Engaging Marginalised Students with John Roache, recorded December 2023
Transcript

Intro: Welcome to the Good Practice in Teaching Podcast, where we talk to staff in the Faculty of Humanities about what works well in teaching, assessment and student support.

In this episode Sarah Dyer, our Chair in Digital Education, chats to John Roache, a lecturer from English, American Studies and Creative Writing. Sarah and John discuss ways in which digital annotation might help HE educators to address issues of student marginality both inside and outside the classroom.

Sarah Dyer (SD): So today I'm talking to John Roache, who's a lecturer in modern and contemporary literature in the Faculty of Humanities. And we're talking because you've just started a project called 'Out of the Margins: Harnessing Methods of Digital Annotation as a Means of Amplifying the Student Voice' for the Institute of Learning and Teaching.

I guess a really great place to start would be what do you mean by that title 'Out of the Margins'? What's kind of informing your project?

John Roache (JR): Hello, Sarah. So, yeah, for me, this is the project that emerged out of the pandemic. And out of new ways of teaching that we had to come up with during that period of time, so I found Zoom and Teams teaching extremely difficult in various ways, I'm sure we all did, and just like many of the colleagues I developed new strategies for trying to bring students into the conversation, which included using different forms of digital annotation for students to use in between classes. So we might have a lecture on a particular text, and then I might set them a bit of pre seminar work to all annotate that text, but to do it using an app that is online and is actually social and collective. So they could all see each other's comments. And we were starting to have a conversation before the class began. And then at the start of the class, that was really useful because I could. Instead of sort of saying has anyone got anything to say and looking at all of these either kind of just the names on the Zoom screen or, you know, blank faces, tentative nervous faces, I was able to say, oh, you know, to one student, you made a really interesting point, should we start with that?

And I suppose at the end of the pandemic, when we all rushed back to the classroom, you know, again, for good reasons, I think, a lot of this sort of innovative work that we were doing just got lost and I missed it because one of the reasons it was so interesting was that suddenly students who hadn't spoken to me in class in an in-person context for various reasons, many of which remain mysterious to me, were suddenly contributing and speaking

and saying things in the digital setting or the online setting that then led to them becoming more involved in the conversation in the class itself or in the Zoom call.

And I didn't really want those students contributions to go away just because we were back in the classroom. It seemed to me that we should try to hold on to some of that really good practice that came out of teaching online. And this project then is an attempt to, you know, create a genuinely hybrid form of teaching, where we are in class, but also at the same time using these digital methods of annotation.

And it means that I can go into a seminar having prepared, yes, the usual material, the text, the theoretical material, whatever it might be, but also having prepared by reading the students comments on the text and knowing what particular students have had to say and perhaps planning in my mind, you know, if there's a moment where things go quiet or we seem to have reached a natural pause, then maybe I could go to this student and ask them about this idea.

And they begin then not just to be more comfortable in speaking in class because you're validating them in advance by asking them to contribute. But they begin to, to teach their peers as well through saying the interesting thing that they've already noted down. So when I say sort of out of the margins, that's what I mean.

I'm thinking about the double meaning of that word margin where it's both the side of a text. It's where we annotate. It's the space we use to think in writing, often quite unconsciously or spontaneously. And it's also a word that we use to think about people or groups who aren't in the centre of things, who feel, who feel marginal, for reasons that, as I said, we don't always know as teachers.

So the project is just trying to officially or formally put some of these methods together with the hope of disseminating them to other teaching and learning colleagues.

SD: And it seems to me to be such an important opportunity that, you know, digital tools give us in terms of I mean, one, I think it's about reflecting more the ways in which our students might be engaging with communities outside of the university.

You know, it, is more familiar, but it, it kind of provides ways of working that enable students to pause, to practice what it is they want to say, to make those thoughtful interventions and to, kind of show up in different ways.

And it, it, it seems to me to be such an important opportunity. And as you say, there were lots of things that we discovered during the pandemic, which amongst all of the horror of it,

we're actually really worth holding on to. And I think it's that sense of, okay, how do we move forward in a way that takes that learning seriously.

