

AperTO - Archivio Istituzionale Open Access dell'Università di Torino

**Science education for sustainability, epistemological reflections and educational practices: from natural sciences to trans-disciplinarity.**

**This is the author's manuscript**

*Original Citation:*

*Availability:*

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/95649> since 2016-01-29T16:03:16Z

*Published version:*

DOI:10.1007/s11422-012-9405-3

*Terms of use:*

Open Access

Anyone can freely access the full text of works made available as "Open Access". Works made available under a Creative Commons license can be used according to the terms and conditions of said license. Use of all other works requires consent of the right holder (author or publisher) if not exempted from copyright protection by the applicable law.

(Article begins on next page)



# UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO

***This is an author version of the contribution published on:***

*Questa è la versione dell'autore dell'opera:*

CULTURAL STUDIES OF SCIENCE EDUCATION, *volume 8 e fascicolo 1*, March 2013,

DOI [10.1007/s11422-012-9405-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-012-9405-3)

***The definitive version is available at:***

*La versione definitiva è disponibile alla URL:*

<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11422-012-9405-3#>

## **Science education for sustainability: epistemological reflections and educational practices. *From Natural Sciences to trans-disciplinarity***

**Laura Colucci-Gray\*, Anna Perazzone, Martin Dodman, Elena Camino**

### **Abstract**

In this three-part article we seek to establish connections between the emerging framework of ‘sustainability science’ and the methodological basis of research and practice in science education in order to bring forth knowledge and competences for sustainability. The first and second part deal with the implications of taking a ‘sustainability view’ in relation to knowledge processes. The complexity, uncertainty and urgency of global environmental problems challenge the foundations of reductionist, Western science. Within such debate, the proposal of sustainability science advocates for inter-disciplinary and inter-paradigmatic collaboration and it includes the requirements of ‘post-normal science’ proposing a respectful dialogue between experts and non-experts in the construction of new scientific knowledge.

Such a change of epistemology is rooted into participation, deliberation and the gathering of ‘extended-facts’ where cultural framings and values are the hard components in the face of soft facts. A reflection on language and communication processes is thus the focus of knowledge practices and educational approaches aimed at sustainability. Language contains the roots of conceptual thinking (including scientific knowledge) and each culture and society are defined and limited by the language that is used to describe the world and to act upon people and nature. Within a scenario of sustainability, a discussion of scientific language is in order to retrace the connections between language and culture, and to promote a holistic view based on pluralism and dialogue. Drawing on the linguistic reflection, the third part gives examples of teaching and learning situations involving prospective science teachers in action-research contexts: these activities are set out to promote linguistic integration and to introduce reflexive process into science learning. Discussion will focus on the methodological features of a learning process that is akin to a communal and emancipatory research process within a sustainability scenario.

\*Corresponding author

### **Keywords**

Sustainability - post normal science – language - action research – initial teacher education

## **Executive summary (in Italian language)**

In questo articolo ci proponiamo di evidenziare alcuni collegamenti tra la prospettiva emergente della ‘scienza della sostenibilità’ e certi elementi di riflessione critica sui fondamenti epistemologici e metodologici dell’educazione scientifica, proponendo esempi di attività didattiche sperimentate in coerenza con queste riflessioni.

Di fronte alla complessità, all’incertezza e all’urgenza delle problematiche ambientali – che hanno ormai assunto una dimensione globale – la moderna tecnoscienza è oggetto di un approfondito dibattito, e da più parti vengono posti degli interrogativi sulle sue basi epistemologiche e sulle sue relazioni e responsabilità con la società e con i sistemi naturali. All’interno di questo dibattito si colloca la proposta di una ‘scienza della sostenibilità’, caratterizzata da una crescente collaborazione (interdisciplinare e inter-paradigmatica) tra discipline, e dalla ‘scienza post-normale’, basata su un dialogo rispettoso tra esperti e non-esperti nella costruzione di nuova conoscenza scientifica.

Una simile trasformazione dell’idea e della pratica della scienza ha implicazioni molto interessanti per l’educazione scientifica, e propone la sfida di trasformare il processo di insegnamento / apprendimento da una comunicazione unidirezionale orientata a trasferire nozioni consolidate, verso una comunicazione dialogica, creativa ed evolutiva, alla quale partecipano con pari dignità insegnanti e studenti. In questo contesto ciascuno è portatore di elementi significativi per la costruzione di una conoscenza condivisa, e diventa più evidente il ruolo del linguaggio con le sue molteplici sfumature (il linguaggio nominale e quello verbale) e canali (iconico, verbale, simbolico...), con i suoi vincoli e le sue potenzialità.

Il passaggio da un contesto educativo polarizzato, in cui l’insegnante è ‘portavoce’ neutrale e obiettivo della scienza consolidata, a un contesto dialogico, in cui tutti partecipano al processo di acquisizione consapevole e critica di un sapere dinamico, in continuo mutamento, spesso incerto e talvolta controverso è molto difficile da realizzare, anche perché nella scuola si sono consolidate certezze e abitudini resistenti al cambiamento.

Il nostro approccio, basato sull’idea di scienza ‘post-normale’ e orientata alla sostenibilità, considera l’ambiente classe come comunità educante, e promuove al suo interno lo sviluppo di un processo dialogico che coinvolge e motiva insegnanti e studenti a costruire insieme elementi di nuova conoscenza scientifica, consapevole dei limiti del sapere umano e in grado di tener conto della complessità e delle interconnessioni tra l’agire umano e il funzionamento dei sistemi naturali, per loro natura in continua evoluzione.

Nella terza parte di questo articolo presentiamo alcuni esempi di attività che abbiamo proposto nel corso di dieci anni a futuri insegnanti di scuola primaria e secondaria: la pratica della ricerca-azione che abbiamo sempre messo in atto ci ha consentito di monitorare i processi di apprendimento in itinere e di valutare il grado di efficacia delle nostre proposte relativamente alla motivazione e alla partecipazione, all’acquisizione di conoscenze disciplinari e trans-disciplinari, all’elaborazione di consapevolezza sui meccanismi di produzione della conoscenza.

## **Executive summary (English version)**

In this article we propose to establish connections between the emerging perspective of sustainability science and some aspects of critical reflection on the epistemological and methodological foundations of science education. We set out to achieve this goal by proposing examples of educational activities that were introduced and studied with reference to such reflections and aimed at achieving consistency with the sustainability science framework.

Confronted with the complexity, uncertainty and urgency of global environmental problems, modern techno-science has been the subject of an articulated debate and revision of its foundations. From many realms of research and inquiry, questions are posed regarding the epistemological basis of conventional, reductionist science and its responsibilities towards society and the natural systems. Within such debate, the proposal of sustainability science advocates for increasing collaboration between disciplines (inter-disciplinary and inter-paradigmatic collaboration) and it includes the requirements of 'post-normal science' arguing for respectful dialogue between experts and non-experts in the construction of new scientific knowledge.

Such transformation of the idea and practice of science has very interesting implications for science education. It sets the challenge for a transformation of the learning and teaching process from a uni-linear format of communication aimed at transferring consolidated notions towards a dialogical type of communication. Dialogical interaction leads to creative and evolutionary knowledge and both students and teachers can participate in its production with equal legitimacy. In this context every person brings a significant contribution to the construction of shared knowledge and crucial is the role of language with its multiple nuances (verbal and nominal language), channels (iconic, verbal, symbolic...), with its constraints and potentialities. Moving from a polarised context, where the teacher is the neutral and objective spokesperson of consolidated science to a dialogical context where everybody participates in the conscious and critical acquisition of dynamic knowledge which is continuously changing, uncertain and sometimes controversial, is very difficult. There are certainties and habits which are now well established in schools and they are very resistant to change.

Our approach based on the idea of post-normal science and orientated towards sustainability considers the environment of the class as an educating community. The aim is that of promoting the development of a dialogical process which involves and motivates teachers and students to build together elements of new scientific knowledge. This knowledge is conscious of the limits of human knowledge and it is able to take into account the complexity of the interconnections between human action and the functioning of the natural systems which are by their very nature in continuous evolution. In the third part of this article we present some examples of activities which we have proposed over a period of ten years to future teachers of primary and secondary levels: through a sustained practice of action-research we have monitored the learning processes as they were occurring and assessed the degree of efficacy of our interventions in relation to motivation and participation, acquisition of disciplinary and trans-disciplinary knowledge and maturation of awareness about the mechanisms and processes of knowledge production.

## Introduction

*Confined to the existing structures of knowledge generation and transmission, universities find it difficult to do justice to the complexity of contemporary problems.*

Jasmin Godemann (p.626)

The crisis of the human communities on the planet has become acute, both locally and globally. Natural systems seem no longer able to satisfy human needs (WHESA, 2011), and violent conflicts are spreading all over the Earth in the face of impending scarcity of land and energy resources (Lambin and Meyfroidt 2011). The current state of emergency requires a profound redefinition of current models of socio-economic development and humanity's demands on the Earth. As argued by Amartya Sen (1999) a great responsibility is given to education to promote knowledge, attitudes and behaviours to enable each person equal opportunities of personal development and access to natural services and resources within a limited planet. In order to achieve this aim however, a change of epistemological and methodological conditions orienting the production and use of scientific knowledge for human purposes is also required.

This is the context in which we introduce the conceptual basis of 'sustainability science', as a contemporary framework for orienting knowledge production processes towards a perspective of sustainability. We argue that a redefinition of knowledge categories and methodological approaches in science can be aligned with a creative and constructive disposition towards complexity and uncertainty and the maturation of an inclusive ethical stance. The argument is developed in three main sections. First, we discuss the implications of taking a 'sustainability view' in relation to knowledge processes by introducing the perspective of complexity of natural systems and knowledge integration; the second part will deal more specifically with language processes in the context of interdisciplinary dialogue in science. Finally the third part provides examples of teaching and learning situations with prospective teachers of primary and secondary education. We draw on a variety of contexts in which science learning was enriched by the linguistic reflection to enable epistemological awareness and a range of social, cognitive, communicative competences that are in line with a sustainability view.

## **Part 1. Transformations of the environment and transformations of science: the epistemological framework of sustainability science**

### **Unsustainable!**

Since 1970, we are depleting our ecological budget for the year earlier and earlier; in 2011, the 'overshoot day' has been on august 21<sup>st</sup> (Global Footprint Network 2011). Environmental degradation and depletion of natural resources are proceeding at a fast-

growing rate, threatening the well being of billions of people (IFPRI 2011) as well as numberless non-human species (Butchart 2010). In this scenario, science and technology are often sought as a means for bringing innovation. The synergy between techno-science and increasingly the private enterprise is expected to boost the economy and help to overcome social problems (DIUS 2011). However science and its technological applications are also the tools for carrying out extensive and unforeseen transformations of socio-eco-systems (Wilk 2010). We are confronted with an uncertain situation whereby the knowledge we produce about the natural world is also the knowledge that leads to problematic situations. It is an ambiguity that is difficult to tackle which requires delving deeper into the complex interaction between ideas of science, representations of nature and the structure of educational processes.

The dominant narrative about science, even in the most rated academic journals, continues to perpetuate the idea that *'fundamental knowledge about the natural world will lead to human progress'* (Alberts 2008, p. 1435). Quantitative and analytical approaches are foregrounded as the preferred means for scientific inquiry (Enquist and Stark 2007) aimed at penetrating the mysteries of nature and providing the keys for making predictions and achieving control over the natural world. A view of science that produces reliable, objective knowledge has much currency in the current world and it is to this kind of science that policy-makers would often refer to both as the source of innovation and its main evaluator (Ellis 2010).

Similarly, in education, traditional approaches to learning and teaching science contribute to the consolidation of a positivistic idea of science, organised in disciplinary realms and characterised by neutrality and objectivity. As David Orr (1991) remarked *'In the modern curriculum we have fragmented the world into bits and pieces called disciplines and subdisciplines. As a result, after 12 or 16 or 20 years of education, most students graduate without any broad integrated sense of the unity of things'* (p. 52). Organised in such a way, the curriculum gives little opportunity to appreciate the holistic nature of living systems and their intrinsic faculty to transcend human existence.

While traditional school systems continue to focus on a disciplinary approach to knowledge geared towards the assimilation and memorisation of large quantities of information, the voices of educationalists, psychologists, sociologists of science, anthropologists and science education researchers are converging in an effort to illustrate the inadequacy of this way of teaching science and its negative implications: from the failures of the learning process to the promotion of ways of thinking and doing which have proved unsustainable for both human communities and the environment. In order to start on this inquiry it is to science and associated views of knowledge of the natural world that we have to turn.

## Complexity and inclusion at the basis of a new framework

The disciplinary, analytical and quantitative approach characterising scientific research and inquiry allows for the in-depth and refined analysis of selected fragments of reality. This approach is underpinned by a mental process of identification of boundaries, in order to undertake measurements and infer relationships, often followed by a physical process of abstraction or 'removal' of the portion of reality

under examination from the rest of the system (van Eijck and Roth 2007). This type of focussed and reductionist thinking has characterised the rise of what Barbara Cartwright (2008) termed ‘modern science’, a form of inquiry insisting that “*we found explanation on experimentally identifiable and verifiable structures and qualities*” (p. 81). By means of empiricism, the author maintains, we are only ever able to gain knowledge about what is in the nature of structures to do and in the manner of a dappled picture, as the world is being described through the specific and bounded features of our empirical apparatuses. As such, through the internally consistent, synthetic practices of disciplinary inquiry, reality can be described as a collection of singular objects.

The descriptive and interpretative character of science has further evolved in recent times into a techno-science actively involved in transforming energy, matter and information fluxes all around the world. By concentrating intellectual, material and financial resources, and by moving scientific experiments outside the laboratory walls, techno-science has contributed to the extensive transformation of human communities, their resources and natural surroundings. Often however, the transformations operated by means of techno-science have led to unpredictable and unforeseen consequences.

Confronted with this state of affairs, some authors have looked at modern, reductionist science as a *forma mentis* that appears to be increasingly inadequate to deal with the complexity of natural systems and of our position - as we are ourselves complex wholes – within such systems. Natural systems are constituted of multiple organisational levels, mutually interacting and connected by relationships of non-linear causality. It is impossible to identify clear boundaries between processes and phenomena, even when considering very different time and space scales (Lenton and van Oijen 2002). Indeed, the system displays different properties at different scales, and it is indeed ‘dappled’ when subjected to disciplinary investigations; however, such properties are in themselves the result of the interactions occurring between parts at multiple levels in a spiral of emergence and creativity (Volk 1998).

In such conditions, while a ‘refutation’ or a ‘new paradigm’ for science might still be possible at an intellectual level in the manner anticipated by Popper and Kuhn (Bloor 1971), the profound transformations that are brought to the natural systems give little or no opportunity to return to a previous situation at a practical level. The system so conceived exists as part of a history of transformations with synchronic and diachronic features posing a challenge to the descriptive power of reductionist science but also to human beings that are required to act in the face of inherent, structural uncertainty.

### *Embodied cognition*

Another emerging perspective feeding into our reflection on scientific knowledge is concerned with the growing realization of the ‘embodied’ nature of our mind which develops within a sub-system, the body in complex interaction with the natural systems hosting it (Clark 1997). Most importantly, it is the interconnection between the inside and the outside environment of the organism that is fundamental to knowledge. James Gibson (1979) maintained that perception is not simply a passive response of the organism to an outside stimulus much in the manner of a machine



recording visual stimuli (cf. Lindberg 1976). Rather, organisms are agents that are actively engaged in sense perception. This idea runs counter to the neural reductionism approach developed in some fields of cognitive sciences which explained sense perception in terms of electrical changes and ion fluxes in neurons and other types of cells. More recently, the works of Erik Myin and Kevin O'Regan (2002) have supported the notion that the organism is involved in shaping the flows of energy and matter in particular ways, thus giving rise to different experiences. Feelings in organisms arise from the exercise of particular 'skills' in interacting, interfacing and thus exploring the world and this will also have to do with intentionality, for "*in order to exercise a particular skill, an organism must pay attention to the world in a particular way*" (Goodwin 2007, p. 78). In another context, an elaboration of this idea was proposed by the anthropologist Tim Ingold in a reflection on the paving of the streets in cities and how it affected - in a coupled way - both people's behaviours in public spaces and the collective perception of the environment: a culture dominated by the visual took over from an older culture rooted into the dexterous, meshwork of signs, feelings and relationships with the soil and other living forms in one's own environment (Ingold 2011).

So perception is linked to the development of skilful and experientially-based way of interaction with the natural world, through breathing, walking, pacing one's activities. Additionally, far from being an objective and inarticulate matter, the environment allows for reflexive feed-backs for the organism learns according to the ways in which it shapes his own environment and his modes of interaction with it. Hence changes in the environment can have profound implications for our behaviours and cultural perception.

#### *Views of the world: continuity between language, experience and thought*

Drawing on the fields of neuroscience, evolutionary biology, as well as linguistics and philosophy, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999) expanded on the continuity between *perceptions and thought* highlighting the crucial role played by language. They authors refer specifically to *metaphors* as being embodied linguistic forms. So the organism is part of a natural context continuously crossed over by flows of matter, energy and information which are distributed across a network of psycho-physiological structures (Goodwin 2007). As such, language is a reflection of such embodiment and linguistic expressions and metaphors are expression of this particular, embodied way of knowing, thinking and perceiving. Thus, language becomes the expression of a way of seeing, sensing and being in the world.

As language is modified over time and across contexts, the present variety of words and meanings that are available to us are also linked to changes of social practices and understandings that have taken place over a longer period of time. So the appearance of redundancies and indistinctness in language can be paralleled to phenomena of biological evolution, whereby change of biological structures, through the appearance of novelty and ambiguity can be seen an expression of the complexity of interactions between living systems in a context of continuous flux and transformation (Bateson 1972).

So, while modern science still aims at objectivity, abstraction, generalisation, universality (Editorial of the Nature journal 2011), it is becoming more and more

evident that scientists are deeply embedded within the complex, evolving, and limited contextual reality from which we completely depend (Bateson 1980).

From the perspective of embodied cognition, our knowledge of the world is not simply the result of ‘discoveries’ but also of ‘inventions’, which are evolutionary, technological, conceptual and, ultimately, linguistic (Jablonka and Lamb 2005). Creative thinking (also in science) depends on language, expressing novelty by means of new words, images and concepts and associating them with elements of the existing culture (Konopka 2002). Indeed as reported by Larson (2011) metaphors are part of the fabric of knowledge production in science and greater sensitivity should be developed to their presence and their implications. Namely, metaphoric ambiguity when productively elicited can be a fertile source of inquiry, allowing for leaps beyond stabilised meanings and opening up new avenues of scientific exploration. This understanding leads to important implications regarding the nature and modes of production of what knowledge about the natural systems.

### *Contingency of human thought*

In the first instance, the contribution of the linguistic dimension allows us to move beyond the image of a single and universal science which eventually ‘uncovers’ the world as it is and to accept the idea of contingency, temporality and value-ladenness of human knowledge (Dunn et al. 2011). In this context, Jerome Bruner (1991) proceeded on identifying the features of narrative as a form of knowledge production: “*It was perhaps a decade ago that psychologists became alive to the possibility of narrative as a form not only of representing but of constituting reality*” (p.5). He signalled the relevance of the inquiring subject, within a context of values, norms and actions.

A similar point was also expressed by Norman Denzin (1989) referring to narratives as ‘thick descriptions’ with four recognisable characteristics: the context of the act; the intentions and meanings; the evolution and development of the act and the presentation of the act as a text that can be interpreted (p.33). So narratives emerge from cultural and social practices and their interpretation can provide useful insights into the organisation of knowledge about the world produced by a particular community.

A second, fundamental implication is that there appears to be no distinction between Nature and Culture, culture being the set of languages, norms, behaviours that arise in response of a particular way of directing our attention to Nature and ‘relating’ to it. The world can be narrated in many different ways and the nature of such relationship is paramount to how we know the world and construct ourselves in a reflexive process.

In this view, also modern, Western science can be looked at as a cultural narration that can be interrogated on the basis of its values, intentions and means of production in relation to the environment. As reported by Thomas Princen (2010), the notion of laboratory research typical of Western science is not simply a way of referring to the familiar place in which scientists undertake their empirical investigations, but it is also a *powerful metaphor*, part of a culturally established consensus on how we conceive of our role of subjects inquiring into the world and how we set boundaries as to which and whom is to be included in the frame. Specifically, the laboratory afforded the possibility of carrying out research in simplified, closed and controlled

conditions to produce 'objectified descriptions that are 'thin' narratives of the natural world (Denzin 1989). Hence an inquiry into the science metaphors is important to retrace complex understandings and what was hidden and revealed behind the formulation of particular metaphors. Larson (2011) for example produced an extensive list of metaphors used in environmental sciences and conservation biology most of which featuring not only in primary scientific research articles but also in everyday language. Some examples may include alien; flagship; community and many others (p. 5), and they are all terms which are retaining socio-cultural implications. It is suggested that the act of comparison and entering into relationship with other ways of knowing can be fruitful in assessing motives, strengths and similarly also the inherent limitations of scientific descriptions.

This level of epistemological awareness however requires further consideration of the methodological features of a knowledge process which can enable perspective shifts and it is indeed built upon cooperation with other cultures and with nature as a means for dealing creatively and constructively with complexity and uncertainty (Goodwin 2007).

## Knowledge, uncertainty and the role of democracy

Many scholars from different fields recognise the idea of complexity as a powerful conceptual tool for rethinking the idea of science and the position of humanity in the world. For example, Sandra Harding (2008) takes a critical stance towards ideas of linear causality and maintaining that: "*Reliability of conventional reliable knowledge has been criticised as producing far too narrow understandings of nature and social relations*" (p. 83). Furthermore, Harding (2008) recognises that current problems involving human-nature interactions cannot be captured by singular, disciplinary framings; they trespass traditional knowledge boundaries and escape the control of academic peers. From here the author argues for the intrinsic incompleteness of human knowledge and the acknowledgement of acting in conditions of ignorance whereby we can only know if we put ourselves *in relation* to other ways of knowing.

The theoretical ideas of Sandra Harding find resonance with the work of Silvio Funtowicz and Jerome Ravetz (1999) who formulated the concept of 'post-normal science' as a new approach towards doing and thinking about science which extends the practice and conceptions of 'normal' science. The awareness that we can only have a partial, incomplete view of the world led the authors to propose a methodology of inquiry which is appropriate for dealing with situations in which facts are uncertain, values are in conflict, the stakes are high and there is a need for urgent decisions. Such a methodology is founded upon the process of 'open dialogue' between all relevant stakeholders, that is, all the people who have a right to participate (as they are involved in the problem) and who are expressing the desire to be involved in finding a solution (Funtowicz 2001).

As reported by Sheila Jasanoff, when confronted with the contingent, transitory and uncertain nature of science knowledge, action and decision-making should include a dimension of humility, '*about both the limits of scientific knowledge and about when to stop turning to science to solve problems*' (Jasanoff 2007, p. 33). Furthermore, an attitude of humility may be a fruitful starting point for encouraging an open and creative decision-making process involving experts from different disciplines as well as people carrying their own practical knowledge. Public dialogue is thus offered as a

methodology which overtakes the idea of a ‘rigorous scientific demonstration’: *‘Inside the knowledge production process, citizens become both critics and creators. Their contribution has not to be defined as ‘local’, ‘practical’, ‘ethical’ or ‘spiritual’ knowledge, but it has to be considered and accepted as a plurality of rightful and coordinated perspectives with their own meaning and value structures.’* (Guimarães Pereira and Funtowicz 2006, p. 35).

