

Ignorance and the Role of Intellectuals: Contemporary Challenges in Higher Education and Teacher Education

Alberto G. Canen & Ana Ivenicki

Alberto G. Canen, Retired Prof. Dr., Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Ana Ivenicki, Emeritus Prof. Dr., Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Abstract

This paper examines ignorance and its manifestations regarding the role of intellectuals and science, discussing how distorted perceptions can lead to the contempt or devaluation of academic knowledge. This has been considered a threat to the value of education, putting it at a crossroads in contemporary times. The paper discusses the role of higher education and teacher training in counteracting distortions and prejudices against science and intellectuals. The methodology is qualitative, drawing firstly on a literature review to pinpoint how those issues have been addressed, and secondly on the analysis of discourses from interviews with two academics. The paper suggests possible ways to counteract those trends, among which is imbuing research with the value of cultural diversity and epistemology. It discusses the ideas gleaned from both the literature review and the interviews, suggesting challenges and ways to move forward so that higher education and teacher education can help disseminate the value of science, intellectuals, and truth, preparing future generations to advance educational research for the good of humanity.

Keywords: ignorance, intellectuals, higher education, teacher education, multiculturalism and epistemology, educational research, leadership

Introduction

This study was motivated by informal meetings in which some people known to the authors, who were not from the academic world, expressed prejudiced views about academic work, science, and the role of intellectuals. As an illustrative example, an academic, before undergoing a medical procedure, heard a comment from one of these people along the lines of “You don’t work, so you can stay at home”, which clearly demonstrates ignorance about scientific activities. To what extent do literature and academics show that this is not an isolated opinion? How do such distorted perceptions spread, often articulated with distrust or hostility toward academic knowledge?

In recent years, various contexts have revealed public statements and actions that display contempt for science, suggesting that intellectual work does not contribute

significant value to society. In this environment, ignorance is not limited to a simple lack of information; it also involves a refusal to learn about what intellectuals actually do (DeNicola, 2017; Harding, 2006).

In fact, ignorance is often intertwined with expressions of arrogance (Stampley, 2020), which obstructs listening to specialized voices or adopting evidence-based solutions (Thiollent & Lima, 2020). Moreover, the post-truth phenomenon, with the spread of fake news, exacerbates collective distrust in experts, scientists, and intellectuals (Dunning, 2011). Consequently, statements that undermine the importance of science are repeated, sometimes by influential political figures.

All this environment puts higher education and teacher education at the crossroads, highlighting the need to counteract those views by reinforcing the value of trustworthy scientific educational research in higher education and teacher education, as well as the power of communicating that value to students, academic staff, and even the wider society.

In light of these considerations, the present paper aims to understand how ignorance shapes perceptions of intellectuals and science and how to challenge such views.

Methodology

The methodology is qualitative and consists of two approaches:

- A literature review, which examines how issues of ignorance and the devaluation of science have been addressed, as well as the role of the internet and social media in spreading post-truth narratives.
- An analysis of discourses from interviews with two academics, focusing on trends in the devaluation of educational research and possible ways to counter these trends in favor of scientific rigor and the pursuit of truth.

The production of knowledge on ignorance: Literature review

A growing body of research explores ignorance as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon (DeNicola, 2017; Gross & McGoey, 2018). The concern is not only the absence of knowledge but also the deliberate use of misinformation for political or economic purposes. According to Gross and McGoey (2018), “ignorance of ignorance” leads to a decline in intellectual activity, as those unaware of their own knowledge gaps may consider themselves “owners of the truth”. This process ties in with the Dunning-Kruger Effect, where people with low competence in a given field overestimate their expertise and consequently disregard others’ expertise (Dunning, 2011). Moreover, Harding (2006) highlights how certain social and institutional arrangements reinforce knowledge gaps, especially when dominant groups fail to acknowledge or value diverse epistemological perspectives. De Beer (2009) argues that ignorance can masquerade as knowledge, posing a significant threat to the integrity of knowledge societies.

