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Concluding Remarks

Heather Ellis

While able to trace its origins back several decades,¹ recent years have seen a flurry of activity in an area of historical inquiry consciously styled the history of knowledge. As the introduction to this special issue points out, there are now dedicated research centres, journals and academic societies for the history of knowledge.² This renewed interest has also expressed itself in a growing number of publications: books, articles and special issues, which aim to reflect on, develop and promote the field.³

One of the biggest challenges that the history of knowledge has encountered is in defining what is meant by “knowledge”. One of its conceptual strengths is its ability to act as an umbrella term, able to bring together and, to some extent, overcome some of the most entrenched divisions in historical inquiry. For example, between the history of science (most commonly understood in an English-speaking context as the history of the natural sciences) and the history of humanities, first studied as the history of individual disciplines but increasingly also as a shared form of knowledge under the banner “history of the humanities”;⁴ these divisions generally represent the conditions and categories of knowledge operating at universities in the late twentieth century when these fields developed as species of historical inquiry; yet they can work to obscure our understanding of knowledge making in the past in periods before the “two cultures” binary was a principal organising category of thought.⁵ This confusion of terminology is compounded by the existence of multiple

- 1 See, for example, Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge: from Gutenberg to Diderot* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge II: from the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Peter Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016); Philip Sarasin, “Was ist Wissensgeschichte?” *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 36, no. 1 (2011), 159–72.
- 2 For example, the Lund Centre for the History of Knowledge (LUCK) founded in 2020; The *Journal for the History of Knowledge* was established in 2020 and is affiliated with Gewina, The Belgian-Dutch Society for History of Science and Universities; see also the website and blog History of Knowledge – Research, Resources, and Perspectives.
- 3 See, for example, Anna Nilsson Hammar, David Larsson Heidenblad, Erling Sandmo, Johan Östling, Kari Nordberg, eds, *Circulation of Knowledge: Explorations into the History of Knowledge* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2018); David Larsson Heidenblad, Anna Nilsson Hammar, Johan Östling eds, *Forms of Knowledge: Developing the History of Knowledge* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2020). Cf. Recent work in geography and historical geography, for example, Heike Jöns, Peter Meusbürger, Michael Heffernan eds, *Mobility of Knowledge* (Cham: Springer, 2017).
- 4 See, for example, Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Rens Bod, Julia Kursell, Jaap Maat and Thijs Weststeijn, “A New Field: History of Humanities,” *History of Humanities* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2016), 1–8.
- 5 For the “two cultures” concept, see Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

meanings of the term “history of science”. Understood, as already mentioned, in an English-speaking context, as the history of the natural sciences only, in a German and Scandinavian context, it is often used to refer to the history of all systematic academic knowledge of the kind generated at an academy or university.⁶ This is usually where the term is given as a translation of *Wissenschaftsgeschichte* which has a much wider meaning in German. “History of science” is used in this way, for example, in the essay by Andersson in this special issue when he refers to “bringing the history of science into dialogue with the institutional history of schooling.”⁷

However, its breadth is also the characteristic which potentially makes the term “history of knowledge” hard to define in practice. Some publications which have appeared under the label of “history of knowledge” have been criticised for including areas so broad and diverse that almost anything could be treated as knowledge. In a thoughtful afterword to *Forms of Knowledge: Developing the History of Knowledge*, a volume of essays published by the Lund research centre in 2020, Staffan Bergwik and Linn Holmberg ask, “What does it add to our historical understanding to study carpentry skills—or religious ritual, public opinion, awareness of contemporary events, or the ability to find your way home—as knowledge rather than as ideas, practices, or capacities?”⁸ For the history of knowledge to function as an “integrative and generative”⁹ umbrella term, there needs to be a clearer understanding of what “knowledge” means. Personally, I would support (with Bergwik and Holmberg) Lorraine Daston’s call to focus on privileged and “systematized ideas and skills.”¹⁰