Humility, and an attitude to respectfully listening, is mostly needed in unbalanced situations, as the ones described by Robert Chambers (1997) who suggests not only ‘to put the last first’, but also ‘to put the first last’: that is to say that experts and powerful people need to become humble with respect to the experiences and framings of the situation that are legitimate for other people. In a paper signed by Carl Folke and numerous colleagues (Folke et al. 2002) who analysed the social and political factors affecting environmental management, the authors underline the need for experts to engage in respectful listening, while the ‘non-experts’ should gain and develop more confidence in their own abilities to make effective contributions.

Thus the notion of responsibility for human-nature interactions is no longer a trade-off between techno-science ‘speaking-truth-to-power’ (Jasanoff 2007) and the political and economical systems acting on the basis of the information received. Instead we can imagine a dialogical relationship between the stakeholders, each one bringing values and interests in a context of participatory democracy, where the aim is that of ‘making sense of the world’ by *co-producing knowledge, mediation and representation* (van der Sluijs et al. 2008).

## From epistemic sovereignty to epistemological pluralism

More recently, the ideas of complexity of natural systems and the need to operate in conditions of uncertainty and incompleteness of human knowledge have provided the foundations for the articulation of a ‘*sustainability science*’ (e.g. Clark, Crutzen and Schellnhuber 2005). Gilberto Gallopin (2004) stresses the evolutionary aspects that characterise both science and the systems that are objects of inquiry: *‘Knowledge of the system is always incomplete. Surprise is inevitable [...]. Not only is the science incomplete, but the system itself is a moving target, evolving because of the impacts of management and the progressive expansion of the scale of human influences on the planet’* (p. 9).

The literature on sustainability science is continuous expansion with a number of academic journals dedicated to discussing its epistemological and methodological features. The review provided by Mary Thompson-Klein (2004) identifies two main foci of reflection that are interrelated. One is concerned with the nature of knowledge and the move from a homogeneous to a heterogeneous and non-linear form of knowing. The other one is more directly concerned with the ideas of post-normal science, the incorporation of non-disciplinary forms of knowing and the relevant social practices.

Specifically, the notion of incompleteness of knowledge has been taken as a springboard for the promotion of interdisciplinary dialogue. Daniel Sarewitz (2004) for example declares that, by virtue of its complexity, outside reality can allow for “*a science enterprise of enormous methodological, disciplinary, and institutional diversity*” (p. 386). Moreover “*the growth of disciplinary scientific methods and*

*bodies of knowledge results in an increasing disunity that translates into a multitude of different yet equally legitimate scientific lenses for understanding and interpreting nature” (p. 390).*

However, the pursuit of theoretical pluralism produces debates to arise at all levels, from the more strictly epistemic aspects of how disciplinary integration can occur to broader philosophical stances as to what is to be considered relevant knowledge and the modes and purposes of engaging in joint efforts to tackle problems.

To this regard, the analytical framework produced by Malin Mobjörk (2010) outlines a progression from multi-disciplinarity to inter and trans-disciplinarity which exists by virtue of the interplay between a set of three sub-dimensions: collaboration, motives and integration. At a first level, multi-disciplinarity, researchers from different disciplines can come together to complete a task which requires the pooling of knowledge from different disciplines. Collaboration and motives are functional in nature and knowledge integration occurs within the normative boundaries of academic research; it is usually confined to a specific project or problem and it is mainly concerned with the synthesis phase (e.g. pooling of results). At the level of inter-disciplinarity, the coming together of different disciplines is pivotal and it arises from a research process that is jointly established on the basis of a shared problem. The topic of concern is intrinsically an area of intersection between disciplines and normally developing at the interface between social and natural sciences. In addition, within an interdisciplinary approach collaboration may be more or less instrumental or critical; for example, interdisciplinary transfers, such as geography’s borrowing models from physics and anthropology, can come from the willingness and awareness of the need to learn from one another and thus enhancing one’s own set of conceptual frameworks (Ramadier 2004). Yet, the extent to which researchers draw on and sustain this kind of reciprocal learning and potentially, mutual interrogation of knowledge and perspectives, is dependent upon the level of personal commitment to the topic (motives) and their value-orientations (Nicolescu 1996), a point that was also made earlier by Chambers (1997) and Folke et al. (2002). For example, collaborative work can be sought as a means for seeking solutions to problems as they occur, in the manner of a problem-solving exercise to adjust to given situations. In this context, research may be conducted within the boundaries and contexts of academic work. Conversely, collaboration may be set out to restructure the modus operandi of modern science by facilitating a form of sustained interaction and exchange of knowledge and beliefs; in this case, informal practices of knowledge sharing and personal aspects may be incorporated and pursued. So depending on the nature of collaboration and the level of mutual learning, also the nature of the integration will be different.

### *Trans-disciplinarity*

Mary Thompson-Klein (2004) maintains that a critical stance towards the way we use scientific knowledge is best fulfilled in the context of trans-disciplinarity; referring to the challenges posed by environmental problems to the economic competitiveness agenda of industrialised countries, Thompson Klein (2004) clearly expressed: *“Transdisciplinarity raises the question of not only problem solution but problem choice”*(p. 518). So, in the first instance, trans-disciplinary research acquires its

distinctive features from the nature of the problem that is being investigated, moving from the strict realm of application to the agora of public debate whereby a multiplicity of stakeholders is involved in formulating a problem and contributing heterogeneous skills and expertise. Such change in the range of actors involved is also an important departure from the mix of academic disciplines involved in interdisciplinary work and a move towards ‘trans-sectoriality’, whereby science is in with and for society (Kim 1998). Hence as we move further into ‘post-normal conditions’ (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1999), the inclusion of other forms of knowledge requires a move towards trans-disciplinarity. For some authors (e.g. Ziegler and Ott 2011) the inclusion of non-scientists and non-strictly scientific forms of knowledge, such as literature and the arts, should be a criterion for quality in sustainability science. The authors point to the necessity to draw upon local knowledge for bringing in ‘thick’ narratives and contextual elements that can help identify relevant aspects; for eliciting criticality towards scientific assumptions and the limitations of institutionalised ways of communicating and also for being able to welcome novel issues and ideas and respond appropriately to the pressure and urgency of a given problem.

Firket Berkes and Mina Berkes (2009) have analyzed in a systematic way some differences between Western science and indigenous knowledge, underlying the complementary approach of the two knowledge systems: *‘Complex systems phenomena, such as climate change, occur at multiple levels, and there is no one correct level of analysis. The system must be analyzed simultaneously across geographic scale, from the global to the local. But the relative emphasis of science has been at the global level. The fact that indigenous knowledge provides local-level understanding is particularly important because it complements science precisely at the level where information is poor’* (p. 11). In this view, trans-disciplinarity combines epistemological reasons associated with incompleteness and contingency of knowledge with political and ethical arguments.

### *Transdisciplinarity and language*

By necessity trans-disciplinarity relies on disciplinary knowledge. However, while multi and inter-disciplinarity continue to rely on disciplinary thinking, trans-disciplinarity challenges it, through the articulation and dialogue between different forms of knowledge. It is a form of research that brings forth and is centred upon an ontology of multiplicity and difference, requiring deconstruction, and the acceptance that *“an object can pertain to different levels of reality, with attendant contradictions, paradoxes, and conflicts”* (Thompson-Klein 2004, p. 524).

Yet scholars who have had firsthand experience of inter and trans-disciplinary research underline the difficulties emerging within cross-disciplinary encounters. For example, Miller et al (2008) recognise the need to accept that each single way of knowing is insufficient to understand the issues, to recognise not only the knowledge that is at stake but also the values and aims of the research, and to be able and willing to build internal reflexivity.

So, trans-disciplinarity is a process of knowledge production as well as epistemological and personal maturation, and it is profoundly rooted into the interactional and linguistic dimensions. On the one hand, there is attention towards

socio-cognitive processes and the opportunities that are offered to stimulate the expression of multiple interpretations, languages and their coming into dialogue. On the other hand, there is attention towards structures and power relations and thus the extent to which different contexts can allow for inclusion, participation and indeed the building of a community of stakeholders that shares the norms of trans-disciplinarity. As indicated by Edgar Morin (1999), knowledge of complexity requires scientific knowledge to be contextualised and concepts created to play the role of “linking operators”, but it is also a process of intellectual and civic reform towards a broad transdisciplinary culture of critical engagement and cooperation (Mobjörk 2010).

### *The University as a forum for science-society interactions*

Within the scenario of sustainability science, the University is charged with an important role with regard to preparing future scientists and future teachers to engage in democratic dialogue. So the question we ask is what kind of knowledge production processes and what kind of contexts should be devised to promote epistemological maturation and the development of citizens’ competences for acting in post-normal conditions? Of particular concern in our case is the preparation of school science teachers and how the linguistic reflection can be used to support scientific preparation that enables understanding of complexity and openness to a multiplicity of views.

## Towards a science education for sustainability

By virtue of a traditional idea of science that still prevails, many people identify scientific and technological progress as the most secure way for resolving the global environmental crisis. The construction of ocean pipes or devices for blocking solar insulation (Keith et al. 2010) fit in with the values and norms of a worldview that separates humans from nature. With consideration of the critical voices arising from different fields of research and inquiry in the sciences, we can argue that the sustainability of human presence on the planet is dependent upon a radical shift of both culture and epistemology. According to Bruno Latour (2007), we need to recognise ourselves as ‘Earthlings’ and move away from the idea of modernization and emancipation from Nature to a concrete scenario of explicit recognition of our dependency upon Nature.

One level of change therefore is epistemological and concerns the shift from a subject-object to a subject-subject relationship. The power division between ‘who knows’ (scientists, teachers) and ‘who does not know’ (citizens, students) gives way to a dialogical relationship between subjects who are all carrying partial but equally legitimate interpretations.

To the extent to which the main research questions are changing, and are increasingly defined by the society at large through democratic processes, also educational priorities are expected to change.

The main goal of the teacher is thus to provide students with reflective skills enabling them to make explicit the dependency of science knowledge from the underlying culture and power relationships (Aikenhead 2003), to understand the complex relationships between ourselves and the natural systems hosting us, and to adaptively

cope - through cooperation and self-restrain - with the huge transformations in energy fluxes and matter use within our shrinking, globalised and conflicting world (Martinez-Alier et al. 2010).

In particular, the recognition of a science that is becoming more and more uncertain finds itself in contradiction with educational practices rooted into the delivering of facts, notions, definitions, rules and similarly with research practices looking for fixed understandings (Torbert 1981). Language, dialogue and communication play a central role in promoting a more dynamic and contextualised idea of science (Roth and Lee 2004). Such an approach is not solely confined to dealing with controversial socio-scientific issues or environmental education (Ekborg 2003). It is located at a more profound level, regarding the interplay between facts and values and the way in which we build and make use of new knowledge.

The second part of the article will now be exploring in more detail the features of scientific language and the different ways of seeing the world elaborated by the scientific disciplines. The linguistic analysis is directed towards the identification of metaphors for enhancing epistemological pluralism and bringing forth a sustainability view. More specific examples of practical applications in action-research contexts will then be offered in the third part.

## **Part 2. From Sustainability Science to Sustainability Education: the methodological foundations of dialogue.**

### **Teaching as a communication process**

A simple, traditional way to describe human communication is a one-way model, whereby a message is transmitted from a source to a passive recipient in a linear and unambiguous fashion. A more recent model implies an interactive and dynamic two-way communication, in which both source and recipient are engaged in active negotiation of meanings (Resnick et al. 1991).

Reflecting upon the nature of communication has allowed for a deepening of awareness of the multiple components of dialogue and their contribution to making the teaching and learning process more effective and 'constructive'. In the first instance, we note the epistemic and linguistic aspects which include: the language we use and its continuous transformations; our interpretive schemes and more generally, the interpretive lenses adopted by the different disciplines to produce new knowledge.

Secondly, we note the pedagogical aspect: the nature of classroom communication and the importance of building language and communication competences for both teachers and learners (Dodman 2004). There is now a widespread consensus that by offering students an educational context where they can express their own ideas and discuss them with teachers and peers (Klymkowsky and Garvin-Doxas 2008) they are encouraged to find personal meanings and fulfil a fair role in society and the environment.

Similarly, in science education, the idea that learning science entails a passage from the social to the personal plane through a process of internal reconstruction has



constituted the fundamentals of the socio-cultural approach to science learning (Scott, Mortimer and Ametller 2011). Learning is equated to a dialogical process of sharing and integrating different ideas mediated by the use of language. As reported by Valentin Voloshinov (1973): “*For each word of the utterance that we are in the process of understanding, we ... lay down a set of our own answering words. The greater their number and weight, the deeper and more substantial our understanding will be ... understanding strives to match the speaker’s word with a counter word*” (p. 102).

In the light of previous discussions about language and embodied cognition, a richness of words and understandings is embraced by complexivist approaches to knowledge. Specifically, children’s ideas about natural phenomena not only can be varied but they often differ both ontologically and epistemologically from the descriptions offered by school science. For example, if in the course of everyday experiences we refer to energy as a quantity that *gets used up*, in Physics, energy is a property or state of a system, which is *conserved*. Scientific concepts are products of specific scientific communities and constitute part of the disciplinary knowledge of that community.

Traditionally, one of the goals of socio-constructivist science education has been that of guiding learners to differentiate between everyday knowledge and consolidated scientific views and so for example, “*to understand what energy is not (a real substance) just as much as what it is (an abstract quantity)*” (Scott, Mortimer and Ametller 2011, p. 6). In this view, the correct scientific description can be identified and transferred, allowing for further integration of different concepts into a hierarchically organised structure (Howe 1996). Links can be established amongst scientific concepts, and between scientific concepts and practical experience, with clearly stated passages between macroscopic features and theoretical, microscopic aspects (Scott, Mortimer and Ametller 2011).

As such, socio-constructivist learning provides the basis for developing the scientific story within a particular discipline, with language being used to set out boundaries of meaning and ideas across disciplinary domains. As indicated in the earlier section, such clarity is important for disciplinary and multi-disciplinary work. However, if science is seen as a subculture (Harding 2008) in linguistic continuity with human thought and experiences across contexts, then we are confronted with the task of re-integrating school science education and its language within a learning process that is both closed and open to conceptual definition (Wittgenstein 1961), in the manner of an ongoing dialogue between partial views. In order to pursue this goal, a discussion of the specific features of scientific language is in order.

## Conceptualising reality: nominal vs. verbal language

All concepts we formulate and we express by means of language are a manifestation of the interaction between the subject or ‘knower’, the object of reality and the

context in which this is located (Hing 1993). While in some cases we have no difficulty in recognising some concepts as mental abstractions, products of our mind (i.e. the concept of ecosystem), in other cases we are led to believe them as generalisations of actual, real entities (for example, the concept of *cell*). When this occurs, we are led to confound reality with its representation. Language and metaphors in particular account for such difficulty. Metaphor is a key component of intellectual inquiry because it enables us not only to understand one thing in terms of another that is more familiar or close to us but also to think of an abstraction in terms of something more concrete (Larson 2011). So language is the vehicle that connects abstract and experiential realms; some metaphors have become so established that we are no longer aware of their use (e.g. the leg of a table as a metaphor to talk about the interplay of several qualities such as sturdiness, weight and support). On the basis of such reflection, dedicating attention to the processes of conceptualization can become a fruitful practice for preventing ourselves from “thingifying” nature (Désautels and Larochelle 1998)<sup>1</sup>, meanwhile offering the stimulus for developing awareness of the powers and the limits of our mental processes and our language.

All language systems offer two different ways of perceiving, representing and interpreting reality. One is the verbal mode, made up of subjects, verbs and complements. This view of reality corresponds to our view of the world as a *process*, where we can identify agents performing particular actions with specific consequences or processes manifesting themselves through outcomes. Another way of representing reality is the nominal form, which makes prevailing use of nouns and adjectives (Chinn et al. 2008). Agents and processes are no longer visible: what counts is the result. The world is viewed as a *product*, as something that has already been made and defined. The progress of science and the subsequent specialization of the different disciplines have been closely associated with an increasing use of the nominal language (Dodman, Camino and Barbiero 2008). This type of language allows for the expression of thoughts with high conceptual density by means of a few, selected words (Halliday 2004) but often the connections between such words and their origin or context may not be apparent.

Arguably, it is the increasing gap between the two languages that led to the anthropologists’ and sociologists’ (Jasanoff 2010) formulations of ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ descriptions and their different representations in society; one being the abstract, scientific one, and the other one being the culturally embedded human experiences. An interesting example is the word wetland as opposed to the word swamp that may be more commonly used. One is focussed on the idea of water while the other retains also other connotations such as the intricacy and richness of a swamp area that may trigger images and bodily sensations.

From an educational point of view, to be able to use both languages, recognising their advantages and limitations, is a precious competence (Yore 2008). As reported by Pauline Chinn et al. (2008), “*Doing science and building knowledge about nature and naturally occurring events are fundamental to knowing how to facilitate learning*

---

<sup>1</sup> A ‘thingified’ view of the world is currently exacerbated by the ‘loss’ of nature and experiences of nature in concurrence with a transmissive mode of teaching. It is associated with a sense of exclusion from processes and events to which we are connected and a sense of alienation from topics and problems proposed in the classroom (Désautels & Larochelle 1998)

*about these same ideas; the verb and the noun are intimately connected in the informal and formal learning environments”*( p. 155).

## Western ways of seeing the world

Throughout the history of Western philosophical thought, the epistemologies and methodologies which have been a long-standing hallmark of our society can be broadly described in terms of three main mental perspectives, which philosophers and scholars have used when looking at the natural world: *characteristics, relationships* and *transformations*.

With the notion of ‘characteristics’ we refer to the “distinctive signs” through which we can recognise, identify and compare particular objects.

Conversely, when thinking about ‘relationships’ we adopt a way of looking at reality concerned with understanding the connections that exist between objects. Finally, when focusing on ‘transformations’ we direct our attention to the manifestation - over time - of both characteristics and relationships and the changes that occur.

A reflection on the elements that structure our ways of thinking and representing reality can be a useful strategy for uncovering similarities between the variously specialised types of knowledge: the *core themes* of every discipline display an association with each one of these three ways of seeing (*characteristics, relationships* and *transformations*).

With regard to the study of the natural systems, it is possible to find such perspectives represented in the different *methodological approaches* developed by specific fields of inquiry:

- the *morphological approach* is concerned with the description of forms and structures (*characteristics*); it has been widely adopted by the earth sciences but also for the definition of every living species as *different* and unique, while at the same time recognising the similarities characterising life as a whole;
- the *functional approach* traditionally deals with the processes and dynamic functions characterising the living forms and the conservation of their identity; more generally, a functional view is used to describe the flows of materials and energy throughout a system (living and non living) at different scales;
- the *temporal or historical approach* considers the time span of each transformation, from the micro to the macro scale;
- the *systemic approach* has the task of bringing forth the web of relationships between living and non living forms, shedding light on a hierarchically organised system in which every part is both a whole and a component of a wider system. Relationships are of crucial importance, for they give both form and meaning to the whole: panarchy according to Lance Gunderson and Christopher Holling (2002), Gaia according to Volk (1998).

Every approach is in turn associated with one or more privileged perspectives. In the morphological approach we can recognise an emphasis on *characteristics* and *relationships*. The functional and historical approaches are particularly focussed on *transformations* with different perspectives: time concurrency (synchronic perspective) and time sequence (diachronic perspective). The systemic approach

supports a view of dynamic interdependency between *characteristics, relationships and transformations* (Kay and Schneider 1994).

## Epistemological and methodological frameworks - shifting between conservation and flexibility

Tom Bryce (2010) has eloquently reiterated the dilemma that still exists for educators, of being confronted by the “*evident strains that exist between teaching approaches which emphasise content (in the conventional sense) and those which try to tackle the contextual complexities*” (p. 592). Such duality one may argue is characteristic of scientific knowledge. At the one end, the epistemological body of knowledge of any discipline contains the basis of the discipline itself (expressed with a preferential choice for nominal language) and in the form that is temporarily accepted by the scientific community of the time. At the other end, the methodological framework provides a variety of practices, tools, techniques which are deployed for the exploration of new fields of knowledge. The two ends of the polarity interact with each other and the development of any scientific discipline is made possible thanks to the continuous shuttling between the two.

From an educational point of view, the shift from and to the epistemological and methodological frameworks can be seen from two, very different standpoints. One is the *paradigm of certainty* which describes science as a ‘building’, a ‘baggage’ or ‘body’ of knowledge that is progressively enriched of new elements provided by the single, specialised disciplines operating through new empirical trials. The teacher adopting this perspective tends to proceed by means of definitions and consolidated notions to be acquired (epistemological framework), while laboratory and field work (methodological framework) is used to demonstrate and confirm what has already been established. By presenting the consolidated knowledge and the method in an alternative and separate manner (first the ‘facts’, then the empirical demonstrations), the idea of science as universal, objective truth is notably reinforced. Students are not encouraged to move along the continuum between the two polarities (Fig. 1a), neither are they enabled to reflect on the processes of thought that occur when they are acquiring new knowledge. Their knowledge is often construed and categorised as divergent from the established scientific view but it is also disconnected from it for alternative conceptions arise and are maintained in the course of their lives.

INSERT FIGURE 1a HERE

Alternatively, the teacher can facilitate the shifts between epistemology and methodology by referring to the *paradigm of flux* (Fig. 1b). In this way, aspects of flexibility and the provisional nature of both frameworks are emphasised. Students are encouraged to shuttle between epistemology and methodology and to reflect on the ways in which concepts are modified to gradually disclose new and different interpretations of reality. ‘Crystallised’ concepts (Ostergaard et al. 2008) are useful to provisionally describe the established knowledge, but the same concepts can become powerful tools for the exploration of new ideas: in this way, they can take on new meanings, lead onto new definitions and suggest new questions. As discussed in

previous part 1, Larson (2011) identified metaphors in science that can be used at a gestalt level to stimulate thinking along new paths and thus reframing original questions and boundaries.

INSERT FIGURE 1b HERE

## From concepts to conceptual tools

From an original epistemological position in which a concept benefits from a well established definition within a specific disciplinary realm, it is possible to move towards a situation of meaning-making by shifting the same concept along the axis towards the methodological side. During this journey, concepts can change status and functions, to become *conceptual tool* for the exploration of other disciplines, operating at different time-scales and/or organisational levels. During the course of our research and educational practice we have identified two typologies of concepts, which are particularly suited to becoming *conceptual tools*. Some concepts originated from specific disciplines (e.g. the concept of *cell*); others are of more general nature, widely used in everyday communication and in a variety of contexts (e.g. the concept of *boundary*), and for such reasons we have referred to them as ‘meta-disciplinary’ concepts.

### *a) Disciplinary concepts*

One example is the concept of ecosystem, which was codified through a definition specifying its characteristics within the particular field of ecology (Tansley 1935)<sup>2</sup>, but the concept of ecosystem can be used also for investigating certain properties of the cells, the human body or the biosphere.

