
Digital Annotation for Social and Collaborative Learning in the Humanities Classroom

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Reading, writing, and discussion are the most common—and, most would agree, the most valuable—components of a university-level humanities seminar. In humanities courses, all three activities can be guided and supported with a variety of digital and analog tools. Digital texts can create novel opportunities for teaching and learning, particularly when students' reading activity is made visible to other members of the course. In this short paper, we will introduce [Lacuna](#), a web-based platform which hosts digital course materials to be read and annotated socially and collaboratively. We report these findings in relation to an observational case study of four different humanities courses at California community colleges using Lacuna.

Lacuna is the result of a collaborative and iterative effort at Stanford to design a platform that supports the practices of critical reading and dialogue in humanities courses. On Lacuna, which uses Drupal to manage content, course syllabus materials are digitized and uploaded to the platform. These materials can be organized by topic, class date, and other metadata such as medium (text, video, or audio). When students and instructors open up materials, they can digitally annotate selections from any text using a pop-up javascript annotator.

Annotation on Lacuna is a social as well as an individual practice, leveraging the participatory possibilities of web-based technologies. Lacuna users can choose to share annotations with one another and hover over highlighted passages to reveal others' comments or questions. Social annotation makes

explicit and visible for students the broad array of annotation practices within an interpretive community such as a classroom and helps students co-create interpretations of texts. Students' annotation activity on Lacuna is also made visible through a separate instructor dashboard, which helps instructors track engagement throughout the course. Finally, annotations can be connected across texts using the "Sewing Kit" in order to support intertextual analyses.

After introducing the features of the platform, we present a case study of the use of Lacuna in four California community-college classes. As part of a U.S. Department of Education Title VI grant, we worked with faculty from Foothill College, De Anza College, and College of San Mateo to incorporate Lacuna into their lesson plans and classroom pedagogy. Drawing on ethnographic methods, we describe how the faculty members used the platform's affordances to integrate students' online activity into course planning and seminar discussions and activities. We also explore students' experience of social annotation and social reading, insights gathered from surveys, interviews, and classroom observation.

In our case study, we find that student annotations and writing on Lacuna give instructors more insight into students' perspectives on texts and course materials. The visibility of shared annotations encourages students to take on a more active role as peer instructors and peer learners. Our short talk will close with a discussion of the new responsibilities, workflows, and demands on self-reflection introduced by these altered relationships between course participants. People at our talk will learn about the benefits and challenges encountered in using Lacuna, which are likely to be shared by individuals using other learning technologies with similar goals and features. We will also consider future directions for the enhancement of teaching and learning through the use of social reading and digital annotation.