

# Coronavirus shows us it's time to rethink everything. Let's start with education | George Monbiot

*George Monbiot*

Imagine mentioning William Shakespeare to a university graduate and discovering they had never heard of him. You would be incredulous. But it's common and acceptable not to know what an arthropod is, or a vertebrate, or to be unable to explain the difference between an insect and spider. No one is embarrassed when a "well-educated" person cannot provide even a rough explanation of the greenhouse effect, the carbon cycle or the water cycle, or of how soils form.

All this is knowledge as basic as being aware that Shakespeare was a playwright. Yet ignorance of such earthy matters sometimes seems to be worn as a badge of sophistication. I love Shakespeare, and I believe the world would be a poorer and a sadder place without him. But we would survive. The issues about which most people live in ignorance are, by contrast, matters of life and death.

I don't blame anyone for not knowing. This is a collective failure: a crashing lapse in education, that is designed for a world in which we no longer live. The way we are taught misleads us about who we are and where we stand. In mainstream economics, for example, humankind is at the centre of the universe, and the constraints of the natural world are either [invisible or marginal](#) to the models.

In an age in which we urgently need to cooperate, we are educated for individual success in competition with others. Governments tell us that the purpose of education is to [get ahead](#) of other people or, collectively, of other nations. The success of universities [is measured](#) partly by the starting salaries of their graduates. But nobody wins the human race. What we are encouraged to see as economic success ultimately means [planetary ruin](#).

Large numbers of people now reject this approach to learning – and to life. A survey [reported this week](#) suggests that six out of 10 people in the UK want the government to prioritise health and wellbeing ahead of growth when we emerge from the pandemic. This is one of the most hopeful results I have seen in years.

I believe that education should work outwards from our principal challenges and aims. This doesn't mean we should forget Shakespeare, or the other wonders of art and culture, but that the matters crucial to our continued survival are given the weight they deserve. During the lockdown, I've been doing something I've long dreamed about: experimenting with an ecological education.