

CHAPTER 6.

TEACHING TEXTUAL ANALYSIS THROUGH COLLABORATIVE, ONLINE ANNOTATION

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This chapter demonstrates a practice of collaborative, online annotation that helps students expand their abilities to analyze complex texts. The authors describe a series of assignments, in which students read and re-read a published essay for homework over three class sessions, each time making public annotations on a communal, digital copy of the text. At each reading, students receive new prompts to elicit engagement with specific aspects of the assigned text. Each layer of annotation involves more conversation among students and deeper analysis. Students learn to use annotation as an exploratory, early-stage writing tool that helps generate ideas, and as a strategy for building up and refining ideas over time. Moreover, students practice taking part in a community of inquiry, working with other readers and writers to create new knowledge. The assignments described are easily used across teaching modalities (in-person, real-time; online, real-time; online, any time; hybrid). This chapter addresses the themes of accessibility and inclusivity and assignments adapted from classic composition strategies.

FRAMEWORKS AND PRINCIPLES IN THIS CHAPTER

- **GSOLE Principle 1.2:** Use of technology should support stated course objectives, thereby not presenting an undue burden for instructors and students.
- **GSOLE Principle 1.4:** The student-user experience should be prioritized when designing online courses, which includes mobile-friendly content, interaction affordances, and economic needs.
- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Curiosity:** The desire to know more about the world.

- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Openness:** The willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.
- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Engagement:** A sense of investment and involvement in learning.
- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Flexibility:** The ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands.
- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Critical Thinking:** The ability to analyze a situation or text and make thoughtful decisions based on that analysis, through writing, reading, and research.

GUIDING QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU BEGIN READING

- How can instructors make student reading practices more visible in order to make them a site of learning?
- In what ways can online annotation facilitate student collaboration and classroom community?
- How can online annotation be used to teach an iterative approach to reading, writing, and textual analysis?

INTRODUCTION

It was Vanessa's first one-on-one meeting with Hae, and the kind of meeting she had become accustomed to. It tended to happen soon after the initial session of Vanessa's first-year writing (FYW) class: a student would show up to office hours, eyes wide with panic. "I just . . . I just . . . I don't think I belong here. I don't understand the reading. At all."

Our college campus is filled with bright, ambitious, overachieving students from all over the world and all walks of life. According to Columbia's International Students & Scholars Office (2023), over 19,000 of our campus' students and scholars identify as "international," and our School of General Studies specifically serves returning, older students beginning their undergraduate education after time off from an educational setting. There is no one single type of Columbia University student. Yet every semester, a number of our students start their undergraduate journey feeling overwhelmed and out of place. What if they hadn't read the right books, or had been out of school for too long? How would they ever keep up?

Vanessa had no doubt that Hae did, in fact, "belong" in her FYW course. She told Hae she thought the essay that the class was reading, Zadie Smith's "Speaking in Tongues" (2009), was a tricky one, and asked Hae to talk about a place in the text where she felt confused. Hae directed Vanessa to the second

page; “I don’t understand,” she said. “It’s a personal essay—nonfiction, no? So, why is she using a character from a play as evidence?”

“That’s interesting,” Vanessa said. “Why would you expect her not to?”

As Hae began to explain her thinking, it immediately became clear that her struggle with Smith’s text was not one of comprehension but rather of confidence. Hae was working to articulate a tension of sorts that she had found in the reading—one that relied on nuanced understandings of genre, evidence, and reader expectations. But, when she was sitting alone in her bedroom trying to get through her homework, having questions felt like failure; if something about the text was confusing, she must be missing something obvious. Hae feared her confusion meant she didn’t belong at the university, but Vanessa saw Hae’s struggle with the text as a productive starting point—a way into the kind of inquiry-based thinking and writing practiced by a university discourse community (Swales, 1990, 2016). Vanessa knew it was her job to show Hae that scholarship begins from articulating confusion, a foundational scholarly practice that the college writing textbook *How Scholars Write* (2021) puts this way:

When scholars analyze a text—a novel, a building, a journal article, a film, a performance, an event—they’re mining for problems. They search for tensions or dissonances: things that don’t quite fit together in expected ways. Scholars then work to make sense of the tensions or dissonances. (p. 6)

Vanessa asked Hae if she had started the annotation assignment. That semester, both of us (Vanessa and Valeria) were debuting an annotation assignment in our FYW classes, which we hoped would help students not only effectively mine for problems, but also see themselves as members of a community of inquiry that works toward a shared goal—making sense of complex texts.

We were asking students to use the annotation program Perusall—a free tool designed for “[s]tudents [to] help each other learn by collectively annotating readings in threads, responding to each other’s comments, and interacting” (Perusall.com). The platform allows instructors to create “courses” that students can join using an email address and a unique course code. By uploading PDFs, linking to web pages, or searching for texts on Perusall’s own digital library, instructors provide students with digital copies of course readings; once enrolled, students can read and annotate the texts using the Perusall interface. Highlighting a passage on the digital copy automatically opens a new “Conversation,” where users can add notes, which other users can then reply to. Annotations in conversation threads can incorporate a hashtag (#) to create an instantly searchable key term (e.g., #question) or mention other members of the course using the @ feature. Students can “second” questions posed by their peers with a click

of the “?” button on any given annotation, and instructors can “upvote” comments as especially useful for others. Figures 6.1 to 6.2 show sample Perusall threads featuring hashtags, mentions, and instructor upvoting.

