

The threshold concept of darwinism in learning history

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Abstract

The threshold concept of the evolutionary theory, otherwise known as Darwinism, is a crucial concept to be identified and properly handled in the learning of history in Albania. The rejection of history learning is often connected to the subconscious belief of the learners that the past is inferior from the present, in terms of human intellectual development, and history which deals with the past cannot offer lessons for the future, expect through its mistakes that are to be avoided. This threshold concept shows up in different aspects of the learning history like linear thinking of the human development, intellectual progression, projection of the present thinking to the past etc.

Key terms: threshold concept, evolution theory, Darwinism, learning history, higher education, Albania, Elbasan University, historical thinking, scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL)

The theory of Charles Darwin that the man originates from the monkey is part of every history schoolbook of the fourth grade in Albania, when history starts to be taught at school. We, however, hardly thought that this theory of evolution, taught so early to our children, is translated into the minds of many people as the past being inferior to the present, and the present being inferior to the future in terms of development. Such a cliché is present in the mind of many people even when they are in their twenties as my university students are and probably even at a later age. Darwinism is, thus, one of the most common clichés in students minds, who think that because the man originates from the monkey, man in the past was less intelligent and less developed than we are today, that is why nothing important can be learned from the history and from the past in general, except for the mistakes, which should be lessons for us not to be repeated in the future.

As a result of this type of historical thinking, I, as a scholar of Albanian medieval history and as a lecturer of history, often encounter students who deliberately refuse to get engaged in proper research about history. They like to discuss historical topics when they are connected to politics of the day, but they do not want to learn about history in a deeper way. Identifying the challenges in the study of history is, thus, the first step towards a solution to changing the attitudes toward learning history, the clue to opening up the historical discourse.

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Being part of the Scholarship of 'Teaching and Learning (SOTL) in the last two years, I profited a lot from this new discipline,² in terms of different approach to students' learning. Although a new discipline, this Scholarship has flourished in a speedy way in the last decades, experiencing a flux of workshops, conferences, projects and, of course, publications giving a very good insight in what goes on in and out the classroom, and in students' minds. It is rather challenging to give an overview of the whole literature produced by SOTL scholars, either published online or in print, in order to display the revolutionary change of the approach to higher education and the deep insight this new field offers for its understanding. Even focusing on the teaching and learning of history, as my prime focus is, it is a huge task to delineate all the trends and achievements of these last years. The main point of this change, however, needs to be explicitly mentioned and that is the focus on students' learning and reflecting rather than on the teaching techniques and teaching activity.³

Focusing on my collected data, which consists of students' papers written during the fall semester 2011, I will concentrate on one of those key concepts that Erik Meyer and Ray Land⁴ would argue to be central to the mastery of their subjects, calling it a threshold concept. That threshold concept is in my case the Darwinist *weltanschauung* that my students share about the past in general. This way of thinking is certainly the root and at the same time the product of insufficient historical understanding, creating, thus, a vicious circle, which gives birth to many other misconceptions, stereotypes and clichés at the university level, but also in the society at large.

Taking for granted the statement of Glynis Cousing⁵ that the idea of threshold concepts came from a UK national research project into the possible characteristics of strong teaching and learning environments in the disciplines for undergraduate education (Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses 2001-2004), here we are delineating the threshold concepts according to these founders. Erik Meyer and Ray Land argued that certain concepts were held by economists to be central to the mastery of their subject. Further investigation in other subjects showed this to be true of any subject.⁶ The threshold concepts are characterized as transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded,⁷ troublesome⁸ and liminal. The Meyer and Land threshold concept have been widely discussed and presented also online,⁹ raising thus a higher awareness

2. The book of Ernest L. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990) is considered as the starting point for the SOTL.

