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## Pursuing a Commitment to Public Scholarship through the Practice of Annotation

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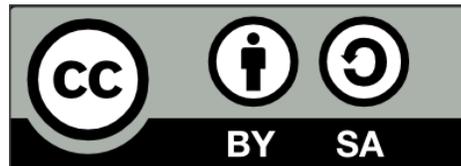
Nicole Mirra ([@Nicole\\_Mirra](https://twitter.com/Nicole_Mirra)) is an assistant professor of urban teacher education in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University. Her teaching and research highlights how young people use their literacy skills to advocate for their communities and challenge injustice. She can be reached at [nicole.mirra@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:nicole.mirra@gse.rutgers.edu).

### *Summary*

Nicole Mirra explains what annotation is and how it can lead to a better dialogue between writer and readers. She argues for annotation as a way of engaging in public scholarship and promoting equity and justice.

Nicole Mirra explica lo que es la anotación y cómo este método puede facilitar un mayor diálogo entre el/la escritor/a y los lectores. Ella sostiene que la anotación es una manera de participar en la investigación pública y promover la equidad y justicia.

**Keywords:** public scholarship; annotation; dialogue; engagement; civic action



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## **Pursuing a Commitment to Public Scholarship through the Practice of Annotation**

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As a junior academic pursuing reappointment and promotion at a U.S. research university, I spend quite a bit of my time writing articles for peer-reviewed journals in my field. While such publications represent only one possible avenue for disseminating research, they command the lion's share of my attention because they continue to be regarded by institutional gatekeepers as the gold standard of scholarship (and hence play a large role in my ability to achieve job security). From what I have gathered, these particular outlets are valued so highly for three reasons: 1. Peer review is intended to offer a sort of quality control by ensuring that common disciplinary standards of rigor are met; 2. Publication in these journals represents symbolic entrance into a continuing dialogue among experts in a particular field; and 3. Articles offer new knowledge and insights to improve theory, research, and/or practice in that field.

Of course, these reasons raise more questions for me than they answer. To name a few: who exactly are my peers? Who decides the nature and purpose of the 'rigorous standards' to be met in research? What kinds of expertise are valued or excluded in scholarly conversations? What constitutes knowledge and what are we using it for?

While I believe that all scholars should be asking these questions to gauge how well we are fulfilling our ultimate responsibility to serve the public good, they feel especially pressing to me as a professor of education – one of the most public-facing disciplines of them all. And unfortunately, I often feel a strong disconnect between my responsibilities to the world of peer-reviewed journals and to the world of K-12 classrooms (for more on the complicated relationship between educational research and practice, see Bransford & Gomez, 2009 and Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013). The peer groups do not overlap enough. Expertise is not being shared. There are not always common goals. And as a result, it could be theoretically possible for education scholars to earn tenure on the merits of research that is not oriented toward or particularly useful to students, parents, and teachers – those to whom I believe we should be most accountable.

Until large-scale changes are undertaken in the peer review process or how tenure is awarded (topics beyond the scope of this piece), I am taking a both/and approach in my ongoing journey to becoming a public scholar. My approach involves making conscious efforts to share my work in multiple public venues such as blogs, talks, and webinars *and* striving to make my peer-reviewed journal articles more accessible in terms of writing style and dissemination (one example: my blog series for the Connected Learning Alliance: <https://clalliance.org/person/nicole-mirra/>). My experience with an openly networked public annotation initiative called Marginal Syllabus represented an opportunity to merge

these approaches and offered innovative answers to my questions about constructing new peer communities and avenues for public dissemination of research.

Through this initiative, in which one of my peer-reviewed journal articles was made available as a public text that could be commented upon, I was given the opportunity to imagine a different paradigm for conducting, consuming, and responding to research - one in which study findings become the start rather than the end of dialogue and in which diverse forms of expertise extend, refute, and re-mix the knowledge production process for the common purpose of making education more equitable and culturally sustaining. I share my experience with the hope of provoking further conversation about what it means to take democratic values seriously in academic research.

