

Learning to Read Collaboratively: A Classroom Experience with Hypothes.is

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Introduction:

This brief essay offers to share a classroom experience carried off with Hypothes.is with the aim of reflecting about the role of computer applications in educational setting as tools to teach collaborative reading practices.

Our basic assumption is that, despite its intuitive advantages, reading collaboratively needs to be learned and integrated in the teaching process. First, we need to guide the students to help them understand that reading can adopt different modes in our academic practice, evoking different rituals altogether which will require of them specific skills. Different texts will activate different modes of reading and so will the different reading objectives. Despite the individualistic and competitive ideology that underlies our academic world, it is undeniable that collaboration is a potent strategy in the world of knowledge, and, in this respect, electronic tools offer new paths to develop it.

For this activity, we chose Hypothes.is, an opensource digital tool for annotation which can be used to annotate any document on the Web. In this occasion, we have not integrated Hypothes.is in our learning management system (Moodle), but the fact that integration in the future is possible has been a decisive advantage over other tools. Hypothes.is is a free application which works as an extension of the web navigator program, and it allows collaborative annotation on select readings (public web pages and PDFs). It is very easy to install, and students will only need to sign in and access the link provided by the teacher to annotate inside a group. However, if the Hypothes.is app is integrated in Moodle, the students will not need to install anything, neither sign up for or log in to separate accounts. In this case, a private Hypothes.is group is automatically generated for each course and the grading of the students' annotation sets will be integrated as a new item in the gradebook.

1. Description of the collaborative reading activity:

This experience took place in the context of an elective course entitled “New Technologies for Literary Research” as part of the English Studies Degree curriculum during the Spring semester of 2022 at the Complutense University of Madrid. The activity

was optional, and it granted an extra credit to the students completing its two literary annotation practices, a preliminary one and the other using Hypothesis. 21 students participated in the first section, and only 13 completed the activity. It was inserted as part of Theme 2 of the course schedule dedicated to “Electronic Textuality: From Print to Screen”, concretely the activity was included as a practice connected to a class dedicated to discussing digital libraries and literary texts repositories: “Toward Smart Libraries and the Future of Reading.” Integrating the experience with Hypothes.is within this topic was oriented to make students reflect upon the necessity of sharing responses to texts in order to make digital libraries lively spaces of knowledge production and not inert repositories of texts only read by a minority of experts. However, the activity itself was addressed to fulfil a series of more concrete pedagogical objectives.

1.1. Objectives:

- The main objective was to make students aware of their role as readers, to help them reflect upon the type of mental operations that take place during an active reading experience and to show them how computer applications such as Hypothesis can help them make explicit these internal operations by sharing them with others.
- At another level, the activity was meant to help students understand the processes involved in literary analysis and the evolution from a subjective reading experience to a literary response to a text that can be collectively shared; the type of conventions involved in literary criticism which entail a dialogue between a personal and an interpersonal perspective.
- Finally, the activity with Hypothes.is had the purpose of helping students visualize and share their responses to a text and making them aware of the wealth acquired by working collaborative in a shared reading space.

1.2. Methodology:

The activity run for two weeks (February-March 2022). It was presented in class in two separate sessions, and students completed the tasks also during class time, except in some cases that continued the activity at home. Each 2-hour session is normally divided into a theoretical first hour, in which the teacher exposes the topic assigned to that day, and the second hour is dedicated to practical activities and students’ work.

During the theoretical part of the session, the teacher exposed the meaning of literary annotation by addressing a series of questions: what we do when we annotate and what are the mental operations involved? What is the purpose of annotations? Who is the recipient of the annotations? How are they written? And, finally, what is the evolution from literary annotation to critical commentary?

The first question addresses the function of annotation as an integral part of an active reading: certain elements of the text demand the attention of readers and suggest an action on their part. Annotating also has the function of fixing readers' attention while they read. On the one hand, annotations arise from readers' personal reading goals (the questions they ask themselves about the text, their inferences about its content, their summary of what is read in an idiosyncratic language). Annotations are a vehicle for expressing what the text means to the individual reader and how has his or her reading been like. But they also have a social component, which depends on each individual's knowledge of the conventions around literary reading, they are the reflection of an apprenticeship in the appreciation of literature that readers have not carried out alone, but that they have been acquiring hand in hand with others, teachers and "expert" readers.

