

How to Teach Futures Studies: Some Experiences

scritto da Eleonora Barbieri Masini | 1 Aprile 2012



In the present I try to show that, although human beings are in many ways interested in the future – as writers as well as, artists and great monuments in different cultures throughout human history, have shown –, in the recent past and in the present there is a certain difficulty has arisen in looking at the future, and especially at in every day life. It is hence consequently very of great importance to learn how to look at the future and hence, with the consequent need for education towards the future at the different levels. The article describes hence my the author's experience in over 40 forty years of involvement in education towards the future at various levels, of which 30 thirty years at the University level.

Why is it important to think about the future and teach futures studies?

Although future thinking has been very important throughout human history, as well as in what can be called the prehistory of futures studies from: in "ancient Greece when stones were carved it was for posterity; when buildings were

constructed in the Maya and Atztec civilizations, it was for the future; in the Egyptian civilization, when the pyramids were built, it was for the future". (Masini, 1993, p.4). Philosophers from from AeraclitousHeraclitus, to Plato, to Thomas More and Francis Bacon, and all wrote throughout the centuries wrote about future societies as seen from different points of view. At the same time, in the everyday lifelives of people and even societies, looking at the future does not come easily -, as many studies, (especially the ones based on fieldwork,) have shown. Maybe it isThis may because ofbe due to the fear of the future related to what has been called the "psychological aspect" of Ffutures Sstudies, or it may be due to a lack of appropriate education in looking into the future (Masini, 1993). Education in looking intohow to think about the future is veryis of great importantce for all members of society, as shown indemonstrated by the efforts made by of scientists and managers, who are well aware of the need ofto looking ahead.

I hence wish to stress in this paper the importance of education. I have had the experience of working with children, even small ones, from kindergarten to primary school, and I have found that they can be easily encouraged to look at the future with various methods which I will describe later. There are many scholars and researchers who have worked in this area. It is interesting that the difficulties of looking to the future mainly arise when children grow up, which therefore poses the question of whether it is adults and education that hinder looking at the future. Yet it is extremely important to acquire this attitude over and beyond the teaching of futures studies.

In this article I shall seek to show how difficult it is to have a futures outlook, and at the same time how it can be developed in different environments in education at different levels, as well as in political institutions also related to the territory of a country. Looking beyond the present is very difficult, and in this regard I shall provide some examples mainly concerning my country, Italy, and some indications

drawn from experiences in other countries, mainly in Europe. At the same time, it is important to emphasise once more that the future has been in the human mind since very early times and that, as John McHale wrote as far back as 1969 (McHale, 1969) (manca qualcosa???) hence the importance of John McHale's e (McHale, McIhale 1969, p.3) phrase "the future is an integral aspect of the human condition", which, is in various manners, documented through the centuries.

Thinking about the future or having awareness about the future can be found embedded in different cultures in the form of art intended to last much beyond its time in remembrance of those cultures, and as artefacts that we can still see today. I cite the Great Wall of China, built from the 5th century to 220-206 BC and the Mayan buildings constructed in pre-classical times from 200BC to 258 AD.

Pre-classical buildings are still visible in Mexico and Guatemala and other Central American countries. The Aztecs, a group of people of unknown origins who settled in the Valley of Mexico during the 12th and 13th centuries AD, and rose to be the greatest power in the Americas by the time the Spaniards arrived in the 16th century, have left wonderful pyramids. Much earlier, the Egyptians constructed the Great Pyramid of Giza over a twenty-year period concluding around 2540 BC, and it can still be admired by present generations. All these wonderful buildings, as well as many others around the world, were certainly erected for posterity.

We may also say that the purpose of all art production, wherever it has occurred, has been for it to remain in time. Hence, the importance of John McHale phrase "the future is an integral aspect of the human condition" cited before.

Also great thinking about the future has emerged in the past, mainly through the work of philosophers and writers through the ages, as utopian thinking shows. I may start with Plato (428 BC – 347 BC) who described an ideal state, as did other writers throughout the centuries, such as, for example, Thomas More (1478 -1535), an English philosopher who also described an ideal society based on tolerance, communication and

technological development, an imaginary island, a “no place”, hence a Utopia. Wendell Bell in his very important work *Foundations of Futures Studies* describes very well the relations between values and utopia in different periods of human history (Bell, 1997). Francis Bacon (1561-1626), also an English political philosopher, developed his Utopia of a society in which the individual and constant progress would be central. Both More and Bacon were in great contradiction to their times and relied very much on progress.