### **Public Annotation and the Marginal Syllabus Initiative**

The Marginal Syllabus initiative began in 2016 with the goal of fostering conversations about educational equity through the use of the web annotation platform, Hypothesis. Its website (<http://marginalsyllab.us/>) explains the multiple interpretations of marginality that inform this work, from the encouragement of counter-narratives to the novel use of an education technology tool for the purpose of virtual note-taking. During the 2017-2018 school year, Marginal Syllabus partnered with the National Writing Project to create a series of reading conversations entitled, “Writing Our Civic Futures.” An introductory post on the [Educator Innovator blog](#) invited all interested participants to “think about the landscape of civic engagement and education while imagining ways that we can engage ourselves and our students as writers and makers of our civic futures”.

The conveners of the project, Remi Kalir and Joe Dillon, asked me and my colleague, Antero Garcia, if we would be interested in having one of our recent articles included in the syllabus. (To learn more about the project, check out these posts from [Remi](#) and [Joe](#). The [article](#), entitled, “Civic Participation Re-Imagined: Youth Interrogation and Innovation in the Multimodal Public Sphere,” was published in the 2017 volume of *Review of Research in Education*. Prior to this opportunity, this article was behind a paywall, only available to those with personal or institutional subscriptions to the journal. The irony was not lost on Antero and I that we had written an article about challenging the ways the academy measured youth civic engagement...for an academic journal. As a result, we jumped at the opportunity to share our work with a broader audience.

The organizers took care of securing permissions to use the article, while Antero and I just enjoyed the fun stuff - participating in a [webinar](#) - to introduce our piece to the world and then joining in the monthlong annotation experience. Signing up for the Hypothesis platform was as simple as choosing a username and password, and the process of annotation was similarly intuitive. Once logged in, our article appeared in the form of a PDF file. Any annotator could then highlight any word, phrase, sentence, or chunk of text and click to add an annotation that would then appear to all readers in the margin. Readers could choose to create new annotations or respond to previous comments in order to create

a discussion thread. As a result, reading the piece would cease to be a linear journey down the page and instead become a constant zigzag from the original text to the margins and back again.

This give and take is where I saw potential for annotation to further the cause of public scholarship. In effect, annotation seeks to break down the hierarchical boundaries that often plague academic research - binaries between authors and readers or researchers and practitioners - by fostering a more equitable and democratic conversation in which all contributions are visible and valid. Readers need not pen their own articles and seek outlets for publication in order to respond to a piece; instead, annotation seeks to make dialogue happen in real time among a wide group of stakeholders.

And indeed, all members of the public were invited to become readers and annotators. Because this effort was spearheaded by the National Writing Project, many teachers and teacher educators were represented; however, many of them invited their students to participate as well in order to support more diverse perspectives and a distributed sense of expertise. Here is a [link](#) to the article with the 85 annotations that these readers added. I want to tease out a few aspects of the process that impacted me in terms of the value of annotation as a promising practice for public scholarship and do some imagining of what a more inclusive vision of democratic knowledge production might look like.

### **Re-Considering the Premises of Our Work**

As we wrote our original article, Antero and I were inspired by instances of young people using social media in order to speak back to dominant narratives about their identities and shaping public dialogue about the issues that mattered to them. We realized that traditional models of youth civic engagement were not equipped to integrate the activities of the Black Lives Matter and DREAMer movements into their analyses; as a result, we made the argument that the multimodal public sphere demanded attention because of the new opportunities it offered young people for civic action.

When the annotation process began, I was surprised to see how much conversation was generated by the abstract at the very beginning of the piece when we offered this statement about the potential of digital media to democratize the public sphere. The annotators, some of whom I knew personally and others I had never met before, quickly problematized our premise by raising concerns about privacy, trolling, and the corporate control of many platforms. The annotations allowed me to see thinking made visible as readers wrestled with the potential and drawbacks of digital media as a source of transformative civic discourse and even introduced new texts to further our collective considerations (more on linking to new resources in a moment).