Other concepts which proved useful as conceptual tools are - for example - the concepts of organism (Hölldobler and Wilson 1997) and metabolism. When applied to the entire planet (Margulis 1998), the concept of organism can be used to introduce the idea of Gaia (Lovelock 1987). The concept of metabolism has been adopted in recent years by the social and economic sciences to express the complex relationships that exist between human activities and natural systems’ functioning (Giampietro, Mayumi and Martinez-Alier 2000).

A concept used outside its original field becomes a powerful tool (Fischer-Kowalski and Amman 2001) for constructing new concepts: such process makes it apparent that there is no real coincidence between concepts and reality, avoiding the risk of ‘thingifying’ nature (Désautels and Larochelle 1998), while at the same time encouraging students to make creative use of concepts, by applying them in new realms or inventing new ones and assessing their efficacy.

---

<sup>2</sup> In its original definition, an ecosystem is the entire set of biotic and abiotic components and their relationships found in a given area. An ecosystem is a dynamic and complex whole, a functional unit in stationary state, characterised by flows of matter and energy between its constitutive elements (Tansley 1935).

### *b) Meta-disciplinary concepts*

As we mentioned before, there is another set of concepts which we have tested over the years as part of our practice. These are concepts of general and familiar use, as boundary, system, cycle, flow... Many of them are metaphors which have become such integral part of our language that their original nature is no longer perceived.

For example, the notion of *boundary* can be applied at many scales and can be alternatively used to either indicate a barrier, a divide, or an edge across which exchanges can happen. We can introduce students to reflect on cell boundaries, the boundaries of an ecosystem or (as we will describe later) the boundaries of a gene. Moreover, the process of thinking about the nature of boundaries is a way to tap into the morphological but also functional and systemic approaches, helping us to find the relationships between the three different ways of seeing and thinking about reality (this point will be exemplified later in Part 3 dealing with specific educational activities).

Another example refers to the concept of energy that in science teaching is often associated and dealt with as part of Physics. How to unchain its meaning from the static, disciplinary definition of “the capacity of a physical system to perform work”? Thinking in terms of *flows of energy* can help us to move along the polarity between epistemology and methodology, and to overcome disciplinary boundaries: flows of energy can be revealed between cellular structures, between the inside and the outside of a cell, between organism and environment, along the edges of the tectonic plates, between the Sun and the Earth. Furthermore, they can be expressed with different scales and units, from electron Volts, to Calories and Joules... Investigating phenomena by means of this conceptual tool we can reason at different scales, consider the processes and phenomena connecting life with the non living world, and integrate not only different approaches within Natural Sciences, but also Natural Sciences with Physics Chemistry, Technology along interdisciplinary paths.

Some of such concepts can be paired to express complementary, non-mutually exclusive polarities: micro-macro, continuous-discrete, linear-cyclical, static-dynamic, process-product and so on. Such way of moving our thinking between two poles can help to acquire more flexibility in organising thought, and to overcome the hierarchical dualism which features strongly in reductionist thinking – i.e. yes or no, right or wrong, black or white, etc. (Sterling 2001).

## Using conceptual tools to promote integration

Drawing on the notion that each science discipline is the result of the application of specific conceptual approaches, each one bringing a particular view on the interpretation of reality, we have drawn the diagram represented in Fig. 2 below.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Our working hypothesis is that, if we keep all such approaches separate and we teach the single disciplines, we promote a fragmented view of reality, we reinforce the idea of science as an objective, certain and indisputable description of reality and we

contribute to develop a sense of detachment and alienation amongst ourselves and from the natural systems. This hypothesis finds supporters from many realms of literature, both from the fields of environmental education (Tomashow 1996) and sustainability education, who are pleading for the development of an integrated vision that promotes a sense of reconnection ‘*of people with their own origins*’ (Bonnet 2002, p. 271). In addition, the integration at school of the different disciplinary approaches was indicated as the crucial element for dealing with “the interdisciplinary nature of problems in the 21st century” (Chamany et al. 2008).

In practical terms, any and each theme in the Natural Sciences realm can be explored through a multiplicity of approaches, and by means of a conscious use of language and conceptual tools, in order to offer a complex, variegated and connected picture of each portion of reality under study. Pillars of such holistic vision are:

- meta-reflective competences: by ‘unchaining’ concepts from their rigid frameworks, it become easy to highlight the difference between ideas and reality and to stimulate a reflection on one’s own ways of thinking. Meta-reflective competences are associated with the development of a fluid type of knowledge, where processes and products, epistemological and methodological frameworks are equally balanced;
- inter and trans-disciplinary knowledge, that derives from the possibility to use conceptual tools to relate the single approaches with one another, recomposing the different disciplinary lenses and connecting them as part of a complex whole. Fig. 3 illustrates the potentialities of some conceptual tools for connecting together the different approaches.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

## Conceptual tools, complexity and education for sustainability

Many of the concepts that we have identified and used as conceptual tools have been recognised as ‘structuring’ concepts in the field of research in didactics (Giordan et al. 1994). They can also be reconnected to Jeff Bloom and Tyler Volk’s (2007) “meta-patterns”. According to these authors, meta-patterns can be used in learning and teaching to promote understanding of systems on a number of different scales and thus to make connections between such scales. A similar idea has been proposed by Reid, Berkes and Wilbanks (2006) in relation to establishing connections between different systems of knowledge. Other similarities can be found with Capra’s (2002) ‘core concepts’<sup>3</sup>, referring to webs, nested systems, cycles, dynamic equilibrium, Bateson’s idea of mind ecology (Bateson 1972) and Stephen Sterling’s (2009) notion of holistic thinking.

Making concepts fluid, thinking in terms of polarities, using conceptual tools and connecting different approaches are all strategies for interpretation and internalisation of the notion of complexity. In one sense, we are talking about the complexity of the natural systems (of which we are part) and which requires new ways of thinking. In

---

<sup>3</sup> ([http://www.ecoliteracy.org/education/principles\\_of\\_ecology.html](http://www.ecoliteracy.org/education/principles_of_ecology.html))

another sense, we are referring to the complexity of our minds, striving to increase awareness of our own ways of thinking and modes of expression, by means of a more fluid and creative use of the extraordinary power of language, endeavouring to use words not only as constraining heritage but also as energising horizons (Dodman 2007). The notion of complexity and its translation into language processes have profound implications for educational research and practice. It opens the way for a notion of participatory research and learning whereby dialogue and deliberation - in ongoing meaning-making processes - are essential mechanisms for the production of knowledge and awareness of its purposes. In the following part 3 we address the methodological foundations of research and practice in science education contexts working from a sustainability view.

### **Part 3. Learning and teaching processes within a dialogical and reflective context. Some examples of courses and activities**

#### **Context**

Over the past ten years, we have developed a series of educational activities aimed at the integration of the different disciplinary realms of the Natural Sciences and promoting the development of a more 'fluid' form of knowing, open to self-reflection and dialogue. The approach of joint working adopted by the group has been informed on the one hand, by the philosophical perspective of complexity in the biological sciences and its critical stance towards the organisation and production of knowledge in science and society; on the other hand, the epistemological reflection has been enriched by the perspective of social constructivism and participatory action-research as a means for bringing science education closer to issues of personal and societal relevance.

Our work developed within a variety of learning and teaching contexts, leading to the production and delivery of a range of courses at the University level, including undergraduate courses in Natural Sciences and Teacher education. In particular, here we focus on examples of practice taken from initial teacher education courses for both primary and secondary teachers and offered in the period between 2000/01 and 2008/09. In both contexts however – primary and secondary– the same methodology applied to provide a form of multi-case methodology amenable to the exploration of the use of conceptual tools in science education.

The discussion of the activities and the concluding section will thus focus on the interlinking of different dimensions of the theoretical framework as part of a global view, to illustrate the multi-faceted process of translating the epistemological basis of sustainability science into the educational practice.

#### **The practice and objectives of action-research**



A combination of teaching and learning strategies eliciting the sharing of ideas in a context of participatory action-research characterises all courses and each stage of the learning and teaching process (McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead 1996). This way of working allows for a collection of large amounts of data on classroom activity. Most importantly, however, data becomes meaningful as part of a process through which the teacher can be tuned in with his/her own practice and outcomes by means of continuous reflection: *“The study of oneself and teachers’ educational practices is a complementary research approach which can enhance the reflexive component of action research”* (Kitchen and Stevens 2008, p. 4). It is a common form of professional action which has the aim of improving the level of coherence of one’s own practice by incorporating monitoring of students’ development within an ongoing verification of the formative opportunities that are being offered (McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead 1996).

In particular by means of the process of action-research there is an opportunity to produce ongoing feed-backs on the ideas and conceptions that are being expressed, thus making it possible to establish and sustain dialogue between teacher and students and amongst the students themselves (Kemmis 2006). Hence a particular focus of interest in our case is the quality of the dialogical space. Our attention is devoted to devising educational spaces allowing students to express themselves in a comfortable manner, safely sharing ideas with each other and dealing with the discussion of new concepts, thus making them fluid and deconstructing the existing ones (Goodnough 2003).

This is a perspective of participation and emancipation in science and technology related issues (Seiler and Abraham 2009) involving people - in these case prospective teachers - in their different roles and capacities, at the professional, personal and political levels (Noffke 2009). Drawing on one’s own experience in the training courses, beginning teachers may feel more comfortable in embarking in the attractive yet somehow fearful enterprise of ‘sustainable’ education: *“The notion of meaning and relevance does not lie just in the conceptual or thematic material itself, but in a context in which there is an interplay between the thematic material, the notions of ownership, and the atmosphere that supports discourse”* (Bloom and Volk 2007, p. 63).

In practice, the process of action-research leading to the development and implementation of the activities during the course is made of a series of steps involving participants at different times and in different roles, as explained below.

The first step in the process is a planning moment – usually consisting of an activity performed by the members of the research group - which is reframed each year according to previous experiences. In the planning stages, the teacher-researchers share critical reflections about the scientific content of a news or academic article, discussing the cultural framings carried by language, possible misconceptions that may be encountered in the process of understanding the content and the main disciplinary approaches guiding the presentation and assimilation of content.

The planning moment is followed by the drafting of educational activities that are proposed to the students to elicit their knowledge and interpretations. For example students are asked to answer open questions or questionnaires, make drawings, or enter into dialogues with and amongst other participants. Data collected in this form is elaborated and then fed-back to the students in the ensuing sessions, in order to

introduce emerging patterns or frames of thinking which are helpful to guide the discussion, unravel misconceptions and inform the development of the topic, introducing interdisciplinary connections. By such means, data are also further analysed and discussed with the participants themselves. This moment usually leads to further deepening of the topic, clarification of doubts and integration of new elements of reflection.

Finally, other data is collected through end of course reflective essays, requiring participants to produce personal accounts on how they approached the themes and the activities of the course. Information from the essay is used to evaluate the course from the point of view of the opportunities given to participants to reflect on their knowledge and ways of learning.

One of the objectives of data collection is therefore that of using data as feed-back, to enrich and support the constructive process of restructuring and integration of knowledge and further planning of the course.

## Participants and contexts

Each course is attended each year by people with different levels of academic competence and personal motives. Starting from a general draft plan elaborated by the lecturer, the dynamic, open and dialogical features of the activities imply that each course becomes an experience that is by its very nature 'unique' for the particular attendants. Such uniqueness is dependent upon the level of dialogue that is being established, and courses with lesser numbers of students are more amenable to this practice.

### *Overview of contexts*

The teaching and learning activities described in the following pages refer to four different courses, located respectively within the Undergraduate Programme for Primary Education (course A1) and the Postgraduate Programme for Secondary Teaching (three courses, indicated here as B1, B2, B3). The two programmes account for some important distinctions with regard to participants' prior levels of scientific knowledge, maturity and expectations; in addition, differences in institutional organisation allowed for pragmatic differences in terms of size and length of courses. All courses however were developed by the members of the group by focussing on a particular aspect of disciplinary and interdisciplinary nature, drawing on a selection of *core* concepts in the Natural Sciences such as cell, organism, ecosystem, gene and evolution and adopting a shared methodological approach. A brief overview of the different contexts is provided in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Overview of teaching and learning contexts**

<b>Programme and courses</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Type of knowledge environment</b>
A1. Didactics of the Life Sciences	Learning of core concepts in biology by shifting from a disciplinary, analytical view to a systemic and complex view of living things.	Disciplinary
B1. Core concepts in Biology	Deconstruction and reconstruction of core concepts (e.g. gene, ecosystem) to open boundaries and transform concepts into conceptual tools.	Interdisciplinary within the biological sciences;
B2. Flows of energy and matter cycles	Energy as a conceptual tool for understanding global, socio-ecological issues;	Interdisciplinary, across different disciplines in the natural and social sciences.
B3. Evolution	Evolution as a scientific concept that allows for an appreciation of uncertainty, unpredictability and creativity of natural systems and the implicit values embedded in language.	Inter and trans-disciplinary. When evolution is understood personally as a process that transcends the individual, there is a possibility to enter in contact with uncertainty and humility as a necessary attitude to knowledge.

*The information obtained from the data*

At the end of every teaching and research unit, the data collected is heterogeneous and varied with regard to number of responses and methods used. Through the application of qualitative (Silvermann 2000) and mixed-method (Creswell 1998) research methodologies it is possible to obtain results that are meaningful and sometimes statistically significant.

So, a first and important aim of gathering perceptions from course participants and include them as part of the research process is not simply to evaluate their knowledge by taking a position from the outside. Rather our attention is placed upon our prospective science teachers' prior knowledge and epistemic content (Quale 2002) and the opportunities offered by the learning environment to uncover discourses about nature, worldviews and to engage with ethical considerations. As mentioned before, data have been collected through a variety of linguistic mediums: drawings, written texts, verbal exchanges, posters. In our methodological framework, such data is used to inform participants' understanding of concepts while introducing a meta-cognitive dimension allowing for considerations about the learning process and its different dimensions: the epistemological level (the nature of science), the methodological level (with particular attention to the variety of languages used), and the ethical level (the quality of interaction between oneself, other people, other living beings). Hence the aim is not simply that of identifying misconceptions and the degree of accuracy of participants' knowledge with respect to consolidated scientific knowledge, but to organise knowledge according to a framework of emergent complexity and understanding. We are at pains to stress that in this particular paper our concern is to give an overview of the methodological approach by looking across contexts to

identify the features of the learning process. By no means we provide a detailed analysis of knowledge construction processes although this point is discussed in the conclusions and addressed elsewhere (e.g. Colucci-Gray et al.2010).

## The role of the teacher-researcher

The notion of dialogue and participation in learning has important implications regarding the role of the researchers and the management of data. While the action-research activity is located within an experience which is continuous and ongoing, 'data' is by its very nature extracted and isolated as information that can be used to capture moments of this experience, defined in space and time. They can be defined as 'snapshots' of the process of learning and teaching unfolding at a micro-scale, and are linked to cultural processes occurring at a macro-scale (Bloom and Volk 2007), although not in themselves wholly representatives of those. It would thus be inappropriate to extrapolate the general from the situated particular, and this has been a recurrent issue in the discussions surrounding validity and generalisation in action-research (Sumara and Davis 2009).

In such conditions, the traditional role of the teacher-researcher in handling data needs to take account of:

- the participatory nature of the teaching/learning process implying that what is constituted as 'data' is part of an interconnected set of meanings. The researchers in this regard are also teachers, co-learners and actors in the process of meaning-making, aware of their knowledge being partial and subjected to change (Goodnough 2003).
- the creativity of the process: each course and workshop produces new cognitive and relational dynamics, that confine the possibility for confirmation/triangulation ('the dilemma of emergence' described by Osberg and Biesta 2007) to contextual aspects.

The process of systematically sharing and discussing with participants not only the data collected, but also the criteria used to organize and classify such data, reduces the risk of super-imposing the teacher-researcher's view. In such a way each issue is presented, discussed, enriched with participants' ideas and conceptions, integrated with inputs drawn from both the disciplinary and educational literature, and finally reviewed in a plenary discussion inviting the expression of multiple and complementary visions and allowing for connections to be made between the different themes and/or perspectives. This is also the methodological choice supporting the presentation of the data later in this section and supports the core idea of a standpoint epistemology which rejects singular narratives to encourage criticality and creativity.

## A. Training courses for primary teachers

The Bachelor of Education programme at Turin University is attended by a large number of students. The number of first year students has progressively increased from a cohort of 30-40 students in 1998 to 571 students in 2008. In many cases, enrolling students often hold very limited knowledge of science (which is assessed through formative opportunities throughout the course), and the structure of the

degree is such that over a period of five years, there are only three courses (two in the first year and one in the final year) dedicated to science learning and associated preparation to teach science in school. This requires science lecturers to strike a difficult balance between the students' need for basic, disciplinary knowledge and the professional aspects related to using such knowledge appropriately in the primary classroom.

#### *A1. The course of 'Didactics of Life Sciences' (Didattica di Scienze della Vita)*

This course is offered in first year and it is attended by approximately 150 students. With such a large number of students, it is difficult to put into practice a learning and teaching approach that is fully interactive, that is, enabling participation and exchanges in a two-way communication process. So the delivery of plenary lectures is by necessity the mode of teaching which is being adopted. Besides, the limited time allocated to science teaching requires making fundamental choices related to course content. One of the goals of this course therefore is that of addressing some of the gaps in students' disciplinary knowledge yet highlighting the educational learning potential (as it was described earlier) of continuously shifting between process and product, verbs and nouns, objects and things (Ingold 2010). In other words, concepts are presented more as tools rather than notions to recover the role of personal interpretation and to allow for conceptual organisation. Content includes unifying and structuring concepts which can be used to interpret and correlate objects, events and processes, bringing together different time and space scales, and from different points of view (Perazzone 2004). In essence, it is a matter of recovering some of the core ideas in Biology, promoting a reflective attitude and organizing concepts within a complex and flexible conceptual web, which can be useful in different situations (Fig. 4).

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

Within the limitation of the delivery mode, students are stimulated to get involved in a variety of occasions. During the 30 hours allocated to the course, we propose brainstorming activities (as it will be shown later with an example) and we encourage students to engage with open questions. In addition, each year we set the students to carry out five, self-directed activities, either individually or in small groups (van Meter and Stevens 2000). The material produced is collected by the teacher-researcher and returned in the following sessions with the aim of generating discussion and reflection on one's own personal conceptions and the factors that sometimes are responsible for turning scientific knowledge into a 'scholastic object' rather than a tool that can be used for understanding oneself and the world (Lewis and Leach 2006). The specific examples reported in the following pages refer to activities dealing with the concepts of organism and cell.

#### *The concept of ORGANISM: from the functional definition to a systemic approach*

The concept of organism is in appearance a simple one to grasp as it corresponds to a reality with clearly identifiable structural *boundaries*. This characteristic however is

both an advantage and a disadvantage. While we can focus our attention on something that is well defined, we also tend to concentrate on what is “on the inside”, contained within the boundaries, overlooking the context to which it belongs and thus attributing the organism a presumed independence from the rest of the system. This way of thinking often leads to the definition of a living entity as a reality with particular functions (functional approach), overlooking the necessity for this reality to interact with the context (systemic approach). Primary school textbooks as well as many first year primary teachers - holding what is a typically scholastic type of knowledge - define living things by listing a series of actions, that are disconnected from one another, but which are considered to be essential to its functioning (Fig 5). Furthermore, there is usually no distinction between basic, metabolic functions (feeding, breathing...) and the ones connected to the life cycle (birth, growth, reproduction...). If asked the question “yes... *but why do living beings breath?*” the answer of many students is predictably: “*in order to live!*” The living state of an organism is taken as an explanation *per se*, without the need for further explanations. While this conception is common in everyday talking about living organisms, it is also associated to a lack of a coherent and structured organisation of biological knowledge (Howe 1986). Surely the textbooks written for the upper stages provide more extended conceptions of living things; nevertheless it is the functional definition that is best memorised and remembered and possibly the one that is considered to be ‘essential knowledge’ in the textbooks and consequently by beginning teachers who will use it with their pupils.

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

The limitations of the functional approach are evident; however what can we do to move forward? How can we stimulate students to re-adjust their conceptions so that the concept of organism can become a basic concept upon which to build further knowledge in biology? By means of a simple brainstorming on the concept of living thing, students usually manage to provide a list of functions that are common to all living organisms. The list often contains also a few structural elements, such as the cell or the organic matter composition. It is towards the end of the activity that students mention a property that is generally less well defined and has to do with the response to stimuli from the external environment. This is the starting point for further reflection on one of the essential properties of all living organisms as autopoietic, open systems (Maturana and Varela 1987), operating with continuous exchanges of matter, energy and information with the environment in order to maintain their organisation. If all students become aware that there is no reaction, no behaviour and no movement without the presence of a stimulus from the outside environment, it is easier to get them to reflect on the fact that all metabolic functions are determined by an energy/matter flow entering the organism from the external environment and exiting it transformed. By applying the conceptual tools of *system* and *energy/matter flows*, all functions that were previously listed can be essentially subsumed within two main common necessities for all living things (Arcà 1992):

- 1) To extract, transform and use matter and energy from the environment according to the individuals’ own life projects (these are *flows of energy and matter* connected to the functions of breathing and feeding);

2) To perceive and elaborate information from the environment and to respond/behave accordingly (*flows of energy and matter* connected to sensorial perception and movement).

From a systems' perspective, the boundaries of our object of study can thus appear less well defined; in other words, by playing on the two polarities, we can move from the idea of boundary intended as a structural barrier for exclusion to the idea of boundary as a dynamic interface playing a relational function.

This approach can be used as early as primary education, because it does not rely on the acquisition of specialist notions and it offers the advantage of helping pupils to build a model of living organism that is not only more commensurate with scientific ideas but also helpful for making connections with other realms of biological knowledge: from the functioning of a plant or the human body, to the process of adaptation to the ecosystems' internal relationships (Gagliardi 1989). This of course may require stimulating pupils' reflections and thinking beyond the simple memorization of the textbook's definition.

At the end of the course, students are asked for some written considerations about particular aspects of the course, both in terms of content and the methodology used. In relation to the question "*Which topics of the course were of particular interest to you? Indicate your reasons*", several answers related to the concept of living organism. Students' comments included elements of appreciation but their answers are also indicative of the development of students' epistemic content, and particularly their level of methodological awareness with regard to the organisation and re-structuring of their knowledge (Howe 1986):

a) *Living things, because they were dealt with by a new approach, different from textbooks; I liked the way of looking at things from a systemic perspective* (2007/08);

b) *The approach to living things was nice, I liked the way the reflection was set up... stimulating and interesting* (2007/08).

c) *Living and 'non living' things and the cell. Topics were dealt with from many different points of view helping us to grasp the different relationships established between living organisms and their environment and the way in which they are made* (2007/08).

In other cases, the level of appreciation suggests that while the course was focussed on disciplinary aspects, students enjoyed making links across disciplines,

d) *The coverage of living things because it provided a more complete idea, less compartmentalised as compared to my previous course of study* (2006/07).

So at the end of the course students are able to refer to a systemic perspective as an organiser of biological knowledge. They clearly identified the contribution given by lecturer but they also appear to be able to articulate the value of a 'change of perspective' for approaching knowledge in a more meaningful manner. While no claims can be made about the resistance or depth of such understanding, we can suggest that within the limitations of the course it was possible to bring together content knowledge and meta-reflection on one's own way of knowing, enhancing students' own affiliation and confidence with the subject matter (Shallcross et al. 2002).

