**Writing Your Hypothes.is: Collaborative Annotation in the Classroom**

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On the first day of classes, as students trudge reluctantly into freshman English classroom, I’m often confronted with a bit of healthy skepticism. Why am I here? Why do I need to take writing classes? I won’t ever have to write, because I’m an engineer. I know it’s because they’re nervous: many of them don’t feel like they’re good writers, and aren’t sure that they ever can be. Sometimes it’s because they’re used to writing essays for standardized tests, which often feel highly regimented. When I ask them to read texts to discuss, they’re not sure how to react. I mean, doesn’t it mean what it says on the page? What more can there be to say about it? In this case, my job isn’t getting them to understand how to use a semicolon. It’s helping them adopt a new approach to writing and argumentation.

Today, I’m going to explain what collaborative annotation is, why I use it in my classroom, how I assign it, and why I think this strategy can be adopted to your classroom, no matter your subject. [SLIDE]

So: what is collaborative annotation? If an annotation is “a note added by way of comment or explanation” to some object, collaborative annotation is when this annotation is done not by one person, but by multiple people. One example we’re familiar with is marginalia, where readers make notes in the margins of their books to comment on specific ideas, highlight important passages, or summarize content. As we can see from my copy of *Tom Jones*, my undergraduate-self drew connections between Fielding’s description of the Allworthy estate and landscaping trends of the 1740s. I made interpretive claims about what the chapter was doing in the piece, and even had moments to react (ha!). Annotation puts the reader in a conversation with the text, giving them space to react to it. [SLIDE] Collaborative annotation is not just a conversation between the reader and the text, but creates a conversation between the **readers** and the text. In this example, we can see how high school students interpret the first chapter of *Great Gatsby*, not only interpreting these specific lines but literally pointing to other moments in the text. In this case, collaborative annotation not only allows students to see how others reacted, but also allows them to ask and answer questions for each other. Nor is annotation limited to students: [SLIDE] the readers who write comments at the bottom of a Medium.com article [SLIDE], the scientists commenting on Mashable, or [SLIDE] explaining a lyric in a Kendrick Lamar song are also engaging in collaborative annotation.

Now, why do I use collaborative annotation? In my case, I use it to respond to the challenges of the writing classroom. Students often think of writing as a product, something you do in response to a prompt, where you inform the reader about what you know, that you procrastinate until the last possible moment. Instead, I want students to approach writing as a process, where you write and revise. I want students to write rhetorically, where they craft their arguments for specific audiences: often their teachers, but sometimes friends, clients, or even strangers. When they write on topics, I don’t want them to give me their “opinion” or “the facts”—I want them to know what others have written on the topic and respond to those arguments.

One way I frame this for students is by borrowing the rhetorician Kenneth Burke’s metaphor for academic discourse: [SLIDE]

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (110-1)

The conversation metaphor suggests that writing isn’t done in isolation, but always relative to an audience. It mirrors the development of academic knowledge: scholars work together to understand phenomena. They build on each others’ arguments. Knowledge isn’t fixed, but open to revision. When we ask students to argue, then, we invite them to join these academic conversations as auditors and speakers.

However, to follow the metaphor, students need to read multiple arguments before they start writing. This reading allows them to understand what’s happening in the conversation: what do people agree on? Where are the disagreements? What’s at stake? Why should you join this conversation, and what can you contribute to it? However, when students do this reading, they need to understand and remember the content. This is where annotation comes in. When students are given advice on reading, they’re often told to take notes, practice summarizing what they’ve read, and take down questions as they read. But they don’t always do this. And the move to digital classrooms, where readings are online, creates new challenges. Research suggests students retain what they read on paper better than what they read on a screen. However, part of this gap is caused by the different reading practices that students use in digital mediums. Since they can search a document for keywords more effectively on a tablet, they’re more likely to skim, missing concepts, than when they read a print textbook. Annotation asks students to slow down the process, helping to combat this move. As we ask students to read to begin engaging in the academic conversation, collaborative annotation can help them make sense of what they’re reading, as well as retain the material better. It also involves digital writing, where students have to consider the possible audiences

So, if collaborative annotation seems useful, how can we do it? What platforms allow for this? [SLIDE] I’m going to mention a few examples, but discuss one in depth. [SLIDE] Genius is both a website and a free annotation platform that can allow instructors to upload material and have students create annotations to respond. Because the interface is somewhat more irreverent, it encourages responses with GIFs and images as well as others. [SLIDE] Diigo is designed for educators and allows linkshares as well as annotations, but there is some cost for annotation abilities. Google Docs allows you to post text and have students comment using their Google accounts, but you’re limited in use. [SLIDE]

Hypothes.is, which I’ll focus on for the rest of the time, is a non-profit open-source annotation platform which can be installed in a Google Chrome browser, accessed through a bookmark, or added into the HTML on your website. Hypothes.is can be used to comment on both HTML pages and PDFs posted online. You can have students comment publicly on these pages, or create private groups for your students to annotate in.

* Other good things: they offer materials for educators, including guides you can share with your students.
* Jeremy Dean has written about this on NYT—talk about how
  + @dr\_jdean

**What kinds of assignments can this use?**

* Annotating scholarly articles helps students deal with complicated texts; also, using digital citation practices (linking to articles in digital artefacts)
* Annotating sample papers lets students comment and learn
* Peer reviews using GIFs upsets general peer review structure, encourages open, thoughtful response.

Hypothes.is is alpha testing an EduApp with Canvas, which will allow you to create and capture annotations.