

Iteration as Transformation of Knowledge

Annual Conference, Collaborative Research Centre 980

“Episteme in Motion. Transfer of Knowledge from the Ancient World to the Early Modern Period”

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The Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) „Episteme in Motion“ investigates processes of knowledge transformation in pre-modern cultures, both European and non-European. This phenomenon merits particular attention since knowledge within these cultures has often been considered as stable, both from an inside perspective and from the outside. The key postulate is that in all ‘traditions’ and apparently stable systems of knowledge, epistemic transfer takes place constantly. This is frequently a long-term, subtle process, modifying existing knowledge and tacitly integrating novel elements. Therefore, to a great extent, this process cannot be explained with the tools of a traditional history of knowledge that relies on concepts of rupture and revolution as indicators of ‘progress’.

The 2014 annual conference will highlight the concept of ‘iteration’ – in the sense of a combination of repetition and change – to address a core issue in the history and theory of knowledge, namely the role of institutions in long-term epistemic transformation processes. Institutions should be taken in the wider sense as being social constellations that accentuate stability both within the institution and towards the outside while giving symbolic expression to the principles governing their activities (cf. Blume, *Institutionalität und Repräsentation*, 2002). Therefore, institutions should not be reduced to their legal foundations.

In this context, power relations may inform epistemic configurations insofar as competing interests can play a significant role in establishing and maintaining institutions and knowledge structures. As a consequence, power relations determine the interaction of agents within institutions. The material aspect of institutions should also be considered, including the loci of knowledge (e.g. the geographical location of a school, or the architecture of a temple) and various media for storing and transferring knowledge (e.g. books, drawings, or oral teaching).

By making ‘iteration’ the conceptual focus of the conference, we intend to draw attention to those processes of knowledge transformation that, paradoxically, spring from institutional techniques of stabilisation and that, in turn, affect and change the institutional settings they pertain to. On the one hand, iterations (such as rituals, established habitus, entrenched styles of thinking, curricula, canons and commentaries, as well as frequent references to charismatic founders of institutions) constitute the practice that generates any given institution, and by which it first achieves stability. On the other hand, institutions decree legitimate forms of iteration, thus generating practices that should not be understood merely as factors that stabilise and consolidate knowledge. Rather,

they should be investigated as engines of transformative processes. After all, epistemic institutions (such as schools, universities, academies, libraries, artists' workshops, circles of scholars, ecclesiastical institutions, archives, etc.) depend on their relation to established knowledge structures, which, in turn, are enforced by them.

The conference will thus reflect on three factors of epistemic transformation: institutional grounding, the transmission of knowledge, and long-term epistemic practices. Knowledge transmission can occur *orally* and by mnemonic *internalisation*, as well as by *externalised* means (such as books, drawings, manuscripts, or papyri). From this viewpoint, the relation between orality and literacy is highly relevant, keeping in mind that the role of genre always has to be taken into account in the case of written transmission. The medium by which knowledge is transferred is to be considered as both a stabilising and a transforming factor. The uninterrupted and yet transformative production of model books in artists' workshops may be taken as a case in point.

In order to explore the interdependency of iterated practices, institutions and 'episteme in motion', participants are invited to present case studies from their disciplines with a view to the following issues in particular:

1. Authority and canon: Many knowledge institutions derive their legitimation from reference to an authoritative founder figure. Likewise, a canon (when understood as an institutional product) prescribes a corpus of sources or the work of a single author as the indispensable foundation of legitimate knowledge and consequently of all instruction and thinking. Nevertheless, the continuing reference to a source can also generate transfer mechanisms, as is documented e.g. in medieval commentary practices. Similarly, translation has always played an important part in shaping and transforming canons. Hence, issues of authority and canon are worth investigating in terms of the tension between stability and discontinuity.

2. Teacher-student relationships often involve teaching by doing, which could include physical or mental *exercitia*. At the same time, the curriculum underpins the teacher-student relationship as a non-personal form of knowledge transfer. In an institutional context, the establishing of a framework for the transmission of knowledge has a systematising and organising function as well as a prescriptive one. It shapes, transmits, and safeguards a group's way of thinking. In the context of instruction, just as in that of religious initiation, institutionalisation and canonisation are often legitimised by rituals and even claims to sacrality.

3. Legitimation and subversion: The position of institutions is always precarious insofar as they depend on the recognition of their status. Iterative practices serve to hedge against problems of justification, recognition and validity. Furthermore, institutions have a special relationship with

power: They dominate and regulate internal processes of knowledge generation and knowledge transmission while still being subject to external acceptance within the framework of social power structures. Conference participants are invited to investigate the interrelation between these two aspects, i.e. for example the ways in which external pressure for legitimation affects internal processes. At the same time, they might address the question of how institutions deal with the undermining of authority, factions, and competition, as for example the ways in which the founding of new academic institutions can trigger transfer processes in universities. How do claims to competence – and the way in which competence is taught, transmitted and exercised – contribute to the stabilisation of knowledge traditions or, in the case of competing claims to competence, their destabilisation? And what about tensions within institutions? To give an example, the normative knowledge repeatedly reproduced in law schools often appears to be inconsistent with legal practice. How do institutions deal with these tension, or rather, which mechanisms do they develop for aligning theoretical knowledge and its practical implementation?

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