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"Annotation is first draft thinking": Educators' Marginal Notes as Brave Writing

The author argues for annotation as a form of brave writing when it is social, public, vulnerable, and critical.

I contend, quite bluntly, that marking up a book is not an act of mutilation but of love.

—MORTIMER J. ADLER

Literacy educators are closely acquainted with annotation. Defined as the addition of a note to a text, annotation is threaded throughout everyday reading, writing, and communication. Whether written by hand or composed using digital technology, annotation aids students as they activate reading and comprehension strategies (Brown 75), learn languages (Abraham 210), and develop familiarity with new content areas and methods (Castek et al. 82). Annotation supports students' cognition and social interaction. It usefully encourages learning in instances whereby students read marginal notes written by experts, such as their teachers, and when they write their own notes, then share these reactions and observations with peers to read and reference (Zucker 94).

Given longstanding attention to student annotation, this article focuses on teachers as annotators. Rather than scrutinize the annotating teacher-as-evaluator, with a corrective pen in hand scribbling copyedits and critique atop a student's essay, I consider educators who write annotation to aid their professional development, teaching practice, and student learning. Specifically, I argue that an approach to annotation as brave writing can be authored by educators to advance professional learning about literacy, learning, and educational equity. In particular, this article draws extensively from my interviews with nine educators to share insight about the circumstances under which educators write annotation in the service of professional learning, what such annotation looks like, and how annotation as brave writing informs literacy education practices.

THE MARGINAL SYLLABUS: ANNOTATION FOR EDUCATOR LEARNING

The Marginal Syllabus is a professional learning project that uses social annotation to advance public conversation about educational equity (Marginal Syllabus). Since 2016, it has sparked and sustained these conversations through collaborative technologies and partnerships. The Marginal Syllabus is now a partnership among the National Writing Project, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the annotation organization Hypothesis. For example, the 2019–20 "Literacy, Equity + Remarkable Notes = LEARN" syllabus featured eight articles by eleven partner authors published in NCTE journals (including *English Journal*).

When I interviewed Cecilia about her experiences as an annotator and Marginal Syllabus participant, she noted, "As you annotate with others, you find this conversation that enriches your understanding and bolsters your work." I connected with Cecilia, as with all the educators interviewed for this article (and whose names are pseudonyms), because of my role as a designer and facilitator of the project.

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As a facilitator of the Marginal Syllabus, I have read with, annotated alongside, and learned from the educators whom I interviewed for this article—and I have done so while balancing my overlapping roles as project designer, annotator, researcher, and teacher educator (Kalir and Garcia 426).

As a teacher educator and literacies researcher, I am familiar with many technologies that enable social reading and annotation, such as Perusall, Now Comment, and Hypothesis, among others (Seatter 2). Over the past few years, it has been a highlight of my career assisting educators to embrace annotation-powered professional learning opportunities intended to improve classroom teaching and learning practices (Kalir et al. 6). The nine educators I interviewed for this article have considerable experience participating in annotation activities whereby groups read digital texts online, synchronously or asynchronously, and use the collaborative annotation technology Hypothesis for commentary and discussion.

When educators are first introduced to the Marginal Syllabus, some ask about the use of the term *marginal* in the project's name. First, the initiative partners with scholars whose writing about educational equity topics is contrary (or *marginal*) to dominant education norms (Mirra 30). Topics discussed in the Marginal Syllabus include critical literacy, media bias, civic engagement, and racial injustice. Second, the Marginal Syllabus facilitates monthly and public conversation among educators in *marginal* discursive spaces via Hypothesis annotation. Third, the Marginal Syllabus demonstrates how educators can openly pursue their interests and advance a *marginal* counternarrative to conventional professional development.

According to participants, the project is a distinct and useful professional learning experience. As Danielle observed,

> Annotating as a part of Marginal Syllabus affords me an opportunity to think in conversation with the authors themselves, and with other educators who join in. I appreciate the space as a way to truly mull over the text, line by line, adding my interpretations, musings, and agitations to what has been shared, both in the articles, and in the margins.

