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DIGITAL FORUM

Open Annotation and Close Reading the Victorian Text: Using Hypothes.is with Students

Meegan Kennedy 

Observers of the digital humanities often see them as shifting literary study away from close reading. Franco Moretti acknowledges the links between the digital humanities and ‘distant reading’, and the implementation of data mining and mapping technologies indeed offers new tools and perspectives for literary scholarship.¹ However, the digital humanities also present opportunities to refine our capabilities for close reading. Whether through new techniques for visualizing the nuances of a line of text or through our ability to discover the multilayered history of a single word or phrase, literary analysis has reached a new sphere.² These digital reading tools, often useful to scholars, may be just as helpful in the classroom.

Many students write critical essays without quoting a word from the primary text; others quote passages and hastily move on without considering the text they have just offered or discussing why it might be relevant. They may be writing about a Victorian novel, but such essays might just as easily refer to a stage, film, or cartoon version of that novel or even a simple summary of its plot. I explain to students that the analysis of words quoted from the text is a crucial element of literary critical argument. Thus, in class, we turn to specific pages in a novel and discuss how the words on the page do or do not align with our ideas about the novel. All too often, however, students working independently drift into general statements that do not support their claims. Whether this is due to a lack of skill or a lack of reading is often difficult to discern.

I suspect that some of my students’ fatigue in reading long works of Victorian fiction derives from their reluctance to saturate themselves in the lush, cluttered texture of Victorian prose. Until they do so, they cannot become ‘fluent’ enough in their reading to enjoy the human dramas unfolding as they turn the pages. How can we coach students to train their attention on the text, on the unique force of a particular phrase or moment, before broadening their perspective to wider horizons? Ideally, students will have multiple low-pressure opportunities to practice this skill. I recently engaged students in an experiment designed to provide them with such opportunities, constructing

1. Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (New York: Verso, 2013).

2. For discussion of visualization methods, see S. Jänicke, G. Franzini, M. F. Cheema, and G. Scheuermann, ‘On Close and Distant Reading in Digital Humanities: A Survey and Future Challenges’, Eurographics Conference on Visualization (EuroVis), 2015 <<http://www.informatik.uni-leipzig.de/~stjaenicke/Survey.pdf>> [accessed 27 July 2016]. For close reading of a reference, see Michael Hancher, ‘Re: Search and Close Reading’, *Debates in the Digital Humanities* <<http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/63>> [accessed 27 July 2016].

a number of class assignments using Hypothes.is. Hypothes.is is an open-source project facilitating group annotation of any online text. Open annotation provides a frequent, collegial assignment to help students gain the habit of turning to specific moments in the text for their examples. This essay's commentary on open annotation in the classroom grows out of the particular challenges and rewards of the course where it was used.

During the 2014–2015 academic year, I planned a new course: 'Literature and Medicine: Diseases and Debates, Then and Now'. The course, which was open to all undergraduate students, ran for the first time in Spring 2016, enrolling 53 students mostly from the humanities and the biological sciences. My objective in this course was to help students develop their critical reading skills by working with primary literary and medical texts from the Victorian era in relation to contemporary texts in the medical humanities and bioethics. The course examined how ethical debates around topics such as patient privacy play out textually and in society, then and now. The course required students to read both primary and secondary texts and to practice literary critical, historical, and ethical analysis of those texts, in part through online annotations in Hypothes.is.

I faced two challenges in designing and teaching this course. Firstly, the course was one of several that fulfilled a university-wide ethics requirement, so it would draw a broader student demographic than my other courses. As a result, over a quarter of my new students were science majors (mostly from the biosciences), who were attracted by the medical topic of the course; I had publicized the course with the undergraduate association for pre-medical students at Florida State University (FSU). Most of the bioscience majors proved their worth in the thoughtful perspectives they brought to discussions, and in their disciplined approach to schoolwork. However, many were less comfortable practising the kind of writing and analysis the course required. They may have enrolled for precisely this reason: the MCAT test places increasing emphasis on critical reading and thinking. Negotiating the diverse range of texts I had assigned was also a challenge for English majors, who were practised critical readers but less experienced in negotiating scientific and bioethics material. I needed assignments that allowed students at all levels to hone critical reading and thinking skills at their own pace.