But doesn't say, okay, zoom is brilliant for teaching, you know, it's about learning from and moving forward rather than having a kind of knee jerk reaction back to the classroom.

JR: Yeah, absolutely, because the important thing about those digital methods that we developed during the pandemic is that this was a new way to hear students' voices.

And those voices weren't always being heard before, and then there's a danger that they go away afterwards because of, you know, the classroom is a really, really difficult situation for some students, and it's a range of factors that contribute to that, and they're often sort of messy and entangled with each other.

A student might feel really confident in one space socially. Or in their home, and then they're a different person when they go to university, and they, you know, that's a structural thing, and it's something that emerges out of that meeting point of the individual and the university institution.

But those voices are so important, and anything we can do to diversify the type of voices, the amount of voices that we're hearing from students. That gives us a better sense, I think, and we're using the phrase student voice all the time, of course, but it isn't one unified thing.

And this is one way in which we can actually nuance that phrase, that is, of course, really important, but also, you know, begs the question of whose voices are most centralized in a classroom.

And also I think part of this comes out of personal experience because I found seminars really hard when I was a student. I didn't really like going to class. Because when I was put on the spot, I tended to lose everything that was in my head. In a way that others, you know, and you always do this thing and students say to me all the time, oh, everybody else has got such interesting things to say. And I feel like I can't.

And it always seems like everyone else in the room is really confident, which of course I know now isn't the case. It's just a lot of things happening in any given seminar. But I found over time, it really helped if I carefully prepared. And even wrote down particular comments I might quite like to say so that it was there for me to sort of draw upon if I needed it and this is just a high tech version of that, in a way, it's guiding students towards having that

more formalized preparation because otherwise and this is obviously Humanities-specific problem in some ways.

The lack of contact times means that we're often asking students to develop their own study skills in their own time and the study skill of preparing well for a seminar is not, it's by no means common sense.

SD: No, absolutely not. And I was also thinking as well there's a sense in which the tools or the approaches that you're investigating is a way in which we can use digital to slow things down.

And actually as a seminar leader that can be really helpful too. And, I think that seminars can be stressful for people teaching because you have the fear of the silence, and, you're often thinking about you know, just as the students might be thinking about, like, what does it want to say and not really listening, you might be doing the same.

Or you might be, allowing people who are more confident speaking to speak, even though you want to hear from others, there's a kind of fear of silence. And so there's a sense in which this is, this might be kind of, slowing things down for students, but also for the academics or the people leading the seminar.

And as you say, it's something about kind of building that community, around the text as well. And creating something that people can go back to because as you, you know, like preparing for a seminar isn't common sense we're not born knowing that, but equally taking notes, and trying to contribute might be kind of challenging and so having this, this kind of artifacts that you can go back to and look at to jog your memory or to revise or think through as you're preparing assessments, whatever, seems really fantastic as well.

JR: Yes, and the other thing you can do with these, so there's, I should say, there's already a lot of staff in the university who are using digital annotation methods and I've spoken to some of them and the other sort of fascinating thing that you can use this to do is you can encourage students to speak to each other through the annotations. So much as you said, one of the problems of a seminar, of teaching a seminar, if you've got, say, a tentative group, quite a reticent group, it can dictate the way you teach. You can sometimes become a little bit safe in your teaching because you're trying to guide everything so carefully to make sure it doesn't all stop.

Another problem is the problem of everyone just speaking back to you and not looking at their peers and feeling that the seminar is a space where it's a kind of Q&A with the seminar leader that moves from student to student.

SD: Ping pong, you know, like passing it back and forth. Yeah, definitely.

JR: Exactly. And you're sort of mediating every comment in that situation and trying to get the rest of the class involved, but it can be quite hard. But then if you have a situation where you've said to the students, look, in your annotations, I'd like you to leave one annotation on the text and then come back to it a few days later.

