

Towards Responsible Narratives in a More-than-Human World: Re-Storying Histories of Education

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Abstract

When futures are disconnected from the past due to disaster and disruption, how do we study and story educational histories and to what ends? The role of education as a motor of technological progress facilitating imagined human sovereignty seems to have lost its persuasive power in creating better futures for all. Therefore, this Special Issue asks historians of education to acknowledge non-Western and Indigenous knowledge paradigms, education systems, and perspectives that have sustained peaceful and healthy ecological systems for millennia. Historians of education can bring into view the different and alternative kinds of knowledge and geo-ecological relationships future generations may want to revive and develop. Furthermore, historians can attend to human histories as a geological force and embrace diversity and decentralisation of knowledge within and against established practices of academic knowledge production.

Keywords: responsible histories of education, shared planetary life, non-anthropocentric knowledge, repair, human and non-human vulnerability

Hacia narrativas responsables en un mundo más que humano: re-narrando historias de la educación

Resumen

Cuando los futuros están desconectados del pasado debido a desastres y perturbaciones, ¿cómo estudiamos y narramos las historias educativas y con qué fines? El papel de la educación como motor del progreso tecnológico que facilita la soberanía humana imaginada parece perder su poder de persuasión a la hora de crear futuros mejores para todos. Por lo tanto, pedimos reconocer los paradigmas de conocimiento, los sistemas educativos y las perspectivas no occidentales e indígenas que han sostenido sistemas ecológicos pacíficos y saludables durante milenios. Los historiadores de la educación pueden poner de relieve los tipos diferentes y alternativos de conocimiento y relaciones geoecológicas que las generaciones futuras tal vez quieran desarrollar. Además, los historiadores deberían prestar atención a las historias humanas como una fuerza geológica y abrazar la diversidad y la descentralización del conocimiento dentro y en contra de las prácticas establecidas de producción de conocimiento académico.

Palabras clave: historias responsables de la educación, vida planetaria compartida, conocimiento no antropocéntrico, reparar, vulnerabilidad humana y no humana

Vers des récits responsables dans un monde plus qu'humain : repenser l'histoire de l'éducation

Résumé

Lorsque les futurs sont déconnectés du passé en raison de catastrophes et de perturbations, comment étudier et raconter l'histoire de l'éducation et à quelles fins? Le rôle de l'éducation en tant que moteur du progrès technologique facilitant l'imaginaire de la souveraineté humaine semble perdre son pouvoir de persuasion dans la création d'un avenir meilleur pour tous. Par conséquent, nous demandons de reconnaître les paradigmes de connaissances, les systèmes éducatifs et les perspectives non occidentaux et autochtones qui ont soutenu des systèmes écologiques pacifiques et sains pendant des millénaires. Les historiens de l'éducation peuvent mettre en lumière les différents types de connaissances et de relations géo-écologiques que les générations futures pourraient vouloir développer. En outre, les historiens devraient s'intéresser aux histoires humaines en tant que force géologique et adopter la diversité et la décentralisation des connaissances au sein et à l'encontre des pratiques établies de production de connaissances universitaires.

Mots-clés : histoires responsables de l'éducation; vie planétaire partagée; connaissances non anthropocentriques; réparation; vulnérabilité humaine et non humaine

Introduction

In times of radical global precarity, climate grief, food crises, political violence, social injustice, war atrocities, pandemics, and unprecedented change, how might histories of education be researched and (re-)written? When futures are disconnected from the past due to disaster and disruption, how do we study and story educational histories and to what ends? What methods, theories, and sources might we draw on to offer responsible narratives of the past considering collective ecological vulnerability and precarious planetary futures?¹

This special issue of *Encounters in Theory and History of Education* grew out of a symposium held at the 2023 ISCHE Conference in Budapest dedicated to environmental, decolonial, and reparative approaches to histories of education. Histories and legacies of colonialism, capitalist extraction of natural resources, damage and disruption to ecosystems balance, anthropocentric concepts of human freedom, sovereignty and growth and their impacts on shared planetary life, have, together, prompted reflection on the fraught, contested, and changing responsibilities of the historian to the past, present, and future.² Responsibility towards the past does not only imply engaging with intergenerational and inherited guilt, but also a different kind of responsibility that seeks to generate fresh answers and relations towards people and situations of the past, present and potential futures.³ This special issue aims to address a gap in history of education research that has not yet deeply engaged its entanglement in anthropocentric and modernist reasoning and its responsibilities to produce a future-oriented, non-anthropocentric knowledge of the past.