3. M. Prosser and K. Trigwell, *Understanding learning and teaching. The experience in higher education* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999); E. Martin, M. Prosser and K. Trigwell et al., "What university teachers teach and how they teach it" *Instructional Science* 28 (2000): 387-412; A.S.P. Ho, D. Watkins, and M. Kelly, "The conceptual change approach to improving teaching and learning: An evaluation of a Hong Kong staff development programme" *Higher Education* 42 (2001): 143-169; N. Entwistle and E. Peterson, "Conceptions of learning and knowledge in higher education: Relationships with study behaviour and influences of learning environments" *International Journal of Educational Research* 41 (2004): 407-28.

4. Erik Meyer, and Ray Land, (eds), *Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding: Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

5. Glynis Cousin, "Neither Teacher-centred nor Student-centred: Threshold Concepts and Research Partnerships," *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, Issue 2, February 2010. [http://www.adlinh.ac.uk/ojs/index.php?journal=jld&page=article&op=viewFile&path\[\]=64&path\[\]=41](http://www.adlinh.ac.uk/ojs/index.php?journal=jld&page=article&op=viewFile&path[]=64&path[]=41) (accessed January 2012)

6. Ray Land, Erik Meyer, and John Smith, (eds), *Threshold Concepts within the Disciplines* (Rotterdam: Sense Publications, 2008).

7. Meyer and Land, "Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (1) – linkages to ways of thinking and practicing", in Rust, C. (ed.) *Improving student learning – ten years on* (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, 2003), p. 6.

8. David Perkins, 'The underlying game: troublesome knowledge and threshold conceptions', in Meyer, J.H.F. and Land, R. (eds.) *Overcoming barriers to student understanding: threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 7.

9. *Threshold Concepts: Undergraduate Teaching, Postgraduate Training and Professional Development A short introduction and bibliography* <http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html#gen2> (last accessed January 2012)

to this phenomenon and enabling a better networking. Using these concepts in history teaching is an area still to be explored, since most of the studies on the threshold concepts are mainly focused on computer sciences and environmental studies, but not only. The above mentioned disciplines are considered as disciplines which do not offer final conclusions, but history tends to be the opposite: It is considered to be a well-structured discipline, which traditionally has offered well-defined ultimate conclusions. This is, in my view, also one the main threshold concepts in this discipline.

When looking for stereotypes, misconceptions and clichés that impede students' learning of history, I risked confusing what is a common students' failure to grasp historical meaning in general, since historical thinking is an unnatural act.¹⁰ SOTL scholars have identified students' and teachers' bad reactions and misconceptions towards history.¹¹ Besides that, many generic students' failures are explained in context like, for instance, students' lack of confidence to critique book authors, emotional difficulties in suspending judgment while exploring a historical phenomenon, students' tendency to rush to judgments, insecurity and fear of exploring areas that are ideologically charged, the alien nature of historical reasoning etc.¹² The culturality of the educational systems could also be another aspect to be taken seriously into consideration, since the huge differences in the understanding of the same subject in different countries plays a considerable role.¹³

The nature of misconceptions in general, when teaching history is quite good highlighted in some experiments with children, whose results are published in the last decades.¹⁴ This brings us back to the distorted view of history that pupils get from their first history textbook in Albania, namely the one in the fourth grade. The book is made out of six parts, as shown in the picture below. Four out of six parts of the book are concerned with the history before the Middle Ages; one is about the Middle Ages, and the last one is about the development of society today and in the future, which is illustrated with a beautiful picture of a child and an woman in front of a computer.

Ill. 1. Historia e klases IV (2012), p. 23: 1. "People appeared on earth." 2. "People dominate the nature." 3. The Birth of civilization. 4. Civilization in the ancient Egypt. 5. Civilization at the seacoasts. 6. The development of society today and in the future.

The national agenda behind the teaching of history in general is also important for

10. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 3-27.

