Writing between the Lines: Teaching Digital Reading with Social Annotation in an Introductory Literature Course

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Reading in the Glow of the Screen
As more college faculty assign free, digital versions of texts posted through Moodle or Canvas or Blackboard,1 questions about teaching students to read digital texts have gained urgency. This is particularly true in literature, rhetoric, and writing courses, in which careful reading is so central to the work we ask students to do. For some, these are questions about the problems of digital reading. Following a variety of scholars and writers before her, for example, Tanya K. Rodrigue (2017: 241) argues in a recent Pedagogy article that “the screen largely invites modes of reading that do not call for the kind of comprehension that we want our students to gain when engaging with texts.” Her experience—in which students are increasingly reading on screens and struggling to read well—joins an emerging conversation about digital reading. This conversation includes many who claim that students’ reading skills are declining, generally and especially on screens (Birkerts 1994, 2010; Ramirez Leyva 2003; Wolf 2007; Carr 2008, 2010; Harl and Jolliffe 2008; Vandendorpe 2008; Flood 2014; Baron 2015). After establishing how widespread concerns about digital reading have become—“according to the most anxious reports, the advent of the screen is destroying our ability to read deeply, slowly, and linearly”—Rodrigue reframes the issue as pedagogical: “What are some ways that teachers might help students engage with the screen and increase their chances of strong comprehension?” (241).
We can begin to answer this question by looking at emerging pedagogical responses to changing literacies and reading practices, as Rachel Sagner Buurma (2016) does in her essay titled “Reading” for the Modern Language Association’s Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities project. “Reading,” she concedes, “has been transformed by digital media and computation, by the computer screen and the e-reader.” Yet this technological change is itself a kind of constant in the history of reading, since reading was also changed “by the advent of machine printing, by the Gutenberg press, by advances in manuscript production, and by the shift from scroll to codex, as well as by social and historical changes in everything from the economics of book production to literacy and access to education.”2 Drawing on Andrew Piper’s (2012) work on the connection between physical media and how we read (which begins with the defiant prologue, “Nothing Is Ever New”), Sagner Buurma strikes a note less despairing and more curious: “The fundamental uncertainty over what it means to add the distributed electronic text to an ecosystem of literary reading previously defined by the ‘vertebral,’ bounded book . . . leads to a new pedagogical challenge for teachers whose fundamental charge is to teach students ‘how to read.’” Her essay curates a collection of teaching artifacts—syllabi and assignments—that illustrate how college teachers are addressing this challenge. They range from digital commonplace book assignments (Pasupathi 2014) to an entire course that considers questions about distracted reading (Raley 2015). These pedagogical examples can be supplemented by others—genre-based reading strategies for navigating digital texts (Morris 2015) or design-based literacies for reading and writing in digital “third spaces” (Pennington 2017)—that show how changing reading practices have prompted new pedagogical experimentation. Notably, many of these new pedagogies themselves draw on digital tools, suggesting that the problems of digital reading may be partially solved by exploring the affordances of digital reading.

The collaborative reading practices enabled by digital, social annotation tools are one such affordance and are the focus of this essay. Teaching students to annotate has long been a key strategy for English teachers, both at the college level and in middle and high school. Annotation has proved invaluable in pushing back against students’ naive notions that complex interpretations of the “deep” meanings of texts spring fully formed from interpreters’ heads after a first reading. Rather, interpretation takes work—methodical work—beginning with the act of careful reading, enabled by the practice of textual annotation. Secondary school teachers have found ways to teach annotation even when students cannot write in their school-owned texts,
using sticky notes, highlighter tape, and dialectical journals to accomplish what college students, who often own their books, can do simply with a pencil in their margins (Porter-O’Donnell 2004). Pencils and sticky notes do not work on PDFs and webpages, of course, but annotation tools for digital texts have also been around for a while—longer than many might realize, as Jason B. Jones (2014) notes in “There Are No New Directions in Annotations.” Like Sagner Buurma, he cautions against presentism by framing our current interest in digital annotation in a longer history of annotative strategies and technologies, citing the provocative visions of Vannevar Bush (1945) and Douglas C. Engelbart (1962). But certainly there are some new elements to be found in digital, especially social, annotation tools and how they are being used by readers and by teachers. Early digital annotation features in programs such as Adobe Acrobat and XLibris simply mimicked analog annotation, enabling readers to add a note to a highlighted section of text—much as Microsoft Word allows users to add comments or footnotes to text. But as annotation technologies matured, they added features that went well beyond what could be done with physical pencils or sticky notes.

What is new today—what digital annotation tools enable—is both the range of materials that can be annotated (including not only texts but also films, audio, images, and graphics) as well as the ease with which readers, teachers, and students can engage in social reading and annotation. It is this social dimension that Paul Schacht (2016), director of the Digital Thoreau project, emphasizes when he notes:

> Although the terms social reading and social annotation point to a genuinely new affordance of digital text, it’s important to note that the affordance isn’t sociality itself but . . . the speed and scale at which it can be practiced. Failure to register this fact obscures one of the most important opportunities that the Web offers us as teachers: to explore with our students how thoroughly social the activities of reading and writing have always been.

His essay illustrates this point by sharing a range of sample assignments by college teachers using social annotation tools (including Genius, Hypothes.is, SocialBook, CommentPress, MIT’s Annotation Studio, A.nnotate, and even Google Docs) in ways that tap into reading and writing’s social dimensions. The social features of these tools can make visible one person’s annotations in an online text to multiple other readers (either a private group or the broader public); enable dialogue among readers in the margins, as readers can see and respond to one another’s comments; allow a teacher to pre-populate a
text with annotations that pose questions or prompt reflection—and then respond to students’ comments as they appear in the margins; allow a team of collaborators to work together to annotate a text; enable the inclusion of not just text but also media (images, videos, audio, and hypertext links) in annotations, as well as voice annotations; enable readers to search and sort their annotations, within a text and across multiple texts; or enable collaboration teams to use controlled tags to serve as searchable indexes of topics or data categories in a text.

