Promoting active engagement with text-based resources in large first-year modules in History

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Abstract

In large courses it can be particularly challenging to engage students in active reading practices. The shift over the last decade to the use of digital sources and during the pandemic, the adoption of online teaching has further exacerbated the problem. In this paper, we discuss our strategies for engaging large classes (150-250 students) in active reading through use of Talis Elevate, a social annotation tool. We outline two case studies in which we used social annotation and observed a significant increase in student engagement. We propose a new concept, 'active online reading', which combines structured individual commenting tasks with responding to other students' annotations to enhance learning. This concept has relevance not only in our reading-rich discipline of History but also across higher education more generally.

Keywords: *Online reading; deep reading; active reading; pandemic pedagogy; large classes*

1. Introduction

Processing quantities of written material through close reading is an important disciplinary skill in History, as in many other subjects, but this can be particularly challenging to teach in large classes (Tinkle et al., 2013). Higher education teachers generally pay little attention to teaching students how to read thoughtfully, even though it has been recognised for some time that purposeful reading practices can enable students to engage in deeper learning than more surface approaches (Dubas & Toledo, 2015). The shift across the sector to the use of digital sources online has altered how we read (Cull, 2011) but only recently has sustained consideration been given to the need to develop pedagogies that enable our students to become active online readers (Cohn, 2021; Kalir et al., 2020; Merrydew, 2021). In this paper we discuss the strategies that have recently been developed for the purpose of engaging students in such active reading in large courses at the School of History and Heritage at the University of Lincoln and the Department of History at University College London (UCL).

2. Description of the Teaching/Learning Context

Like many universities, Lincoln and UCL employ large-group teaching on much of their core undergraduate curriculum in BA History and related programmes. These modules usually adopt a lecture-seminar format, with assigned preparatory reading feeding into in-class discussions. Such large-sized classes often yield reduced levels of student engagement with learning; reduced frequency of lecturer feedback; and reduced development of students' active reading skills (Kerr, 2011). These residual issues were magnified by the pandemic, which necessitated remote learning for the 2020-21 academic year at minimum, further divorcing students from lecturers and seminar leaders. To address these challenges, the authors turned to Talis Elevate (talis.com/elevate), an online tool that facilitates the annotation of a range of media (e.g., text, images, audio, video) to support student engagement with digitised preparatory readings. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, at both Lincoln and UCL we noticed a significant increase in student engagement with reading following the adoption of this tool.

2.1. Case Study 1: The Medieval World at the University of Lincoln

The Medieval World is a core undergraduate module run over one semester at first-year level. The module offers an introduction to medieval history and is taught using a standard lecture-seminar format (two one-hour lectures and a one-hour seminar per week) over 12 weeks. In 2020-21, the module had 161 students. During the pandemic, lectures were delivered asynchronously online, while seminar groups were split in half into two subgroups. Each week in alternation, one subgroup met on campus for a socially distanced seminar, the other used Talis Elevate online. Students were provided with a weekly

worksheet with guiding questions and extracts from primary sources. They were also invited to read at least one secondary source per week. The weekly worksheet was uploaded to Talis Elevate for each seminar group (roughly 20 students each), and students were asked to add answers to the guiding questions and to annotate specific parts of the primary sources.

Students were surveyed at the end of the course. Fifteen responses were received, or 8.7% of the cohort, which cannot be considered a representative response rate but is in line with the number of responses end-of-course surveys generally receive. Of these, 14 respondents said that annotation activities had helped their studies. When asked to elaborate, responses focused on analytical practice, collaboration and diversification of opinion on the subject matter due to the 'public' nature of discussion. Students particularly valued being able to see their peers' annotations on resources, emphasising that this provided them with confidence and reassurance. However, a small number of respondents expressed anxiety about the requirement to comment 'publicly', while nonetheless recognising the overall value of the exercise.

2.2. Case Study 2: Approaching History at UCL

Approaching History is a core first-year undergraduate module that is taught online over the whole academic year. The module offers an introduction to historical theory and method, and in 2020-21 had 241 students. Although traditionally delivered via a two-hour lecture, in 2020-21 the module was delivered as a one-hour asynchronous lecture and a one-hour live lecture per week. Students were expected to read at least two secondary sources each week and were provided with guiding questions. The live lectures focused on discussion of these questions as well as of example essay or exam scripts. The scripts were uploaded to Talis Elevate and students engaged in synchronous annotation of them during the live lecture.

