Project Information Literacy
Provocation Series

Reading in the Age of Distrust

The ability to read analytically and deeply should be one of the most important takeaways from college. But are educators equipping students with the skills they need for today?

CULTURE

BY ALISON J. HEAD

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Tweet

As soon as they begin college, course reading awaits them. Often students will be required to read texts closely, not just to glean important facts and figures, but to arrive at understanding through context, inference, and making connections of their own.

For college students in America today, these reading competencies are not only essential for academic success, but for functioning in the workplace and participating in a society that is increasingly more divided than ever over the veracity of news and information.

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But how many faculty spend time talking to students about becoming stronger readers of all kinds of texts, not just assigned content? There's the little-discussed skimming and scanning that most students have been doing since third or fourth grade for scrolling through social media feeds, news digests, and textbook assignments. Then there's the college-level immersive reading for making sense out of texts that many professors in a variety of disciplines expect of them.

Both types of reading co-exist in a world flooded by content. Both are situated in a context. Both are necessary. And yet, there's every indication that discussions about the purpose of assigned readings and strategies for mastering the art of deep and analytical reading get short shrift in the majority of different courses students will take.

While educators believe reading is an investment in learning and knowing, what many aren't considering is what reading analytically means to civic life in the digital age when many of the old gatekeepers of traditional publishing are disappearing. As new voices have emerged and there is an explosion of reading material, there is also less quality control and editorial oversight for accuracy.

Nor are faculty re-evaluating their own role in ensuring that students are prepared not just to read critically, but also to discover the contexts and social constructs that shape texts in a variety of ways. For students, these competencies are urgently needed for making sound choices in a fast-paced and often chaotic world.

As trust in the written word continues to fray, are educators doing enough to prepare students for this new world of reading?

"Connecting the Dots"

Nearly two-thirds of first-year students are unprepared for the college-level reading they will be expected to do, according to the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress Report. This finding resonates loud and clear with research we've conducted for the past decade at Project Information Literacy (PIL), a national research institute that has studied the information practices of nearly 21,000 U.S. college students.

We first noticed problems with college reading as part of a 2013 PIL study on how students make the information transition from high school to college. Students we interviewed in composition courses said they felt unprepared to read the texts they were assigned by faculty and the materials they sought out independently to complete their assignments.

More than a third of the students described having difficulties with reading comprehension, the very basis for deep and analytical reading. Even though first-year students may have some of the vocabulary, most lacked the analytical skills for making inferences, interpreting results, and solving complex problems that are necessary for college-level reading.

Students in our study said they grappled with trying to understand what authors mean and what to retain from a passage, given their lack of familiarity with scholarly language. Many more had trouble integrating information culled from sources in a range of formats, such as scientific findings, books, library databases, and web sites.

In their own words, students struggled with "connecting the dots," "figuring out the hook," and "discerning what to use" from course readings and their own selections for writing research papers.

Recent findings from education research suggest most undergraduates' reading abilities will not improve much during their first year, or even by the time they graduate from college. This problem isn't merely academic.

When we interviewed 23 hiring managers at leading companies like Microsoft, Batelle, KPMG, Nationwide Insurance, and the Smithsonian for a 2012 PIL study tracking new graduates' move to the workplace, employers said their new hires had trouble seeing patterns and making connections when reading texts.

At work, most of these new employees seemed reluctant to take a deep dive and read a variety of information sources to come up with solutions or formulate arguments. As one employer said of the college hires he supervised, "To be able to decipher information out of an old book isn't there for them, but to find it on the internet, find it on a website — it's quick, it's instantaneous, it's already put into a synopsis for them when they bring it up."

Suspicious Minds

While shortfalls in college reading abilities may show up in the classroom, it is only part of the picture. The networked infrastructures that students, and most of us, use for so much of our reading today have a profound impact on reading comprehension.

These connected frameworks, and the algorithms they increasingly employ, influence the uncertain and deeply polarizing information landscapes that students inhabit in their everyday lives. Many students come to college reading with a wariness developed over years of cutting through the wild frontier of social media platforms.

In our 2020 algorithm study, students said that skepticism about news and information had been baked into their psyches when they were young. Their viewpoint appears to be less a symptom of political partisanship than a pervasive belief that they should trust their instincts.

This early conditioning helps explain why so many students automatically pass what they read through their own bias detectors. Early in their college careers, they have already developed a repertoire of fact-checking techniques in their efforts to identify reliable online sources they may want to read.