Can social annotation tools, used in pedagogically thoughtful ways, address Rodrigue’s (2017: 241) question about helping students “engage with the screen”? Studies on digital, social annotation suggest that yes, these strategies at least show promise. At the turn of the millennium, composition studies scholar Joanna Wolfe (2001, 2002a) was one of the first to begin investigating technologies for creating and sharing annotations on digital documents. In a dissertation and series of articles, she explored questions about how digital and social annotations shape reading practices. How might they support critical, close discussions of texts? How might they “scaffold different note-taking and information strategies that help students learn to move from reading to writing” (2002a: 479)? Could reading texts that had been pre-populated with annotations by other readers—the instructor, classmates—shape how students read a text? Could annotation activities prompt students to approach writing tasks with an argumentative framework? Considering the effects of social annotations, where readers can see others’ notes as they read, she outlined intriguing possibilities. “Because annotations seem to affect the social contexts in which writing occurs,” she proposed, “they have the potential to influence the writing tasks that students construct for themselves—particularly if the annotations contain arguments about the source materials and are thought to have been made by an instructor” (Wolfe 2002b: 301). She found that “students were significantly more likely to engage in critical, independent thinking when reading [pre-annotated paragraphs]” and that reading socially annotated texts shifted students away from “summary strategies characteristic of novice writing” and toward more advanced, argumentative writing strategies. Indeed, Wolfe (2008: 159) argued, “much of the learning value of an annotation lies in its ability to provoke students to take a stance on the primary text”—an intriguing finding for those of us in fields that teach students to make interpretive arguments anchored in textual evidence.  

Much has changed since Wolfe began studying annotation technologies and pedagogies nearly twenty years ago. Annotation tools have evolved from SparTag.us and HyLighter into the “new tools for old models” that Jones
(2014) lists: digital text annotation tools like Hypothes.is and Perusall, annotation mapping and browsing tools like Highbrow, and multimodal publishing tools such as Omeka and Scalar that enable juxtaposition of objects and commentary. Scholars in a variety of fields have investigated how these tools can affect students’ reading comprehension, meta-cognition, peer review, critical thinking, or motivation, and a few have also examined how they support teaching the sociality of reading (Kaplan and Chisik 2005; van der Pol, Admiraal, and Simons 2006; Hwang, Wang, and Sharples 2007; Nelson et al. 2009; Mendenhall and Johnson 2010; Johnson, Archibald, and Tenenbaum 2010; Mendenhall, Kim, and Johnson 2011; Samuel, Kim, and Johnson 2011; Razon et al. 2012; Luo, Gao, and Hoff 2013; Li, Pow, and Cheung 2015; Reid 2014). Most found evidence that social annotation strategies could, at least marginally, improve students’ learning within certain parameters. Yet while this proliferation of options has led to wide-ranging experimentation, studies of how these tools work in classrooms have lagged. Many newer tools have not been formally studied at all. Most importantly, disciplinary context and pedagogical goals matter when considering how we teach critical reading and writing, and studies performed in one context may not be generalizable to others. The question, then, is not whether social annotation tools can work to improve learning. It is clear that they can. Rather, how can they work in particular courses to pursue particular goals?

In this article, I explore the pedagogical uses of an emerging social annotation tool (the free, open-source Hypothes.is software) in a required general education literature course for nonmajors in light of specific goals for reading and writing. This study’s intersection of context, tool, and goals enabled me to ask questions specific to the course and students while addressing broader conversations about reading and writing pedagogies. My questions were these. First, could digital, social annotation solve some of the challenges of digital reading? More specifically, how could annotation activities supported by digital, social tools develop the reading skills of novices in the college literature classroom? Second, could they support a scaffolded approach to writing for students unused to writing about literature? Finally, could they help model the social practices of literary interpretation—and academic discourse more generally? To pursue these questions, I moved beyond the quantitative research designs used in most social annotation studies. Taking a fine-grained approach—one that explored the content and strategies of students’ annotations and listened to their perspectives—I explored social annotation both by directly analyzing students’ annotation and written work and by asking them in anonymous surveys about their experiences.
Ultimately, I argue that social annotation with Hypothes.is in an introductory, general education literature course can play a valuable role in cultivating slower, closer reading and can help students construct arguments about texts richly grounded in textual evidence. Further, the social features of these tools can help students develop as participants in scholarly discourse and collaborative knowledge making, though this remained a challenge for students. When used early in a student’s career, particularly with students unfamiliar to literature or even humanities courses, social annotation tools can help begin to habituate students into two fundamental academic norms: the iterative, developmental, even inductive process of knowledge building through writing and also the collaborative, social, discursive nature of interpretation.

Reading and Writing in the Gen Ed Literature Classroom

My concerns about reading came into focus on a day when I was teaching Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ([1837] 2001) essay, “The American Scholar,” and saw phone screens, not paper texts, laid out across the desks of a hundred first-year students. Because Emerson is notoriously hard for students to analyze, I had adopted a scholarly edition of the essay with explanatory footnotes and then had added hand-written numbers in the margins next to each paragraph so that we could reference specific paragraphs as we discussed the text. I had scanned this version of the essay—which combined Emerson’s prose, the scholarly editor’s footnotes, and my margin numbers—into a PDF file, uploaded it into Blackboard, and asked the students to print a copy to bring to class. It was this PDF that students were trying to read on their palm-sized screens. It was impossible to see a full paragraph at once, much less the paratextual materials, so students were swiping and moving bits of text around on the screen. It was also impossible for them to mark up the text. If we discussed a critical passage in the text, they could not underline it. If we explored the meaning of words or metaphors, they could not jot notes in the margin. All sorts of essential activities were suddenly unavailable to many students.

