

Teaching with Technology Project

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The social annotation and problem paper assignment that I created with the assistance of a DigLibArts Teaching with Technology grant is a three-part exercise designed to improve students' close reading skills. In English the term "close reading" refers to the practice of identifying and explicating textual detail in order to shed light on the text as a whole. Close reading is almost always a mandatory component of papers in English classes because it is a skill that we want students to be able to take into their encounters with all kinds of texts in the world.

In student papers, I have found that students do not offer sustained close readings. Instead, they tend to do one of two things: either they quote from the text only within sections of essays where they are summarizing the plot, in which case they do not explain the significance of details; or they analyze a single detail without connecting it to other moments within the text. By creating a venue for social annotation (i.e., a digital space where students offer multiple responses to a single passage and are exposed to other students' responses), they would be encouraged to develop more sustained close readings. Using Google Drive for social annotations made what would have otherwise been very difficult logistically into an exciting and expeditious project.

The mechanics of the assignment are described at length in the syllabus so I will be brief here: First, each student in the first group had to select and transcribe a passage and then write four annotations explicating details within that passage. For the next class, a second group of students read through the passages and annotations of the first group and added four annotations of their own. These annotations were supposed to remark on details not treated by the author, offer an alternative reading and/or connect the passage and the first student's observations to a passage in the next section of the novel. Finally, for the next meeting, the first students had to synthesize all of the comments on one of the passages (it need not be their own) into a short essay. Each student in the class went through each part of the cycle twice. Thus a student selected, transcribed and began annotating a passage twice; s/he added annotations to other students' passages twice; and s/he wrote papers synthesizing the comments twice.

One obvious and immediate benefit of this assignment is that it meant that students could not get away with skipping the reading. A second was that at least eight students came to every class meeting not only having completed the reading but also having developed ideas about the reading and about other students' ideas. A third benefit was that the papers students wrote—especially in their second time through the cycle—tended to offer a much deeper analysis than I have seen from students at the same level previously, and considered multiple interpretations. In the future, I will encourage students to actually cite their classmates' commentary to ensure a more consistent consideration of other interpretations.

Transcription and Annotation Exercises & Problem Papers

The class will be divided into three groups (A, B and C) and students in each group will complete and submit Transcription and Annotation Exercises, as well as Problem Papers derived from those exercises, according to the schedule for their specific group.

Transcription and Annotation Exercises will feature a social annotation component where students will collaboratively develop close reading notes using Google Drive. Collaboration is intended to push you beyond your initial and individual observations, so that you ultimately produce papers featuring richer, more nuanced arguments about the texts that we read.

[The next three paragraphs refer to those places on the syllabus that ask you to “Transcribe and Annotate”]

The first step in this process is selecting a passage (anywhere from a paragraph to half a page) from the reading assigned for that date. You will want to find a passage that is rich in figurative language, curious in form or otherwise abundant in detail; a passage with one interesting image or detail will not be productive since your task will be to think through the effects of all of those details. Why are they included? What are they doing?

Once you have located your passage, open up the folder assigned for your week in Google Drive, create a document within that folder and transcribe the passage word-for-word.

Next, annotate four sections from your passage. You can begin by placing your cursor next to a pertinent word or phrase and clicking on the “Comment” button at the top right of the screen. Within the comment cell that appears, write 2-4 sentences explaining the effects and significance of the details that interest you. Find three more places within the passage and annotate them similarly, making connections between them and other moments in the text if you wish.

[This paragraph refers to those places on the syllabus that ask you to “Add to another group’s annotations”]

On two occasions you will add annotations to another group’s annotations. Here you are required to add four remarks of your own, either about details not treated already or offering alternative readings in response to the annotations made by your classmates. You may add all four of your annotations to any one of the previously uploaded passages, or you can divide them between two different passages. Keep in mind here that the point of this exercise is to help your classmates to produce richer, more nuanced readings, not to belittle or condemn the work of others.

**[The remainder of this section refers to those places on the syllabus
that ask you to produce a "Problem Paper"]**

On two occasions you will draw on the transcription and annotation exercises (your own, or your classmates') to produce a succinct (three-page) paper.

How to write a very good problem paper:

A problem paper is a succinct essay that asks a question of a text and then resolves that question through a persuasive argument. The question identifies a problem, something that is clearly full of significance but not directly explained: *Why is the whale in Moby Dick white? To what ends does the Wife of Bath include so many biblical references in her tale? Why are so many elements in the Enchantress of Florence doubled? Why does Theresa Cha begin Dictée with a translation exercise? What are the effects of giving narrative voice to inanimate objects such as a gold coin in My Name is Red?* The argument proceeds by using evidence within the text to contextualize the problem and answer the question posed.

1. Think small. Think interesting. Think enjoyable to argue.
2. Ensure that you are finding a PROBLEM in the text rather than making an observation. Structure your paper as an articulation and resolution of the problem. For example, it's not enough to assert that Victor Frankenstein and his monster have many traits in common and that makes the world complicated; everyone knows that already. What is valuable, though, is to formulate an argument that accounts for this intertwining. What does the author accomplish in making monstrosity a shared category? Why might she do so?
3. Always bear in mind that you are presenting a convincing ARGUMENT, not simply making remarks about things that are interesting. The text should be used to supply evidence. Quote from it in to back up your assertions. If it helps, think of your paper as a court case: you want to persuade your audience. Don't hide contradictory evidence -- react to it, show how your argument explains it.
4. Remember that you have just three TYPED, DOUBLE SPACED pages to make your argument. Every word is precious. Omit anything that is too general, and say as much as possible with as few words as possible. A thesis sentence like "Levy employs many themes to make interesting points" says nothing at all. A sentence like "Levy embodies in *Small Island's* Queenie the contradictory impulses of social camaraderie and imperial anxiety" will make your reader want to know more.
5. ANALYZE, DO NOT SUMMARIZE. If you are simply retelling the story, you are not writing a critical paper. Your reader knows the plot already and does not require a rehash.
6. Keep a formal tone. Take your writing seriously. Proofread assiduously. What you have to say about the text is important, and will be graded seriously.

English 270: Transcultural Literature
Annotation Exercises and Problem Paper Rubric

Name: Katie

Part I. Transcription and Annotation

2 / 2 points for selection of a richly detailed passage that is accurately transcribed

4 / 4 points for four clear and insightful annotations explaining the effects of details within the passage and/or for making logical connections to other moments in the text, explaining the significance of such connections, why they matter and how they reward our attention. (No points are awarded for annotations that simply summarize the plot or paraphrase the passage.)

Part II. Annotating a peer's work

3.5 / 4 points for four annotations that help a classmate to deepen his/her analysis by either (1) drawing attention to the significance of additional details that have not been discussed; (2) offering replies to earlier annotations that suggest more nuanced or alternative readings; or (3) discussing the significance of passages in our subsequent reading that extend or complicate the original student's point.

Part III. Problem Paper

5 / 5 points for identifying a problem within the text and setting up a thesis-based argument to resolve that question

10 / 10 points for careful close reading of textual details drawn in part from the annotation exercises and incorporated fluidly into your prose. Properly cited evidence must be limited to crucial keywords or phrases (not lengthy block quotes) whose significance fortifies your argument. Quotations should NOT simply summarize a plot point.

5 / 5 points for clarity, organization, and mechanics.

29.5 / 30 Total

What I'd like to see you work on improving...

In your problem paper I'd like to see you develop a bit further how the emblematic moment you are focused on gives us insights into a larger theme. Then cite other instances across the text.