ANNOTATION AS WRITING FOR POWERFUL LITERACY

Session B.5, Palisades G, 10:00-10:45am, Hannah Rule

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*As this is a speech text, please forgive sentence structure and style in places ☺*

1) [Introduction] . . .As the handout directs you, you can go to a website, hannahjrule.com where you see the slides and where there is a script for accessibility of you want to follow along and some other materials

I want to talk with you today about the work and potential of *ANNOTATION* in our writing and literacy instruction.

**1. (warm-up) Associate – free then specific**

To open up this topic, I’d love to get our minds going together. Let me start us with some free association. When you think of annotation, or marginalia, what comes to mind? Words, images, feelings?

[share]

I’m also curious about *specific* associations, if anyone has or is using annotation in some way in their ELA instruction and classroom practice that they’d be willing to share?

[share]

**2. The “A-HA” a) Annotation as Writing**

2a) I’ve been thinking and experimenting over the years with annotation practices with my first-year composition and secondary education English students, how to make it do more. I’ve always liked annotation as a textual habit for reading – that manner of *active* engagement with text, that is detailed, questioning, critical. Those latter two are really important to me especially coming from the rhetorical perspective as my teaching does, where I’m wanting my reader-writers to see text of all kinds – everyday, digital, academic, their own – as constructed artifacts open to endless interpretation and impact.

But I think for some time I was containing or sideling annotation, really thinking of it as reading, as private, as none of my business, as meaning making processes that students might use somehow to do something else. I, and maybe you too, in this way are inclined to see annotation conventionally as those indecipherable scribblings in books, as traces of private thinking, or a background study skill we teach or assume that involves highlighters and some kind of rigorous excavation of meaning or information.

A breakthrough moment for me came when I started to think, talk about, and teach annotation instead *as writing*. On the one hand, this is not so much of a leap – annotations are of course writing; they are literal marks in the margin, words, phrases, punctuation, symbols. In a sense more philosophically too, that active reading we associate with annotation could be seen as writing, as reading becomes the act of recomposing or approximating a text rather than downloading its essence. Too, annotations are sometimes published—what comes to mind for me is the Annotated Rime of the Ancient Mariner, which I remember pouring over in high school. (BTW When I searched to make sure I was picturing the right artifact from my literacy past, I thought one product review of the Annotated Rime on Amazon that captures the meta space that annotation layers on: A reviewer writes “The Coleridge is there, complete. Lots of extra words from people talking about the Coleridge”).

Additionally, annotation is also seen as writing increasingly through web-based social annotation tools, like Perusall, where annotations are shared, let’s say, amongst classmates as a means to stimulate reader-response and dialogue.

Today, though, I want to focus on a slightly different way of seeing annotation as writing, still dialogic, but less so with others and definitely more with the self. I want to show you in my own practice how I’ve used annotation as *reflective writing*.

**2. . . . and the Pitch b) Annotation *In Practice*: as Reflection in the Writer’s Notebook**

2b) I’ll start with a little of my teaching context. My examples will come from a first-year writing course, one focused on rhetorical analysis, research, and information literacies. One of the main assignments in this course is term-long writer’s notebook, a place where my writers write about readings, do classroom activities, freewrites, brainstorming, sentence style exercises, doodles and so on. Like many who use this notebook practice, I see this assignment as a kind of sandbox, a place for information, response, and low or no stakes writing to learn. Twin challenges in this practice – depth of reflection and metacognition as well as assessment – is where I feel annotation as writing begins to help out. Let me start with reflection.

[*and this is where the slides pick up*]

[SLIDE#3] Reflective writing is a huge part of my writing pedagogy, definitely something I’m asking students to do all the time. [*THE LIST on the slide deck*]🡪 I ask for a reflective memo in their final portfolios, I solicit progress report reflections during drafting, I ask them to reflect on the sources they’re reading for their researched inquires, and I was asking for a written reflection when they turned in their Writer’s notebook for a check at mid and end of term. And it’s that last performance of reflection I want to zoom in on, in the Writer’s Notebook.

