

# Reading History Online

*Jamie Wood, winner of this year's RHS Teaching Innovation Award, explains how a better understanding of students' reading patterns informs and improves his teaching.*

If we know one thing about studying History at university, it's that it involves a lot of reading. As teachers, we regularly grapple with the challenge of engaging students with unfamiliar and inaccessible texts. In response we have developed a range of approaches to help them become better readers. The shift of most teaching online during lockdown, alongside the increasing prevalence of digital technologies for reading, has challenged historians to consider how we can help our students to become better readers.

Over the past few years, I have experimented with various approaches to engage students in reading sources online in preparation for class. I have found that technology can be a really powerful support, when coupled with a structured pedagogic approach. Most recently, when designing a new final-year undergraduate module in 2018, I was keen to get students reading some rather obscure primary texts. I found a tool, Talis Elevate, that enabled me to upload readings to a shared space where students could collectively annotate them as part of their preparations for class.

So, how does it work? Generally, students are asked to post at least three comments (questions, points of interest, responses to peers) on the weekly primary source in Talis Elevate (disclaimer: other tools can do a similar job). I rarely reply to student comments. Online readings therefore become a space for independent student work and interaction.



I read the comments and use them to plan activities and select sources for focused reading in class—seminars are directly informed by student interests and not driven by what I think they should be interested in. During the pandemic, I made extensive use of Microsoft 365 documents to enable students to engage with shorter source extracts in online seminars, further focusing the module on collaborative annotation. Quantitative and qualitative feedback has consistently indicated high levels of engagement with this approach. Students have expressed an appreciation of the opportunities that are provided for interaction and discussion of challenging texts and really like the fact that their annotations feed directly into seminars, with a positive effect on engagement in class (far more so than in a traditional 'read for seminar and then discuss' approach).

Historians at the University of Lincoln, and elsewhere, have also engaged enthusiastically with the collaborative annotation approach using Talis Elevate. It's proven particularly important during lockdown, with significantly increased levels of engagement when teaching shifted fully online after March 2020. Furthermore, historians have acted as catalysts for uptake in other disciplines. At Lincoln, and other universities, historians have been at the forefront of innovative reading pedagogies for online reading.

As a result of this work, I recently started leading, alongside Anna Rich-Abad (Nottingham) and Jon Chandler (UCL), a QAA-funded project, 'Active Online Reading', that aims to develop pedagogies for digital reading in higher education. The project seeks to enhance our understanding of how students read and analyse texts online, and will further underline how historians lead teaching innovation across and beyond the sector.



**As part of the 'Active Online Reading' project, Anna, Jon and myself are launching two surveys designed to gather feedback from students on how they read online, and from academics and other staff on how they teach students to read online.**

**We would like to invite members of the Royal Historical Society to complete the survey and share it with their colleagues and students. The Student Survey is open to all undergraduate and postgraduate students, and we welcome responses from within and beyond the UK. You'll find links to both surveys at the end of this article.**

Tools such as Talis Elevate also help us understand how our students read, and provide a powerful means of improving how we teach them to do so. Because I can observe the kinds of things that my students comment on when annotating

documents, I am able to gain some insights into what they have found interesting, or difficult, and adjust my approach accordingly.

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Jamie was one of eight winners of prizes for publishing, research and teaching at the 2021 RHS Awards, held in July this year. For a more on the 2021 prizes, winners and runners-up, and the call for the 2022 awards see: [royalhistsoc.org/prizes/](https://royalhistsoc.org/prizes/)

*For more on Jamie's 'Active Online Reading' project see: [makingdigitalhistory.co.uk](https://makingdigitalhistory.co.uk). The surveys that form part of the project are available at (Staff) [bit.ly/3ltPX7m](https://bit.ly/3ltPX7m) and (Students): [bit.ly/3oPOnyJ](https://bit.ly/3oPOnyJ)*