

HIST 421/521: THE ORGANIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Prof. Ian F. McNeely – University of Oregon – Fall 2009

Meeting times: TR 2:00-3:20 in 214 MCK

Office hours: M 10:00-11:00, R 12:00-1:00 in 319 MCK

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Description

As confusion reigns over what knowledge means today, this course surveys the ways knowledge has been produced, reproduced, and redefined over the last 2,300 years. Beginning with the library at Alexandria and culminating in our own times, we will see that knowledge has always been more about connecting people than collecting information. Seekers of knowledge have repeatedly congregated to serve the demands of politics, religion, or economics—the wider social needs that have enabled them to practice their craft. Through dramatic struggles, they have also founded powerful institutions, from the library to the university to the laboratory, enabling them to pursue knowledge according to their own values and standards. Each institution has fundamentally reinvented what knowledge means, showing the Western intellectual tradition to be a succession of several radically different modes of knowing, not a single unbroken lineage of ideas.

In this course we will alternate between explaining how knowledge institutions came into being and exploring how they work. Students will in fact mimic practices of learning ascendant in different periods of history to gain insight into the different ways the life of the mind has been led in the past. They may physically copy a manuscript, verbally dispute a question, or author a mock grant proposal. These practical exercises, featured on the *italicized* days on the schedule below, underline the vibrant and intriguing historical alternatives to the ways we pursue knowledge in today's colleges and universities. They are both instructive to prepare and fun to enact.

Readings

Our textbook is my *Reinventing Knowledge: From Alexandria to the Internet*, which grew out of previous versions of this course. I'm assigning it so that we can devote more time to class discussions and less time to my lecturing. (I profit very little, incidentally, from assigning the book to this class.) Together with the other four books for purchase – Grafton, Humboldt, Mead, and Drucker – it is available at the UO Bookstore and on [two-hour reserve at Knight Library](#). All other readings (indicated with a * on the schedule below) are posted as PDFs on [Blackboard](#). Full bibliographic citations for all readings are given on the schedule below. Note that the reading load for this course picks up dramatically after the invention of the printing press.

Requirements

- Academic “exercises” on three of the eight *italicized* topics below (20% each)
- Midterm on Tue. 11/3 (20%)
- Final exam on Thu. 12/10 from 1:00-3:00pm (20%)

Exercises: A list of the eight academic exercises can be found at the end of this syllabus. Everyone must do either exercise 1 or 2. The other two are up to you, with the following restriction: you may not do both 5 and 6, or both 7 and 8. A **sign-up sheet** will be circulated during the second class meeting asking you to choose, in advance, the two exercises (besides 1 or 2) that you’ll be preparing. These choices should be regarded as binding.

The exercises will function as a springboard for class discussion; you may be called upon to read sections out loud to your peers and/or perform in other appropriate ways. For this reason, exercises are due at the beginning of class on the designated day. The sole exception is exercise 5, the *academy* assignment, which is due *Nov. 10*.

Lateness policy: Late exercises will not be accepted, save in cases of documented emergency. If you fail to turn in a completed exercise in class on the applicable due date—and fail to produce evidence of debilitating illness or acute family crisis—you will receive no credit for that particular assignment. You may not write an exercise for extra credit to offset a late or otherwise failing assignment or for any other reason.

Grading: Both A- and B-level assignments demonstrate rigor, clarity, and mastery of the material. To earn an A you must, in addition, immerse yourself in the logic of past knowledge institutions, showing creativity and imagination without losing analytical precision. C-level assignments show mere competence, whereas D-level assignments do not even rise to that standard. Fs are given for incomplete or missing work.

Exams: The midterm will focus on Grafton and, secondarily, on Humboldt; the final exam will emphasize the second (post-midterm) half of the course. However, each will require you to marshal *all* your newly acquired knowledge and interpretive skills and to have kept up with the readings. Unlike the exercises, the exams will be conventional in format, with short-answer, identification, and essay questions.

Graduate students: I encourage graduate students to enroll in HIST 527 instead of this course, as the pedagogy for this course is more appropriate for undergraduate students. Those who nonetheless wish to enroll in HIST 521 are required to complete significant additional work. This work may consist of a series of meetings with the course instructor, additional scholarly reading at a higher level, and work with primary sources. The specific character of the supplementary work is negotiated at the beginning of the term and may vary in emphasis depending on the needs of the student.