Regarding the mental operations involved during the reading activity that might be susceptible of resulting in an annotation, the teacher enumerates the following:

- Interpretative (search for meaning for incongruous, strange, incomprehensible elements, writing of reading hypotheses, paraphrases, etc.).
- Associative (connections with other elements inside or outside the text, with memories of other readings, vital episodes, sensations, emotions, etc.).
- Mnemonic (pointing to the most relevant passages, for example, those that concentrate the content expressed over a greater length, annotations that summarize the content, etc.)
- Analytical (they detect useful elements for literary analysis: arguments, spaces and times, points of view, themes, characters, symbols, stylistic resources, etc.)
- Evaluative (issue of value judgments, comments about the ideas suggested by the text, reactions).
- Creative (they develop elements that are not present in the main text). Taken to an extreme, they can become a literary genre in their own right, as in Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire*, or become an integral part of the work, as does T.S. Eliot in *The Wasteland*.

Regarding the purpose of the annotation, the teacher expounds how annotations offer a history of active reading, but they can also be considered as a particular genre of writing, with connections, for example, to journaling. The objectives depend on the person who performs the action of annotating: a writer unravelling the strategies of another, perhaps with the idea of imitating them, transforming them, etc.; a teacher with the idea of preparing a class and helping the student recognize the highlighted elements of the text; an editor for the purpose of enriching the reading experience, aiding the understanding of a difficult passage or providing background information, etc.; a student with the idea of pointing out aspects to write a commentary or answer an exam about the work, etc. The purpose of the annotation is thus directly connected with the needs of the annotator. However, sometimes these annotations transcend the private sphere.

In principle, the receiver is the same reader (as in a journal), but annotations can also acquire an exhibitionist dimension. They record the reader's depth and insight in reading, and they also reveal his or her interests. It is very useful to study the annotations that a writer makes to the text of another writer (for example, those of Nabokov included in his famous *Lectures on Literature*, 1980), since they detect the scaffolding of the work and focus on very specific elements.

The teacher then refers to the different types of annotations, and how their written form depends on a variety of factors, mainly on the idiosyncrasies of individual readers. She highlights three annotation styles: underlining, annotation in the margins, or graphic representation, though it is also possible to find a combination of all three. Thus, annotations often incorporate a combination of signs, schemas, diagrams, some of which may make sense only to the annotator. Annotations can be easily retrieved by the writer himself or by others, ranging from telegraphic to totally cryptic. Therefore, how are annotations written depends on the potential receiver that the annotator has in mind, the reading objectives, and the needs on which the possible recovery of the annotations is based.

To conclude, a final section is devoted to discussing the evolution involved from the production of annotations to the elaboration of a critical commentary. The habit of annotating a text can be considered a step prior to making a critical commentary about it. The writer selects from the complete set of annotations those that are necessary. The teacher then emphasizes that this task is what a computer program helps to carry out, introducing an innovation with respect to previous times. But, for the annotation to be retrieved and selected, it must be tagged with respect to its content or function. In this

way, computer programs devoted to annotation also force readers to reflect on the annotation at the time of its realization in a more functional way. Moreover, a vital change introduced by collaborative annotation programs is the possibility of reading simultaneously with others and sharing one's reactions to the text in real time.

After exposing this reflection about active reading and literary annotation, the students were asked to complete the Literary Annotation Practice 1 (Appendix 1), where they read an extract written by Edgar Allan Poe in which he discusses his own annotation habit in detail. Then, the students were invited to provide a similar account of their own habits. The second question was aimed at making students reflect upon their classificatory needs and, had they the chance to design an electronic tool to satisfy them, to make them think about what type of operation they would require from it, how would they order and retrieve their annotations.

The second practice (Appendix 2) entailed using Hypothes.is in a 2-hour session. The activity was explained in class and students were informed about how to install the plugin and use the program with a very brief tutorial. To motivate students into sharing their reading, the Literary Annotation Practice 2 was oriented to analyse a text that was part of the course syllabus and an essay question, to which they had to provide an answer, was formulated to give students a common reading objective. The text selected was the science-fiction short story by Brian Aldiss "Supertoys Last All Summer Long" (1969). The emphasis was placed on the use of tags and annotations for a collaborative reading. Breaking traditional norms of individual essay writing, students were encouraged to incorporate in their essays those ideas from their classmates which they had found particularly insightful.