11. There are many scholars who share the same idea. See S. Wineburg, 'Probing the Depths of Students' Historical Knowledge', *Perspectives* 30 (March 1992): 19-24; Mike Huggins, "1066 and all that! Pupil misconceptions in history," In *Children's Perception of Learning with Trainee Teachers*, ed. Hilary Cooper and Rob Hyland (London, USA, Canada: RoutledgeFalmer, 2000), 85-93. Mike Huggins, "1066 and all that! Pupil misconceptions in history." *Children's Perception of Learning with Trainee Teachers*, edited by Hilary Cooper and Rob Hyland (London, USA, Canada: RoutledgeFalmer, 2000), pp. 85-93.

12. Arlene Díaz; Joan Middendorf; David Pace and Leah Shopkorn. "The History Learning Project: A Department "Decodes" Its Students." In *The Journal of American History* (March 2008): 1-14; David Pace, "The Internationalization of History Teaching through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, *Creating the Institutions to Unite the Efforts of a Discipline*," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 6 (Oct.2007): 329-335; *ibid.*, "Decoding the Reading of History: An Example of the Process," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 98 (Summer 2004): 13-21;

13. Vicky Gunn and Leah Shopkorn. "Doing SoTL in Medieval History: A Cross-Atlantic Dialogue." *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 6, 3 (2007): 255-271 <http://ahh.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/6/3/255> (Last accessed: January 2012).

14. Mike Huggins, "1066 and all that! Pupil misconceptions in history," *Children's Perception of Learning with Trainee Teachers*, edited by Hilary Cooper and Rob Hyland (London, USA, Canada: Routledge Falmer, 2000), pp. 85-93; A. E. Pendry, J. Atha, S. Carden et al., eds. "Pupil misconceptions in history", *Teaching History* 86: 18-20.

explaining certain phenomena in the classroom.¹⁵ Recognizing the bottlenecks to learning history is thus a thorny issue which might, in my case, be confused with what I want to point out as stereotype, misconception and cliché. This will, to a certain extent, be defined by the national agenda and the collective memory in Albania, which, however, will not be covered in this paper, because it leads my research outside my classroom.

In order to have my classroom as the starting point for a bigger project, it is very important for me to use the appropriate research tools for data collection and review. SOTL literature in this field is quite instructive and beneficial.¹⁶ The problems within the discipline of history are widely discussed by HistorySotl group in Indiana¹⁷ and also at CEU.¹⁸ The debate is thus an ongoing one.¹⁹

My Primary Source and Findings

The data collected for this research project is composed by students' written works, either in-class, or at home, the total number of which is 131 handwritten relatively short texts. These texts were produced by second-year students of History-German Language class at the University of Elbasan during the fall of 2011 on mainly three different occasions: prompts at the end of each class, reflective papers during class or at home, and as part of the final exam. The first two occasions were mainly on a voluntarily basis, and were not to be graded, encouraging, thus, students to express themselves as sincerely as possible. It is important to mention that these assignments²⁰ could be anonymous and they were not to be assessed, or used for any grading purpose. Nevertheless feeling released from this "punishment of grading," students did not want to remain anonymous in their writing, but on the contrary, they wanted sincere feedback for everything they were expressing in their papers. Some of them were even surprised by their own thoughts, when written in paper. Although it was made clear to them, that no right or wrong answers was expected for this kind of writing, they still wanted their written thoughts to be approved or disapproved by the authority they recognized as such, namely by me in the classroom or outside. When asked why the voice of "the authority" was important to them, and who

15. Irma Budžinaite, *National identity and the teaching of history: the reflection of Lithuania's 16th-18th centuries commonwealth with Poland in Lithuanian schools* (Budapest: CEU, Budapest College, 2010).

16. Richard Gale, "Asking Questions that Matter... Asking Questions of Value". *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, vol. 3, no. 2 (July 2009). http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/ijstol/v3n2/invited_essays/PDFs/InvitedEssay_Gale.pdf

Huber Mary Taylor and Shermyn P. Morraale. *Disciplinary Styles in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Exploring Common Ground* (AAHE and Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement Teaching, 2002); Lendol, Calder, W. III Cutler, and Kelly T. Mills. "History Lessons. Historians and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, in *Disciplinary Styles in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Exploring Common Ground*, ed. Mary Taylor Huber and Shermyn P. Morraale (AAHE and Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement Teaching, 2002), pp. 45-67.