This conversation was eye-opening for me because it served as a valuable reminder that the claim that formed the basis for our entire piece and was almost taken for granted in our theorizing was in reality up for debate at a very fundamental level. The norms of academic writing often encourage authors to assume a mantle of confidence and put forth

ideas in such a manner as to make them appear as settled fact. But how refreshing and intellectually engaging to recall that even the fundamental premises that structure our writing are works in progress! How exciting for me to be shaken from the complacency of some of my assumptions and be encouraged to reconsider and/or justify my stances!

This conversation felt like the democratic process in action as the voices of my peers complicated and ultimately strengthened my thinking. As John Dewey (1916) reminds us, “Society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication” (p. 5, emphasis original). Annotation is a practice that makes this communication transparent and gives each individual a chance to foster rigorous analysis by adding her own perspective to the conversation. In effect, annotation provided more satisfying answers to the questions I raised at the start of this piece about peers, expertise, and purpose than the traditional peer-review process ever had. Annotation embodied public scholarship by welcoming everyone as respected members of an educational conversation - no credentials required. It encouraged the sharing of various forms of expertise that normally would not be considered “rigorous” enough for the research establishment, thereby turning these rules on their head and demanding that more voices be heard. And it reminded us that if our ultimate aim as researchers is to encourage civic engagement, we must welcome such engagement in all possible forms.

### **Welcoming New Voices through Resource-Linking**

In one obvious sense, the practice of annotation invites multiple voices to contribute to a scholarly conversation in terms of the actual individuals who add notes in the margins. Yet during my engagement in the practice I was also struck by the ways that the participating voices multiplied as individuals supplied links to a wide variety of additional texts that furthered the dialogue. As I scrolled through the annotations, I was fascinated to see how the original article sparked recollections in the minds of our readers to such diverse context, from political cartoons and artwork to infographics, TED talks, and other academic articles.

I was familiar with some of these texts while others were completely new to me. Some had been obvious influences on my thinking while others made connections that created new neural pathways in my brain. They embodied the idea that every text that we compose is inevitably influenced by a multiplicity of other texts (both consciously and unconsciously) and that every idea represents a conversation with supporting and contradictory perspectives. I appreciated the annotation process for offering links to these multifaceted perspectives right there on the page instead of keeping them hidden in the minds of each reader, thereby creating a map through which we could trace the lineage of our most deeply held convictions as well as the ideas with which we disagreed.

I also appreciated the fact that the texts being referenced were not confined to other peer-reviewed scholarship but represented a full scope of expression. Especially in a field

like education, which is so applied, annotation offers a refreshing reminder that knowledge can just as easily be borne from a student-produced video or teacher blog post as a researcher's experimental design study. As a qualitative researcher who is often trying to understand the life of a school and put classroom practice into conversation with discourses swirling across the educational landscape, I feel a responsibility to stay abreast of everything from the latest research articles to the latest viral videos students are watching. Annotation offers a forum in which both can be shared.

### **Clarifying Arguments through Dialogue**

One of the most meaningful aspects of the annotation process for me was witnessing how others took up the claims that formed the core of our article, both because I appreciated seeing how others interpreted our work and because those interpretations helped me to understand how I might clarify my writing when I realized I was not coming across in the way I intended. In the world of literary criticism, reader response theory argues that meaning is created in the interaction between author, text, and reader and that the conclusions that readers draw, whether intended by the author or not, are irrevocably added to the life of the original text. Yet so often those reader responses do not receive the same level of recognition as the original text because of the artificial hierarchy between writer and reader and inequities in who receives platforms to speak. Annotation can help flatten this hierarchy and break down the binary between writer and reader, giving both roles to play in the production of knowledge.