The second challenge I faced was delivering the course in an asynchronous online format. My interactions with students would take place within Blackboard, the virtual learning environment, via videos, slideshows with voiceover, and the Discussion Board, as well as through quizzes and two longer essays, which were graded online and with audio comments. This would be my first foray into online teaching. How could I replicate the give-and-take of class discussion in the artificial environment of Blackboard's Discussion Board? It is clunky to post in, difficult to read through, and encourages students to unmoored meanderings. Additionally, when I try to foster conversation by inviting students to reply to other students' postings, these replies cannot be graded individually unless each student initiates a separate forum, which can be unwieldy.

I needed an online asynchronous format that would allow me to replicate the open space of classroom discussion, with accountability for each of the elements of post and response. I needed to be able to annotate outside webpages, not just text that I myself could upload. And I wanted to require students to make links to our assigned Victorian

texts. I wanted our tool to anchor students' analysis in specific words, phrases, passages, and images so they were forced to engage with the language of the period. Furthermore, I preferred our tool to be open source and provide the option of a private class 'channel' within which students could respond to their peers' postings and be held accountable in discussion. I needed some form of open annotation.

I considered a number of annotation tools. After trying many and consulting with colleagues and the distance learning team at FSU,³ I chose Hypothes.is.⁴ It offered stability, good reviews, open source, creative commons, the option of private annotation, a clean and inviting interface, and flexible possibilities for the course and beyond. I was also reassured by the past and future partnerships that the team at Hypothes.is has generated.⁵

The Hypothes.is mission statement argues for an open-source platform for sentence-level annotation that is 'free, open, non-profit, neutral and lasting.'⁶ This non-profit organization, supported by a roster of well-known foundations, emerged from the Annotator project in the effort to create 'a new open layer [...] over all knowledge'; that is, to standardize annotation across the web.⁷ Its goal is to enable readers of any web page to add and exchange notes linked to the content on that page, whether or not comments are enabled on the page itself, by adding a conversation 'layer' over each page via browser extensions. Taking their cue from the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) working group on annotation, Hypothes.is is helping coordinate a coalition of publishers and institutions to support these goals. Most important for my situation, Hypothes.is has dedicated education programming staffed by personnel with experience in both academe and open annotation; Jeremy Dean, who worked with us, draws on a PhD in English and experience both in the classroom and at Genius, another annotation project.⁸ His role was not strictly necessary for our course to get up and running, but his advice was welcome and demonstrates the commitment at Hypothes.is to making their resource workable in the classroom.

Assignments

'Literature and Medicine: Diseases and Debates, Then and Now' included six opportunities for annotation, all of which were structured as individual contributions to a group discussion of Victorian primary source texts. In one assignment, the students group-annotated an e-text of George Eliot's novella *The Lifted Veil*, an assigned text, which had been discussed in other course materials such as my video lecture and discussion

3. Thanks are due to Paul Fyfe, Tarez Graban, and Charles McCann for their advice on this topic.

4. *Hypothesis* <<https://hypothes.is>> [accessed 3 August 2016].

5. Dan Whaley [dwhly], 'A Coalition of over 40 60 Scholarly Publishers', *Hypothes.is*, 1 December 2105 <<https://Hypothes.is/blog/a-coalition-of-over-40-scholarly-publishers/>> [accessed 17 May 2016]. For a list of the participating publishers, see 'Annotating All Knowledge', *Hypothes.is* <<https://Hypothes.is/annotating-all-knowledge/>> [accessed 17 May 2016].

6. 'About us', *Hypothes.is* <<https://Hypothes.is/about/>> [accessed 17 May 2016].

7. 'Annotating All Knowledge', *Hypothes.is* <<https://Hypothes.is/annotating-all-knowledge/>> [accessed 17 May 2016].

8. 'Welcome to Hypothesis, Educators!', *Hypothes.is* <<https://Hypothes.is/education/>> [accessed 17 May 2016].

questions. Annotation in Hypothes.is requires students to attach their response to a specific element in the text. One student annotated the phrase ‘I have no near relatives,’ spoken by Eliot’s narrator Latimer, by explaining, ‘While this passage appears in the beginning of the story, it plays a great role in foreshadowing the theme of loneliness in the rest of the tale. [...] Latimer [...] is constantly surrounded by others’ thoughts and the fruits of his gift but is increasingly lonely.’⁹ Elsewhere, students and I debated the likely historical meaning of Latimer’s heart ‘palpitation’ and subsequent medicinal ‘draught’. This assignment replicated the kind of class discussion we might have had in a face-to-face course. It encouraged students to do the kind of ‘slow reading’ or ‘deep reading’ that they so often overlook. In browsing the highlighted text, the reader can also quickly identify ‘hot spots’ where more interesting or controversial material occurs. Because I required students to respond to two other annotations as well as posting their own, clusters of postings quickly built up, signalling knotty textual moments and inviting students to pause and read more closely.