Another question raised about recent work in the history of knowledge is the extent to which those working in the field have placed themselves and their work within the context of existing literature in other areas of historical inquiry which have been asking questions about the nature of knowledge, knowledge making and mobility in the past for many years such as the history of science, intellectual history and historical geography. There have been calls to try and tie down more concretely what it is that makes the history of knowledge distinct as an approach to the past. What can it add to existing approaches? This is why a special issue like this one which focuses precisely on this question, namely how the history of knowledge connects with and crucially adds to a well-established field such as the history of education, is to be welcomed. While it may seem obvious that the two fields are connected, they have tended to be written at something of a remove from each other, a tendency I have noted elsewhere regarding the history of science and the history of education.¹¹ One of the reasons for this separation may be the perception that the

6 See Denise Philips, “Francis Bacon and the Germans: Stories from when ‘science’ meant ‘Wissenschaft’,” *History of Science* 53, no. 4 (2015), 378–94.

7 See Andersson, 87.

8 Staffan Bergwik and Linn Holmberg, “Concluding Reflections. Standing on Whose Shoulders?” in *Forms of Knowledge*, ed. Johan Östling, David Larsson Heidenblad, and Anna Nilsson Hammar (Lund: Nordic Academic Press), 291.

9 Johan Östling, David Larsson Heidenblad and Anna Nilsson Hammar, “Introduction: Developing the History of Knowledge,” in *Forms of Knowledge*, ed. Johan Östling, David Larsson Heidenblad, and Anna Nilsson Hammar (Lund: Nordic Academic Press), 17.

10 Bergwik and Holmberg (2020), 287.

11 Heather Ellis, “Editorial: Science, Technologies and Material Culture in the History of Education,” *History of Education*, 46, no. 2,(2017). 143–146.

history of knowledge (as is also the case with the history of science) is concerned with knowledge making, formation and production, while the history of education is focused on the transmission or reception of knowledge. The concept of “knowledge transfer” has been highly influential in the history of education in the last two decades, where the mobility of knowledge is conceived as uni- (or, at best, bi-) directional between makers and receivers/users.¹² As Daniel Andersson’s essay on the relationship between historiographical knowledge and school history textbooks in this special issue clearly shows, this model fails to do justice to the contradictions, lags and discontinuities which characterise the movement of knowledge in different historical situations. As Michel Foucault has expressed it, knowledge, along with other forms of cultural exchange and communication, operates within “complex systems of restriction.”¹³ These complexities are better (but still imperfectly) captured by alternative concepts such as “circulation” which still seems to imply an even-paced, balanced movement around a neat circuit which is rarely what we find in the messiness of the past. As this collection of essays makes clear, history of knowledge approaches should aim to “analyse and comprehend knowledge *in* society and knowledge *in* culture” at all stages of its creation, development, reception, adaptation, and transformation.¹⁴

It is welcome to see these older, yet still influential, ideas of transfer being challenged in recent years, not just by those working within the “history of knowledge” but by scholars in a wide range of different historical fields. We have new, more nuanced frameworks for thinking about the different ways in which knowledge moves, which draw on the work of theorists such as Bruno Latour, Michel Foucault and many others as well as the broader influence of postcolonial and decolonial approaches.¹⁵ In particular, there has been a recognition that unequal distributions of power within the networks and spaces of knowledge making, circulation and adaptation have a significant impact on the ways in which (and the speed/ease with which) knowledge moves. The essay from Marcel Caruso in this special issue is particularly interesting in this light as it explores the change in status experienced by Western pedagogical knowledge when it was introduced in colonial India. Considered a relatively low status knowledge type in the British imperial metropolis, in the context of colonial power structures, Caruso argues, it was valued more highly, undergoing what he interestingly terms a process of “de-subalternisation.” We see something similar in the essay by Karen Andreasen and Annette Rasmussen which examines how the perceived value of “knowledge, skills and competences associated with running a household” in Denmark was raised substantially in the period between 1890 and 1940 when they became institutionalised in formal schools of home economics.¹⁶ There appears to have been an associated rise in the status of women who were the

12 See, for example, Jenny Collins and Tim Allender, “Knowledge transfer, educational change and the history of education: New theoretical frameworks,” *History of Education Review* 42 No. 2 (2013), 112–118.