Schedule

<u>Date</u>	<u>Topic</u>	<u>Readings</u>
9/29	Introduction	(handout)
10/1	The school	<p>Ian F. McNeely with Lisa Wolvertton, <i>Reinventing Knowledge: From Alexandria to the Internet</i> (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008), xi-xxii, 3-13</p> <p>*Randall Collins, <i>The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change</i> (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 24-28, 80-103</p>
10/6	<i>The dialogue</i>	<p>McNeely, <i>Reinventing Knowledge</i>, 13-36</p> <p>*Michael Deakin, <i>Hypatia of Alexandria: Mathematician and Martyr</i> (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 137-42, 150-57 (for letters from Synesius of Cyrene)</p>
10/8	The library	<p>*Steve Fuller and David Gorman, "Burning Libraries: Cultural Creation and the Problem of Historical Consciousness," <i>Annals of Scholarship</i> 4 (1987): 105-19</p> <p>*Christian Jacob, "Eratosthenes: Intellectual Athlete," in <i>Alexandria, Third Century BC: The Knowledge of the World in a Single City</i> (Alexandria: Harpocrates, 2000), 101-13</p>
10/13	The monastery	<p>McNeely, <i>Reinventing Knowledge</i>, 37-76</p> <p>*Jean Leclercq, <i>The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture</i> (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 71-83, 89, 106-7</p>
10/15	<i>The gloss</i>	<p>*Clement of Alexandria, "The Educator," in <i>After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity</i>, ed. Bart Ehrman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 387-99</p>
10/20	The university	<p>McNeely, <i>Reinventing Knowledge</i>, 77-118</p> <p>*Walter J. Ong, "Agonistic Structures in Academia: Past to Present," in <i>Faith and Contexts</i> (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992-95), vol. 3, 112-137</p>
10/22	<i>The disputation</i>	<p>*Constant J. Mews (ed.), <i>The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France</i> (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 16-19, 140-43, 209-13, 227 (at #49)-37</p>

10/27	The republic of letters	McNeely, <i>Reinventing Knowledge</i> , 119-160 Anthony Grafton with April Shelford and Nancy Siraisi, <i>New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery</i> (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1-35 (and start Thursday's reading)
10/29	<i>The letter</i>	Grafton, <i>New Worlds, Ancient Texts</i> , 35-194 (read strategically with this week's exercise in mind)
11/3	Midterm	Alexander von Humboldt, <i>Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of The New Continent</i> (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1995 [1814-25]), 5-125
11/5	<i>The academy</i> (professor absent)	Grafton, <i>New Worlds, Ancient Texts</i> , 217-37
11/10	The disciplines	McNeely, <i>Reinventing Knowledge</i> , 161-204 *Andrew Abbott, "The Disciplines and the Future," in <i>The Future of the City of Intellect</i> , ed. Steven Brint (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 205-30
11/12	<i>The curriculum</i>	Humboldt, <i>Personal Narrative</i> (review and finish, reading strategically with this week's exercise in mind)
11/17	The laboratory	McNeely <i>Reinventing Knowledge</i> , 205-50 *Bruno Latour, "Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise the World," in <i>The Science Studies Reader</i> , ed. Mario Biagioli (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 258-75
11/19	<i>The experiment</i>	Margaret Mead, <i>Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study</i> (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001 [1928]), 3-11, 12-134 (skim), 179-184, 199-210
11/24	<i>The grant proposal</i>	Mead, <i>Coming of Age</i> , 135-70
11/26	Thanksgiving	(none)
12/1	The knowledge society?	McNeely, <i>Reinventing Knowledge</i> , 251-76 Peter Drucker, <i>Post-Capitalist Society</i> (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 1-112
12/3	What comes next?	Drucker, <i>Post-Capitalist Society</i> , 181-218

Exercises

Note: I've set target lengths for the exercises to ensure that each requires roughly the same amount of time and thought. You are welcome to append an explanation of your thought processes and preparation to your assignments, though this is not required. Such explanations do not count against the target length and I do not grade them directly; however, they may help me to appreciate the virtues and better understand the shortcomings of your work.

