Iterating the Marginal Syllabus: Social Reading and Annotation while Social Distancing

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The coronavirus pandemic exacerbated long-standing educational inequities associated with technology access, learner agency, and participation in online learning. How were preservice and inservice educators supported in their pursuit of interest-driven professional learning that critically examined the unfolding impact of these inequities? This article describes how the Marginal Syllabus project rapidly iterated three public, online, and equity-oriented social annotation activities for educators that included: Facilitating social reading sessions which combined synchronous social annotation with videoconferencing conversation; a collaborative partnership with the Speculative Education Colloquium to augment reading opportunities for shared dialogue; and supporting teacher education courses participating in social annotation activities under remote learning circumstances. The article details

three recommendations for supporting educators' technical
and sociopolitical professional learning via social annotation,
and notes directions for future research that can examine how
annotation-powered conversation may productively inform
more equitable pedagogy and student learning practices.

Rationale

With schools shuttered amidst a hurried shift to emergency remote instruction, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated educational inequities and highlighted parallel professional learning needs. Educators faced technical challenges, such as developing familiarity with digital tools to support online learning, while also confronting challenges associated with students' academic, social, and emotional well-being at a time of unprecedented disruption (Kamenetz, 2020; Meltzer, 2020). This article describes how the Marginal Syllabus project sought to support educators' technical and sociopolitical professional learning by rapidly iterating *social annotation* (SA) activities in response to this crisis.

The Marginal Syllabus—a project and partnership among the National Writing Project, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the software organization Hypothesis—gathers together preservice and inservice educators to read about educational equity topics, discuss these texts online, and establish connections to educator pedagogy and student learning. Since 2016, educators have participated by commenting on digital resources via public SA for the purposes of information sharing, social interaction, and knowledge production (Novak, Razzouk, & Johnson, 2012). During Marginal Syllabus social reading, SA encourages public discussion about civic and ethical qualities of learning (Kalir & Dillon, 2019) and illustrates the social scholarship of teaching (Greenhow, Gleason, & Willet, 2019). The project guides educators' SA of texts about educational equity as contrary, or marginal, to dominant education norms while demonstrating how educators' interest-driven learning advances a marginal counternarrative to conventional professional development (Kalir & Garcia, 2019). The Marginal Syllabus also provides a forum for considering how social practices foster literacy learning and teaching as research indicates that, for K12 students, SA activities support literacy practices like shared meaning-making (Brown,

2007), close reading (Zucker, 2016), and argumentative writing (Castek, Beach, Cotanch, & Scott, 2014).

Process

The COVID-19 pandemic accentuated the relevance of just-in-time and equity-oriented professional learning. Marginal Syllabus programming—featuring accessible and participatory SA—was strategically iterated in response to educators' technical and sociopolitical concerns. The Marginal Syllabus is a *social design experiment* (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016) with a leadership team, ongoing research about SA and learning, and technical infrastructure (Kalir, 2020) capable of quickly enacting cycles of design, implementation, and analysis. Thus, the pandemic precipitated new Marginal Syllabus efforts with the goal of modeling low-barrier collaborative inquiry as one technical approach to online learning while creating the conditions for educators to productively discuss educational equity. Table 1 summarizes social activities and technologies for three new designs: Facilitating public social reading sessions; augmenting colloquium readings; and supporting teacher education courses pushed into remote learning.

First, we facilitated four social reading sessions that combined synchronous SA (or "flash mobs") with videoconferencing conversation. These public and free events extended discussion from the 2018-19 and 2019-2020 Literacy, Equity + Remarkable Notes = LEARN syllabi, and illustrated how to quickly organize collaborative learning relevant to literacy education and sociopolitical topics (Figure 1; Educator Innovator, 2020). For instance, during one session about youth activism, a literacy teacher educator referenced prior SA commentary to guide subsequent discussion by observing, "I don't suspect we'll go back to the classroom in the same way… what are we leaving spaces for?"