In the other assignments, students annotated Victorian texts that had not already been discussed in class, although they were expected to draw upon and refer to knowledge they had gained from the course. These assignments asked students to pull together two to five weeks’ new knowledge to make sense of a difficult new text, acting as capstone assignments at the end of each of the main segments of the course. Most were annotated as a class, although one – W. E. Henley’s *In Hospital* – was assigned as individual poems to groups of about four students each. Students also had one annotation completed independently: they were to choose one item in the site *Nineteenth-Century Disability*¹⁰ to relate to some text in our course. The students spread out among all the different pages of this site as though wandering through a many-roomed museum. Most students were the only original annotator on their chosen exhibit. As usual, they also had to find and reply to two other students’ posts. Luckily, Hypothes.is had instituted a ‘group stream’ function that lists all sites and annotations in our group channel, arranged in reverse chronological order.

For this course, I simply required students to post literary, historical, or ethical annotations, sometimes guiding them with a broad prompt. Using Hypothes.is on Victorian texts lends itself to focused annotation along a number of axes:

- (1) Historical: highlight a literary, medical, judicial, or historical reference and discuss its history;
- (2) Linguistic: highlight one word and discuss its history, usage, and connotations;
- (3) Literary: highlight a phrase or sentence to discuss using particular literary or analytic concepts discussed in class (metaphor, free indirect discourse, irony, etc);
- (4) Ethical: highlight a sentence that represents an ethical choice in this text and discuss the costs of that choice;
- (5) Multimedia: highlight a phrase or sentence and link to a visual, audio, or video clip with a brief explanation of the connection you see.

9. George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil*, Project Gutenberg <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2165/pg2165.txt>> [accessed 3 August 2016].

10. *Nineteenth-Century Disability: Cultures and Contexts* <<http://www.nineteenthcenturydisability.org/>> [accessed 1 March 2016].

In future iterations of the course, I plan to move students through a sequence of annotations on text (and, eventually, video) along each of these axes.¹¹

Issues and resolutions

Jeremy Boggs has noted three roles for instructors using technology in the classroom: role model; tech support; and cheerleader.¹² Given my students' lack of familiarity with annotation software, each of these roles was distinctly necessary. I offered instructions and advice via assignment guidelines, announcements, FAQs with screenshots, personal emails, video conferencing, and meeting with students personally in office hours. The staff at Hypothes.is emailed with students, and Jeremy Dean provided a Student Resource Guide and video tutorial. After working with Hypothes.is with this group of students – who were generally well motivated but from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and unfamiliar with online annotation – I have compiled some lessons to consider for future semesters.

The 'on-ramp'

There are different ways to deploy the Hypothes.is tool, in particular a bookmarklet/browser plugin, a 'via proxy' typed before the URL, or a search box on the home page. This variety should assist students having difficulty with the browser plugin – some did not know what this was – but may simply have confused them. Those students having trouble were also likely not to know what information to provide us. Several exchanges were necessary to find out how they were accessing Hypothes.is, what kind of browser they were using, what URL they were on, and whether they had looked at the directions or video. No student accepted my offer to confer via Collaborate on Blackboard (through screen sharing) but I will require this in the future.

Students' two major problems were not technological but practical. First, they posted to the wrong websites. The advantage Hypothes.is offers in being able to attach to nearly any website becomes a disadvantage when students simply performed a Google search for *The Lifted Veil* (for example) and annotated whatever they found, rather than following my posted link to a specific version of the story. With our source texts in the public domain and many versions available online, this was a persistent misstep. Second, students annotated the correct website but in the 'public' channel rather than in our private, class channel. In both cases, their erroneous postings showed up in the group stream, where they would sometimes lure unwary peers off course as well. The staff at Hypothes.is was extremely helpful in deleting these false pointers once students had re-posted their annotations in the correct location.

