Project description

Motivation

Often overlooked, handbooks, protocols and manuals are key tools in the making and sharing of knowledge. Across scholarly studies, artisanal workshops, religious schools, and biomedical laboratories, instructional and reference texts codify the knowledge of a working community, with an eye to communicating what a new practitioner needs to know. Across the globe, manuals and handbooks have also played a key role in bringing local knowledge to far-flung readers. Over the past two years, the organizers have assembled a working group of scholars who are examining the role of such texts in different countries and regions, and in periods from antiquity to the present. We seek funding to enable our group to meet in person, share our work, and involve graduate students in our collaborative effort.

a) Project plan

I. International Conference at Princeton, 2018

We request limited funding to complete support for an international conference on “Leaning by the Book: Manuals in the History of Knowledge,” to be held in Princeton in January or June 2018. Most of the funding has already been committed by the German Historical Institute, Washington, DC and Princeton’s Center for Collaborative History. This conference will bring together an interdisciplinary group of scholars working on the role of manuals and handbooks in knowledge transmission, from antiquity to the present, in Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Our project brings together three vibrant fields—history of books and media, science and technology studies, and history of knowledge—to consider (in simplest terms) how practices relate to text, and how bodies of technical knowledge are shaped and maintained over time. Moreover, we believe that the topic of manuals and handbooks broadly construed will provoke an especially fruitful exchange between scholars based in Anglo-American and German scholarly traditions, between specialists on different periods (from antiquity to the 20th century), and between those approaching the problem of knowledge from various disciplinary perspectives. The conference grant from the German Historical Institute is aimed specifically at expanding the conference beyond historians of science, technology, and medicine to the humanities more broadly. As soon as we have firmed up the meeting date, we will disseminate an open call for papers.

The conference as envisioned has several specific goals. One is to delineate a general history of manuals and handbooks as a genre, working off of what has already been done for political and religious texts (e.g., catechisms). A second will be to compare different ways of delineating, ordering and changing—think of the importance of the editions of the DSM to psychiatry and medicine, for example—or the different methods of communicating instructions. To this end, we will also draw on the newest methods from book history to examine how methods are transmitted in various fields. Here, digital history could also play an important role, and we have been in contact with Princeton’s Center for Digital Humanities about developing new research tools in conjunction with
our collaborative effort. Last, traditional scholarly products, namely publications, are also in the works. We are currently in discussion with editors about a planned book whose chapters will be presented at the conference.

II. Graduate Workshop Following the Conference

This project also has potential to shape the current work of graduate students at Princeton and beyond, especially those working on the interdisciplinary field of history of knowledge. To take advantage of the event to benefit these humanities graduate students, we propose a two-day graduate student workshop to immediately follow the conference. The idea is give graduate students a chance to discuss their dissertation research in a setting with senior scholars from around the world, with a particular focus on the methodological problems and promises of using manuals and related media as sources for scholarly interpretation. Graduate student conferences and summer schools have become increasingly popular in the last twenty-five years, and benefit graduate students not only by imparting cutting-edge expertise, but also by enabling networks to form between established scholars and early career scholars at different institutions and in different countries. For this reason, we feel the graduate workshop would be most effective if around half of the participants came from beyond Princeton’s graduate programs.

We will announce our post-conference workshop with a call for papers within and beyond Princeton, focusing particular attention on recruiting graduate students (and early postdocs) from Princeton’s international partner institutions. Rather than being asked to present a précis of their dissertation work, we will ask applicants to focus on a methodical problem emerging from their own project (e.g. pertaining to comparative historical approaches over time and space, to archival resources—often problematic for the history of books and publishing in the more recent period—or the use of digital tools). From the applications, we will select c. 20 candidates who will be invited to attend both the conference and workshop. The workshop sessions will center on one or several such problems, and match junior researchers with (an) expert(s) on the respective topic. The sessions will include an exposé of the respective problem and find suitable formats in which to explore it. These could involve the presentation of source materials, joint explorations of software, conceptual discussions etc. The overall aim of the workshop will be to support graduate students (and recent PhD’s) by exploring novel dimensions of the respective projects, to create space for conceptual or methodical discussions, and to allow for unexpected conjunctures between different scholars, projects and fields of study.

