10 Reading in Conversation: A Writing Student's Guide to Social Annotation

Michelle Sprouse

Overview

Students are often encouraged to annotate while reading.[1] However, annotation is often framed as an individual undertaking, a conversation between a reader and text. This chapter repositions annotation in the writing classroom as a social activity that can support students' literacy development. Beginning with opportunities for students to reflect on their experiences with annotation, the chapter argues that social annotation can help students practice reading for different purposes as members of learning communities. Using examples from writing students and public annotators, students will learn about social annotation in classroom and public contexts. Students will then consider several affordances of social annotation technologies—expanded marginal space, hashtagging, and multimedia enrichment—that they can use for more productive marginal conversations. Because navigating a core text and its annotations can be challenging, the chapter concludes with a discussion of reading workflows that integrate skimming, close reading, and extending to help students get the most from social annotation.

Easing open the cover of J.D. Salinger's *Nine Stories* that I annotated two decades ago, I can see in the rounded letters of my adolescent handwriting are notes about Salinger's life and the underlined heading "3 Themes" followed by the bulleted points "communication, innocence of children, perversion of adults." Squeezed on the bottom of a page

---

much later in the book was my annotation, "Ramona's glasses—child's view, scratched." Even though the term paper they helped me to write has been lost, the first steps on my journey toward becoming an English scholar remain mapped in the pages.

An annotation is a note added to text. Like many of my students, you may have had experience annotating in high school. Perhaps your teachers asked you to add notes to printed documents or in the margins of paperback books. You may have used digital annotation tools. But, if you're like many of my students, annotation might have been a reading strategy you practiced alone.

In this essay, I will introduce you to social annotation, a practice where groups of readers annotate in the shared margins of the text to engage in conversations about texts and reading. You'll learn about what social annotation may offer as a tool for engaging with the communities in which you read.

Whether you are an annotation expert or novice, I invite you to make and share your own annotations on this chapter. You might use Hypothesis (web.hypothes.is/start) or another tool suggested by your instructor. There are questions embedded throughout to help you reflect on your own reading practices and to engage in conversation with others as you read. I also hope you will feel inspired to respond to other parts of this chapter.

Let's start by reflecting on your own experiences. *What experiences have you had with annotation? How might those experiences prepare you to read in community with others?*

Learning is Social

Annotation has been practiced for thousands of years as a way to improve reading. Readers annotating texts individually to aid learning is an old practice, one recommended by Erasmus as early as the sixteenth century (Jackson 48). Social annotations can help us learn about what we're reading too. In the Jewish tradition, published Talmudic annotations help readers make sense of the Talmud (Kalir & Garcia 78). Before the invention of the printing press, it was common to share a text and annotations among groups of readers even though the technology made reproducing the text and annotations time consuming.

But new tools for digital social annotation afford readers new possibilities not only for making annotations that are shared with others, but also for annotating at the same time and across distances. Digital annotation thus creates a more expansive space for the social practice of annotation.

Let's pause again. *Whether written into the margins of texts, integrated into the print, or digitally superimposed, in what contexts have you encountered annotations written by another person? In what ways have you shared your annotations with other readers?*

When I annotated in high school, I thought all annotations focused on the literary elements of texts. But I've learned since, by annotating and reading with others, that different communities of readers annotate for different purposes. In a composition course, successful reading may differ depending on a writer's purpose. Seeing what and how you are reading is an important first step toward more effective reading. Social annotation can help you practice reading for different purposes.

Social annotation makes visible the different ways people read to accomplish their goals. You might need to "read like a writer" (Bunn 72), evaluating an author's writerly choices and deciding how similar choices might or might not work in your own writing. Seeing how others respond to those same choices might help you decide how best to address your own audience. Or, you might read a source text, analyzing the author's findings to make an argument of your own. Social annotations might help you understand how others interpret the evidence so that you can tailor your own argument to the values of your readers.

Learning is a social act; we learn from others and from helping others learn. When you share the margins of a text in social annotation, adding your thoughts and questions and considering others' interpretations, you contribute to a community in conversation about texts.

Social Annotation Is Conversation

In the sections below, I will share examples of how writing students use social annotation to engage in conversations through course-based and public social annotation.

Course-Based Social Annotation

You are an important part of your classroom community. Through social annotation, you can contribute to conversations about reading and writing to enrich learning in the course, much like when you participate in class discussions.