*The concept of CELL: from a component of the organism to a system penetrated by flows of matter and energy*

From a structural point of view, all living beings are made by one or more cells and the cell is reasonably considered a component of the organism. The organism however is organised according to hierarchical system levels, from *micro* to *macro*. While the cell can be perceived as a self-contained unit, its characteristics and functions are dependent upon the exchanges of energy and matters occurring both at the levels above and below (Gagliardi et al. 1993). By means of two powerful conceptual tools - *micro/macro*, *component/system* - we can move from the concept of organism to the cellular level and *vice-versa*, thus making explicit the cognitive difficulty of managing changes of dimensional scales - a constant feature in the study of biology (Arcà 1993) and in the sciences more generally (Scott et al. 2011).

If we start to inquire into students' knowledge of the cell by means of a simple drawing task ("Represent the model of a living cell"), we find that their knowledge is strongly bounded by the *structural approach*. Every year, about 70% of the students' drawings focus on a structural model. In some cases we recognise meticulous reporting of the names of many cellular parts and also their structures appear to be remembered in detail (Figs.6a and 6b).

INSERT FIGURE 6a HERE

INSERT FIGURE 6b HERE

The other 30% of drawings tend to integrate the names of the structural components with a function label, although often without trying to express the integration between the different components. Only 3% of the students feel the need to represent the cell as part of a context/environment and 2% is able to identify the membrane as a boundary and exchange surface, thus making the cell a relational as well as a functional and structural unit of living systems (Fig. 6c).

INSERT FIGURE 6c HERE

Sharing our collective observations about the drawings is the starting point in the learning process. A key element in this process is to give relevance to everybody's contributions; any linguistic expression by definition becomes intelligible through the limitations of a given frame (Wittgenstein 1961), hence whenever we are asked to make a representation we are bound to make a choice, shaped by conceptual and pragmatic reasons. In this view, the use of the structural approach is an immediate and by all means a legitimate choice. The learning opportunity will then be provided by the reflection on the limitations of the prevailing model, by relating it back to what was discussed previously about the concept of organism. At this point, structural and functional approaches can be integrated with the systemic one. More specifically, the link is introduced by means of the concept of *system*, by showing that within a hierarchically organised system, the cell is both a component of the system and a



system in itself. As a living entity, every cell is in interaction with the environment and the functions of single organelles carefully labelled by the students are involved in the energy and matter flows occurring across their boundaries, allowing the cell to perform its activities and to reproduce itself.

In the comments gathered at the end of the course we can find some general observations about students' ability to grasp conceptual unity in biology, with some emotional connotations:

a) *I have particularly appreciated the overall aim of presenting an organic view of "life". In the past, I received information in 'solid compartments' which prevented me from seeing the big picture (2008/09).*

An emotional dimension also appears which is intra-psychological and related to personal motivation to learn:

b) *I have gained a new interest for the subject (2006/07)*

as well as inter-psychological, pointing to a sense of connection with the world out there and inclusion of oneself within it:

c) *I have managed to connect together old knowledge which did not make much sense to me. [The course] has triggered a sense of wonder towards the living world and its relationships with the environment. For the first time in many years I have developed a holistic view where all the bits I learned are joined up together. I had the impression of being able to gaze at the world around it and embrace it as a whole.... with a growing feeling of marvel (2006/07).*

d) *I have really appreciated the different way of doing sciences, because this is what I believe we have to teach the children and not a list of names (2007/08).*

Students' comments appear to suggest that a change of thinking patterns has occurred, with connections being established between the learning of disciplinary scientific concepts and the grasping of a worldview (quote c), and such learning is bringing psychological, emotional and ethical connotations (Goodwin 2007). Such findings are in line with the theoretical framework of trans-disciplinarity offered by Thompson-Klein (2004) in which scientific knowledge is contextualised within a broader scenario of knowledge, values and emotions. In this way, the course provides students with the preliminary, basic competences for entering a scenario of participation with nature and dialogue with other ways of knowing.

## B. Training courses for prospective secondary school science teachers

The observations and data reported here stem from activities we conducted as part of courses and workshops for prospective teachers of mathematics and science in the lower and upper secondary school<sup>4</sup> and enrolled in the two year post-graduate teaching diploma at the University of Turin. All courses are attended by a maximum of 20 students and are characterised by the use of an interactive methodology throughout (e.g. work in small group on given tasks; reflective questions followed by

peer and plenary discussions; answering of open questions and exchanges of views with peers). Participants attending courses for the lower secondary constitute a multi-disciplinary audience of math, physics, and chemistry and biology graduates. Hence, the majority of students in these courses tend to have a partial preparation for teaching general science in school. Often in this context, the awareness of one's lack of knowledge seems to be present as a condition shaping the learning climate in the class: students appear to be naturally inclined towards engaging with students from other disciplines and they are keen on being part of a collaborative process.

Conversely, in the group of graduate students preparing for the upper stages the basic knowledge competences are well established: all participants hold a first degree in general science and science-related subject or a doctorate on a specific subject. With this group of students, who are holding a much specialised (and sometimes 'crystallised') knowledge, the task of making knowledge fluid is perhaps more difficult, as they are resistant to discuss their body of consolidated knowledge (Zoller and Scholtz 2004).

All courses and workshops have the purpose of involving student teachers in testing strategies and suggestions for teaching/learning activities they can bring to the classroom, and stemming from the theoretical premises introduced previously about the use of common concepts as conceptual tools: the purpose is once again that of making scientific knowledge fluid and integrating the different approaches elaborated by the Natural Sciences within a climate of communal exploration.

#### *An overall view*

More specifically, the data to which we refer here are drawn from two courses (*Didactics of Life Sciences* – respectively for lower and upper secondary school science teachers) and three workshops: *Core Concepts in Life Sciences* (for higher secondary school teachers); *Energy Flows and Matter Transformations* (for lower secondary school teachers) and *Ethics and Science* (upper secondary school teachers).

On the whole, empirical work was conducted on a total of 21 courses and 12 workshops, each one with a time allocation of 25 hours, for a total of more than 820 hours of action-research practice.

Each course and workshop was developed around specific topics and according to participants' competences and levels of prior knowledge. As indicated in the earlier section on methodology, the activities presented during the courses had the double purpose of eliciting participants' prior knowledge and pre-conceptions and producing information that is then returned to the participants - including the teacher-researchers - as part of the action-research process, to enhance reflection and awareness of changes of ways of thinking. So all proposed activities shared the same aims, working strategies, and assessment and evaluation criteria. Figure 7 contains a map of activities<sup>5</sup> developed for the workshop on Energy Flows and Matter Transformations. The map shows the variety of activities used (from disciplinary inputs to reflections) as well as their sequential arrangement. While there are generic features which are

---

<sup>5</sup> For the data presented in Fig. 7 we gratefully thank Dr. Daniela Marchetti, who developed a research on teaching / learning processes in a perspective of sustainability within her PhD thesis (unpublished).

repeated in different courses, the various activities are arranged differently in each course depending on need.

#### INSERT FIGURE 7A AND 7B HERE

A detailed analysis of the findings from these educational activities and a reflexive evaluation of the overall process have been carried out by one of the members of our Research Group (Marchetti, unpublished PhD thesis, 2008). An analysis of activities regarding a specific issue of biological evolution was carried out as part of a degree thesis by Alessandro Cerutti (2007).

In this article we report some examples of such activities, with the aim of offering experimental, classroom ‘translations’ of our epistemological and methodological premises.

#### *The concept of GENE*

*“We have often heard it said that genes contain "information" that specifies a living being. This is wrong for two basic reasons [...]. When we say that DNA contains what is necessary to specify a living being, we divest these components (part of the autopoietic network) of their interrelation with the rest of the network. It is the network of interactions in its entirety that constitutes and specifies that characteristics of a particular cell, and not one of its components. That modifications in those components called genes dramatically affect the structure is very certain. The error lies in confusing essential participation with unique responsibility” (Maturana and Varela 1987, p.69).*

Still now many students hold the idea of genes as ‘objects’ containing the plans for executing the development of an organism, and they are prone to place structural boundaries around an invisible reality in order to define it as an object of study and to grasp its role and functions. In fact, for a long period of time genes have been referred to as active agents, capable of animating the organism and enacting its construction, while eclipsing the role of the cytoplasmic body (Fox Keller, 1995). However, the underlying idea of a ‘one way’ communication has been slowly replaced by the expression of ‘gene activation’ that implies a dialogue within the complexity and agency of the organismic body.

So, deconstructing the structural boundaries of the gene helps to reflect in terms of functional boundaries, and to move from a structural approach to a systemic one. This is a way for approaching more current scientific thinking and which goes beyond biology’s *Central dogma* (Crick 1958). It is an epistemological shift from perceiving the gene as an object which - albeit invisible - can be manipulated (taken apart; moved around), to the idea of gene as a complex system of relationships (Barbiero 2002), and thus much more difficult to predict and control (Barbiero 2005).

As part of the activities for the class A060, we proposed students to work in small groups to:

- a. reflect on the definition of ‘gene’;
- b. explore the concept of ‘gene’ by using the different approaches (structure, function, time, system):

c. identify the 'boundaries' of the gene.

These tasks generated interest and discussion, leading to further research in specialised journals and the production of concept maps and reflections that were then reported by the students in their final assignments. For example, in the following extract, one of the students reports on the process of coming to appreciate a different way of looking at the gene. The student appears to become aware of the gene as an epistemological construct rather than a 'thing' or object:

*It was difficult to reflect, trying to find a different answer, on what the boundaries of the gene might be. In the first instance, they appeared to us as being certain, defined. Having to consider things from a different perspective has generated a crisis for we had strongly held conceptions and interpretations. In addition, reflecting linguistically on the definition of gene was useful in order to appreciate the new directions of the epistemological reflection. Just like it happened when we did not have information about the DNA, now the epistemology of biology is looking at the gene as concept rather than an object. To adopt this vision for the concept of the gene was much more unsettling than for the concepts of ecosystem and species, given the current possibilities of physically manipulating genes (genetic engineering). We would like to stress that this latter point was indeed the biggest difficulty for us, although it did open up new and wider opportunities for looking at things (2007/2008).*

From the quotation above we are able to infer that the active process of conceptual restructuring operated by language is effective in reverting from an original 'thingified' view of the natural world (Larochelle 1998) to a more dynamic view where decontextualisation and transfers of ideas are possible. The student makes comparison with other biological topics (ecosystem, species) and makes reference to the social and ethical implications of scientific activity. So even small entities for which we have no direct experience can be brought part of a dynamic reality of interactions and impacts bringing in a sense of reflexivity and criticality that are more akin to humility than hubris (Jasanoff 2007).

In other cases, the students were able to reflect on their evolving understanding as they engaged with the production of concept maps on the topic.

*With our surprise, we realised that the first version of our map was a total...disaster! The word gene did not even feature in the map: albeit involuntarily, the graphical representation placed the DNA as the central element, as if our minds had automatically replaced it with the concept of gene. Our map almost inevitably put emphasis on the structural and functional aspects of the gene, completely overlooking the historical, systemic, ethical and social elements which in actual fact turned out to be of great relevance to the concept of gene. We then tried to revise our mental schemata: time and space are now the background for all concepts. While retaining the structural elements as important and essential parts, the map is open to other epistemological realms, opening up towards the history of life, ethics, relationships with culture, medicine... (2007/08).*

Figure 8 and Figure 9 depict the process of conceptual reformulation underpinning students' revision of their own concept maps.

INSERT FIGURE 8 HERE

## INSERT FIGURE 9 HERE

In particular in this case, the quotation opens with the expression of a surprise that the student associates with the recognition of having gone ‘wrong’. Indeed concept maps are not meant to be right or wrong: they are tools designed to aid conceptual restructuring as an ongoing process of establishing links between ideas and creating new meanings and ideas. So perhaps what we observe here is the sense of a realisation of having moved not only from a previous map to a new one that may feel better or right to them, but to a different way of thinking regarding biological processes and organisation. Gregory Bateson (1972) locates this process of shifting perspective and playing with ambiguity at the basis of humour in human communication. Uncovering assumptions can generate rather strong emotional reactions as people discover to have been guided or misled by their implicit notions; hence the humorous situation reaches its climax when the audience is presented with an alternative framework that was unknown or unexpected (Fry 1963). With the introduction of ambiguity and the possibility to approach it as part of science learning we can suggest that students are acquiring a sense of familiarity with the idea of contingency of scientific knowledge (Harding 2008) and the features of an emerging epistemological framework which include the possibility of being wrong (Alles 2008).

### *The concept of ecosystem*

The idea of ecosystem which emerges most commonly from preliminary investigations of student teachers’ knowledge is that of a limited portion of territory characterised by a complex web of relationships between living systems and non-living components. Also at this organisational level (much in the same way as it was observed when reflecting on genes, cells and organisms) students seek to identify the structural boundaries as a first approach to thinking about an ecosystem. Hence from here, reflecting on the boundaries of an ecosystem becomes a strategy for reasoning in terms of conceptual tools and approaches.

One way for sustaining the discussion is to start from the reading of selected passages from scientific texts, and for example:

*“An ecosystem is a functional unit. It is not simply a portion of land. When applying ecosystem management, you need to think not only about what’s inside the boundary but what’s going in and what’s coming out.”* (Interviewing Eugene Odum 1997).

*“Among ecologists willing to draw any lines between ecosystems, no two are likely to draw the same ones. Even if two agree, they would recognize the inherent artificiality of their effort, and probably make the attempt with only a few species in mind. Moreover, one of them might prefer to draw a band or zone of separation rather than a line. Different lines are not surprising, but rather are entirely expected, because of the intrinsic interconnectedness of living systems: the discrepancies between scientists accurately reflect the diversity of the real world”* (Corn 1993).

*“Ecosystem processes are scale dependent and, as such, the choice of boundaries for an ecosystem is of profound importance to the conceptualization of an ecosystem and the scope and validity of questions being asked within that ecosystem. The process–function approach [...] focuses on processes that influence the flux and flow of energy*

*and materials through an ecosystem. Instead of focusing on organisms, the process–function approach addresses the functional role of constituent parts of ecosystems and, therefore, is often organized around understanding the cyclic causal pathways that maintain ecosystem functions. Energy flow and biogeochemistry are points of focus for ecosystem ecology under this approach.”* (Post et al 2007).

The functional approach recalled by Eugene Odum, the difference that exists between reality and the methodological choices made by researchers (Corn 1993), the importance of scale and the attention to matter and energy flows mentioned by Post et al. (2007), are considerations which, drawing on a variety of approaches, can help to make fluid the concept of ecosystem. The integration of the different aspects can help towards maturing awareness of the cognitive acts that are involved in enclosing and labelling parts of a natural reality and to reduce somehow its complexity. From this perspective it is possible to observe a key aspect of current globalisation processes: increasing levels of exchanges of information, matter and energy around the globe has effectively resulted into a profound transformation of ecosystems’ natural boundaries. These are no longer places of separation and minimum exchange between adjacent environments (according to the classical definition), but they have become sites of conspicuous flowing (both in and out) of objects, people, living beings, energy and information, often with destructive consequences for the natural systems and biological communities. The development of a reflective stance on the notion of ecosystems - promoted with the application of a variety of approaches and conceptual tools (Camino et al. 2002) – helps to reach awareness of the nature of our planet as the only, effectively ‘closed’ system: this view can disclose crucial opportunities for sustainability education (Bertolino and Perazzone 2005).

Here we report the reflection of a student:

*It is indeed thanks to the use of conceptual tools, together with the adoption of a variety of approaches and the use of concept maps, that the study of the concept of Ecosystem could be undertaken. The activity was very interesting because the analysis of the ecosystem required using different approaches which highlighted the complexity, dynamism, interactions and thus the bringing together of all acquired knowledge and their further re-organisation. Furthermore, it helped problematising the relationship between human beings and the environment and considering man’s fundamental role as a creator of new ecosystems, at the expenses or in favour of others. From a structural/functional approach focussed on the study of single phenomena (separation of events), we moved to a systemic approach, paying attention to the construction of the whole (re-composition of events) (2006/07).*

The quotation provides a contribution on a similar theme that is to do with the acquisition of a systemic view of ecosystems. Yet the student also indicates how this understanding came as a result of a process of deconstruction by means of conscious application of conceptual tools. The learning process so described involved an active exploration of the complexity of coupled interactions and circularities in complex structures. Particularly in this case we find a mention to the role of human beings, as both ‘inhabitants’ and ‘creators’ of the natural world, thus part of the complexity and in continuity with other forms of life. A relational perspective in this case is brought into closer alignment with the ideas of participation in the environment and embodiment outlined by Ingold (2011). From this perspective, an idea of

responsibility for one's own actions within a set of interrelationships was also made possible (Jasanoff 2007).

### *The concept of metabolism*

In the words of Lynn Margulis (1998): “*metabolism, the incessant chemistry of self-maintenance, is an essential feature of life... Through ceaseless metabolism, through chemical and energy flow, life continuously produces, repairs and perpetuates itself*” (p. 63).

In our experience, we have found the concept of metabolism to be of value for science education. Perhaps because of the difficulty of associating this term with a precise definition, we are also less prone to ‘thingifying’ it. Indeed rather than defining the concept of metabolism, people tend to give descriptions of metabolic processes (Box 1) or explanations as to how and why they occur. Generally the idea of metabolism is expressed ‘visually’ as a large set of coordinated and interdependent, chemical transformations happening simultaneously, within highly organised living structures and mediated by the presence of enzymes. Enzymes are responsible for regulating the intensity, direction and duration of the chemical processes, by responding to flows of information coming both from within (genetic information, cellular self-regulation) and from outside the cell (type of substances, membrane receptors, temperature, pH, and so on).

When talking about metabolism, it is spontaneous to use concepts such as ‘energy flows’, ‘structures’, ‘systems’ as we are dealing with transformations powered by energy sources contained within molecules, or developed as electro-chemical gradients across membranes. Altogether such transformations contribute to maintain the structure and organisation of the living organism. Key to metabolic transformations is also the continuous integration of genetic information with environmental information (in terms of matter, energy, information) outside the system. So it is important to specify the boundaries of energy and matter transportations: by means of metabolic processes, cells and organisms actively manage internal and external energy budgets and they transform matter. Metabolism implies the introduction of molecules, their transformation and further release/production of new molecules either within or outside the system. Matter transformation - guided by a flow of internal and external information – is always associated with a flow of energy in input and an equivalent flow in output. Depending on the selected scale, we can refer to the metabolism of a cell or the metabolism of an organism. Furthermore, as we mentioned earlier, the concept of metabolism has been used in recent years as a powerful metaphor for dealing with the study of complex systems: hence we can talk about the metabolism of a city (Odum 1988), the metabolism of Gaia (Volk 1998), or social metabolism (Giampietro and Mayumi 2000).

What follows is an example of one activity selected amongst many. First, prior to any explanation of content, participants were asked to write down – individually - a personal definition of metabolism (Box 1). The collection of students’ contributions was then taken as the starting point for a plenary discussion aimed at finding a definition which integrated everybody’s suggestions.

### Box 1 Participants' definitions of metabolism

- *Combination of biochemical reactions enabling a single or multi-cellular organism, or even organs and tissues, to live, through the modification of resources coming from the outside and transformation of them into energy and matter or waste products.*
- *It is a biological function allowing for an organism to interact with the external environment and guaranteeing its life.*
- *With the term 'metabolism' we intend the ability of an organism – animal or plant – to absorb substances from the outside and appropriately transform them to become useful for survival.*
- *The global combination of biochemical reactions taking place within a living organism.*
- *The global combination of all biochemical reactions taking place within a living organism and allowing for its maintenance and survival.*
- *It is the global combination of energy transformations within the organism. It comprises of an anabolic phase of "construction" and a catabolic phase of "destruction".*
- *Combination of reactions enabling living things to absorb and "degrade" nutritional matter to make them available for use by their organisms.*
- *Combination of catabolism and anabolism. Anabolism is the biological activity aimed at "construction", while catabolism is the biological activity that by means of transforming more complex molecules into simpler ones determines the production of energy*
- *The combination of chemical reactions enabling the living organism to transform initial substances into final products. It can be a transformation from inorganic to organic substances (autotrophic organisms) or transformation of organic compounds (heterotrophic organisms).*
- *Combination of reactions inside animal organisms when they introduce solid or liquid food. Transformations generate energy for vital functions (movement, growth, reproduction....).*
- *The process generating the organic compounds constituting living things starting from elementary molecules.*
- *The global combination of reactions and transformations taking place in each living organism. Every living thing grows moves, reproduces and is kept alive by means of metabolism.*

Box 1 contains a series of definitions that differ for the level of detail and the use of specialist language, such variety being indicative of different levels of knowledge as well as choices made by the students to capture the essence of the process in a given definition.

The next step in this work consisted of finding a means to put such definitions into some kind of mutual dialogue, by recognising and uncovering a prevailing disciplinary view, approach, or scale range (Reid, Berkes and Wilbanks 2006) and identifying possible misconceptions. Further to these initial considerations students are encouraged to work with their definitions, for example by creating a collective conceptual map that is further discussed and used for reflecting on the multi-dimensionality of the concept and integrating new knowledge. Box 2 shows the results of an activity conducted with the students and aiming at organising the definitions into a list showing increasing levels of complexity. We are at pains to stress that the final list is not necessarily the 'right one', and it can be further modified according to new contributions offered from participants.

In reading the contents of Box 2, we point the reader's attention to sentence n. 12 which is placed last in the list. This sentence includes both structural notions (cells,



tissues, organs) and functional ones (combination of biochemical reactions), as well as considerations of boundaries and process-product dynamics. Within the new arrangement displayed in Box 2, the last sentence is the culmination of a process of progressive integration between the morphological approach to the concept of organism (i.e. with emphasis on movement, reproduction and so on..., sentence 1) and the physiological-systemic one (e.g. sentences 6, 7, 8).