Part of the argument that Antero and I were making in our article was semantic. We suggested that encouraging young people to 'participate' or 'engage' in civic life implies that civic institutions as they exist are healthy, trustworthy, and responsive to their concerns - an implication that we found fatally flawed considering the multiple ways in which these institutions marginalized the concerns of youth generally and youth of color in particular. We instead called for an embrace of youth civic 'interrogation' and 'innovation' in order to honor the ways in which youth were developing pathways to civic action on their own terms. While these semantics might seem like an exercise in empty theorizing, we argued that the language we use to describe phenomena - particularly in academic spaces - is a form of action and can have tangible influence on the kinds of initiatives that get funded.

Our purpose was also to spark dialogue within the field of civic education, and as a result it was fascinating to see how the participation/innovation distinction was taken up by readers/contributors. One annotator sparked a lively conversation by asking, "I'm all for imagining new kinds of civic participation or "innovation," but at some point there needs to be a connection to the established means of engagement and action, right?" This question sparked a cascade of responses as folks wrestled with whether we were constructing an artificial either/or binary or a both/and invitation as we pushed for recognition of non-traditional forms of civic action. For instance, do social media campaigns need to result in voting in order to be considered effective or are they important regardless of whether they interact with traditional structures of engagement?

In one sense this was the exact sort of conversation that Antero and I wanted to elicit, which felt rewarding, but in another it made me wish that we had more explicitly and forcefully made clear our aim to trouble binaries rather than reinforce them and our commitment to challenging the idea that action was meaningful only to the extent that it harkened back to formal systems. As a result, annotation offered me a learning opportunity that will resonate as I am working on my next pieces, reminding me to think more consciously about audience and exactly what I want to communicate and how.

Yet there were other moments when annotation exposed fundamental differences of opinion that did not inspire me to change my approach but instead confirmed my deeply held views and reminded me of why it is so important for me to advocate for them in my scholarship. Antero and I claimed toward the end of our article that the development of critical consciousness and a deep understanding of structural oppression were key elements of informed and transformative civic action. We critiqued programs that encouraged young people to get involved in addressing community challenges without first delving deeply into the systemic issues that cause them because of their tendency to reinforce the status quo, rely upon institutional gatekeepers as agents of change, and mask the perpetuation of inequity.

One annotator disagreed with this claim, commenting, “If we set the bar too high, requiring full purity of understanding, few educators will get involved.” This individual suggested that teachers may not be prepared to introduce critical analysis and that it could be cultivated later after students are introduced to action civics projects. As I considered this annotation, I realized how much I disagreed with this perspective, both because it created a binary between action and reflection and because it suggested that critical understandings were not essential to understanding and engaging in public life. This time around, the annotation process helped me to understand the bedrock principles that I am not willing to compromise and alerted me to a view that I feel compelled to continue challenging in my work to come. I remain committed to the belief that normative forms of civic learning will continue to marginalize the perspectives of young people from minoritized communities until educators heed the civic disruptions and innovations of youth and forge a new path based on honoring their civic counter-narratives.

### **Public Annotation and Democratic Praxis**

Despite the perilous state of dialogue in our country embodied by highly charged partisan rhetoric and media-driven sound bites that characterize most political discussions, I have hope that annotation has a role to play in re-imagining public scholarship as a project of equitable co-construction of knowledge - a project that is profoundly democratic. As Cornel West (1998) reminds us, “dialogue is the lifeblood of democracy” (p. 10).

I also envision annotation as having a role to play in the enactment of critical pedagogy. Paulo Freire (1970) argues that when teachers and students engage in critical dialogue together, the traditional power structures of authority that divide them fall away,

and “teacher-students” and “student-teachers” are created who are co-intent on unveiling oppression and re-creating knowledge (p. 80). He argues that only through praxis can the traditional, ‘banking’ model of education, in which students are seen as passive depositories of isolated chunks of knowledge, be replaced by a problem-posing model of education that focuses on collective inquiry for shared empowerment. He reminds us that, “Apart from inquiry, apart from praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 72).

I can imagine no greater role for teaching and scholarship than to foster mutual humanization for the purpose of promoting equity and justice. For me, annotation represents one practice that can support us as we continue on that worthy journey.

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