Students were surveyed at the end of the course. Twenty responses were received, or 8.3% of the cohort, which again cannot be considered representative but is in line with the norm. Of these, 17 respondents felt that the online annotation activities were beneficial. Respondents elaborated that social annotation was 'useful at gaining new skills for analysing academic papers' and appreciated the ability to 'bounce ideas off each other' virtually. Social annotation, therefore, helped engage students in the core disciplinary skills of 'deep reading' and critical analysis that are often challenging to manage in large classes.

3. Literature Review

Online reading (reading that takes place in an online space while the reader is connected to the internet) is now increasingly the norm for students. However, particularly within a large course, such reading is too often approached passively. Large courses in History are often

described as 'surveys', which, as the term suggests, typically focus on providing comprehensive 'coverage' of the history of a region and/or period (Clarsen, 2009), with readings selected by specialists in the field to ensure that students are exposed to advanced knowledge of the content. A major weakness of this approach is that students are placed primarily as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active learners engaged in developing new ideas, explaining their understandings to each other, and applying their knowledge to different contexts. Research suggests that requiring students regularly to participate in close reading exercises and to reflect on their experiences encourages engagement (Tinkle et al., 2013).

Several recent studies have analysed pedagogical approaches to structuring student engagement in reading online (Cohn, 2021). Providing students with guided reading tasks gives them greater motivation to complete academic reading and a better understanding of its significance for their learning (Miller & Meridian, 2020). Research from Lei et al. (2010) shows that students who engage in regular reading generally do better in assessed tasks and are able to contribute more to discussion and collaboration, increasing their levels of knowledge. By building collaborative annotation activity into courses, as Kalir et al. (2020) outline, 'these practices can aid learners' curation of resources, information-seeking behaviours, and collective sense-making'. Further, Di Iorio and Rossi (2018) detail how this practice may enable learners to generate implicit knowledge from both documents and their interactions with others within a shared social resource. As has been observed of active reading and deep reading in general (Merrydew, 2021), such social annotation, a 'technology which allows students to process, discuss, and collaborate on information they have collected for their learning' (Chan & Pow, 2020), helps students work through material at their own pace and revisit content they do not understand (Dubas & Toledo 2015).

4. Analysis of/Reflection on/Implications for Practice

In both modules discussed in this paper, Talis Elevate was used to enable students to annotate texts collaboratively. While there was some initial apprehension, for the majority of our respondents the work was recognised as playing a positive role in their studies. Student feedback indicates that the collaborative annotation of texts had a positive impact on their independent learning, confidence, and critical faculties. Students also perceived that active online reading had deepened their learning. However, it should be recognised that a minority of students reported feeling some anxiety about making responses visible to their peers. Care should thus be taken to set out clear expectations early in modules, stressing the value of this practice for critical thinking, deep reading, and collective knowledge creation. Further, it is important to ensure that activities are framed sensitively

to ensure that annotation spaces are as inclusive as possible, enabling all students to express their voices.

The relatively small-scale activity of students adding comments to readings makes explicit many hidden aspects of their academic reading practices. Asking students to 'think of a question after you've done the reading' or 'annotate things you don't understand' may seem minor tasks, but they prove to help students engage with and therefore, understand the material. Social annotation had at least two positive benefits in our case studies. First, writing a short comment required reflection on reading, which students perceived as deepening their engagement with and understanding of the text. Second, the collaborative element of the process (i.e., the sharing and visibility of comments) was, in general, viewed positively by students, validating perspectives and opening up new interpretative possibilities.

What we describe as *active online reading* is a new and important pedagogical approach. Active online reading combines structured individual commenting tasks (on readings) with responding to other students' comments. In History, active online reading focuses on close analysis of primary sources and secondary literature, creating a collective space for students to share their observations about the texts, sometimes in response to guiding questions. The collectively annotated resource represents a bank of shared knowledge, and feedback demonstrates that students perceive value in observing the work and behaviours of their peers. Active online reading offers a framework to 'fill some of the gaps' lost due to the lack of physical collocation during the pandemic, and provides effective scaffolding for further activity (e.g., in face-to-face seminars or other online work). An inherent issue with large classes, made even more acute by the pandemic, is the limited time in which to create and foster personal interactions either among students themselves or between students and teachers. Active online reading creates time and space for student-student and teacher-student interactions in an online environment as well as in the post-pandemic classroom. We suggest that it has the potential to enhance learning not only in the reading-rich discipline of History, but also across higher education more generally, in large modules as much as in seminar-based courses.

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