With algorithms lying beneath the surface of popular sites and library discovery systems, students are well aware of the drawbacks of getting trapped in filter bubbles, narrow spaces of confirming and reinforcing beliefs. Many more acknowledge the very act of choosing something to read opens recommended pathways to a host of other information sources that may either confirm existing knowledge or nudge them to more extreme positions.

When higher education first began to discuss online reading in the 1990s, the networked information systems that students use for college reading and course research did not exist. Nor did the constant and blended flow of information and misinformation being pumped out and amplified on social media platforms and other algorithm-driven platforms at warp speed.

Amid a deluge of online content, political propaganda, cynical clickbait, and slickly packaged misinformation, who teaches today's students the reading practices for academic and everyday life? Whether they do their class readings on a screen or from a book, who helps students decide when to skim the surface and when to dive in?

A Curious Conundrum

There is an invisible and growing problem with reading on American college campuses today: Those responsible for teaching students how to read analytically and deeply are not clearly defined on campus org charts — or in most classrooms. Many faculty across the disciplines say that teaching their students how to read (and write) is something they cannot fit into their already crowded class sessions. Places dedicated to teaching students how to improve their college-level reading skills are few and far between on most campuses compared to writing centers that proliferated in recent years.

The hard fact, though, is most college students will not reach out for help with reading at all. By and large, reading is a discipline focused on K-12 levels where there often is a passionate commitment to literacy and empowering students with core comprehension skills.

While some professors may take the time to train students to read articles in the *Journal of the American Chemical Society* or the *American Sociological Review*, faculty don't necessarily tie that kind of reading to participating in life after graduation. Instead, college reading is taught more as a performance of a role: How well can you take a seat at this or that disciplinary table and hold a conversation in its language?

Where academic librarians fit into the reading conundrum is more complicated than most educators or administrators realize. For instruction librarians, much of their effort is filtered through "50 minutes to explain everything" sessions that librarians call "one-shots."

These training sessions often occur at the request of a faculty member seeking expertise in searching library resources they, themselves, may lack but know librarians specialize in.

But one-shots are often staged at a point when students aren't even sure what their research assignments are about, let alone know what to read or how to read materials. While instruction librarians may focus on helping students develop strategies for finding and evaluating quality information resources, there is little discussion of reading. And yet, reading is part of the same research process, especially where critical inquiry and interpretation are concerned.

Helping students develop these intertwined competencies — finding, evaluating, and reading — is increasingly important as campuses, and many instruction librarians, have become embroiled in the misinformation wars raging throughout the country. Many instruction librarians are finding there is much more they need to cover in training sessions than using library databases. In her 2021 essay, "Lizard People in the Library," Barbara Fister, an academic librarian and information literacy scholar, proposes that faculty and librarians must do even more to prepare students for reading and researching in these complex online spaces.

Both educators and librarians must help students see how networked systems affect how they read, and how they come to know things. Ultimately, students must learn how to *read* these systems — the architectures, infrastructures, and fundamental belief systems — so they can put what they read in context and determine whether or not it's trustworthy.

This kind of change requires educators and librarians not only to make revisions to their reading assignments, but also to acknowledge the dramatic transformation occurring in the online information ecosystem, and how it affects knowing, learning, and reading experiences.

In these most challenging of times, should faculty and librarians be asking themselves what the reading practices taught in college actually accomplish? Are they giving students what they need to succeed in college — and beyond?

Two Faces of College Reading

Whether they're taking microeconomics, biochemistry, English composition, or American history, almost all college students will be introduced to some kind of academic reading. Most students will find a list of required and recommended texts relevant to the course in the pages of a course syllabus.

Perhaps more than anything else in higher education, a reading list is a rare visible artifact of a college's reading culture. Assigned texts have the power to map a field of knowledge for learners' exploration while reflecting a campus's shared customs, values, and academic goals for scholarly reading, for better or worse.

Many instructors consider reading assignments the fulcrum of deep learning. But students see them as a means to a more obvious end — passing a quiz, contributing to a group project, or earning a good grade.

It's unclear though how much undergraduates value the intellectual wayfinding of syllabi. Few faculty can attest to the learning value of their own reading lists. One recent study found just 11% of the 63 faculty surveyed said their readings helped students "map concepts in the discipline." Doubts about the usefulness of reading assignments don't end there.

