Visual methods in teaching sociology of public sphere in Russia

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Abstract: The aim of this research was to contribute to the discussion on the role of visual methods in improving student learning. Visual methods provide means to understand the practices of representations as cultural texts, to develop interpretations of meanings in socio-cultural context, to decode images of social relations and individual experience. Visual sources play a growing role in social studies as well as in teaching as they offer new routes to understanding the past and the present. It was anticipated that when students learn to interpret visual images of social issues as constructs and metaphors in addition to reading relevant literature they might develop critical and contextual imagination, namely connect individual incidences to historical conditions and social institutions, to link seemingly impersonal and remote forces with the lives of real people in concrete institutional and symbolic environments. The main data set included anonymous student journals and portfolio with assignments. The study documented student discourse around visual methods implementation and examined student identities as sociologists, their perceptions of academic expectations at universities, their views of the curriculum, and their identity claims. The results are concerned with the outcomes of teaching and learning considered not only in relation to visual methods but also to the public sphere and sociology. The more and less desirable identity for a sociologist was articulated, some tensions and biases were discovered but more research is needed in order to see more explicitly the role of visual methods and other pedagogical tools in overcoming these barriers.

Keywords: visual methods; scholarship of teaching and learning; public sphere; sociology; university; Russia

Introduction

The aim of this research was to contribute to the discussion on the role of visual methods in improving student learning. The methods of teaching sociology and other social sciences in Russian universities till now have been closely related with old legacies and new challenges met by the teachers and students. As teachers and students were overloaded with hours spent in lectures or seminar room [1], little time was left for conducting valuable research, reading and producing useful scholarly literature, and developing effective teaching techniques (Umland 2005: 222). The teaching has been usually conducted with heavy reliance on the traditional lecture method, and the course frequently ends with oral examinations on the content of the lectures or the main textbook. The lecturers had little motivation to use written homework or class assignments or when using such assignments, mark them quite

formally, without even checking them on plagiarism, while the students learn very well such formal ways of treating their obligations and behave accordingly (Umland 2005: 225-226). In sociological education throughout Russian universities the major emphasis was since 1990s and still is placed on teaching the theories and research process, mainly survey research, and statistical analysis. At the same time, not all university departments have well qualified staff to foster these competencies in the students.

Gradually more and more universities, individual departments and teachers have begun using active teaching and learning techniques, placing greater emphasis on reading and writing assignments and projects and creative activities, both inside and outside the classroom[2]. Sociological education programs today more broadly include courses on qualitative research, and some programs have started placing emphasis on visual studies and participatory action research methodologies.
Visual methods provide means to understand the practices of representations as cultural texts, to develop interpretations of meanings in socio-cultural context, to decode images of social relations and individual experience. Visual sources play a growing role in social studies as well as in teaching as they offer new routes to understanding the past and the present.

By tracing the changes in students' performance in homework assignments, oral discussions and their own self-reflection, I tried to see whether or not visual methods applied along with reading the relevant texts would drive student motivation, attitude, and interest in learning, and induce sociological imagination and criticality in reasoning and learning. It was anticipated that when students learn to interpret visual images of social issues as constructs and metaphors in addition to reading relevant literature they might develop critical and contextual imagination, namely connect individual incidences to historical conditions and social institutions, to link seemingly impersonal and remote forces with the lives of real people in concrete institutional and symbolic environments.

The data were collected during teaching a course in the MA program in "Sociology of public sphere and social communications" at State University – Higher School of Economics (Moscow) during the 2009-2010 academic year. This two year master program was established in 2009 within the Faculty of Sociology, Department of General Sociology and enrols between 20 and 30 students annually. The course "Sociology of Public Sphere and Social Communications" included several lectures and seminars on visual methods, film screenings and participation in a debate exploring social problems as they are presented in documentary films, and visiting a performance of the verbatim theater[3]. What are the current Russian dominant images of social problems, what images of public policies do we have and where are they located, whether or not they are publicized? It was hoped that answering these questions would help students to recognize the constructed nature of social problems as well as ideology embedded in social policy and contradictions in the development of the public sphere.

The research question was: What happens when students apply visual methods in addition to the traditional practice of reading the texts in learning sociology, in

particular public sociology? Following Michael Burawoy (2005), by public sociology I understand an approach to the discipline which seeks to go beyond the academy and engage wider audiences, including the publics who are active in civil society.

During the course and for their final essays the students were asked to visually document issues of public sphere and civil society as well as social problems in the life around them, while simultaneously learning what scholars have said about these problems in theoretical works and empirically-driven research. The data base includes anonymous student journals and electronic communication as well as visual data produced and/or selected by the students for their interim assignments and final essays arranged as portfolios (No.26). Students had been encouraged to reflect (negatively or positively) on the course when writing their journals, and were explicitly given the opportunity to voice those views in public during the final oral feedback. All materials were scrutinized under the informed consent signed by the students.