In higher education, Arrondo (2011) highlights the challenge of combating ignorance through interdisciplinary collaboration and social engagement. Harding (2006) provides influential theories on ignorance, emphasizing how certain social structures perpetuate knowledge gaps.

Studies reveal that individuals with limited knowledge often perceive science and intellectuals with skepticism or hostility. The Dunning-Kruger effect illustrates how individuals with lower competence overestimate their understanding and dismiss expert

opinions (Dunning, 2011). Thiollent and Lima (2020) discuss how misinformation and post-truth culture shape negative perceptions of academia, emphasizing the role of media in amplifying distrust towards scientific authority. Halbesleben and Buckley (2004) discuss pluralistic ignorance, demonstrating how individuals misperceive the knowledge of others and its impact on decision-making.

Arrogance and ignorance are intertwined, reinforcing each other through overconfidence and resistance to learning. Stampley (2020) explores how arrogance fosters a false sense of superiority, leading to a rejection of knowledge and critical inquiry. De Beer (2009) argues that when there is a prevalence of “camouflaged ignorance”—where individuals believe they possess knowledge—it perpetuates societal and institutional stagnation. Ivenicki (2018) explores the cultural dimensions of multicultural education and its relation to educational frameworks.

Scholars like Stampley (2020) and Canen and Canen (2012) integrate elements of arrogance and envy into discussions, which could be linked to the issue of ignorance focused on the present paper, illustrating how these attitudes can lead to a “closing off” from learning or valuing intellectuals. They also claim that within organizations, envy may prompt a refusal to acknowledge the merits of others, perpetuating ignorance. Additionally, Ivenicki (2018) explores multicultural issues as a way to combat prejudices, showing how it can be anchored in racial, ethnic, or belief-based prejudices that inhibit knowledge exchange. Halbesleben and Buckley (2004) highlight “pluralistic ignorance”, wherein individuals tend to overestimate others’ agreement or level of knowledge, leading to collective misjudgments.

To counter ignorance and improve the perception of science, authors advocate for qualitative methodologies and multicultural approaches in research and education (Ivenicki, 2018; Ivenicki & Canen, 2016). The latter authors emphasize that qualitative methodologies combined with multiculturalism foster the recognition of cultural diversity in research and teaching environments. Such an approach allows for listening to multiple narratives, including those from traditionally marginalized social groups, thereby broadening the understanding of how prejudice against intellectuals is formed. Costa and Canen (2022) argue that internationalization expands knowledge exchanges and fosters interaction among different cultures, reducing stereotypes and bringing researchers closer to diverse contexts. This approach encourages greater appreciation for intellectual contributions, especially when universities, businesses, government, and civil society collaborate.

According to Thiollent and Lima (2020), there is a need to integrate epistemology and ethics into educational curricula to instill critical awareness for fact-checking and evidence-based evaluation. DeNicola (2017) adds that critical thinking education is key to coping with the overload of (mis)information in the digital age. Qualitative research in social sciences, education, and organizational studies can uncover entrenched beliefs and prejudices that undermine the appreciation of intellectual work (Ivenicki & Canen, 2016; Arrondo, 2011). Equipping students and professionals with the ability to scrutinize methods, data, and evidence, resisting superficial explanations or those aligned with particular interests, is also an important research strategy to combat ignorance (Harding, 2006). On the other hand, Verburgt and Burke (2021) emphasize that understanding the social and historical roots of ignorance helps dispel narratives that pit “common wisdom” against scientific production. This opens space to recognize that much of current knowledge emerges from cumulative, collaborative processes.

Concerning the university's role in combating ignorance, Arrondo (2011) suggests that universities must engage more directly with social challenges, thereby building mutual trust with the wider population. Communicating the scientific production process in accessible language can also mitigate prejudices about what intellectuals do and underscore the impact of knowledge on daily life. In light of that, Canen and Canen (2008, 2012) introduce the concept of multicultural leadership as a way to foster inclusive, cooperative environments. When transparency and respect for diversity prevail, gratuitous attacks on researchers' work or intellectual endeavors are less likely. Moreover, leaders who acknowledge the importance of science tend to influence society and public policies positively (De Beer, 2009).