13 Michel Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” in *Untying the Text: a Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 62.

14 Lundberg, 4.

15 See, for example, Jöns, Meusburger and Heffernan eds, *Mobilities of Knowledge*.

16 See Andreasen and Rasmussen, 64.

chief educators and students in this field of knowledge, although, as Andreasen and Rasmussen admit, it also served to perpetuate the traditional connection between women and the private sphere. By contrast, the rise of women's technical education, promoted in Sweden in the late twentieth century by the Fredrika Bremer Association, helped to create and circulate "new and more inclusive knowledge relating to the technology society...in Sweden," according to Rosalía Guerrero Cantarell.¹⁷

I welcome the tripartite division of approaches set out by Björn Lundberg in the Introduction to this special issue – the focus on (i) arenas of knowledge, (ii) forms of knowledge and (iii) knowledge actors. It helpfully captures insights gained from the recent spatial and material turns in historical research as well as from the growing influence of actor-network theory. Overall, they help to create the conditions for a more nuanced, holistic understanding of the way in which knowledge operates. It allows us to bring together productively those two aspects of the history of knowledge which have often been treated separately, the formation or making of knowledge, on the one hand, and the transfer, transmission, framing and adaptation of knowledge, on the other, and to show how they both form part of a much larger whole.

Focusing on the intersection between the history of knowledge and the history of education helps to refine what we mean by the "history of knowledge" as a term; it forces us to be more precise in our definitions and sharpens the idea of "knowledge" as a conceptual tool for understanding the past. In particular, it brings into focus the crucial relationship between knowledge and power. Educational spaces, particularly formal, institutionalised spaces such as the classroom, act as knowledge arenas characterised by very visible and often rigid sets of power relations, where knowledge is communicated, framed and legitimated (not always successfully) through the figure of the teacher, lecturer or instructor. As is mentioned in the Introduction, all the essays in this special issue deal with knowledge within institutionalised education settings (teacher training colleges, elementary school classrooms, public lectures). As such, they are choosing to set some limits, preferring to think of knowledge (although this is not explicitly said) as called for by Lorraine Daston – as "systematized ideas and skills." In making that choice, however, the variety of types of knowledge focused on in the essays makes clear that it still allows for the umbrella function of the term "history of knowledge" to operate. Epistemic hierarchies and the operation of power within and between different types of knowledge are at the centre of several essays including Marcelo Caruso on the status of pedagogical knowledge in colonial India and Karen Andreasen and Annette Rasmussen on the status of home economics as a field of knowledge.

The range of history of education as a field of inquiry is similar to that of the history of knowledge, including, conceptually and semantically, as it does, the full range of subjects which can be taught. It does not restrict itself to the teaching and learning of the (natural) sciences alone or the humanities, for example. Similarly, history of education does not confine itself to a consideration of academic subjects but can, as the essays here show, extend to a wide range of practical and pragmatic instruction formats such as traffic and swimming education. Indeed, a concept which is used on a number of occasions in the essays here (see, in particular, Joakim Landahl's essay

¹⁷ See Guerrero Cantarell, 144.

on traffic education in Swedish elementary schools) – educationalization¹⁸ – shows very well how education has been so broad in its semantic range as to be considered a potential means of solving a wide variety of social problems from teenage pregnancy to drug use and traffic deaths.