The study documented student discourse around visual methods implementation and explored student identities as sociologists, their perceptions of academic expectations at universities, their views of the curriculum, and their identity claims. The images selected by the students to represent issues of public sphere, civil society and social problems are scrutinized as well as the way students used these images in contextualizing these concepts; students effectively turned these images into research data to grasp the issues of public sphere. The results are concerned with the outcomes of teaching and learning considered not only in relation to visual methods but also to the public sphere and sociology. The signs of progress in learning sociology through applying visual methods are found in students' journals and assignments. The more and less desirable identity for a sociologist was articulated, and some tensions and biases were discovered, but more research is needed in order to evaluate more explicitly the role of visual methods and other pedagogical tools in overcoming these barriers.

Methods and methodology
Visual methods in teaching social sciences

In spite of the rapid growth of the literature on visual research throughout the social sciences and humanities (see discussion for example in Wagner 2002), the use of visual methods to enhance the active learning process is not so widely discussed (except for a big array of literature on teaching and learning using specifically visual-based methodologies such as drawing (Savoury et al. 2007: 31-43) and observation as a sociological method (Have 2003), as well as a number of publications on teaching such subjects as photography, film, representation and broadly, visual culture (see: Mitchell 2002). However, the following claim is relevant not only to the students learning arts but also for those who are in sociology: "The right-brained way of seeing coupled with a left-brain analysis of form and meaning leads to Visual Literacy" (Savory et al. 2007: 32), which is a good part of sociological imagination. As Glynis Cousin (2009) states, "The relative ease with which we can secure text-based evaluating from learners in higher education had led to a neglect of the potential of visual research." (214-15)

It is important to teach students recording techniques and electronic media in a way that encourages critical reflective thinking and ethical considerations (Pauwels 2008), through applying group work techniques and participatory approaches to research and practice as a component of training.

Alice Lai and Lilly Lu (2009) integrated feminist pedagogy with visual culture art education and online pedagogy to encourage students to challenge patriarchy in the history of art. Peter Taylor and Pettit Jethro (2007) explore learning needs of "social change practitioners" who are challenged to develop their capacities for learning through critical reflection on action and aspire to promote participation as a key element of social change.

According to Damon Mayrl and Laurel Westbrook (2009), public sociologists often are working beyond the academy, and in order to achieve understanding with wider or specific publics, they need to include "a variety of voices from inside and outside academia, and a variety of media, from written to oral to visual communication" (2009:155).

It is possible that the opportunities to seeing the citizen as a political force and the public sphere as a space and process of exercising democracy may be opened through the implementation of visual methods.

Arrangement of teaching and learning process as a research field

The course "Sociology of Public Sphere and Social Communications" comprised 15 lectures and 16 seminars. The *lectures* were used to cover the main theoretical ideas on the public sphere and included topics on the social history of the concept "public" in different national traditions, the main classic and contemporary definitions of public space and public sphere, public/private division in various theoretical paradigms, gender analysis of private/public divide, civil society, urban spaces, and social movements. The *seminar* format was used to stimulate debate among students on the topics emerging from their reading, observation, field visits experiences, and to exchange perspectives on various issues of public sphere. Visual methods were integrated into the agenda of special lectures, several other classes and field visits, including screening documentary films on social problems at the university culture center and visiting a performance of the verbatim theater, all followed by discussions and short written individual reflections.

In addition to the traditional reading and writing assignments focused around working with literature about public sphere and civil society, a number of assignments included visual components: to find published images and to make one's own pictures of "public sphere" and "civil society", to comment on images using ideas from lectures and reading materials, to read and discuss articles on visual research, and to conduct analysis of images for the final essay. For a few students, however, it turned out to be difficult to take their own photographs due to absence of photo cameras. Given such circumstances, the production of one's own images was not a mandatory task.

The students were encouraged to assemble a *portfolio* where each element was followed by regular feedback. The chain of assignments for a course portfolio aimed to provoke in students an increased awareness of how and why visual methods can inform sociological imagination while the special selection of reading materials and the sites for field visits would have promoted understanding of and induce interest in studying issues of social inequality and civil society.

On their very first day, students were made aware that the lecturer was conducting a study. Each of them was given an informed consent form to sign their agreement or confirm their withdrawal from the research process. As it turned out, all students agreed to participate.

