

Fostering Criticality and Engagement through Collaborative Online Annotation

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Introduction

Annotating texts while preparing for a lecture or an assignment is a common practice that helps more in-depth engagement with a text by focusing on the most relevant and important information, identifying links to previous knowledge, leaving memory prompts, and raising questions that would demand further research or thinking. This is a long-standing practice for effective readers and is further enhanced by discussing these ideas with other students and/or instructors in seminars or study groups. *Collaborative Online Annotation* refers to this process hosted online, on platforms that allow for cooperative learning through public annotations and discussions within a group of learners and the instructor (D'Entremont and Eyking, 2021). From a social constructivist perspective, this is a form of collaborative learning that can provide space and means for deeper understanding of texts and creative discussion and foster the co-creation of a knowledge base that is critically explored and enhanced as discussions move forward. According to D'Entremont and Eyking (2021), this differs from cooperative learning in that it does not involve learning negotiation, and, unlike forums, it is grounded on the document so there is no need to reconstruct or explain the context (Porter, 2022).

Collaborative Online Annotation had been used and researched long before the forced switch to online teaching due to the pandemic. Renewed interest mostly focuses on quantity and quality of engagement on the platform and student perceptions of the learning experience. It has been shown that student-text and peer-to-peer interactions increase with greater use, a sense of community and a shared knowledge base can be formed, making the experience the closest to face-to-face classroom in terms of tracing student thinking (D'Entremont and Eyking, 2021; Porter, 2022). However, effectiveness largely depends on the choice of texts, the nature of assignments, timely feedback and scaffolding the student experience using not only instructions and examples but also macro- and micro-scripts (De Boer and Spoelstra, 2021).

Method

This talk reported the findings of the first phase of action research on incorporating Collaborative Online Annotation in an MA TESOL context at the University of Northampton. The aim of the project was to explore student perceptions of their learning experience. Social annotation was integrated as more 'targeted' reading in preparation for seminars. The readings were short and focused on the seminar

questions: 2-5 pages from essential reading sources, and 1-2 prompts by the instructor to initiate discussion. The social annotation tool used was Perusall as it has been positively evaluated as user-friendly in the relevant literature. Students were automatically divided into smaller groups and anonymised.

Research design involved qualitative data collection tools (focus groups) since the aim was an in-depth analysis of students' experiences and views. All students (N=11) participated in the process; however, only volunteers (N=5) participated in the focus group discussion. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. The themes included: usefulness of interaction, engagement, challenges, and views on improvement. Quality of annotations was not within the scope of this study.

Results and Discussion

The participants agreed that the social annotation tool was easy to use and there were no technical challenges. The positive aspects of the learning experience mentioned are consistent with the literature. Most participants appeared to understand the value of peer interaction and found the experience useful, as it was more focused:

“So we- we know that we should like focus on those information and we have to answer those questions [...] before the class.” (S2)

However, the instructor's comments and reactions were highly valued, which shows high dependence on the teacher as a source of learning and less confidence on student own views and independent learning practices.

Unlike research claiming that anonymity on the social annotation platform can result in higher levels of participation (D'Entremont and Eyking, 2021), the most important finding is that the medium does not weaken cultural challenges – face saving processes may still inhibit creative discussion and effective collaborative learning:

“[...] also have the, you know, the- the personal issue with Perusall because normally I don't wanna write anything and many people can see it.” (S4)

“...because we normally just read and then observe the- the knowledge, we don't like put questions to others.” (S2)

Finally, in terms of pedagogies, the participants identified the need for more scaffolding and more student involvement in building up their annotation skills.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings showed that scaffolding the learning experience, with clear links to existing pedagogies, and taking into consideration possible cultural barriers can have considerable influence on student engagement with Collaborative Online Annotation tools.

References

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