What could I do to help students actually work with the many digital texts I had uploaded or linked in our Blackboard site? One option would have been to force them back to paper, banning digital devices from class and ramping up demands that students print texts before class. And I did begin providing clearer guidance about printing for class. But I also began to explore other options, and eventually I found a free annotation tool with minimal usage barriers, Hypothes.is. Annotating with Hypothes.is is like laying
a plastic transparency over a text and then marking all over the transparency. The annotation feature can simply be turned on as a layer over any page viewable online. Users can highlight and comment on text, and those annotations can be viewed by other members of a private group or made publicly viewable to any other Hypothes.is user looking at that page. To look at the text without all the markup, the transparency can be toggled off. Students needed only to install a widget on their browsers, turn it on, and begin annotating.

With a new tool in hand, I redesigned one of my courses to focus on annotating digital texts using digital, social annotation to see if this approach could help students become better readers. I was also curious about whether it could support their writing, enabling them to draw on their annotations as the first stage of drafting essays. Further, I wanted to see how a digital, social annotation pedagogy could support the challenges particular to an introductory-level, general education literature course for nonmajors. This course spanned from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first, with about half of the course’s readings published before 1900. Typically, students struggled with language and with historical and cultural references unfamiliar to them, and they found the reading load daunting. At the same time, some students were minimally motivated for this work, as is sometimes the case with general education requirements. Students also came into the course with a wide range of preparedness and confidence levels. None were English majors. Few felt confident in their ability to do the kind of analysis and writing emphasized in this class.6

Given these factors, I outlined several goals for the modified course. The first, of course, was to slow down their reading and build close reading skills. For a general education course, these skills included reading with attention to detail, looking up information (unfamiliar vocabulary, unfamiliar historical references), asking reflective questions, and recording their reactions or ideas while reading. A second goal was to help novice students learn to move from reading the text to developing nascent interpretations and then formulating a full argument. By scaffolding these nonintuitive processes, students would practice the skills separately but be guided through the process of connecting them together as they wrote an essay—building confidence and skill and ultimately improving their work, I hoped. Ultimately, they would be ready to develop a paper that actively incorporated the original annotations into the final product.

A third goal was to exploit the social features of this digital annotation tool to make visible the collaborative nature of knowledge making and to get students to see themselves as part of that process. As Gerald Graff and
Cathy Birkenstein (2006: 6) note in *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, “For us, the underlying structure of effective academic writing—and of responsible public discourse—resides not just in stating our own ideas but in listening closely to others around us, summarizing their views in a way that they will recognize, and responding with our own ideas in kind.” In literature and writing courses, our classrooms attempt to model this conversation. We see this not as busy work but as practice in the basic skills of academic inquiry: listening to others, using others’ ideas to improve and stimulate our own, letting these ideas and questions guide our research, and then responding by contributing our new discoveries back to the conversation. Yet students do not always realize that this is what we are doing. They may not see the connection between those informal, ephemeral classroom conversations and the solitary work of writing a paper, or the “real” work of scholars who publish (what appear to be) single-author articles and books. Educational researchers have found that students are often unfamiliar with, and even uncomfortable with, active and especially constructivist or inquiry-based pedagogies, even when they do better in courses that use them (Ambrose et al. 2010; Breslow 2010; Howard 2015). Students may think that the only words spoken in class that count are those that come out of the professor’s mouth. That is to say, they do not readily see themselves as part of Graff and Birkenstein’s conversation. While novice literature students may be unlikely to contribute significantly to the scholarly conversation about a text, teaching them to actively join academic and civic conversations is a key goal of a liberal arts education. Ultimately, I wanted to see whether the social features of the annotations—their being visible to other students in a shared digital space—facilitated collaborative learning and knowledge building. Did students compare their reactions, questions, or ideas about the text to others’? Did they gain understanding or ideas from others?

In addition to these major goals, I had a variety of ancillary questions about the redesigned assignments. Could requiring students to annotate every text before class motivate students to come to class prepared? Since they could do the annotations only if they had completed the reading, the annotations might serve a kind of accountability function. Could opening up discussion spaces in the digital margins of texts create a more participatory and collaborative classroom? Students sometimes feel unready or unwilling to participate orally in class discussions about literature in general education courses. By making space for students’ voices to appear and interact between the lines of texts, student discussion could take a new form. And would these discussions validate the role of uncertainty, of puzzlement and confusion, in
the classroom, so that students could feel more at home in a space of unknowing, not needing to fake expertise or confidence?

**Designing the Assignments and the Study**

The first part of the new strategy had students learn close reading skills through a sustained focus on annotation. Annotations, completed in a shared, social space on digital versions of the texts, were required for every reading. Although I considered requiring annotations for only a portion of the course’s texts, I ultimately decided that if it was assigned, they were annotating it. I wanted them to see annotation as an essential, not optional, part of critical reading, and to see their close reading, as captured in their annotations, as the foundation for all further analytical work on the text. To limit the grading time involved, I treated these as completion assignments. If students wrote the required annotations following the directions, they received points equal to the assigned number of annotations.

The second part of the strategy consisted of informal writing and analysis activities that drew on their annotations. Students each had a blog: an individualized area of our class website using Wordpress’s Edublogs platform. I created a set of short writing assignments (roughly one every other week) that required students to respond to an interpretive question using textual passages that they had annotated. These exercises were to help them practice developing a modest argument about the text and supporting it with textual evidence. It would also encourage them to use their annotations as the basis for these beginning analyses. And since these were posted online for other students to see, they could also feel that these were semipublic—an actual contribution to our class’s conversation. Because I had always included regular, informal writing activities in my courses, this assignment did not add to the grading load.