So like the day before the seminar, and I'd like you to leave one more annotation, this time responding to someone else's. What that does is it just encourages a really lovely kind of collectivity and the students are speaking to each other in a way that sometimes in class, it's really hard to, you know, to suddenly make that move and be like, oh, I'm speaking to you now.

And I'm, we're having a discussion and it's, it's quite tricky if, if the, if the set pattern of a seminar is back and forth with the seminar leader, whereas if it's already happening in the pre-class annotation, you as the seminar leader can say, well, there was this interesting conversation between A and B, and I wondered if we could maybe, you know, if you'd each like to speak about that.

And it just starts a conversation where you're not the one dictating things, and that's what you want, really. You want yourself to kind of merge back into the background, if you can, for a period.

SD: Yeah, no, that's fantastic. And could you say a little bit about what you're planning to do for your ITL fellowship?

It'd be interesting to hear kind of like, what does that look like as a project?

JR: Yeah, so there's a few different elements to the project. It's underway already this semester, although this is kind of my piloting and planning semester, where I've tried things out. And next semester, I have a third-year course on my research topic, which is marginality.

So as a scholar of literature, my interest is in sort of experimental literary texts that play with the page layout, not conventional forms of centre and margin that we might expect, but are rather you know, really unconventional in various ways. And I think about how that might relate to wider political, social ways of understanding the word marginality.

So that's the basis of that third-year course. And part of the project is trying to integrate these methods of annotation into the course so that we're talking about marginality week to week and how that's developed as a word. Even going back to the medieval period up to the, up to the present and how it helps us to understand the work of reading a text in front of us.

At the same time as we are also using methods of digital annotation, you know, marking up the margins of text from week to week, using that as a basis for our conversations. Really what that does is it means that the teaching methods become organically appropriate for the subject matter, and it means that the students when they're contributing in that way between classes, they're also being encouraged to think about the subject of the course. So there's a sort of synchronicity there between form and content. So that's going to take various different forms.

We're going to use different platforms. So different types of technology. You've got Google Docs, you've got Hypothes.is, Perusal in terms of social annotation, but I'm also working part of the project, which has been fantastic actually, is I'm working with a student partner from computer science. And she has already really opened my eyes to lots of ways in which computer science students do things differently. Computer science lecturers as well.

So, lots of different software, you know, things that technologically I may not have been aware of or may have felt were beyond me. Working with a student partner in a completely different discipline means that now I'm going to be able to integrate those in.

So, for example, live comments on a lecture. So when you're actually delivering a lecture, having the opportunity for students to leave comments, as it were, sort of in the margins of your PowerPoint, for you to come back to, sort of questions that you might return to at the end. Yeah, I know.

SD: Exciting.

JR: I know, yeah, so, you know, there's those sorts of methods.

Also trying to integrate it wherever I can, so in a midterm feedback, student feedback on the course, and also end of term feedback, where I sometimes think that the forms we use, the generic forms we use, produce the same sorts of answers again and again, because obviously there's a question and then there's your reply and you get diversity, but it's also a certain form that can become, you know, familiar to the students and familiar to us.

Whereas I'm going to try and have students annotate course materials, annotate the syllabus as a way of feeding back on the course. So giving them a slightly different shape and form to respond to is likely to invite different sorts of responses. That's the theory anyway, and that might also then lead into the university considering different ways of eliciting student feedback.

SD: I think digital tools do offer us like a massive inclusivity opportunity and I think that quite often they're not thought of in that way and it'd be really great to design that in or, just to have that as be something that people are thinking about.

I think that we do need to think about, both digital equity, but then also kind of inclusivity tools. There are lots of things that, you know, as a geographer, or I'm in education now, that we ask people like questions about text.

There's no reason why we couldn't actually attach a particular question in the text. Again, you're doing some of that signaling. Some of it might be questions about the whole of the text, but actually it might be about like, okay, how is this argument being employed here? What's counting as evidence? Again, just stuff that we, think students should just know, and I don't know that they do, you know, and we don't teach them to, so.

