Chapter 11
Social Annotation:
A Practical Guide for Collaborative Implementation

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ABSTRACT

Annotative social reading is an interactive form of reading that is performed either synchronously or asynchronously by multiple users who access and annotate the same source text. This mode of online reading has the potential to advance metaliteracy in the digital humanities by supporting critical student conversations by design. This chapter explores how faculty, librarians, and technologists can collaborate to manage emerging technologies and develop online learning communities that maximize learning opportunities. Challenges related to collaboration, metaliteracy, and online learning are explored, and resources for content and technology, including social reading and digital humanities software, are provided.

INTRODUCTION

There is a rich history in academia of discussing texts. Student and mentor interactions clarify thinking, develop knowledge, and can build a community for learning. Although classrooms have evolved to inhabit digital environments, the technologies used within these environments do not always support the aforementioned cognitive and social goals. One possibility for improving the online learning experience is the incorporation of social reading tools, a motley suite of technologies that support the sharing of ideas, annotations, bibliographies, reading lists, and reviews. Social reading software does not engender novel ways of thinking, but instead generates a space within the modern information environment for centuries-old reading practices, providing a way for our digital selves to engage in a deeper level of meaning-making.

Social reading functionalities like highlighting and annotation can be a supplemental feature; for example, e-readers frequently feature such tools as an added benefit for the user, who presumably opened the program with the primary purpose of reading. Social reading functionalities can also be a central

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feature, and as such used for the express purpose of commentary, socializing, note-taking, and otherwise engaging with the text and its community of readers. In particular, explicitly annotative social reading software that embeds discussion forums within the boundaries of a shared text may support a more engaging online learning environment. Projects like the New York Public Library's *Candide* 2.0 (http://candide.nypl.org) and the collaborative *Digital Thoreau* project (http://www.digitalthoreau.org) have demonstrated the value of inviting readers to socially annotate and parse meaning within the margins of a source text, thereby creating a cooperative, digital form of marginalia.

Both *Candide* 2.0 and *Digital Thoreau* are inspiring examples of how social annotation can be incorporated within the context of participatory, multi-faceted representations of a source text. In addition to social annotation, *Candide* 2.0 features artwork, multimedia, and maps inspired by the text, and provides users with tools to create their own (New York Public Library, 2010). *Digital Thoreau* incorporates multiple versions of its source text, each inviting users to engage in different types of analysis. *The Readers' Thoreau* supports social annotation, and *Walden: A Fluid Text Edition* fosters comparisons between different editions of the source text (Schacht, 2014). To supplement these two platforms for reader interpretation, a third *Digital Thoreau* project, *The Days of Walter Harding, Thoreau Scholar*, features online exhibits created by SUNY Geneseo students, who digitized and uploaded documents from their library's special collection (Schacht, 2014). *Candide* 2.0 and *Digital Thoreau* both thoughtfully incorporate available technologies to create digital environments which stimulate and celebrate readers' critical interactions with a source text.

Social annotation incorporates an embedded source text, representing a rich opportunity for critical reading, thinking, and writing. Because social annotation occurs at the intersection of knowledge building, technology, and social practices, the inclusion of explicit metaliteracy learning objectives can be advocated. Metaliteracy is a set of thinking and social practices that are integral to the critical use and communication of information in a variety of formats (Jacobson & Mackey, 2013). In the past, literacy primarily involved interpreting words and numbers in a static text. The Internet has introduced new ways of constructing meaning at the individual and community level on a scale that was not even conceivable 10 years ago. To be literate in today's world, learners must navigate words, numbers, images, and other media in an information environment that is simultaneously fluid and permanently archived. Issues of access further complicate the issue: learners must possess both the means and basic skills to access the Internet before they can learn to critically engage with its content.

When considering the implementation of a social annotation project, a collaboration between faculty, librarians, and technologists can yield a fuller understanding of the multilayered challenge of such a project and capitalize upon its potential rewards. A social annotation project employs collaborators in familiar roles: librarians as disseminators of information, faculty as facilitators and content experts, and technologists as technology experts and supporters. Yet such a project could certainly strengthen the connection between the collaborators, allowing them to benefit from one another's expertise as well as explore new or emerging roles: librarians and technologists as co-facilitators and faculty as emerging technology experts.

Although much can be written about the cognitive, social, and academic import of social annotation, this chapter is primarily intended to introduce the practical and educational concerns for implementation. Following a brief overview of social annotation, a detailed discussion of the practical considerations of implementation will be provided. These considerations include: the identification of potential collaborators and outreach, educational standards and objectives, overcoming social barriers to developing an online learning community, and resources for content and technology. However, this is by no means an