The third component came in the form of two longer, formal essay assignments. For each, students had to formulate their own thesis through a topic proposal process. But they were guided to use their annotations and their informal writing as the basis for their essays. I hoped to see, in particular, an improved ability to develop a meaningful and focused thesis, and then to support it with relevant evidence by using their own and others’ annotations on specific passages of text.

While the first three steps of the process helped students move from text to essay, the fourth and final activity sought to show how all of this could then be published, at least in a small way. Drawing on the research and ideas contained in their essays, students posted a set of Hypothes.is annotations
to their digital text that would be public facing, not just shared privately with our class. Any person in the world with Hypothes.is would be able to see these annotations when looking at the digital text. In doing so, students stepped into the role of scholarly editors, providing informational and interpretive footnotes for a section of their text, thereby assisting readers who might encounter the text online. In this way, they would understand annotations not just as a personal reading strategy but also as a form of public scholarly work. These public annotations were marked, using a simple rubric, at the same time that the essays were graded.7

One additional strategy was pursued more informally. Since Hypothes.is made it possible to create links to individual comments, annotations could themselves be cited and linked by another student—in an annotation, blog post, or formal essay. Students were encouraged but not required to cite one another’s annotations in their short writing assignments, giving credit to how their ideas and readings built upon others’ comments. In addition, once a semester they were required to collaborate with another student in writing an “annotation round-up,” a brief summary of key threads in the class’s annotations about a text, and, in this assignment, they were required to quote from and cite one another’s annotations. These activities sought to help students understand the classroom as a site of knowledge production and to understand themselves and their fellow students as contributors. By citing one another’s ideas, as expressed in the annotations, classroom writing practices could parallel professional scholarly conversations.

How could I know whether these pedagogies worked? To gain insight into students’ experiences and learning, I used two qualitative approaches: 1) I asked them directly about the course, at the semester’s mid- and end points, using anonymous surveys that included both Likert-scale items and open-response questions; and 2) I directly observed and analyzed their written work in the annotations, short writing assignments, and formal essay projects.8 What I discovered over the course of the semester was both more and less than I had hoped. Some goals, particularly the scaffolding of critical reading skills through annotation to writing processes, worked better than expected. Others—notably, developing students’ understanding of the collaborative nature of knowledge production—were somewhat less successful.

**What Students Said about What They Did**

Before narrowing in on the details of students’ annotations, I wanted to explore their overall experiences with social annotation. To do so, I asked them directly about their learning on mid- and end-of-course surveys. Both
began with the standard questions I include on all student feedback prompts: “What features of this class are the most helpful to your learning?”; “Are any features of this class unhelpful for your learning? If so, what are they?”; and “What suggestions do you have that could help the instructor improve the course?” Some useful insights came from the first two questions, where students revealed how annotation had changed their reading practices.

Students’ responses to the question, “What features of this class are most helpful to your learning?” were consistent, both at mid-term and at the end of the semester. Three topics were mentioned repeatedly. First, they singled out annotations as a critical tool that proved helpful to their learning, particularly for building analytical readings of the texts. One student admitted, “As much as I don’t like to do them, the annotations are helpful. Hypothesis is pretty useful.” Another reflected that “the annotations, though sometimes overwhelming, are a great & effective learning activity. The annotation part of the project really builds a greater understanding.” Another paired the annotations with the classroom discussions: “I think the annotations and blog posts have really helped me improve my skill level. In class activities do as well.” Indeed, many of the students explicitly linked annotation work with the analytical skill building we did in class, which was a second major theme in response to this question. One wrote that the most helpful aspect of the course was “the analyzing of the text. This class has taught me to be a better close reader.” Another said, “The ability to practice analytical reading skills & writing skills.”

Finally, students valued how class discussions and activities built on their annotations to deepen their learning. These responded to the “What was most helpful?” question with comments such as: “Going over our annotations the following day of class”; “The discussions we have in class. Talking about the readings and explaining what they are talking about”; “I think completing annotations and going over them in class is incredibly helpful”;

and “In-class activities & discussions are really helpful, they help me understand the text more clearly because I feel that sometimes our annotation aren’t exactly related to what the text is saying, it’s sometimes hard to understand. Discussion & activities help with this.” This last comment acknowledges that students’ first-try annotations on primary texts sometimes misread details from the text or, at the very least, did little to aid in understanding. But because the annotations had highlighted areas needing clarification, class discussion was able to home in on questions and ideas already articulated. These sorts of comments also affirmed my strategy of linking at-home annotation work with in-class discussions, often by pulling up the annotated text.
on the overhead and drawing attention to interesting or questioning student comments.

“Are any features of this class unhelpful for your learning?” At mid-term, students did not have many complaints, but one concern revealed the ongoing need for students to understand strategies for social reading: “Its [sic] sometimes hard when you want to put an idea down for an annotation, but 10 other people have already done it.” The student who wanted to say something insightful about a passage might find that other students had beaten them to the point. Instead of seeing an opportunity to respond to other commentators, students could feel that their thunder had been stolen, or that further annotation was fruitless. In subsequent courses, I have asked students to spread their comments across a text and assigned students to small groups, where they see only the annotations of the others in their group. Yet this issue highlights the need to help students see that having a conversation in the margins is a viable option. The fact that comments are already there is a feature, not a bug, of a socially annotated text. To think about what you were going to say in relation to what others have already said, identifying the next step or question in understanding a passage, pushes the conversation forward. And yet it is a part of the social nature of academic conversations that students may struggle to see.

Remarkably, students generally did not complain about the constant work of writing annotations or about the blog posts, in which they synthesized some of their annotations into a two-paragraph response about a text. I had worried that asking students to annotate every text in the class would lead to pushback, or that they would dislike the every-other-week writing deadlines of the blog posts. But students seemed to grasp the value of annotations with little advocacy on my part, and they also recognized the connections between first reading and annotating, then class discussion to deepen those initial insights, then short informal writing activities (the blog posts), and, finally, developing longer essays.