1. The dialogue: Construct a conversation Hypatia and Synesius of Cyrene might have had if they were reunited as teacher and disciple in Alexandria.* Try to tease out the philosophical issues lurking within his letters to her, and how they might have been differently discussed face-to-face instead of from afar, as is the case in the letters. (You may add other conversation partners if you choose.) In the course of the conversation you should treat these two issues: (a) the superiority of true philosophers over their rivals and (b) the proper role of books and libraries in the pursuit of knowledge, especially in comparison with speech. (Target length: 7-8 double-spaced pages)

2. The gloss: Recopy one or more chunks of Clement of Alexandria's "The Educator" word for word, by hand, in your best penmanship.† Then "gloss" it: that is, add a series of brief comments, whether between the lines or in the margins (or both), that together add up to a robust, coherent interpretation of the text. Adopt the perspective of a Western European Benedictine monk—or nun—adapting Clement's ethical guidelines to life in a rural cloister. Consider the vast cultural and material differences between your situation and that of Eastern Mediterranean urbanites, but also your shared ideals as Christians. (Target length: one sheet of paper or other writing material, of any size, plus at least one separate page explaining how you put the assignment together)

3. The disputation: Distill the letters of Abelard and Heloise into a series of questions on the nature of love: the different forms it can take (sexual, familial, charitable, divine, etc.) and the proper role of each in Christian life.‡ Make each question take a yes-or-no (*sic/non*) format, and write out a short paragraph defending each side of each question. Cover the subject of love as completely as the letters allow, taking them as textual authorities on the subject. But don't simply recapitulate or summarize their arguments; instead, recategorize and sequence the material in the most logical, rational way possible. Extra credit for using Latin terminology and concepts. Come to class prepared to debate. (Target length: 5-6 double-spaced pages)

4. The letter: Choose a discovery described in Grafton's book that relies on visual, tactile, aural, olfactory, and/or gustatory observation or experimentation, possibly through the mediation of scientific instruments, possibly through travel, and possibly through images, maps, diagrams, mathematical formulas, or other forms of graphic representation. Then write a letter to a distant colleague explaining the discovery, defending its validity, and situating it within the tradition of textual authorities on the subject, going back to antiquity if possible. Don't assume your recipient

* For a model, you may want to consult [Plato's *Ion*](#).

† For background, you may want to consult [Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen* \(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966\), 31-65.](#)

‡ For a model, you may want to consult the relevant sections of [Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*](#), and condense the scheme of objections and counter-objections into a simpler (*sic versus non*) structure.

will be able to re-create the observation or experiment him- or herself. Instead, use your best rhetoric to persuade from a distance. (Target length: 4-5 double-spaced pages)

5. The academy: For this exercise, since I will be absent, the class will constitute itself as an independent body of gentlemen and gentleladies, i.e. as an academy. Your collective task is to evaluate Alexander von Humboldt's findings from the New World, keeping in mind the history of outlandish discoveries emanating therefrom. Devise a series of criteria to test the accuracy of his reports and his trustworthiness as a scholar while at the same time behaving with scrupulous civility. Base your interrogation purely on the text he has provided and on whatever biographical information you judge to be relevant. Students doing the exercise should lead the discussion and afterwards summarize the discussion and its results for the *Transactions for the Oregonization of Knowledge*. (Target length: 5-6 double-spaced pages, *due Tues., Nov. 10*)

6. The curriculum: Imagine a university based on Alexander – not Wilhelm – von Humboldt's interests, which were as encyclopedic as those of his brother yet focused not on philology and philosophy but on the observation of nature in all its forms. Design a coherent program of study to prepare future Humboldts – again, Alexanders – and specify what disciplines will make it up. Either enumerate Gen. Ed., major, and other requirements, or concoct a wholly new scheme of higher education, but in either case ground your proposal in the world of disciplines, paying close attention to the political and administrative difficulties that arise when attempting to harmonize them. One other thing: you may not use the name of [any UO department, institute, program, center, major, or minor](#). (Target length: 5-6 double-spaced pages)

7. The experiment: Imagine you have received a journal article by Margaret Mead summarizing the “experiment” she performed in Samoa, and have been asked to referee it for an academic journal as part of the standard scientific practice of peer review. Write a report recommending that it be accepted, rejected, or “revised and resubmitted” according to suggestions you spell out. Describe the nature of her experiment, discuss the nature and importance of the question it seeks to answer, evaluate the methods and techniques she employs, and consider her reported results and their interpretation. Pay close attention to the criteria defining laboratory science but also to the modifications expected of social-scientific investigations. (Target length: 5-6 double-spaced pages)

8. The grant proposal: Write the introduction to a grant proposal applying Mead's findings about sexuality, gender, adolescence, and education to the redesign of the public school system in a large, racially and economically diverse American city in the mid-twentieth century. Direct your proposal to one of the major foundations practicing “scientific philanthropy,” such as the Carnegie or the Rockefeller. As Principal Investigator, you should outline a budget (in general terms), describe the organization and management of your team of researchers and other workers, specify criteria for gauging the success of the project, and consider how to gain support for and participation in your project from school administrators, teachers, parents, community leaders, politicians, and government bureaucracies. (Target length: 5-6 double-spaced pages)