While we had both previously given quick lessons on annotation in our FYW courses, we had never read and commented on student annotations, or even checked that students were completing them. But the semester that we were debuting the annotation assignment was also one of our first semesters teaching entirely online (in real-time), due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and, while we found ourselves no longer able to see and teach annotations as we had in the past, we also felt that we had been presented with an opportunity to investigate the affordances of collaborative, online annotation.

There were immediate practical advantages. Most students didn’t have access to printers at home and were doing their reading digitally. Perusall offered a free way to interact much more thoroughly with the readings than was offered by more common free platforms for digital reading. Perusall was also built for educational use (not for harvesting student data). For all these reasons, it accorded with GSOLE OLI Principle 1.4: “that student-user experience should be prioritized when designing online courses, which includes . . . economic needs” (GSOLE, 2019).

Other advantages having to do with our stated goals (to deepen student engagement with texts through inquiry, to help students try on the practices of a university discourse community, and to increase their sense of belonging) soon became apparent. As Hae and Vanessa started looking through the annotations that some of Hae’s peers had added, it became evident that Hae was not the only one with questions. Sure, she was the only one questioning Smith’s use of Eliza Doolittle as evidence (at that point in the assignment, at least). But her peers had *many* questions, some of which Hae actually felt she had answers to. Vanessa suggested that Hae could highlight the passage on the second page that they had talked about and pose her question in an annotation. Hae did, pausing at the end before typing, “What do you think?” and hitting return. By posing her first question, Hae was acknowledging that, yes, she had questions about the text, as well as starting to actively seek out answers from her fellow readers.

Our approach to this assignment was informed by three major claims made by researchers studying writing pedagogy and reading practices in the last two decades. First, researchers have argued that, to make reading a site of learning, teachers must find ways to make reading visible. As Robert Scholes wrote in 2002, in a passage often quoted in later studies:

We normally acknowledge . . . that writing must be taught and continue to be taught from high school to college and

perhaps beyond . . . because we can see writing. . . . But we do not see reading. We see some writing about reading, to be sure, but we do not see reading. (p. 166, as cited in Carillo “Engaging” (2016), in Carillo “Creating” (2016), and in Lockhart & Soliday, 2016)

As Scholes and the scholars who have followed him have noted, assessing, intervening in, and promoting reflection around student reading presents difficulties for writing instructors because reading practices are, by default, hidden; not being able to see reading happen means not being able to address it. “We must find ways to make reading as visible as writing,” Ellen C. Carillo has argued, “so we can work as deliberately on reading as we do on writing” (2016, “Creating,” p. 18). In online learning—be it “real-time” or “any time”—student reading practices are potentially even less visible than in the traditional classroom. After all, in a traditional classroom, we might still see some incidental evidence of how students are reading: a book full of Post-it notes, or a highlighted printout on the seminar table.

Second, research has suggested (as we detail later in this chapter) that explicitly teaching annotation as a reading-to-write strategy is a productive way to make reading into a site of learning. And third, while online teaching may initially look like an obstacle for teaching annotation, it may—in certain, significant ways—actually be an advantage. As Carillo (2019) has pointed out: “Annotation makes the process of reading visible, and therefore, makes reading easier to address in the classroom . . . Digital platforms such as *hypothes.is*, *Diigo*, and *iAnnotate* have made this practice that much easier” (n.p.).

Tara Lockhart and Mary Soliday’s (2016) research provides compelling evidence for annotation assignments’ efficacy in teaching concrete, nuanced engagement with texts. Lockhart and Soliday interviewed 76 undergraduates from 20 majors after these students had taken a writing class that integrated the teaching of reading and writing. Students in the study tended to report that “annotation practices helped them better understand and engage what they read and helped to prepare them for later writing or reading tasks” (Lockhart & Soliday, 2016, p. 28). Even better, many students in Lockhart and Soliday’s study went on to adapt the annotation practices they learned in the writing class to other courses and contexts, especially the use of annotation for the brainstorming and invention stages of their writing (2016, pp. 28-30). Finally, students also reported that leaving traces of their thinking on the page during a particular period of reading created an opportunity for them to “compare previous knowledge with new knowledge” when they returned to a text (Lockhart & Soliday, 2016, p. 30). If we wanted to teach students to pay close attention to texts and to build up and refine their ideas over time, annotation would be a key practice to teach.

Existing research supports the efficacy not only of individual annotation practices, but also of collaborative ones, especially for helping students identify problems, tensions, and complexities in a given text. A lesson study conducted by Nancy Chick and colleagues (2009), for instance, has suggested that collaborative annotation is an especially effective vehicle for teaching students to articulate and respond to tension in a literary text. Chick and her co-authors oversaw an in-person, real-time lesson in collaborative annotation, devised with the goal of teaching students to read “for contradictions [and] paradoxes that do not fit a single, coherent interpretation” (2009, p. 404). During the lesson, student groups annotated patterns and pattern breaks in a poem on a transparency film, linking each pattern and each break “to the concrete language of the poem.” Students then saw all of the groups’ transparencies overlaid and projected via an overhead projector, “as a visual representation of the poem’s layers of meaning and complexity,” and wrote “about how they [saw] the patterns relating to each other, how it is possible for these patterns to coexist in one poem, and how they explain the elements that do not seem to fit the patterns” (Chick, et al., 2009, p. 405). After class, students reflected in writing on how the method of reading that they were taught affected their overall interpretation of the poem.