The mid- and end-of-course surveys also asked questions about what the students were doing with the annotations assignments. I wanted to hear from them about how much they were actually annotating and whether they saw a connection between these activities and their critical reading skills. I also wanted to understand the social dimension of the annotations—were they reading one another’s annotations, and if so, did reading others’ notes help their learning? By the end of term, most students (71 percent) self-reported that they were completing the required number of annotations for the reading assignments “most of the time,” and most said that writing anno-
Annotations helped their learning about the text—either most of the time (41 percent) or “some of the time” (53 percent). On the other hand, their use of other students’ annotations was less consistent. Only 24 percent said that they read at least three annotations written by other students when reading a given text most of the time, and another 41 percent said they did so some of the time. I took this result less as a bald fact and more as a mark of their intentions. In reality, unless a student was the very first person to read and annotate the digital text, they would encounter (and almost certainly read, at least fleetingly) the notes left by their classmates who had read and annotated it before them. During popular study times, multiple students, reading and annotating the digital text at the same time, would see one another’s comments materializing in the margins in real time. So, I knew they were seeing one another’s comments. But the survey question got at whether they were intentionally seeking out one another’s voices, or if they were merely shuffling past others’ annotations so they could get down their own. Students acknowledged that reading others’ annotations improved their learning about the text most of the time (47 percent) or at least some of the time (30 percent). This mixed result made sense to me; the quality of students’ notes and insights varied significantly. It was also unsurprising that students might not always see the value in reading their classmates’ comments, since they also often struggle to see the value of class discussions. Indeed, part of the purpose of scripting this kind of activity was to make discussion less ephemeral, capturing it in the digital margins as a tangible record of the interpretive process. Students showed varying levels of awareness of these goals. When asked “What is the most helpful aspect, for your learning, of the annotations activities?” many acknowledged one of my most basic goals: “forces me to read the text.” But some other responses hit on more complex behaviors: “Seeing how other individuals think or dissect stories”; “Recording my thoughts of the text - it promotes thoughtfulness”; and “Just doing them it ensures that you understand in a deeper way - good way to learn text on your own!” The significant number of comments that referenced “thoughtfulness” or “deeper” reading strategies showed that students could see how this process was slowing them down, enabling them to work through the text more thoroughly.

When asked, “What is the most helpful aspect, for your learning, of the blog [short analytical writing] assignment activities,” several students noted a connection between the annotations and their writing: “It gives me practice with writing out what I noticed while reading the text”; “The ability to expand on my own thoughts and ideas”; “Helps create ideas and practice for papers / projects”; and “It helps me better analyze and understand
the reading.” These assignments had some critics, though. One student felt that the connection between activities was too close: “Overlapped w/ other course work too often,” and students did not like the requirement to read one another’s blog posts, although most (59 percent) said that reading others’ posts improved their learning about the text most of the time.

Overall, students’ responses to survey questions revealed that required digital annotation was, essentially, working as intended. The annotation assignments helped them prepare for class by increasing their accountability for completing the readings, since they knew the instructor could immediately see all students’ (time-stamped) annotations through the digital interface. And they readily acknowledged that annotating helped their own close reading skills. They also noted how their annotations informed their beginning attempts at analytical writing. In short, this approach seemed to make a kind of intrinsic sense to students.

Their reports on the social features of digital annotation activities were more mixed. They could see that reading one another’s comments could, at least some of the time, benefit their reading. Yet while Wolfe (2008: 159) found that “students were more likely to engage in critical, independent thinking when reading [pre-]annotated paragraphs” and that “because of the annotations [added by others] readers might see connections to other works or outside influences that would otherwise go unnoticed” (2002b: 300), her research looked at students as they encountered annotations they considered to be “expert”—notes left by instructors. My students’ comments told a slightly different story: that novice learners are less likely to take seriously or respond to annotations by fellow students. In social annotation assignments that encourage students to learn from one another, faculty may need to provide more guidance to students about the value of reading and responding to others’ comments. Instructors might also consider adopting elements of Wolfe’s (2002b) strategy: seeding the margins with instructor-written annotations to get the conversation started or assigning a few students to the role of “expert” annotators—a kind of parallel to having a student lead a class discussion or give a presentation on a text—to begin the annotations on a given text.

**Practicing Inquiry and Observation with Benjamin Franklin**

A second, more in-depth research strategy for understanding students’ learning processes was to directly analyze their annotations, which yielded rich insights into their reading and interpretation processes. Before the second meeting of the course, students completed their first annotations task. For Benjamin Franklin’s ([1758] 2013) satirical essay, “The Way to Wealth,” they
were to write eight annotations using Hypothes.is on a web-based edition of the text. I suggested a variety of options for their annotations: “[Annotations may include] a) reference checks (looking up the definitions of words, looking up references to people or places or historical events, etc.); b) questions you have about what the text means or is saying; or c) your ideas or reflections on the text.” For later texts in the class, I would add additional options, such as commenting on connections between the current text and previous texts we had read.