From week one, students were asked to keep journals in which they recorded thoughts on their course experiences. All journals were anonymous: students used their secret nicknames or special signs to recognize them, while the lecturer numbered the journals for transcription purposes. Students were provided with a structure for an entry for the journal almost every class meeting. The lecturer read every student's entry and sometimes commented in the journal if the student asked a question or if the lecturer would like to clarify something. The idea was to make sure that the focus of the course was oriented to the difficulties and interests that the students were writing and reflecting about. Throughout the course, the issues raised from journal-keeping were integrated into the teaching and learning process.

The classroom meetings and email correspondence became forums where the insights gained from different sorts of field visits, classes, reading and meetings with special guests were re-contextualized in light of the theories presented in the lectures.

Data and findings
Applying visual methods: signs of progress in learning sociology

After an introduction into visual methods the idea in general was welcomed by the students. According to the entries in their journals, many of them embraced enthusiastically the possibility of doing visual study of public sphere,. Analytic competence and ability to apply knowledge and skills in the real world are highly valued by many students in sociology, and such comments are related to their aspirations and hopes to develop such capacities by using visual methods. Few students expressed skepticism; they foresaw difficulties in finding relevant materials and were uncertain about the methodology itself "Well, I liked it, but where is science? What about reliability?" (Journal #1 of 6th October)

These remarks are rather typical for epistemological debates on objectivity and validity in sociology, and these concerns are very important for the development of visual studies both in terms of method of inquiry and in their teaching applications.

However, the majority of the students enthusiastically collected a wide array of posters, cartoons and photographs, which they looked upon as icons of political actions, public figures, civic initiatives, public spaces, means of propaganda, etc.

After the first assignment was complete, we discussed the results in the class. For many students it was a rewarding experience, they got new ideas and inspiration. They committed themselves to this approach. To write a master's thesis at the end of the two-year study program is a big concern for all students, and some of them obviously tried to use any opportunity offered to them to move further along this uneasy road to their graduation.

But what actually happens when students apply visual methods in addition to reading texts?

The first important challenge is related to the cognitive process of grasping an abstract concept. This process in teaching sociology often is completed through verbal means, and a perceptual symbol that designates a concept is usually a word (Peikoff 1990:97–98). In a process of completing a visual assignment, for some students it was very important to grasp a concept of public sphere in their efforts to find words and images that would correspond with each other:

> The biggest complication for me was an assignment on finding visual material. I had to revise and look through a huge number of images before any were found that were the most relevant to my views on public sphere. (Journal #9 of 6th October)

It is possible that the students accelerated their reflection processes by engaging themselves in self-organized and creative work of searching for the visual metaphors of sociological concepts.

Further work on the second assignment and final essay stimulated in some students further reflection on visual means as a tool to literally see the concept "I noticed that assignments on visual methods help me better understand the focus of study." (Journal #10 of 13th October)

Indeed, "visual culture is not limited to the study of images or media, but extends to everyday practices of seeing and showing" (Mitchell 2002:170), and the question on "how to look at some issue" became crucial for the students.

The image-based work was supported by reading and discussion of literature. We discussed with the students the following grouping of theoretical explanations of "public/private" divide by Jeff Weintraub: (1) the public/private distinction as the distinction between state administration and the market economy; (2) the "public" realm in terms of political community and citizenship, analytically distinct from *both* the market and the administrative state; (3) the "public" realm as a sphere of fluid and polymorphous sociability, which is made possible by cultural and dramatic conventions; and (4) the public/private distinction (which is often gendered) in terms of the divide between the family and the larger economic and political order (1997:7).

How did the students come to pick a particular perspective, and what does this mean? Selection of images made by the students was structured by the theoretical ideas found in lectures and reading materials. However, the focus was chosen also by the students themselves depending on how they understood theories, as well as what explanation they preferred. Important aspects of identity, belonging and memory are

often experienced and/or expressed through taking and looking at photos (Tinker, 2008).

Although it is not possible to generalize from the small numbers, the overall picture can be drawn about how learning took place in this group. Half of the students preferred the second explanation in Weintraub's scheme, which sees "public" close to collective action and civil society.   They sent comments about posters and made their own pictures of public activity of civic organizations and political parties:

> [The] woman seems to be a member of a trade union meeting. In the background there are people, some of them in militia uniform, it might be that they belong to the security organs and are on duty during the demonstration. The poster demonstrates antagonistic relations between trade unions and militia due to the orange arrow and line that circle the object. (Anna[4], photo from the Internet, 1st visual assignment, September 2009)

> People with umbrellas, and tanks. Everything is calm. Maybe there is confusion but not antagonism. This image projects the courage of public, the collective cohesion towards a common goal important for the country; this was the time when ordinary people came out to the street and stood to defend something that they hoped was for the best future. They were weaponless against the army. And there were victims… (Irina, photo from Internet, 1st visual assignment, September 2009)

Practically all comments showed that the students recognized the structure of representations of public protests, collective actions, and marches, as usually including two antagonistic sides –Woman vs. Militia, People vs. Tanks, Freedom vs. Oppression, etc.