Table 1

New project designs implemented across teacher education
and professional learning contexts

Spring 2020 Designs	Social Activities	Common Technologies
Facilitating public social reading sessions	• Synchronous SA "flash mobs" • Four videoconference sessions (critical Indigenous literacies, youth activism, racebending counternarratives, the racial hierarchy of the literary canon) • Discussion of four previously annotated Marginal Syllabus readings • Public participation, focus on K-12 literacy educators through networked communities (National Writing Project, National Council of Teachers of English, Connected Learning in Teacher Education)	• Hypothesis SA for both public and private (group) commentary and discussion (https://web.hypothes.is/) • Zoom videoconferencing • Shared and editable Google Docs for SA technical support, group note-taking, and post-activity reflection • Twitter and other social media to invite participation, share resources, and network • "Crowd Layers" dashboard to view and analyze learning analytics from Hypothesis SA (https://crowdlaaers.org/)
Augmenting colloquium readings	• Asynchronous SA • SA of three texts recommended and/or authored by colloquium speakers • Semi-public participation (via event registration), focus on educational researchers	
Supporting teacher education courses pushed into remote learning	• A/synchronous SA of current Marginal Syllabus readings • "Why annotate?" activity • Peer-to-peer discussion of SA commentary • Discussion of implications for SA activity during COVID-19 • Course participation (public and private group), focus on preservice and inservice K-12 literacy educators	

Figure 1. Public invitation for preservice and inservice educators to join social reading and annotation activities.

Second, we orchestrated a partnership with the Speculative Education Colloquium that augmented the colloquium's spirit of interaction and imagination through the annotation of three texts recommended or authored by the event's speakers (Garcia, 2020). For participants unfamiliar with SA, we guided asynchronous social reading via public instruction, technical supports, and conversation starters. SA activities provided colloquium participants with an additional opportunity for shared dialogue during and after the event. For example, one teacher educator's public annotation embraced a hopeful vision for more equitable learning futures: "Liberation has always existed and we can actively work towards it now."

Third, we broadened support for literacy teacher educators incorporating Marginal Syllabus texts and SA activities into courses initially taught face-to-face but that moved online. Our team helped teacher educators lead activities about the relevance of annotation to literacy and learning (Appendix A), guided SA of shared texts, and discussed implications of SA for learning both on-the-ground and online during the pandemic. Considering implications of this work during COVID-19, one preservice teacher annotated, "Talking with any students about real-world topics is both difficult but also very necessary right now with remote learning" (Figure 2).
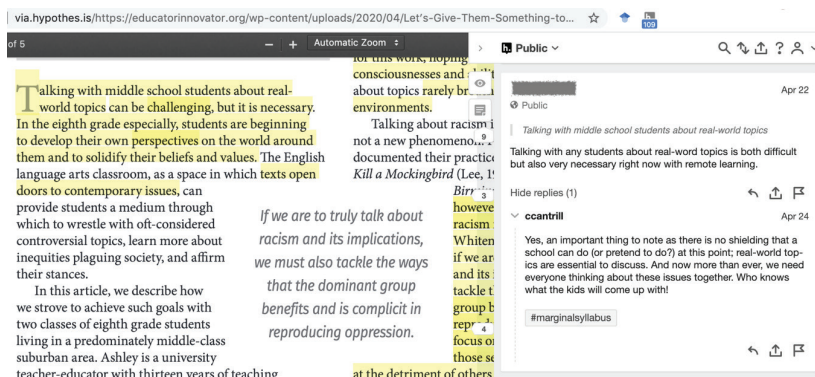
Figure 2. The Marginal Syllabus team supported remote teacher education courses with social reading and annotation activities while also discussing the challenges of remote learning.

