

**HIST 421/521**  
**THE ORGANIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE**  
**FROM ALEXANDRIA TO THE INTERNET**

Prof. Ian F. McNeely – University of Oregon – Winter 2006  
CRNs: 25553/25554

**Meeting times:** TR 10:00-11:20 in 360 CON  
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**Course description**

This is an historical survey of the major social institutions in which academic knowledge has been produced, transmitted, preserved, and categorized in the West.

The course will mix lectures with discussions of readings, though the two parts are kept deliberately out of sync. Lectures emphasize institutions designed to encompass all knowledge and the ideologies that undergirded them. Readings focus on times when institutions were in flux and individuals and small scholarly communities could reshape how knowledge was organized. These were times, too, when women could participate in the reorganization of knowledge despite their frequent exclusion from formal institutions.

Prerequisites: basic familiarity with European history, ancient, medieval, or modern; and a willingness to rethink the structure and very purpose of contemporary higher education.

**Assignments**

- Academic exercises (~3 pp.) on four of the nine reading assignments (15% each)
- In-class midterm exam on Tue., Feb. 21 (15%)
- A take-home final exam due Thu., Mar. 24 by 5pm (25%)

The various academic exercises are intended to mimic the forms of learning found in each of the institutions we'll be studying. They also highlight the theme of gender. For example, during week two, students copy a passage, by hand, on the relation between gender and learning during the Middle Ages—just as a medieval nun might have.

Everyone must do *either* exercise 1 or 2. Further exercises, described at the end of the syllabus, are required for *three* of the remaining seven units of the course (nos. 3-9). A sign-up sheet will be circulated during the *second* class meeting asking you to choose, in advance, the three units (besides no. 1 or 2) that you'll be writing about. 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 day the readings in question are being discussed. 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.

Students enrolled in HIST 521 are required to complete significant additional work. This work consists 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.

### Books for purchase

- Maria Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) \$15.95
- *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004) \$14.00
- Londa Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) \$21.95
- Alexander von Humboldt, *Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* (London: Penguin Books, 1995) \$16.00
- Steven Epstein, *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998) \$16.15
- Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (Cambridge, MA: DaCapo Press, 1988 [1954]) \$15.00

### Working schema

Unit	Institution	Ideology	Era	Form
1	The library	Philosophy	Antiquity	Critical edition
2	The monastery	Christianity	500-1100	Gloss
3	The university	Scholasticism	1100-1500	Disputation
4	The republic of letters	Humanism	1500-1800	Letter
5	The academy	<i>same</i>	<i>same</i>	<i>Impresa</i>
6	The disciplines	Idealism	1800-1900	Syllabus
7	The laboratory	Materialism	<i>same</i>	Experiment
8	Big science	Scientism	1900-2000	Grant proposal
9	The two cultures	Postmodernism	<i>same</i>	<i>In formation?</i>

## Class schedule, discussion topics, and weekly readings

**CAPITALS** indicate lecture days. *Italics* indicate exercise/discussion days. Asterisks (\*) indicate readings on the Web or on electronic reserve.

### (1/10) INTRODUCTION

In-class reading and discussion

\*[McNeely, \*The Organization of Knowledge\*, intro. \(PDF on website\)](#)

*On Thursday, bring a list of your top four choices from exercises 3-9*

### (1/12) THE LIBRARY

(1/17) *The critical edition*

Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria*, 66-106 then 27-65 and 111-120

**Exercise 1:** Use the [Google search engine](#) to assemble a two-page, single-spaced collection of short paragraphs shedding light on the nature of Hypatia's bond—erotic, spiritual, intellectual, and purely friendly (“Platonic”?)—with her male students. The paragraphs should be copied from the most authentic ancient sources you can find online; keep in mind that information on the Internet is, however, notoriously inaccurate. Append a one- to two-page description (1) describing your research methods and (2) defending the authenticity and accuracy of your edition. Consult Dzielska for ideas on sources.