17. History projects and also with the ongoing projects in this field. *HistorySotl*. <http://www.indiana.edu/~histsotl/blog/?cat=3> (last accessed: January 2012) http://web.ceu.hu/crc/crc_sotfel.htm#2011fellows (last accessed: January 2012)

19. For more detailed studies on specific issue of scholarship of history teaching I have considered Charles Anderson, and Kate Day. "Purposive Environments: Engaging Students in the Values and Practices of History." *Higher Education* 49 (2005): 319-343; Alan Booth, "Rethinking the Scholarly. Developing the Scholarship of Teaching in History." *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 3 (2004): 247-262. <http://abhs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/3/3/247> (last accessed: January 2012); Stephane Lévesque, *Thinking Historically, Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Linda S. Lenzi, "Articulating the Silences: Teachers' and Adolescents' Conceptions of Historical Significance," in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter C. Seixas, Sam S. Wineburg (New York and London: NY University Press, 2000), 284-306.

20. Paper 26-131.

this ‘authority’ could otherwise be, they were surprised by the question, but immediately started to describe “the professor” as they had experienced this role throughout their educational system. Refraining myself from direct or indirect assessment of their thoughts, but provoking them with short “scandalizing” questions, made them become quite active in writing. Some of them even stated they had “never in their life written so much about their own thoughts concerning learning and certainly not about learning of history, which was only to be memorized and not to be thought about.”²¹

The third occasion was the final exam. I base my analysis mainly on the written works produced on this occasion.²² The reason why I chose to analyze mainly these works is that they are final products expected to be assessed and graded and can reflect also a maturity in their historical understanding as a final stage of the course. Differently from the two first occasions, the final exam was certainly taken much more seriously, because of the association with the final grading, which was very important to students. They tried to do their best. The surprise was that on the final exam many students went back to their deep-rooted misunderstandings and clichés, although in voluntarily written papers they convinced me to have made a huge progress in their shift of historical thinking and understanding. This can only be explained with the pressure of the final grade, which made them fall back to what was generally considered “proper history”, rather than rely on what they had thought about history recently.

The contrastive method as a tool to identify threshold concepts

The teaching of History of German-Speaking Countries to students who were familiar with Albanian history offered me a good opportunity to use the contrastive method as the main teaching method throughout my course, although this method is not a typical one in the discipline of history. The contrastive method is commonly used in linguistics, especially in second language acquisition, since it is based on the epistemology that one never teaches the language *per se*, but the whole school of thought. As such one cannot think in a language and speak another one, because that is destined to fail, since the same words mean different things in different cultures. From this point of view, I find the contrastive method as a very important one in the history teaching, since no historical event can be translated and understood by comparing it to another one and translating it with the same concept. One has to understand the underlying ties, the whole complexity of that event in order to be able to grasp its meaning. The comparative studies done within the scholarship of teaching and learning are, however, important corner stones for understanding pros and cons of the contrastive method and here I was well informed by the report of Svetlana Suveica,²³ and others²⁴ for this.

When contrasting the history of Albania with the history of German-speaking countries, students could easily realize a different approach applied in the two historiographies, although they were not able to grasp this difference, or at least not able to articulate it properly. One of the first identifications was the multiplicity of the primary sources used in the German historiography, pointed out a student. The student could,

21. *Class discussions in November 2011.*

22. *Papers no. 2-25.*

23. “Thinking Comparatively in Moldovan History Classroom,” web.ceu.hu/crc/sot_fel/Suveica_final.pdf (Last accessed: July 2012)

