

World Social Science Forum 2013
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Social Transformations and the Digital Age

**Knowledge and learning in the digital age:
in search for a new alphabet (and role) for the social sciences and higher
education institutions**

A panel promoted and organized by *Next Generation Global Studies*
(www.nextgenerationglobalstudies.eu)

Introductory note by Claudia Padovani (NGGS)

Higher education and the global reality: in search for a new alphabet

Universities and international organizations worldwide are reflecting on how higher education and related institutional arrangements have changed over the past decades, as well as on future transformations. In a global context that has been profoundly transformed by human mobility, globalization processes and the widespread diffusion of technologies, means of communication, data sharing and information, international organizations, governments, networks of teachers, educators and scholars from different disciplinary fields are producing analyses and outlining scenarios that show how current global trends are posing major challenges to education: are higher education institutions apt to operate in a '*globally competitive*' context? Are university curricula adequate to prepare students for complex and interconnected knowledge societies? Are conventional pedagogical models adapting to new forms of interaction, of knowledge production and exchange, made possible by digital technologies? These challenges need to be addressed at different levels, from international cooperation to national policies, from institutional arrangements to day-to-day pedagogic practices.

At the same time, the very assumptions on which the concepts and words we use to define challenges and elaborate programmes are premised, should be unmasked and discussed: what we have witnessed over the years is the diffusion of terms such as excellence, ranking, internationalization, which we have seen translated into Italian educational programs over the past 15 years through the adoption of formulas such as

'the 3Cs' (competence, capacity, *conoscenza*, under the Prodi government) and the '3Is' (informatics, *inglese* and *impresa*, during the Berlusconi governments).

While scholars like Umberto Eco (on the occasion of the 25th celebration of the *Magna Charta Universitatum*) still remind us that universities are fundamental because they are 'places of silence' in a world of noise and 'places of memory' in a context where any information is quickly surpassed and 'places of face-to-face encounters' when virtuality seems to be an acceptable substitute, others highlight the risks associated with global ranking of higher education institutions and related paradigms; the 'publish or perish' logic of scientific production evaluation, which are but a reflection of the neoliberal approach that has come to prevail in orientating education in today's globalized context.

Next Generation Global Studies (NGGS), a recent initiative at the University of Padova, associates itself with these reflections in the conviction that we need to rethink the ways in which knowledge is conceived, produced, circulated and shared in a profoundly transformed global context. NGGS aims at making sense of contemporary social experiences, and of plural times and spaces of globalization, by operating in three directions:

- reflecting in theoretical terms on how the global is conceived and experienced, and on globality as a 'new condition' for thinking the world and its connectedness;
- investigating the role and responsibility of human agency in such global context, with a focus on responsibility of action, political participation, decision-making and governance;
- and fostering critical reflections on teaching and educational activities, particularly for the social and political sciences, which are drawn from our conceptualizations and empirical investigations, but also explored in practice through concrete educational activities: intensive courses¹, new curricula², online innovative teaching experiences³.

¹ An international Winter School titled 'Times and Spaces of Globalization' and supported by the University of Padova has been organized since February 2013. It adopts an early thematic focus (2013 'The Challenges of Global Communication'; 2014 'Europea in a Global Context'); features scholars and students from a diversity of regions and disciplines, engages with a variety of teaching methods and knowledge exchange practices.

² In the context of a master degree in 'Studi Europei' a new curriculum focused on 'Political Cultures and Global Society' is being developed, mostly offered in English and building on the collaborative practices and approaches of NGGS.

³ In the course of the 1st semester of 2013 NGGS collaborates with an online course - promoted by Dutch NGO Sharing perspective Foundations and involving 8 European universities - titled 'Perspectives on the Euro(pean) crises' and structured around innovative methodologies combining video lectures, virtual classes and facilitation, simulation practices etc.

All activities in which digital technologies are explored, and reflected upon, as integral components of activities of new educational frameworks.

In operating along these lines, NGGS also aims at contributing to the University of Padova's efforts of transforming and upgrading its research and teaching activities with a truly global perspective. Over the past few years, 'Internationalization' has become a major challenge, a 'buzzword' and a must, for European Universities, including Padova. Today the concept characterizes the documents produced at the EU level as well as programs at our institution, it informs attempts to renovate courses and degrees, and has become a major criteria for research and teaching programs' selection, evaluation and funding. At the same time, not much critical reflection seems to accompany ongoing practices aimed at making research and educational activities more open and responsive to a world that is fast changing: often we operate to change curricula and degree programs under the pressure of tight deadlines and performance criteria, with little time (or will) to discuss the assumptions as well as the outcomes of the introduced changes. Often 'internationalization' is equated with 'englishization' and English is becoming 'the' language of international education with little consideration for the possible risks associated with an a-critical adoption of a 'dominant' language in the world of science, nor as part of more comprehensive efforts to recognize and reflect a world of diverse languages and conceptual frameworks. Rarely the very values, and goals, and modes and of an 'internationalized' education have been discussed and clarified, in spite of these being the core towards effective change through learning. But, we should ask, 'which change'? And premised on which epistemology? Seldom, if at all, internationalizing efforts have given space to concerns about whose knowledge is being internationalized, and about the situatedness of knowledge in a world of historically grounded differences, and inequalities.