11. Adeline Koh, 'Annotate Video on the Fly: A Review of VidBolt', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 24 April 2014 <<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/annotate-video-on-the-fly-a-review-of-vidbolt/56787>> [accessed 17 May 2016].

12. 'Three Roles for Teachers Using Technology', in *Hacking the Academy: New Approaches to Scholarship and Teaching from Digital Humanities*, ed. by Daniel J. Cohen and Tom Scheinfeldt (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), DOI: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/dh.12172434.0001.001>> [accessed 20 May 2016].

Privacy

Hypothes.is allows easy shifting between public and private annotation. I needed to ensure students' anonymity online because FSU's Office of Distance Learning was concerned about FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) violations. There are good reasons to reconsider the assumption that all student work must be submitted privately and/or anonymously in order to comply with FERPA.¹³ FSU required students to submit a form acknowledging that we were venturing outside the Course Management System (CMS) onto the public web, although our course would be using a private 'channel' within Hypothes.is. Some students, however, chose an alias that revealed their identity and opted to disclose personal, even medical matters using that alias. Students provided me with their aliases so I could link annotations to real names; each annotation was represented in the Blackboard Gradebook by a fake (closed) Discussion Board so students could see their grades. Hypothes.is sets up an 'annotation stream' for each user, so it is easy to browse submissions either in context or by student.

Consent

The original list of principles for Hypothes.is included 'Work everywhere. To the extent practical. Without consent.'¹⁴ Although the last phrase no longer appears, a reader can indeed post public annotations on an author's site 'without consent'.¹⁵ Despite the benevolent ideals on which the project is founded, unmoderated online comments all too often degenerate into offensive remarks towards the author and other readers.¹⁶ This did not arise in my course, probably for several reasons. Firstly, many students used their own names; secondly, they were being graded on their comments; thirdly, I did not ask them to annotate especially controversial course material; and finally, due to the sensitive nature of the course material, I worked to establish trust and community so that we could respectfully disagree upon difficult matters. I strove to mitigate the ethical dilemmas of open annotation in the curated space of my classroom, but they remain in the larger context of the web.

Lost links

Some websites do not integrate smoothly with the Hypothes.is shell. Hypothes.is is designed to work with PDFs, but page frames and embedded readers as in Googlebooks and Gutenberg still caused us difficulties. Annotations on an HTML plaintext on

13. Jack Dougherty offers a thoughtful and nuanced defence of public student writing under FERPA. See 'Public Writing and Student Privacy', in *Web Writing: Why and How for Liberal Arts Teaching and Learning*, ed. by Jack Dougherty and Tennyson O'Donnell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Trinity College ePress edition, 2014) <<http://epress.trincoll.edu/webwriting/chapter/dougherty-public>>; Jeremy Dean links to courses using public annotation projects at *Hypothes.is* <<https://Hypothes.is/blog/the-lit-anthology-in-the-age-of-web-annotation/>> (with a webinar) and at *An Annotated Domain of My Own* <<http://jeremydean.org/blog/getting-started/an-anthology-of-ones-own/>> [all accessed 17 May 2016].

14. Jason B. Jones notes some difficult questions that have arisen around annotation in 'Framing Annotation', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 30 March 2016 <<http://chronicle.com/blogs/prof-hacker/framing-annotation/61963>> [accessed 17 May 2016].

15. '12 Principles', *Hypothes.is* <<https://Hypothes.is/principles/>> [accessed 17 May 2016].

16. 'About us', *Hypothes.is* <<https://Hypothes.is/about/>> [accessed 17 May 2016].

Gutenberg could only be accessed via a link within Hypothes.is, for example, not from the special URL I provided the students. A more serious problem occurs when the underlying website is updated. Annotations disappear from the sidebar if their original text ‘anchor’ has been deleted from the page code. Web developers can add code to prevent this problem, but not everyone will. The old annotations do still exist in the group and user streams (where they can be found with the search function), hosted on Hypothes.is servers, and eventually Hypothes.is will transfer them over to the new page. It is hard to see this solution being scalable if Hypothes.is goes viral, however. Instructors can minimize problems by prioritizing sites that work well with annotation. In the meantime, the coalition encourages publishers and institutions to make their websites more annotation-friendly.

