The Indiana University
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presents a roundtable discussion by

E L E N A   I A R S K A I A -   S M I R N O V A

Looking for Change: Visual Methods in Teaching Public Sociology

Friday, May 6, 2011
12-1:30 p.m.
Ballantine Hall 004
IU Bloomington

Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova is a Professor of Social Anthropology and Social Work at Saratov State University as well as Professor of General Sociology at the Moscow Higher School of Economics in Moscow, Russia. Her area of specialty includes gendered aspects of social policy reform and the social work profession, the history of Soviet social policy, the changing profession of social work in Russia, gender theory, and the politics of disability and disability policy. She will visit the Institute May 3-9, 2011 to collaborate with her primary sponsor, Sarah Phillips (sadphill@indiana.edu) in Anthropology and consult with colleagues in Anthropology, Sociology, Education, and History.

Professor Iarskaia-Smirnova’s paper, which will be discussed at the roundtable, is attached. The abstract is as follows:

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. The ways to construct and define social problems as well as approaches to solving them varied in different periods of history. Photographs and episodes from films, posters and cartoons depicting images of people in the roles of parents and workers, care providers and patients, can be used not just as illustrations or representations but also as an important element of a studied context – as important as official documents or personal narratives. 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 home 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, induce sociological imagination, 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.

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