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Institute of Teaching and Learning

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**OUT OF THE MARGINS:
HARNESSING METHODS OF
DIGITAL ANNOTATION AS A MEANS
OF AMPLIFYING THE STUDENT
VOICE**

ITL FELLOWSHIP 2023/24

**PROJECT
REPORT**

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ITL Fellow 2023/24

JOHN ROACHE



John Roache is a Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Literatures in English. He has published extensively on issues of textual and socio-political marginality and is now looking to harness this work in the development of more inclusive approaches to pedagogy both inside and outside his subject area.

John's project, "Out of the margins: harnessing methods of digital annotation as a means of amplifying the student voice", aimed to explore established and newer forms of digital annotation as a

means of bringing currently marginalised students into a more central, empowered, and visible position within the learning environment. In this sense, it focused on the co-construction of a hybrid learning environment that combined the best advantages of digital and `in-person` pedagogies and, in the process, helped to facilitate a more sustained and nuanced mode of pedagogical engagement.

In the long run, the hope is that this project will not only help to increase levels of student participation across the University but might also enable us to develop a more representative and inclusive understanding of the Student Voice as a whole.

Fellowship Student Partner Intern

MINAHIL TARIQ

Context and objectives

Recent studies have found that Higher Education (HE) students stand to benefit from having access to a diverse range of both modes of engagement and assessment methods; this, in turn, is one way in which the university might address the increasingly important issue of how to enable and amplify the Student Voice.

This project builds on my extensive research and pedagogical experience of working with different forms of annotation, from handwritten marginalia to new modes of digital interface between text and student, to effectively bring our students 'out of the margins' and into a more central, empowered, and visible position within the learning environment.

The strategic alignment of such a project is clear: it has the potential to bring students who are currently 'marginalised' (for a variety of possible reasons) into a more active relation with pedagogy; to engage a more diverse range of student groups; to build a greater sense of belonging among small- and large-scale cohorts; and, in the process, to drive positive changes through the amplification of student voices at every level of the institution.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the attendant shift to online teaching, and the subsequent shift back into the classroom, students and teachers alike have articulated their wish to co-construct a 'hybrid' learning environment that combines the best advantages of digital and analogue pedagogies and, in the process, helps to facilitate a more sustained and nuanced mode of pedagogical engagement. This project seeks to address precisely this need.

Project activities

There were two primary activities that the project looked to pursue:

i) Integrating digital annotation into teaching

This project first facilitated the integration of a number of innovative and complementary methods of digital annotation (chiefly Hypothes.is and Google Docs) into two undergraduate courses on which I currently teach (ENGL10171 English Literature Tutorials and ENGL35312 Culture and Marginality).

Although a number of staff members at the University have been integrating modes of annotation into their teaching for some time, this project sought to push the promise of such activities even further, seeking to make student annotation much more of a 'central', rather than 'marginal', part of the pedagogical process. Rather than acting solely as a mode for enabling preparatory or summative forms of student engagement, diverse **annotation practices were integrated** into every part of the courses in question, including:

- weekly reading and preparation
- 'flipped' seminar design
- lecture and seminar discussions
- mid-term and end-of-term course unit evaluation.

ii) Testing and evaluating different methods of annotation

In conjunction with the activity outlined above, the project also facilitated the **testing and evaluation of a range of methods of annotation** not currently licensed by the University of Manchester, such as Weava, Kontxt, and Diigo, to explore how they might complement the annotation software that is already available to staff and students.

Challenges

One key challenge for the project was to think about ways of **identifying and measuring aspects of 'marginality'** in the student body in a quantitative way. As existing research in this area shows, the notion of marginality is at once central to many sociological and educative discussions, yet at the same time inherently nuanced and flexible. This brings a number of difficulties: for example, while using demographic data can be an effective way to identify potentially marginal elements of the student body, it can also inadvertently reproduce or exacerbate the very feelings of marginality that we're seeking to alleviate (i.e., by pre-emptively describing this or that student as 'marginal' on the basis of an unsafe assumption). At the same time, such an approach risks overlooking the more surprising and under-considered forms of marginality that we often find in the university classroom: students can perceive themselves to be marginalised for any number of shifting, context-specific reasons.