Finally, a questionnaire (Appendix 3) about reading habits was passed to assess their reading experience, not only in an academic setting but also as a hobby, to trace their familiarity with onscreen reading, and obtain data regarding their preferences, time dedication, reading device, etc.

1.3. Discussion of Results:

The first task was completed by 21 students. The first literary annotation practice showed that students associate an active reading using annotations with academic tasks, only a few students also annotate when reading for pleasure. When annotation takes place when reading for pleasure, the passages annotated or highlighted are those that produced pleasure in the reader and are selected for rereading. A minority of female students

reading romance novels for pleasure had a far more sophisticated method (using different colour codes) of annotation for pleasure reading than for academic reading, which was surprising.

There is also a respect for the print book that inhibits direct annotation or highlighting on its pages, so these functions are more freely performed on digital devices.

Students' accounts show an assimilation of the course content and vocabulary. Annotation is associated with "close reading", which is often performed as a second reading of the text for academic purposes. Since they are students for whom English is not their native language and they are reading English literature, annotation is often associated with vocabulary definitions and translation.

Students write marginalia for elaborating their ideas and use different colours or diagrammatical shapes to highlight different textual characteristics. They also use post-its, notebooks (for extended annotations) or bookmarks to facilitate retrieval of important passages.

Some students were already familiar with tools such as Hypothes.is and underscored its functionalities, these tools are perceived as allowing the annotation process to be carried out in a more "advanced way", also more organized, with more space to write, producing a "cleaner" intervention on the text. The easy retrieval of quotes and annotations that the electronic medium provides is also appreciated.

Regarding their demands for a hypothetical electronic tool for annotation they requested that the tool allows free tagging. They also would like to be able to highlight passages in different colours to distinguish categories, add bookmarks, and annotate, as they do on paper. They are aware that they can be also creative with diagrammatic shapes and mindmaps. Their classification of annotations included the following tags: themes, plot structure, setting/historical context, characters, literary resources, references.

Out of the 22 students registered in the classroom only 13 students completed the task with Hypothes.is, which should not be regarded as a lack of interest on their part since more than half the class was engaged with the tool and finished the essay even though it was a voluntary activity. However, not all the participants in this second task used the tool as they should. Out of 13, only 9 students wrote a total of 36 annotations, an average of four annotations per reader (Figure 1). Four students were not able to join the group and made their annotations public.

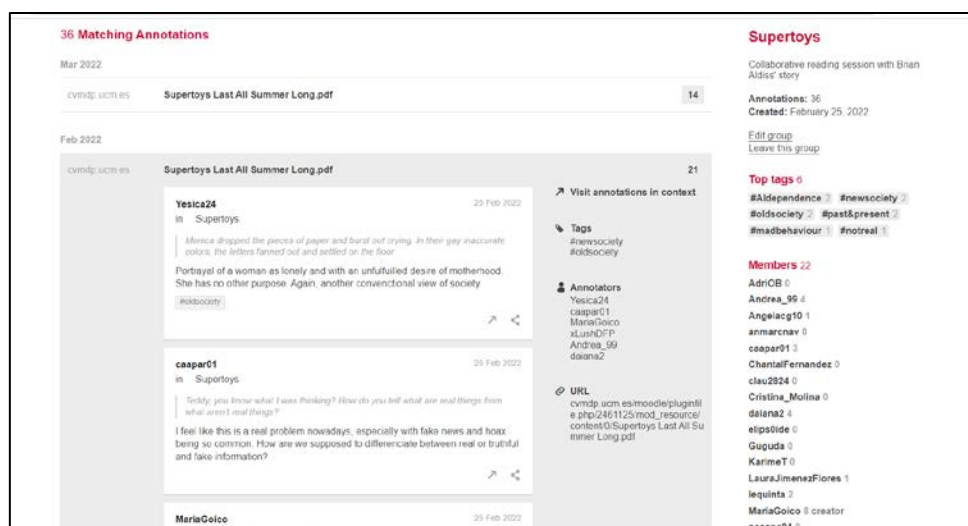


Figure 1. Screenshot of the group activity in Hypothes.is' interface.

