Ulric Neisser
“Memory: what are the important questions?”

Theme of the reading

This paper was originally published 35 years ago. You may think that this would make it out of date. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Of course a lot has been learned in cognitive science and psychology since Neisser wrote this paper, but his central claim, that “If X is an interesting memory phenomenon, psychologists avoid it like the plague.” is still true today. The theme of this reading is that while laboratory experiments have produced mountains of results about memory, they have not told us much of interest about the nature of memory. He identifies a set of important questions about memory that have not been answered in cognitive science or psychology. Most of these are still unanswered today.

Getting ready to read

Look up the word “quixotic.”
In the world of biologists, what is a “naturalist”? What is an “ethologist”?

Questions to keep in mind while reading

How does Neisser define memory?
What are the important questions identified by Neisser?
Why has academic psychology NOT addressed these questions?
What brought about the demise of classical learning theory? How is it that a psychological theory was crushed by researchers who were not even psychologists?
What does Neisser say we must do in order to answer his important questions?
What is ecological validity?
How can Neisser claim that perhaps “memory” in general does not exist?