

MY FRIEND KURT, FROM HARVARD TO ERICE
The unfolding of mind, brain and education

Antonio M. Battro

Kurt W. Fischer (9 June 1943 – 30 March 2020)

I travel a lot and I keep the records of my meetings, projects and drawings in dozens of notebooks. From time to time I have the pleasure of revisiting these trips and I always feel astonished by all the events I have forgotten, the impressive number of people I have met, and the continuous transformations of my projects and ideas.

I have registered that my first meeting with Kurt was at Harvard in 1998. I was there writing a book about Nico, the hemispherectomized child who was my pupil in Buenos Aires, and I spent most of my time in the university libraries searching for information. In my notes I wrote: “it is impressive the lack of information on brain and education”, and immediately I quoted: “make an appointment with Kurt Fischer”. Kurt became interested in my book and helped me to present it to the publishers of Cambridge University Press, as he was one of the editors of the Cambridge Studies in Cognitive Perceptual Development. Thanks to Kurt’s support the book was published in 2000 with the title *Half a brain is enough. The story of Nico*.

In 2000 I received an invitation from Kurt to come to Harvard with Nico in order to study his cognitive skills using brain images. It was a most generous and unexpected invitation indeed. And there we went and spent a wonderful time in Cambridge with Nico and his mother, an important decision in two aspects. First, the opportunity to put Nico in contact with the most prestigious experts at Harvard and MIT, and second, a perfect occasion to expand my interests in the many dimensions proposed by Kurt in his studies. That year Kurt and my dear friend Howard Gardner were launching the idea of a “concentration course on mind, brain and education” at the Graduate School of Education. In 2002 they started to teach a yearlong course together on “cognitive development, education and the brain”, a landmark in the history of education.

Also in the year 2000 I received a most welcome invitation to visit the Ross School in East Hampton, New York. The founder of this school, Courtney Ross, was a friend of Howard who became a very influential mentor and warmly recommended me to go. It was the start of a very friendly and fruitful relationship with Courtney and her team at the Ross. I returned in 2003 for several months and had the pleasure of inviting Kurt and his beloved family to visit the school. Kurt also became a Scholar in Residence at the Ross.

During my stay I worked on a project on a metaphor about the neurons as “butterflies of the soul”. The inspiring idea came from Santiago Ramón y Cajal, the celebrated Spanish neuroanatomist, (1852-1934) who in his memoirs, first published in 1923, wrote: *As the entomologist chasing butterflies of bright colors, my attention was seeking in the garden of gray matter, those cells of delicate and elegant forms, the*

mysterious butterflies of the soul, whose fluttering wings would someday –who knows ?- enlighten the secret of mental life.

Kurt continued his generous effort at Harvard to promote the cognitive studies on hemispherectomy and he invited me to discuss my book with him at the Askwith Education Forum, Longfellow Hall, Graduate School of Education.

In 2002 I got the unexpected and generous invitation to return to Harvard as Robert F. Kennedy Visiting Professor of Latin American Studies at the Graduate School of Education. We immediately decided with Kurt to organize a course together on the “Educated Brain” and I was profoundly grateful to have him as my friend and colleague to deal with this new pedagogical challenge at Harvard

With Kurt we taught one semester on the “Educated Brain” to a very bright group of students. It became for me an unforgettable course in so many aspects. We invited several of our dear colleagues to give lectures, Ellen Winner, Alvaro Pascual Leone, Alberto Galaburda, Marcelo Suárez Orozco and Joseph Murray.

One day in Cambridge we were having lunch with Kurt at the popular restaurant Casablanca, near to our offices (a place of fond memories for many students and teachers, now unfortunately closed “forever”, as I recently saw posted at the door). We were certainly inspired that day because we made two bold projects: to create an international organization to promote the new ideas of the cognitive neurosciences in education, and to publish a journal affiliated with that organization. These ideas soon became a reality and *IMBES, the International Mind, Brain and Education Society*, and the quarterly *Mind, Brain and Education*, were founded. The Journal was published in 2007 by Blackwell and edited by Kurt with David B. Daniel as managing editor. I became associate editor. The first IMBES conference was held at Fort Worth, Texas, in November 2007. Kurt became the first IMBES President, and I had the honor to succeed him for a second period. Both IMBES and the Journal are still thriving today.

During my stay at Harvard I had the honor to become a member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences at the Vatican. I will always remember my joy and gratitude when I received the nomination at my office at Larsen Hall in August 2002. The Academy generously offered me the possibility to organize seminars and working groups on our topics. I invited Kurt and my friend Pierre Léna, also a member of the Academy and director of LAMAP, *La main à la pâte*, - a leading French Institution on “learning by doing”- to organize a meeting on *Mind, Brain and Education* at the Academy during the celebration of the 400th anniversary of its foundation as Accademia dei Lincei.

The magnificent celebration took place in Rome in November 2003 with representatives from the most prestigious scientific institutions in the world. Kurt came to Rome with Jane, his dear spouse, and their children and we spent a marvelous time together. The proceedings of our meeting were published as *The educated brain. Essays in neuroeducation* (2008). By the way, a butterfly appears on the cover of the book... Moreover, thanks to Jiaxian Zhou, a former Harvard student of Kurt - and now at the Center for Educational Neuroscience, East China Normal University,

Shanghai -this book was translated to Chinese and became one of the recommended books of the year by the Ministry of Education.

At the Academy I had the pleasure to meet a distinguished Italian physicist, Antonino Zichichi, who is the founder and director of the Ettore Majorana Foundation and Centre for Scientific Culture, in Erice, Sicily, a most celebrated international institution. He generously invited me to visit the place and create there a new School dedicated to mind, brain and education. I talked to Kurt and we decided to organize in Erice, as co-directors, the International School on Mind, Brain and Education (www.mbe-erice.org). The first school, 15-20 July, 2005, was dedicated to the Educated Brain and many of our good friends and colleagues from America, Europe and Asia Pacific, attended. Many of the presentations of the School have been published in our journal Mind, Brain and Education. In 2015 we celebrated the tenth anniversary of our School. The course was about the Teaching Brain and was directed by our friends Sidney Strauss (Tel Aviv) and Elena Pasquinelli (Paris).

As we see, everything converges at the top of the Erice mountain, celebrated by so many poets of antiquity, in particular by Virgil in the Book V of the Aeneid: *fraterna Erycis...* Also many disciplines converge in the new field of neuroeducation that our dear Kurt has opened to all of us. Thank you Kurt!

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