¹ Ian Grosvenor and Karin Priem, "Histories of the Past and Histories of the Future: Pandemics and Historians of Education," *Paedagogica Historica* 58, no. 5 (2022): 581–590; Karin Priem, "Emerging Ecologies and Changing Relations: A Brief Manifesto for Histories of Education after COVID-19," *Paedagogica Historica* 58, no. 5 (2022): 768–780, DOI: 10.1080/00309230.2022.2075230; Enric Novella, "COVID-19 and the Emotional Culture of Pandemics: A Retrospective and Prospective View," *Paedagogica Historica* 58 (2022): 660–675; Angelo Van Gorp, Eulàlia Collel Idemont, Inês Félix, Ian Grosvenor, Björn Norlin, and N Björn; Núria Padrós Tuneu, "What Does this Have to Do with Everything Else?" An Ecological Reading of the Impact of the 1918–19 Influenza Pandemic on Education," *Paedagogica Historica* 58 (2022): 728–747, DOI: 10.1080/00309230.2022.2053555; Arathi Sriprakash, "Reparations: Theorising Just Futures of Education," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 44, no. 5 (2022), DOI: 10.1080/01596306.2022.2144141.

² See Pierre Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2021); Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London, New York: Verso, 2019).

³ Natan Elgabsi, "What Is Responsibility towards the Past? Ethical, Existential, and Transgenerational Dimensions," *History and Theory* 63, no. 4 (2024): 128–151.

Today, we face a present condition characterized by human and nonhuman vulnerability in light of deteriorating Earth climate systems. Our entanglement with the material and “natural” world has been laid bare. Modernist developmental conceptions of change over time, which position the future as the potential fulfilment of that development, look decidedly less assured in a world where the future now heralds unprecedented, likely-catastrophic changes.⁴ Moreover, the frameworks of nationhood that rationalized the idea of history as a process of continual movement towards the future with the transcendental human subject as its hero, are now threatened by entangled planetary forces of epidemic and ecological collapse. Coming to terms with the trauma and grief caused by humankind’s imagined mastery has produced myriad effects, not least foreclosure, procrastination, and a sustained ethnonationalist backlash in many Western societies. At the same time, many have galvanized around public policy initiatives such as a Green New Deal, climate activism such as School Strikes for Climate, and the resurgence of Indigenous environmental management practices, among other social and environmental movements.

Historians have played a role in sustaining myths of human exceptionalism through emphases on human sovereignty, agency, and development. Education has been invoked as the place where ideals of human autonomy, freedom, progress, and rights might be developed, realized, learned. Histories of education as a modernizing tool, histories of the stratifying effects of education systems, and of the development of human subjects and societies, have long been written without recourse to their ecological consequences. Unfolding pandemics, ecological crises, and reckoning with colonial violence have exposed the hubris and failure of anthropocentrism – a foundational principle in historical studies – that positions human beings at the centre of planetary life.⁵ As Ewa Domanska has argued, going beyond anthropocentrism is not only to consider an epistemological approach, but is “mainly a future-oriented ethical choice.” This is a choice to “displace the human subject from the centre of historical, archaeological and anthropological studies,” which, she argues, entails a special focus “on the materiality, concreteness, relations and interactions” of the nonhuman aspects of the past.⁶

Papers in this collection take up this challenge. They urge the unlearning of ontological dualism of culture and nature, and advocate an epistemological and ethical shift rooted in ecological relations and entanglements between the human and the

⁴ Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, *History in Times of Unprecedented Change: A Theory for the 21st Century*. 1st ed. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350095083>.

⁵ Ewa Domanska, “Beyond Anthropocentrism in Historical Studies,” *Historein* 10 (2011): 118–130, <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein>.