Some still found difficulty using tags. When used, tags did not correspond to the main categories (themes, characters, literary resources, etc.) identified as necessary in their previous practice and, instead, they were free tags connected with the main topics of the particular story they were reading. Main themes, character description, and contrast between the world described in the story and contemporary society were the interpretative elements that received the focus of students' commentaries (the tags shared by the students were #AI dependence, #new society, #old society, #past&present, #not-real, #mad behaviour). Regarding their use of tags, it is significant that they were able to use tags created by other classmates for their own annotations.

The second literary annotation practice showed how most students (70%) were able to appropriate others' useful annotations to produce a more nuanced commentary, but some students ignored the annotations and tags of their classmates and focused on their own ideas to complete the task. It is interesting to remark that students with better grades in the class were among the students that were able to benefit from other students' ideas and integrate them in their own essays effectively. They were not only good readers of the literary text but also appreciative readers of their peers' annotations.

As the questionnaire about reading habits showed, students in general already spend most of their reading time reading online, however, only one student in the class had heard about the possibility of reading collaboratively using a digital tool. The teacher observed that the tool was received positively and that it improved her communication with students, since it favoured a less hierarchical relationship. She became just another annotator and students were able to express themselves authoritatively and freely.

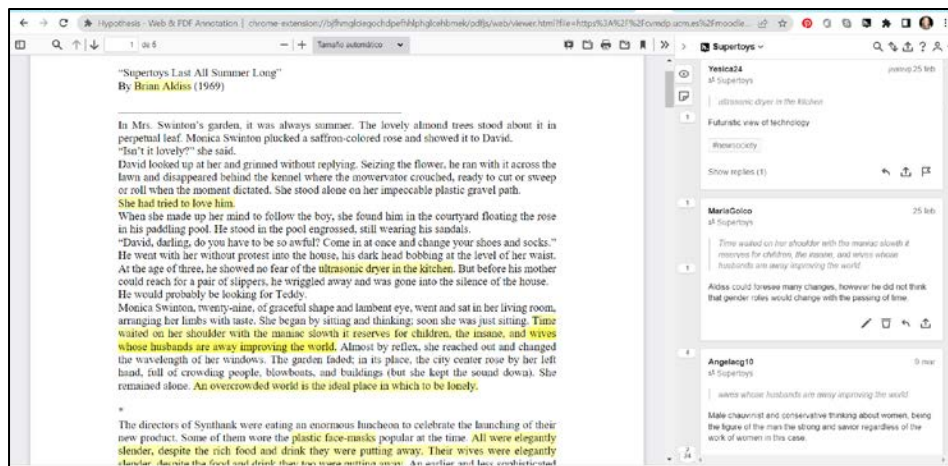


Figure 2. Screenshot of Hypothes.is interface with the underlined story and annotations.

Conclusions:

Before this experience, only a minority of students acknowledged annotating profusely while reading for pleasure, whereas most acknowledged underlining texts and adding some marginal annotations when reading for academic purposes. Though not all the students participated in the task with Hypothes.is, those who did were able to start annotating the story after a very fast tutorial on the part of the teacher and use tags correctly. Most students were able to discern the best annotations from their peers and incorporated their ideas in their own commentary, though a minority was still unable to use the collaborative dimension of the tool and introduced their own annotations without responding to others or sharing tags. After completing these two tasks the participants have become aware of the role of annotation as part of an active reading experience and the potential for collaborative reading a tool like Hypothes.is offers.

From the teacher's perspective, to be able to exploit this tool appropriately, this activity requires more time to progressively introduce annotation as a sustained reading practice throughout the whole course. The reading tasks assigned need to be completely integrated in the course syllabus so that the whole group participates, and students also need more time to familiarize themselves with sharing their reading experience online and engage in a true dialog among themselves and with the teacher.

Appendix 1

Literary Annotation Practice 1

- A. Read the following extract from Edgar Allan Poe ("Marginalia by Edgar Allan Poe, *Democratic Review*, November, 1844. <http://eserver.org/books/poe/marginalia.html>) and write your own paragraph describing what do you do when you read (do you annotate, underline, draw on the margins, etc.):

In getting my books, I have been always solicitous of an ample margin; this not so much through any love of the thing in itself, however agreeable, as for the facility it affords me of pencilling suggested thoughts, agreements, and differences of opinion, or brief critical comments in general. Where what I have to note is too much to be included within the narrow limits of a margin, I commit it to a slip of paper, and deposit it between the leaves; taking care to secure it by an imperceptible portion of gum tragacanth paste.

