Leveraging Technology to Create Social Readers

Working in open-access institutions with a large majority of underserved populations, community college instructors often face the twofold tasks of helping students become conversant in discipline-specific coursework and also bringing students up-to-speed in their academic skill sets. Between publishers’ higher costs of textbooks and students’ struggle with large amounts of reading materials, getting students to both access and engage more deeply with texts is a challenge.

E-Texts
The rise of the e-textbook format at first might seem like a way to equalize access to and interest in academic materials. However, a recent global study of over 10,000 college/university students found that students still overwhelming prefer print materials, particularly when the goal is a deeper level of comprehension of the text. The study found, however, that e-texts were preferred for shorter readings where the goal is to review materials. Thus, students’ perceptions of the text format itself may have an impact on its use in the classroom.

An EDUCAUSE Review column on Open Educational Resources (OER) noted the case of a community college professor who found that his students seldom accessed texts in electronic format. Meanwhile, a quick glance at the Open SUNY Textbooks website statistics—just to take one example—shows that students are not downloading texts in ePUB format but, rather, as PDFs. The format in which these materials are available to students, then, has an impact on students’ willingness to access and use materials, which in turn can inform how we utilize these in both remedial and general education instruction.

Developing Community College Readers
Basic skills courses are not the only place where scaffolding active reading practices should occur. General education community college instructors can also benefit from reframing their reading lists as tasks rather than as standalone assignments that students do in isolation. Metacognitive frameworks like Reading Apprenticeship, which trains students to read more deeply using think-aloud protocols and annotation assignments, aid students’ problem-solving competencies and foster critical thinking skills.

These methods encourage a social dimension to reading, where multiple students together can engage in a dialogue with the text. Reading is then something that is recursive: understanding is not linear but, rather, is a process of revising assumptions to gain deeper insights. Social reading is nothing new, argues Anne Trubek in a reflective essay on reading and technology. Before print became ubiquitous, readings often occurred as a public, communal experience. Trubek defines social reading vis-à-vis technology as that which occurs ex post facto via online discussions or social media sharing or as an interactive experience within a text through hyperlinks. Current technology takes this a step further as modern annotation tools combine, in one platform, both the social sharing/dialogue and the ability to engage in ways beyond the text.

Annotation Tools
Traditional online publishers have developed ways in which students can highlight and even annotate e-texts, but for many community college students and instructors, these tools may lack the practicality of other, free and open-source web-based annotation platforms. Publisher e-texts assume students are paying for or buying their textbooks; however, according to a 2013 survey, 65 percent of students decided to forgo buying textbooks because the cost was prohibitive. This, coupled with the fact that the market is not set up for students to purchase used e-texts, means that the annotation tools that are native to publisher platforms are often not a realistic option for the community college population.

Several free and open-source web-based annotation tools can be used to engage students with texts in new ways, in addition to ensuring equitable access to course materials. These tools rely on platforms, which add a layer to existing PDFs or web pages, do not expire, have various privacy settings, and allow students to develop the 21st-century skills needed for digital literacy. As an added bonus, instructors can use these tools to provide content in a format that students tend to prefer, whether PDFs or web pages. While each tool has differing ways in which it can be used in the classroom and with various Learning Management Systems (LMSs), they all have one feature in common: the ability for students to highlight, annotate, and share thoughts on a given text.

One of the more widely used tools that also allows for deeper Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI) integration with various LMSs (e.g., Canvas, Blackboard, or Moodle) is Hypothes.is, a web-based open-source platform with a simple and intuitive user interface. Because Hypothes.is can integrate within an LMS, the platform is easy to use through existing institutional authentication systems once students have set up their individual accounts. While it qualifies as a third-party...
software application for many districts, the facts that students can use it within the system and that their work is recorded in the LMS gradebook (e.g., the SpeedGrader in Canvas) help to demonstrate that students and faculty are engaging in regular and effective contact in online courses.

Another tool that allows free access is Ponder, a social reading platform that emulates many aspects of social media with micro-responses and sentiments. Ponder also lets instructors create a list of course themes, which students can use to identify key topics and concepts while reading. Ponder can be used via a desktop version or a browser add-on or with an iOS app, making it a useful tool when third-party authentication is not an issue. The free version allows for unlimited class creation, but LMS integration requires a site license and institutional technical support. More advanced features incorporating video and various search functions are available with the paid versions.

Additional platforms—including Stanford’s Lacuna—offer varying levels of LMS integration, privacy settings, and analytic tools. When assessing these tools for the community college population, instructors should consider ease of use and the cleanliness of the interface. Additional “layers” on top of an annotated layer could easily take away from the pedagogical purpose for which the tool is being employed. Another consideration is whether the platform can easily be added to a course by instructors or if it requires more advanced technical support at an institutional level.

Classroom Applications

Annotation tools can be used in a variety of ways to support both reading instruction and reading comprehension. When used with shorter texts, they can be used as an alternative to traditional discussion forums in which students are asked to highlight something about which they want to know more or have questions. Students can either respond to each other’s questions/posts/highlights or share their ideas external to the platform. What differentiates annotation comments from discussion posts is that as each student reads, responds, or asks a question, other students can see that work. For students who might struggle with reading, this can be a way to start training them to generate and share pre-reading questions—akin to the popular reading strategy SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review). When students are asked to comment on others’ annotations, they use the text as a springboard for their ideas. Rather than having threaded discussion posts that show up based on the time posted, annotations are based on the text itself, which in turn exposes students to a wider range of opinions and ideas. Students actively aid each other in constructing meaning from the text. For basic skills and remedial courses, Hypothesis can be used as a check on students’ ability to highlight only key information from a text and as training for the academic reading strategies that they will need in general education and discipline-specific classes.

With the range of options that web-based annotation tools provide and the ever-increasing sophistication of these applications, community college instructors can help their students develop critical thinking, digital literacy, and collaboration skills through their reading assignments. Annotation tools provide an alternative to the image of the solitary student sitting in the library reading a text. Instead, these tools leverage 21st-century technology to bring social reading back to its traditional roots.

Notes


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