### (1/19) THE MONASTERY

(1/24) *The gloss*

Peter Abelard, “Historia calamitatum” (pp. 57-106) and “Letter 5. Heloise to Abelard” (pp. 159-79) in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*

**Exercise 2:** Read the story of Abelard's calamities. Copy at least a page's worth, by hand, word for word, as neatly as possible, from *Heloise's* letter to Abelard and then gloss it: that is, add a running commentary, either in the margins or between the lines, on the significance of gender to the pursuit of learning during the Middle Ages. Neatness and readability count.

### (1/26) THE UNIVERSITY

(1/31) *The disputation*

\*[Prudence Allen, \*The Concept of Woman\*, vol. 2, 68-74](#)

\*[Margaret Porette, \*The Mirror of Simple Souls\*, verse prologue, prologue \(=ch. 1\), ch. 2](#)

\*Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*: familiarize yourself with its [contents and structure](#) (prima pars through tertia pars) and read carefully the discussion of [“Whether, besides philosophy, any further doctrine is required?”](#)

**Exercise 3:** Consider the question “Can love provide knowledge of God that reason cannot?” Compose an answer Aquinas might have given to this question, adopting the form he would have given it. Come to class prepared to defend both the *pro* and *contra* stances in verbal confrontation.

## (2/2) THE REPUBLIC OF LETTERS

### (2/7) *The letter*

Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex?*, 1-118, 245-264

**Exercise 4:** Compose a letter Maria Winkelmann might have written to a male colleague to help her gain admission to the Berlin Academy of Sciences. Pay attention both to her substantive credentials and accomplishments and to the obstacles raised by her gender and class background.

## (2/9) THE ACADEMY

### (2/14) *The impresa*

Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex?*, 119-88, 265-78

**Exercise 5:** Use images and symbols of masculinity and femininity to design an *impresa* (emblem with a motto, in a language of your choice) for an academy dedicated to the study, appreciation, cultivation, worship, domination, or desecration—you decide—of nature. Explain the thinking behind your choices, and in particular what kinds of people and what kinds of science/art/scholarship your academy means to attract. Consult [Roberto Paolo Ciardi’s article on e-reserve, “A Knot of Words and Things.”](#) on the design of *imprese*.

## (2/16) THE DISCIPLINES

### (2/21) *Midterm*

Humboldt, *Personal Narrative*, xxxv-lxiv, 5-125

*The midterm will require you to design a knowledge tree (hierarchy of disciplines) using Humboldt’s multifarious interests as a guide.*

### (2/23) *The syllabus*

Humboldt, *Personal Narrative* (finish with exercise 6 in mind)

**Exercise 6:** Read [Bonnie Smith’s “The Practices of Scientific History”](#) on e-reserve. Imagine that you’re one of Humboldt’s male companions and want to make a name in one of the fields you’ve already identified as a subset of his encyclopedic project on the midterm exam. Design a full-fledged syllabus that will appeal to other young men and give them a structured program of university-based study.

## (2/28) THE LABORATORY

### (3/2) *The experiment*

Wiener, *On the Human Use of Human Beings*, 7-111

[\\*Ken Newquist review of William Gibson's \*Neuromancer\* \(1984\)](#)

**Exercise 7:** It has been estimated that one-third of the messages sent over the Internet contain pornographic images or text. How would Wiener explain the popularity of “cybersex”? (See ch. V on the notion that organisms might be understood as messages.) Formulate a question comparing some aspect of cybersex with conventional human sex and devise an experiment to answer it.

(3/7) **BIG SCIENCE**

(3/9) *Grant proposal*

Epstein, *Impure Science*, 1-19, 26-38, 45-104, 181-89, 216-64, 330-53

**Exercise 8:** Write the introduction to a grant proposal proposing joint scientific and civic participation in studying a current issue related to men’s, women’s, or sexual health and requiring financial support from the government agency of your choice.

(3/14) **THE TWO CULTURES**

(3/16) *Speculations about the future*

Wiener, *On the Human Use of Human Beings*, 112-93

**Exercise 9:** Write an op-ed piece (nonacademic newspaper commentary for the general public) outlining the form of a new institution of knowledge to bridge the sciences and the humanities.

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