Some images presented further on under the second visual assignment were illustrative of the fake civil society, depicting events arranged by the party bureaucrats. The students used such words as "quasi-formal event" (Anna, own photo, 1st visual assignment, September 2009), "one can dispute the real democracy of elections" (Sonya, photo from Internet, 2nd visual assignment, October 2009). Some comments were rather descriptive and directive, repeating the slogans and ignoring the political nature of organization of many segments of the volunteer movement in today's Russia, "Action on the International Day of Refraining from Smoking. This photo depicts civil society, which fights for a healthy way of life among the youth." (Yana)

However, such commentaries could have been produced in a traditional assignment as well. Visual materials only helped to illuminate an uncritical nature of thinking and therefore discuss and revise the interpretations.

Students demonstrated concern with social inequality, dishonest politicians, threatened democracy, and growing civic activism, and tried to depict the state as a public domain and its responsibilities in relation to the issues of inequality and poverty. Some of the comments show that a new social issue or a new side of a known social

problem has been exposed for a student: "I have never ever made such photos before" (Sveta, 1st visual assignment, September 2009).

It is also apparent that the state is chosen as the main actor to be responsible for poverty and homelessness, while the public should only be made aware of these problems:

Fig. 1, Sveta's 1st visual assignment, September 2009

> If even the society would change its attitude… - we won't solve this
> problem. Only the state should… The main point of this picture [is] –
> to attract attention of the public towards the problem and not passing
> nearby... (Sveta)

The choice of some other students was made in favor of political propaganda of the state endeavors and political caricatures. Just as popular was the image of public sphere that relates it with sociability, the rules and conventions of communications in public places. The students selected and commented on images of celebrities, politicians and other public figures presented in various occasions of social life. To imagine public sphere in this sense was to think of it as of a spot for a dialogue, as a space where communication is going on.

The fourth group of images was related to the private as an area of decisions made in the household, in contrast to public as a market economy, and this divide is easily interpreted in terms of gender. Actually, almost all images selected for the assignments were possible to analyze from a gender perspective (in terms of unequal participation in politics, profession, religious sphere, etc.) but this aspect was not appreciated by the students.

By the end of the course, not all of the students had proved the usefulness of visual data in their analytical work. At the end, all 26 master's students had used visual images in their Power Point presentations of final works, while only 12 students included visual materials in the texts of the final essays, trying to integrate them into the discussion concerning such topics as participation of youth in political movements, social adverts, film club and café as a ground for public discussion, publicity of governing in North Caucasus, civic activism of TV spectators, public art and football fans. For example, Marina included a critique of mass media representation in her essay

on public policy in contemporary Dagestan. Six students chose production and consuming of visual information (e.g. cinema clubs, photo journalism, public art, social ads, animation, TV-show) as the primary subjects of their essays, but not all of them included visual data in their works.

In her essay on protest actions of the spectators of TV channel 2x2, Lena included several images of demonstrations as well as propaganda posters produced by the TV channel management. She showed that some participants of the demonstration wore masks because they were afraid of repressions.

Two students wrote final works that focused specifically on visual analysis: these were essays on civic journalism and visual means used by football fans.

Masha elaborated on such issues of civic journalism as professionalization, ethics, public reaction, etc. She considered photo reportage and exhibition, as well as types of public and peculiarities of perception:

> Which photos do their authors consider to be good examples of civic journalism? One photo is made by an amateur photographer, a journalist A. Kabatov during the Dissenters' March. He has photographed the helmet of a Special Forces officer with a sign of SS and published a post in his blog. This photo received a stormy resonance both in mass media (including Internet) as well as among the officials who accused the journalist of photomontage [doctoring the photo]. The situation was resolved thanks to the photos of professional photographer Oleg Klimov who was present at the same March.

These comments tackled several complex of issues, including institutional arrangements of production, distribution and reception of images, professional/lay hierarchy, vulnerability of photographers as well as their 'objects', ethical and political aspects of displaying the photos in public sphere, etc.

The participatory approach was presented in a lecture and in reading materials, and the lecturer emphasized its importance in sociology, but nevertheless none of the students implemented this method in final essays. Only in extra-curricular activities, photo-research as a version of participatory approach was conducted by a small group of students for a conference paper.

The majority of the students appreciated assignments and instruction on visual methods throughout the course. The evaluations ranged from acceptance of visual data and possibilities of application to satisfaction with the entertaining nature of the classes. A few others were rather skeptical or uncertain, appealing to more "scientific" methods instead of or in addition to visual methods.

