

Symposium on Knowledge, Education and Progress

UCL Institute of Education, London, UK.

March 26th, 2025

9:30am to 5:30pm

This symposium will bring together scholars and teachers interested in exploring the relationships between knowledge, education and progress. As John Hopkin succinctly explains, 'The idea of education is an idea of progress, an investment in the future of our young people and community' (2011). Hopkin's pronouncement echoes Hannah Arendt's notion that education is intergenerational conversation, mediated through the curriculum in schools that are separated from, but related to the real world. Schools are also embedded in communities and play a role in sustaining a culture, thus the curriculum will reflect ideas about 'who we are and what we believe in' (Young, 2008), meaning that ideas about education and progress are shaped by culture and will vary from country to country (Retz, 2022). Implicit to education is the belief that schools are institutions for improving society and building a better tomorrow, linked to ideas of social, political, moral, economic and environmental-technological progress.

The suggestion that humanity is lifted through studying a planned curriculum of learning different disciplines dates to Peter Rasmus (1515-1567). Rasmus built a case for learning from a designated series of books (a curriculum), not just individual scholars, thus opening the potential for the democratisation of education. Similarly, in his *New Organon*, Francis Bacon (1561-1626) proposed that knowledge was not an internal virtue but external to individuals, and hence cumulative and progressive (Muller, 2018). Together, Rasmus and Bacon challenged the Aristotelian notion of learning by deduction from texts of the Ancients and paved the way for epistemic growth in disciplines, as open, inductive, forward facing, and for the improvement of human welfare.

In 21st century Europe, societies struggle to articulate a positive vision of the future. Ideas of social, economic, moral and political progress are problematised and contested. The idea of progress has been tainted with its past association with colonialism, exploitation and domination and is thus criticized as a genuinely 'Western ideal', a secularized 'hollow replica of a Christian conception of history' or even as a kind of 'Prozac for intellectuals' (Gray, 2004). Moreover, critics argue that the traditional modern formula: more education = more progress has lost credibility in postmodern times and point to the fact that the largest mass murders in history were perpetrated by regimes that often not only aimed at a radical reeducation of the population but also considered themselves and their ideology driven by grand narratives as 'progressive'. Due to these and other critiques and in light of persistent crises such as climate change, terrorism and wars, it seems that the traditional idea of progress via education is increasingly replaced by the idea that education should be geared towards coping with inevitable regress, and hence 'Education After Progress' (see *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, December 2023). There is 'no longer the old inherited faith in a direction of history with an end, no 'telos' nor faith that educational institutions will inevitably move societies forwards' asserts Thoilliez (2023).

Culturally pessimistic narratives around development and history more and more tend to shape debates about and in education, often without criticism. Here, we want to explore the implications this has for teaching and whether education is possible without optimism and hope for a better future. In so doing, this symposium specifically focusses on a) the epistemic and educational dimensions of progress, b) on schools as sites for the re-contextualisation of knowledge that in different ways rely on ideas of epistemic growth and progress as well as c) on how we should think about and revise the relation between knowledge, education and progress in different socio-political and educational contexts.

Speakers

Anders Schinkel
VU Amsterdam

Bianca Thoilliez
Autonomous University of Madrid

Johannes Giesinger
University of Zurich

Johann Muller
University of Capetown

Tyson Retz
University of Stavanger

Johannes Drerup
VU Amsterdam/ TU Dortmund

Krassimir Stojanov
University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt

David Alcock
UCL Institute of Education

Organisers:

Alex Standish and David Alcock
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Registration:

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The fee for the symposium will be around £40 (£10 unwaged).