[SLIDE #4] After I got my notebook practice going in this course, I felt let down my reading them. In general, actually I’m often let down by this kind of process writing; it doesn’t do quite what I want it to. And so, I was thinking: What really dissatisfies me? [LIST] 🡪 for one, reflection can be vague and distant. Too, Kathy Yancey, who’s studied reflection and portfolios extensively in college composition, helps me articulate the issues, as she notes that writers can maybe not get to a sufficiently readerly distance from their own work, or worse that they sniff out the task to just please the teacher. In short, I find that often reflective writing doesn’t give me a voice actively thinking and a-ha’ing, but summarized platitudes about their how the rhapsodies of the very good learning they did.

[SLIDE #5] My question became, How can I jostle or UNPARGRAPH reflective writing? Because I had an instinct that if I could push reflection into forms that felt less automatic, cursory, obliging and directed at pleasing me, the writing teacher, I might get deeper thinking and results.

[SLIDE #6] As you already guess, ANNOTATION is what helped me nudge my students’ reflective writing. I’ve included on the website, the entire assignment description for the notebook; and on the slides you’ll see just the portion that prompts the annotation process. As you can see if you’re looking at the slides is a list of starter questions that get writers into the interrogative mode – for example, highlight an idea you and disagree with it or pose questions throughout a response, or revise your thinking and writing if you were to do it again today. As with all prompts, there’s lots of talk about what else they might do and what stance they can take as they’re basically reencountering themselves, their thinking and writing.

I’ve come to see these annotations as *in-situ or on-the-spot moments of metacognitive critical thinking*. What I continue to be gratified by in this shift to reflection as annotation – and by the way, I mean it when I say gratified, I just LOVE the writing I read in this form! - is the literal locatedness of the thinking and marks – it’s like “right HERE, when I reencounter this paragraph I wrote, this is what occurred to me.” I think I’ll say more about this when I link to powerful literacy . . .

But first let me show you a bit of what this looks like. I’ll focus on the annotations of two students, where some cool stuff happened.

[Slide #7] One is Andrew, who in the first annotation example shows how he’s able to see his own writing as a reader. Here, he’s sort of being silly about returning to his own writing as a reader – getting that distance that Yancey talks about as needed for deep reflection.

[Slide#8] The next examples from Andrew I’ll say a bit more about. What you see on slide 8 is a number of moments where Andrew is loving his own sentence craft:

Top: he’s quoting himself – he finds this sentence about genre to be profound

RIGHT: he names himself a “master of appositives”—something we were practicing in class exercises

LEFT: “I appreciated this activity [that he had logged in his notebook earlier in the semester] because I treasure wordings of quotes and maxims that I love”

[Slide#9] Where it gets interesting is then some pages late, in an entry in the notebook that was moving students toward the course’s end, Andrew asserts himself to be “a math guy.” He’s coming around in this entry to see writing as a critical part of math, but really as the previous showed, he also fancies words on their own, not just in instrumental ways. But bc I see that pattern of loving words and craft when I’m touring the entries and the annotations when I’m assessing the notebook, in MY annotation I can challenge his sense of self. Andew is not just a math guy. This example shows the ways a sense of self and experience gets revised, exposing the moment-to-moment feelings and thoughts rather than the more impenetrable stories we might tell or reproduce about ourselves.

[Slide#10] This next student, I’m calling Melissa. The first annotations here are her self-evaluation comments and what I see a lot in the margins of these notesbooks - a reencountering as reconsideration of course concepts and terms – a chance to rethink her sense of things and her previous takes on course texts.

[Slide#11] Similarly, on slide 11 you can see Melissa connecting rhetorical analysis and concepts we encountered in readings to her own writing. Because of the arc of the class, we start with rhetorical concepts and practice rhetorical analysis with published texts. But now that Melissa is in a place where she’s developed this researched inquiry paper, reencountering concepts from earlier in this annotation process allows her to see the extension of her knowledge in application, to move up the Bloom’s taxonomy, if you like. Again, there’s something powerful about the present tense-ness of the annotated reflection moments – it opens up a place of ongoing consideration and revisioning rather than assertion.