**Box 2 An ordered sequence of sentences, following collective discussion amongst participants**

1. *The global combination of reactions and transformations taking place in each living organism. Every living thing grows moves, reproduces and is kept alive by means of metabolism.*
2. *The global combination of biochemical reactions taking place within a living organism.*
3. *The global combination of all biochemical reactions taking place within a living organism and allowing for its maintenance and survival.*
4. *It is the global combination of energy transformations within the organism. It comprises of an anabolic phase of “construction” and a catabolic phase of “destruction”.*
5. *It is a biological function allowing for an organism to interact with the external environment and guaranteeing its life.*
6. *With the term ‘metabolism’ we intend the ability of an organism – animal or plant – to absorb substances from the outside and appropriately transform them to become useful for survival.*
7. *Combination of reactions enabling living things to absorb and “degrade’ nutritional matter to make them available for use by their organisms.*
8. *Combination of catabolism and anabolism. Anabolism is the biological activity aimed at “construction”, while catabolism is the biological activity that by means of transforming more complex molecules into simpler ones determines the production of energy.*
9. *The combination of chemical reactions enabling the living organism to transform initial substances into final products. It can be a transformation from inorganic to organic substances (autotrophic organisms) or transformation of organic compounds (heterotrophic organisms).*
10. *Combination of reactions inside animal organisms when they introduce solid or liquid food. Transformations generate energy for vital functions (movement, growth, reproduction....).*
11. *The process generating the organic compounds constituting living things starting from elementary molecules.*
12. *Combination of biochemical reactions enabling a single or multi-cellular organism, or even organs and tissues, to live, through the modification of resources coming from the outside and transformation of them into energy and matter or waste products.*

In their reflective assignments, students provided some further insights into the activity. More generally, students made comments about the interdisciplinary way of approaching topics in the Life Sciences:

*Our reflection started from a static vision of the concept of “metabolism’, linked to definitions which were strictly associated with biochemistry. It was thus a useful exercise to think first about the concept in terms of structural and functional approaches and then again from a systemic and historical perspectives. This activity enabled us to broaden our views with consideration of many topics of the Life Sciences, approached through the idea of energy exchanges and matter transformations and the self-regulatory systems linked to homeostasis (2007/08).*

In some other cases, students made more explicit comments about the learning methodology being used and the creation of a social climate within the climate that would allow for knowledge exchange and co-construction:

*We started from the cell and its compartments, then we considered metabolic processes at the level of the organism, and finally at ecosystem and Gaia levels; those considerations enabled us to find new connections with current issues and to see any given concept from all its multiple facets, thus triggering meta-cognitive reflection on the different processes for knowledge building used by each one of us. Indeed we also became more conscious that not only the contributions expressed within our group but also the wider exchanges with the rest of the class were crucial for finding new connections with current matters and other concepts, thus achieving a socially constructed form of knowing (2007/08).*

More specifically, the students refer to disciplines as ‘perspectives’ and the opportunity to use such lenses both to deconstruct and recompose knowledge:

*Many discussions, during the activity on metabolism, originated from the different backgrounds of the members within our group (we were two biologists and two chemists). It was incredible to see that by studying the same concept from two different points of view (biological and chemical), the same things would appear totally different; this means that different courses of study led to different conceptualizations (2007/08).*

The first quotation makes clear references to cognitive development and the possibility for integrating as well as deepening knowledge of various topics of the Life Sciences and processes that might occur at different scale (e.g. omeostasis of the cell or homeostasis of the organism). It appears that people with specialist knowledge can be encouraged to make links with other areas of specialism and conversely to integrate and build knowledge. In the following quotations we find more explicit references to the process of mutual learning underpinning knowledge building and how this way of learning was ultimately referred to as a crucial aspect for reaching understanding by means of link-making (quote 2) and awareness of different ways of seeing the world (quote 3). So mutual learning in this case can include both a more functional and instrumental dimension to do with furthering one’s own knowledge by drawing on other people’s but it is also fulfilling a critical function to enabling the expression of alternative frameworks in the fashion advocated by knowledge creation in post-normal conditions (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1999).

#### *Flows of energy and matter transformations*

Issues of sustainability are characterised by the interconnection of a diverse range of problematic aspects, apparently very different from each other, and occurring at multiple time and space scales. One strategy for making connections between processes and events is that of considering the flows of energy across a living being or through a particular process, being the manufacturing and uses of a product. Unmasking the origin, quantity and types of energy at the basis of material transformations (or deriving from the transformation of matter) is a conceptual strategy for integrating different disciplinary approaches (Doménech et al. 2007), building awareness of energy problems (Trenbert 2009) as well as for overcoming conceptual obstacles (Trumper 1997). This conceptual tool was subject of focussed

observation and reflection in a dedicated course addressed to prospective teachers preparing for teaching science in the lower secondary<sup>6</sup> classroom (Colucci-Gray et al. 2010).

During the course, a variety of activities were proposed with the aim of developing participants' competence with using this tool as part of interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary dialogues. For example, one of the activities required students to reflect on the expression 'oil eaters' (Jones 2001) with its real and metaphorical meanings. Together, we reflected on the flows of energy and trails of energy transformation underpinning the products and production processes and how the production and consumption of oil was implied. Thinking about all mutual interconnections between energy and matter is a way for getting to the heart of societal dilemmas – such as food production and environmental pollution, economic demands and resource scarcity, by helping to find the connections - which are often hidden – between science, technology and value systems: e.g. the meaning of a good life; the meaning of societal progress and development and so on. In relation to this point, Vaclav Smil (2008) makes the following considerations: *“I strongly believe that the key to managing future global energy needs is to break with the current expectations of unrestrained energy use in affluent societies (p. 384). ... The gains that elevate humanity, that make us more secure and more hopeful about the future, cannot be brought solely by rising energy use. (p. 387)... Equitable sharing would thus provide the world's entire population with enough energy to lead healthy, long and active lives enriched by more than a basic level of education and the exercise of individual liberties (p. 387)”*.

And here we report some of the participants' comments, written in their final individual reports, in which they were asked to express personal considerations and suggestions on both the content and methodology of the course, and on their own level of involvement and commitment. In the selection of comments provided by the students it is possible to recognise some similarities with the comments provided by the undergraduate students attending the Primary Education Degree Programme. Students point to the development of a way of looking at the living world that has features of connectedness across disciplines and scales:

- a) *“I must admit I had some reservations about the course and content; I am in the habit of not reading the course guide and personally, the term “flows of energy...” did not suggest anything good. Discovering this topic bits at a time, the links with all other disciplines and indeed its cross-cutting nature, was a nice surprise [...]. I had the pleasure to discover that the terms “energy” and “matter” do not only have a meaning in Physics but they extend to broader areas, from the microscopic level (hydrolysis of a molecule of ATP, for example) to the macroscopic level; and also it is a topic that relates to the world in its totality, including issues of energy consumption, dispersal and waste, and which can thus be dealt with from many points of view” (2004/05).*
- b) *“From the point of view of content and methodology, this course was a total eye-opener: for example, thinking about the relationships between matter and energy, their close interrelationship and the fact that textbooks would more commonly*

---

<sup>6</sup> A059

*present them as two separate and separable components, and so there is the concept of energy on the one side and the concept of matter on the other. I also think about the concept of autopoiesis which I had already had the opportunity to discover when reading “Gaia’s body”; or the concepts of Energy, Exergy and Emergy as possibilities to track energy flows and transformations through matter and more” (2004/05).*

In particular, the topics of energy and matter appear related to everyday experiences as a result of a learning journey that enabled them to cross over the boundaries of scientific and everyday knowledge. Indeed as reported in quote a), the student stresses the relevance and importance of generating and recovering a multiplicity of points of view for exploring the topic.

In another occasion, students expand on their description of the learning process by including comments on their psychological and attitudinal development. They point to feelings of mystery and wonder which are associated with the perception of the whole from what is the limited and partial position of human beings.

- c) *“The course “Flows of energy and matter cycles in the living organisms” invited me to look at reality with a sense of wonder, to take notice and to appreciate life and its mystery. It is quite apparent however that this sense of admiration, or looking at reality with “different eyes”- and thus giving children the opportunity to similarly develop a sense of wonder about life - is made possible only if concepts are offered, understood and then explained to pupils as something ‘new’. Not in the sense of being “new concepts” but in the sense of offering a new way of perceiving them and connecting them together, to conceive them in their uniqueness” (2007/08).*

While such quotations are not to be considered *per se* as final evidence of the ability of students teachers to hold specialist knowledge, they do indicate that the knowledge they built has become integrated within both an epistemological and a methodological framework and this appears to be a common feature across different courses and contexts. From such basis one may infer that student teachers will have acquired a way of looking at things, an organising framework of knowledge and values that can be potentially available to them to filter and organise further knowledge and practice.

### *Evolution as a frame of mind*

Eva Lövbrand and colleagues specifically refer to the concept of Anthropocene as a geological époque traced back to the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and characterised by changes in biogeochemical cycles (e.g. global concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere; nitrogen in the soil), transformations of land and sea, loss of biodiversity due to human activity *“which has influenced the very dynamics and functioning of the Earth itself”* (Lövbrand, Stripple and Wiman 2009, p. 10). So, in a world that is increasingly transformed by human actions, if and how can the evolutionary perspective contribute to the development of behaviours and actions directed towards sustainability? Nowadays, the evolutionary perspective is increasingly applied in fields of research beyond Natural Sciences, such as the Medical Sciences (MacCallum 2007), Agricultural Sciences and Human Sciences (Futuyma and Meagher 2001). In the light of recent discoveries focusing on the importance of epigenetic inheritance, i.e. traits that can be passed on without changes

to DNA sequence, Jablonka (cited by Whitfield 2008) argues: “*there are social implications in our approach [...] our way of looking at heredity and evolution counters genetic determinism and its political implications*”. Douglas Futuyma (1995) recommends educating the public and policy makers about evolution: the worldview in which evolutionary biologists are trained recognizes “*that species are genetically variable in almost every respect; that species and their environments are highly complex, sometimes unpredictable systems; that nothing is constant in the fullness of time*” (p 42).

Taking into account the evolutionary component further increases the level of complexity which had already been made evident by the systemic approach: evolution is not only a process of the past but it is acting at every moment in the present thus connecting synchronic and diachronic events of Life on Earth. An interdisciplinary and reflexive approach to evolution could thus be a key concept for acquiring a sustainability perspective for it connects the actions of the past with the choices of the present and it is an inherent dimension of our existence as individual beings and as a species.

From these premises, a big picture approach to teaching and learning about evolution encompasses a reflection on common ideas about evolution which are present in the population. In fact, the topic intersects with conceptions about the nature of science and how scientific knowledge is produced, the political, religious and cultural aspects (Alters and Nelson 2002), as well as the nature of environmental systems described by scientific disciplines.

#### *Activities based on verbal and non-verbal language as an opportunity for learning and research*

In the following paragraphs we present some results obtained from three interactive activities about the topic of evolution that were carried out with future teachers over the course of five academic years (from 2003/2004 to 2007/2008)<sup>7</sup>. The activities described below are based on the use of language (in different forms) as a means for generating active engagement with the reality encapsulated by scientific labels. The purpose is that of unravelling contexts, actors and processes and so to grapple with dynamic descriptions of evolutionary processes, along multiple space and time-scales.

The activities included respectively: a) drawing evolution and b) reflecting on the meaning of words used in scientific and everyday life contexts.

In line with Mario Bagnoli (2009) and following recent emphasis on the use of communication methods in educational research that are different from verbal answers to given question (such as interview settings), the activities were aimed at generating interpretations and disclosing personal representations. While the activities engaged different cognitive areas (e.g. visual and verbal language; short and long-term memory) they all worked from the same principle of generating ‘data richness’: making a drawing or engaging with the search for meaning would not only be a means to elicit students’ knowledge (and possible misconceptions) but also for

---

<sup>7</sup> For the data presented in this part we gratefully thank Dr. Alessandro Cerutti, who developed a research on teaching / learning processes about evolution as part of his Degree Thesis (unpublished work).

highlighting the specific qualitative dimensions of evolution that were chosen by each student in order to make sense of phenomena (Weber 2008). What is obtained is a qualitative description which cannot easily be put into words, as it taps into personal knowledge and beliefs unravelling from layers of personal experience. Yet when such representations and descriptions are shared, the process becomes akin to a dialogue which may occur between partial and all legitimate views on a complex phenomenon (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1999) for the purpose of deepening self- awareness and reflection (Primavesi 2000)

*a) Drawing evolution*

In class, participants were invited to undertake an individual activity proposed with the following question: “Using a graphical device (a drawing, diagram, vignette...), represent the concept of evolution of living beings”.

Students were given a form with a blank rectangular space of about 18x6 cm and an allocation of 10’ to undertake the activity: this was a way to promote spontaneous and concise representations of their ideas of evolution. Similarly to the activities described earlier, the analysis of the drawings was a means for triggering a discussion amongst participants about the content of the representations and to reflect with them on the potential and limitations of any image when describing evolutionary processes.

The drawings collected over six years have been organised in categories, and five main typologies of drawings were identified (Table 2):

**Table 2. Students’ drawings of evolution**

<b>Types of drawings</b>	<b>N.</b>
Sequential lines of forms: this category includes all drawings which illustrate a linear sequence of forms usually linked together by arrows.	44
Phylogenetic tree: it is the representation of the family lines of particular taxonomic groups.	19
Conceptual map/diagram: these are usually diagrams in which various concepts are connected by segments or arrows indicating relationships.	14
Metaphors (for example ladders or pyramids).	7
Cartesian graphs, constructed with the variable ‘time’ on one axis, and a parameter expressing the complexity or the anatomical diversity of the organisms, on the other axis.	6
TOTAL	90

The category which is most frequently used is the time sequence (Figures 10 and 11 below), whereby evolution is represented as a series of different moments/events of the history of life on the planet.

INSERT FIGURE 10 HERE

This representation (Figure 10) recalls familiar images in textbooks and the common way of writing about life moving from the oceans to the land. It can also be associated with misconceptions: for example the sequence which links dinosaurs with mammals of various groups can suggest a phylogenetic derivation of the mammals from the Tyrannosaurus or Diplodocus forms (the most frequent types in students' drawings). In addition (Figure 11), the presentation of a different group of organisms at every stage in the sequence (i.e. unicellular organisms, then sponges etc...) may suggest that at each transition a form is replaced by another form, due to a sequence of extinctions. There is therefore the danger of losing sight of the fact that many living forms have been present on the planet for a very long time (performing amongst other things fundamental roles, as some bacteria which are involved in the planets' biogeochemical cycles).

INSERT FIGURE 11 HERE

The drawing of the phylogenetic tree (Figure 12) focuses on an important aspect of evolutionary theory that is the link between all living beings and the occurrence of processes of speciation. The representation of the tree is also one of the most frequent strategies for illustrating the concept of biodiversity. This kind of drawing features frequently in academic textbooks and we could speculate that student teachers made their drawing by recollecting images they had seen in their books.

INSERT FIGURE 12 HERE

Year by year, the analysis of the drawings has provided ideas for further reflection and discussion in the following lessons. By looking at the overall display of the results we can see that:

68 drawings out of 90 report information about time, although only 3 drawings make explicit reference to geological time scales.

9 drawings contain the idea that evolution is a process which is still ongoing.

5 drawings represent the process of extinction, while the drawings which in different ways point to an idea of increase in number and variety of forms are much more common.

The environment as a cause of selective pressures is illustrated in 7 drawings.

So, when operating at the level of general ideas, we notice the emergence of an idea of time that is mainly linear and uniform. Evolution appears to indicate progress, as accumulation of life forms and continuous improvement. It is interesting to note that this idea has formed the basis of the 'modern mindset' whereby human beings by means of science can emancipate themselves from nature along a trajectory of continuous growth (Larson 2011).

### *Alternative representations and misconceptions*

Some drawings contain ideas or concepts which do not respond to the original request (for example some drawings represent instances of ontogenesis) or which are indication of possible misconceptions. Some examples include:

Drawings presenting the human figure as being the last one in a sequence of forms: this representation can transfer the idea of a process in which mankind is the final product of evolution.

Drawings presenting sequences of images in which old animal forms are followed by human figures associated to various cultural artefacts (on the horse, then in a car and finally on an airplane...). To some authors, cultural development can be considered as an integral part of biological evolution (Dennett 2006) although for educational purposes it can be useful to reflect on the differences between cultural and biological evolution.

Some drawings convey the idea of a hierarchical organization of living beings. According to many authors this idea needs to be discussed and contextualised, or it can induce misconceptions.

The variety of aspects related to evolution emerging from the drawings is an opportunity for sharing what are the most significant elements for each participant, or which are the aspects which are more readily brought to mind, thus giving the opportunity to link and integrate ideas together.

### *b) The language of evolution*

Since 2004, and for three years, participants of one of the courses were asked to individually compile a form with questions and activities about the meaning and use of terms respectively in everyday language and in scientific language (with a total of 42 forms being collected).

The form was designed to make student teachers aware of some problems related to the understanding of evolution which can be associated with the different meanings that some words can have in the everyday context or in the scientific one.

### *Everyday versus scientific language*

For example, at the request to write synonyms of the word 'evolution' (as found in the everyday language) most student teachers used the term 'change', or 'transformation': both neutral terms. However, it was frequent to find the positive connotation which associates the term 'evolution' with the idea of progress and improvement (22 questionnaires out of 42). It is clear therefore that if the two contexts, everyday and scientific, are not clearly defined, the positive connotation can be associated with the misconception that evolutionary processes are directed towards a positive finality.

From the analysis of data about synonyms of the word 'adaptation' it emerged that the neutral connotations such as 'commensurate with' (38%) and 'apt' (24%), are the most frequent. However, there are various terms which refer to a characteristic of 'plasticity' (for a total of 21% of the questionnaires) or which contain a value-laden element ('correct', in 10% of questionnaires).



### *Different conceptual domains*

The second part of the form focussed on the meanings of evolution and revolution. The task was presented as follows:

*The words “evolution” and “revolution” are both connected to the idea of change. However they can be chosen to express different kinds of change. Try to formulate two sentences, one for ‘evolution’ and the other one for ‘revolution’, and to explain the difference in meaning.*

According to the majority of participants, evolution can be described by a gradual and regular process of morphological change over a long period of time; on the contrary, revolution refers to changes which take place over a relatively short period of time and mainly in the domain of human history. Very frequent is also the idea that revolutions are characterised by stark discontinuities with previous situations, and leading to an entirely new set of conditions (Table 3). In the discussions that followed, it emerged that many student teachers linked the two processes to different time-scales and could not be reconciled.

**Table 3. Students’ ideas of evolution embedded in language**

	<i>Evolution</i>	<i>N°</i>	<i>Revolution</i>	<i>N°</i>
Speed of change	It features slow and gradual modifications	30	It features sudden, unpredictable, unsettling and often violent changes.	22
Relationship with the past	The new situation is in continuity with the previous one	17	There is radical and drastic change which signals a new beginning.	27
Trajectory	Idea of progressive rise towards improvement in relation to the starting point	10	It does not always lead to a better situation.	3
Where it can be found	It is found in Nature	5	It happens to humans; therefore it is located at the socio-cultural level.	5

The linguistic reflection helped to uncover some implicit assumptions held by student teachers about evolutionary processes: slowness and gradualism are commonly linked to the classic formulation of evolutionary theory. What emerges is a Darwinian view of evolution which somehow overlooks later, complementary interpretations, such as that of punctuated equilibria (Eldredge and Gould 1972) which is more akin to revolutionary changes leading to new and unpredictable configurations in the system. Currently the idea of William Eldredge and Stephen Gould (1972) has been further reinterpreted by contemporary system theorists using the notion of ‘tipping point’ (Lenton et al. 2008), whereby a new pattern of relationships and emergent properties appear quite suddenly and in discontinuity with previous conditions.

*Is there a hierarchical order in evolution?*

The third section of the language form was aimed at collecting individuals' ideas for the specific purpose of sparking a debate about the possibility of establishing a hierarchical order of the organisms, on the basis of their adaptations and evolution. The task was given as follows:

Try to move from the common use of language to a scientific use which takes into account the modern evolutionary theory. What does the following expression mean? "*Species A is more evolved than species B*" Is it correct to use such expression in a scientific context?

The answers were many and varied. The majority of students reckoned stating different levels of evolution is a legitimate thing to say, but their justifications originated from different types of reasoning, as displayed in Table 4 below:

**Table 4. Students' interpretations of language in the context of evolution.**

Categories of answers	N°	
Yes, because...	organism A is more complex	4
	organism A is able to perform more functions	2
	organism A is more specialised	3
	organism A is older	5
	organism A has undergone more modifications than the ancestor	5
	organism A is more similar to mankind	1
	organism A belongs to a higher evolutionary level	4
	organism A is more adapted than organism B	4
It is appropriate only...	If organism A is current and B is extinct	1
	For the characteristics of the organisms and not the individuals	3
	If we do not mean that A is better than B	1
No, because...	There is no such thing as measuring a evolutionary level	6
	It does not make sense to compare the evolution of different organisms.	3

Student teachers did not reach consensus about the scientific legitimacy of the phrase suggesting that some species can be considered more evolved than others.

In this situation, and as it often happens when a number of different and contrasting ideas emerge from the participants, it is possible to appreciate the close interconnection between collection of data, action-research methodology and pedagogical effectiveness: after the activities described here, almost all student teachers declared they had never addressed the problem before; they participated with great interest in the discussion and contributed to deepening the topic, appreciating the possibility of expressing themselves and discussing the different interpretations.

## Conclusions

Ongoing processes of transformations of socio-environmental systems, with rapidly increasing extinctions of species and cultures are well documented by an overwhelming plethora of scientific data as well as personal and collective testimonies. Such processes - that are irreversible at a human scale - are ongoing, shaping the lives of communities in ways that are unknown. Confronted with this scenario, we feel it is reasonable, urgent, and crucial for scientists and educators alike to spark a debate about the worldviews underlying modern science and modern scientific education and their implications and consequences.

So, our research focus is very broad. It responds to the idea that changing a 'worldview' is a gestalt switch, whereby every other aspect - from views of knowledge to the aims and practices of science education - is fated to change.

In this paper we described our 'experiments' with the linguistic reflection to generate learning and teaching contexts aligned with the epistemological framework of post-normal science and sustainability science. This particular epistemological terrain challenges consolidated views of positivistic science to embrace the broader perspective of interconnections between science, technology, society and environment. As indicated in the first part of the article, two main currents of thought converge to characterise knowledge production processes in sustainability science. On the one hand, interdisciplinary dialogue is advocated as a necessity to address current issues of science in society and it is sought as a means for questioning categories of thought, methodologies and focus boundaries. On the other hand, the stream of post-normal science brings forth the necessity of integrating different forms of knowledge in a communal process of knowledge production. Hence the cultural aspects of knowledge become paramount and they interrelate and even subsume the most consolidated forms of scientific knowledge (Harding 2008). Throughout this process however many questions are raised with regard to the procedures for such dialogue to occur. While interdisciplinary conversations can be inspiring and critical to new research, the style and procedures of any one discipline may be seen by scholars in another discipline as cryptic if not irrelevant to their own work (Miller et al. 2008). In addition, there may be disagreements with regard to the opportunity of bringing together different forms of knowledge, which may be perceived to be in conflict or simply alternative and distinctly located in separate realms of human existence. A pertinent example of such debate is the interface between science and religion. In this context, as articulated by Reiss (2010) the nature of scientific knowledge is at stake, for in normal, paradigmatic science, the presence of alternative beliefs systems is very rare. In order to pursue this approach, a different epistemological position needs to be developed. So the objective of our research was to devise settings that were amenable to such investigation and could lead to a more general reflection about pedagogy of science education that would support a sustainability perspective.

In this paper, we provided an overview of the application of conceptual tools in different contexts of teacher preparation. Starting from consolidated scientific concepts, our aim and challenge - within a constructivist and reflexive educational approach - was that of 'deconstructing' concepts in order to focus on their role as conceptual organizers, dynamically evolving together to raise awareness of the complex reality in which we are embedded. From the juxtaposition of the different

experiences we derived a series of reflections on the nature and processes of scientific learning involved.

### *A reflection on knowledge*

A first, main distinction between the various learning and teaching situations in which we operated was the level of initial preparation in science held by the students, which differed greatly between the primary and secondary context.

While considering these important differences, the data collected from the two cohorts accounted also for some important commonalities in relation to processes of knowledge production in the natural sciences, and in some cases, we would argue, also complementarities. Reflecting on the use of a common strategy in different contexts would thus be helpful to gain an insight into the multiplicity of learning opportunities characterising this particular way of working and particularly, the role played by specialist knowledge.