A similar sentiment was shared by Bridgit, who remarked, "To be in conversation with both the author's text and my fellow readers changes my understanding of the text. This larger and social conversation brings nuance and background knowledge and is a very different reading experience than reading and annotating alone." In this article, I illustrate how Marginal Syllabus participants such as Cecilia, Danielle, and Bridgit write annotation that is social, public, vulnerable, and critical.

FORMS OF ANNOTATION AS BRAVE WRITING

A scribble, a wry interjection, and detailed exposition are all forms of annotation. Yet not all types of annotation are equally significant. Annotation that is courageous helps to open up what Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens describe as a brave space, or a learning environment in which risk, presence, and critique are shared to advance justice-oriented objectives (97). My interviews with educators suggest the Marginal Syllabus is a brave space defined by annotation that is social, public, vulnerable, and critical. While these four qualities reflect educators' annotation in a project that uses Hypothesis, the following descriptions gloss over that tool's technical features to argue more broadly about the relevance of annotation for educators' professional development, teaching practices, and student learning.

SOCIAL ANNOTATION

Much of the annotation added over centuries to the literary and scholarly record is private marginalia, or traces of readers' "private exchange between themselves and whatever book they happen to be talking back to" (O'Connell). Yet handwritten and private annotation can be shared. Readers in the Victorian Era, for example, regularly swapped books to read others' annotations as "social activity" (Jackson 62). Today, educators like those who participate in the Marginal Syllabus can embrace the social life and liveliness of annotation.

Annotation may be written for a social purpose with the intention of interaction. For Donnamarie, social annotation represents a distinct stance toward

reading a text and then annotating it. She described the perceptible shift from private musing to shared meaning, reflecting,

> On a logistic level I think this is a different way to read. It means understanding the piece in new ways through the annotations of others which is often a favorite part. It also means that my annotations are in the paths of others and I need to consider that, forcing me to add context and consideration to my own notes.

Social annotation, for Oscar, is a means of authoring entry points for participation in a broader community of shared interest. He explained, "One of the most powerful things that can unfold in these discussions is the feeling that there is a wider community of people out there that cares about equity and is ready and willing to engage in talking about it seriously." Annotation can spark connection and meaningful dialogue.

PUBLIC ANNOTATION

Annotation becomes consequential writing when, as Damien suggested, educators "accept the responsibility of a public conversation around issues that matter to you." In addition to being social, annotation may also be composed and shared publicly online. While readers have annotated manuscripts for hundreds of years, it is only in the past few decades that various digital annotation technologies have shifted the accessibility, audience, and scale of social annotation that is written and shared across the Web.

"Annotating in public is brave," Bridgit commented, "because reading a piece and responding to it is the first draft of thinking. That thinking can be flawed, full of mistakes or misunderstandings, examples of confusion. Often, we are schooled to only make public our best thinking, the 'final draft.' Annotation is first draft thinking." There is risk associated with sharing "first draft thinking" online, even when the purpose of such formative writing is to make shared meaning of an educational text.

Moreover, there are added risks for people granted less social privilege and institutional power. Laura addressed such dynamics and added, "There are many reasons right now to feel less brave while writing online. Anywhere from fearing harassment to fearing that your data is being used for evil purposes." These concerns notwithstanding, Laura continued, "Marginal syllabus is one of those places where I don't worry much about either. . . . As a model, the intentional design elements are important to impart so that future online spaces might also be designed with such humanistic thought and care." When notes move from private marginalia to public remark, annotation serves as a public and open resource that supports collective learning opportunities.

VULNERABLE ANNOTATION

Vulnerability is a third quality of annotation in brave learning spaces. Educators who participate in Marginal Syllabus conversations voluntarily chose to author social annotation publicly online. Doing so requires a productive stance toward personal vulnerability. As Danielle expressed, "Every time I set out to annotate on the open web, I proceed in the face of vulnerability." Similarly, Kenneth reflected,

> To make public one's first encounters with a text, with an author, with words and ideas, requires both a change of mindset and mustering of courage. Often these thoughts are raw and unformed. We expose ourselves at a moment in the creation of knowledge that is deeply vulnerable and typically reserved for private contemplation.

