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Midpoint Reading: Collaborative Student Annotation in the Humanities Classroom

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In the era of remote learning courses, the humanities instructor struggled more than most to translate the many familiar techniques of close reading to the unfamiliar realm of technology. Oftentimes instructors have depended on facsimiles of traditional methods: a shared passage annotated by the class digitally, or small groups sent to individual breakout rooms which will eventually rejoin the class and share their findings. This article offers a methodology which incorporates the beneficial technologies which were necessary in remote classrooms into the traditional classroom, encouraging students to collaborate and debate through the shared digital annotation of primary texts.

Keywords: group work, remote learning, digital humanities, literature, digital pedagogy, hypothes.is, close reading, distance reading

Introduction

The typical format of the humanities classroom, a teacher, students, and a shared corpus of texts, was disrupted by the pandemic in ways which no one could have anticipated or prepared for. Some traditional methods of study and pedagogy became impossible, while avenues opened for digital technologies to enter what has historically been a wholly analog space. A technology which has proven pedagogically useful in that setting which also translates to the traditional classroom is collaborative annotation. The following classroom examples and scholarly debates center around the teaching of English literature, but the lessons and applications for collaborative annotation stretch across the humanities and social sciences. It represents a middle ground between the familiar practice of close reading and what Franco Moretti termed distant reading, the use of technology to prune through massive selections of texts: in short, an attempt to use readily available and free technology to engage students and offer unique perspectives on readings.

Close reading as a methodology dominates the humanities classroom. In her survey of the history of close reading, aptly titled "What Was 'Close Reading'?", Barbara Herrnstein Smith (2016) showcases the century-long rise of close reading, from pre-New Critical roots to the present moment. Matthew Jockers, himself an advocate for digital methods in the study of literature, called close reading the "primary methodology" of literary study (Jockers, 2013). Timothy Shanahan points to his website page on close reading as the one which has been "read, cited, and distributed most often" (Shanahan, 2012). The last several years have featured an outpouring of texts insisting on the primacy of close reading, including J.W. Phelan's *Literature and Understanding: The Value of a Close Reading of Literary Texts* (2021). Franco Moretti's distant reading is comparatively very young and indeed extremely controversial. It was first proposed at the turn of the millennium as a sort of dual solution both to the human limit of the individual scholar and the limit of the canon of so-called 'great texts' (Moretti, 2000). He contests that there is a finite amount of time one person can spend reading, severely limiting the amount of books that can be studied, and this necessarily creates canons of texts which are considered superlative in some aspect, crowding out other texts entirely. In his own words, "the trouble with close reading…is that it necessarily

depends on an extremely small canon…you invest so much in individual texts *only* if you think that very few of them really matter" (Moretti, 2000). The corpus of world literature becomes "not an object, it's a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method: and no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts" (Moretti, 2000). Straddling the line between ingenuity and sacrilege, Moretti's call to read less to learn more enlists the help of digital archives of novels and computer software.

The controversy should not be understated: Moretti is literally arguing that, with a computer, the act of close reading has become obsolete. He terms close reading merely a "theological exercise": "we know how to read texts, now let's learn how *not* to read them" (Moretti, 2000). Stephen Marche, stands vehemently opposed when he writes that the "experience of the mystery of language is the original literary sensation. The exuberance of ancient literature…contains a furiously distressed joy that words mean so much more than they mean" (2012). Literature, he posits, is not data. It is the "fugitive release from the status of information" (Mache, 2012). In the *New York Times*, Kathryn Schulz (2011), lambasting Moretti's chart which 'graphs' *Hamlet*, states the "trouble is that Moretti isn't studying a science. Literature is an artificial universe, and the written word, unlike the natural word, can't be counted on to obey a set of laws."

The two sides of this debate are in effect sparring over the role of what tools of analysis should be prioritized in instruction. Especially in the era of ChatGPT and similar offerings, these debates concerning technology in the humanities classroom seem particularly prescient. What I will offer is not a solution to end the discussion, but an alternate approach which uses advantages provided by computers while still centering the all-important human readers who populate the classroom. Attempts to incorporate annotation into large lecture halls (Tariqul Islam et al., 2017) have emerged, but it is my contention that annotation is a useful tool in classrooms of all sizes.

