# Social Sciences and the Design of Tools for Future Learning

Francesca Odella

**Dept. Sociology and Social Research, Unitn**

francesca.odella@unitn.it

# Presentation

This presentation is a brief synthesis of the paper prepared for the conference and it is functional to discussion in the session.

- The overall dimensions of change in educational systems
- Two examples concerning futures of education
  - MA Anticipation groupwork
  - Collective discussion on inequality in education
- The role of social sciences role for innovation in learning and teaching (Higher education)

**CHANGES IN THE FUTURE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**

Reports about educational futures highlight the prospective changes that educational systems will have in the future:

- Structural changes (economic, financial, political and social role of educational systems)

- Technological changes (media, tools and forms of knowing)

- Social and pedagogical changes (learners/ teachers, ontology of learning)

**CHANGES IN THE FUTURE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**

Most of the analysis foresee for the future relevant changes in the area of :

- Educational settings (composition, use of technology, didactical methods)
- Learners and teachers roles (in prospective who they will be, symmetric/power relations)
- Knowledge and innovation (resources, modes of knowledge diffusion and creation)
- Inclusivity and civic values (social participation)

# An anticipation of futures of education?

Are these processes already present in the present?

→ **seeds of change as anticipation**

- Which elements from reading the reports can be foreseen in the real – day to day life inside educational settings?

→ Two cases (examples) of collective reflexivity about the future of education and learning.

# Example 1

- MA Anticipation groupwork (not the typical graduate students!)
- Class discussions in small group and online thematic group discussion.
- Large use of online and other multimedia learning tools for teaching and learning
- Confrontation at the end of the term between their imagined model of learning in the future and the 'real' experience of learning (or coming back to a learning space..).

# A confrontation of imagined and 'real' learning

- <u>Imagined future</u>: narratives of situations/ fictional identities that involve learning as part of future life.

- <u>'Real' or present learning</u>: individual reflexivity on individual experiences of learning at the end of the term

→ identity, space and time

# Imagined vs experienced learning

- Learning as an activity for all life (life-long), related to needs (re-employment, skills) but not necessarily
- Technology as an aid to save time, to expand references/knowledge and to access new resources
- Learning can be planned and designed according to individual preferences
- Creativity raise from access to knowledge resources
- Social dimension of learning comes from different sources (online, F2F)

- Learning individually can be boring/ time demanding and risky.. Time is always running out or.. It takes too time to learn
- Need of social relations (teacher, peers) to connect knowledge, especially when new media resources are involved. Tutorial roles are essential..
- Transformative changes are difficult in online environments. Strategies of learning can be difficult to find individually. (Imitation and copying are not too bad! )

# Comments on the confrontation

- Learning and teaching are social roles and involve a shared agreement on identities (E. Goffman) and their possibilities of action, as well as on the content of the exchange (What shall I teach? What shall I learn?) → pedagogical relation

- Social environments (and individual learning tools too) define the type of characteristics of knowledge (ex. can nurture or prevent creative learning, re-inforce interpretative frameworks, favour practice based learning) → organizational learning

- Time in learning is a non-negotiable resource: as it cannot always be 'shaped' according to individual/social needs and it is still linked to neurophysiological processes or to the social organization of society→ education in post-capitalistic systems

# Example 2

- An international discussion forum on education (+80 participants). Groupwork on inequality in Higher Educational systems and future solutions. Mixed participants (students, teachers, administration employees).

- One of the group analyzed why HE systems can fail and in particular why talented students (social inequality) are left aside or excluded.

→ Brief synthesis of the proposed solutions and comments.

**Results from one of the groupwork on inequality in HE systems**

- Re-use good experiences (EU database of best practices)
- Improve decision making (inclusion) in HE systems at all levels.
- Create a portfolio for parallel processes of learning (formal+ informal)
- Which expectations students have while entering HE ($\rightarrow$ may depend on the generation)
- Develop motivation as a driving resource for learning.

# Comments on the results -1

- The group focused mainly on **policy making**, as action driven perspective is the usual way of dealing with future problems.

   → If decision making in HE systems is based on inclusivity which future shall prevail?

- Prospective changes were also proposed for some aspects concerning <span style="color:red">students' expectations</span> and <span style="color:red">motivations for learning</span>. Policies against inequality shall encourage talented students and reduce drop-out with flexibility and equity in curricula and programs.

# Comments on the results -2

- The discussion converged also on the need to re-define the actual model of <span style="color:red">accreditation of competences</span> in HE systems (more flexibility and interdisciplinarity).

→ Which forms of learning are 'recognizable'? criteria of social/ institutional accountability

- Some aspects of HE systems in the future, however, require a critical analysis as they question the role and the structure of HE systems in our societies (elites and other social classes, creation of 'educated' vs non educated citizens).

# Social reflexivity and the social sciences

The debate on futures of learning and the capacity to analyze futures in educational systems requires to see innovations as part of a complex web of changes.

Social sciences can help in understand why the confrontation between the imagined future (that will be our present) and the actual experience of it (its seeds) is frequently discouraging or confusing.

# Social reflexivity

Social reflexivity uses models of social interactions to put in evidence that some aspects of the future are rooted (dependent) on the present (if not on the past) and that changes in educational systems are not driven only by exogenous factors (technology, institutions, economic factors) but part of a transformation of all the society.

In particular, re-design of learning settings is not separate from a re-design of social (and organizational) relations. → And not all the learning settings are prepared or willing to change!

# In conclusion…

- We need to raise more awareness in all Educational systems for the futures of learning (and teaching) prospected by forecasts and institutional reports.

- Methods to approach societal changes in educational systems need to go further policy making or re-design of learning tools and environments.

- The capacity to create anticipations and imagine possible changes (either at the individual or social level) should be encouraged in learning curricula
  →Sociological imagination..

- Social sciences should collaborate more with Future Studies in order to develop future literacy and social reflexivity on implications of learning scenarios.

# Comments and observations of session participants

- Several Educational systems are orienting to 'high' performance but in reality they force participants (learners, teachers , administrators) to standardized models of learning.

- De-motivation in HE may rise for several reasons (learning environment  as a cage) both for learners and teachers.

- Learning and teaching are prominently social interactions also in technological contexts (see the rise and fall of online courses).

- Life course implications of learning are still to realize and could have a great impact for groups inclusion and societal integration.