If we run through time we find interesting scholars that look at or think about the future from different perspectives. An example is H. G. Wells, who proposed in a well-known speech on the BBC in 1932 that professors of foresight were needed and wrote an article in 1901 about a “science of the future”.

In this regard, it is interesting that, much later, the philosopher Ossip Flechteim spoke in his *History and Futurology* (Flechteim, 1966) of “a science of the future, futurology”, but at the same time raised doubts as whether it could be a science and left it to the reader to decide whether it was a science or a “pre-science” as a branch of science. Many have discussed “futures studies”: as did, at more or less at the same time, Bertrand de Jouvenel, with whose argument that futures studies cannot be a science I agree, because its object has not yet occurred. At the same time, it is interesting to see that even the author of the term “futures studies” had doubts about it. Indeed, the term was misused in subsequent years.

What I find most interesting in the context of this article and of this issue of the *Journal of Futures Studies*, is that Flechteim himself devotes an entire chapter to teaching the future and writes: “it is natural that such problems as are here indicated have not yet penetrated into classrooms and textbooks”. (Flechteim, 1966, pp. 63-68). How can we respond to the issue raised by Flechteim more than forty years ago? I think that this is the reason why this issue of the *Journal of Futures Studies* is so timely today.*** (cosa sono ***???)

Some experiences in future teaching and futures awareness

It is indeed in our times and, certainly since World War II, that it is difficult to acquire an attitude and a way of thinking about the future. It is for this reason, I believe, that although the teaching of futures studies in universities is very important, it is not enough. A future outlook must be taught since infancy to the young, but also to economic and political decision-makers, and, I would stress, also in administrative environments, whether social or strictly economic.

I hence also wish in this article to recall the work being done in education at different levels and in different countries and in administrative institutions in Italy. I shall do so by recalling my own experiences in these various areas.

Education in schools, mainly kindergartens and primary schools

Educating very young children in kindergartens and primary schools has been, for me and other teachers, an important task for many years, I personally started in the 1980s on the conviction that educating for the future means going beyond maintenance of the present or consideration of only one's own future. Rather, it should be an education geared to possible alternative futures. This attitude towards the future, as I have already said, does not come easily and it requires education. It is possible to think of one's own future, but it is difficult to look at many futures. Education in how to do so and should start at a very young age.

Education towards the future means creating a way of looking at our futures, as well as participating with those who will come after us and with those who are far from us in space. Looking at the future means enlarging our sense of time but also of space; it is participation in time and space. Education towards the future also means teaching how to live in a complex society.

Children who are not usually part of the constructed social system are, in my experience, better equipped to look at the

future as being “out of the system” than children who are part of that system and tend to maintain it because it helps them feel more secure. It is for this reason that it is easier to educate children who do not yet feel part of a given social system.

At the same time, when children grow older – for example in the second part of primary school – describe the future, they express fear of change as well as of the consequences of change. Fear is very evident in children aged between 10 and 12, as much of the research done or analysed by Jane Page at Melbourne and Sydney University shows. Page writes (Page, 2000) that the most fundamental factor causing the negative attitudes of children of the age mentioned “is the fear of the consequences of change”. Page also notes that such fear is clear when children talk about the context whether global or national, while they are much more optimistic about their personal futures.

I found the same attitudes in research which I carried out together with other sociologists, (Masini, 1982) in various parts of Italy: Fiumicino near Rome, Rome itself, and Caltanissetta, Sicily. The research showed that the children were able to think in global terms and have images of the future. But when these images related to the personal future, they were immediately related to the family situation and interestingly, especially in Sicily, to the jobs of the fathers, who were blue-collar and white-collar workers. In Sicily, unemployment seemed to be the greatest fear, but not in Rome (this was during the 1980s) (Masini,(1982)).

Similar research has been conducted not only in Australia, as already mentioned, but also in Israel and Croatia. The general conclusion is that such research is greatly needed to stimulate the very young to acquire a way of thinking about the future, as well as to raise the awareness of teachers as to the importance of education to the future at an early age. Another research study that I wish to mention is that by Simone Arnaldi, whose fieldwork collected children’s images about the future which showed that the teacher/student

relationship is of great importance at primary school (Arnaldi, 2005).