While this challenge certainly attended the project throughout, I wouldn't say it impaired our investigations; rather, it informed the way we worked, showing us new and specific things about the challenges of investigating marginality in HE.

Another challenge was our encounter with what is sometimes called **'survey fatigue'**. One of our attempts to think more concretely about student marginality was through the design and dissemination of a student survey. However, despite advertising the survey in multiple relevant online venues, we did not generate the kind of participation levels necessary to make the survey results indicative of broader patterns and problems within the student body as a whole. This caused us both to reflect on the ongoing viability of the survey as a method for investigating student views, and to focus in more detail on the insightful **qualitative evidence** that were able to garner (e.g. from mid-semester student questionnaires, feedback from departmental colleagues, and peer review).

Student partnership

My Student Partner, Minahil, played a key role from the very beginning of the project. As a student working on Artificial Intelligence from a Computer Science background, she brought a range of different views and ideas into the equation regarding teaching methods and student views.

Minahil offered **constructive feedback** on the original project outline. She also acted as an excellent **interlocutor** as I undertook the innovative teaching activities themselves, while offering **detailed advice on different apps** and software that I might consider integrating into my approach.

Minahil played a leading role in the **design and construction of the student survey**. While the take-up on the survey was disappointingly low, working on its development with Minahil made for an immensely insightful experience. For example, while my own focus in designing the survey was sometimes steered more by my interests as a researcher, she offered thoughtful and **nuanced input** on the particular aspects of teaching and learning that students themselves might like to be asked about. This, in turn, informed my own approach to researching the topic.

Alongside myself, Minahil also **co-wrote and co-presented** a paper at the University of Manchester's annual Teaching and Learning conference. Her approach in this, as in all areas, was confident, enthusiastic, and consummately professional.

Collaborative work

In designing and delivering the project, I discussed the ideas and objectives with a number of colleagues, including Professor Sarah Dyer and Professor Mairéad Pratschke. They were able to offer excellent advice on aspects including my use of technology, and how I might think about and measure impact.

The project was partly inspired by a fantastic Teaching Innovation Collective panel organised by Mairéad, which ran during the 2022/23 academic year, and showcased the excellent use of digital annotation already being made by my colleagues Dr Aña Nino (Spanish), Dr Ruth Morello (Classics), Dr Chika Watanabe (Anthropology), and Dr Noelle Dückmann Gallagher (English).

I'd also like to thank my previous line manager, Professor Ian Scott, whose support and guidance was invaluable in getting the project off the ground.

Outputs

- Good Practice in Teaching - University of Manchester (2024). *Ep 21: Engaging Marginalised Students with John Roache* [Podcast]. 20 February. Available at:
<https://open.spotify.com/episode/72MwHZKc1aPu9qGX4VzDeu?si=WBC42JweSua1mBw6ViyEVg>
- Roache, J., and Tariq, M. (2024). 'Out of the margins: harnessing methods of digital annotation as a means of amplifying the student voice', *University of Manchester ITL Teaching and Learning Conference*, Manchester, England. 26-27 June 2024. <https://doi.org/10.25416/NTR.25997314.v1/>
<https://www.staffnet.manchester.ac.uk/umitl/events/itl-conference/itl-teaching-and-learning-conference-2024/>
- Roache, J. (2024). 'The marginality paradox (and how student partnership might help us to solve it)', *Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity Blog (University of Manchester)*, 02 September 2024. Available at:
<https://blogs.manchester.ac.uk/edi/2024/09/02/john-roache-the-marginality-paradox-and-how-student-partnership-might-help-us-to-solve-it/>
- Roache, J. (2024). 'Marginality and digital annotation', *English, American Studies and Creative Writing Teaching Away Day*, Manchester. September 2024.