Franklin’s piece is short, humorous, and, for an eighteenth-century text, relatively accessible, but it plunges students into a historical and rhetorical world far from their own. Students find it hard to figure out whose voice they are hearing in the text, and they struggle to navigate its interplay between humor and seriousness. The essay is written through the voice of Franklin’s fictional character, Richard Saunders, the ostensible publisher of the popular *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. Poor Richard begins the essay by recording an “overheard” speech that proves that “the people” admire his almanacs. This speech was made by a second fictional character—an old man, “Father Abraham,” who quotes from *Poor Richard’s Almanac* as he harangues a large crowd. Poor Richard then quotes Father Abraham’s speech, which is itself primarily made up of quotations from *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. If all of this sounds confusing, it is. For novice readers, keeping it all straight is not easy, and keeping in mind that Franklin is behind the text requires readers to continually pull themselves out of it to recall Franklin as the puppet master pulling the rhetorical strings. Historian Jill Lepore (2008) has argued that the essay is often read transparently as “Benjamin Franklin’s—and even America’s—creed, and there’s a line or two of truth in that, but not a whole page. *The Way to Wealth* is also a parody, stitched and bound between the covers of a sham.” While dealing with a notoriously slippery text, most of these students were beginning their first (and only) college literature course and commenting on that text in a digital space where they could all see one another’s thoughts, reactions, questions, and interpretations in something close to real time. By the second class meeting of the semester, their chosen screen names appeared in the right-hand margin of the digital text, attached to more than one hundred comments, all keyed to specific, highlighted passages in the main text. At this same point in the previous semester, I had no idea how well students were understanding the readings. This time, the marginalia had opened a window into their reading processes and thoughts.

Analyzing the content of their annotations revealed students’ using
them in various ways, from decoding surface-level meanings to questioning the text’s structure and rhetorical strategy. Some students, for example, immediately began defining unfamiliar words, such as “abatement” or “prodigality.” While primarily helpful to the students consulting the dictionaries, these definitions were now available to all who came after them. In a similar vein, some used the annotations to translate Franklin’s text into their own words. In response to an adage about how much we are “taxed” by our own idleness, one student wrote, “This is saying that our laziness, our pride and our mistakes result in heavier taxes than those imposed on us by the government and they can’t be eased by the government.” When these strategies failed them, sometimes they used the annotations simply to admit confusion: “I don’t completely understand what he means by this. Is it saying that it is . . . ?” This sharing aloud of the readers’ difficulties was also a valuable contribution. By showing the challenges of reading, the annotations made it clear to all students that the text was not easy for any of them. The classic imposter phenomenon fear—that one is the only person struggling in an academic or professional setting—would be quickly drowned by all of the annotations indicating questions, confusion, and uncertainty. No one reading the marginalia could retain the belief that they were the only ones struggling. Their struggles also helped me identify difficulties and focus class time on those areas.

Not many, but a few students began trying to work out the rhetorical maneuvers of the text, and these annotations would have modeled more sophisticated reading approaches for other students. At the beginning of Father Abraham’s speech (the text within the text), one student wrote, “This signals the beginning of excessive ‘life lessons’ by Poor Richard—who is actually Benjamin Franklin. I am unsure if the public is aware of this at this point in time.” Later the same student asked, “I am unsure if ‘Father Abraham’ is a real individual or simply a tool for Franklin to share how relevant his idioms are.” Approaching the question of voice and authorship from a different angle, a few students wondered about the sources of Franklin’s aphorisms. One wrote, “I was interested to see whether this quote was a variation of something from the Bible and found that it actually originated from an ancient Greek motto that became proverbial. One of the translations out of Sophocles quote was ‘Chance never helps the men who do not work.”’ This student also saw a connection between this text and the discussion of virtue in Franklin’s Autobiography, a comment that could have aided other readers who wanted to figure out the relationship between this text and more serious writings by Franklin. He then added a hyperlink to a digital edition of the Autobiography.
to his annotation so that anyone else interested in this relationship could read further. In these cases, students were getting closer to making the kind of critical annotations that, according to Wolfe (2008), help students adopt a more argumentative stance toward a text.

The annotations also revealed an unsurprising but problematic tendency by students to view the text simply as a trove of inspirational and motivational “truths,” showing how many took the text’s authority for granted rather than approached it critically. For example, students took one of the text’s most famous adages, “There are no gains, without pains,” as a transparent statement of Franklin’s own beliefs, ignoring the text’s complex framing of these phrases as coming from a vain, unreliable writer (Poor Richard) through the mouth of a silly old man (Father Abraham) who was simply parroting what he had read. One student, collapsing these characters’ voices back into Franklin’s own, wrote that “Franklin strongly advocates hard work. Whether you succeed or not is in your hands, you can choose to be lazy or hard working and successful.” Another reflected, “I think Franklin . . . meant this to be true of all classes of people.” Although the annotation activity could not in itself correct uncritical reading habits, it quickly surfaced them so that they could be discussed and examined in class.

However, the social features of digital annotation also meant that even uncritical readers would encounter examples of critical reading when perusing other students’ annotations. In response to the barrage of aphorisms, some students practiced questioning the text, beginning the kind of work we would develop more fully in our class meetings. One wrote, “His ideas are very black and white. If you work hard you will be well off economically but if you don’t you will be poor and buried in debt. I think it fails to take into considerations other factors that might disrupt your economic status.” Another wrote, “This statement is neither applicable to most of America at the time nor to most of its citizens except a white male. . . . Additionally, I think this is a very one sides [sic] statement that carries no sympathy for the marginalized and oppressed around them.” Another student realized that the resonance of some of these statements with today’s readers was not necessarily a sign of their timeless truth, but of Franklin’s rhetorical influence. She wrote: “Another phrase that is still popular today. At this point it is kind of crazy to see how much Benjamin Franklin has contributed to current phrases/idioms.” As I read their annotations, I could see elements of both tendencies: students falling under the sway of the adages, taking them as ahistorical truths to be applied to their own lives, but also a budding awareness that these truisms had origins, and, in the case of the “Way to Wealth,”
crafty, rhetorical, historically situated origins. By reading the text in an open, shared, annotated space, the students had the chance to watch one another engage in both uncritical and critical modes of reading.

It was not surprising that in their first week of class, reading a revered author, students often sought truth from the text. But with the benefit of additional context, seeded by the work of effortful reading they had already performed, and informed by the critical reading some of their peers had modeled in the margins, our in-class discussions were able to move beyond these first readings to begin taking account of the ironic rhetorical structure of the text and its complex historical context. The annotation activity had succeeded at both laying the groundwork for further analysis and opening up space for students to learn from one another’s readings.