When students were learning to interpret visual images of social issues as constructs and metaphors in addition to reading relevant literature, some of them demonstrated critical and contextual imagination, connecting individual incidences to historical conditions and social institutions, and linking seemingly impersonal and remote forces with the lives of real people in concrete institutional and symbolic environments.

Social issues in some works were interpreted not as objective conditions but as constructs created in certain discourse formations by various actors with use of verbal and visual means; these connections were made most successfully in class during group discussions. It became clearer for some of the students that one can deconstruct and reconstruct such concepts and intervene into the public sphere with new challenges and fresh ideas. This is seen in their reflexive writing and/or from the images they produced and comments they made about those images.

A new quality of contextualising the abstract terms in students' lifeworld

As Jeff Weintraub (1997) mentions, visibility and collectivity as the main criteria of "public" versus "private" may blur into each other in specific cases, and can also be combined in various ways. Such dialectics are present in students' comments about the chosen images, and this is very important for the development of sociological imagination:

> Public sphere penetrates us even when we are sitting home, in one's own apartment and reading a magazine full of advertisements and even with style of expression of materials. We constantly communicate with the society through these magazines, getting signals-symbols on how to behave tomorrow… we can trace the changes in tastes and will be able, therefore, to correctly interpret actions of the others and to act ourselves. When we are walking through the streets, even with no one there but an advertisement board, we communicate non-stop with the society and still are in the public sphere. (Inna)

Five students sent their own or found in the Internet images of cafés. They commented on the ambivalent nature of these places – both public and private:

> Conversation between two women, most probably in the café. They are sitting on a bed, which is an element of coziness here. It is like a part of the apartment where two friends met (the distance is short between them, personal).

This choice might have been enhanced by the learning of Jürgen Habermas' notion of coffee-house as a place of emerging public sphere. But looking at the content of comments, one can explain it due to the popularity of cafés as a communication site among the students, where they can feel free, speaking privately while being in public.

Especially exciting for the students was a discussion of several homework assignments of their classmates. Indeed, this exercise served as a good vehicle for sociological imagination, "We have a possibility not only to tell what we see ourselves but also to see the picture through somebody else's eyes." (Journal #21 of 6th October)

As it is seen, a new quality of contextualising the abstract terms in students' lifeworld does seem to occur, not always amounting to some sophisticated observation but pointing to a deep learning approach occurring and emotive investment into the learning process. This was supported further by the students' enjoyment of looking at the pictures taken by/presented by classmates.

Increasing capacity to deconstruct the content/context of production and to appreciate the potential of visual sociology as more then illustration

Following Marcus Banks (2001), we shall adopt a dual perspective on visual media, which includes two dimensions of analysis: the content and the context. For some students, a really hard task was to accept and comprehend such a sociology that deviated from what they have been taught previously and aspired to deal with further on:

> Visual assignments … many similarities with art criticism but it is far away from such sociology that I would like to do. (Journal #16 of 6th October)

> A practice of applying visual methods is not yet understandable for me. I do not fully understand what image gives us apart from illustration, which helps to explain something but does not produce new knowledge. (Journal #2 of 6th October)

The students did not always realize that the source of the image they found is an important element of the context and it is not enough only to comment about the content of the picture, which is to be interpreted in a certain place and time, is produced by certain rationales, and is targeted towards a special audience. While commenting on social ads and documentaries, some students elaborated on the meaning of colors and wrote about the target groups but ignored the nature of the source and its ideology.

For example, Tatiana did not pay attention to the source of the image she acquired (it was a website of creative products of former combatants) and did not comment on the cultural specificity of the gender divide in public/private spheres. "Time of the afternoon tea. Muslim men during the afternoon tea. This photo shows the origins of the public sphere." (Tatiana)

On the contrary, some of the students demonstrated increasing capacity to deconstruct the content/context of production and to appreciate the potential of visual sociology as more than illustration. This observation is supported by some of the comments in essays and journals, as for example, in the following revelation:

> All this is very new and therefore interesting. Visual sociology, which turned out as something more than presentations at the conferences. (Journal #15 of 25th November)

Those students who attempted analysis of visual data in their final essays demonstrated signs of mature visual literacy: their interpretation became multi-angled, images as well as inscriptions/titles were insightful, and comments revealed context as well as content of the images.

For example, Lena in her final essay takes into account the policy of production – she emphasizes the role of TV channel administration in governing of

this public when says that some of the posters used by the participants were previously published in the Internet and were appealing to participate in the rally.

