

THE USEFULNESS OF KARL POPPER'S SELECTIONIST THEORY OF LEARNING
FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

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The purpose of this 60-minute session is to stimulate a discussion about what seems to us to be a problem with the exploitation of Popper's epistemology in the practice of education. To start the discussion we have prepared a paper, the abstract of which follows. It is to be hoped that participants will want to read the paper before the session: from 1 September it can be found at www.learningfordemocracy.com. At the session we shall offer a short summary of no more than ten minutes, in order to leave the remainder of the hour for discussion.

While professional philosophers, and academics in general, are willing to criticise works of theory, and may even strive to improve their own explicit ideas by subjecting them to criticism, relatively few are inclined to reflect critically on philosophical assumptions embedded in practice. Bucking this trend, and in keeping with Karl Popper's apology for the continued existence of philosophy, we take the view that the principal responsibility of social philosophers is to challenge common assumptions, particularly those embedded in widely adopted social practices. Rather than devoting our energies to criticising or defending Popper's work, we have used his evolutionary epistemology to challenge assumptions underlying: the organisation and conduct of teaching; curriculum design; policy-making and the governance of education; educational research and method in general. We have also drawn on Popper's insights to develop in practice new ways of 'doing education'. Popper's seminal achievement is, in our view, his solution of the problem of induction, which led him to develop his selectionist theory of learning and the growth of knowledge. Following Popper, one can argue that learning *never* takes place by means of instruction from without the organism; *all* we learn from the environment is that some of our expectations and other ideas are mistaken (or inadequate). Clearly, this has radical implications for education at all levels worldwide.

A problem for us now is how to further the work that we (and other non-inductivist educationists such as Henry Perkinson and Ronald Swartz) have begun, given that (a) Popper's work is still largely neglected by mainstream educationists, (b) when it is acknowledged it is often misunderstood, and (c) many thinkers who are attracted to Popper's ideas are reluctant to engage with the practical implications of his evolutionary epistemology. This is the problem the paper is designed to address.