For us, this study from Chick and her co-authors has some particularly exciting results: the authors noticed that, in a sample of 65, students on the whole moved from the “flat” and “reductive” readings (2009, p. 400) evident in their pre-class writing to more nuanced readings that could acknowledge and reflect on multiplicity. Chick et al. speculated that there were two main reasons for the lesson’s success:

1. students were being specifically directed to identify patterns and seeming discrepancies, using an annotation method that could make those patterns and tensions visible, and
2. students were encountering the observations and interpretations of their peers, which in itself raised productive dissonance and made multiplicity apparent.

As we designed our lesson, we were especially excited by this last thought—that seeing each other’s observations might help students develop more nuanced and interesting interpretations.

In designing our online annotation assignment, we aimed to take advantage of the individual benefits described by Lockhart and Soliday, as well as the benefits of collaborative annotation described by Chick and her co-authors. By explicitly asking students to look for seeming discrepancies and ambiguities in a text, and by asking them, through rereading, to complicate their initial impressions, our assignment teaches students a transferable habit: noticing and responding to complexity

in their objects of analysis (be they texts, or images, or organisms, or data sets). In this way, this early assignment acts as a touchstone for our entire semester and offers our students a generalizable approach to scholarly engagement with, and response to, complex material. We hoped, also, that annotating collaboratively would promote students' awareness of being part of a scholarly community. And, in an online course, students annotating together would be able to experience writing as a social practice, even without sharing a classroom space.

Our use of Perusall to accomplish these goals is informed by GSOLE provision 1.2, that “use of technology should support stated course objectives, thereby not presenting an undue burden for instructors and students.” Our assignment sequence using Perusall is designed to teach a number of moves and habits central to our pedagogy—including careful attention to the particulars of an object of analysis, rereading to sharpen and complicate thinking, and the articulation of tensions and questions.

These objectives, in turn, are informed by the *Framework for Success in Post-secondary Writing* (2011), which encourages instructors to foster the habits of mind of curiosity (students “use inquiry as a process to develop questions . . .”), openness (students “examine their own perspectives to find connections with the perspectives of others; listen to and reflect on the ideas and responses of others . . .”), and engagement (students “make connections between their own ideas and those of others; find meanings new to them or build on existing meanings as a result of new connections; act upon the new knowledge that they have discovered”) (para. 5).

In addition, this lesson helps students develop what the Framework calls critical thinking, since it asks students to “write about texts for multiple purposes including (but not limited to) interpretation, synthesis, response, summary, critique, and analysis” and to “generate questions to guide research.” It also encourages students to “develop flexible writing processes,” to see that these processes are “not linear,” to “move back and forth through different stages of writing,” and to practice several generative moves for the “invention” stage of writing. The annotation lesson that we designed helps students see that flexible, exploratory writing at the start of a project can help them develop compelling lines of inquiry for the project's middle and later stages. Using an online platform for collaborative annotation, students are able to draw on each other's observations as they develop and refine their questions about the text.

COURSE CONTEXT AND LESSON

We teach a one-semester FYW seminar, capped at 14 students, that meets twice per week for 75-minute sessions. Over the course of the semester, our class

moves through four units, or “progressions,” each progression building up—through low-stakes, ungraded pre-drafting and drafting exercises—toward a final essay that students turn in for a grade. The essays written during the first three progressions steadily increase in length and complexity, and the fourth and final progression asks students to write a shorter essay, an op-ed, for an audience beyond the university.

The first essay assignment, a single-text analysis essay, tasks students with identifying a compelling question or tension that arises for them in a text, and to use that question to motivate a close-reading and analysis of the text. The first essay assignment is similar to typical close-reading assignments in literature and composition classes that ask students to choose a passage in a text “and then ‘unpack’ the passage, paying close attention to the textual elements including the passage’s language, tone, and construction [and to] connect this passage to the rest of the work” (Carillo “Engaging,” n.p.). However, our first essay assignment also adds an emphasis on identifying a compelling question that motivates this analysis and “unpacking,” in order to encourage student writers to practice scholarly inquiry and to think rhetorically about engaging their readers. If readers can see that an essay begins from a pressing inquiry, they are more likely to be interested in reading on and discovering the essay’s findings.

Thus, the aim of the first essay assignment is to teach not only transferable analysis skills like close-reading, citation, and quotation, but also in a larger sense to teach concepts and habits generalizable beyond literary studies. Writ large, the objective of the first assignment is to introduce students to a set of fundamental moves of inquiry-based, scholarly writing—i.e., beginning by naming something difficult to understand or poorly understood, developing a plan or project for examining it, and, through analysis, coming up with claims that help illuminate what was initially unclear.