Some practices of communication in public spaces were captured by Aleksandra and Liza. They considered the ways that are used by people to communicate their thoughts and reactions:

Fig. 2, Alexandra, photo in Warsaw, 1st visual assignment, September 2009

The wall with announcements and ads. In the center – anti-advertisement of Olympic Games in China and Sochi. Black and white colors dominate. Maybe they signify mourning and prohibition. This bulletin board serves as a public ground for liberal human rights advocacy ideas… There was an attempt to tear off this poster from the wall. Therefore, this wall became a public ground for the faith of two opposite ideas. (Alexandra)

Fig. 3, Liza, photo in Stockholm, 1st visual assignment, September 2009

It is a sign of pedestrian crosswalk with a lot of different stickers and inscriptions. This sign is a symbol of public space where people can express their opinions. One of the stickers depicts a man with a child. (Liza)

Both of these images are very important choices, and especially the first one, which was very successfully discussed in class and helped some students to overcome an understanding of visual as a simple illustration.

Visual methods provide means to understand the practices of representation as cultural texts, to develop interpretations of meanings in socio-cultural context, and to decode images of social relations and individual experience. It is important to remember that all visual representations are both produced and consumed in a social context (Banks 2001), and to apply the constructionist perspective on social problems. This learning develops within the context of debate and competition and would provide students with the opportunity to acquire skills necessary for participation in policy arenas (Fine 2000).

The more and less desirable identity for a sociologist

Finally, there seems to be a very important point arising about the more and less desirable identity for a sociologist. Some participants of the course felt wholeheartedly committed to the idea of use of creative means in studying the society:

> I liked very much the articles on visual methods that were given as reading assignment. A harmony with my inner feelings appeared concerning the idea that public sociology can and should be creative and not just academic. A wish appeared to arrange for a photo-exhibition or photo-competition devoted to some particular social problem. And to conduct a research "through smb's eye's" related with this competition. A wish appeared and became fixed to do visual sociology and to write a paper for a conference. (Journal #4 of 13th October)

The verbatim theater experience as well as documentary screening and debate were challenging for all students who participated:

> To me, such [activities] as visit to cinema club and watching the film or interview with a real representative of an NGO, are much more effective in understanding civil society and social responsibility than lectures and reading the books (but books and lectures are necessary, too). (Journal # 10 of 17th November)

At the same time, several comments were critical towards the course's focus on the sharp issues such as social problems and civil society "The program is rather interesting but I would like more visual and public and less civic. It might be a consumerist position but anyway…" (Journal #12 of 3rd November)

The majority of the images (N=17) selected for the second assignment devoted to visualization of civil society pictured various practices, including rallies and demonstrations, among them 16 images depicting meetings of protesting nature.

> Dissenters' March. Very dynamic picture. Protesting people are being piled up. Surrounding people are observing. Some are emotionally reacting. Journalists are taking pictures – is this an emotional act or just doing a job? Militia man is videotaping the event. The attempt of civil society to give its voice is firmly suppressed but not very organized. (Dasha)

> Dissenters' March. Civil society is not easy to visualize. Only public dialogue between the state and society and opposition of the opinion. It is a strong emotional photo. Fighting for one's own opinion is similar to war. (Alina)

At the same time, the majority of these images were taken from a distance – almost all of them are from the Internet.

Compared to the choices of two students who decided to comment on the crackdown on the Dissenters' March (see above), the other images were less dynamic and more peaceful and many of them were a part of the students' personal experience. This group of images was devoted to the activities of volunteers and charities and the ideas of mutual help.

According to Bourdieu (1984), photography as an ordinary cultural practice offers a way of understanding the aesthetics that dominate the discourse and the practices of different classes (see also Bourdieu, Boltanski, et al. [1964]1990). The selection of photos can be treated as 'mirrors with memory' reflecting what has mattered most in people's lives" (Weiser 1999/1993).

It is possible that some students projected into the choice of images and into the comments their own biases and fears:

> Often ideas of civic initiatives, means and goals of the citizens' self-organization are understood quite aggressively and incorrectly. (Liza)

> It is not necessary to take part in demonstrations and marches. (Masha)

For some of the students the difficulties of completing the assignments were associated with their lack of involvement with non-governmental organizations and/or local communities. It seems that conventional definitions of a sociologist shared by some students differ from an image of a professional who is engaged in public and political ways with issues stimulated by debates over political activism, social movements, and civil society.

Implication and conclusion

Many students appreciated the format of the classes (use of active methods, visual components of presentations and small groups activities, etc.). In the seminars students expressed their concerns and insights; they learned to work collaboratively as

well as individually. Both in the seminars and lectures I had an opportunity to address some of the issues and difficulties expressed by students in their journals and email communication. Some students expanded their research methodologies and started using photographs, films, and posters in their essays and further in course papers on the topic of their master thesis. Students' personal commitment became apparent at a number of points: they asked for further reading, for feedback on specific entries in the journals, they shared insights into their own reflexive experience from field visits and meetings with people.