Many of my students that find it difficult to speak up in whole-class discussions find social annotation a meaningful way to participate. Social annotation also gives you a chance to revise your thinking before you share

it with a group. You can edit your words in the margins in a way that is impossible when speaking up in class.

Reading others' annotations can help you see more in the text than you might find on your own. During a think aloud, my former student Chloe noted how reading her classmate's annotation changed her thinking about a text:

> When I was first reading this, although I guess I didn't question it as much, I see Layla's comment and how she really questioned it. It got me thinking more and now I'm reading it once again just to see what the author meant by that term.

You might help your classmates, for example, notice the significance of a term that they might otherwise overlook. Reading their annotations can also give you insight into what matters to other readers. This knowledge can help you learn about others' perspectives. As a writer, this insight might help you see how people respond differently to the same writerly choice, or how a readers' experiences shape their interpretation of an argument.

My students were reviewing research papers for our class and encountered a number of citation strategies. In their readings, Elizabeth and Tom[1] used their annotations to raise important questions about the citation strategies they were encountering (Fig. 1):
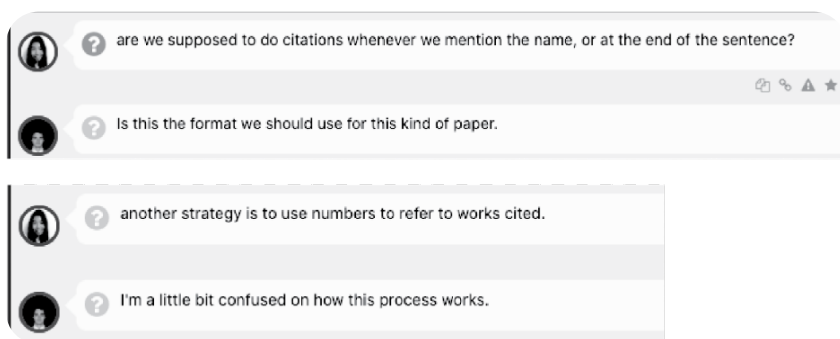

Figure 1. Screenshot of student annotations exploring citation strategies. (Permission to use this image was obtained from students.)

Your classmates might also ask questions to which you can respond. In the annotations below (Fig. 2), Elizabeth is able to answer Cole's question about an author's cultural background.

I thought we were talking about Chinese families. Why not just use the same int[...]

I think it's because a lot of people in Singapore are actually Chinese; the author [...] experiences.

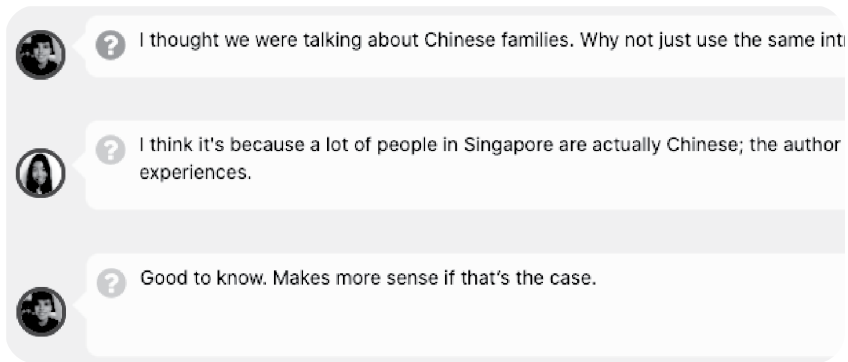Good to know. Makes more sense if that's the case.

Figure 2. Screenshot of annotations with replies to student questions. (Permission to use this image was obtained from students.)

Community is an important aspect of social annotation. So that you and your peers can learn well together, it is important to establish and follow norms for respectful communication. Treat the margins of your shared text like you would a physical classroom space, as a place where different opinions and experiences can be valued and discussed safely.

Public Annotation

In addition to building community within a class, social annotation also offers opportunities for you to contribute to conversations about texts with public audiences.

Have you ever wondered about the inspiration for the lyrics to your favorite song? The popular lyrics site, Genius (genius.com) for example, allows readers to annotate song lyrics. Annotators use research and links to other sources to support interpretations and contribute to collaboratively written annotations.

As I'm drafting this chapter, Harry Style's song "As It Was" is number one on the Genius list. The first annotation (Fig. 3) combines the work of four contributors who have crafted an explanation of the introduction using quotes from interviews, links to his music video, and an analysis of how the line might fit with broader themes in Styles' music ("Harry Styles As It Was Lyrics"). Ratings for the annotation as a whole and individual contributors help other readers evaluate the annotation.

