

# Chapter 1

## Talking Back to Texts: An Introduction to Putting the “Social” in “Social Annotation”

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Every moment of reading offers readers the opportunity to enter into the text as part of a larger conversation, one that likely started long before the reader encountered the text. Yet there remains the myth that reading is about encountering a text ossified in time rather than bringing an idea into a dialogue. Recognizing that a text is lively, that it invites voices to intervene and disrupt a conversation, is critical to the creative development of new thought. The Social Web offers opportunities in college classrooms to make the ongoing conversation that begins in a reading visible so that students can enter into a conversation in shared textual spaces. This chapter offers a broad understanding of what social annotation is and why it is important by offering the benefits and challenges of social annotation while briefly reviewing the empirical literature on social annotation from a variety of disciplines.*

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## INTRODUCTION

At its core, reading is a social act. At first, that claim may seem counterintuitive to readers since the embodied act of silent reading can often feel isolated from any social context. Yet the moment that a reader processes the text on a page, that reader is immediately brought into conversation, jolted into contact with the author. The reader occupies the position of listener, working to understand the argument, the story, or the ideas that the author expresses.

A savvy reader quickly recognizes that an author speaks from a position grounded in a particular history, tradition, or culture. Academic writers make it especially obvious that they are part of a conversation: citations to other writers are a deliberate way to bring other voices into the text and to make room for the variety of perspectives that bear on a particular issue. But even in literary works, authors bring in various voices in other ways, perhaps explicitly through allegory or more implicitly through imagery or description that evokes other moments, people, or places. The point here is that every moment of reading offers readers the opportunity to enter into the text as part of a larger conversation, one that likely started long before the reader encountered the text.

I am deliberately invoking the idea of the Burkean parlor, a metaphor about text as conversation that originates in Kenneth Burke's *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), to suggest that one of our most productive ways of explaining why reading is important to our students emerges from the perspective that we must see reading as part of a lively dialogue. Indeed, Lev Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theories of learning have long confirmed that the process of sharing and discussing knowledge and experiences improves student learning, so it is critical to see reading as part of this sharing and discussion process. Indeed, reading can all too quickly become a one-way communicate between author and reader, where the reader only "listens" to the author "speak" rather than contribute to the conversation. The reader can act more like a "wallflower" in the Burkean parlor than a conversant. Sometimes, being a reading wallflower is appropriate; after all, it may be the case that when we're learning something completely new that we have no prior knowledge of or experience with, the best thing that we can do to understand a conversation, at first, is merely to listen.

At other times, however, it is appropriate to jump into that conversation, as our own contributions can allow us to process and engage with the ideas we're discovering. Conversants might offer affirmation, expand upon particular claims, or echo key ideas. Similarly, conversants may disagree or offer a new perspective. This conversation is the stuff of active learning (Bonwell & Eison 1991), a process

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