Students almost always complain about how many pages they are expected to read each week, while holding down a job(s) to help defray college costs. Likewise, many faculty are frustrated by students who don't complete their assigned readings.

Both faculty and students bemoan the prohibitive cost of textbooks, but these primers remain a feature of most STEM courses. Students describe these compilations as boring; faculty have criticized textbooks for their top-down, standardized, and time-bound perspectives.

In many other disciplines, faculty choose readings that are classics in the field or important current scholarship rather than relying on textbooks. How instructors make their choices can influence whether students feel included in the conversations of the discipline, and whether they can connect those conversations to their own experiences and to current events.

Some critics claim that if more instructors considered intersectionality when selecting readings, they could combat feelings of distrust in this country around social justice, equity, and individual stories of oppression.

Many more faculty criticize using the canon of Eurocentric readings from humanities and social science that maintain status quo narratives about whiteness, masculinity, ability, and what have become American ideals. Moreover, this set of prescribed readings amplifies inequities and excludes students without the cultural capital to make connections between Western European traditions and values and their own lives.

As more students enroll in college, including those who are first-generation, LGBTQIA+, ESL or BIPOC, how can faculty ask them to read and trust a body of knowledge that dismisses their perspectives as less relevant?

Although diversifying reading lists is one step in the direction of "decolonizing" syllabi, much more needs to happen. Scholars, such as Safiya Noble, have described how algorithms in library databases, discovery systems, and web search engines, like Google, reinforce social injustice faced by people of color. Others say there needs to be a bigger commitment to campus-wide structural changes, especially hiring more faculty of color to ensure better representation of the larger world and contributing voices.

As the "fake news" phenomenon spreads and acknowledgement of scientific facts diminishes, another issue has emerged. Some educators and librarians are asking how readings can better prepare students for civic literacy and news literacy.

Yet, they may be fighting an uphill battle, since many of their colleagues see journalism as falling outside of the gilded cage of the campus library and particularly peer-reviewed journal articles. This denigration exacerbates the general distrust of news and seems to be at odds with a growing movement to nurture social justice and civic education throughout the curriculum.

Today, reading in itself has taken on new urgency amid widespread political and social divisiveness and as a deadly pandemic continues to ravage the nation. Add in the closure of campuses and libraries, and remote learning where disparities in educational opportunities are thrown into starker relief than ever, and college reading takes on new meaning.

The question isn't so much whether critical reading should be taught across the disciplines in college, but what steps should be taken on campuses to provide this crucial training?

Turn the Page

Every college classroom will always have its "good readers." These are the students who find the sweet spot of any class reading, no matter how challenging. They are the first to raise their hands in a class discussion and can effortlessly connect a reading to what they already know. These good readers fool us into thinking most students are prepared for the many pages of advanced reading they will be assigned.

But how many students can actually demonstrate these reading competencies in class discussions, their papers, or on exams? How many *get* what instructors expect them to do with the assigned readings within a certain discipline? How many actually do the reading word by word rather than relying on the professor's summation of a reading in a class lecture?

In a larger sense, how many students appreciate that power and agency are gained from being an analytical and deep reader and being part of a campus reading culture made up of readers with a variety of life experiences? How many develop the habit of reading deeply, even when no grade is at stake? How many see the usefulness of deep reading for participating in a divided society?

The inconvenient truth is many of today's students will become deep and analytical readers only by chance. Many others never will.

Helping students develop strategies for critical reading in their academic and everyday lives is the responsibility of both educators and librarians alike, whether they actively recognize it or not. Clearly, college reading is more challenging to teach and learn than before, especially as so much of the material constantly put in front of us is shaped by motives other than veracity.

Students are well aware of how these circumstances impact what they believe. Most come to college wary of being snookered by the texts they will be assigned to read or find on their own. Many traverse online spaces with an innate skepticism fueled by fears of "fake news," cyber bullying, conspiracy theories, and filter bubbles. Almost all students read enveloped in an inescapable fog of deep political and social polarization that has spread throughout our society.

Many more get into trouble when they don't know the differences between deep reading and snap assessments about what to read when they don't have a reading list prepared by an expert to guide them. Few learn how to look for cues to see what to read in the stream of options, and *then* take the time and effort to read something carefully and deeply, absorbing arguments, and making connections that go beyond cherry picking a quote to add to a course paper.

But all is not lost. If we believe that college educates students to live in and influence the world, then we — educators and librarians — must bring more intentionality to reading assignments. To do this, we must actively teach students how to elicit the deeper meaning from texts as they may differ from one discipline to the next.