Several scholars propose strategies to counteract negative perceptions of science and intellectuals. Verburgt and Burke (2021) advocate for a historical approach to ignorance, arguing for a deeper understanding of its societal roots. Canen and Canen (2012) suggest adopting multicultural leadership strategies to promote inclusivity and transparency in academic institutions, thus addressing prejudices at the organizational level. Costa and Canen (2022) emphasize the internationalization of higher education institutions as a means to broaden perspectives and counter ignorance. On the other hand, Arrondo (2011) stresses the importance of universities engaging directly with societal challenges to foster trust and understanding.

Envy is identified as a contributing factor to ignorance in organizational settings. Canen and Canen (2008, 2012) argue that envy can lead to a reluctance to acknowledge or learn from others' knowledge, thereby perpetuating ignorance. They propose fostering multicultural environments to mitigate envy and encourage knowledge-sharing. From the same perspective, the referred authors claim that leadership plays a pivotal role in combating ignorance within organizations and society. Canen and Canen (2008) suggest that multicultural leadership fosters environments where diverse perspectives are valued, reducing the impact of ignorance. De Beer (2009) emphasizes the responsibility of leaders to champion knowledge integrity and counteract the reign of ignorance.

Such ideas could be more and more enhanced in higher education and teacher education, so that challenges to ignorance and a lack of scientific research could be fostered in the preparation of future teachers and researchers. According to Ogunleye et al. (2015), perceptions of students and teachers are a central part in clarifying factors that help the development of higher education courses, particularly focusing on lifelong learning ones. That way, we argue that promoting multicultural dialogues and participatory research could boost students, teachers, intellectuals, and academics in helping them face educational crossroads with the defense of scientific knowledge and the pursuit of truth.

Analysis of the interviews

The interviews were carried out with two renowned academics, based on questions referring to the meaning they attribute to ignorance and envy, as well as the role of science and of intellectuals in combating both.

The first interviewee claimed that ignorance refers to the situation in which "the person is unaware of human relations, of science, and is poorly prepared in the civilizing process". In that sense, ignorance "became almost a bad word...", and the ignorant person "does not know respectability, scientific reference, and they are not able to live in society". In contrast to ignorance, the academic claims that science appears as a way to

move forward, “showing the pros and cons of what has already been done”. Science would be viewed “as a distrust of the divine, and a distrust against prejudices as well”.

When we started to talk about envy and ignorance, as well as the arrogance shown by some ignorant people, the interviewee said:

Yes! It is a psychoanalytic question! The fear of appearing unaware makes the person want to show off, being arrogant. This also happens with the case of violence, wars, and the violence of human reason. In dreams, people are less alert, everything is mixed, including violence, ancestral fear. Education is the recognition of otherness, of the other; it is the realization that we are social beings, we cannot be happy alone.

Talking about how to combat ignorance and envy, the academic suggested:

Rehabilitate epistemology, against the relativist wave that says that any discourse is valid... The idea is that it is important not to have linguistic prejudice. The student starts to look with different eyes, The students should start to have another perception of languages and culture, which knowledge brings!

Developing this conversation further, the interviewee expressed the idea that:

The University is the space for the production of knowledge, based on the understanding of what exists. It is our role to disseminate this knowledge. Why is knowledge vilified? Because it is being “profane”, challenging the “sacred”. But it is for the social welfare! It is difficult. When people have certain knowledge, they think it is already good! Lyrics are also cognition, it is knowledge! This conversation should be constant at the University, to advance knowledge, for the good of society, and all.

The second interviewee claimed that:

Today, ignorance has to do with post-truth, fake news. An American material says that there are several types of ignorance, the best known being the lack of education, which makes the person ignorant... Another type of ignorance is more problematic, it is that selective ignorance, the one that is the result of ideology, such as, for example, associated with neo-fascism, authoritarian thinking, about the idea of the earth being flat, ideas that have also arrived in Brazil. For these types of ignorant people, there is only a dichotomy between good and evil, between their ideology and different thinking. In this case, the subject may even have a PhD, but is ignorant in other matters.