The first essay assignment provides a robust scaffolding for the second essay assignment in our FYW sequence, which asks students to choose some object of analysis (a text, a film, an event, a performance, etc.) that raises an interpretive problem for them, and to draw on ideas and concepts from several other writers, whose work circulates in a related scholarly conversation, as they examine their object of analysis and respond to their problem. If the chosen object of analysis fulfills the role of what Joseph Bizup (2008) has called an “exhibit” source, the other sources that students must engage in conversation (chosen by the instructor during this unit) play the roles of “argument sources” and “method sources.” The third essay assignment in the course is a research essay that asks students to choose their own objects of analysis and to find most of the other sources that they will draw upon as they develop

their arguments. This third unit includes instruction in locating and managing multiple sources. Finally, the fourth essay assignment is an op-ed written for a target publication selected by each individual student, giving students a chance to write for an audience beyond the university. At all of these stages, students use annotation to generate ideas.

LESSON DESIGN AND RATIONALE

The following assignment sequence unfolds over three class sessions at the start of the semester, in the early days of the first progression, as students begin working toward their first essay. As our class meets synchronously, in real time, a fair amount of scaffolding for using the Perusall platform occurs during class meeting time. In Class 1, students register for Perusall, join the class Perusall “course,” and read the first page of the class text together. As students read, they generate observations and questions, which are added as Perusall conversation threads (first by the instructor as a model, then by students themselves).

In Class 2, we introduce the term “interpretive problem” or “scholarly problem,” building on the definition in Aaron Ritzenberg and Sue Mendelsohn’s *How Scholars Write* (2021): “By ‘problem,’ we don’t mean mistake or fault. We mean an intellectual tension that merits resolving” (p. 6). Referring to some of the examples of problems in *How Scholars Write*, we review in class some of the annotated questions and confusions that students have posted in Perusall—first as a large group, then in pairs—to discuss whether or not these questions might stem from (or lead to) problems ripe for analysis and interpretation.

In Class 3, we work together on a model interpretive problem as a class, looking for textual evidence that could help us stage this problem for a reader, as well as evidence that might offer some clues towards its analysis and/or resolution. Students also use class time to select an interpretive problem they think they would like to work on in their own essays and generate a list of keyword hashtags associated with that problem.

This assignment arc reflects three features we believe are essential in “better practices” for online writing instruction (and in writing instruction more broadly). First, students are afforded ample opportunities to see and experience reading and writing as inherently social acts. In this assignment arc, students’ annotation is necessarily collaborative, as students not only add their own observations and questions, but also respond to lines of inquiry opened up by their peers. Students are not reading (or, in turn, writing) in a vacuum, but rather as part of a larger intellectual community. Second, students have the opportunity to encounter texts and learning strategies multiple times. By

returning to the same text (with the same technology) repeatedly and with decreasing amounts of instructor support, students become more comfortable using the technology and, crucially, develop a more comprehensive and complex grasp of the text. Third, instructor expectations are transparent and supported via clear models and ample examples. Perusall has the potential to make reading more visible to both us and our students, but only if they are confident enough to use it and understand annotation as a process, as opposed to a final product to be assessed. Modeling early reactions to the text as annotations on a shared document allows instructors to validate initial responses as essential first steps in comprehension and analysis. Continued incorporation of annotations in lesson plans allows instructors to point out sites of progressing comprehension and complexity.

READING TO WRITE: PERUSALL COLLABORATIVE ANNOTATIONS

Due dates: Classes 2, 3, and 4

Purpose

The purpose of this assignment is to help you practice the critical reading skills that are necessary to not only *understand* difficult texts, but also to *analyze* them and thereby offer your own scholarly interpretation of their content and form. This assignment is also designed to help you identify the interpretive problem that will form the basis for your first essay project, and to generate a collection of possible textual evidence that you can use in that essay.

Skills

Upon completion of this assignment, you will be able to . . .

- *Pose* questions that can effectively motivate analysis of complex texts.
- *Analyze* specific parts of a text to find new meanings and interpretations of the text as a whole.
- *Evaluate* and *select* strong textual evidence that will allow you to present a persuasive interpretation to your readers.
- *Use annotation* as a tool that makes it easier to identify evidence, develop rich questions, and generate interpretations.

Knowledge

This assignment will also help you become familiar with the following important content knowledge in the discipline of academic writing . . .

- Nuanced analysis usually requires multiple readings of a single text.

- Academic writing identifies and incorporates concrete examples as evidence.
- Academic essays often center on problems that merit interpretation, originating from a place of questioning, rather than a place of *knowing*. Remember, in this case, confusion can be productive . . . if we put it to good use!
- Academic writing is written for an audience of other readers and interpreters.

Task

For Class 2: Reading to Understand

Part 1: By 12:00 p.m. (noon) the day before class, please finish reading our class text, “Speaking in Tongues,” by Zadie Smith on Perusall. As you read, select any sections of text (anything from a word to an entire paragraph) that raise questions for you and/or confuse you in some way. In the conversation thread that opens, explain what questions you have or what confuses you. You may post as many comments or questions as you like, but you must start *at least* two threads on questions or confusions. Please be sure to label each post with a hashtag: #question #confusion

When writing your comments, try to be as specific as possible: for example, instead of just telling us “this is confusing!” explain why you were confused. Did Smith do something unexpected? You might write, “Smith’s coldness towards the character of Joyce confused me because she doesn’t seem so hard toward anyone else.”