Student experiences

Anonymous student surveys reported largely positive experiences with annotation and Hypothes.is in general. Out of 38 respondents, 34 students enjoyed using Hypothes.is; three disliked it; one was ambivalent. Many students remarked that Hypothes.is helped them strengthen their ability to work closely and critically with difficult Victorian texts. They specifically mentioned its key features: anchoring commentary to specific moments in the text and facilitating replies to those annotations (as they put it, ‘being able to highlight and focus in on certain lines’ and ‘seeing what my classmates think of the lines I chose’). They also described the experience as ‘inventive’, ‘interactive’, and ‘thoughtful’. Six students explicitly preferred Hypothes.is to the context-free comments permitted in Blackboard’s Discussion Board.

Thirteen students acknowledged some difficulty in learning how to use the tool. They requested a more deliberate introduction to Hypothes.is and mentioned site-navigation issues, which are being fixed. However, most students found Hypothes.is easy to use once they had learned how, and they said they would use it again. One or two reported consistent problems with the tool, and it is difficult to know from the survey whether this was due to user error, to incompatible devices, or to underlying technological glitches. During the semester, a handful of students reported problems to me or Jeremy Dean. Those students’ issues were resolved once we walked through the instructions with them step-by-step.

Some students felt disoriented because the Hypothes.is tool was not explicitly within the CMS. Although I posted links from Blackboard to the assigned texts for annotation, those texts were not hosted on pages within Blackboard, nor were they linked to the Blackboard Gradebook. This difficulty was exacerbated when students posted annotations to the ‘wrong’ pages (not following the links I would post), because orphan annotations did not attract responses or grades, a cause of frustration for all. We tracked down as many of these as possible to help students move them to the proper location, and we sent out multiple reminders about these pitfalls. I chose not to penalize grades when early annotations were late for these reasons. I felt it was important not to alienate students while introducing a new technology, although their errors were avoidable. I also took care to be transparent about my goals in using Hypothes.is, my reasons for

choosing it, and my interest in hearing honest evaluations of this course experiment. This is perhaps why Hypothes.is earned largely positive responses from my students.

With a large class, some responsibility must fall on the student to follow directions and ask for help. However, since students working in haste may not follow instructions to the letter, some may have difficulty with the first Hypothes.is assignments. I recommend a deliberate, staged introduction to the tool to ensure that students do not go astray. If reading public-domain Victorian literature, one could also set up a WordPress site with these texts and embed Hypothes.is natively. In that case, students would need accounts but they would not need to install the browser plugin. However, annotations would be limited to whatever is hosted on the course WordPress site. In addition, although it is perhaps thoughtful to protect students from having to install a browser plugin, we might consider that being able to do so is an important component of digital literacy. In the future, I will ensure that students know when registering that this online course requires the use of a text annotation tool; my students' responses suggest that it is rare for such tools to be integrated into university-level coursework.

Conclusion

My students' literary analyses were indisputably enriched by Hypothes.is. It facilitated easy online interaction with a variety of texts and each other, and it required students to anchor their comments rigorously in specific textual passages. Their survey responses recognize their progress in the collaborative work of close reading. Our positive experience shows how easily open annotation could support the work we do as scholars. Journals, scholarly associations, libraries, or universities could host sites where faculty would post Victorian texts for open discussion via annotation or works-in-progress for scholarly feedback (like the pre-print model in the sciences). A conference commemorating Elizabeth Gaskell's birthday or the 200th anniversary of *The Pickwick Papers* might coordinate a mass-annotation event. Conference speakers could choose to post their talks so that conference participants could register responses and continue the discussions started in live panels; or so that scholars who did not attend could participate. This would resemble the live-tweeting of conferences¹⁷ or the 'virtual MLA' that Brian Croxall sparked by posting his MLA paper on his blog,¹⁸ but with full access to the original talk, an asynchronous discussion, and responses anchored in particular strands of the text. Ideally, Hypothes.is will continue to work with organizations and sites large and small – like the HathiTrust, Project Gutenberg, Google Books, and the Dickens Journal Project – to ensure seamless use of open annotation on the texts they make available.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

17. See, for example, George Williams, 'Social Media and Book History: #SHARP11 and Twitter', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 29 July 2011 <<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/social-media-and-book-history-sharp11-and-twitter/35009>> [accessed 20 May 2016].

18. See Brian Croxall and David Parry, 'The Absent Presence: A Conversation', in *Hacking the Academy*, DOI: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/dh.12172434.0001.001>> [accessed 20 May 2016].

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