The interviewee continued to expand on this idea:

The ignorant of the second type are arrogant, impose certain truths, and do not accept other possibilities. This second type of ignorance is recent, it is ideologically grounded. There is science denialism (...). It is a recurring theme in Philosophy, Ecology, Global Warming, and so on. These untruths are repeated and are obscurantist because they claim that Science is just a discourse. This relativism is another way that feeds post-truth, as it argues that all discourse has validity!

The academic argued that social media has been responsible for much of the ignorance that has been spreading lately, as shown in the following excerpt:

It is the culture of social networks, which is always manipulated! The culprit is not the user, who cannot filter. There is an intoxication through social networks. People read anything, have their minds repeated, without seeing the truth. It is an unfiltered spread of information by people who have millions of followers and millions of pieces of information. The situation is not good, even though the journalistic discourse tries to act to change it.

When talking about how the University could try and counteract all the situation that results in ignorance, the interviewee expresses the following idea:

I think that maintaining a critical position about these ideologies is important, including religion. Returning to rationalism is important, I am in favour of re-establishing the value of rationalism, of Science. Postmodern discourses must be viewed carefully! We must always ask where the field research is, and the validity of research data. It is important, so as not to just repeat narratives that come from dubious sources. It is important to have an epistemological reflection on scientific thinking.

Discussion

As can be seen in the above excerpts, both academics seemed to share some views on ignorance, by stating it has two perspectives: one of lack of knowledge and the other one linked to ideologies and the refusal to accept other views, as generally claimed by authors such as DeNicola (2017), De Beer (2009), Arrondo (2011), Harding (2006), and Dunning (2011). The role of social media, together with fake news, in creating what is called “post-truth” has also been pointed out by them, as defended by authors such as Thiollent and Lima (2020) and DeNicola (2017).

Concerning the role of the University and teacher education in combatting those fake ideas, both interviewees stressed the importance of valuing Science, as well as sharing views of what trustworthy data from educational research can be the foundation for truth, which also has been a perspective defended by authors such as Thiollent and Lima (2020), DeNicola (2017), Harding (2006), Verburgt and Burke (2021), and Ivenicki and Canen (2016). Indirectly, both interviewees seemed to embrace multicultural thinking in that they stressed the importance of challenging stereotypes and prejudices against other ways of thinking, as well as combatting ignorance, envy, and arrogance, as defended by authors such as Canen and Canen (2008, 2012) and Costa and Canen (2022).

The interviewees also called attention to the need to be wary of certain kinds of relativism, particularly stressing the need to combat narratives that deny the value of science (Canen & Canen, 2012; Costa & Canen, 2022). Such ideas could counter the kind of relativism that accepts all narratives irrespective of their scientific foundation. Epistemology, which focuses on how reality is created through research, has also been stressed by both of them. University, teacher education, and education in general could help in combating lies and ignorance by building on solid research, as well as fostering art, lyrics, and culture in general, since elementary school.

Conclusions

The present paper discusses how ignorance and envy have been attaining the perceived role of Science and intellectuals and academics in contemporary times. It argued that higher education and teacher education could try and contribute to challenging those views and help education win those crossroads in which it has been put lately. The paper first reviewed literature on the area, which has highlighted the pervasive nature of ignorance and its implications for science and intellectual perception. Literature consulted seemed to point out that addressing ignorance requires a multifaceted approach, including interdisciplinary collaboration, effective communication, multicultural leadership, and educational reform in higher education and teacher education. Different strands of research on ignorance were pinpointed, which showed how factors such as arrogance, envy, and social structures can reinforce the devaluation of science and intellectuals. Ignorance extends beyond lacking knowledge, encompassing mechanisms of deliberate refusal or complacency with misinformation that becomes popular, especially in a post-truth context.

