Guest Editors' Introduction

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In January 2016 this journal published a special issue on reading, guest edited by Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue. That special issue probed such questions as why we were seeing a "re-turn to reading," "which needs it fulfills, what significance it might have for the discipline at large," and "how does the current turn to reading figure students—their interests, their needs, their strengths, their investments" (Salvatori and Donahue 2016: 3). Five years later this special issue, focusing on critical reading and writing in the era of fake news, extends that inquiry by asking further questions about this return to reading, specifically in terms of what this return suggests about students' needs in our current climate.

Although published in January 2016, Salvatori and Donahue's issue was off to press well before President Trump took office, well before uses of the term *fake news* spiked, well before the term was politicized by both sides, and well before President Trump used the term to eviscerate the free press. Like Salvatori and Donahue's issue, this special issue will be published more than a year after it was developed, a year that included the 2020 presidential election. Although President Trump has since left office, the stakes have already been raised for instructors at all levels and across all disciplines who are responsible for teaching students how to make meaning—through the practices of reading and writing—of the world that surrounds them. And while we cannot predict whether the term *fake news* will remain in circulation, misinformation and disinformation will continue to circulate. We saw

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as much after Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election and some media outlets continued to report for weeks that the election was still undecided. While misinformation can be problematic, it is usually not as dangerous as disinformation (which has malicious intent behind it), particularly for a democracy. We saw as much with the deadly insurrection at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, incited by Trump's disinformation campaign surrounding the results of the 2020 election. Of course, fake news, only one form of disinformation, is not new. What is new, however, is the speed at which these stories spread because of social media and related technologies, as well as the ease with which they can be created by everyday people because of our advanced digital technology.

Despite criticisms of the very term *fake news*, we have chosen to use the term in the title of this special issue for the very reasons that many have turned away from it: because it encapsulates the sort of complexity that faces us—the politically charged manipulation of information that we and our students face daily. Unfortunately, our students are not faring well as they try to navigate our current information landscape wherein "internet subcultures take advantage of the current media ecosystem to manipulate news frames, set agendas, and propagate ideas" (Marwick and Lewis 2017: 1). For example, in "Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning" Wineburg et al. (2016) reported on a study of 7,804 responses from students in middle school through college in twelve states conducted by the Stanford History Education Group, which sought to gauge students' capacity for "civic online reasoning." The researchers summarized the goals of the study as follows:

> We sought to establish a reasonable bar, a level of performance we hoped was within reach of most middle school, high school, and college students. For example, we would hope that middle school students could distinguish an ad from a news story. By high school, we would hope that students reading about gun laws would notice that a chart came from a gun owners' political action committee. And, in 2016, we would hope college students, who spend hours each day online, would look beyond a .org URL and ask who's behind a site that presents only one side of a contentious issue. (4)

They observed that, "in every case and at every level, we were taken aback by students' lack of preparation" (4), concluding that "democracy is threatened by the ease at which disinformation about civic issues is allowed to spread and flourish" (5).

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A follow-up study, “Students’ Civic Online Reasoning: A National Portrait” (2019), also conducted by the Stanford History Education Group, suggests that the slew of curricular interventions and initiatives surrounding media literacy instruction that emerged after the 2016 presidential election—including many that were state and federally funded—did not improve students’ media literacy skills. Between June 2018 and May 2019, the 3,446 high school students from 16 districts in 14 states who participated in the study were asked to evaluate digital sources on the internet. The executive summary describes the study’s findings as follows: “Nearly all students floundered. Ninety percent received no credit on four of six tasks.”

Other studies have confirmed students’ lack of preparedness for engaging digital formats. In her study of students’ digital reading habits, Tanya Rodrigue’s (2017: 5) goal was to “identify the kinds of reading strategies they use to engage with screen reading, and how these strategies help them navigate the text for the ultimate purpose of working with the source in a research-based essay.” Rodrigue found that students were, in effect, reading online sources as they would read print sources rather than “employ[ing] reading strategies specific to digital texts” (4) such as clicking hyperlinks or opening new tabs. She concluded that

> the minimal engagement with the features of many digital texts and the common strategies used for print reading suggests students approach reading digital texts in the same way they do print—mostly engaging with the words on the page, reading from left to right. It also suggests a lack of knowledge of digital reading strategies as well as what constitutes a digital text—multiple modalities that demand their own unique kind of engagement. (8)

Rodrigue connected students’ lack of knowledge of digital reading strategies to “common and traditional pedagogical approaches in the teaching of writing and reading. In present-day,” she explained, “many instructors assign alphabetic papers (as opposed to multimodal or multimedia projects) just as those who taught the students in this study, and often times, these research projects require the use of print texts, namely scholarly articles and books. Thus, perhaps, instructors are not recognizing the need to teach digital comprehension strategies” (8).

The findings from these studies are not anomalies but are representative of findings that have emerged from various kinds of studies (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, large, small) over the last several years. And even though many—perhaps most—of our students are digital natives, research repeatedly

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shows that we cannot assume that they have the skills they need to navigate the digital information landscape. The articles that comprise this special issue offer a range of ways to help students navigate this landscape, including ways to teach students how to understand, assess, analyze, and synthesize—how to read and respond to—the information that bombards them on a daily basis.