Lessons Learned

As our team rapidly implemented three new Marginal Syllabus designs, we gleaned important lessons about how to introduce educators to the tech-

nical qualities of SA while also encouraging their "equitable co-construc-
tion of knowledge" (Mirra, 2018) about pressing educational equity topics
via social reading and annotation. Across our efforts, it was valuable to de-
scribe how SA was germane to online learning and remote instruction (Zhu
et al., 2020). Consistent with pedagogical approaches for constructive an-
notation (e.g., Zucker, 2016), we modeled different types of annotation, pro-
vided discursive prompts, replied to first-time participants, and offered tech-
nical assistance. Perhaps our most important lesson learned concerned the
need to engage with the complexities of educational (in)equity amidst a cri-
sis that revealed pervasive injustices and instructional challenges (Meltzer,
2020). We learned that educators, across career phases and settings, sought
to pair the development of new technical skills with ongoing examination of
equity topics and tensions—like digital literacy, learner agency, and ethical
uses of learning technology—that have affected, and will continue to im-
pact, the lives and learning of students.

Implications

We have identified three recommendations that echo established social
reading and annotation practices in K12 and higher education classrooms
(e.g., Brown, 2007; Novak et al., 2012), and that build upon lessons learned
from our new project designs. The recommendations—to read, remark, and
remix—are presented as both associated with and also as distinct from the
Marginal Syllabus. While K12 teachers and teacher educators in California,
Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, and Pennsylvania have previously adapted
Marginal Syllabus resources in hybrid and remote course contexts, we antic-
ipate ongoing adoption of SA activities in the aftermath of COVID-19 given
how social reading enables domain-specific and collaborative inquiry, digi-
tal literacy development, and connected online learning (Zhu et al., 2020).
Whether by adapting the Marginal Syllabus or adopting SA activities, Table
2 details how educators can read, remark, and remix to promote SA in vari-
ous classroom and professional learning contexts.

Table 2

Recommendations for the use of SA in teacher education and professional learning

Recommendation	Adapting the Marginal Syllabus	Adopting Social Annotation
Read	All syllabi texts are open-access and feature public Hypothesis annotation. Read articles included in the Marginal Syllabus as introductions to educational equity topics. Read the public annotation layer to see how educators have made sense of the texts and sociopolitical concerns.	Identify digital texts, ideally open-access publications, aligned with course objectives, student learning goals, and/or professional learning needs. Include digital and openly-accessible texts in course syllabi and professional learning curricula.
Remark	Annotate Marginal Syllabus texts publicly by extending the existing SA layer, and/or annotate privately by creating and using a closed Hypothesis group.	Annotate selected readings to make connections, raise questions, share opinions and resources, summarize ideas, and support dialogue. Begin by annotating privately within a closed Hypothesis group specific to a course or professional learning event. Transition from private group to public annotation.
Remix	Remix project texts, resources (like blog posts and webinars), and facilitation designs to create a new syllabus relevant to local problems of practice. For example, educators at San Francisco State University created the first local Marginal Syllabus project in 2019.	Remix conventional approaches to online peer-to-peer discourse, such as discussion forum posts, with annotatable texts. Remix course orientation activities, like a syllabus quiz, with SA comments. Remix small group discussions, like the jigsaw method, using social reading and annotation.

Future Research

Educators' longer-term professional needs will continue changing as the consequences of COVID-19 and emergency remote instruction deepen. It will be pertinent to research how preservice and inservice educators leverage open, low-barrier learning opportunities—whether affiliated with the Marginal Syllabus or other SA efforts—that simultaneously support the technical and sociopolitical qualities of professional learning. Emergent SA designs, like the three described in this article, should be studied to ascertain how educator participation influences either their beliefs or classroom practices. Finally, as SA can create the technical and social conditions for collaborative learning (Gao, 2013; Kalir & Garcia, 2019), future research should detail how social reading and annotation can productively guide educator digital pedagogy and student participation in more equitable online learning (Brown & Croft, 2020).

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APPENDIX A: "Why Annotate?" Resource