Midpoint Reading

Midpoint reading was initially an attempt to encourage students to think critically about the entirety of the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, rather than its component parts, in an introductory literature class. How would they reckon not just with one character, or a passage of the text, or even one of its volumes? Did students have initial observations which became inflected in compelling ways, or developed in new directions, as they continued to read? In an initial foray, I reproduced the entirety of the first volume of the novel, some hundred plus pages, into Google Docs, and asked students to use the comment feature at least three times between each class session: once to add either a comment, question, or comparison, and twice to respond to classmates' comments. My exact instructions:

1. After completing the assigned reading for class, write at least one comment on an element of the reading which gave you pause, you found compelling, or which confused you. This might take the form of the start of an argument, a comparison to something we've read already, or something from outside of our readings, or a question you have.
2. Comment at least twice on classmates' contributions. At least one of these comments should be on a contribution for *this day's assigned reading*, but you may comment any number of times on earlier contributions which you find relevant.
3. Be prepared to discuss your own contributions, as well as your classmates'. The strongest ways to participate in class discussions begin with either a reference to the text or a reference to your classmates' thoughts!

Like the characters in the novel, students became intertwined in networks of

communication and collaboration which did not end with the end of a class session. A small remark on the first page of the novel, for example, pointing out that the narrator seemed to be a character despite apparent omniscience, was echoed and remarked on for weeks afterwards as that initial observation proved vital. The document became lit up with student comments, and discussions continued between class sessions. These comments worked on a level beyond what I had seen from Canvas posts, which students would often write without much care shortly before class: I was asking them to engage with the reading, but also with each other, rather than posting in what seemed to be digital discussion board isolation. In these comments, students had genuine discussion which evolved as their understanding and familiarity with the expectations of their annotations did. Through collaborative annotation, students gained a sense of continuity in their classroom community that transcended the three hours of class time we had together weekly.

Given the current prevalence of and concern towards writing AIs, I would also suggest that collaborative annotation neatly avoids some of the assignment design pitfalls which enable their easy use. From a very mechanical, practical standpoint, it is currently impossible for ChatGPT to take and respond to a word choice or a strange sentence in a novel coherently. The annotations were very short and required a kernel of student insight, rather than a lot of procedurally generated text, which is something ChatGPT is quite good at, and which is enabled by a daily or weekly Canvas post assignment. From another, perhaps more sentimental, perspective, collaborative annotation asks students to think carefully about what they truly owe each other: using ChatGPT to write a blog post that only their teacher might read is one thing, but cheating their peers out of responses to their novel ideas and quick thinking, neglecting to participate in a living document shared between several dozen curious students, seems to me a different order of magnitude. Our document actually became increasingly slow to load, as the written legacy of classroom discussions which spanned some four class meetings put strain on web browsers: the students had pushed past the functional limit of the annotation technology in a way I hadn't considered.

It was at this point that the software Hypothes.is became invaluable. Students were able to comment in a private document where only they could see and respond to each other. The annotations between classes continued, and I dedicated class time to the deep annotation of linked passages in the novel, chosen by students, and shared back with the class. It became relatively easy and commonplace to link back to previous conversations, preserved in text, and add to them as the strands of the novel progressed and compounded on each other. All too familiar in the traditional classroom is the comment which begins something like, 'I think someone mentioned this last class.' With collaborative annotation, students were able to cite their peers directly, while also asking questions about the ideas which emerged and were tested throughout the semester. Without doing so consciously, students had taken the lead in their learning. Another benefit, perhaps the most helpful, was that students who were normally quiet in open discussion not only participated, but had their voices amplified by their peers, who could follow up with them on their thinking. It is entirely possible that collaborative annotation measurably helps quiet students as well as students in underrepresented groups (Bakermans et al., 2022).

What started as an initial foray into digital pedagogy driven by necessity became a tool that I have used in the traditional in-person classroom. Students have responded phenomenally well, perhaps because they are eager to collaborate, and perhaps because the deliverables asked of them are more concrete than one might find in a class with freeform discussion and impromptu digressions privileged over their pre-prepared comments. Midpoint reading through collaborative annotation might be helpful for an initial unit in the classroom, teaching students how to close read, or how to think holistically about texts, or perhaps a way to encourage group participation late in the semester. It has proven more effective than blog posts or discussion questions, and is at least worth considering as the humanities instructor continues to reckon with how much

technology belongs in the classroom and how they intend to maximize the usefulness of technology that does.

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