Part 2: By the start of class, please look through the Perusall threads started by your classmates and reply to *at least* two threads. Your responses can take the form of agreement, respectful disagreement, complication, or answering a question. For example, you might comment that you, too, were surprised by a passage and explain why. Or, you might explain why you *don’t* think a passage is so confusing after all. You might complicate an observation by a peer by pointing out some conflicting evidence in the text. Or, you might offer an insight into a peer’s question about the text. All of these are useful contributions to the conversation threads.

For Class 3: Reading to Interpret

Part 1: By 12:00 p.m. (noon) the day before class, please *reread* Smith’s text on Perusall. This time, we are reading for *interpretive problems*. As you read this text a second time, try to identify tensions within the text that you believe

are rich interpretive problems—that is, not flaws in the text, but cruxes that can be better understood and/or resolved via analysis and interpretation. You might find that some of your original confusions or questions from your earlier annotations are, in fact, interpretive problems. That’s great! If so, add on to your original conversation thread, and explain two things: 1) What two elements are in tension? That is, what expectation did Smith create, and where did you see her deviate from it? And 2) Why do you believe the question or confusion merits interpretation? That is, how do you think making sense of this one might help us illuminate something important about “Speaking in Tongues”?

If none of your original confusions or questions seem like interpretive problems, that’s fine! Try to identify an interpretive problem with this second reading. Keep in mind that interpretive problems have two parts—an expectation and something unexpected; two elements that appear contradictory or in tension; etc. Therefore, you might actually need to highlight and annotate two places in the text in order to identify one interpretive problem.

You are welcome to annotate as many interpretive problems as you like, but you should identify at least two for class. Please label your posts with the hashtag #IP.

Part 2: By the start of class, please read through the interpretive problems identified by your peers. You can easily do this by filtering for the #IP hashtag on the left-hand side of Perusall. Reply to at least two of your peers (prioritizing annotations that do not yet have a response). Do you agree that this annotation identifies an interpretive problem? Why or why not? For this portion of the assignment, consider the questions that we addressed in class that can help you assess the effectiveness of an interpretive problem:

- Is it identifying a seeming flaw or mistake in the text, or does it ask a question that motivates interpretation?
- Does it capture a tension or ambiguity, which, if resolved, could help us better understand the text as a whole?
- Does it capture something confusing, not only to you, but potentially to other readers?
- Is it a question that requires analysis, or a question whose answer is already out there somewhere and can simply be looked up?
- Can we try to make sense of it with more reading and thinking about the text? Or would it require outside research?

You are also welcome and encouraged (but not required) to suggest other places in the text that you think might be relevant to an analysis of this problem.

For Class 4: Reading for Evidence

Part 1: By 12:00 p.m. (noon) the day before class, reread Smith’s text once more, this time with an eye towards finding textual evidence that might help you interpret or resolve your chosen problem. Are there places in the text that might help you figure out *why* your tension exists in the text, or to say something about how it affects the meaning of the text as a whole? Specifically, you might look for:

- Patterns related to your interpretive problem that appear throughout the text.
- Parts of the text that seem newly relevant to you, now that you’ve been thinking about your interpretive problem.
- Parts of the text that change your initial understanding of the author’s aim. Has studying your interpretive problem brought you to a more complex understanding of the author’s project?

As you annotate, hashtag each comment with one of the project keywords that you identified in class. For example, if you were writing an essay on the interpretive problem of Joyce (“why does Smith express opposition toward Joyce’s self-identification as ‘multiracial’ if Smith herself advocates for ‘multiplicity?’”), you might want to label your evidence with #Joyce or #multiplicity.

You should aim to identify and label *as many* pieces of relevant evidence as possible; you might not use it all in your essay! As a minimum, however, you should aim to find three pieces of evidence that you believe could help you *interpret* your problem (as opposed to seeking out evidence that simply *exemplifies* the problem, which you began to do for Class 3).

Remember: You can filter comments on Perusall to see all annotations, just your annotations, or no annotations. Pick whatever view is easiest for you as you look for evidence.

Part 2: By the start of class, return to the interpretive problems identified by your peers. Remember, you can easily do this by filtering for the #IP on the left-hand side of Perusall. Assist at least one of your peers (prioritizing posts that do not yet have a response) with a suggested piece of evidence that they might use in their analysis. Rather than replying directly to your peer’s IP, highlight the text you think might serve as evidence and mention your peer in your annotation using the @. Explain why you believe the evidence is relevant to the problem, as your colleague explained it. For example, you might write, “@Valeria I think this relates to your Joyce IP because here, Smith discusses ‘pride and shame’—terms she also uses when writing about Joyce.”

Criteria for Success

Successful completion of these assignments will result in at least seven original annotations (2, 2, and 3, respectively, in the order of assignments noted above) on Smith's text that will help you identify and develop your textual analysis essay. You will also generate at least five annotations (2, 2, and 1, respectively) in response to your colleagues' ideas and comments, offering them feedback on the viability of their projects and suggesting specific places they might look in the text for deeper analysis.

While your annotations are graded as complete/incomplete, they are an essential part of your reading and writing process for this progression and will be factored into your overall participation grade for the progression. Additionally, the quality of your annotations will necessarily impact the quality of your final essay—the more closely you work with the text, the more advanced your thinking will be in your final essay.