⁶ Ewa Domanska, “Beyond Anthropocentrism in Historical Studies,” 122.

more-than-human world of plants, animals, geology and meteorology.⁷ Drawing on important work on ecological entanglements of the human and the non-human world, social-anthropological studies on the history of everyday life and living conditions, histories of what is called the “Great Acceleration” (an era of escalating industrialization, extraction, pollution, and consumption that began in the middle of the eighteenth century) and recent studies that deal with histories beyond the human, papers in this collection explore different concepts, tools, and methods useful for rethinking the history of education.⁸

This collection illustrates the importance of problematizing the role of education as a motor of technological progress facilitating imagined human sovereignty. This implies the acknowledgement of non-Western and Indigenous knowledge paradigms, education systems, and perspectives that have sustained peaceful and healthy ecological systems for millennia.⁹ Historians of education can bring into view the different and alternative kinds of knowledge and geo-ecological relationships future generations may want to revive and develop.¹⁰

This collection aims to prompt reflection and debate on how histories of education can attend to human histories as a geological force, and how they can embrace diversity and decentralization of knowledge within and against established practices of academic knowledge production. How can historians of education approach the environmental history of political ideas including how these ideas became embedded in educational reasoning?¹¹ How can we move beyond human-centered histories of modern education and professional training that elide the damage wreaked by attempted anthropocentric domination of human beings?¹² How can historians of education navigate anew archival and cultural heritage systems – including obligations

⁷ Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, translated by Janet Lloyd (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2013). Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁸ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Wolfgang Reinhard, *Lebensformen Europas: Eine historische Kulturanthropologie* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2004); Gabriel Jackson, *Civilization and Barbarity in the 20th Century Europe* (Amherst, MA: Humanity Books, 1999); Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2009); Will Steffen, Wendy Broadgate, Lisa Deutsch, Owen Gaffney, and Cornelia Ludwig, “The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration,” *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 81–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019614564785>; James Bridle, *Ways of Being: Beyond Human Intelligence* (Dublin: Allen Lane, 2022); David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

⁹ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies* (London, New York: Verso, 2007).

¹⁰ Stewart Brand, *The Clock of the Long Now: Time and Responsibility* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.2307/lj.ctvc77bcc>.

¹¹ Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom*.

¹² Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*.

for repair, equitable access, and repatriation – without reinscribing familiar rationales and hierarchies of “modern” knowledge practices?¹³

This special issue asks what modes of historical understanding have the potential to orient us in the maelstrom of our times? Authors of this collection chart new ground by presenting histories of education that engage questions of planetary responsibility and centre entangled relations and post-anthropocentric perspectives. The papers show that historians have a crucial role to play in the broad-scale historical thinking needed to provide orientation, build community, and open possibilities for generative ways of making sense of our present and repairing our past and future.¹⁴ The contributions to this special issue consider transformations, transitions, and trends in the history of education that are responding to these conditions.

The first section of this special issue explores questions of repair, representation, and ecological relations and how these questions are reshaping conversations about historical research, educational media, and school education.

Matthew R. Keynes explores how histories of education are closely entwined with agendas of reparative justice, redress and reconciliation. His article argues that historical thinking has a vital role to play in making sense of the afterlives of violence that are history’s present. This includes radically re-historicising and re-storying educational pasts from entangled, decolonial, and post-anthropocentric perspectives, work, he claims, that is already underway in other disciplinary and public spaces. Keynes conceptual paper asks: what might reparative histories of education look like? What might constitute an ethics of repair for the history of education? The paper aims to provoke dialogue about how historians of education might develop reparative dimensions to their work in a world that desperately needs repair.

Rafaela Silva Rabelo writes about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic that has prompted fearful publics worldwide, to look at the past for solutions and to revisit the impacts and measures adopted in previous pandemics. Silva Rabelo concentrates on how contemporary Brazilian magazines and newspapers rediscovered and represented previous health crises. The article aims to identify whether and how the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted recent discussions and research on the history of education in Brazil. Specifically, it explores whether the context of health emergency has triggered new connections between the history of education and environmental issues.