24. M. Miller, ‘Comparative and Cross-national History: Approaches, Differences, Problems’, in: *Comparison and History: Europe in Cross-National Perspective*, eds. Deborah Cohen, and Mauna O’Connor (New York: Routledge, 2004).

however, not articulate the difference this could make in researching the past, which shows a clear lack of understanding or preparation in research methods. This could partly be student's fault, but also the result of insufficient training in this area: "The study of history is a difficult discipline – stated the student. - In order to study the history of a country, one has to use multiple sources, which could be material and written ones. For the study of history of Germany, one has to mention that there are many material sources discovered by archeologists and also many written sources. The same can be also said about the history of Albania."²⁵ That is the end of her argument, and that clearly shows she could not articulate how these sources are used for the history of Albania.

The underlying problem in articulating the difference is also connected with the general perception that history is equal to the past. While the object of research in the historiography of German-speaking countries is the past, where different primary sources and research methods are well integrated to highlight the past, the object of research in the Albanian historiography is the history itself, which means the knowledge about the past that has arrived to us mainly through written evidence. The texts of the German speaking countries show the past from different angles and give them free space to read between the lines and also make sense of it by asking questions that matter and also questions of value.²⁶ The Albanian historiography had given them little room to glimpse in the past. The authority of such history is often presented as unquestionable, and students are forced to hear the voice of such texts, but not expected to enter any discussion with them.

Identifying the limitations of such texts, but being unable to understand their proper context, and articulate this understanding, students blame the inferiority of historiography in the Middle Ages: "A distinguished feature of the medieval historiography is in general the fact that the historical critical skills were naïve and weak. The reason for this low-level intellectual work stands, according to them, in the mystical-religious conception of history, in the narrow circle of historical knowledge, and in the low-level research techniques used in the Middle Ages."²⁷

Although the student does not articulate openly the Darwinist belief in the evolutionary development of the human race in this text, one can already read these thoughts between the lines, especially when speaking about the historical critical skills as being naïve and weak in that 'remote' time-period. A similar case appears also in another paper, in which the student tries to contrast the history of the countries, but ends up in summarizing it in a Darwinist way: "The history of Albania and the history of Germany have much in common, especially during the middle ages. Such can be mentioned about the nourishment, governing, organization of the country etc. For both of these countries, this period was, thus, a period of lack of development."²⁸

Darwinism and a strong belief in the evolution theory is not explicitly expressed in a written texts, because students who write these texts are not aware of their belief, and I refrained myself from naming and presenting it to them. Since the theory of evolution implies that everything in the past is less developed than and inferior to the knowledge we have today, it can be easily identified in daily conversations, in their written papers, and

25. Paper no. 4.

26. I am using these terms in their broader sense. For a specific meaning of them especially within the scholarship of Higher Education see Richard Gale, "Asking Questions that Matter ... Asking Questions of Value," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 3:2 (July 2009).

27. Paper no. 1.

28. Paper no. 5.

but strangely enough even in the last essays. I use the term “strangely”, because I did not expect my students to think the same at the end of the course, since we learned so much about the facts that proved human literacy since the early middle ages already. Although in the structured questions they reached high scores, because of good preparation for the course, in the unstructured essay about their own opinion concerning the development of the human being from the early to the late middle ages, they went back to their original ideas, preconceived outside this course.

“The human being experienced a great change from the early middle ages to the late middle ages. These changes happened as a result of the development. People started to use various materials as their tools. They did not live any longer in herds, but started to be organized in tribes, and each tribe had its chieftain. The chieftain had full rights and everything had to be done with his approval. They started to get better nourished: started to cook the meat and not use it raw any longer.”²⁹

After having discussed the incorrectness of the above statement in the group, without mentioning the name of the student who had written it, we spoke directly about the Darwinist theory of evolution which has plucked their minds in glimpsing at the past. As a threshold concept that influences the whole understanding of the past, the theory of evolution becomes clearly visible in the following example.