Exemplary annotations will:

- Identify concrete examples of specific language in the text (e.g., “Here Smith claims her voice ‘deserted’ her, which makes it sound like something was done *to* her—like she was a #victim”).
- Demonstrate an awareness of the text as a whole (e.g., “I don't understand why Smith critiques Joyce for wanting to avoid the ‘#singular’ when Smith's whole essay seems to advocate for #multiplicity.”)
- Offer concrete suggestions to peers in the forms of evidence to look at (e.g., “@Vanessa, check out this quote for more on whether Smith thinks #multiplicity is a #choice or a #gift.”)
- Draw connections between specific textual moments. (e.g., “This is surprising because at other places in the text, she suggests that she could have kept her original voice if she had tried harder; in other words, she suggests it was a #choice, in her control.”)
- Reflect an evolving awareness of both the text itself and the writer's interpretive problem (e.g., “This seems like useful evidence because while I used to think Smith was being mean about Joyce, after rereading it, I think Smith actually relates to her in some way . . .”)

REFLECTION ON PRACTICE

One of the most immediate observations we made when first implementing these lessons was the impressive degree to which students interacted with one another's annotations, building a virtual conversation about the text and beginning to negotiate meaning together before our class meetings. Simply receiving

affirmation of confusion via a “seconded” question, or having an observation marked as useful by a peer seemed to encourage students to share more observations, questions, and complications. Students especially gravitated toward the use of hashtags to label their annotations, introducing their own keywords (such as #observation) without being prompted. The keyword labels allowed students to associate passages to other passages, and annotations to other annotations, and to implicitly call on each other to work on possible interpretations together in the comments. This willingness to embrace inquiry and to approach it collectively was an exciting step forward for our goal of promoting curiosity and critical thinking.

Discussing their lesson study on “reading literature for complexity,” Chick et al. note that, “[f]or many, this prompt may be their first encounter with the idea that a text may contradict itself or have pieces that ‘do not fit’ by design” (2009, p. 409). In our teaching context, too, we often find it to be true that students have not previously been asked to read in this way. While novelty and the inherent challenge of complexity itself make the assignment no easy feat, the recursive and interactive nature of the Perusall annotation assignments seemed to position the challenge as worthwhile and workable, and complexity as something to be sought out, speculated about, and interpreted.

The iterative approach in Perusall provided our students with a concrete method that they could use for developing a rich interpretive problem, a strategy for beginning to generate ideas and take notes toward the essay in tandem with reading, and a way to use their colleagues to deepen their engagement with the text. In the example in Figure 6.1, for example, we see a student (“CL”) pose a question as part of the first exercise, “Reading to Understand.” This annotation points to a seeming contradiction in Smith’s text but is labeled with the hashtag #question; on the first reading of Smith’s essay, CL understood this as an issue with their own comprehension, not as a site of potential textual analysis. At the bottom of the same conversation thread, however, we see “CL” return to the same place in the text five days later as part of the second assignment, “Reading to Interpret.” Here, CL adds an #observation: this contradiction may not, in fact, reflect a failure of comprehension on CL’s part, but rather might be an interpretive problem (IP) that merits analysis. Further, CL cites a conversation started by another student (Diya) as a source of potential insight. This evolution of CL’s thinking suggests that students did return to places they had annotated on their first reading in subsequent readings, and that rereading allowed them to find opportunities for analysis they may not have initially seen. It is these principles—annotating to generate rich ideas, rereading, engaging with the ideas of others—that we hope students will take with them into other reading and writing contexts outside of FYW.

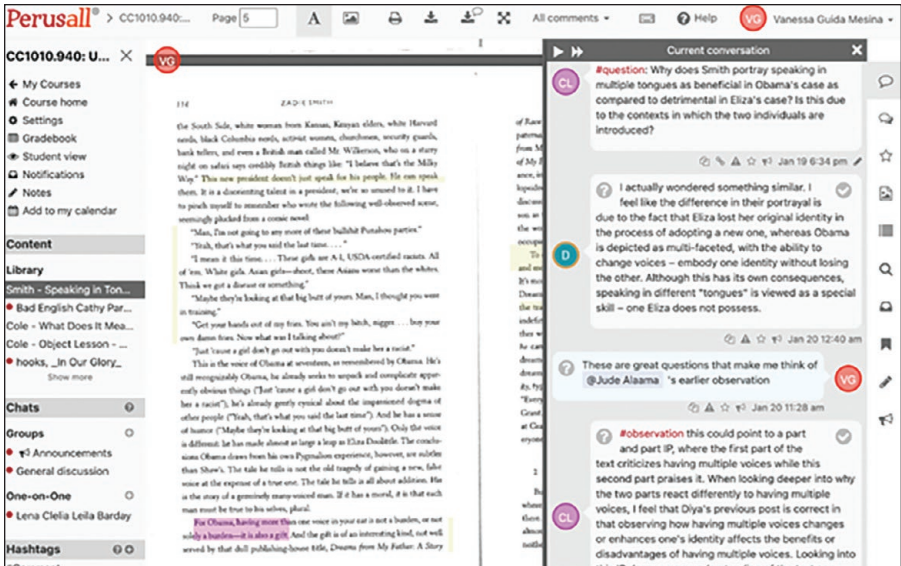


Figure 6.1. Reading to interpret example.

