Social Annotation Tools
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Overview and Definition
Social annotation tools facilitate the collaborative markup and discussion of digital documents or web-based content by a group of individuals. Used in courses, students and instructors can see shared annotations and respond to one another, which can serve as a form of collaborative learning (Kalir 2019). Potential strategies of social annotation include identifying difficult passages in text, source evaluation, close reading, and rhetorical analysis (Dean 2015). Researchers and writers may also make use of social annotation tools for the process of peer review or community-based discussion.

Popular tools developed specifically for social annotation include Hypothesis and Perusall, both of which can be used with a variety of course management systems and managed centrally by institutions. Alternatively, the practice of social annotation could be accomplished through shared document systems which allow commenting such as Google Drive, One Drive, or Box using students’ existing accounts. These web-based tools could be used to replace engagement with paper-based materials in the classroom, to facilitate pre-class readings, or for classes conducted entirely online.

Why Do You Need to Know?
Social annotation has direct connections to the practice of information literacy. Through close examination of texts and engagement with the claims made by authors, students and instructors can work together to locate and investigate arguments and share links to relevant information that may be used to assess credibility and place those claims in a larger social context. By making the evaluation of information a social interaction, librarians and instructors can demonstrate how the idea of credibility does not reside in the source itself, but as a community-based assessment that varies depending on who is doing the evaluation. Further, the use of social annotation recognizes the role of the student as an engaged reader and participant in the larger conversation about the topic at hand.

Social annotation has also been seen as a way to increase the transparency of research processes. Writers may use social annotation to show their work, so to speak, or direct readers to the information or data on which they base their arguments. For readers, collaborative annotation may make clear how documents were developed and facilitate ongoing discussion about the subject at hand.

Current Applications in Libraries and Higher Education
Social annotation as a pedagogical approach has received increased attention in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw a rapid shift to online learning in settings that had primarily been conducted in-person. Social annotation has been one way in which instructors have facilitated engagement with students in online courses. Instructors may use social annotation in a variety of pedagogical approaches. A recent literature review (Zhu et al. 2020) found that social annotation was used to facilitate learning of course content, to promote comprehension of reading material, as a tool for assessment and instructor feedback, and to encourage learners to make meaningful connections from existing knowledge and outside information to course material.
Instruction librarians may find using existing social annotation and inviting students into the process can be a powerful way to demonstrate information literacy practices in action. By viewing pre-publication comments or reading post-publication commentary, students can see for themselves examples of the scholarly conversation and the process of information creation. When they have the opportunity to annotate and discuss information sources, students may see the variety of ways in which information is evaluated and credibility assessed. This approach may be especially valuable for moving evaluation beyond basic conversations about the veracity of information to deeper discussion of the ways that information is used in practice to construct our understanding of the world and how we can navigate conflicting information.

In addition to use in coursework, social annotation tools may be used in developing scholarly communication by facilitating open peer review processes (Murphy 2021). For example, the PubPub platform provides space and tools for digital academic communities to develop and publish new information, including the process of peer review. The MIT Press Open uses the PubPub platform to host both monograph and journal content, such as the book Data Feminism and the “overlay journal” Rapid Reviews: COVID-19. The press also hosts Works in Progress where authors can share new documents in the early stages of development for open peer review. In a similar vein, the Qualitative Data Repository, which facilitates data sharing specifically for scholarship using qualitative data and methods, has advocated Annotation for Transparent Inquiry as a way for scholars to point directly to the data that they use to develop their arguments as a practice of transparency.

Potential Hurdles

Instructors at schools where social annotation programs are centrally supported through campus instructional technology units will have the easiest path into using these tools. Perusall and Hypothesis, for example, can be integrated into the campus’ existing learning management system, limiting set up for instructors. In cases where this infrastructure is not already available, instructors will have to set up the workflow and prepare students to use the tool. For students, adding a new tool outside of the learning management system may add to a large number of existing programs to understand and accounts to manage. It is worth considering whether the pedagogical goals of social annotation may be accomplished by using an existing program with which students are already familiar.

As with any software used in coursework, instructors must consider questions of accessibility and whether students will have access to devices and internet connections to use web-based tools for annotation. Privacy of student data through any online platform is also a concern, especially when students may be sharing personal experiences online or engaging with difficult content. As in the classroom, instructors will likely want to develop expectations for online engagement and have a strategy for addressing any abusive behavior (Brown and Croft 2020).

Conclusion

Social annotation, whether conducted with specialized tools or though existing digital platforms, offers a way for students and instructors to collaboratively engage with online content. Such software can be used to extend the well-known practice of information annotation into the digital realm. This strategy has the potential to recognize the knowledge and contributions of all students in the shared understanding of course-related material.

In deciding whether to use social annotation tools, instructors should assess how the tool fits into the existing digital workflows for students, particularly if the software is not already used and supported centrally. The pedagogical outcomes may not outweigh the challenges and technical support required to adapt a new tool. Where sufficiently supported, however, social annotation platforms may be particularly useful for information literacy instruction settings where students need to engage deeply with content and experience the community constructed nature of information evaluation.

Tools Discussed

- Hypothesis
- Perusall
- PubPub
References


Further Readings

- Marginal Syllabus
- Social Annotation Beyond the Classroom (University of Chicago)
- Social Annotation Tips (Cornell University)