The portfolio and other relevant data made it possible to indicate several signs of the learning progress. By the end of the course deeper understanding of the chosen topic and contextualization of the issues of "public sphere" in general was achieved. Some of the students' assignments included signs of "visual literacy" – concepts of analysis, reference to the sources on visual methods, and interpretation became multi-angled. Some of the images as well as inscriptions/titles were insightful, and comments revealed the context and content of the images.

Images selected by the students represented issues of public sphere, civil society and social problems; these images were used by some students in contextualizing these concepts, and for some of these students visual materials become research data in their final essays.

It is seen from their reflexive writing and/or from the images they produced and comments they made about those images that the students' perception of public sphere, social problems and civil society was enhanced. The ability to contextualize the abstract terms as well as the capacity to deconstruct the content and context of image production and to appreciate the potential of visual sociology as more than illustration were strengthened throughout the course. However, all this does not necessarily help to build up or strengthen their identity as organic public sociologists willing to study and participate in civil society.

For a social scientist, it is important to challenge the ways images have mattered and continue to matter in the struggle for human rights (Berger 2010; Sliwinski 2006). Images play a vital role in constructing social problems; therefore, in order to understand how potential troubles become recognized as matters of collective concern, it is possible to discuss with the students visual elements of the discourse on social problems and stories of visual enhancement of human rights movement in the works of documentary photographers who often collaborated with sociologists.

It could be possible for future courses to enhance collaboration and dialogue between the students by making their insights accessible to—and encouraging comments from—each other. Concrete proposals were made by some students concerning the organization of the learning process:

> Maybe it would be a good idea for next time to make a list of topics, divide students in several groups by these topics, assign them to search for visual materials and then conduct the seminar – it might be bright, interesting and visual. Maybe even arrange for some exhibitions. Or at least such materials would be obvious proof of the students' work and

development of their "participant understanding" of visual methods, their significance and peculiarities. THANK YOU! (Journal #6 of 25th November)

Another important self-advice would be to focus students' search on some selection of topics, to make the focus more concrete and to enhance reflection based on comparison and connectivity. The majority of the students favored visual technologies and liked to discuss images but in order to be able to apply them to working with publics, to promote social change and advocate the interests of vulnerable groups, additional mechanisms are required. These mechanisms should be provided by civil society, the professional sociological community, and of course, the students' own motivation. Service learning may be used to integrate learning associated with the experience of participation in civil society and formal academic work (McGoldrick and Peterson 2009). According to Jeffrey Alexander (2006), it is inside the world of civil values and institutions that we develop our capacity for social criticism and democratic integration.

It might be hypothesized that the students' interpretations of the visuals, or their reactions to the assignments and the pedagogical approach, reflect something specific to the Russian/educational/social context. Students are 'affected by the consequences of the above problems as learners, researchers, university members, and young citizens' (Umland 2005: 226). The conservatism expressed by some of the students is nurtured not just in sociology training programs. It reflects "substantive and symbolical transformation of the political climate" (Hamburg 2005:108) as well as at the societal level in general. Then, there is more reason to get the students engaged in challenging that conservative way of thinking.

As Caroline H. Persell (2009) argues, the students "need to see a broader spectrum of the social world, especially those who have grown up in communities relatively segregated by color, class, or ethnicity" (2009:215). It is important to help students to get out of the sterilized conditions in the classroom to the real world and to engage with communities and groups in order to understand their issues (see McGoldrick and Peterson 2009).

Critical pedagogy (see development of Freire's ideas in Shor 1992) should be fundamental to teaching sociology and one might refer also to the works by feminist writers such as bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) and other publications (see for example: Luke and Gore, 1992; Mayberry and Rose, 1999) that could impress and move us and our students emotionally and morally. Unfortunately, many university sociological programs in Russia do not seem to fully appreciate the criticisms leveled at the classics of sociology; nor do they grasp their limitations for today's sociology. A similar problem is pointed by DeCesare (2009:193) concerning the high school programs in USA. But it is not enough only to read these powerful texts.

Public sociology is a contested area in Russia. Possibilities for public sociology in Russia are limited by the lack of democratic mechanisms in the political context, weak civil society, and controversial processes of institutionalization of sociology (Zdravomyslova 2008). New generations of sociologists are prepared at the universities

to serve the state or the market. Only a small community of independent sociologists—working under the support of international and some Russian foundations—identify their research issues in relation to civil society and marginalized groups. At the same time, civil society and public sphere are in danger and the state treats civic initiatives suspiciously, selectively supporting some non-governmental organizations and scapegoating the others (Zdravomyslova 2008: 407).