Cecilia perceived her vulnerability as connected to personal and social presence. She mentioned, "I appreciate the space to just come to the text as I am and being able to engage honestly." Some types of annotation may not require that a writer embrace their vulnerability. However, when educators are motivated to read about and openly discuss via annotation educational equity topics of personal, sociopolitical, and pedagogical relevance, their social interaction becomes vulnerable and memorable writing.

CRITICAL ANNOTATION

During Marginal Syllabus conversations, educators are vulnerably and socially sharing their annotation so as to examine, debate, and make meaning of texts

that concern the systemic inequities of American education. In other words, their annotation is critical. Or, as Danielle remarked, "Given our nation's history of anti-Blackness, class hierarchies, and gender inequities, it is brave to engage with articles that ask questions about race, language, culture, and power as instantiated in schools and spaces of learning." Critical literacy foregrounds the ways in which political interest and expression informs discourse (Luke 5). For educators who participate in the Marginal Syllabus, writing annotation is a public and digital discourse that productively "interrogates" (Ávila and Pandya 3) the self, a source text, social relations, and society. Annotation, as critical writing, is a literal, symbolic, and social means of re-marking upon and speaking truth to power.

Annotation as critical writing challenges assumptions, elicits bias, or critiques a stance from either a source text or another participants' commentary. According to Lester, such annotation is possible because "the gathering of readers are diverse thinkers, bringing forward different views on a common text, and opening the door for conversation. We learn from each other. Having a text as a touchstone provides for common ground, even if our interpretations might be different. From this, we learn together." This appreciation for annotation enabling divergent interpretations and multiple perspectives was echoed by Oscar, who noted that "there's a deep bravery in engaging in public conversation about equity in a time when it can be dangerous to even talk about equity, much less take stands." The critical qualities of such annotation contrast with conventional approaches to professional development in which educators are often discouraged from engaging with the sociopolitical dimensions of education.

ANNOTATION IN ACTION

In an *English Journal* article that critiques the racial hierarchy of the traditional literary canon, authors Mario Worlds and Henry "Cody" Miller suggest that "English language arts classrooms must be sites to name, challenge, and ultimately dismantle oppressive systems" (43). They reimagine the types of texts, discourses, and disruptions that are needed for English curricula and analyze *Miles Morales: Spider Man* by Jason Reynolds as a novel that can meaningfully bring students into conversations about racism and white supremacy.

My Marginal Syllabus colleagues and I contacted Mario and Cody, and we received their consent to include this article in the 2019–20 LEARN syllabus. To date, more than a dozen educators have added scores of social, public, vulnerable, and critical annotations to the article (Figure 1). Having organized and facilitated this conversation, I now present select examples of educators authoring annotation about the article. Though

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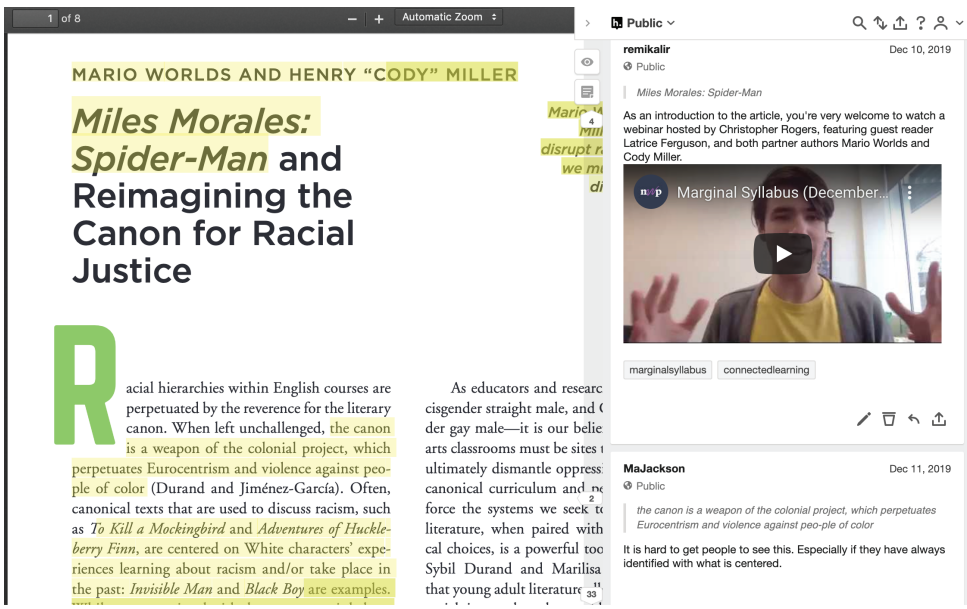