Starting from the data collected in the primary teaching education context, data obtained from the final assignments pointed to students' growing awareness of their knowledge in biology. More specifically, students' comments pointed to a process of change, that is, from an initial state of knowledge fragmentation to a condition of further integration with the acquisition of a systemic perspective: "*The coverage of living things because it provided a more complete idea, less compartmentalised as compared to my previous course of study*" (2006/07 – primary education). From a strictly cognitive point of view, such results appear to be in line with the socio-constructive perspective advanced by Howe (1996) and Scott et al. (2011). Activities based on the use of personal knowledge in dialogic settings appear to support the development of meta-cognition and link-making across levels and scales. Hence in our case the deployment of conceptual tools is a means to facilitate acquisition of basic knowledge in biology.

However, an interesting feature emerging from the data across all cohorts and contexts is the students' awareness of the way in which their knowledge is organised. In particular, they refer to the acquisition of a systemic perspective on the Natural Sciences, which is enabled by link-making. For example, within the secondary context, this process is described by the students with a cognitive focus: "*...the analysis of the ecosystem required using different approaches which highlighted the complexity, dynamism, interactions ....*" (on page 36).

Within the framework of sustainability science such results can corroborate the idea that conceptual tools can be offered as an educational aid for introducing concepts as linking operators in the manner suggested by Morin (1999). Basic fundamental knowledge in biology can thus be a springboard to structure further knowledge production processes about the natural world in its multiplicity of aspects.

From a knowledge perspective however, there is a distinction to be made between learning science as a description of a reality 'out there' and learning science as a means to connect one's own knowledge with a personal experience, that is by putting in touch the cognitive experience with the state of affairs in the internal world (Reiss 2010). In the case of primary teachers, the realisation of the interconnectedness of the natural world and the position of human beings as part of it is elaborated both at a cognitive and emotional level: "*[The course] has triggered a sense of wonder towards*

*the living world and its relationships with the environment. For the first time in many years I have developed a holistic view where all the bits I learned are joined up together. I had the impression of being able to gaze at the world around it and embrace it as a whole.... with a growing feeling of marvel (2006/07 – primary education).*

So it appears that what students refer to is not only the acquisition of biological knowledge per se but also an awareness of the pattern or organising structure underlining their learning, and which involves the subject.

Also in the data from the secondary context we can recognise the presence of an ethical dimension: *“Furthermore, it helped problematising the relationship between human beings and the environment...”* (on page 36). While the expression of gazing at the world and feeling fascinated is suggestive of an attitude of contemplation and openness towards the world with resonates strongly on the inside; the ideas of co-existence and responsibility expressed more formally in the other quotation point to an understanding of relationships with other living forms.

So knowledge is not simply an accumulation of facts but it affects the way the learner relates to the natural world, conceptually, linguistically, emotionally.

Such continuity of learning dimensions can lead to some considerations about the role of specialist knowledge. In all contexts, elements of specialist knowledge are present: they are part of the knowledge of the students but they are also introduced explicitly by the lecturers during the courses. Across all the cohorts however we find the introduction of specialist elements leading to a process of ‘opening up’ of the learning process to stimulate a range of learning dimensions, to enable connections with other topics (e.g. energy) and openness towards other ways of knowing: *“It was incredible to see that by studying the same concept from two different points of view (biological and chemical), the same things would appear totally different; this means that different courses of study led to different conceptualizations”* (2007/08, secondary education, on page 39).

Therefore in both contexts, it is possible to appreciate students’ acquisition of scientific knowledge alongside an understanding of the incompleteness and partiality of all knowledge, which is an epistemological position more in line with current debates on sustainability (Sterling 2009). An important aspect in this process is also the appreciation that alternative modes of knowing can co-exist, that they are possible and plausible within the scenario of complexity and unpredictability of the natural world.

### *Knowledge and values and the curriculum*

As indicated earlier, students refer to a process of learning ‘in a new way’ rather than the acquisition of new concepts; equally however in this approach traditional concepts do not disappear: scientific knowledge forms the basis of the process of deconstruction. Besides, as indicated more prominently in the case of the topic of evolution, traditional, consolidated knowledge can be a means to disclose and reflect on cultural representations. Adopting a similar approach in science education has important implications.

In the first instance, we recognise the role played by values which are not separate from science learning but they are part of an active process of knowledge construction. The involvement of the learner at a personal and emotional level may allow for ethical positions to be further expressed and be legitimised as part of the process of how humans learn. This work can thus be offered as a response to the dilemmas outlined by Bryce (2010) with regard to the dichotomy between facts and values that dominates current practices in science education. Equally, it is a position on learning which does not discount the role of specialist knowledge. Rather it departs from an understanding of the legitimacy of all forms of knowledge and ways of knowing, amongst which specialist scientific knowledge plays a contributing part.

Paying attention to students' conceptions and to forms of open dialogue in the classroom – a fundamental point of constructivist education (Gergen 1995) - is a means for students' own values, assumptions, narratives and methodologies to become explicit and recognised. Students' knowledge can be construed not so much in terms of its similarity or divergence from consolidated scientific views (as in many approaches based on the deconstruction of misconceptions), but as a series of coordinated perspectives, all legitimate but all limited (in time, scale, context and so on; Liberatore and Funtowicz 2003). This alternative perspective on knowledge can be applied to the broader context of science-technology interactions as well as to the smaller scale context of classroom interaction: epistemological pluralism can be practised also within the educating community. A similar point has also been made by Reiss (2010) in relation to the need for science educators to engage more openly with the worldviews of the students and in such way bring the classroom in open communication with the value-base of science communication in society. Indeed it is within the educating community that both students and teachers can approach value-based issues: from the teaching of socio-scientific issues to the analysis of debates reported in the media but also to engage critically with the worldviews that are implicitly transferred and produced by dominant models of social and economical development. We are arguing for a type of science education that does not discourage people from engaging with the ambiguities and uncertainties of techno-scientific developments and seek to stimulate a variety of points of view.

### *Further research*

The interplay of conceptual knowledge and linguistic reflection by means of conceptual tools can thus make a significant contribution towards the acquisition of a more dynamic scientific competence, evolving within socio-cultural and historical contexts, and to the integration of core science knowledge with social, ethical and cultural dimensions. This type of science education is aligned with the recommendations given by Larson (2011) with regard to the need to prepare students in the natural sciences to become more accustomed to the worldviews accompanying their knowledge and create a classroom climate for the co-construction of shared alternatives and scenarios. In particular here we would like to point out to the need for further and more focussed research on the use of conceptual tools within learning and teaching sequences. For example, an area that requires investigation is concerned with the role and attitudes of the teacher, the types of questions posed (the degree of openness, of inter-disciplinarity and so on), the balance between flexibility and structure in the agenda and more generally the quality of the participatory climate in

promoting consciousness about the multiplicity of ways of knowing and relating to the natural systems.

Further research of longitudinal nature might also be required to look at whether elements of epistemological awareness in science would relate to the students' emerging philosophies of practice. A systemic perspective might help students to respond more flexibly towards alternative views, languages and ways of being in the world. Hence further study could focus on the use of conceptual tools as a means to create and evaluate interdisciplinary learning and teaching units in which a variety of learning opportunities - from the learning of basic concepts, to discussion of controversial issues and experiences in the environment is used. In this paper we attempted to provide an integrated framework that could incorporate further experimental units and theories of knowledge.

We are at pains to stress that such research is only at the beginning and it is in the hands of all teachers, teacher educators and researchers who want to embark with experimentations in sustainability. Our hope is to enable students to understand the scientific worldview alongside other worldviews and enter the arena of public communication to produce imagery and attitudes that are more respectful of other people and the environment. As indicated by Sarewitz (2010) "*wise democratic guidance will take more than ad hoc panels. A commitment to reflecting on technological futures needs to be integrated into the research and development enterprise*" (p. 688). Is science education the key?

### **Acknowledgments**

Research partly financed by MIUR and by Assessorato Ambiente, Regione Piemonte (PIES 2009).

### **References**

- Aikenhead, G.S. (2003). STS education. A rose by any other name. In R. Cross (Ed.), *A vision for science education. Responding to the work of Peter Fensham* (pp. 59-75). New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Alberts, B. (2008). A scientific approach to policy. *Science*, 322 (5907), 1435.
- Alles, M. (2008). Governance in the age of unknown unknowns. *International Journal of Disclosure and Governance*, 6, 85-88.
- Alters, B. J., & Nelson, C.E. (2002). Perspective: teaching evolution in Higher Education. *Evolution*, 56, 1891-1901.
- Angelotti, M., Perazzone, A., Tonon, M., Bertolino, F. (2009). *Educating the educators. Primary teacher education*. In D. Gray, L. Colucci-Gray & E. Camino (Eds.). *Science, society and sustainability. Education and empowerment for an uncertain world*. New York: Routledge.

- Arcà, M. (1992). Flussi di informazione e flussi di materia. In E. Ferrero & E. Camino (Eds.), *Atti dei seminari di Didattica delle Scienze Naturali* (pp. 28-40). Torino: CLU.
- Arcà, M. (1993). *La cultura scientifica a scuola*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Bagnoli, M. (2009). Beyond the standard interview: the use of graphic elicitation and arts-based methods. Working paper 12, Realities, Manchester: ESRC National Centre for Research Methods.
- Barbiero, G. (2002). Il dna leggero. Appunti per una didattica della genetica post-genomica. *Naturalmente*, 15 (2), 14-19.
- Barbiero, G. (2005). Il principio di precauzione nella crisi dell'impianto epistemologico dell'ingegneria genetica. Quaderni del CRASL - Centro di Ricerche per l'Ambiente e lo Sviluppo sostenibile della Lombardia, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, pp. 18.
- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. San Francisco: Chandler.
- Bateson, G. (1980). *Mind and nature - A necessary unity*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Berkes F., & Berkes M.K. (2009). Ecological complexity, fuzzy logic, and holism in indigenous knowledge. *Futures*, 41, 6-12.
- Bertolino, F., & Perazzone, A. (2005). La città sottovetro... Ecologia, etica, educazione alla sostenibilità. In E. Falchetti & S. Caravita (Eds.), *Per una ecologia dell'educazione ambientale*. Torino: Edizione Scholé Futuro.
- Bloom, J.W., & Volk, T. (2007). The use of metapatterns for research into complex systems of teaching, learning, and schooling, Part II: Applications. *Complicity: The International Journal of Complexity and Education*, 4, 45-68
- Bloor, D. (1971). Two paradigms for scientific knowledge? *Science Studies* 1, 101-115.
- Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18, pp. 1-21.
- Bryce, T.G.K. (2010). Sardonic Science? The resistance to more humanistic forms of science education. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 5 (3), 591-612.
- Butchart S. H. M., Walpole, M., Collen, B., van Strien, A., Scharlemann, J.P.W., Almond, R., Baillie, J., Bomhard, B., Brown, C., Bruno, J., Carpenter, K., Carr, J.M., Chanson, J., Chenery, A.M., Csirke, J., Davidson, N.C., Dentener, F., Foster, M., Galli, A., Galloway, J.N., Genovesi, P., Gregory, R.D., Hockings, M., Kapos, V., Lamarque, J.F., Leverington, F., Loh, J., McGeoch, M.A., McRae, L., Minasyan, A., Hernández Morcillo, M., Oldfield, T.E., Pauly, D., Quader, S., Revenga, C., Sauer, J.R., Skolnik, B., Spear, D., Stanwell-Smith, D., Stuart, S.N., Symes, A., Tierney, M., Tyrrell, T.D., Vié, J-C., & Watson, R. (2010). Global Biodiversity: Indicators of Recent Declines. *Science*, 328, 1164.
- Camino, E., Perazzone, A., Bertolino, F. & Vellano C. (2002 November). A comparative analysis of various teaching approaches and different learning situations concerning the core concept of "ecosystem" in the Natural Sciences education. In Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Science Education, Nicosia.
- Capra, F. (2002). *The hidden connections*. New York: Doubleday.



- Cartwright, N. (2008). *The dappled world: A study of the boundaries of science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cerutti A. (2007). La prospettiva evoluzionistica nella formazione scientifica. La proposta della laurea magistrale EDEN (Evoluzione e Diversità Dei Sistemi Naturali) di Torino. Unpublished Master's thesis.
- Chamany, K., Allen D., & Tanner, K. (2008). Making Biology Learning Relevant to Students: Integrating People, History, and Context into College Biology Teaching. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 7, 267–278.
- Chambers, R. (1997). *Whose reality counts?: Putting the first last*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Chinn, P.W.U., Hand, B., & Yore, L.D. (2008). Culture, language, knowledge about nature and naturally occurring events, and science literacy for all: She says, he says, they say. *Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, 8 (1), 149-171
- Clark, A. (1997). *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together Again*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Clark, W. C., Crutzen, P.J., & Schellnhuber, H.J. (2005). Science for Global Sustainability: Toward a New Paradigm. CID Working Paper No. 120. Cambridge, MA: Science, Environment and Development Group, Center for International Development, Harvard University.
- Colucci-Gray L., Camino E., Marchetti D. & Angelotti M. (2010 July). *Flows of energy and matter cycles in the ecosystems: A conceptual tool to deal with issues of global sustainability*. (Paper presented at the 8th Conference of European Researchers in Didactics of Biology (ERIDOB), Braga)
- Corn, M.L. (1993). Ecosystems, Biomes, and Watersheds: Definitions and Use. CRS Report for Congress, Washington DC: National Council for Science and the Environment. Retrieved September 16 2010, from <http://ncseonline.org/NLE/CRSreports/Biodiversity/biodv-6.cfm>
- Cresswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design; choosing among five traditions*. London, Sage Publications.
- Crick, F. (1958). Central dogma of molecular biology. *Nature*, 227, 61-63.
- Dennett, D. (2006) *Breaking the spell: religion as a natural phenomenon*. London: Penguin Books.
- Denzin, N. (1989) *Interpretive Interactionism*. Newberry Park, CA: Sage.
- Désautels, J., & Larochelle, M. (1998). The Epistemology of Students: the “Thingified” Nature of Scientific Knowledge’. In B. Fraser & K. Tobin (Eds.), *International Handbook of Science Education* (pp. 115-126). Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) (2008). Science and Innovation Investment Framework, 2004-2014. Available at: [http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/migratedD/publications/2/2008\\_economic\\_impact\\_report](http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/migratedD/publications/2/2008_economic_impact_report)
- Dodman, M. (2004). Sapere linguistico e sapere scientifico-tecnologico-professionale, *Insegnare*, 5, 37-42. Roma: Editoriale Ciid.

- Dodman, M. (2007). Competenze linguistico-comunicative nella costruzione del sapere matematico. In B. D'Amore & S. Sbaragli (Eds.) *Allievi, insegnanti, sapere: la sfida della didattica della matematica*. Bologna: Edizioni Pitagora.
- Dodman, M., Camino, E. & Barbiero, G. (2008). Language and science: products and processes of signification in the educational dialogue. *Journal of Science Communication*, 7 (3), 1-8.
- Doménech, J., Gil-Pérez, D., Gras-Martí, A., Guisasola, J., Martínez-Torregrosa, J., Salinas, J., Trumper, R., Valdés, P. & Vilches, A. (2007). Teaching of energy issues: a debate proposal for a global reorientation. *Science and Education*, 16 (1), 43-64.
- Dunn, M., Greenhill, S. J., Levinson, S. C., & Gray, R. D. (2011). Evolved structure of language shows lineage-specific trends in word-order universals. *Nature*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1038/nature09923.
- Editorial. (2011) Universal truths. *Nature* 472, 136.
- Ekborg, M. (2003). How student teachers use scientific conceptions to discuss a complex environmental issue, *Journal of Biological Education*, 37 (3), 126-132.
- Eldredge, N. & Gould, S. (1972). Punctuated equilibria: an alternative to phyletic gradualism. In Schopf T.J.M. (Ed.) *Models in paleobiology* (pp. 82-115). San Francisco: Freeman, Cooper & Co.
- Ellis, R.J. (2010). Biochemistry: tackling unintelligent design. *Nature* 463, 164-165.
- Enquist, B.J. & Stark, S.C (2009). Follow Thompson's map to turn biology from a science into a Science. *Nature*, 446, 611.
- Fischer-Kowalski, M., & Amann, C. (2001). Beyond IPAT and Kuznets curves: globalization as a vital factor in analysing the environmental impact of socio-economic metabolism. *Population & Environment*, 23(1), 7-47.
- Folke C., Carpenter S., Elmqvist T., Gunderson L., Holling CS, Walzer B., Bengtsson J., Berkes F., Colding J., Danell K., Falkenmark M., Gordon L., Kasperson R., Kautsky N., Kinzig A., Levin S., Mäler K-G., Moberg F., Ohlsson L., Olsson P., Ostrom E., Reid W., Rockström J., Savenije H. & Svedin U. (2002 April). Resilience and sustainable development: building adaptive capacity in a world of transformations. (Scientific Background Paper on Resilience for the process of The World Summit on Sustainable Development on behalf of The Environmental Advisory Council to the Swedish Government) Retrieved September 20, 2010 from <http://www.sou.gov.se/mvb/pdf/resiliens.pdf>
- Fox Keller, E. (1995). *Refiguring Life: Metaphors of Twentieth-Century Biology*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fry, W. (1963). *Sweet Madness: A Study of Humor*. Palo Alto (CA): Pacific Books Publishers.
- Funtowicz, S.O., & Ravetz, J. R. (1999). Post-Normal Science - an Insight now Maturing. *Futures*, 31 (7), 641-646.
- Funtowicz, S.O. (2001). Post-normal science. Science and governance under conditions of complexity. *Notizie di Politeia*, XVII (62), 77 – 85.

- Futuyma, D.J., & Meagher, T.R. (2001). Evolution, science and society: evolutionary biology and the national research agenda. *California Journal of Science Education*, 1 (2), 19-32.
- Futuyma, D.J. (1995). The uses of evolutionary biology. *Science* 267, 41-42.
- Gagliardi, R. (1989). Le rappresentazioni mentali degli studenti e i concetti strutturanti che ne permettono la trasformazione. In E. Ferrero & E. Camino (Eds.) *Atti dei Seminari di Didattica delle Scienze Biologiche*. Torino: CLU.
- Gagliardi, R., Bernardini Mosconi, P. & Bocchiola, M.T. (1993). *Il maestro, il bambino e le scienze*. Pavia: Edizioni Antares.
- Gallese, V. & Lakoff, G. (2005). The brain's concepts: The Role of the Sensory-Motor System in Reason and Language. *Cognitive Neuropsychology*, 22, 455-479.
- Gallopin, G. (2004 October). Sustainable development: epistemological challenges to science and technology. (Paper presented at the Workshop "Sustainable development: epistemological challenges to science and technology", Santiago de Chile).
- Gergen, K.J. (1995). Social Construction and the Educational Process. In L.P. Steffe & J. Gale (Eds.) *Constructivism in education* (pp 17-39). Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Giampietro, M., & Mayumi, K. (2000). Multiple-Scale Integrated Assessments of Societal Metabolism: Integrating Biophysical and Economic Representations across Scales Population and Environment. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 22 (2), 109-153.
- Giampietro, M., Mayumi, K., & Martinez-Alier, J. (2000). Introduction to the special issues on societal metabolism: blending new insights from complex system thinking with old insights from biophysical analyses of the economic process. *Population & Environment*, 22 (2), 97-108.
- Gibson, J.J. (1979). *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Houghton Mifflin: Boston.
- Giordan, A Y., Girault, Y. & Clément, P. (1994). *Conceptions et connaissances*. Lausanne: Peter Lang Verlag.
- Global footprint network. What is Earth Overshoot Day? Retrieved April 20, 2011, from [http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/earth\\_overshoot\\_day/](http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/earth_overshoot_day/).
- Godemann, J. (2008). Knowledge integration: a key challenge for transdisciplinary cooperation. *Environmental Education Research*, 14 (6), 625-641.
- Goodnough, K. (2003). Facilitating action research in the context of science education: reflections of a university researcher. *Educational Action Research*, 11(1), 41 – 64.
- Goodwin. B. (2007). *Nature's due. Healing our fragmented culture*. London: Floris Books.

- Guimarães Pereira, A., & Funtowicz, S. (2006). Knowledge representation and mediation for transdisciplinary frameworks: tools to inform debates, dialogues & deliberations. *International Journal of Transdisciplinary Research*, 1(1), 34-50.
- Gunderson, L. H., & Holling, C. S. (Eds.) (2002). *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems*. New York: Island Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (2004). *The language of science*. Collected works of M.A. K. Halliday edited by J. J. Webster. London: Continuum.
- Harding, S. (2008). *Sciences from below. Feminisms, postcolonialities and modernities*. London: Duke University Press.
- Hing, L. S. (1993). Distinctive features of Chinese and Western thought patterns as seen in Mandarin and Chinese. *Guidelines*, 15 (2), 38–44.
- Hölldobler, B., & Wilson, E.O. (1997). *The Ants*. Berlin: Springer Verlag and Harvard University Press.
- Howe, A.C. (1996). Development of science concepts within a Vygotskian framework. *Science Education*, 80(1), 35–51.
- Ingold, T. (2010). Bringing Things to Life: Creative Entanglements in a World of Materials. Realities, working paper 15. Retrieved September 21, 2010 from <http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/realities/publications/workingpapers>
- Ingold, T. (2011). ‘Culture on the ground. The world perceived through the feet’, in T. Ingold (Ed.) *Being Alive. Essays on movement, knowledge and description*, pp. 33-50. London: Routledge.
- International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) 2010 Global Hunger Index. Retrieved March 10, 2011, from <http://www.ifpri.org/publication/2010-global-hunger-index>
- Jablonka, E., & Lamb, M.L. (2005). *Evolution in four dimensions*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jasanoff, S. (2007). Technologies of humility. *Nature*, 450, 33, 1
- Jasanoff, S. (2010). A new climate for society. *Theory, culture & Society* 27 (2-3), 1-21.
- Jones, A. (2001). *Eating oil. Food supply in a changing climate*. London: Sustain/Elm Farm Research Centre.
- Kay, J., & Schneider, E.D. (1994). Embracing complexity, The Challenge of the ecosystem approach. *Alternatives*, 20 (3), 32- 38.
- Keith, D.W., Parson, E. & Morgan, M.G. (2010). Research on global sun block needed now. *Nature*, 463 (28), 426-427.
- Kemmis, S. (2006). Participatory action research and the public sphere. *Educational Action Research*, 14 (4), 459 – 476.
- Kim, Y. (1998). Transdisciplinarity, in *Transdisciplinarity: Stimulating Synergies, Integrating Knowledge*, UNESCO, Paris.