In this context we argue it is time to develop a more articulated understanding of what it means to operate, as researchers and educators, in a global context; and to identify the challenges our institutions face, and the paths to undertake, if they aim not just at 'responding to global challenges', but to 'contribute in shaping global futures through education'.

The conversation which is today taking place in Montreal is one in a series, initiated with an international symposium - held in Padova in December 2012 and titled *The Future of Political and Social Sciences. An International and Interdisciplinary*

*conversation*⁴ - where scholars from different geo-cultural and disciplinary contexts (including colleagues De Sousa and Cogburn, alongside with Jan Scholte, Ann Sisson Runyan, Saskia Sassen, John Trent, Indrajit Banerjee) were invited to discuss the challenges and directions for innovation in research⁵ and for innovation in education for democratic global societies⁶. On that occasion we have been invited to consider the possibility and challenges to democratize the way in which we ideate and conduct global research (Scholte); the necessity to interrogate ourselves about the relevance of what we research, and teach and share (Trent); the potential of centering our attention in the shadows of powerful explanations (Sassen); the possibility to develop truly transnational educational programs, harnessing the potential of digital technologies (Cogburn), but also the importance of reflectively assessing their impact and sustainability; the need to be fully aware of diversities – in epistemologies, frameworks, methods of knowing and learning - which compose the global, while being rooted in very local experiences and practices (Runyan); and the necessary ‘change of posture’ that

⁴ Video resources are available at: <http://nextgenerationglobalstudies.eu/past-activities/the-future-of-political-and-social-sciences-2012/>.

⁵ Amongst the issues addressed:

- recognizing that uncertainty and complexity are global conditions that require *new ways of thinking (and planning, and sharing, and networking, and making decisions concerning research objects and methods)*;
- cultivating the awareness that societal diversity implies *better articulated ways of fostering pluralism alongside a culture of respect for diversity* (of gender, culture, language, religion);
- the appreciation that only *multi-vocal and interdisciplinary efforts* can contribute to identify those ways of thinking;
- and the coming together of *diverse competencies and skills capable of combining consolidated knowledge with the desire to innovate*, both in terms of content and methods.

⁶ Also discussed were the followings:

- **Cognitive aspects:** *what kind of factual knowledge? What kind of pedagogic approach?* The growing quantity of objectified knowledge that is available through Google, dispenses the memory, at least in its traditional functions. This situation feeds back on the quality of knowledge and, from an epistemic point of view, on the organization of knowledge, which tends to become structured around "information's packets". This process requires reflection and action, and a rethinking of the entire educational process, in terms of innovation (including through new training methodologies and an appropriate use of new technologies) and recovering the tradition of the collective reflection (through interactive and reading based seminars) on the classics.
- **Knowledge for what:** *fostering awareness of the relevance of acquired knowledge and competencies; multi-level conception of citizenship.* The modern idea of citizenship has been constructed on the basis of the nation state, and then of a national culture that has given a common sense of belonging. Through the process of globalization that sense of belonging is in crisis and it should be redefined (also as a part of the Eurocentric paradigm). This process of uprooting is in itself neither the danger nor the solution, but the opportunity of rethinking new forms of global identity.
- **Working through diversity:** *moving beyond a western-centric paradigm; integrating history, economics, values, language and the political with a view to locals-to-global connections.*

emerges from ‘listening with care and patience’ and from allowing to ‘hear ourselves listening to others’ (De Sousa 2012).

That event, and the subsequent educational practices that conversation has contributed to shape, have strengthened our conviction that we need to rethink not just the *frameworks* according to which we see and read and interpret the social world, but also the ‘*frame-words*’ we use: meaning the very terms according to which we frame, delimitate, establish lines of separation and connection in educating in and for the global. We need to be more aware of the theoretical and value assumptions that inhabit terms which are currently guiding innovation in (higher) education – excellence, competition, ranking, internationalization and the likes - as well as of the interests they reflect or mask; and aware of the non neutrality of using English as the sole medium of global education. We need to critically reflect on the (often implicit) goals associated to ‘global education’, and the possible deriving risks: how to think and work towards educated global citizens? is global education to reflect the richness of world societies or to orientate their living together? In order to elaborate adequate frameworks for the social sciences and to orientate educational efforts, we need to engage with new terms, to elaborate a new alphabet to guide our daily practices as educators, where buzzwords like ‘inter-disciplinarity’, ‘knowledge societies’, ‘e-learning’ and ‘competencies and skills’ are critically explored and exposed, while new conceptualization of ‘translation’, ‘epistemology’, ‘creativity’, ‘communication and media literacy’ and ‘empathy’ and ‘listening’ as core to critical thinking gain adequate space in global educational efforts.

This is the rationale that guided the organization of today’s panel, which brings together different voices and different disciplinary and teaching experiences. For a number of reasons two of the speakers could not join us today in person, but they are connected through the GoToMeeting platform, that has been kindly set up by the organizers.

In order to facilitate this exchange from remote we have slightly changes to order of interventions; we shall then have:

- Derrick Cogburn, from the American University, connected with us from Singapore; followed by
- Norman Landry, from Teluq; then
- Mino Conte from the University of Padova and also a member of the NGGS group; and finally
- Mario Lyn De Sousa from the University of San Paolo.

Thank you