JR: yeah, you can produce a sort of guided reading of a text in that way, particularly useful I think if you've got a really hard essay to teach with the students that has ideas that would be useful for undergraduates, but really would challenge most postgraduates. You can still use the essay, but perhaps use the annotation software to actually just yourself annotate it in advance and signal to students particular paragraphs and say, where critics such and such says this, this is the particular context that's being drawn upon. What might we take from this comment? And sort of giving access to the text in a slightly different way. So there are pros and cons, because of course you want there to be that independence of reading too.

But for when it is really hard material, for them to feel like they have you, some kind of teacher figure, helping them a bit. Yeah, there's not many ways in which we can, we can really do that easily.

SD: I think there's something interesting about the idea of authorship and, I don't know, but my sense is that younger generations think about authorship quite differently , and I guess that's social media, but my eldest is 13, and she just loves fan-fiction, like, it's just the most bizarre idea to me, but she reads these novels written by fans of games. To her, it's just a book, it's no different.

And so I wonder if there are like, there are some really interesting things about authorship, that come from social learning. And there's a sense in which we just aren't engaging with those ways of thinking about being an author. You know, in the university, we still have this really kind of static idea of not necessarily authorship of teaching and you know, we don't really feel like we're really actually engaging with social learning and in kind of a meaningful way. That's kind of what students, how they experience it outside of the university

JR: Yeah, I have no idea how to do this but what would be really great to do long term is to use it in that way, because assessment in the university, for reasons that are really logistical, practical, and clear, is tied to the individual, in the same way that we think of authorship usually, as being completely tied to the individual autonomy.

You know, so we, often in our classrooms, we're trying to break down ideas of the individual as completely autonomous, and think about social forms of meaning instead. But then, everything that gets submitted is individual. And, a high stakes thing for each particular student, whereas there's obviously this trend towards ungrading and rethinking assessment itself.

And the nice thing about social annotation is it could be in the future, almost like a form of group work. So that's, you know, what's being graded perhaps, or what's being assessed is not one individual, but rather something collective, something that's emerging out of conversations between students and so that everyone's responsible for that.

Now, that's very difficult, as you know, but the potential is there, and it is linked to, like you said, theories of authorship, that there's an interesting congruence between what you were talking about with fan fiction and the way the internet works in terms of intellectual property and authorship.

And then one of the first things students do on an English literature degree in our medieval literature course is learn that we have no idea who wrote most of those texts because loads of people wrote them all together over a long period. So there are really interesting kind of disciplinary specific things to do with authorship that, yeah, this has the potential to just help us to push that, but it's thorny and tricky.

SD: I mean, I guess like there is a halfway house, isn't there? So it's not just about, so I hear absolutely the issue of kind of collaboration in assessment I think is really key because nobody gets marked on their own work in the rest of life. But I guess the halfway house for software like this would be, you can be marked not just on the contribution you make, but the ways in which you support others to contribute.

And so that's in a way that's a bit more familiar, you know, it gives us an opportunity. So it's not just about, oh, you made this great comment, but actually you probed so and so's comment that enabled that to be taken. So that kind of supporting collaboration, supporting others, productive, so it's the kind of marking the productive and the reproductive.

I think there's stepping stones to that collective mark as well.

JR: Yes, and that's very very difficult to teach in person. Whereas with the social digital annotation you can build it into saying to students, this is how I actually want you to try engaging both your own views but also helping others thinking about what other people have said. The version of that you get in it in a seminar is of course, is that wonderful student who comes every week and prefaces their answer with, I don't know what other people think, you know, and looks around and actually is clearly someone who's both confident, but also wanting genuinely to hear what other people have to say.

That's a very, very important skill. And there are ways of doing it in person, but it's harder. Whereas you know, thinking about social forms of meaning is a bit easier if you can build it into this slower technique of digital notation.

Outro: Thank you for joining us for this episode of the Good Practice in Teaching podcast from the University of Manchester.

In the podcast description you'll find a link to more information about John's project with the Institute of Teaching and Learning.

Links:

Institute of Teaching and Learning Projects