“In the early middle ages, people were undeveloped, because they had started to live in countryside after the destruction of the cities by the numerous wars in Europe. Because of the barbarian migrations, rural lifestyle is the most common. There is a lack of sources from this period because of the migrations, but soon started the building of the new cities and in the late middle ages there is a cultural development of the folks. In the early middle ages, people did not get any education, and nobody did anything for the intellectual life. In the late middle ages, big cities were built and along economy and trade, schools and education was paid a huge attention.”³⁰

After discussing the plausibility of the theory of evolution, the student above wants to avoid discussing it as being the main change of the human being. Nevertheless, she cannot control thinking inferiorly about the social life in the Middle Ages. Trying to make sense to this inferiority, the student comes with a different explanation that justify the “undeveloped people” in the Middle Ages, namely the lack of the urban life, due to “the destruction of cities by numerous war.” This camouflage of the deep-rooted belief is strategically used to ‘please the authority’ and to still not to refuse the norm.

The presence of a blind belief in the Darwinism comes clearly into picture when discussing the time of evolution. Students believe that the evolution happened in such a short time like from the early Middle Ages to the late Middle Ages, just because the Middle Ages seems to them to be quite remote. “From the early middle ages to the late middle ages, the human being changed in many aspects, especially concerning the way of living and the organization in the society.”³¹

29. Paper no. 7, 8, 17.

30. Paper no. 13.

31. Paper no. 4.

One of the students was eager to write about the change of the woman's position in the family and society from the early to late Middle Ages. Thinking evolutionary, this student is unable to keep track of time and of change.

“In the early middle ages, people were undeveloped and lived in very bad living conditions. The working tools were few, the field production scarce. The social organization was very loose. The importance of the woman in the family was almost zero. Only the opinion of man as a head of the family was considered important. In the late middle ages, the man managed to improve lifestyle and the living conditions. There were new working tools and manners that increased the productivity and the social and political organization were at higher levels. The position of the woman in the family was improved. Her opinion mattered in special cases.”³²

When considering time, it is important to note that continuity is important in the evolutionary theory, where everything comes in a lineal order. Not understanding this component, students often fall into the trap of evolutionary thinking, although they might be against the evolutionary theory.

There are, however, also students who consider early Middle Ages and Late Middle Ages as extremely different periods and manage to get out of the lineal development of the human race. They consider different periods to have experienced different aspects of change. “Everything changes from one period to another one. In the early Middle Ages, books were written by hand and that made books very expensive. In the late Middle Ages, after 1445(!) the printing was created and numerous books were printed easier, which led to a less expensive book production. In the late Middle Ages, navigating was made easier, because ships were better built and equipped....”³³

Religion is also part of the big picture of the Darwinist theory, being one of the evolutionary components, presented in the Albanian historiography as part of the naïve thinking of the inferiorly developed human race. When speaking about history of the Middle Ages, students feel obliged to write about religion, because “when speaking about Middle Ages, it is impossible to leave aside the concept *Christianity*. It is impossible, not to write about this concept, because Christianity had a huge influence in the Middle Ages, in every aspect of life, social, political and economic.”³⁴ Almost all the students treat Christianity as one of the most controversial aspects of the Middle Ages.

As opposed to religion and inferior capability of thinking and explaining attached to it, the importance of knowledge seems to be crucial for the development of the human race in students' understanding. “The man had a great change from the early Middle Ages to the Late Middle Ages. In the former period, people did not know as many things as they knew in the late Middle Ages. In the Late Middle Ages, inventions changed the world and they would help them to improve their life and to facilitate the work of their hands.”³⁵

Although considered as a naïve way of explaining the world, and thus central when speaking about the remote Middle Ages, religion was, however, one of the main topics that profited by the contrasting method. Seeing religion from the perspective of another