FIGURE 1
The Marginal Syllabus conversation added atop an article by Worlds and Miller.

Marginal Syllabus conversations are public, Hypothesis usernames are deidentified in direct quotes.

Worlds and Miller open their article with trenchant criticism of canonical and so-called exemplary texts. For example, they observe, "Teachers' inability to challenge the status and content of the canon emboldens a hierarchy that places white characters *learning* about racism over characters of color *experiencing* racism" (43; italics in original). This statement resonated with many Marginal Syllabus participants. The first annotation of this passage was brief: "This is a good insight" (Educator1). Nonetheless, this initial comment opened up space that then elicited multiple responses from other educators.

Educator2, for instance, replied by suggesting a professional learning opportunity and noted, "I'd love to start generating a chart of these books. I think it could be enlightening for teachers to see them side by side." In contrast, Educator3 offered a different type of response, deepening the social and racial analysis with the annotation:

> This is still the case in society today. There are arguments all over about kneeling for the anthem, but far fewer conversations about the issues that have led to the kneeling. Think about how we teach slavery and racism. Often we don't want to expose kids to those concepts too young, but what about students of color? They aren't saved from racist encounters because of their age.

These annotations showcase how educators voluntarily made their annotations a public resource for others interested in the relationship between literacy and educational equity.

Given the article's core argument about the racial hierarchy endemic to the literary canon, the content of some educators' annotation subsequently addressed personal privilege, whiteness, and antiracist educational practices. Worlds and Miller foreground the relationship among white supremacy, American schooling, and literacy education by noting, "The canon submerges knowledge in an unnamed whiteness that masquerades under labels such as 'universal' and 'timeless'" (44).

An exchange among three educators about this sentence began with Educator4 writing: "I have moved away from the idea of 'universal themes.' Curricula are littered with these problematic notions guiding the essential questions of units." In response, Educator5 asked: "So, you're saying universal themes are not valid?" Educator6 then jumped in and replied: "I read this section and hear a call for teachers to think critically about how the things they have been calling universal might in fact uphold white supremacy. If we are troubled by the idea that students don't see themselves in the texts we teach, we have to understand how schools justify reading lists that are stagnant." This exchange demonstrates how educators used annotation to participate in "the messiness of meaning-making" (Zucker 93) and navigated a brave space with contrasting viewpoints about pedagogy to better understand more equitable student learning.

Echoing these educators' interrogation of the canon upholding white supremacy, other participants authored related annotations in different areas of the article. In one instance, Educator7 annotated: "Reimagining the canon must mean we take an antiracist stance & continually be both vulnerable & reflective as we consider how, being steeped in whiteness, we may remake the canon but not change the structures or messages of what students read." In another area, Educator8 wrote: "Many interpret longevity in the canon as a mark of quality and not as a component of the colonial/Eurocentric/racist systems that have elevated these texts. This leads to a 'teaching it because I was taught it' mentality instead of evaluating which texts are most relevant to the students." These contributions reveal the promising ways in which annotation can function as both a literary device and means of social inquiry for educators writing to advance their equity-oriented professional learning.