I have also found that when young people look at the global context, they usually foresee disasters, while in relation to their personal futures they have great optimism, although this decreases when they are asked to consider their personal futures in the next twenty years in the regional, national or global context.

I found this attitude in young people aged between 16 and 20 in countries with high or medium rates of income. And I also found it in university students in Minnesota, USA, in the 1980s and also in Italian universities in the 1990s. These attitudes were also similar to children's views in the second part of primary schools.

These experiences, as well as field research carried out by myself in the 1980s and by others in the 1990s and early 2000s, show that future education should be intensified both at the level of young children and at higher school levels and in universities. It is interesting to note that, in Finland, a futures education is offered from kindergarten level onwards, as well as at all Finnish universities and polytechnics.

Future education in universities: some of my experiences

I have held brief courses or seminars at various universities in Italy and other countries. I have taught for many years at universities in Italy, mainly at the Gregorian University (I describe this specific experience below), in Spain and Andorra, and in Dubrovnik at the Interuniversity Center (IUC) from its foundation in 1972 until the early 1990s. The IUC was founded by Johan Galtung, a sociologist from Norway, a futures studies and peace studies expert, and founder of various institutions in these areas. IUC was intended to educate students from various countries in interdisciplinary social studies. The IUC was sponsored by many universities around the world, quite a number from the US, the UK, Italy, France, and northern European countries such as Sweden, Norway and

Finland. The teachers came from some of these countries as well as from Eastern and Central European countries such as Poland, Hungary, Romania, and a few from the Soviet Union.

The students also came from many countries in northern Europe as well as in eastern and central Europe. One of the courses on the programme was Futures Studies, which I taught after Johan Galtung. I was followed by Bart van Steenberg, a sociologist from the Netherlands, who had been co-chair of the course with me for some years.

This was a very interesting experience because the Futures Studies course was taught by well-known scholars, such as Jim Dator, John and Magda McHale, Yehezkel Dror, Johan Galtung, myself, and many others. The students, as already said, also came from all over the world but mainly from Northern Europe, Germany and Central and Eastern Europe.

It was a very interesting and important educational endeavour aimed at interdisciplinary as well as intercultural education. This context fitted futures education very well, and although difficult in many ways, was very interesting and rewarding. The courses lasted for two very intensive weeks. The fact that the students and teachers came from different countries caused difficulties at the beginning of the course, especially because many students were from various Eastern and Central European countries, with no international experience, and who tended to be highly defensive. Despite the difficulties, the results were very good for all teachers and students because they opened their minds to contexts other than their own. It was an experience which was very powerful for the students but also for the teachers. It was a true learning experience, also encouraged by the fact that all teachers and students lived in the same hotel in a country like Croatia in the 1970s and 1980s and at that time part of Yugoslavia. I believe that this kind of interdisciplinary and intercultural experience is of great importance also in the present and that it should be developed further, although similar schemes have, I believe, been introduced in some countries, Taiwan, for example.

My experience of teaching futures studies at various

universities is that, in looking at the future, students and teachers need to be aware of the differences among their social contexts, as well as, in many cases, being aware that they come from different disciplines but also cultures, which give rise to differences in values and choices. Exchanges in class between people belonging to different disciplines and cultures open the mind to the future in ways different from those perceived at universities, where students and teachers come from only a few cultures and a few disciplines.

I cannot end this part of my article without underlining the great contribution made by Jim Dator for many years to Futures Studies and Futures Studies education. He started teaching in 1967 and has indeed taught many of us a great deal about futures studies and about teaching in the area. He has written widely on the subject, and here I mention in particular his *Advancing Futures Studies*, *Futures Studies in Higher Education* (Dator, 2002).

The Gregorian University: an intercultural and interdisciplinary experience

Teachers and students at the Gregorian University come from cultural backgrounds different from Italy, of course, but many are from North America and Latin America, Asia as well as Africa – although teachers from Africa are fewer than those from other regions. It is interesting that students from Europe before the fall of the Berlin Wall were quite numerous, and they came mainly from Poland, Bulgaria and Hungary.

It is important to recall that when Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit Company, established the Gregorian University in 1551 with the name of “Roman College”, it was meant to be an international university. The name that Ignatius gave it was, in Latin, *Universitas Nationum*, and it was later called Pontifical Gregorian University, as it is today. With this name the founder expressed his vision of an international university.