As It Was Lyrics

[Intro]
Come on, Harry, we wanna say goodnight to you

[Verse 1]
Holdin' me back
Gravity's holdin' me back
I want you to hold out the palm of your hand
Why don't we leave it at that?
Nothin' to say
When everything gets in the way
Seems you cannot be replaced
And I'm the one who will stay, oh-oh-oh

[Chorus]
In this world, it's just us
You know it's not the same as it was
In this world, it's just us
You know it's not the same as it was
As it was, as it was
You know it's not the same

FEATURED VIDEOS

Genius Annotation   **4 contributors**

Styles introduces us to his lead single through a child's voice, his goddaughter, Ruby, whose father is British producer Ben Winston. She is speaking to him over voicemail since he didn't pick up.

This is later confirmed by Harry during an interview.

❝ It's my Goddaughter at the start of the song. [She] got a streak of calling me every night before bed, and I missed it once, and she wanted to let me know that she was quite angry with me

Alternatively, staying on theme, the child could be speaking to Harry on the other side of a door as he is behind one in the music video which means he isn't letting anyone inside his "house".

👍 +156 👎   💬 2 ⤴ 1 ⬆ Share

Suggest an improvement to earn IQ

Figure 3. Screenshot of public annotation of Harry Styles' "As It Was" lyrics by four contributors. This image does not fall within the CC license for this work.

Public social annotation can help us to understand and share our interpretations of texts. Shared annotations can also help us to understand the responses readers might have to an authors' writing choices.

Figure 4 is an example of an annotation contributed to the UM Press Annotates project where readers were invited to add annotations to open access ebooks around several themes, including disability studies.

> wmcleod   Mar 8
> ⊕ Public
>
> > geopolitically rendered framework linked to these eugenic
> > itineraries. In the pages to follow, the visual transmission of
> > corporeal difference will remain crucial to the eugenic
> > project and the demarcation of exclusions   Less
>
> This is not really related the content, but I do want to mention
> that as someone with ADHD (among other things), I have trouble
> processing dense language like this, even if I look up all the
> words I don't know. I know that words like "eugenics" can't be
> replaced, since they're central to the message and very
> complicated (and explained in depth earlier on), but I think plain
> language can be really important when writing about disability
> history, as it allows for more disabled people to engage with our
> own stories.
>
> #UMPAnnotates #DisabilityStudies
>
> ↩   ⬆

Figure 4. Screenshot of wmcleod's annotation of Susan Antebi's Embodied Archive with the hashtags #UMPAnnotates and #DisabilityStudies. This image does not fall within the CC license for this work.

Social annotator wmcleod responds to a passage in Susan Antebi's *Embodied Archive: Disability in Post-Revolutionary Mexican Cultural Production* with a critique of the author's language choices for her intended audience. As a writer, you can use this annotation to reflect on when and how you might choose to use technical vocabulary to make your own writing more accessible for a wider audience.

These are just two of many social annotation projects you might explore. You might also be interested in seeing how annotators have contributed to historical documents in Speculative Annotation hosted by the Library of Congress (https://labs.loc.gov/work/experiments/annotation) or literary texts like Frankenstein (https://www.frankenbook.org).

Affordances of Digital Spaces for Social Annotation

Now that we've had a chance to think about some of the conversations social annotation can facilitate, I want to share some of the affordances of digital tools that we can use to get the most out of social annotation.

One way to think about affordances is to imagine the possible uses of the tools. Texting, for example, affords nearly instant sharing of brief messages across wide geographic distances. Texting also allows for silent, more private communication in a shared space.

There are three important affordances of digital, social annotation that you can leverage for more productive conversations: expansive marginal space, hashtag organization, and multimedia enrichment.

Expansive Marginal Space

If you've ever annotated a paperback book, you've probably found yourself short on space to write notes. One of the major affordances of digital and social annotation is the expansive marginal space.

Whereas I could hardly squeeze three words into the margins of the inexpensive paperbacks I used to annotate for my high school English classes, the digital margins give you room to write much more. Tye, one of my students, appreciates this affordance, explaining, "I feel like it makes you do a deeper read because I can just highlight and do an analysis of a line instead of trying to squeeze [in] little words."

