

# With Online Social Annotation, Students Read Together

Students who use collaborative annotation tools learn and build community, according to a new study. Many faculty members are enthusiastic proponents of the tools, even while acknowledging their limitations.

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Matthew Luskey, assistant director of the University of Minnesota's writing across the curriculum program, wants undergraduates in his classes to talk with each other when they first encounter an essay such as Vershawn Ashanti Young's "[Should Writers Use Their Own English?](https://pubs.lib.uiowa.edu/jjcs/article/id/29866/)" But several of his classes are blended, which means that some of the "talking" needs to happen online.

Luskey could direct students to a discussion board in the learning management system, but "talking" there tends to be linear; one student may comment, followed by one or two replies, followed by another student comment and so on. Also, when a student wants to refer to a section of the text on a discussion board, they must import the quote, where it sits apart from the rest of the essay, cutting short conversations that might have naturally emerged from the context.

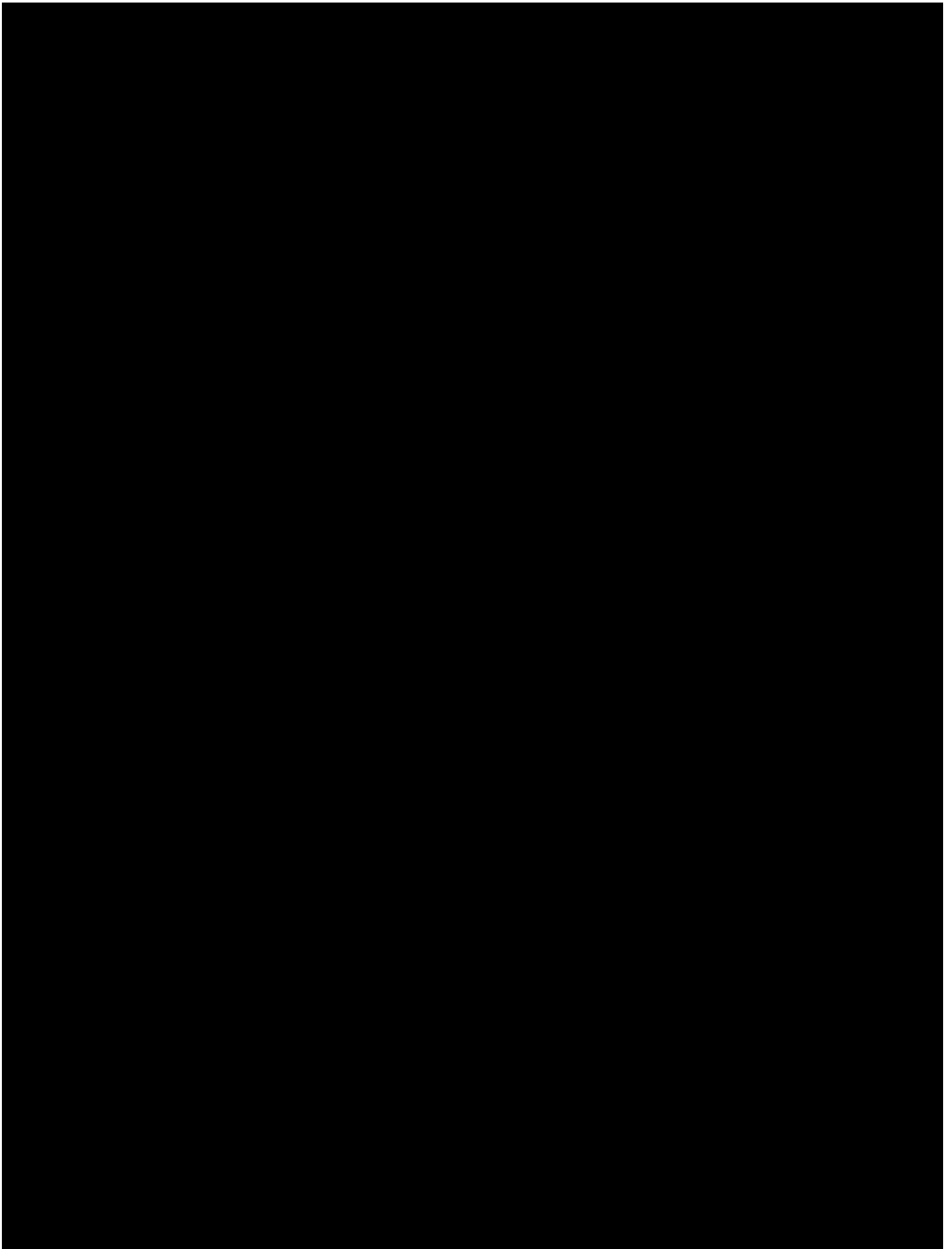
For these reasons, Luskey is a proponent of online tools that facilitate social annotation—collaborative reading, thinking and marking up of an article, webpage, podcast, collection of images or video. Now, a new [study](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8938630/) offers evidence supporting what Luskey has long observed: online social annotation helps students understand and construct knowledge around scholarly content, while at the same time building community.

Social annotation tools may be the natural evolution of collaborative

"It's bringing that collaborative energy right to the thing, with zero distance between it and our peers," said Dan Whaley, CEO and founder of [Hypothesis](https://web.hypothes.is/), a company that creates open-source software and pushes for standards in online social annotation.

## A Digital Upgrade for an Age-Old Practice

Students have long marked up texts to make sense of reading. When they collaborate online, they not only have access to a wider range of annotation tools for text but also may annotate a wider range of content, including audio and visual sources.



marginalized students who may be less inclined to speak in class may be more at ease adding their voices to the digital notes.

## Limitations of Social Annotation

Despite the benefits of social annotation, instructors interested in incorporating the practice into their teaching can get started in less-than-perfect ways, according to proponents.

As with other technology, instructors should first ensure that they know how to use the tool. Then they should allocate class time to instruct students on its use. Even when all are versed in the mechanics, students may need guidance on how to engage.

“Something similar happens with peer response, right?” Luskey said. “The research shows it’s a good practice, but we’ve all had crappy experiences doing peer response—oftentimes when we don’t know what we’re supposed to be doing, when there’s no protocol, procedure or clarity about the process.”

Guidance for annotators often involves two steps.

“Highlight something that is confusing and ask a question about it,” Derek Bruff, visiting associate director at the University of Mississippi’s Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, suggested as an example. “Highlight something that you find surprising and then write why you find it surprising. Highlight something that reminds you of something else we studied, and make that connection explicit.”

Social annotation may help students grapple with, for example, a first pass on a reading, though it may be less effective when they are asked to summarize or respond to an argument about a whole document, according to Bruff. Also, faculty members who adopt the tools specifically for autograding features may be disappointed.

“They’re not just there because they must make seven annotations and respond to two of their peers’ comments,” Bruff said. “That’s going to bring a lot of artificiality to it.”

## Social Annotation Beyond the Classroom

Ithaka, a nonprofit focused on improving access to knowledge and education, recently made a \$2.5 million (<https://www.ithaka.org/news/ithaka-invests-in-open-annotation-leader->

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