only option, he announced that he was going to the dean's office to claim his right to drop out the class. Later on I approached to him asking about the motives of such a response and unexpectedly got a harsh and unkind answer: "The whole stuff is complete nonsense!" (Originally foul language was used.)

Their interviews have shown that both have strong prejudices against feminism and feminists whom they interpret as man-haters, and they regard gender studies and gender courses as a feminist agency. Marat could not even pronounce the word 'feminism' properly; he was making visible efforts speaking about it. In his talk, Oleg stressed that motherhood is the main state he values in women:

¹³ Kathryn A. Remlinger, 'Negotiating the Classroom Floor: Negotiating Ideologies of Gender and Sexuality', in Michelle M. Lazar (ed.) *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. Gender, Power and Ideology in Discourse*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005: 116.

“Feminists corrupt our life as they don’t want to bear children... I deeply respect women and want them to be happy mothers and wives. From my side, I shall do everything to make my wife happy...”

Student survey data don’t contain any evidences of “aggressiveness” with exception of one utterance that indicates again the author’s preoccupation with feminist message in gender studies. The statement was: *“I think we should not study gender as it may bring girls to feminism”*.

2) *“Why don’t we speak about that?”*

Another way of expressing resistance to learning gender is students’ attempts to switch class discussions to an entertaining chat. Indeed, appealing to personal experience as a method of teaching may (and in many instances does) generate an illusion of easiness or superficiality among students and inevitably leads to diminishing the subject matter.

In addition, class participants quite often preferred telling anecdotes or funny stories instead of discussing such topics as sexuality or family relations. To outward appearances the students were eager to consider these problems (*“Oh, yes, let’s speak about that!”*) but sometimes it was difficult to induce students to think and speak seriously. They were reluctant to use terminology that seemed slippery to them and while, for example, referring to Freudian theory they operated as an alternative the utterances such as *“you know what I mean”* or *“that thing”* meaning human genitals. As a rule, these words have been accompanied by expressive facial appearance and, in result, snickering or open laugh of the group participants.

This kind of emotional reaction is rather typical and widespread. My diary contains a set of examples of situations when students facing difficulties in expressing their thoughts have been trying to escape the uncomfortable moment taking it as a joke. I am quite far from the idea to establish draconian rules in my classes and am able to appreciate witty remarks but I regard such behavior as a strategy of hidden resistance that prevents students from successful learning. Gender studies open an agenda and use language which are not common or conventional both in daily life and academic discourse. Studying gender requires additional intellectual efforts from the students which some of them are not so willingly make or simply don't make; in some cases they defend their personal beliefs, and at times irony or sarcasm mask their negativity towards the course content.

In comparison with cases described above, evidences of this behavioral model may be traced in the observation notes mainly and almost do not appear in the students' scripts. However, it reveals an attitude to studying gender that has enormous effect on learning outcomes; because of that it is impossible to omit this kind of students' response from the analysis.

3) The reluctance to participate in the class work can be also manifested in a strategy of ignoring difficult or challenging issues. In every group there are a number of students whose involvement in the course comes to nothing, but I am interested here in those cases which indicate the particular reaction to the topics under consideration.

One of the vivid examples of this kind of resistance strategy was represented in some students' attitude to written assignments. When the class participants were asked to formulate a problem for their assignment, two of them claimed they would prefer to

get more detailed instructions or even another task. They explained that they felt unable to define any problem corresponding to one of the topics developed in the course. *“I don’t think that these issues can be raised in an open discussion. These issues are too subjective and can not form a kind of academic knowledge”*. Later on they did not sign up to the list of individual consultations and ignored the deadline for submitting final papers. To pass the exam, they had to bring their papers but both questions put in the center and the quality of argument had nothing to do with the course they attended.

Also, a number of students reacted negatively to the interactive methods of teaching. Out of 20 students present in the class, two of them did not participate in discussions and pair work regularly. They just were watching inertly what was happening in the class and when were asked refused to respond. Their attitude to the teaching methods was manifested in students’ written reflections on class work:

- *“It is too difficult. To understand everything, I would prefer to listen to a lecture”*
- *“It is not clear enough what we should speak about on exam”*.

4) The patterns of behavior described above do not represent the majority of views students have on studying gender. The cases of resistant responses are rather sporadic. For the most part, students go to the class enthusiastically and demonstrate their aspiration to grasp and operate the new knowledge. Some of them are follow the course requirements and work to pass the examination. At the same time, learning outcomes they reveal in many cases are not satisfactory, their knowledge is superficial while students keep holding traditional stereotypes and expose gender insensibility which gender studies are supposed to overcome. This is the most difficult situation for analysis when the students conform to the instructor’s position without real

understanding of the subject but I would prefer not to ignore this fact and will show some examples of such 'positive' response as particular way of learning strategy.

Now, by applying to the collected material, I will try to demonstrate how some of these behavioral models impact the students' learning activity. My particular attention will be on those three participants whose 'profiles' I defined as 'cases of strong or persistent resistance' to the course. In the end, all of them have passed the exam more or less successfully, so my aim here is to trace the trajectory of their movement in mastering the course from the beginning to the end.