While we have found Perusall to be a valuable tool in helping students develop and practice these critical skills, we don't mean to suggest that simply moving annotations online and into a “public” space will inherently translate to collaboration, critical inquiry, and analysis. Chick et al. noticed that a potential pitfall of collaborative annotation exercises is interpretive relativism: seeing peers' observations and interpretations of the text can lead students to believe that “all interpretations are correct . . . instead of seeing that the text itself contains multiple meanings, [students can focus] on their classmates as the sources of the multiple responses” (2009, 415). While the authors are clear that this isn't where they want their students to stop, they note “this relativism may serve as a developmental way station” (2009, 415).

With such unintended byproducts in mind, we found it vital to model the kinds of annotations students might add to the texts on the assignments themselves. As can be seen in Figure 6.2, initial annotations on Perusall can be made by the instructor—either based on their own impressions of the text, or based on contributions of students during real-time instruction. In a real-time class discussion, for example, Vanessa elicited observations about the text that could be added as model annotations. The initial comment in Figure 6.2's conversation thread was a comment made verbally by a student that Vanessa typed up to model the functionality of Perusall and attributed to the student (Francesca) via the @ mentioning function. While this was a model annotation intended to help students better understand how and when to use the conversation feature,

this conversation was continued by classmates during the initial annotation assignment, with one student (Jose) making a personal connection to the content of the text, and another (“SP”) posing a subsequent “question about the text’s meaning in turn. This conversation thread also provided an opportunity for Vanessa to “upvote” a potentially fruitful line of inquiry regarding the definition of a key term (“voice”) in Smith’s text.

By both modeling annotations and participating in the conversations as fellow readers, we were able to facilitate conversations about potential misunderstandings about the text, as well as to help students practice distinguishing between interpretive and research problems, identifying persuasive textual evidence, etc. This also allowed us to frame annotations not as an end in and of themselves, but as a means to enhance class discussion and student drafting; in other words, we were also able to more fully integrate the Perusall technology into our larger curricular design. Figure 6.3 features a conversation thread that began with straightforward praise of the writer’s style and message. Such observations are, of course, valuable insofar as they allow students to identify writing that they admire and begin to reflect on why they admire it. Here, however, we see the annotations quickly progress from students praising the text as *readers* to students critically examining the text as *writers* and *interpreters*.

The screenshot displays the Perusall interface. On the left, a text document titled "CHANGING MY MIND" is visible. A red box highlights a sentence: "There's no quicker way to insult an expert Scotsman in London than to tell him he's lost his accent. We feel that our voices are who we are, and that to have more than one, or to use different versions of a voice for different occasions, represents, at best, a James-Lee duplicity, and at worst, the loss of our very souls. Whose voice changes their voice takes on, in Britain, a queerly tragic dimension. They have betrayed".

On the right, a conversation thread is shown. The messages are as follows:

- @Francesca Marchett Rivero** (VG): "This is actually in contrast to the beginning because it's not relatable - some of us might take this as a compliment!"
- #comment** (VG): "I relate with @Francesca Marchett Rivero as in my country too, we admire those who are able to speak English with no accent at all. Through this quote, it seems that we can understand more deeply how those who have 'voices' react to their ownership of their voice." (Upvoted by instructor)
- @Jose Guillermo Avelar** (SP): "Would you say that if you have no accent that you still have a 'voice' as Smith would put it?"
- I think this is a useful thread/line of questioning - Smith's definition of 'voice' strikes me as changing (evolving?) throughout the essay...** (VG)
- #comment** (CL): "I do feel a dissonance on how Smith uses 'voice' throughout the text, it almost seems like she changes the definition to fit her the context of her analogies"

Figure 6.2. Instructor annotation example.

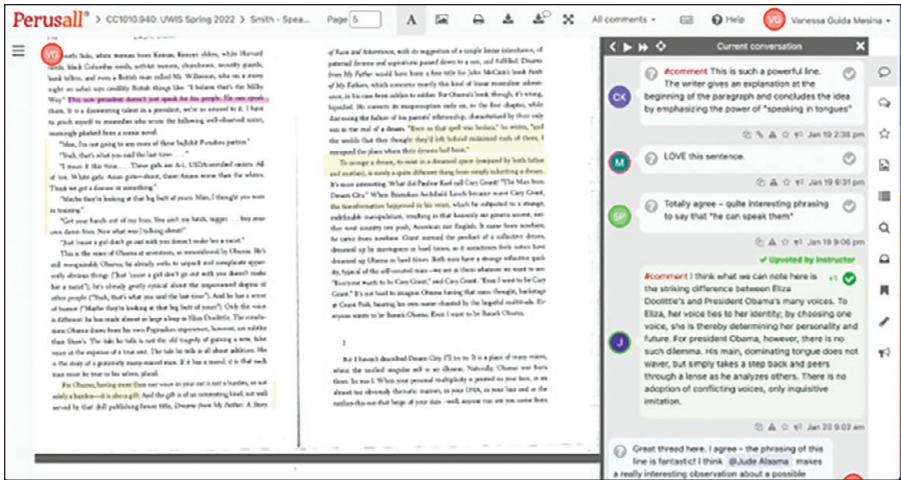


Figure 6.3. Annotating as readers and writers.

