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Collaborative groups and online annotations

26 June 2020

In our ongoing series of posts about what worked well in spring term, Susan Jaret McKinstry (English) shares how she used collaborative groups to do annotations of both text and images.

Why did you decide to have students work on collaborative group annotations?

Spring 2020, I was teaching a deeply cross-disciplinary course, ENGL 225: Public Offenders: Pre-Raphaelites and the Bloomsbury Group, examining two radical and profoundly influential groups of 19th and 20th c British artists, writers, designers, and thinkers. Since I last taught it (Spring 2017), online resources in visual art, historical documents, and teaching resources have exploded, thanks in particular to Jerome McGann's *The Rossetti Archive*, George P. Landow's *Victorian Web* (just named a charitable organization), and Dino Felluga's COVE. Each of those brilliant sites emphasizes scholarly collaboration, and COVE in particular highlights annotations. The emergency of the coronavirus accelerated some experiments I was hoping to try in the course.

Can you provide a brief overview of how this was set up and what you asked students to do?

Small group discussions are central to literature classes, and this course focuses on detailed analysis of both textual and visual objects. The students were frosh to seniors, all disciplines, and spread across the world, so finding ways to deepen their sense of community and interpretive skills outside normal classroom activities was essential. I decided to try using online annotation tools.

I set small collaborative groups of 4-5 students each (with a spread of class year and major, and attentive to time zone). I asked them to name their group (they were very inventive). For the first few weeks, each group was asked to select a literary text (poem) and image (painting or drawing) from the week's materials to collaboratively annotate. Using Google Docs or Google Slides, they could pose questions, uncertainties, ideas, connections, and answers; they would build on one another's points to produce an evolving online discussion and analysis of the works. At week three, we shifted to one annotation, and I used the first COVE annotation – a professional annotation that shows scholars bringing different perspectives to the visual or textual object, and also color-codes annotations (textual, contextual, biographical, interpretive). That was particularly helpful in giving students ideas for determining how to categorize and answer their own questions, as well as see annotation as a scholarly resource. I used two more COVE sites later in the course.

What worked well? Did anything surprise (in a good or bad way) about how things went?

The collaborative annotations were astonishingly effective. Students learned from one another; they were far more comfortable testing ideas than they are in class discussion; they readily brought in knowledge from other courses. And I could *see* their learning as

they debated technical details and interpretive possibilities (using the comment history tool) over each work and over the term. I think letting them try their own annotations before seeing COVE's scholarly, professional models helped build their confidence and curiosity, and it showed them that scholarship begins with questions and can come to different answers.

Working in the same group over the term, students developed a sort of intellectual history together. (Since we were studying two groups who started as college friends, the positives and the challenges of groups seemed particularly apt). When the whole class discussed poems or images in our synchronous sessions, students often brought up collaborative group members' ideas – and also, increasingly, built on classmates' comments during the discussion (and also in the CHAT, which they used actively). I believe the annotations built community both within the collaborative group and in the class as a whole, for they had aired ideas in a small group already.

Finally, students used the Google tools in synchronous class and breakout rooms to highlight details, especially of visual objects – an outcome I had not considered that was helpful (and sometimes very playful), and added to their sense of collaborative learning.

I had assumed the collaborative groups would work asynchronously, starting early in the week (I had posted a detailed weekly work schedule). I was wrong. They often "met" synchronously, but late in the week. I shifted my expectations and the assignments accordingly, and – at the end of the term – had each group lead synchronous class discussion, which went very well.

I initially planned to use Hypothes.is, but I decided against it because the Google tools worked well for our needs.

Finally, although I gave all students the option to omit a final project, all but two students chose to complete one, and three were done in collaborative pairs (not members of the same collaborative teams). And the final projects overall were more inventive, interdisciplinary, and scholarly than I expected in a 200-level course (and particularly in the extreme challenges of this term).

Do you have any advice for colleagues who might be interested in trying something similar?

I will use collaborative annotations again in any course format, for they were effective and even exciting. Student feedback on the final course evaluation was very positive. Next time, I will be much clearer on my expectations (now that I understand what they were!) and assignment details, and think harder about how the timing of the annotation fits into the week's work. I will also articulate more clearly the purpose of the annotations: build intellectual community, test ideas, highlight how interpretation begins with questions, and recognize that ideas are shaped, reconsidered, and revised as we learn. I would be glad to share ideas about using collaborative annotations in our new teaching landscape.

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