

Developing close reading through active, collaborative annotation

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Reading is fundamental to all subjects at university, but especially to History, a discipline in which direct engagement with primary and secondary sources is fundamental. This case study addresses how an online tool called [Talis Elevate](#) was used to develop students' skills in the core disciplinary skill of close reading. But before I begin, it's important to note that several other tools can also enable students to read actively and collaboratively online. For example, I've also made extensive use of shared Microsoft 365 to support students in collaborative reading

Introduction

I used Talis Elevate for a final-year undergraduate module that has ran from 2018-2021. There have been three iterations of the module, the latest during the pandemic, half of which was delivered using a blended approach and half entirely online. The module is structured into a series of 12 two-hour seminars. Three one-hour lectures are interspersed to introduce the module and to prepare students for assessments. Students are expected to do preparatory readings in advance of class (usually a primary source and/or a secondary article/ book chapter for a total of 20-30 pages of reading). Talis Elevate is used at a platform to enable students to engage in these preparatory reading activities.

Approach

At the start of the module, I introduce the students to Talis Elevate in the opening lecture and they are given the opportunity to 'have a go' in advance of the first seminar, during which we discuss what they had found and how they had used the tool. This provides a low-stakes opportunity for troubleshooting and enables me to show the students what I'm looking for in terms of level of annotation.

For all subsequent seminars, students are required to go into the weekly reading in Talis Elevate and add 3 annotations. They are asked to annotate parts of the text that address points of interest, questions that the text raises for them, elements that they didn't quite understand, connections to other parts of the module, and/or anything at all that strikes them as noteworthy. They are also encouraged to engage with one another by responding to and building on earlier comments.

Prior to class, I read the students' annotations and use them to help me to decide what we will look at during the seminars. This helps me to make the seminars more relevant to the students' interests than they might otherwise have been by picking out elements of sources where their comments had clustered or particularly interesting annotations. I can also correct misunderstandings, although the group as a whole tends to work together to 'figure out' the text (here, the 'wisdom of the crowd' does seem to have a positive effect!). Importantly, this also gives me the chance to see what students think of the reading 'live' (or almost 'live'), which is not only helpful pedagogically, but also fascinating as they build up their understanding of and engagement with the topic.

It's important to note that the students' contributions on Talis Elevate are graded, as part of a 'participation mark' element of the module's assessment regime (worth 15% overall). This

has been vital to driving student engagement because they can see that they receive a reward for the work that they do outside class (as well as contributions in class, whether in-person or online). The annotations enable me to get a better sense of their overall engagement in the module than previously, when their reading was pretty much invisible to me until it was time for the class or even when I was reading essays (i.e. right at the end of the module).

The screenshot displays a digital reading environment. On the left, a document titled "Vol. lxxij Slave Education in Roman Empire 263" is shown. The text is annotated with various colored highlights: blue for "were of servile status: bookkeepers, stenographers, secretaries, doctors were almost always slaves or freedmen; bankers and teachers were usually of that class.", pink for "And in the period of the Empire an increasing number of these slaves were home-raised, vernae, who must have received at least their basic training as slaves.", yellow for "the informal exchange of knowledge between master and slave or slave and slave should not be overlooked.", and purple for "a creature who instinctively seeks an opportunity to share his knowledge with his fellows." The text continues with a paragraph starting "Though it is my purpose to speak primarily of formal, systematic education..." and another starting "Horace's account of Davus' absorption of pseudo-Stoic doctrine is perhaps a case in point...".

On the right, a sidebar titled "Class comments" lists several student comments with their names and timestamps. The comments include:

- Sophia Wilson-Morley** (10:00): "The jobs that were needed in society were occupied by slaves. Somehow the roles are soon important enough that they are a necessity (like healthcare), but not important enough that a free bo... Show more" (with "Reply" and "Agree" buttons).
- Meloy Carter** (10:00): "Was looking my research essay as I found that almost all teachers of higher education had at least 2-3 slaves thus showing that slaves were important for those with important jobs and were, as... Show more" (with "Reply" and "Agree" buttons).
- Thomas Bradshaw** (10:00): "Probably because it was seen as cheaper for people to buy a young, cheap and uneducated slave than train that slave to learn a profession, rather than buying an older, more skilled slave. If so, then... Show more" (with "Reply" and "Agree" buttons).
- Sam Smart** (10:00): "It was probably seen as an investment to train a slave from a young age into something useful which will benefit your household." (with "Reply" and "Agree" buttons).
- Matthew Goodacre** (10:00): "Highlights the unique ways in which slaves could pick up information and education from their masters inadvertently, although this would be largely dependent on the master and his relationship with th... Show more" (with "Reply" and "Agree" buttons).
- Alasdair Redwood** (10:00): "By educating a slave, the slave could then be 'awarded' not only intellectuality but also in regard to their morals. By doing this the slave was then fit for certain jobs and roles within Roman socie... Show more" (with "Reply" and "Agree" buttons).
- Thomas Bradshaw** (10:00): "Not really true for many people, but since this man is an academic, he must..." (with "to COMMENTS" link).

Image of a resource, with student annotations in Talis Elevate

Feedback

Talis Elevate has proven to be a really effective tool for enabling students to engage in collaborative and active close reading in preparation for seminars. Student feedback has been positive, emphasising the following elements:

1. learning from each other, especially getting access to different perspectives and interpretations ('It [Talis Elevate] helped as a convenient place for notes and was good for class collaboration and sharing/building of ideas' – student feedback)
2. generating a knowledge bank that they can return to later for assessments ('Because I participated more on Talis, I knew sooner what to base my research essay on unlike other modules when I found that harder. It also was a useful repository of notes which made planning the essay a lot easier. The comments also provided me with more to discuss in the seminars, helping to develop my ideas and understanding better.');
3. and integrating 'homework' and in-class activity so they are able to see that their contributions are relevant to the module as a whole.

Top tips:

- Wherever possible, 'design in' tools such as Talis Elevate – both you and the students will experience them as an integral part of the module rather than an add-on.
- At upper levels, make reading tasks using Talis Elevate 'open' so that students can explore texts for themselves and use one another to develop their understanding.

- Reduce the amount of reading that you set the students. I get much higher engagement with shorter readings (20-30 pages max.) and try only to use 1 Talis Elevate link (i.e. you may want to put several shorter readings into one file rather than having students click in and out of several – some just won't bother).
- Assess engagement to reward students for their labour and because it gives a fairer indication of overall engagement on the module than pure in-class participation (I combine the two). Some students appreciate this, especially the quiet ones.
- Make it relevant – feed what you can see in the online annotations that students have made into class. This shows them that their thoughts have worth. Personally, I know what I think about the texts we're reading so am much more interested in exploring the views that the students have shared.