Mentioned above, Oleg represents the first case I would like to consider here. He attended almost all classes (with exception of three) and participated regularly in discussions. His answers to the first group of questions revealed that he had known about the term 'gender' and gender theory almost nothing. What was remarkable he did not understand properly the question about gender stereotypes and wrote that '*sex roles can not influence a person's status as it is exclusively a private matter*'. He skipped the last question and demonstrated in that way he was not interested in the new course. The second questionnaire was filled in the middle of semester and was to show the level of competence a student gained at that moment. Oleg tried to answer to all questions but those answers did not demonstrate his knowledge but rather his subjective opinions. Thus, he thinks that there is only one reason for studying gender that is '*to pass the examination*' (this sentence was closed with a smiley). The sentence about feminist message in gender studies cited above was central in the next point while replying to the last question he could just state that he is against any terminological borrowing. He was not too attentive to details in the final form either, and his answers show that he was

unlikely to change his views about gender studies. On the one hand, he admitted the course helped him *'to develop some skills'* (not defined which ones); on the other hand, he wrote that the discipline is *'useless because it does not change anything. What is the idea? Just to say that men and women are different? Everybody knows it'*. And in the end he suggested to include more texts written by men into the list of required reading without explaining why. To sum up, his answers do not show any particular growth but his persistent negativism towards the course content (this becomes obvious against the background of detailed and in-depth answers of some other group participants). Such negative response was articulated also in his refusal to write reflective notes after each class (as he said: *'I will not do it. This is just wasting of time'*).

Oleg's written assignments confirm general effect of bias and superficiality. He did not submit his comment on a reading (and I guess he did not read these texts); he experienced some problems with defining a research question for the final paper. After all, he decided to survey the labor market and produced a short paper of rather little value. The main fault of this piece of writing was the author's failure to put his research into general context and to make references to secondary sources. Interpretative part was also poor; it consisted of a couple of descriptive statements without attempts to analyze the findings. As a result, he fulfilled that minimum of the course requirements to pass the exam.

The second case represents Aleksei whose accomplishments were reduced greatly because of resistant approach to the course. Like Oleg, he could not take the subject seriously though he did not express such a vivid negativism. He fulfilled all the course requirements and submitted his final paper in time; his participation in class work might be regarded as quite satisfactory (he attended more than half of all classes

during semester), but most of his comments looked as jokes (to say correctly, he was taking the floor only when he wanted to say something funny from his point of view). In the beginning of the course, answering the first questionnaire, he wrote that gender means *'relations between the sexes'* and made a note about his great enthusiasm for the course: *'I hope to find out something really new and exciting'*. His expectations were based on information he got from senior students: *'I have heard that these classes are interesting and not boring'*. In other case these words would sound promising, but Aleksei's interest did not let him to deepen his knowledge and develop his understanding of these new issues. His views on gender studies as a field of knowledge did change neither in the middle of the semester nor in the end of it. He wrote in the second questionnaire that gender studies is *'a very useful subject because it can help to cope with girls'*. In the final form, he confessed that *'now it is easier to understand all the problems between men and women'* and that *'there is a need to read more about gender relations in order to be a successful specialist'*.

According to the requirements, he submitted the assignment including written comment and justification of the research project, but these pieces were formal and did not have any signs of intellectual efforts. For instance, Aleksei explained his choice for the comment in this way: *'I have measured all the articles offered in the list and realized that I can understand more or less only this one, Andrea Dworkin's 'Gynocide: Chinese Footbinding'. Indeed, it was just striking to read about such a thing'*. The 'comment' was short and reduced to condemnation of this old Chinese tradition. In both cases, Oleg's and Aleksei's, the students were not operating the principal concepts of gender studies in their writings; they neglected key texts and were not independent in formulating problems for research. It appears that the main reason for it is their

reluctance to accept gender studies as an academic discipline, as a branch of learning deserving serious consideration.

I have chosen the last example, Marina's case, to show that resistant strategies exploit not males only and that this resistance may be hidden. Marina attended only 50% of sessions and hardly participated in the class discussions. The survey helped me to detect that she reacted negatively both to the course content and methods of teaching. In her reflective notes she wrote she felt uncomfortable in the class, during the group work, she felt lost without systematized lectures and was 'in panic' before the exam. As I realized soon, she is used to getting high marks, and this time she expected to receive a body of information to reproduce it at the exam. Then, as it appears from the questionnaires, she was very restricted in her answers and tried to repeat the utterances from textbooks in her responses. Her research paper demonstrated that she did not have clear understanding of what she was writing about. Trying to follow high standards of academic work, she saturated the text with complicated categories which totally contradicted with the whole idea of the paper. It was impossible to trace any progress in her learning because her presences in the class as well as her writings were so impersonal.

Conclusion

The data presented here demonstrate that biased and negative attitudes towards subject matter prevent students to a great extent from successful learning. Various behavioral strategies conjoin in students' conduct and are reflected in their texts and in their classroom interactions. The most harmful consequences had aggressive response to the course content backed by intolerance of feminist message in gender studies. The

most widespread and no less damaging for learning outcomes were attempts to reduce class work to jokes. These kinds of attitudinal and behavioral responses become apparent in the situation when personal views and values are at stake. Therefore, the study of student resistance to teaching gender is vital to understanding the learning process and how gender affects learning.

The cases described above represent the most obvious examples of counter-strategic resistance when reluctant behavior does not promote any progressive change in the society. Providing in Russia gender studies were seen as ideological contraband for quite a long time, there was a strong prejudice and even hostility towards these issues in the society, and some students' negative responses echoed these particular ways of thinking.

This study inevitably raises the question about what should be done to induce reluctant learners to overcome their prejudices. Of course, it is difficult to speak about such a sensitive thing as personal opinions and beliefs which educators can affect just softly. It seems the only constructive way to cope the situation is to promote a positive image of gender studies in academic circles, universities and society.

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