Making Visible the Work of Reading Emerson

A second interesting site for studying students’ annotations was their work on Emerson’s ([1838] 2001) “Address Delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge,” also known as the “Harvard Divinity School Address,” because it is a particularly dense and allusive text that stymies introductory students. Students struggle to understand Emerson’s prose and, after flailing a bit on their own, sometimes stop altogether and just wait for the instructor to explain it to them. In the past, I have not always been able to tell what portion of the class had even finished reading the essay. This time, instead of guessing, I could see their struggles mapped out in the text’s digital margins.

For a text like this one, annotations often began with the phrases “I believe Emerson is trying to say that” or “Right here he is explaining” or “I believe that he is saying that.” For students, this act of glossing is usually a necessary first step with particularly difficult texts. They cannot work with the text’s ideas or literary features until they grasp its literal meanings. If glossing is not facilitated, students are tempted to make a wild leap beyond the surface of the page into its deeper meanings, without basing their leap on even a basic comprehension of the words on the page. As a result, this translation work was exactly what they needed. And this time, I could actually see it happening and, perhaps more importantly, they could see one another struggling to translate in the margins. By making visible these shared difficulties through the social annotations, effortful reading became normalized. Students could see that everyone struggled with Emerson, and because their annotations were visible to others, they could also read, and possibly benefit from, one another’s attempts at glossing. Seeing this work played
out in the margins also demystified the analysis process. Literature teachers often struggle to counter romantic notions about literary interpretation that many students hold, especially the notion that readers should easily be able to peer through the messy words on the page to almost intuitively grasp an essential or underlying meaning. Instead, we guide them to a more workmanlike approach—requiring them to do careful reading and research, facilitated by the practices of annotation. Using a social annotation tool laid bare these practices and ensured that this interpretive work left visible traces throughout the text.

Not surprisingly, their annotations made it easy to see when their glossing was working and when it was not. Many students’ first attempts at translation did not hit the mark. (And it is possible that other students, reading their peers’ mistaken interpretations, could have become more confused.) But some students’ interpretations were more helpful. Even on the first reading of the text, one student was able to grasp Emerson’s idea that “second-hand” reception of truth is inferior to directly experiencing it through intuition: “I think he is saying that he is against the teaching of religion, it shouldn’t come to you by a second hand.” Several other students grappled with Emerson’s idea that Jesus was just a human, but like all humans, contained divinity. Responding to Emerson’s claim that “Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets” because he was “true to what is in you and me,” one wrote, “Emerson expresses that God lives through man. Thus, man is God. If man practices intuition, they will in essence not only discover themselves but they will also discover God which will lead to deeper religious sentiments.” The student’s grasp of this particular passage would likely have helped others’ understanding.

The annotations also showed another phenomenon at work: how the space of the digital margins made room for quieter students to play a more active role in the discussion. One student who remained quiet during most in-class discussions soon emerged as a star contributor to the marginalia. Her annotations were always on point, offering clarification, making connections to other ideas, raising significant questions, or identifying important details. When discussing Emerson’s critique of typical preachers, for example, she grasped that he valued lived experience over book knowledge as the key resource a preacher should draw upon: “I think he is referring to the fact that men look at religion with more of a scripted and structured practice. They are missing the point. Emerson is emphasizing that preachers need to be men first—they need to put their personal lives out to those who are listening so that people can relate and create a sense of familiarity.”
classroom, she and several other students were almost invisible, but in the digital margins, she became a leader. In this regard, social annotation proved a success.

Another goal had been to help students recognize the social, communal nature of knowledge making, and to see that their own classroom community could produce insights and knowledge about the text. For this goal, the social annotation strategies were inconsistent. For example, in their blog posts, I encouraged students to reference and link to other students’ annotations if they found them helpful in discussing an idea. Citing one another would parallel how scholars build on one another’s ideas and would also create a credit-granting system, similar to publication citations, that would increase students’ sense of ownership of their work. Students were also encouraged to do this in the periodic “annotations round-ups,” in which two designated discussion leaders would read through all the annotations for a text and pull together some of the major threads, which they would post to the class website as a blog post. In practice, however, students mostly cited one another only when required to do so; only a few began citing one another’s comments in their own writing. I am not sure if students ever fully grasped this idea of a community of interpreters, building on one another’s work. As an instructor, I came quickly to see that some students consistently wrote particularly insightful annotations, and I expect students could also see that some of their classmates brought higher levels of expertise. Perhaps some began to actively seek out certain classmates’ annotations to get their take on a text. I did not ask about this practice in the study, but in the future, it would be worthwhile to probe further whether a form of “following” expert annotators emerged among students.

Despite this project’s mixed success with social learning, using digital, social tools to help students understand the sociality of scholarship is a goal being pursued by a variety of other literature, language, and writing teachers. In their work on open educational resources and “open pedagogy,” for example, Robin DeRosa and Scott Robison (2017: 117) consider how college teachers are using freely available digital texts and tools to create spaces where students contribute to knowledge construction: “Faculty have the opportunity to create a new relationship between learners and the information they access in the course. Instead of thinking of knowledge as something students need to download into their brains, we start thinking of knowledge as something continuously created and revised.” Similarly, in “The Secondary Source Sitting Next to You,” Christopher Hager (2014) asks:
If I could “publish” my students’ writing—and I very easily could, using WordPress—could students see their peers’ essays as secondary literature? If I asked them to cite sources written by the very people sitting next to them in the classroom—to see “sources” as the work of actual peers, rather than of invisible “authorities”—would they begin to regard those sources not just as reservoirs of ready-to-use quotations but as the products of particular thinkers’ research processes, inflected by particular points of view?