Such ideas also seemed to be present in both interviews with academics. According to them, ignorance involves not only the absence of knowledge but also false beliefs, fake news, arrogance, and a lack of critical self-awareness. University, teacher education, and education in general could help combat prejudices against science and intellectuals by embracing cultural diversity, as well as avoiding the kind of relativism that accepts narratives without checking research validity and broadening the recognition of academic work. Also, they claimed for the rigor of methods, and findings should be shown for students, as well as demonstrating the tangible value of science. Integrating epistemology, ethics, and critical thinking across the curriculum was also pointed out to combat superficiality and manipulation in social media discourse.

In short, overcoming ignorance and prejudices against intellectual work requires a multifaceted strategy, integrating educational policies, multicultural leadership, and scientific outreach. Even in an age of widespread connectivity, the challenges posed by misinformation and intellectual arrogance remain pressing, calling for ongoing efforts of higher education and teacher education to bridge academic knowledge and broader society, thus promoting genuine advancements in science, technology, and culture.

It should be noted that this paper should be part of a bigger research agenda, so that more and more discussions should be carried out about the relevant subject in contemporary times.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank the PhD student Felipe Salgado de Souza for his assistance in developing the research.

References

- Arrondo, V. M. (2011). El papel de la Universidad en la Sociedad de Ignorantes. *Revista Científica*, 12, 29-56.
- Canen, A. G. & Canen, A. (2008). Multicultural leadership: The costs of its absence in organizational conflict management. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 19(1), 4-19.

- Canen, A. G. & Canen, A. (2012). Challenging envy in organizations: Multicultural approaches and possibilities. *Business Strategy Series*, 13(5), 199-207.
- Costa, P. C. & Canen, A. G. (2022). Internationalization of Higher Education Institutions: Perceptions of scholars. *Ensaio: Avaliação e Políticas Públicas Em Educação*, 30(114), 94-115.
- De Beer, C. S. (2009). Against the Reign of Ignorance. In *Best Practices for the Knowledge Society. Knowledge, Learning, Development and Technology for All*. WSKS, 49 (pp. 346-356). Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer.
- DeNicola, D. R. (2017). *Understanding Ignorance: The Surprising Impact of What We Don't Know*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Dunning, D. (2011). The Dunning–Kruger Effect: On Being Ignorant of One's Own Ignorance. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 44, 247-296.
- Gross, M. & McGoey, L. (2018). *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*. London & New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Halbesleben, J. R. B. & Buckley, M. R. (2004). Pluralistic ignorance: historical development and organizational applications. *Management Decision*, 42(1), 126-138.
- Harding, S. (2006). Two Influential Theories of Ignorance and Philosophy's Interests in Ignoring Them. *Hypatia*, 21(3), 20-36.
- Ivenicki, A. (2018). Multiculturalismo e formação de professores: Dimensões, possibilidades e desafios na contemporaneidade. *Ensaio: Avaliação e Políticas Públicas em Educação*, 26(100), 1151-1167.
- Ivenicki, A. & Canen, A. G. (2016). *Metodologia da Pesquisa*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Ciência Moderna.
- Ogunleye, J., Griffiths, C. & Ryan, P. (2015). Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of a 'Successful' Lifelong Learning Training Intervention – an EMILIA Project Research Report. In *Quality, Social Justice and Accountability in Education Worldwide* (pp. 251-266). BCES Conference Books, Vol. 13, No. 1. Sofia: BCES.
- Stampely, H. (2020). *The Arrogance of Ignorance: What Do You Know?* USA: World of Wonder Publishing.
- Thiollent, M. J. M. & Lima, D. M. da C. (2020). A Pós-Verdade e a Gestão: Reflexão a Partir do Exemplo do Brasil. *Sociedade em Debate*, 26(1), 56-71.
- Verburgt, L. M. & Burke, P. (2021). Introduction: Histories of Ignorance. *Journal for the History of Knowledge*, 2(1), 1-9.