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Teaching in times of Crisis

General education needs a new name. The bland, catch-all-sounding phrase belies its importance, its vitality, and the vexing, urgent struggles to make sense of the world that are its reason for being.

Our general education competencies at Hostos reflect the skills and knowledge that transcend disciplines and that we believe all students should develop during their time with us. The competencies most relevant to library research instruction include: analyzing, evaluating, and critically treating information; interpreting data and observations; comprehending research; distinguishing between (an unfortunately implied hard binary of) factual information and subjective opinion; and considering the source.

In the library world, we refer to this kind of subset of non-discipline-specific critical thinking skills as *information literacy*. The Association of College and Research Libraries elaborates a "framework" of crucial foundational concepts about information that college students should grasp, such as the idea that authority is constructed and contextual, that the research process is one of inquiry, that scholarship grows through discourse, that information has a creation process that can and should be examined, and that information itself has value in many forms, including as a commodity or as political power.

The Hostos gen ed "global citizenship" competencies lay bare what critical thinking about information is *for*: reasoning ethically and applying principles to decision-making; appreciating and respecting human differences; and developing the ability to participate and lead within a diverse, larger society. Our students need information literacy skills developed by a solid general education not only to succeed in classes or earn degrees, but, as Mandy Lupton and Christine Bruce argue, to understand, challenge, and transform the world they live in.

To do so, students must grapple with sources well beyond gatekept library collections. Ready or not, students are bombarded with the news that finds *them*, what Project Information Literacy researchers describe as "an overwhelming hodgepodge of headlines, posts, alerts, tweets, visuals, and conversations that stream at them throughout the day." If all we ask of students is to meekly accept the hollow proposition that only "scholarly" sources can be trusted, we are not helping them confront the media cacophony that surrounds them, nor enabling them to participate in civic debates that take place in non-academic spheres.

Instead, students are better equipped to make sense of the world if they start to understand the dynamics of mass misinformation, surveillance capitalism and semi-shrouded manipulation of attention, conspiracy theories, and the "fast news" of soundbites, video clips, and clickbait headlines. But they should also learn about journalistic ethics and best practices, and about measures of subject expertise beyond the ivory tower. Information literate students don't just shun cheap takes and hoaxes, but value sound logic, corroboration, and historical context; they don't seek one right answer but rather grapple with honest disagreements between equally qualified authors. They understand that a critical reader does not look for an impossible, absolute objectivity, but rather analyzes a work in part by understanding its author's perspective. They also do not sit around waiting for peer-reviewed journal articles on every matter of importance, but rather engage with the media of their day, as complex issues evolve and urgent questions emerge.

What does *general education or information literacy* mean in a country where Black people are consistently singled out and treated with violence by police forces charged with "serving and protecting" everyone? What does it mean--I write this in June, 2020--when masses of people pour into the streets to refuse, to protest, and to demand change?

Students with the critical habits of seeking out information and questioning their sources, students who critique, analyze, and synthesize ideas, can readily ask: Which representations of the protests do we believe? How much news coverage and commentary are being devoted to the fringes of crowds engaging in property damage and looting, and who is framing that property loss as if it were more important than the loss of human life? Where can we go for contextualizing analyses of police militarization, of mass incarceration, or of the long history of institutionalized anti-Black racism in this country? What are the steps now being proposed toward police reform or elimination, and by whom, and what other models of ordering society might we find around the world, and what could we learn from them? Students *without* the above-described skills are passive, looking to be told the answers, unquestioning of their own assumptions or confirmation bias.

What does *general education or information literacy* mean in a world facing a pandemic with no end in sight, and yet strong economic imperatives to "re-open" schools, businesses, and every other form of public life, in the city that is the epicenter of our country's crisis? A student with strong information literacy skills can ask: What do scientists know now that they didn't know in March? What should I know about testing, tracing, antibody tests, vaccine trials? What does it mean to be safe, and what choices can I make to lower my risk? What should our college, our city, our state, our nation, do to help us collectively, so that we are not all just individuals looking to save ourselves as best we can? Who is spreading misinformation and rumor, and who can I trust is at least engaged in a good-faith effort to understand and inform?

All of us living through this time of COVID-19--to varying extents, as the pandemic has not touched all of our lives equally--have been afraid and angry. But students who have not yet developed strong information literacy skills can't do much more with their anxiety and rage than react to arbitrary shreds of news designed to appeal to emotional impulses. Students who have developed these skills can help themselves, their loved ones, and any group of which they are a part to seek and examine information more purposefully, despite their fear and anger--skeptically but not cynically, engaged in practices like the lateral reading recommended by Mike Caulfield--and make decisions accordingly.

What does *general education or information literacy* mean in a country facing an election of unprecedented importance with an incumbent unlike any other? A student with strong information literacy skills can ask: What should be our concerns about fair elections and voting rights? What information can help me understand how distance-voting measures will affect particular populations, including my community? Where can I find out about *all* the candidates on my ballot, and how can I sort propaganda from slander from balanced reporting? How can I even determine the origin of posts in my social media feed or sites in my Google search in this age of (as the excellent Barbara Fister notes) disaggregated published

information being dispersed, remixed, and shared with little or no attribution?

Students without a strong foundation in general education will be more vulnerable to have their attention diverted and opinions swayed. They will be less likely to reflexively interrogate the messages targeted to them by algorithms that were designed to make someone else money or gain someone else power at their expense.

Students who have, through a rigorous general education, developed strong information literacy skills, can not only be active and critical seekers of knowledge, but can take part in public debate, and can make informed decisions as members of their community. They can ask the questions and construct the ideas that will help their generation build a better future.

Works Cited

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HOSTOS READS
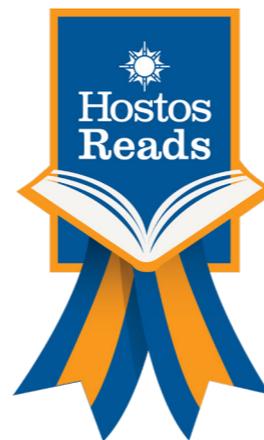
Virtual Hostos Reads!

This Semester we are Hosting a series of Virtual Discussions involving a variety of short reads that are very timely.

Please Join us! Share with your thought and ideas about these texts.

Link: Hostos Reads

Upcoming Events

Wednesday, September 30	3:30-4:30	[Facebook post on the death of her aunt] by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (social media)
Wednesday, October 14	3:30-4:30	The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas by Ursula Le Guin (short story)
Wednesday, November 11	3:30-4:30	Trayvon, Redux by Rita Dove, and This is Not a Small Voice by Sonia Sanchez (poetry)
Wednesday, December 9	3:30-4:30	You Do Not Belong Here by Jaquira Díaz (essay)