

Chapter 3

Students' Uses of a Private Margin on Public Online Discussions

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, marginal notes have been integral to the acts of reading and studying. In the print realm, margins provide a private space where readers can record their initial reactions to text. Today many postsecondary students use online discussion forums as a prescribed part of course activities; yet these forums typically provide no private space for students to record their initial reactions to one another's posts. The authors added a private margin to the online discussion environment used in two graduate courses and examined students' uses of it. Without any specific instruction or encouragement, students used this margin as an integral part of how they participated in the discussion forum over the entire semester. The most common uses of the Virtual Margin were to privately record opinions on other students' posts, to create summaries of others' posts for personal study, and to create private drafts of notes to post publicly later. Overall, the results suggest that a private margin has potential to assist students in their learning and in developing public forum contributions.

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INTRODUCTION

For centuries, making marginal notes has been an important part of the acts of reading and studying (Jackson, 2001). Since the advent of inexpensive volume-printed books, readers have experienced the margin as a private space in which they can freely record their initial reactions to written text, without concern over other readers' potential responses or judgements. In line with this tradition, early on the development of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee made provision for readers to annotate web pages privately. He wrote, in his design proposal for the new document sharing system, "One must be able to add one's own private links to and from public information. One must also be able to annotate links, as well as nodes [documents], privately" (Berners-Lee, 1989). The first releases of the NCSA Mosaic browser supported these features, but they were quickly lost from subsequent browsers, such as Netscape Navigator. As other chapters in this volume attest, a long series of developers and entrepreneurs have struggled to bring support for annotation back to the web.

In this research, the scope of our interest is not web documents generally, but web-based discussions specifically. Postsecondary students today study a great deal online, but this studying does not involve published documents alone. In many if not most postsecondary institutions in the developed world, students use online discussion forums as a prescribed part of course activities, and their contributions to these forums are formally evaluated. Every major learning management system (e.g. Canvas, Moodle, Desire2Learn) implements asynchronous discussion, and this feature is used in courses across a wide range of disciplines. However here as in the web at large, user annotation of other students' posts is rarely supported; and where annotations are supported, they are generally public. By design, these systems appear to assume that privacy is unnecessary at any stage of students developing public contributions.

There is reason to believe otherwise. In sociocultural theory, "Any true understanding is dialogic in nature" (emphasis in original) (Wertsch, 1991, p. 54), and learning is a process of dialogue and internalizing external speech. The act of writing can generate in the author both internal and external dialogical situations (Motta, Rafalski, Rangel, & de Souza, 2013). Reading with understanding involves a form of inner speech in which one responds to the text; and when annotating text, a reader responds to what another has written by externalizing this internal speech. Adjoining a reader's annotations (which are externalized internal speech intended solely for private use) with a published text (which is externalized speech intended for a public audience) provides a pregnant set of possibilities for learning.

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