

KNOWING THE WORLD IN THE 1920s

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In 1926 and 1927 the Floating University took nearly 500 American college students around the world on a nearly eight-month cruise that was designed to deliver an education in international affairs not available in the land-based classroom. It was through direct sense experience in and of the world, rather than indirect engagement via textbooks and lectures, that the leaders of the cruise believed students would learn to be “world-minded.” This presentation argues that uncovering the history of the Floating University not only reveals much about the entangled world of internationalism, American empire, and education in the 1920s but also has implications for how historians understand the legitimization of knowledge during the twentieth century. Universities derive much of their social standing (not to mention their income) from their claim to have authority over knowledge. They are the institutions that undertake the research, distil the learning, and provide the training that enables the specialized expertise so crucial to multifaceted economies and societies. The story of the Floating University troubles the naturalization of this assumption. It reveals a 1920s contest over the kind of knowledge that should underpin university education in which academically authorized expertise came into conflict with an emphasis on direct personal experience. Although it was academically authorized expertise that came to underpin the business model of universities during the twentieth century, at the start of the 1920s the issue of what legitimized knowledge was by no means settled.

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Convened by Miles Taylor (Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany), Ku-ming (Kevin) Chang (Academia Sinica, Taiwan), Heike Jöns (Loughborough University, United Kingdom) and Tamson Pietsch (University of Technology Sydney, Australia). Hosted by the Humboldt University of Berlin on Zoom: <https://www.histgeog-uni.net/history-of-universities-seminar-2/>.