In the fourth comment in the conversation thread, a student (“J”) shifts from praise to a detailed consideration of how this passage differs from a previous one on a similar subject. In doing so, “J” shifts the conversation from evaluative of the sentence-level prose to analytical about the text as a whole. An instructor “upvote” signals to fellow readers that this is an especially helpful progression of this thread.

Teachers interested in incorporating collaborative annotation into their curricula would thus benefit from first considering how much time they have to devote to “onboarding” their students to a new technology and scaffolding the use of that technology in practical terms. In our teaching, it became immediately clear that some students would catch on to the annotation technology faster than others, resulting in uneven contributions. We found it helpful to first introduce students to Perusall during real-time instruction to ensure students were comfortable registering for Perusall, joining their Perusall course with the class code, highlighting text, and starting conversation threads. Building in this preparation allowed us not only to demonstrate how to use the program, but also to scaffold annotation practices more broadly by modeling sample annotations and discussing student annotations during class.

Alternatively, turning to a simpler, but more familiar, technology (such as Google Docs) might allow students to contribute fully with less labor upfront from instructors. While programs like Perusall are built for educational use and offer advanced functionality (not to mention seamless integration of PDFs), the benefits of “visible” reading practices and interactive annotation can be gained through simpler options as well, some of which allow for enhanced accessibility

options such as the integration of screen readers and talk-to-text technology. Regardless of the particular interface, however, online annotation in general promotes access and inclusivity in the sense that moving beyond analog, pen-to-paper annotations acknowledges the very real financial concerns of our students; in addition to doing away with the need for expensive printing and printer supplies, digital annotation offers a practical solution to students reluctant to annotate their assigned texts because they anticipate reselling their books at the end of semester (Carillo, 2019, n.p.).

CONCLUSION

In our teaching context, collaborative annotation with Perusall served as a way to teach better textual analysis because it helped instructors and students break down the process of interpreting a text into concrete, repeatable moves, and it dramatized the advantages of rereading and rethinking. The assignment also demonstrated that academic writing is an inherently social practice, as it required students to work together in a community of inquiry. And, finally, at its most basic level, the assignment rendered more visible the often-invisible act of reading.

For instructors, the benefit of such visibility is clear; the opportunity for assessment and pedagogical intervention grows exponentially when we have insight into how our students are engaging with their readings—the kinds of questions they ask, and the ways in which they go about answering them. For students, online annotation platforms offer the opportunity to track their own thinking over time, and also to develop the habits of mind central to the Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project’s *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (2011); by engaging with their colleagues’ annotations, they both gain the confidence in performing inquiry in the exploratory stages of writing and learn to develop their ideas in relation to the ideas of others.

We see opportunities for expanding on this annotation practice, especially by incorporating more active student reflection on its affordances and challenges. Carillo’s work (2016, “Creating”), which builds on existing research into learning transfer, points to reflection’s effectiveness in promoting a more deliberate, and therefore a more flexible and adaptable, reading practice. Students who learn to reflect on the choices they make while reading, Carillo suggests, will be better able to adapt the reading strategies they know to new contexts outside of their initial learning environment; students exposed to multiple reading approaches, who are then asked to reflect on which approach works for them in which context, may more readily “mov[e] among reading approaches in deliberate and mindful ways” in new contexts outside of class (2016, p. 12). We suspect that

deliberate instruction in reading techniques throughout the semester, as well as deliberate prompts for student reflection on the affordances of each approach, can help students become more mindful and flexible readers.

MOVING BETTER PRACTICES ACROSS MODALITIES

We originally designed these lesson plans for an online, real-time class format, but we have since used them primarily for in-person, real-time teaching. With proper scaffolding, collaborative annotation assignments can promote student engagement and learning across teaching modalities: in-person, real-time instruction with technology-enhanced assignments in class and at home; online, real-time instruction; online, any time instruction; and hybrid instruction.

- **Online, Real-Time Learning:** These lesson plans can be implemented “as is”; the focus on digital texts and online annotation is especially well-suited to the online or hyflex classroom.
- **Online, Any Time Learning:** For any time instruction, we suggest using screen-cast videos to introduce students to Perusall, to introduce the idea of Interpretive Problems, and to model good annotations. Following along with a screencast orientation to Perusall could be an initial assignment, serving the function of “Class 1” above. Teachers might also include an initial “pre-assignment” task to ensure that all students are able to leave comments on the document before embarking on the three-assignment arc. Notably, the teacher’s role as facilitator serves a special purpose in the any time learning modality. As students may never see each other or interact in real time, teachers can look for moments of connection in the student annotations, and make note of these in their responses, even tagging classmates to help students see their annotations as contributions to a larger conversation (see Figure 6.3 for an example). In so doing, instructors can help foster a sense of community and collaboration, with or without real-time interaction.
- **Hybrid Learning:** Instructors teaching in a hybrid environment will likely find it beneficial to introduce the Perusall platform during in-person, real-time sessions as this will minimize the chances of the technology becoming a barrier to engagement early on, supplemented by short, on-demand instructional videos. As the occasional in-person meetings of the hybrid learning modality offer more opportunities for student engagement with each other, teachers might allot some class time to student discussion about the annotations they’ve made and

read to keep the conversation going in real-time. For example, students might be placed in groups corresponding to themes or hashtags appearing in their annotations.

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