Intensive boundary work is going on among the various paradigmatic subcultures of sociologists, and the field discipline is sharply divided along several lines. One group of scholars sees the public role of sociology as helping define and promote the national idea and state policies. Another group trusts in democratic reformist criticism of sociological consciousness (Zdravomyslova 2008: 409). Both groups argue that sociology should serve public interests, to help solve acute problems. For this they are labeled by a third group of sociologists as carrying 'forms of post-Soviet thinking' (Vakhshtayn 2012). After the decades of ideological pressure, many intellectuals justify their 'disengaged' position as the only way to emancipate themselves from the socialist past. Engagement with critical thinking and civic activism is often understood as a Soviet legacy, identified as non-scientific, state-dependent activity.

Many contemporary Russian intellectuals would agree that 'the sociologist is not on the public/political barricades whilst he or she wears the white robe of a scientist' (Pokrovsky 2011). At the same time, there are groups of scholars who associate themselves with public movements; work in civil society organizations (including human rights and advocacy groups); and engage in various kinds of public engagement through community creative activities, art practices, discussion clubs, etc. (e.g. projects of the Center for Independent Sociological Research in St. Petersburg; see http://cisr.ru/en/). Many intellectuals define the public role of sociology as a channel of providing important information to the mass media, while their opponents question what they call 'pop-sociology', accusing them of making non-professional and incorrect statements, and degenerating the public image of the discipline itself.

In fact, many university instructors in Russia have students do public sociology in a way that "gets students out of the classroom into a variety of public settings, where they can begin to talk with and hopefully understand the perspectives of a wider range of people than they have previously met" (Persell, 2009: 216). Some sociology teachers at Samara, Saratov, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg and other universities encourage students to work with local grassroots social movements, social services, and businesses. It is mostly an optional choice in relation with the topic of course project, diploma or thesis, but some sociology programs have instituted service learning. In Burawoy's words, service learning can be a prototype of such education: "as they learn students become ambassadors of sociology to the wider world just as they bring back to the classroom their engagement with diverse publics" (2005: 9).

Recently there is a rising interest towards participatory-action research projects that include photography or film techniques (see for instance: Lykes 2001; Wang 1999). Using the idea from Spence and Solomon's (1995) *What can a woman do with a*

camera? as a starting point and following Claudia Mitchell (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh 2002), we can formulate the questions "what can a sociologist, a social worker or a student do with a camera?" and "what can a child do with a camera?" The Photo Voice is a participatory-action research methodology where researchers use photographs to elicit, bring forth, and draw out responses from participants on issues related to their health and community needs (Wang and Burris 1997). Beth Perry, Janice Dalton, and Margaret Edwards (2009) have turn the Photo Voice method into an interactive tool and report such positive effects (as stated by the students themselves) as capturing attention, stimulating creative thinking, and creating community. Sociology educators may develop their own videos depicting their own and their students' unique experiences, using the interdisciplinary, collaborative, problem-based approach.

The reception of public sociology may be improved by applying visual methods in teaching and learning but the effects will depend on the motivation of the primary audience (the students) and the wider audience (the professional community of sociologists) to reflect and take on a public role of sociology. And vice versa: if sociology students can go out of the academy into various public settings where they can talk with and hopefully understand the perspectives of a wide range of people, they will bring more diverse social experience and observations to their study of professional sociology (Persell 2009:215, 216). Opportunities of the classrooms and various public settings can be used to build up motivation through practicing communicative knowledge. Debate and consensus building skills in concert with visual methods may be useful in developing collaborative and cooperative projects.

At the same time, the epistemological questions in terms of "knowledge for what" and "knowledge for whom" should not discourage students from studying carefully social theories and research methodologies (see Brownlie 2009). As it turned out in our group, the young researchers were deeply involved in political debates about the choice of focus and role of research while their ability to comprehend differences in formulating research goals from different theoretical standpoints was limited. It was partly due to the assumption that students at the graduate level are fully aware both of the theoretical bases and methods of sociology, but this should not have been taken for granted. After the missing elements in the background of the group were discovered, one additional assignment was solicited: it was devoted to the ability to formulate research questions departing from different sociological paradigms, as well as two classes on discussion of theories and methods.

Acknowledgements

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[1]   30 academic hours per week, sometimes more spent in the lecture or seminar room.

[2] Higher School of Economics is an example of a university integrating modern teaching and learning principles and techniques.

[3] Verbatim is a documentary theatre. The plays are written using the exact words of people from the interviews or words from the other sorts of documents.

[4] The names are changed for ethical reasons.