Use this extra space to share enough of your thinking so that others, including your future self, can converse with your ideas. Compare Evan's two annotations below (Figs. 5-6). First, he makes a brief response that would fit into the margins of a trade paperback.
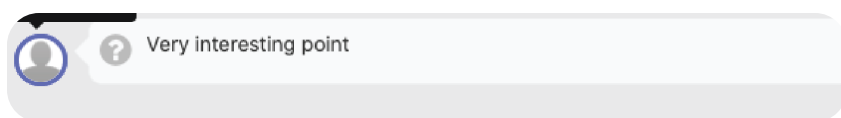

Figure 5. Screenshot of brief student annotation, "Very interesting point." (Permission to use this image was obtained from student.)

While we can read how a bit about what he's thinking, there's not much to respond to. Visually, we can see too that there's space for him to elaborate.

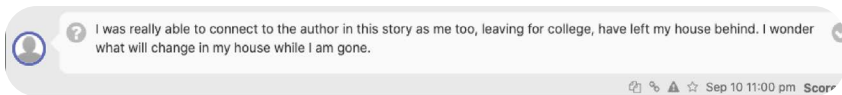Now read Evan's longer annotation (Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Screenshot of longer student annotation, "I was really able to connect to the author in this story as me too, leaving for college, have left my house behind. I wonder what will change in my house while I am gone." (Permission to use this image was obtained from student.)

Notice how this longer annotation more fully explains Evan's thinking. In the expansive digital margins, more complete thoughts actually open space for a dialogue to develop. You might add to the conversation about how your home might change if you too are away for college.

Of course, just like in class, you don't need an extended monologue that leaves no room for anyone to respond. The sweet spot for my students seems to be about two or three sentences. Enough to share a complete thought, but not so much that it takes over.

If you are composing a longer annotation, you might use line breaks as in the Genius example to separate points and make your annotations easier to skim on screens.

Hashtag Organization

As you share your thinking and begin to participate in marginal conversations, you may find yourself wanting a way to sort and organize the notes. Enter hashtags.

Most social annotation technologies allow readers to create hashtags to label and organize annotations. These can be especially helpful when you're looking for themes or patterns across texts.

The hashtags which will prove most helpful will depend on your course goals and the audience. One place to start to identify important themes for your social annotations is the course syllabus. My students, for example, create a set of hashtags to represent the goals outlined in the syllabus. They also add hashtags to represent their personal learning goals for the course. The list from a recent first year writing class included #audience, #wordChoice, #ethos, #structure, and #style.

For your instructors and classmates, you might also create hashtags that signal questions or issues you want to discuss in class. Some annotation technologies, like Perusall, have built in features that allow you to mark important questions as you write or second the question asked by your peers.

Hashtagging public annotations can also make conversations searchable within an annotation tool like Hypothesis or even across social media platforms.

Multimedia Enrichment

Not only can you add hashtags to existing resources on the web, but you can also embed multimedia resources within your annotations using most modern social annotation technologies.

Images, including gifs, function in many social annotation platforms. Sometimes writers use these humorously to illustrate their reactions, especially when I ask them to annotate our syllabus and assignment sheets. Reginald, one of my students, included a gif of a man throwing a cell phone against a wall to illustrate his response to a request to keep cell phone notifications off during class.

As we saw earlier in wmcleod's public annotation (Fig. 4), we should also consider the accessibility of our annotations for diverse audiences. When you include multimedia annotations, captions and alt text descriptions can help audience members who use screen reading technology access your annotation.

You can also use multimedia hyperlinks to help clarify confusing sections of text for yourself and your classmates. You can find the correct pronunciation of an unfamiliar name or a word in a new language. Or, if you're reading a description of a process that's difficult to follow, you might consider finding and embedding a video that illustrates the process. Consider adding a brief explanatory note to make clear why you are including the multimedia.

What other affordances might social annotation tools offer?

Reading Workflows

There are many affordances of digital and social annotation that can enhance your learning. But as with most things, there are also tradeoffs. In technology terms, we might call these constraints. Constraints are the challenges and limitations associated with using any tool, including social annotation technologies.

One of the constraints social annotators may face is finding a path through an annotated text. Do you read the text all the way through and then read your peers' comments from top to bottom? Do you pause as you encounter new highlights and read and respond to the comments left by

your peers? Are you the first to read and responsible for annotating for the readers yet to arrive?

There is no single path through a socially annotated text, or any text for that matter. But there are three flows readers can use to get the most from their readings: skimming, digging in, and extending.