- Kitchen, J., & Stevens, D. (2008). Action research in teacher education: Two teacher-educators practice action research as they introduce action research to preservice teachers. *Action Research*, 6 (1), 7–28.
- Klymkowsky, M. W. & Garvin-Doxas, K. (2008). Recognizing Student Misconceptions through Ed’s Tools and the Biology Concept Inventory. *PLOS Biology*, 6 (1/3), January.
- Konopka, A. K. (2002). Grand metaphors of biology in the genome era. *Computers & Chemistry*, 26 (5), 397- 401.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy In The Flesh: the Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. London: Basic Books.
- Lambin E. F., & Meyfroidt, P. (2011) Global land use change, economic globalization, and the looming land scarcity. *PNAS* 108 (9), 3465-3472.
- Larson, B. (2011). *Metaphors for environmental sustainability*. Redefining our relationship with nature. London: Yale University Press.
- Latour, B. (2007). A plea for earthly sciences. (Keynote lecture for the annual meeting of the British Sociological Association, East London). Retrieved September 20, 2010 from <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/articles/article/102-BSA-GB.pdf>
- Lenton, T. M., & van Oijen, M. (2002). Gaia as a complex adaptive system, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 357 (1421), 683-695.
- Lenton, T.M., Held, H., Kriegler, E., Hall, J.W. , Lucht, W., Rahmstor, S. and Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, (2008). Tipping elements in the Earth’s climate system. *PNAS* 105 (6), 1786–1793.
- Lewis, J., & Leach, J. (2006). Discussion of Socio - scientific Issues: The role of science knowledge. *International Journal of Science Education*, 28 (11), 1267-1287.
- Liberatore, A., & Funtowicz, S. (2003). Democratising’ expertise, ‘expertising’ democracy: what does this mean, and why bother? *Science and Public Policy*, 30, 3, 146-150.
- Lindberg, D. (1976). *Theories of vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lövbrand, E., Stripple, J. & Wiman, B. (2009). Earth system governmentality. Reflections on science in the Anthropocene. *Global Environmental change*, 19, 7-13.
- Lovelock, J. E. (1987). *Gaia. A new look at life on earth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacCallum, C.J. (2007). Does medicine without evolution make sense? *Public Library of Science*, 5(4), 679-680.

- Marchetti, D. (2008) Formazione alla sostenibilità dei formatori. Verso il superamento della frammentarietà delle conoscenze scientifiche. University of Turin, *Unpublished PhD thesis*.
- Margulis, L. (1998). *Symbiotic planet: a new look at evolution*. London: Basic Books.
- Martinez-Alier, J., Kallis, G., Veuthey, S., Walter, M., Temper, L. (2010). Social metabolism, ecological distribution conflicts, and valuation languages. *Ecological Economics*, 70, 153–158.
- Maturana, H., & Varela, F. (1987). *The tree of knowledge*. New York: Shambala.
- McNiff, J., Lomax, P. & Whitehead, J. (1996). *You and Your Action Research Project*. New York: Routledge.
- Miller, T. R., T. D. Baird, C. M. Littlefield, G. Kofinas, F. Chapin, III, and C. L. Redman. 2008. Epistemological pluralism: reorganizing interdisciplinary research. *Ecology and Society* 13(2), 46.
- Mobjörk, M. (2010). Consulting versus participatory transdisciplinarity: a refined classification of transdisciplinary research. *Futures*, 42, pp. 866-873.
- Morin, E. (1999). Reforme de pensee, transdisciplinarite', reforme de l'universite', Address at international congress Quelle universite' pour demain? Vers une evolution transdisciplinaire de l'universite'. Locarno. 30 April–2 May 1997. CIRET-UNESCO: Evolution transdisciplinaire de l'universite', Bulletin Interactif du CIRET, 9–10 (1997) at <<http://perso.club-internet.fr/nicol/ciret/>>.
- Myin, E. And O'Regan, J. K. (2002). Perceptual consciousness, access to modality and skill theories; a way to naturalise phenomenology? *J. of Consciousness studies*, 9, pp. 27-45.
- Nicolescu, B. (1996). *La transdisciplinarite': manifeste*. Paris: Editions du Rocher, English trsl.by K-C. Voss, *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*. State University of New York Press, 2001.
- Noffke, S. E. (2009). Revisiting the professional, personal, and political dimensions of action research. In S. Noffke and B. Somekh (Eds.) *The SAGE handbook of educational action-research* (pp. 6-23). London: Sage.
- Odum, E.P. (2002). Interview. Retrieved May 02, 2010 from [www.chattoogariver.org/index.php?quart=F2002&req=interview](http://www.chattoogariver.org/index.php?quart=F2002&req=interview)
- Odum, E.P. (1988). *Basi di ecologia*. Padova: Piccin.
- Orr, D. (1991). What Is Education For? Six myths about the foundations of modern education, and six new principles to replace them. *Context*, 27, p. 51. Retrieved June 15, 2010 from <http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC27/Orr.htm>
- Osberg, D.C., & Biesta, G.J.J. (2007). Beyond presence: epistemological and pedagogical implications of 'strong' emergence. *Interchange* 38(1), 31-51.
- Ostergaard, E., Dahlin, B. & Hugo, A. (2008). Doing phenomenology in science education: a research review. *Studies in Science Education*, 44 (2), 93 – 121.
- Perazzone A. (2004). Verticale si... ma come la tela del ragno! Le Scienze Naturali nella scuola, Anno XIII, Proceedings of the National Conference "Una visione del mondo", Torino 23-27, marzo 2004, p. 125-128.



- Post, D.M., Doyle, M.W., Sabo, J.L. & Finlay, J.C. (2007). The problem of boundaries in defining ecosystems: A potential landmine for uniting geomorphology and ecology. *Geomorphology*, 89, 111–126.
- Primavesi, A. (2000). *Sacred gaia: holistic theology and Earth system science*. New York: Routledge.
- Princen, T. (2010). Speaking of sustainability: the potential of metaphor. *Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy*, 6, 2, 60-65.
- Quale, A. (2002). The role of metaphor in scientific epistemology: a constructivist perspective and consequences for science education. *Science & Education*, 11, 443-457.
- Ramadier, T. (2004). Transdisciplinarity and its challenges: the case of urban studies, *Futures*, 36, pp. 423-439.
- Reid, W.V., Berkes, F., Wilbanks, T., Capistrano, D. (2006). *Bridging scales and knowledge systems*. Washington DC., USA: Island Press.
- Reiss, M. (2010). Science and Religion. Implications for science educators. *Cultural Studies of science education*, 5, 91-101.
- Resnick, L. B., Levine, J., Teasley, S. D. (Eds.) (1991). *Perspectives on socially shared cognition*. Washington DC, US: American Psychological Association.
- Roth, W.-M., & Lee, S. (2004). Science education as/for participation in the community. *Science Education*, 88, 263–291.
- Sachs, W. (1999). *Planet Dialectics: Explorations in Environment and Development*. - London: Zed Books.
- Sarewitz, D. (2004). How science makes environmental controversies worse. *Environmental Science & Policy* 7, 385–403.
- Sarewitz, d. (2010). Worldview: Not by experts alone. *Nature*, 466, p. 688.
- Scott, P., Mortimer, E. & Amettler, J. (2011). Pedagogical link-making: a fundamental aspect of teaching and learning scientific conceptual knowledge. *Studies in Science Education*, 47, 1, pp. 3–36
- Seiler, G. & Abraham, A. (2009). Hidden wor(l)ds in science class: conscientization and politicization in science education research and practice. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*. 4, 739-753.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Shallcross, T., Spink, E., Stephenson, P. & Warwick, P. (2002) How Primary Trainee Teachers Perceive the Development of their Own Scientific Knowledge: links between confidence, content and competence? *Int. J. of Science Education*, 24, 12, pp. 1293-1312.
- Silvermann, D. (2000). *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.
- Smil, V. (2008). *Energy in Nature and in society. General energetics of complex systems*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Sterling, S. (2001). *Sustainable education, re-visioning learning and change*. Totnes: Green Books.
- Sterling, S. (2009). Sustainable education. In D. Gray, L. Colucci-Gray & E. Camino (Eds.), *Science, Society and Sustainability* (pp. 105-118). New York: Routledge.
- Sumara, D., & Davis, B. (2009). Complexity theory and action-research. In S. Noffke & B. Somekh (Eds.) *The SAGE handbook of educational action-research* (pp. 358-369). London: Sage.
- Tansley, A.G. (1935). The use and abuse of vegetational terms and concepts. *Ecology*, 16, 284-307.
- Thompson-Klein, M. (2004). Prospects for Trans-disciplinarity. *Futures*, 36, 515-526.
- Torbert, W. R. (1981). Why educational research has been so uneducational: the case for a new model of social science based on collaborative inquiry. In P. Reason & J. Rowan (Eds.), *Human Inquiry* (pp. 141-152). New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Trenbert, K. E. (2009). An imperative for climate change planning: tracking Earth's global energy. *Current opinion in Environmental sustainability*, 1, 19-27.
- Trumper, R. (1997). Applying conceptual conflict strategies in the learning of the energy concept. *Research in science and technological education*, 15 (1), 5- 18.
- van Der Sluijs, J., Douguet, J-M., O'Connor, M., Guimarães Pereira, A., Corral Quintana, S., Maxim, L. & Ravetz, J.R. (2008). Qualité de la connaissance dans un processus délibératif. *Natures Sciences Sociétés*, 16, 265-273.
- van Eijck, M., & Roth, W-M. (2007). Keeping the local local: recalibrating the status of science and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in education. *Science Education*, 91, 926-947.
- van Meter, P., & Stevens, R. J. (2000). The role of theory in the study of peer collaboration. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 69, 113-127.
- Voloshinov, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. New York: Seminar, 1973.
- Volk, T. (1998). *Gaia's body. Toward a Physiology of Earth*. New York: Springer Verlag.
- Weber, S. (2008). Visual images in research. In J. Gary Knowles & Ardra. L. Cole (Eds.), *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research*. 41-55. London: Sage.
- Whitfield, J. (2008). Biological theory: postmodern evolution? *Nature* 455, 281-284.
- Wilk, R. (2010). Consumption embedded in culture and language: implications for finding sustainability. *Sustainability: Science, Practice & Policy*, 6, 2, pp. 38-48.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1961). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- World Hunger Education Service Associates (WHESA). 2011 World Hunger and Poverty Facts and Statistics. Retrieved April 02, 2011, from <http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/world%20hunger%20facts%202002.htm>



- Yore, L. D. (2008). Science literacy for all students: Language, culture, and knowledge about nature and naturally occurring events. L1. *Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, 8 (1), 5-21.
- Ziegler, R. and Ott, K. (2011). The quality of sustainability science: a philosophical perspective. *Sustainability: Science, Practice & Policy*, 7, 1, pp. 31-44.
- Zoller, U., & Scholz, R. W. (2004). The HOCS paradigm shift from disciplinary knowledge (LOCS)—to interdisciplinary evaluative, system thinking (HOCS): What should it take in science–technology–environment–society oriented courses, curricula and assessment? *Water Science and Technology*, 49, 27–36.

## Figures

**Figure 1a** Fragmented perception of the two polarities of science: products and processes

**Figure 1b** Restored links between epistemological and methodological polarities of scientific knowledge

**Figure 2** Integrating disciplinary views may contribute to reconnect with and to feel included in nature

**Figure 3** Conceptual tools help to integrate the different approaches

**Figure 4** Integrated overview of the main topics covered in the course of Didactics of Life Sciences. *Image modified from Angelotti et al. 2009.*

**Figure 5** Pictorial representation of the ‘life cycle’ of a living organism, extracted from an Italian textbook for primary schools. (English translation: ‘The life cycle’: it is born; it feeds; it grows; it reproduces itself; it dies).

**Figure 6a** Drawing of a model of the cell detailing the single components.

**Figure 6b** Drawing of a model of the cell emphasising a structural approach.

**Figure 6c** Drawing of a model of the cell featuring names of components and associated functions (i.e. cell membrane for protection)

**Figure 7a** Map summarizing the sequence and typology of activities carried out during the workshop on Energy flows and Matter transformations.

**Figure 7b** An explanation of the symbols used in figure 7a. Arrangement and distribution of activities may change according to subjects, students and context.

**Figure 8** A collective concept map on the concept of ‘gene’.

**Figure 9** Progressive transformation of the original concept map following discussion and reflection by the group.

**Figure 10** Example of drawing representing a time sequence.

**Figure 11** Example of drawing representing a progression of sequential forms in time

**Figure 12** Example of drawing representing a phylogenetic tree

**Box 1** Participants' definitions of metabolism

**Box 2** An ordered sequence of sentences, following collective discussion amongst the participants

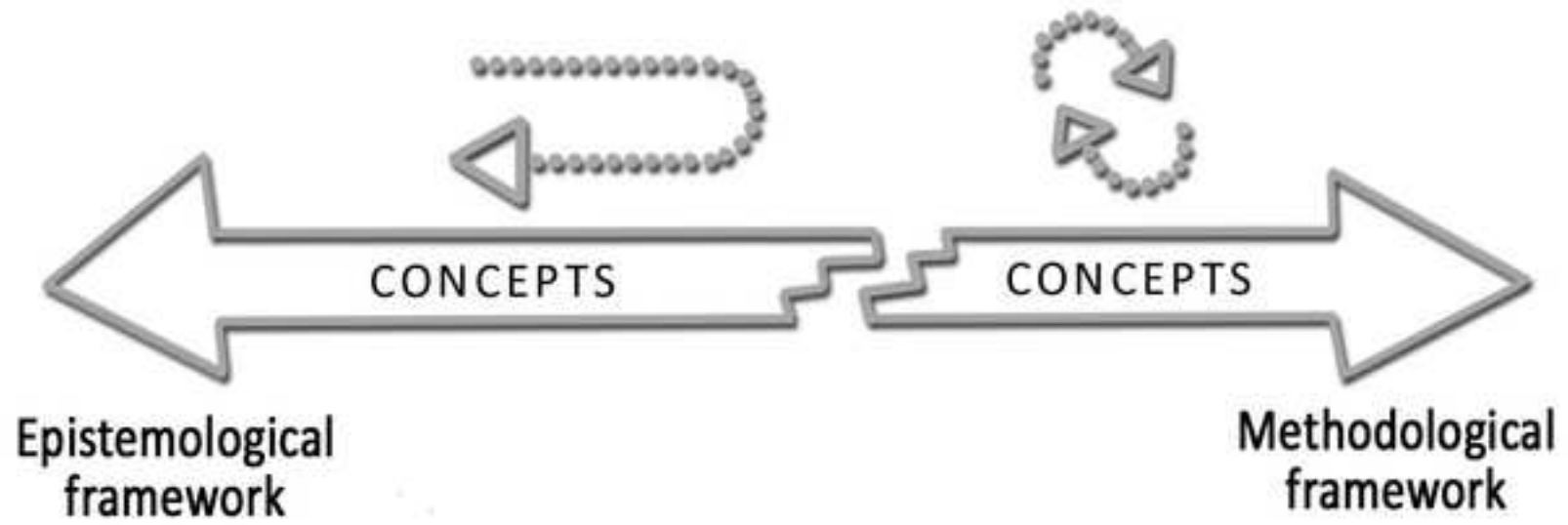
### **Tables**

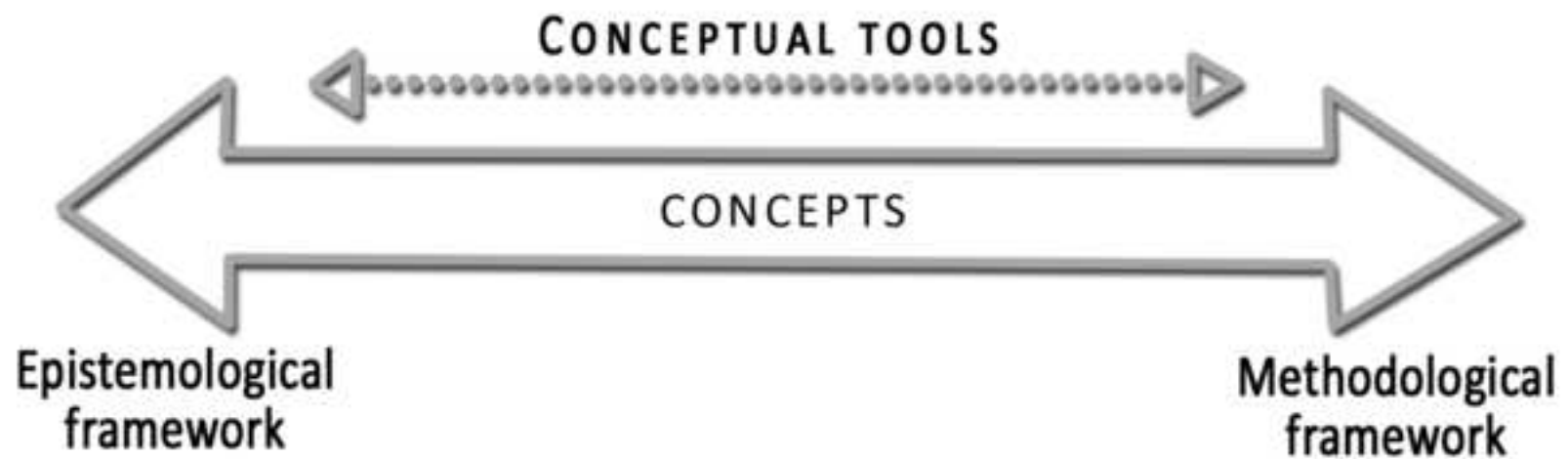
**Table 1.** Overview of teaching and learning contexts.

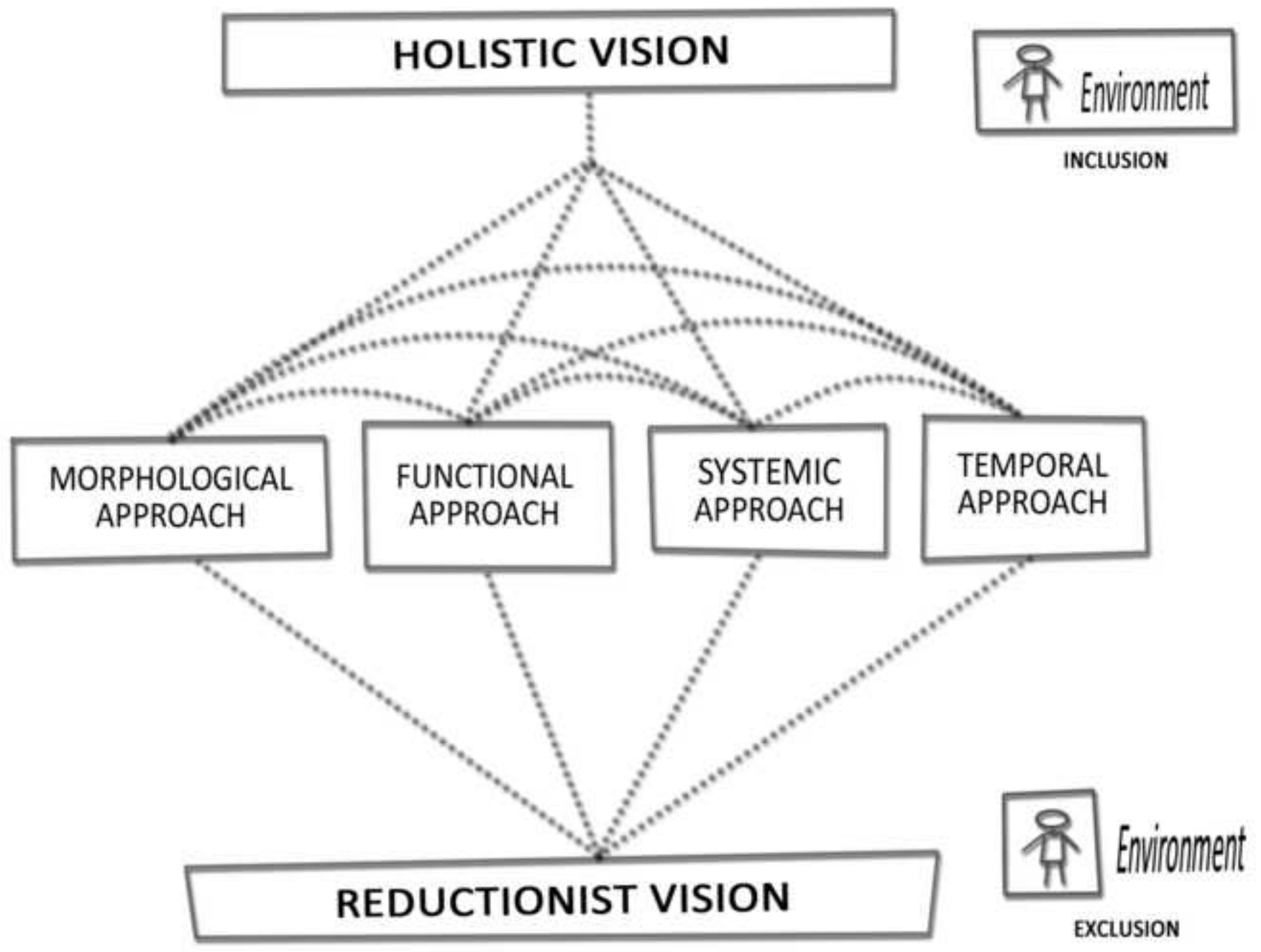
**Table 2.** Students' drawings of evolution

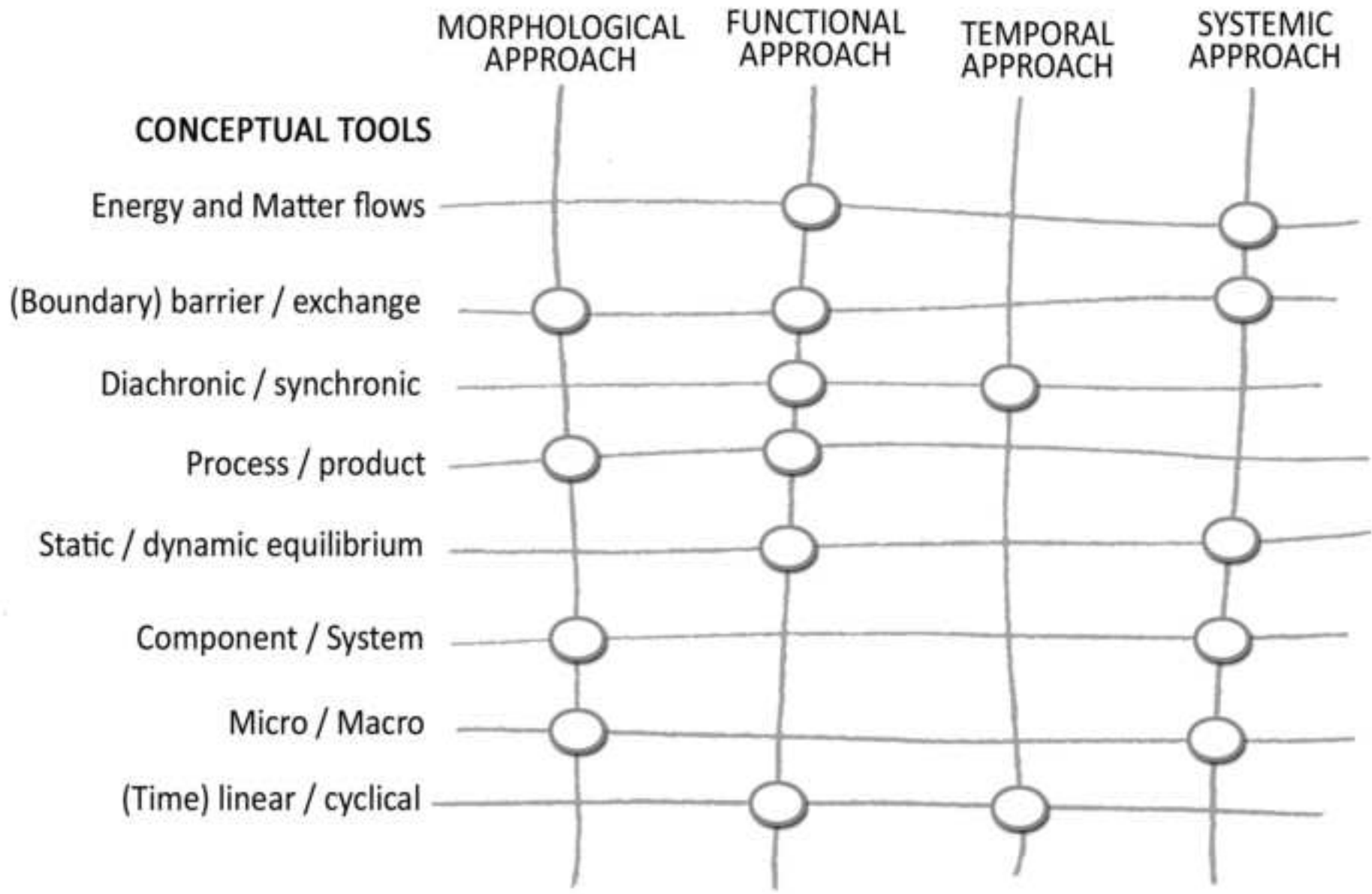
**Table 3.** Students' ideas of evolution embedded in language