We received an enthusiastic response to our call for proposals for this special issue—roughly four times the number of essays we had room to publish. Therefore, we have also developed a collection of essays with Peter Lang Publishing on the same subject. Despite the limited space a single journal issue offers, compared to an entire volume, we were committed to choosing articles for this special issue that represent a range of approaches, interests, and investments, articles that respond to the wide net we cast in our call for papers, which included the following questions:

- How can English instructors best prepare students to participate in a democratic society that depends upon its citizens' abilities to read critically?
- How can the discipline of English explore the concept of credibility in complex ways to better reflect the challenges students face in the era of fake news?
- What does it mean to be an educator at a time when democracy is threatened by fake news and other forms of disinformation?
- In a culture that does not agree on the principles of evidence and rationality, or on facts, how does one teach reading, writing, and thinking?
- What is the best way to help faculty learn about reading so that they can teach students more efficient and effective reading strategies?
- How do reading problems tie into the problems identified by recent studies on critical reading, thinking and writing, or college attainment (i.e. graduation)?
- How might those who teach critical literacy make use of disciplinary and/or professional guidelines such as the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, a joint project of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Writing Project, and National Council of Teachers of English (2011)?
- Do the K-12 Common Core State Standards do enough to address the reading/critical literacy problem and support more and better instruction in reading to prepare students for college-level work?
- How can students learn to go beyond simple search strategies to understand and use sources they find in print and online?
- How can faculty improve student reading for the writing of research and inquiry projects?
- Can students learn to transfer their reading skills with social media to more substantive and critical reading of longer texts?

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While we have not separated this special issue into sections according to the questions above, or any other heuristic, we do imagine the articles as being part of two loose groupings. Still, we hope readers will find additional connections both within and between these groupings.

The first group of articles is organized around the concept of considerations. These authors identify a series of considerations that they believe must be part of discussions about teaching reading and writing in a moment characterized by the widespread circulation of disinformation. For Doug Downs, a crucial consideration is the difference between critically reading web-based texts and the kind of classic critical reading with which most instructors are comfortable. In "Critical Reading in a Screen Paradigm" Downs argues that it is imperative to build instructors' "acceptance of and comfort with screen literacies" so they can support students' development of screen-specific reading strategies. Irene L. Clark maintains that paying attention to the research emerging from neuroscience can help us expand how we help students think critically and judge the credibility of information. To support this goal, in "Critical Thinking, Identity, and Performance" Clark details pedagogical approaches that incorporate performance and reflection to address the role that nonrational and emotional biases play in how students make meaning in their reading and writing. For Joanne Baird Giordano and Holly Hassel, a key consideration is underpreparedness. In "Developing Critical Readers in the Age of Literacy Acceleration," Hassel and Giordano maintain that, as we address the teaching of reading and writing in this climate, we must pay attention to the increasing number of students who are underprepared to take on the kind of work expected of them in postsecondary institutions. Rounding out this section, Mara Lee Grayson underscores the importance of considerations surrounding race. In "Information, Identity, and Ideology" Grayson addresses how a racial literacy curriculum can help instructors prepare students to explore the situatedness of language and navigate a textually mediated society.

The second grouping offers theoretically informed teaching strategies, many of which address considerations brought up in the first grouping. These articles report on various institutional-review-board-approved studies of the efficacy of assignments, activities, projects, and software that can support the teaching of reading and writing in our current climate. Addressing the kind of fragmented reading that Doug Downs describes in his article, Anna Maria Johnson and Nusrat Jahan argue for the use of commonplace books in the classroom because they reflect the fragmented, screen-influenced ways of reading that our students engage in while also providing a way to

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manage that kind of reading. Kelly King-O'Brien also describes assignments that allow instructors to deliberately incorporate attention to reading into their classrooms. In her classes, students read and analyze the news, its sources, and its writers to practice engaging with contemporary and real-world problems with compassion, complexity, and nuance. Also committed to helping students develop stronger reading habits, Tina S. Kazan, Nicholas N. Behm, and Peg Cook discuss how a collaboration with librarians at their small liberal arts institution led to a new conceptualization of information literacy as a developmental process and a disposition toward information and source material that involves four interrelated critical practices: process, enactment, engagement, and attribution. Kazan, Behm, and Cook detail their use of visualization tools, among other strategies, to help support the teaching of these interrelated critical practices.

Mary Traester, Chris Kervina, and Noel Holton Brathwaite highlight the uses of Hypothesis, a digital annotation tool that makes students' reading visible by allowing them to annotate digital texts. Their findings have implications for how we understand susceptibility to misinformation and suggest that students' susceptibility may be connected to instructors' reluctance to adopt pedagogies that incorporate digital tools for reading. Michelle Sprouse also considers annotation, specifically in the context of graduate education. Findings from Sprouse's case study of one document shared among three graduate students suggest that they benefited from engaging in social annotation, in which the readers participated in discussions in the margins of digital texts, allowing them to "transcontextualize" from the original reading event to future events and other spaces. The issue closes with Timothy Oleksiak's article on slow peer review, reminding us of the value of slowing down in our fast-paced world. Based in the values and theories of rhetorical feminism, slow peer review, as Oleksiak conceptualizes it, can help mitigate if not offer an alternative to the rhetoric of fake news. Oleksiak explores how two students used and reacted to this nondirective approach to peer review, leading to meaningful changes in their reading and writing practices.

We are excited by the heterogeneity of these articles—the different methods they deploy, the range of student populations they discuss, the kinds of studies they report, the different contexts they create, and the diverse theoretical lenses and interdisciplinary questions that frame them. And we are especially excited that, despite their differences, each article offers theoretically informed practical approaches to teaching, approaches that you can adopt, adapt, and bring to class on Monday morning.

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As you read this special issue, we invite you to think about how you are supporting your students as they navigate our current information landscape, how the ideas and strategies discussed in these pieces might enhance that work, and how you can develop reading and writing pedagogies that address the urgent critical literacy needs of our students.

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