3. Outcomes of Annotation as Writing 🡪 Annotation for *Powerful Literacy*

[Slide#12] Let me now conclude kind of in two ways, one with broader outcomes or benefits and then second a narrower connection to the kind of power I see in annotating as reflection.

First, turning to slide 12, this annotation process is. . . first, a chance for writers to read a huge corpus of their own writing, it’s a space to evaluate their own writing and thinking and skills, it’s a chance to both solidify and question knowledge and concepts gained. Annotation as reflective writing too exposes those connections between reading/writing, between composing/analyzing. It moreover serves as this extremely helpful bridge for my assessment – as you saw, I talk back to their talk back. Their annotations help guide me toward what they see as their successes and shortcomings, which in turn helps me more authentically evaluate their efforts in their Notebooks. Most importantly perhaps, annotation as written reflection exercises students Practice in “talking back” – to themselves! It opens up this place to change their minds.

[Slide#13] ANNOTATION FOR POWERFUL LITERACY This last bit I want to expand on. Annotation as writing, as reflective writing, for me embodies on-the-spot reconsideration, healthy skepticism, strategic tentativeness, question-posing, changing one’s mind. Complementing active learning, constructivist, and metacognitive benefits, I’ve been thinking about this vision of annotation in relation to Ernest Morrell’s notion of powerful literacy. This is a phrase repeats as a kind of anchor term through some of his work, some of those places you’ll see on slide 13.

Morrell holds up powerful literacy as a goal post in our information overload times, as a critical literacy, where what we want of literate persons is not just to be able to decode and comprehend but to “ask questions of any text that they read” (“Powerful”). Elsewhere, Morrell connects powerful literacy to Friere’s critical pedagogy and the fundamental importance of a questioning stance, of reading not just the word, but the *world* – bringing critical slant to all text that comes at us (not just written, not just academic or literary) and ciphering it through one’s experience, evolving identity, and the values of one’s family, cultures, and communities.

As he says, “We want students to engage texts, to interrogate texts, to demand meaning from texts, to talk back to texts; to juxtapose texts with their lived experiences, with their encounters with other texts, and with their rapidly expanding ideas about people and the world” (28). I stand so behind this vision; it encapsulates some of my own vision of my college literacy instruction.

And I also think, from where can we start tapping this power? From where can our students begin to ramp up to this powerful stance? Text looms large to young people; texts operate on all of us, relentlessly. It’s not so easy for any of us to maintain a stance of powerful questioning as Morrell advocates. So I wonder, how can we best position reader-writers to begin to stand up to text, to talk back to those messages and images that are damaging, that reinforce stereotypes for example, that harm, that are need of a collective radical revisioning and change?

One little place, small, I think is inviting students to reevaluation and questioning of their OWN texts, as annotation as writing in the writer’s notebook is trying to do. Practicing this questioning and reevaluation vantage in one’s *own writing*, I think, positions the English student to more readily wonder about the thinking and messages and values of others’ text.

Because powerful literacy is not simply procedures of “critique” or “analysis.” I’m thinking of Morrell’s quote: the first-personness of the processes he’s describe, the emphasis on lived experiences, encounters, evolving perspectives. I think it’s important for reader-writers to feel that in-process and changing nature of their *own* thinking, to question themselves and be curious about what they really actually think and know, and how much that can change with the passage of time and experience. It’s that dimension, that *in-the-momentness of the encounter with text*, that annotation as writing opens up and that I think is critical to the powerful literacy stance Morrell is calling English Studies toward.

**4. *Discussion*: Adaptations, Limitations/Challenges, Questions**

With that, what I’d love to do is open up the conversation. Any questions you might have about what I’ve been doing, the challenges or limitations you can anticipate in doing something like this with your own students, or other ways you’re thinking about how what I’ve been talking about might connect to what you’re doing with your own students. . . . .