Skimming

Skimming can give you an overview of the text and the conversation. Skim through the introduction and the conclusion and the headings of the text—what does it seem to be about?

Skim through the social annotations. Are there any spots that seem, as my student Phil says, important because lots of folks have annotated them already? And, importantly, are there places where folks haven't annotated that you might be able to add something new to the conversation?

Digging In

Social annotators often spend most of their time digging in. Many writers like to dig deep into the primary text first, reading carefully and sometimes annotating as they go. In their first full read, they might mostly ignore others' annotations. Chloe, for example, prefers using tools that allow her to temporarily hide others' annotations and highlights for a more focused first reading. When they finish the assigned text, they go back and dig into the annotations, reading carefully and crafting responses to their peers.

Other annotators choose a lateral dig that moves back and forth between the text and the social annotations. They might read a paragraph or section of the assigned text and then pause to review and respond to any annotations and leave their own before continuing to the next.

I have worked with a few writers who prefer to dig into the social annotations first. You won't have much to add to a conversation about a text you haven't read. So, even if you start with a careful reading of the annotations, plan to dig into the text before you write your responses. Otherwise, you'll miss out on the opportunity to develop your own thoughts and compare them to other writers. The direction you dig is up to you.

Extending

Social annotators also extend their reading by sharing connections to other texts. Have you or other readers asked any questions that remain unanswered? If some research will help you answer them, do the research, add your answer, and cite or link to your source in the annotation. If you still

can't answer a peer's question, consider marking it if your social annotation tool allows or add a reply that says you also have this question. This signals to other readers your interest in learning more and may help you to crowd source answers.

Reflections

Whatever your social annotation workflow, I encourage you to take time to reflect on your reading purpose and summarize what you're taking away from the conversation. If you've been "reading like a writer" to identify strategies for writing in the genre (Bunn 72), record the key writerly strategies named in the social annotations you want to try out. If you've been learning about a new topic or interpreting an argument, summarize the key point in your own words. One writer, Tye, explains his process for using my pre-reading instructions to review his annotations:

> I use the notes function whenever I want to look back at your questions. I normally answer your questions in that section just because I feel like you're asking them because we're going to need them later. And it's just easier to find my thoughts.

This practice of reviewing the reading prompts and summarizing his thoughts, he explains, prepares him to revisit and categorize annotations again later in class. Spending just a few minutes preparing to move the annotation work you did with your peers to the next step—class discussion, an exam, or a writing project—will help you to get the most from your reading.

Public annotation can help you to connect with other readers and writers—sharing knowledge well beyond the classroom.

What is your typical reading workflow? How do you anticipate it changing when you socially annotate?

Taking the time to review your annotations will also teach you about yourself as a reader. Reviewing the social annotations, Tye learns about how his thinking compares to his peers, "I see things in a different way than I think most of my classmates do." You can learn about your identity and strengths as a reader—what kinds of questions and ideas do you readily notice? You can also use your peers' annotations to identify places to grow as a reader.

Most importantly, socially annotating can help you to form a community of readers. My students sometimes tell me that our class feels "like high school." Annotating with their peers helps them to feel more con-

nected to each other, to be more ready to share and receive feedback in writing workshop, and to build friendships that sometimes extend beyond the classroom.

Discussion Questions

1. What experiences have you had with paper, digital, and social annotation?

2. When might you choose to share annotations with your class and when might you make your annotations public? How would you annotate differently for the two audiences?

3. What hashtags would you create to summarize the major themes in this chapter? How would you categorize them?

4. Describe your workflow for reading and annotating this chapter. What worked well? What might you change to be more strategic?

5. How might social annotation fit into your course? For what purposes might you begin conversations in the margins of the texts you read with your class?

Note

1. All student names are pseudonyms.

Works Cited

Bunn, Mike. "How to Read Like a Writer." *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, edited by Charles Lowe & Pavel Zemliansky, Vol. 2. Parlor Press, 2011, pp. 71–86.

Jackson, H. J. *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books*. Yale UP, 2001.

"Harry Styles As It Was Lyrics." *Genius*, https://genius.com/Harry-styles-as-it-was-lyrics. Accessed 12 April 2022.

Kalir, Remi H., & Antero Garcia. *Annotation*. MIT Press, 2021.

wmcleod. "This is not really related the content, but I do want to mention that as someone with ADHD (among other." *Hypothesis,* 8 March 2022, https://www.fulcrum.org/epubs/f1881p00r?locale=en#/6/22[Antebi-0011]!/4/2[ch02]/2[-header0201]/2/2[p68]/1:0.