We need to invite students to draw on their own experiences and insights, and encourage peer-to-peer learning. We must develop and share strategies with fellow educators and librarians to better prepare students for reading in this new world. It may be most useful to start small by simply asking a single question: What do I *mean* by the reading that I'm asking students to do?

In her 2021 book, Skim, dive, surface: Teaching digital reading, Jenae Cohn says one of the most important things teachers can do is demystify the purpose of a reading assignment by learning to situate a text in a context and appreciate its rhetorical value. Not only does this framing bring instructor expectations out of the shadows, but it also provides crucial context to students before they dig in.

There are other steps to be taken, too. Though they require more time and planning, they are possible. They are doable. And they are imperative for developing good readers, especially now. Here are four promising ways for educators and librarians to begin inviting students to become readers on their campus.

First, educators and instruction librarians must make the invisible activity of reading more visible. Something as simple as reading aloud and voicing the inner commentary that glosses the text in real time can show students that reading comprehension is a process of interaction, not ingestion. Taking some time in class to invite students to critique a reading *before* the analysis begins can go a long way to students developing critical reading skills.

Instructors can accompany a reading assignment with questions, such as these: What do you think of this article I asked you to read? Was it hard to understand, and if so, why? What does this article remind you of or connect to in your other readings, in other courses in this discipline and beyond, in the news, or outside of the classroom? What questions would you like to ask the author? Such questions not only model critical reading behaviors; they enable students to share and build trust in their reading experiences.

Second, librarians need to help students see reading as an intrinsic — and interrelated — part of search. One tactic is for librarians to recommend that instructors have their class read either an academic text or news article together before a library session, teasing out connections and questions the article raises in a class session or through online annotation, and modeling active reading. What terms and phrases do authors use to name things? Who do they write about — people who are experts, or communities that are most affected?

These questions cannot be answered without reading first, and reading deeply. Then, the library session could use those connections and questions in a workshop format. Students could be guided to start by reading titles and abstracts to get some search ideas and develop angles to explore rather than rely on Google search for cherry picking keywords.

Third, there are already lessons to be learned from the deadly pandemic. Everyone's patience has been strained by a year of remote learning and Zoom lectures. Students and their professors alike have felt the drudgery of voluminous reading assignments, and both have noticed that their ability to concentrate has been substantially impaired during the shutdown. Some faculty have started assigning shorter — and fewer — readings. What they've discovered is a lighter reading load may spark more engagement with readings from students and a willingness to participate in discussions about readings.

Fourth, it's time for a reset to college reading. Empathy — seeing through the eyes of another — is an outcome of college-level reading, but it usually gets little attention in class discussions. In Generous thinking: A radical approach to saving the university, Kathleen Fitzpatrick claims that student readers need to build understanding and the capacity for empathy rather than tearing apart and rejecting readings that are not aligned with their own perspectives.

In our contentious times, students must learn to critically analyze what topics and voices are amplified and which ones are not. Literacy should not only include analyzing a single assigned reading but a deeper understanding of the technological and social forces shaping the circulation of information in society today. These life skills are as important for readers in the age of distrust as hard skills from math and science.

Looking Ahead

Some years ago, we interviewed the acclaimed educator, Ken Bain, about the remarkable lifelong learners he profiled in his 2012 book, What the best college students do. Many of his subjects shared a deep curiosity about topics they had been avidly reading about since they were quite young.

When we asked Bain about the significance of these habits, he said, "Reading is the way to explore other people's ideas, and through that exploration to make them your own; the most productive people, the most satisfied people, are the best-integrated people who see connections between every subject."

We can hope that 10 years from now college reading assignments will look very different from those of today. As higher education fulfills its fundamental role of shaping the future of society, educators must assign and discuss the purpose of readings that not only prepare students for careers, but nurture their personal well-being, sense of equity, and participation as continuing learners in an increasingly connected world.

But none of that can happen until we teach students how to "connect the dots" at a time when it is more difficult, and more crucial, than ever.

Read the author's reflections on what inspired this essay.

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This occasional series is meant to formalize and voice pressing information literacy-related issues, ideas, and concerns while raising solutions or new ways of thinking for plotting a way forward. The goal of the international series is to create better teaching and learning opportunities for students, librarians, and educators, while identifying new directions that inform future research. Read more about the series »

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