All this may be whim; it may be not only a very hackneyed, but a very idle practice; –yet I persist in it still; and it affords me pleasure; which is profit, in despite of Mr. Bentham, with Mr. Mill on his back.

This making of notes, however, is by no means the making of mere memorandum—a custom which has its disadvantages, beyond doubt "Ce que je mets sur papier," says Bernadine de St. Pierre, "je remets de ma memoire et par consequence je l'oublie;"—and, in fact, if you wish to forget anything upon the spot, make a note that this thing is to be remembered.

But the purely marginal jottings, done with no eye to the Memorandum Book, have a distinct complexion, and not only a distinct purpose, but none at all; this it is which imparts to them a value. They have a rank somewhat above the chance and desultory comments of literary chit-chat—for these latter are not unfrequently "talk for talk's sake," hurried out of the mouth; while the marginalia are deliberately pencilled, because the mind of the reader wishes to unburthen itself of a thought; –however flippant—however silly—however trivial—still a thought indeed, not merely a thing that might have been a thought in time, and under more favorable circumstances. In the marginalia, too, we talk only to ourselves; we therefore talk freshly—boldly—originally—with abandonnement—without conceit—. . .

- B. Think about a particular mode of annotation, the literary annotation. What different types of annotation would you need if you could classify them using an electronic tool?

Appendix 2

Literary Annotation Practice 2

- A. Reread “Supertoys Last All Summer Long” (1969) by Brian Aldiss and add new annotations. This time use tags that will help you write a brief commentary in answer to the following question:

Study Question:

Brian Aldiss' story seems to pose the problem of human responsibility towards their creations. However, the world that he describes reveals other important issues: government interference in the private sphere, life in completely artificial spaces, people's loneliness, etc. Also significant is the writer's inability to imagine women's emancipation or detect the main threat of the near future, underscoring overpopulation and not climate change. In your opinion, what is the main idea that you would highlight from the text and how would you relate it to contemporary anxieties regarding technology?

- Insert here a list of your tags:

- Explore your colleagues' annotations. Which of their tags have you found useful?

- Answer the study question in approximately 500 words. You can add your classmates' ideas and reflections.

Questionnaire about Reading Habits

General background information

1. Please, indicate your age: *¹

18-22

23-27

28-32

33-37

38-42

43-

2. Please, indicate your nationality

3. Which is your L1 (mother tongue/lengua materna)?

4. Second language:

English

Spanish

Catalan

Galician

Basque

French

German

Italian

Chinese

Other

5. If your second language was not in the previous list, please indicate it here:

6. Do you speak another language? Which one(s)?

7. Towards which professional career are you orientating yourself?

8. What is your mother's profession?

9. And your father's?

10. Are you studying and working at the same time?*

Yes

No

Questions about reading habits

¹ * The asterisk marks the compulsory questions.

11. Did your family encourage you to read? If so, how?

12. How much do you enjoy reading?*

Very much

Enjoyable

Just okay

Not at all

Only when it is my choice

13. If so, what kind of books do you like to read? (Fiction)

Novels

Short Stories

Drama

Poetry

Other

14. Do you like to read non-fiction books?*

Yes

No

Sometimes

15. If so, in which fields are you interested?*

History

Politics

Economics

Philosophy

Art and Culture

Psychology

Nature

Education

Other

16. How often do you read when it is your choice (not assigned at university)?*

Everyday

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

17. How much time do you spend reading when it is your choice (not assigned at university)?*

I don't read unless I have to

Less than 15 minutes

Between 15 minutes to 30 minutes

30 minutes or more

18. What reading format do you prefer? Please rank using numbers where 1 is low preference and 5 is high

a. Reading from a print book*

1 2 3 4 5

b. Reading from an e-reader device*

1 2 3 4 5

c. Reading from a computer*

1 2 3 4 5

d. Reading from your iphone/smartphone/Ipod*

1 2 3 4 5

Reading from a tablet/Ipad*

1 2 3 4 5

19. Do you know where to find literary texts in the Web?*

Yes

No

20. If so, where do you go to get books?

21. In which occasions do you print a text to read it?

22. Do you have a favourite piece of literature, something that has moved or spoken to you at some time in your life?

23. What motivates you to read? Check all choices that apply to you.*

University assignments

Recommendation from a friend

Recommendation from social networks

Need for information for myself personally

Enjoyment

Relaxation

Other

24. I would read more if...