Impact

The project led directly to **innovations in course design and teaching practices** at first- and third-year. Here are some examples of student feedback on the incorporation of digital annotation in my third-year course:

“useful and strong way to develop the module and give it further application”

“Hypothes.is is good as a starting point [for wider discussions]”

“very helpful to see other people’s ideas before the seminar... also a very useful resource to come back to”

“[digital annotation] was a great way to start thinking about marginality”

“really good in terms of engagements, especially from everyone in the class”

As these comments make clear, **digital annotation is a popular teaching method with students** (there was no negative feedback on this aspect of the course). It helps them to start formulating their ideas, while also placing them into a **richer and more sustained dialogue with a wider range of peers** than would be possible when relying solely on a one-hour or two-hour seminar discussion. This feedback will be incorporated into my teaching practices moving forward, and I will continue to develop new modes of teaching that harness the forms of digital annotation explored during the project.

The above aspects of the project have been shared in multiple venues: a busy conference session, a departmental away day, a university-wide blog, and a podcast on Spotify. It has thus helped to contribute to an ever stronger and more innovative discussion around **critical pedagogy** both inside and outside the university – a discussion to which I will continue to contribute moving forward.

The project has fed directly into my ongoing research on marginality and will inform the article that I am currently working on, about the question of teaching and learning difficult or upsetting material. One insight emerging from the project is that digital annotation can provide one mechanism for negotiating students’ complex engagements with texts in a safer or less pressurised environment than the ‘live’ or ‘in-person’ classroom.

In 2024/25, the University moved towards making mid-term student evaluations compulsory. My project had already helped to develop a more **focused and engaging mode of student evaluation** for such a purpose. As a result of the presentation I gave at the English, American Studies and Creative Writing Department Teaching Away Day in September 2024, a number of colleagues have reached out to discuss adapting the innovative model that I developed as part of the project.

The project also gave Minahil crucial ways to develop her **professional skills and confidence**. Alongside collaborating more generally on the main project activities, for example, Minahil had the opportunity to co-write and present at a major university conference for the first time, giving her valuable experience and transferable skills for environments both inside and outside of HE.

Reflection

I feel the project has been very successful on a number of fronts. Firstly, it gave me invaluable **time and space** to develop and share new methods of teaching in a way that would not otherwise have been possible. This has made me a better and more flexible educator overall.

Secondly, the project gave me insightful experience of **collaborating with a student from an entirely different disciplinary background**. The knowledge and experiences that we shared throughout have made me a more open-minded and student-centred educator as a result.

Thirdly, the project brought me into **discussion with a wide range of peers, students, and collaborators** about the topic of teaching and learning, in a number of different contexts. This has helped to contribute to a robust debate around critical pedagogy at university level.

Fourthly, while I ultimately concluded that the new, unlicensed forms of as

part of the project were not as effective as our existing, licensed software at the University, this nonetheless gave me a better appreciation of the kinds of educational apps available on the marketplace, along with their pros and cons.

Finally, while the work of developing the student marginality survey was extremely valuable – both in terms of designing the questionnaire and going through the ethics clearance process – it was disappointing that the survey did not achieve the sort of participation needed to make the results significant or representative. This led me to reflect on the problem of survey fatigue in the HE context, and the need for us to find fresh, more effective ways of hearing the Student Voice in future.

Next steps

I will continue to **incorporate and develop** the new approaches to teaching that I explored during this project. I will also continue to **disseminate my findings and techniques** at the levels of department, school, and faculty, and across the University as a whole.

I am currently writing an article about the usefulness of **digital annotation as a means of negotiating complex conversations** around difficult or upsetting content in teaching and learning. I hope that this will help to develop new and more effective ways of thinking about questions of responsibility, consent, and distress than those currently available to HE educators.