Although Hager (2014) calls portions of this experiment “disappointing,” his students improved how they used research and learned to “take each other seriously and treat their peers as authorities.” Using a different strategy, Laura Lisabeth’s (2014) student-generated, wiki-based annotated edition of Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* enabled students to collaboratively author and critique new interpretations of this influential text. She found it worked to facilitate “networked knowledge-making” and foregrounded a “collaborative space for purposeful bricolage, a less hierarchical model of authorship and critique.” Although annotating in Hypothes.is did not significantly shift my students’ perceptions of the social dimensions of academic work, the tool has the potential to do so and may contribute to ongoing experimentation in this area.

On the whole, my direct observations of their work in the margins revealed much that was promising: work that usually would not begin until class meetings could now begin on first encounters with the text; students were modeling for one another critical reading processes; asking questions and working through difficulties was laid out for all to see as a normal part of reading; and knowledge making could be visually seen as a community effort. As students began working on full-length papers, I could also see how their annotations and short writing assignments influenced their essays. Triangulating their papers with their annotations and their blog posts revealed the close connections among these activities: their papers used textual quotations more and in more precise ways, drawing closely on observations and ideas first articulated in their annotations and short writing assignments.

**Annotation and Its Futures**

Open, digital annotation activities can have drawbacks. Students’ annotations may contain misunderstandings and errors, and when other students read those, the inaccuracies may cloud understanding. Certain passages of texts can become densely annotated, if all students think them significant, leading to clusters of annotations in certain paragraphs and sparse annotations in
other areas. And, of course, digital, networked texts bring with them the host of distractions that computers and the internet offer. And yet, the approach is rich with possibilities. Students annotate to figure out what they are thinking, to articulate questions, to name and define and explain, to mark significance in a text, and to give voice to their reactions, including deep emotions, as readers. Doing so in digital, shared class spaces makes these processes visible and validates them. It also opens up the possibility of dialogue around their notes—answering one another’s questions or amplifying them, reacting to others’ reactions or affirming them, posting a counterpoint, adding more details or information. At the same time, it makes visible to the professor the thinking and reading processes that would otherwise go unseen, making it possible to give students feedback on their reading and to align lessons and discussions with student needs. Finally, it enables students to see active annotation as a foundational step in writing about texts. Because these notes are recorded, traceable (citable, linkable), and keyed to the text, they become a form of prewriting and are usable in the next stage of writing, especially when informal writing activities as well as formal essay assignments explicitly scaffold the movement from annotations to more fully developed arguments about a text.

As teachers of critical reading and writing, we are working in a time of uncertainty and change, responding to emerging tools and to reading and writing practices still unfolding. Our anxieties are not unreasonable. And yet, it remains wise to meet students where they are when possible. To do so, we can draw on the creative pedagogical work emerging from our communities of practice. We can enrich our understanding of the present with the histories of reading, books, and pedagogies past. We can stay open to the affordances of new media even as we guard against their risks. And we can approach students as partners and critical sources of insights as we explore new approaches, media, and tools.

Notes
1. The increased use of free, digital resources, particularly those that are openly licensed, should be understood in the broader context of open educational resource (OER) developments. Robin DeRosa, creator of The Open Anthology of Earlier American Literature (2015) and an advocate for open pedagogy, notes that “OER are free, digital, easily shared learning materials. . . . OER are flexible, and they empower faculty and students to work together to customize learning materials to suit specific
For considerations of the promise and problems of open education approaches, see Watters 2014 and 2016, and Jhangiani and Biswas-Diener 2017.

2. Her nod to reading’s past signals a resistance to jeremiads of its present: “We have always read discontinuously, extensively, and intermittently as often as we have read in long uninterrupted stretches and intensively”—a claim that will not seem particularly novel to those familiar with the histories of books and of reading (Buurma 2016). For readers seeking an introduction to these fields, several anthologies have collected essential essays from leading scholars. See, for example, Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier’s History of Reading in the West (1999) and David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery’s Book History Reader (2006). Americanists will particularly benefit from David D. Hall’s five-volume History of the Book in America series (2000–2009).

3. Wolfe has since coauthored a textbook that brings composition studies research to bear on teaching literature. See Wolfe and Wilder 2016.

4. A team of educational psychologists sought to review all of the published studies on how social annotation tools were being used to support learning in higher education, although they included only studies with a scientific, empirical design. They concluded that “SA [social annotation]-based learning activities contribute to improved critical thinking, meta-cognitive skills, and reading comprehension” (Novak, Razzouk, and Johnson 2012: 47). These individual, course-based experiments with annotation stand in contrast to a major study focused on a large-scale, campus-wide e-texts initiative that saw less success, however. Researchers at Indiana University investigated usage patterns for the notes features of e-textbooks used in their campus-wide e-texts initiative across 2,896 courses, finding that some instructors used the notes features, but student use was low (Abaci, Quick, and Morrone 2017).

5. The tool I discuss in this essay, Hypothes.is, was launched for general use only in October of 2014—a little more than a year before this project began.

6. I know this because I asked them. To gauge their readiness to read and analyze complex texts, formulate arguments, and write academically, I surveyed them at the beginning of the semester and asked them to rate their comfort levels, on a scale of one to ten, with these and other key skills we would be using in this class.

7. My assignment planning benefited from the ideas of Jeremy Dean, Hypothes.is’s director of education (Dean 2015a; Dean and Schulten 2015), and by an assignment designed by Elisa E. Beshero-Bondar for her Nineteenth-Century British Literature course at the University of Pittsburgh, discussed as part of a public Google Hangout organized by Dean (Beshero-Bondar 2015; Dean 2015b).

8. This project was undertaken in the spring of 2016. At the end of the academic year, I took a job at a new institution where I would not teach the course again. As a result, this essay focuses on the evidence I collected during spring 2016 only. For this project, I gained both IRB approval and students’ consent to use their work.
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