We anticipate strong interest in this workshop among Princeton graduate students, but the event will have a more enduring effect on their careers if we also involve graduate students (and early career scholars) from other institutions, beginning with Humboldt University. We have seen from international graduate summer schools and graduate student conferences that such gatherings catalyze lasting scholarly networks and exchanges that are highly beneficial to Princeton’s graduate students.
b) How the project supports the internationalization goal and the objectives of the IF

As mentioned, our proposal combines an international conference at Princeton with a workshop of graduate students and early career scholars on the topic. This will lead to integration of researchers in two dimensions: First, vertically, as a core group of renowned scholars participating in the conference will stay for the workshop, contributing their expertise and methods to the benefit of research projects of more junior scholars. Of course, the learning will be reciprocal, as graduate students will also be asking probing questions to presenters at the conference. Second, our proposal comprises a horizontal integration as well, since we will assemble graduate students and postdocs from at least the U.S., Europe, and Latin America, and we hope beyond. We have organized a symposium on the topic at the International Congress for the History of Science and Technology, meeting in Rio de Janeiro this summer, and anticipate reaching out to graduate students there. History and philosophy of science, technology, and medicine is especially strong in Brazil, so this could be source of applicants for both the conference and workshop.

Overall, we intend to foster a transnational and transgenerational group of researchers centered around our shared problem. This will enable collaboration on a common topic between faculty at Princeton with scholars abroad as well as with graduate students at our institution and beyond. More specifically, we expect that the events will consolidate the already-strong connections between Princeton University and Humboldt University.

c) Participants in the project

Beyond the organizer, two Princeton faculty members, Jennifer Rampling of History and Federico Marcon of East Asian Studies, are part of the symposium this summer and would also (we assume) present a paper at the 2018 conference. We would invite Nigel Smith of English, Tony Grafton and Michael Gordin of History, and Anke te Heesen of Humboldt’s History Department, to attend and likely comment at the conference. Professor te Heesen and our Princeton colleagues (particularly those involved with Committee for the Study of Books and Media) have been supportive of this collective project since we began working on it two years ago.

Possible graduate student participants that we are aware of include Christian Flow (History, Princeton), Silke Körber (Philosophy, Humboldt), Ann MacKinney (History, Humboldt), Madeline McMohan (History, Princeton), Anna-Maria Meister (Architecture, Princeton), Stephanie Pope (English Literature, Princeton), and Alrun Schmidtke (History, Humboldt).

As mentioned, we will issue a call for papers for the conference, and so we cannot anticipate who will be our final list of presenters. We expect Kerstin von der Krone and Elisabeth Engel, both of the German Historical Institute, to submit papers. In addition, we
hope to include as many of the international group of scholars as we can who are involved in our book project. They include the following:

Markus Asper, Professor of Greek, Department of Classics, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, “Ancient Greek Manuals: How to Make Things Work Through Text.”


Karine Chemla, Directrice de Recherche, SPHERE (CNRS–University Paris Diderot), “Reading Instructions of the Past, Renaming and Reclassifying Them: Song Commentaries on the Canon The Nine Chapters on Mathematical Procedures (11th–13th centuries)”

Stephanie A. Dick, Assistant Professor, Department of History and Sociology of Science, University of Pennsylvania, “‘A Guide for the Perplexed’: Making a New Mathematical Community”

Hjalmar Fors and Nils-Otto Ahnfelt, Researchers, Office for History of Science, Uppsala University, “Mapping and Making Theriac”

Mathias Grote, Assistant Professor, Department of History, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, “In Between Field Guide and ‘Bible’ – A Manual of Biological Classification in Time, 1920s–1980s”

Lara Keuck, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, “How to Correctly Use the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Negotiating the Boundaries of American Psychiatry in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century”


Federico Marcon, Associate Professor, Department of East Asian Studies, Princeton University, “The Clubber’s Guide to Nature: The Sociability of Knowledge in Early Modern Japan”

Matteo Martelli, Researcher, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, “Selecting and Organizing Recipes in Late Antique and Early Byzantine Compendia of Alchemy and Medicine”
J. Andrew Mendelsohn, Reader in History of Science and Medicine, School of History, Queen Mary University of London and Institute for the History of Medicine and Ethics in Medicine, Charité Berlin, “The Book of a Thousand Questions, or: What the Enlightenment Did to Autopsy”

Staffan Müller-Wille, Associate Professor, University of Exeter and Giuditta Parolini, Postdoctoral Researcher, Science, Technology and Innovation Studies, University of Edinburgh, “Manuals in the Early History of Mendelian Genetics”

Jennifer M. Rampling, Department of History, Princeton University, “Reading Alchemically: Early Modern Guides to Impossible Practices”

Simon Werrett, Senior Lecturer in History and Philosophy of Science, Department of Science and Technology Studies, University College London, “Astro-Oeconomy: Books of Household Management and Domestic Astronomy in Eighteenth-Century Britain”

d) Ongoing benefits of the project to Princeton faculty members and students

First, the conference will solidify the collaboration of three Princeton faculty members with a diverse and interdisciplinary group of scholars from many institutions around the world. Second, the graduate workshop would give graduate students at Princeton access to many of these scholars, as well as enable them to form scholarly networks that lead to future conversations and opportunities. Lastly, we are interested in developing and using tools from the digital humanities, which could contribute to both new knowledge and possible new platforms for research.