The faculties at the Gregorian University teach various

disciplines, from philosophy to law to social sciences; this latter faculty was founded in 1953. As already mentioned, teachers at the University come from various parts of the world. Not all of them are Jesuits, and today many are women. It is therefore interesting that the Gregorian University is still the only university in Italy that offers courses and doctorates in futures studies. Other universities in Italy hold short courses and seminars, but the only one to have a formal chair in futures studies is still the Gregorian University, where the course is called "Social and Human Futures Studies" and was introduced on the curriculum in 1976. The course, which is the one that I taught for almost thirty years, is also supported by ad hoc seminars such as scenario building on specific topics. The course director is now my former PhD student, Riccardo Cinquegrani, and it continues to attract numerous students.

Like all other courses at the Gregorian University, this one has a population of students from many parts of the world such as Europe, Latin America, Asia with an increase of students from Africa in recent years. At present, the teachers are mainly from Europe, the US, Latin America and Asia. Many are lay men and women. The students are men and women also men studying for the priesthood and women from international orders. It is also open to students with faiths other than Christianity.

The richness arising from an intercultural presence of students has been very beneficial to the course in itself, as well as to each teacher and student, opening their minds to different ways of perceiving futures. I have experienced the opening of minds of European and Italian students who, after an initial sense of superiority towards students with cultures different from their own, on looking at the future have realised that they can learn a great deal from their colleagues from so-called less developed countries but with strong cultural values which influence their ways of looking at the future.

What we all learned from the students from those countries

still called “developing” was an openness to the future expressed in different manners and related to the cultures to which they belonged. We learned the importance for Africans when looking at the future of the sense of continuity deriving from of their past in terms of their ancestors, as well as their sense of responsibility for following generations, and therefore for their futures. We also learned how Latin Americans have a deep-rooted sense of the future left to them in the form of great historical buildings such as those of the Mayan and Aztec cultures, and at the same time their feeling of being multicultural: what some Latin American authors have called “mestisation” (Alonso Conceiro, 1992) and which emerges in an attitude towards the future in terms of different cultural backgrounds and at the same time the desire to find one’s identity.

Part of the teaching process centred on the differences among the students and at the same time richness of cultural backgrounds while learning the basic concepts of futures studies, as well as their limits, the different historical backgrounds of the disciplines and the use of methodologies according to where they were first used, for example in the US or France.

I always found of great interest the questions emerging from the topics presented on the course, such as the importance of space and time or how futures studies had developed in different parts of the world, and how terminology had been used over the years, as in the case of ‘futurology’, ‘prospective’, ‘foresight’, etc. (Masini, 2000).

Another process which brought out the differences among the students but also the compatibilities among cultures, was the use in class of methodologies of Futures Studies such as scenario building. We first chose the topic of the scenarios, then the students divided into groups of 6 or 7, each with the task of developing one part of the scenario process: objectives of the scenarios, basic variables, indicators, actors or turning points. Each group had a reporter, and after some days the students conducted full class debate on each of

the steps, followed by general discussion and development of the second step, in a continuous process until there was a common basis for scenario building and decisions and choices had been made. The students then once more divided into groups according to the different scenarios which had been decided in class. Each group took some time to develop each scenario chosen, followed once more with final discussion on the difficulties encountered, experiences both positive and negative. This was a learning process enriched by the participants from different cultures.

Many of the students wrote theses at bachelor and master level on futures studies based on specific aspects of their countries. Interestingly the main topics chosen by the students were women's issues and difficulties in their countries or strains in family or other social institutions or, very often, ecological issues such as water or desertification. All topics concerning their countries required research on both quantitative and qualitative data which, given the distance of those countries, had to be drawn from documentation available in Italy. When possible, basic empirical research was developed. For doctoral theses, empirical research in the different countries was mandatory, which often meant that students had to return to their countries for some time. These were efforts by students from different countries in which values always emerged, thus reinforcing acceptance of a normative element in all the work developed by the students as should be, in my view, in Futures Studies.