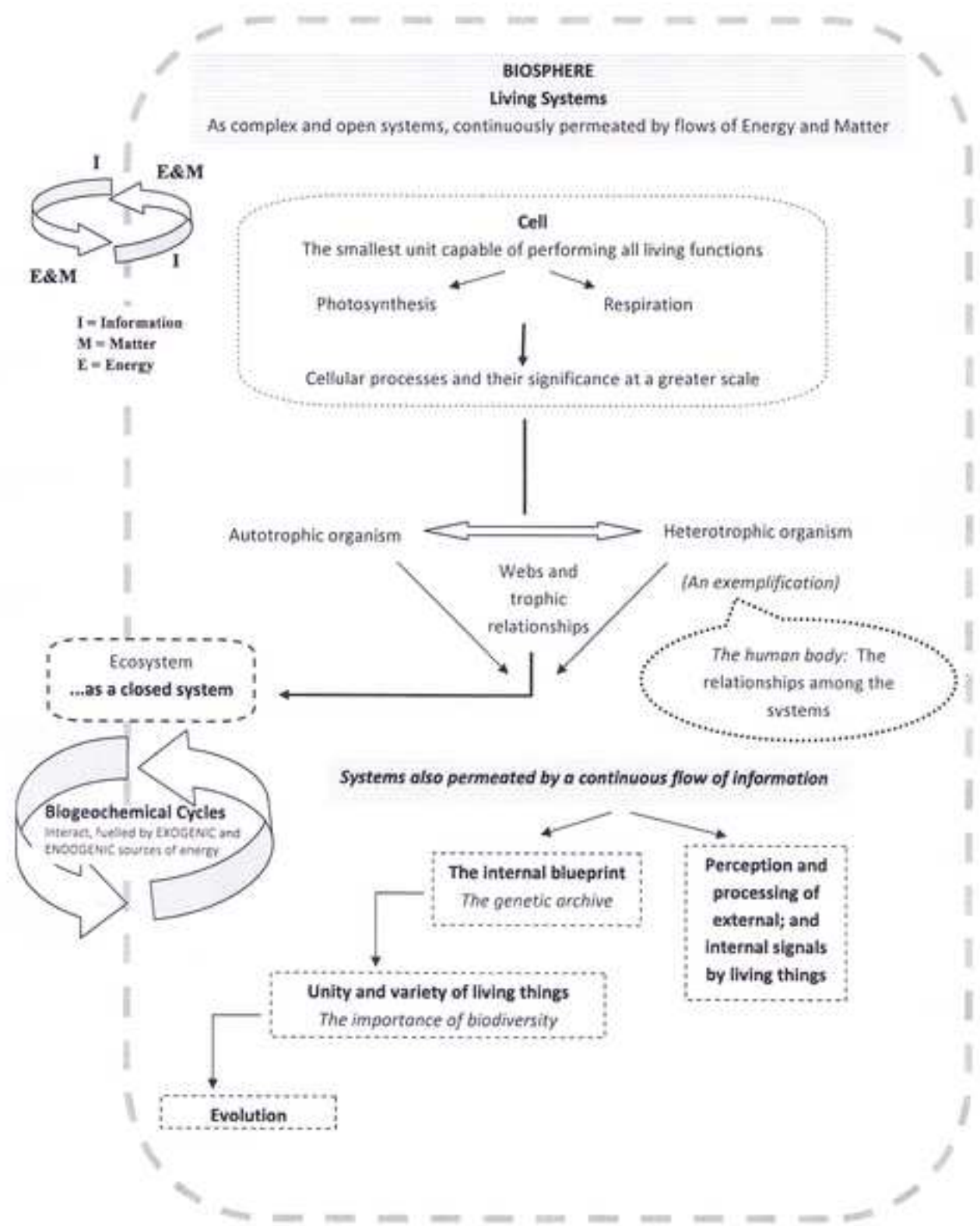
**Table 4.** Students' interpretations of language in the context of evolution











## IL CICLO VITALE



NASCE



SI ALIMENTA



CRESCE



SI RIPRODUCE

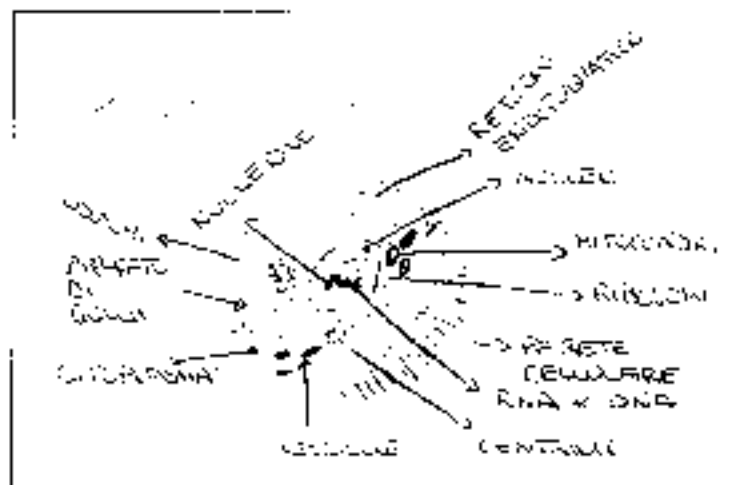


MUORE



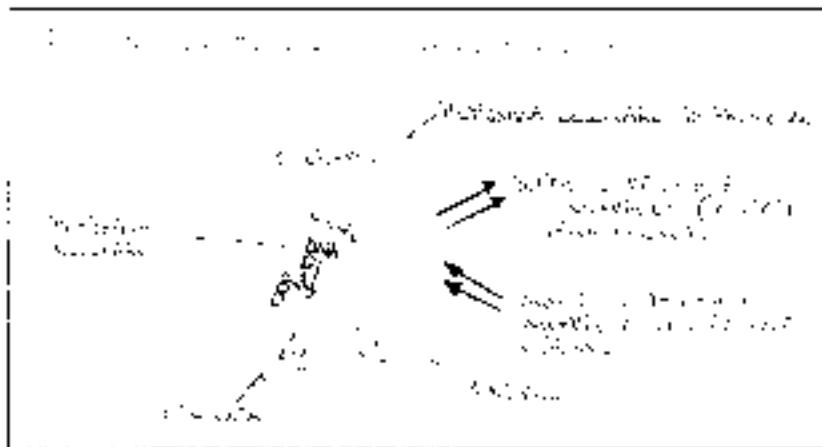


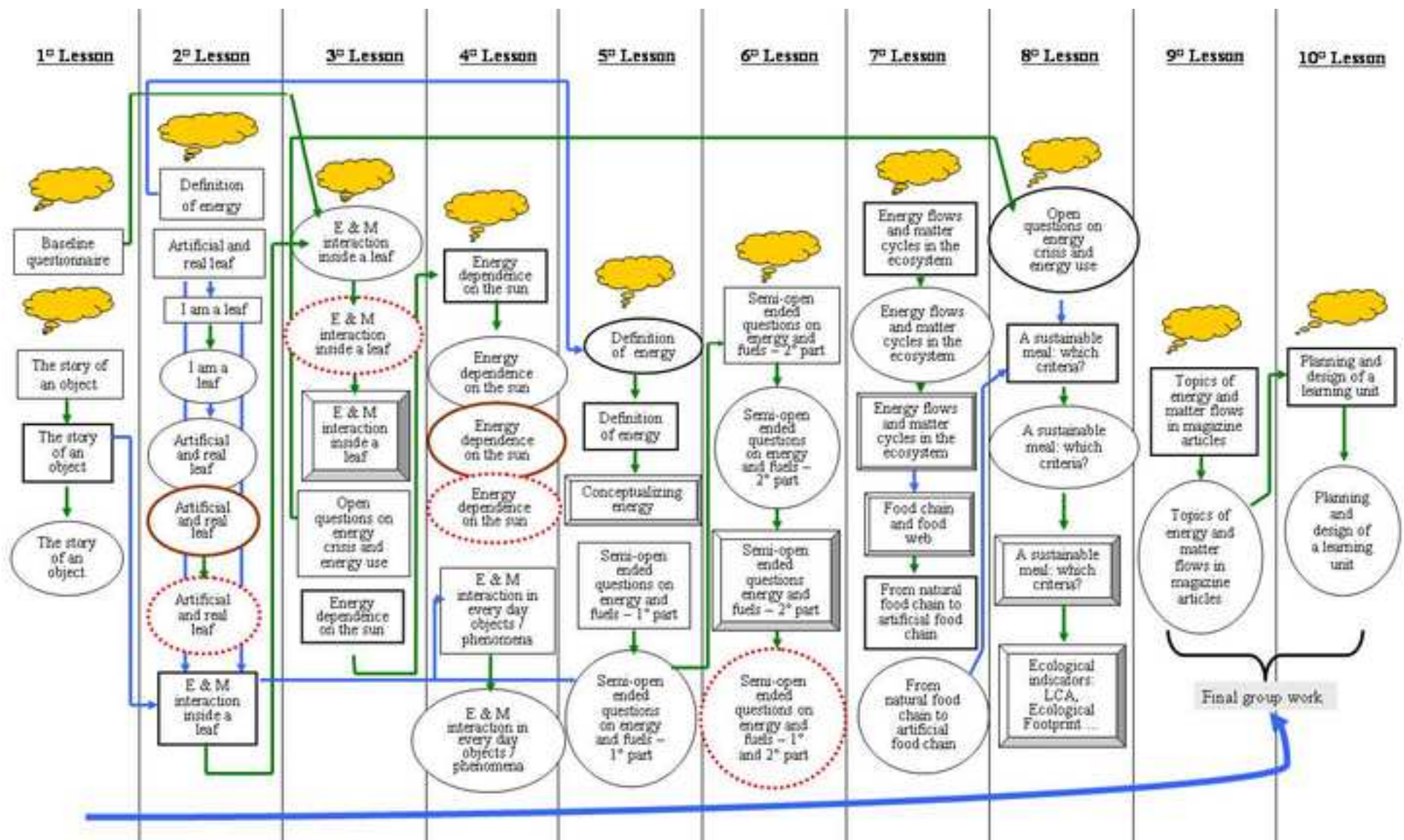




**Uncompressed Figure File**

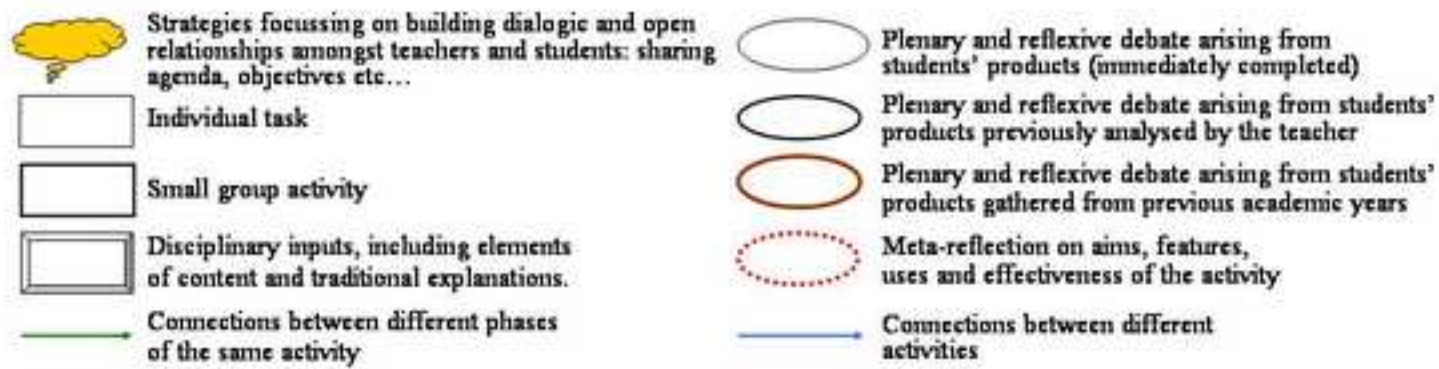
[Click here to download high resolution image](#)

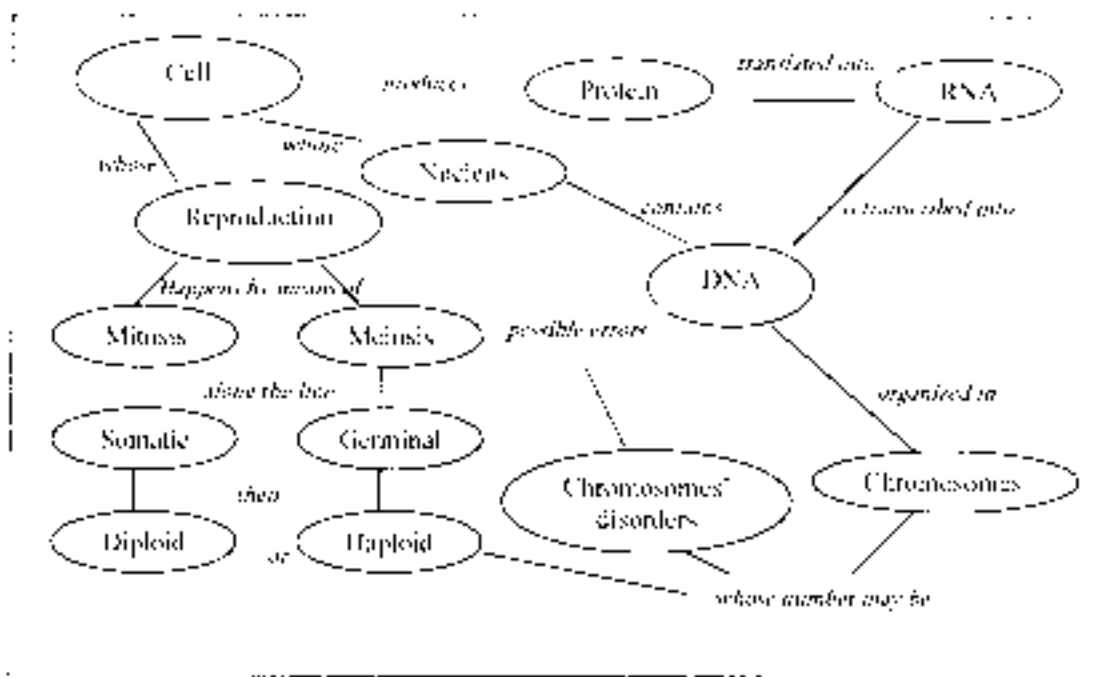


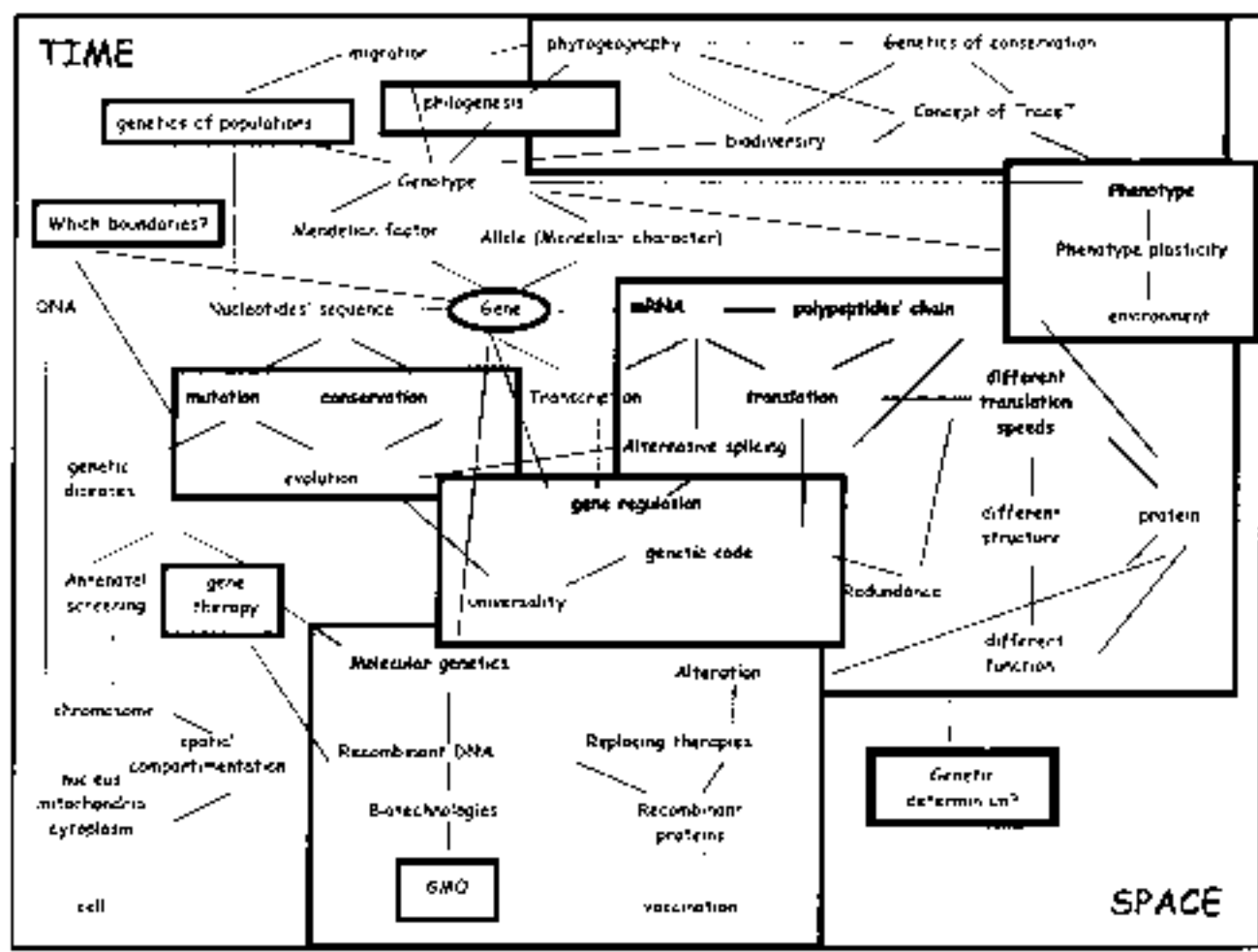


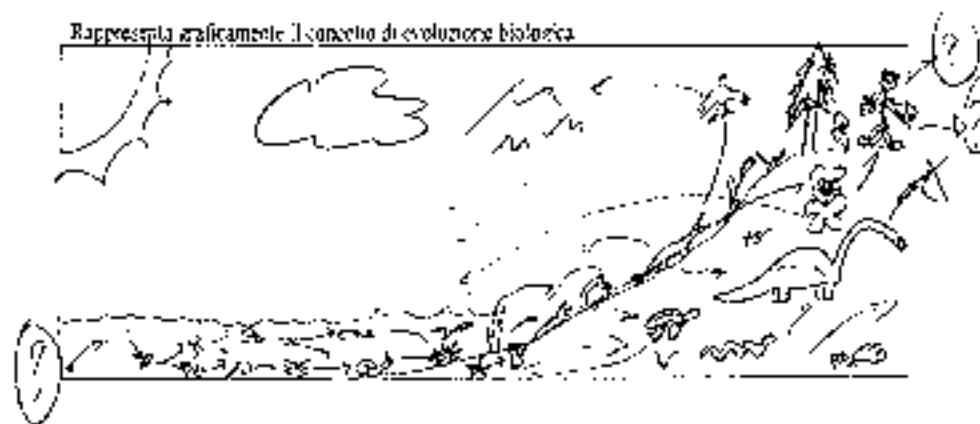
# Uncompressed Figure File

[Click here to download high resolution image](#)











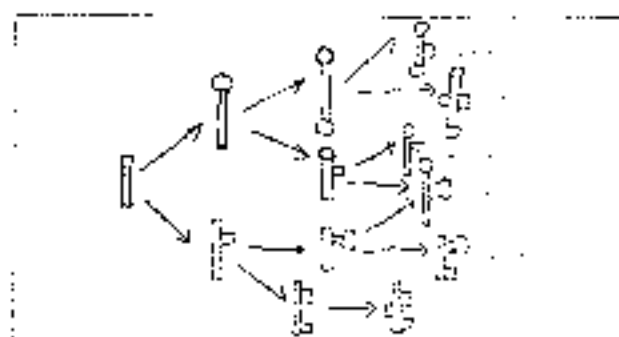
**Uncompressed Figure File**

[Click here to download high resolution image](#)



Uncompressed Figure File

[Click here to download high resolution image](#)



1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14

**Science Education for sustainability: epistemological reflection and educational practices. *From Natural Science to trans-disciplinarity.***

15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22

**Laura Colucci-Gray** has a degree in Natural Sciences and a PhD in science education. She is currently a lecturer at the University of Aberdeen (UK) and is a member of the Interdisciplinary Research Institute on Sustainability based at the University of Turin. Her research activity covers teacher education and sustainability education. Her interest is primarily in the use of interactive pedagogies such as role-plays to deal with socio-environmental issues and conflict.

23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32

**Anna Perazzone** is a lecturer in science and environmental education in the Department of animal and Human Biology at the University of Turin. She is a member of the Research Group in Science Education and the Interdisciplinary Research Institute on Sustainability at Turin University. She specialises in primary education and initial teacher education, with a focus on didactics of biology and environmental education.

33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60  
61  
62  
63  
64  
65

**Martin Dodman** is a graduate in literature and language at the College of Arts and Technology at Cambridge University. He carried out post-graduate research in comparative linguistics and literature at Columbia University in New York. Currently, he lectures in comparative education and didactics of language in the Faculty of Educational Science of the Free University of Bolzano and he is free-lance consultant in educational research. He is also a member of the Interdisciplinary Research Institute on Sustainability based at the University of Turin.

**Elena Camino has** a degree in Physics and is a senior lecturer in the Department of Animal and Human Biology at the University of Turin. She founded the Science Education research group and is a co-founder of the Interdisciplinary Research Institute on Sustainability based at the University of Turin. Her main areas of interest are in sustainability studies with a particular focus on interactive pedagogies and action-research.