Teacher Resources for "Reading in Conversation: A Writing Student's Guide to Social Annotation"

Overview and Teaching Strategies

This essay is intended to help you make reading a visible practice in your classroom, whether that is face-to-face, virtual, or hybrid. I encourage instructors to assign "Reading in Conversation" early in the semester to set the stage for an ongoing investigation into the ways writers and communities of writers use reading to improve their practice. Other essays in *Writing Spaces* might be used as companion pieces that introduce how to read for different purposes:

- Mike Bunn's "How to Read Like a Writer,"
- Ellen Carillo and Alice Horning's "Effectively and Efficiently Reading the Credibility of Online Sources,"
- Laura Bolin Carroll's "Backpacks vs. Briefcases," and
- Karen Rosenburg's "Reading Games: Strategies for Reading Scholarly Sources."

Students can practice the strategies outlined in these and other how-to-read pieces using social annotation technologies.

Before assigning this essay, I encourage you to select an annotation technology and introduce students to its basic functions so that they can practice socially annotating as they read this chapter. Instructors have many options for social annotation technologies, including at the time I am writing, Hypothesis, Perusall, and even Google Docs. Balance the available features and the demands of adopting a new technology for your students. Perusall and Hypothesis are two applications designed specifically for social annotation but may require more time for students to create accounts and familiarize themselves with available features. While Google Docs offers less in terms of grouping, hashtagging, and note-taking, many students are familiar with the tool and will need less onboarding instruction. Instructors may also wish to consider whether the social annotation tool integrates with the school Learning Management System. This can reduce the need for additional login accounts and make annotation assignments easier for students to complete.

When possible, I encourage instructors to introduce the social annotation technology in class. Begin by modeling how to access the tool, make

and reply to annotations, and use basic accessibility features such as text-to-speech, adjusting text size, and keyboard navigation. Give students time to make their first social annotations when instructors and classmates are nearby in time and space to offer support. Depending on your class size, you might choose to break students into smaller groups of three or four so the number of annotations they see is not overwhelming.

Most importantly, use students' annotations in your instruction. I suggest integrating social annotations as discussion starters regularly to build on students' ideas and give them incentives for beginning thoughtful conversations. Address key questions posed in the margins, by responding yourself or reposting to the larger group. Regularly ask students to review annotations. You might ask them to identify and describe the characteristics of the most helpful social annotations or create lists or charts that summarize key ideas about course readings.

Other Activities

Below, I offer four suggestions to extend social annotation in the classroom and in the public sphere.

Annotate the Syllabus

Remi Kalir (http://remikalir.com/courses/annotate-your-syllabus-2-0/) encourages instructors to have students annotate the syllabus. Do this and avoid the blank stares when you ask if there are any questions. They'll be right there in the margins and so will your answers for students to refer back.

I ask my students:

- What questions do you have about the syllabus?
- What #RelatedExperience have you had? What will be #New for you?
- What #Excites you? What #Concerns you?
- Where do you see your #PersonalGoals reflected in the syllabus? What changes might you suggest better reflect your #PersonalGoals?

Then, repeat for the assignment sheets for each major unit.

Integrate Social Annotation into Peer Review

Social annotation practices can also be integrated into peer review. First, ask students to share their documents in your social annotation tool or a

collaborative word processor like Google Docs. Then, ask students to annotate their own texts—pointing to the places and issues where they want to solicit feedback. Their peer reviewers can then continue the conversation in the margins, adding their own noticing as they write.

Give students opportunities to synthesize their reviews in peer review letters or synchronous workshop sessions. You might even ask students to annotate their own texts with their revision goals and plans in response.

Use Social Annotation to Support Student Reflection

For each unit, I ask students to write cover letters introducing their work. As part of letters, students review their annotations and reflect on how individual and social annotation supported their work as readers and writers. Not only does this support students in developing the metacognitive skills to connect their reading and writing, but their letters help me to reflect on the usefulness of the reading and annotation assignments to improve my instructional practice over time.

Converse with the Author

Social annotation also affords opportunities to engage with authors. Projects like UM Press Annotates invite authors to share their work for social annotation. Students' annotations can help to spark conversations with authors in the margins. Or, you might invite an author as a guest speaker for a course or event where they incorporate responses from readers.