Considering the history of knowledge and education together can also do much to challenge the idea that the history of education is primarily (or only) about the reception and transmission of knowledge. Through the key concept of mediation which is central to a number of essays (in particular, those by Daniel Andersson and Rosalía Guerrero Cantarell), we see how knowledge is not just transferred but transformed in the arena of the classroom, lecture hall, museum, art gallery or political meeting through the interactions of a complex array of knowledge actors. New knowledge is also generated in these spaces or in any other space of education, formal or informal. Making use of the concept of “mediation” helps us to reconceptualise agency in both the making and movement of knowledge. It is also key that none of the essays restrict themselves to the institutionalised spaces of education they investigate but insist on exploring how knowledge moves between classrooms and other spaces in society. Among others, the essays presented here consider the entanglements of knowledge with colonial structures of power (Caruso); state administrative systems (Garz, Isensee and Töpper; Andreassen and Rasmussen), the police (Landahl), museums, journalists, industry and the general public (Guerrero Cantarell).

Björn Lundberg describes the conceptual approaches adopted in these essays as “eclectic,”¹⁹ but I would suggest that there is actually quite a lot of consistency between them. For example, most of the authors engage closely with the forms and formats of knowledge. They are the focus of the essay by Jona Garz, Fanny Isensee and Daniel Töpper in which they explore what they call “small forms”, in their case, pre-printed blank forms designed to collect specific educational data in late nineteenth-century Prussia. Memorably, they describe these forms as “deliberate acts of miniaturisation” and in so doing they get right to the heart of *how* knowledge is made, specifically how information can be turned into knowledge through the acts of “writing down and putting into order.”²⁰ They point, in particular, to the paradox of an act of miniaturisation as they describe the collation of information on the small form enabling “a maximal expansion of reach of knowledge practices.”²¹ They provide us with an instructive example of how a focus on the *how* of knowledge formation can reveal much about the scales and speed at which these processes operate.

We gain a similar insight from Andersson’s essay which shows how what counts as historical knowledge among academics in universities can change much more rapidly than among teachers in elementary school classrooms. School teachers rely on much more heavily formatted, standardised (and therefore more stable) knowledge forms such as textbooks whose design is informed by a very different set of conventions and rationales from those operating in university-based research.

18 On “educationalization,” see Marc Depaepe and Paul Smeyers eds., *Educational Research: The Educationalization of Social Problems* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009).

19 Lundberg, 4.

20 See Garz, Fanny Isensee and Daniel Töpper, 40, 43.

21 *Ibid.*, 43.

This contrast in the pace of change is even more significant when we reflect that many authors of school history textbooks were also academics.²² Landahl in his study of traffic education in Sweden also focuses on forms of knowledge, identifying a variety of knowledge forms used to teach children about the dangers of traffic including handbooks (which often incorporated relevant newspaper articles), colour images and visualisations as well as physical reconstructions or inscenations of particular traffic situations.

There are still some conceptual questions remaining, for example, precisely how we use the term “embodied” knowledge. In the Introduction, for example, “embodied” knowledge is positioned as a type of knowledge which can be contrasted with theoretical or explicitly stated knowledge, an idea sometimes captured by the notion of praxis, where knowledge exists in the actions/practices of a teacher and is incapable of being expressed in an explicit (textual) form. I would argue that such an understanding of “embodied” can obscure another important sense in which knowledge can be embodied – where it is recognised that knowledge cannot move or flow without being “embodied” within particular social and cultural contexts and within particular people. Knowledge processes – be they knowledge making, knowledge communication, knowledge reception or adaptation – are always embodied in individual people (and groups of people). It is vital, as the field develops, that the history of knowledge does not replicate the tendency of work in other fields which sees knowledge as something free-flowing, which exists (and can be studied as) texts, images and objects, seemingly without reference to people. As David Larsson Heidenblad has written (and his words are quoted in the Introduction to this special issue), the circulation of knowledge in society does not occur by or of itself, but rather because “specific people did specific things at specific times, which triggered chain reactions”²³

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22 Heather Ellis, “Elite Education and the Development of Mass Elementary Schooling in England, 1870–1930,” in *Mass Education and the Limits of State Building, c.1870–1930*, ed. Laurence Brockliss and Nicola Sheldon (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 54.

23 David Larsson Heidenblad, *The Environmental Turn in Postwar Sweden*. Lund: Lund University Press, 2021, 21.

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