AUTHORING ANNOTATION

Annotation is a form of writing that permeates today's on-the-ground and online classrooms, pedagogies, and technologies. Hiller Spires and colleagues have demonstrated that annotation can be multimodal, used with interdisciplinary texts, and that it augments critical and digital literacy skills (54), which echo the previously discussed qualities of brave writing during Marginal Syllabus

conversation. Table 1 presents strategies for teachers and their students to start authoring annotation that is social, public, vulnerable, and critical, strategies that I next detail by means of conclusion.

When educators are in the classroom learning alongside their students, first introduce annotation as a social literacy practice. Inform students that annotation is not only enacted alone but also with peers, through constructive reader response and shared dialogue. If helpful, begin by modeling "mindful" text selection methods (Turner et al. 306), or ways of finding and cataloging interesting reading materials, as well as by showcasing annotation as one strategy for encouraging more connected reading and comprehension. For educators writing annotation in professional learning spaces, identify a group of colleagues at school, via an organization, or through social media who share similar interests and curiosities. Commit to read, annotate, and discuss texts and topics relevant to educational equity and related problems of practice.

Because annotation can include public qualities, establish annotation as a peer-supported practice that encourages the sharing of notes and questions with multiple audiences. Whether with professional colleagues or among students in a class, annotate as a collective means of communication to make everyone's rough draft thinking visible to the group for the benefit of mutual comprehension (Porter-O'Donnell 83). With students, there is no need to broadcast their annotation beyond the immediate learning community. Rather, consider the semipublic qualities of social reading in the context of a small group or shared digital space.

Encourage students to write their reactions and questions on sticky notes attached to a poster or via digital commentary on an accessible (though private) online notepad. Doing so will position annotation as a visible and actionable resource for other learners. Moreover, the social and public attributes of annotation may motivate peer-facilitated discussion and debate, whether face-to-face or online, and can function as a means of formative assessment.

To propel the vulnerable and critical qualities of annotation, I further suggest literacy educators attend to care, community building, and respectful "ground rules" (Arao and Clemens 101) for annotation, especially as students write and share their marginal notes with peers. It may be challenging for some educators and students to author honest and critical annotation, especially if texts selected for reading and discussion concern topics of social consequence,

TABLE 1
Strategies to Author Annotation as Brave Writing

Annotation Qualities	Annotation by Educators	Annotation by Students
Social	Identify colleagues with shared professional interests as well as educational equity questions and concerns.	Identify texts that students prefer to read, particularly texts found in digital spaces (Turner et al. 292).
Public	Establish annotation as a collective practice and write to share rough draft thinking via annotation with group.	Share student annotation with class through multiple modes, as with sticky notes on posters or digital documents.
Vulnerable	Maintain group norms for risk, presence, and critique as educators share annotation in a "brave space" (Arao and Clemens 97).	Establish "ground rules" (Arao and Clemens 101) for care, community building, and respectful discussion via student annotation.
Critical	Annotate texts that address educational equity topics; author annotation to explore equitable learning futures.	Affirm student agency as annotations raise questions, elicit debate, and propel critique of texts and topics.

Educators and students can follow these strategies to begin writing annotation.

power, and privilege. This will require establishing and maintaining group norms that enable participants to share their honest questions, raw thoughts, and formative impressions with one another. Educator pedagogy should affirm student agency and voice while managing potentially contentious or confusing annotation through open feedback and reflection (Brown and Croft 6).

At the beginning of my teaching career, I perceived annotation, perhaps like some educators and students, as little more than a perfunctory and rote response to a text. The wisdom shared by educators who annotate in brave spaces suggests, however, that it is useful to expand on Adler's statement, penned eight decades ago, that marking up a book was an act of love (11). Annotation can open up transformative learning opportunities for educators and their students to take intellectual risks, share personal opinions, and make meaning together about challenging texts and topics. If annotation conveys engaging, or even endearing, remarks among teachers, students, and their chosen texts, then annotation may also function as a means of composing more social, public, vulnerable, and critical literacy education practices and contexts. EJ

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