Linda Chisholm argues that recent environmental historiography and the decolonial turn invite re-examination of the educational past in Southern Africa. To do so, Chisholm explores the little-known history of educational initiatives of social actors in exile during the apartheid regime in South Africa, arguing that ideas about environmental education

¹³ Azoulay, *Potential History*.

¹⁴ Tamson Pietsch and Frances Flanagan. “Here We Stand: Temporal Thinking in Urgent Times,” *History Australia* 17, no. 2 (2020): 252–271, DOI: 10.1080/14490854.2020.1758577.

were present in exile as much as in South Africa's internal anti-apartheid movement. Through a case study analysis of the Development Studies curriculum of the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (SOMAFCO) Archives, Chisholm shows how the curriculum aimed to counter the colonial developmentalist 'othering' assumptions of apartheid curricula.

The second section of this special issue addresses the vulnerability of human beings in light of histories of human exceptionalism. Papers focus on emotional disruptions caused by health crises, extractive politics and the continuing history of colonialism. Authors unanimously agree that histories of education should systematically address related anxiety, injustice, and emotional, ethical, and material threats that were once experienced, suppressed, forgotten, inherited, remembered, and continue to unfold in the present.

Focussing on the COVID-19 pandemic, Enric Novella reviews the genealogy and central assumptions of current trauma culture. After outlining the crystallization and development of the contemporary doctrine of (psychological) trauma in clinical psychiatry, psychopathology and psychoanalysis, he problematises the concept of cultural trauma by reflecting on the global understanding of human catastrophes (either due to collective violence or to natural disasters) as traumatic events. Novella points to limitations of the trauma narrative that does not fully grasp the final course of a health crisis that in its early stages seemed to have threatened our way of life and our values.

Sandra Camarda presents an alternate perspective on coming to terms with cultural trauma. She examines the potential of video games as a heuristic tool for engaging with so-called "difficult history." Traditionally, video games have been dismissed as trivial entertainment, unsuitable for addressing complex historical topics. However, new paradigms challenge such perceptions by exploring how "ludonarratives" – stories shaped by game mechanics – can facilitate transformative learning. By shifting players from passive spectators to active participants, Camarda argues that games offer immersive experiences that can encourage critical engagement with historical events. The emotional impact of these experiences, supported by empirical studies Camarda shows, has the potential to promote empathy, understanding, and social change. Building on theories of resonance and transformative learning, Camarda advocates a re-evaluation of video games' role in historical education, emphasising their ability to provide meaningful, multi-perspective experiences that deepen our understanding of the past and its relevance to contemporary issues.

Sarah Van Ruyskensvelde and Mieke Berghmans explore an example of decolonial praxis in history of education research. They argue that history of education scholarship, despite its inclusion of critical post- and decolonial perspectives, remains largely entrenched in a modernist logics of scholarly knowledge production. Their paper offers an alternative approach by examining "The Conversations" – a locally-embedded practice of collective study about Belgium's colonial past and its legacies. Van

Ruyskensvelde and Berghmans argue that a decolonial approach to historical study and research may help in connecting the discipline's commitment to a critical study of the (colonial and imperial) past with the activation of possible futures and promote alternative ecologies of knowledge.

This special issue's closing article is on critical histories of education in the twenty first century. Johannes Westberg and Beth Marsden identify four key elements of such research: critique, truth, method, and intended audience, arguing that modern critical histories must engage with existing critical traditions and address issues of truth and politics. Drawing on Indigenous Studies as a vantage point, this article offers reflections on how these histories might be constructed. Although not providing definitive answers, it outlines important considerations for designing critical research at the present juncture.

At first sight, the articles of this special issue may seem surprising or unconventional. However, the editors' ambition is to bring together a wide array of approaches that could inspire new pathways for the history of education in times of socio-ecological disruption. The central question of this collection is how historians of education might overcome anthropocentric world views and human exceptionalism by acknowledging the vulnerability of the planet, the human body and mind, other living beings, and the material world, and seeking new modes of future-oriented knowledge of the past.

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