32. Paper no. 21.

33. Paper no. 20.

34. Paper no. 25.

35. Paper no. 23.

people helped my students to understand it in a different light. “Learning the history of Germany has helped me in many cases (to understand the history of Albania), especially the Christianity.”³⁶ “If I know how Christianity was introduced in Germany, it is easier for me to learn how Christianity spread also in Albania, because comparing them I can see common points and also differences in the spread of a religion in different countries.”³⁷

Through the contrasting method, students manage to make some very crucial differences, which otherwise they would not be able to express. They are certainly not aware of what they are pointing at, but the genuine way they bring this issue into our attention, makes it worth for further study. “In the history of Albania” – wrote one student, - “there are many dates, many years, centuries that have to be memorized. Then, the reading becomes worthless. In the history of Germany, it is not so important to memorize dates: it is sufficient to read the literature and you learn the dates anyway. It is thus not so important to learn by heart, neither data, nor years or centuries.”³⁸ This genuine assessment raises the big question of what is good history writing and good history teaching. History is certainly filled with data and dates, and that is true not only for the history of Albania, but also for the history of Germany. Whether information or concepts and ideas should be the focus of learning, this is a question of approach to history writing and learning, raised genuinely by the statement of this student.

History is closely linked with the politics in students’ understanding. The main motif of learning history is for my students generally connected with future reasons: “... because knowing the past, we can also foresee the future.”³⁹ This is the main statement that legitimizes the learning and the researching of the history in Albania, and one can receive this answer not only by undergraduate students. Learning the past to tell the future, and writing the history to shape the future are here closely connected.

Geopolitical division is the basic perception of time and space when learning history. My students were careless to distinguish between the history of German-speaking countries, and the history of Germany, history of Albanian-speaking countries and history of Albania, although they know the difference. “In order to study the history of *a state*, one has to divide the history into periods, and to study those periods separately”⁴⁰ – is the conclusion of a student for the best approach to learning history.

While pointing out the threshold concepts, it is also important to think about the way out. Many of the publications offer discipline related solutions. The best expressed one was the dialogue with students: involving students in a dialogue about their difficulties dramatically reduces these possibilities, particularly if the teacher gives them full permission to flounder, fail and forget.⁴¹

Conclusions

The threshold concept of Darwinism should be seriously taken into consideration when teaching history and also when writing history textbooks. Its lifelong impact on the historical thinking of students, but not only, may cause a considerable damage to their

36. Paper no. 6.

37. Paper no. 23.

38. Paper no. 12.

39. Paper no. 5, 8.

40. Paper no. 4.

41. Orsini-Jones, M. (2006) *Identifying troublesome concepts and helping undergraduates with crossing grammar thresholds via assessed collaborative group work*; *Threshold Concepts within the Disciplines Symposium*. Glasgow.

weltanschauung and the way they approach knowledge originating from the past. Since threshold concepts are not easy to be identified, it is always a challenge to understand how the deep roots of the evolutionary theory are presenting themselves in the conducts and intellectual products of the students.

This study was an attempt to test whether the contrasting method can be a powerful tool in identifying threshold concepts in the teaching and learning of history, i.e. in teaching the History of the German-Speaking Countries to Albanian students who used to learn Albanian history. My research showed that the main students' obstacle in getting properly engaged with history was their unconscious belief and conviction on the Darwinist theory of evolution, which treats the human being as continuously progressing and human race as improving. Although at some cases students manage to logically understand that this is not really the case, at least not for such a short time as two thousand years, they still continue to use unconsciously the components of this theory, sometimes even mixed with Marxism, like lineal development of history and human beings, work as the essential tool to get improved, socialization and intellectual work as indicators of developed human race and reduction history to political aims and ends.

While using the contrasting method, it is important to use authentic literature, because if one would use books about the history of the German countries produces in Albania, it may end up using the same pattern of thinking that was used to write the Albanian history books. The translation of concepts would also lead to the same danger, because of wrong associations. The limitation of this method, is thus, the language competency of students. The same could be true also if the professor would be a German speaking person alone, because if not directed to contrast on purpose, students will not be able to do it automatically.

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