Teaching courses at a State Study Centre for the education of high-level regional functionaries

In Rome, I taught for seven years a course entitled "Seminar for a Futures Perspective in the Social Context" sponsored by, and held at, the "Scuola Superiore della Pubblica Amministrazione dell'Interno" (Higher School for the Public Administration of the Ministry of Interior) in Italy. The

course was intended for vice-prefects, who are public functionaries at provincial level and second in authority to the prefect. High level officers in law enforcement agencies and officers in state prisons also participated in the course. The course lasted for a week, eight hours a day, for the first five years and thereafter for two or three days. The main topic of the course was the importance of Futures Studies for public decision-makers, especially, in this case, at the local level, to acquire a future outlook on issues related to their territory.

Some of the topics discussed during the course were the following: the importance of the dimensions of space and time for state functionaries at the local level; analysis of the specific physical characters of the area, mountains, closeness to the sea, as well as its northern, central or southern location in Italy, and the related socio-economic situations. Very important in some of the provinces administered by the course participants were age structure, the presence of immigrants, and the industrial, agricultural or service activities in the province, as well as their possible future developments.

Many could be the variables that the vice-prefects and the other participants would find and had to face at their final destinations at the province level indifferent parts of Italy.

This also applied to other participants in the course such as the police officers. They would all have to decide on necessary actions, and they were all responsible for the appropriateness of such actions. Exercises were carried out in class with the use of various methods, mainly scenarios, which would prove useful when they found themselves in the provinces to which they were assigned.

Ethical elements in futures studies were part of the curriculum, and they were considered very important for the participants, who would be responsible not only for careful analysis but also for action in the

provincial or other administrative bodies.

Depending on the composition of the group, specialists were called to advise on specific issues, such as the development of technologies, or the role of enterprises, in the various provinces represented. The course ended with a written essay on specific areas of interest to the participants and discussed with the head of the course who, in this case, was myself. The essay was presented and evaluated by a commission which usually also comprised the head of the school and representatives of the Ministry of the Interior. The evaluation was also taken into consideration for the careers of the course participants. Consequently, the course imposed great responsibility on whoever taught it.

Of great interest were the results, subsequently achieved, by the participants in their jobs during the years following the course. I have had the privilege of being kept informed of the results in some of the provinces to which the participants were sent after the course ended.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, I wish to stress the importance not only of Futures Studies in themselves, but also as a response to the need for all people in general to learn how to look to the future in their everyday lives, in any kind of work, in the family and, of course, in decision making. Unless such an attitude is acquired it will be very difficult for people or social groups to learn to live in a context which is increasingly influenced by rapid and interrelated changes that have now also become global. Long ago, Donald Michael (Michael, 1973, p. 18) in his still important book *On Learning to Plan and Planning to Learn* wrote about the importance "to live with and acknowledge great uncertainty" and also "embrace error".

I think that at the basis of Futures Studies teaching there is a need for learning and teaching how to look to the future in the awareness that we live amid increasing uncertainty and

hence the possibility of error. Such awareness brings with it the need to think in terms of alternative futures, as we all learned long ago. The point is that we must be able to teach these basics as well as the means to reduce the level of uncertainty about the future by using also the methodologies that we, futurists, learn, employ and teach.

References

Alonso Conceiro, Antonio. (1992). The Futures of Cultures in Latin America, in Masini Eleonora, The Futures of Cultures. Vol. II. The Prospects for Latin America and Africa. Paris: UNESCO.

Arnaldi, Simone. (2005). Scuola Bambini e futuro, un'indagine sui fattori che influenzano la rappresentazione umana del futuro , (School, Children, and the Future, a Research on Elements that Influence Human Representation of the Future). Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University. (dissertation).

Bell, Wendell. (1997). Foundations of Futures Studies. Vol. I-II. New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Transaction Publishers.

Dator, James A. (2002). (Ed). Advancing Futures Studies, Futures Studies in Higher Education. London: Praeger.

Donald D., Michael. (1973). On Learning to Plan and Planning to Learn. San Francisco, Washington, London: Jossey Bass Publishers.

Flechteim, Ossip K. (1966). History and Futurology. Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain.

McHale, John. (1969). The Future of the future. New York: George Braziller.

Masini Barbieri, Eleonora.. (2000). Penser le futur. Paris: Dunod.

Masini Barbieri, Eleonora. (1993). Why Futures Studies?

London: Grey Seal.

Masini Barbieri, Eleonora. (1982). Les enfants et leurs images du future. Paris: Temps Libre, Hiver, 6, 71-84.

Page, M. Jane. (2000). Reframing the Early Childhood Curriculum. London-New York: Routhledge.