

Title

The Feeling of Thinking: Social Annotation with Emojis

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Abstract

We extend research on social annotation in education by implementing a new annotation technique in the literature classroom. Over the course of one year, we invited students to socially annotate literary texts using emojis that reflected their affective responses to those texts. This approach was inspired by new functions of social annotation systems, discussions of affective pedagogy, and developments in literary theory. We used a coding scheme linked to the literary theory of Rita Felski to analyze students' annotations and theorize our results. Via surveys and interviews, we inquired into students' experiences of this annotation strategy. Students evaluated the experience positively, and our analysis suggests that this practice made contributions to their learning which align with Felski's account of literary "attachment." We conclude that annotating literature with emojis provides a concrete means of implementing affective pedagogy in literature education.

Keywords

Social annotation

Tertiary education

Affective pedagogy

Teaching literature

Disciplinary literacy

Introduction

In her 2020 book *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, Rita Felski proposes to reorient how readers approach art and literature in schools and universities. Building on her previous work, like *The Limits of Critique* (2015), Felski argues that the bonds which readers form with particular texts are irreducible to the historical or ideological analyses offered by critics. She claims that due to these intellectualized dispositions, students' states of "attachment" to words, sentences, characters, scenes, works, or authors go unremarked where they are not actively discouraged. Others like Alfred Gell (1993) and Bruno Latour (2007) have also argued that works of art and literature produce attachments in readings, becoming active agents in their own reception. For these theorists the whole process of reading, reception, and social impact depends not only on underlying structures of power but also on experiences of pleasure, puzzlement, and rapture. If so, we ought to consider a more differentiated picture of what takes place in the literature classroom than can accounts focused on the ideological or institutional orderings of canonization (Guillory, 1993). As part of this reorientation of critical mores emerging "after critique" (Latour, 2004), Felski's work has had a major impact in schools and universities (e.g. McKenzie et al., 2018).

While it is important to us that students achieve broad knowledge of literature and its history, and while it is important to us that students learn to write analytically about literary texts and their meanings, we felt that a significant component of students' experiences in our class—their attraction to, or repulsion from, our course texts—was rarely appearing in their classroom discourse. Yet, as Palmeirim (2023) implies, the ideas for teaching that result from Felski's work should not be limited to a general injunction that teachers enfranchise diverse kinds of literary response. Our study explores a specific pedagogical method that *materializes* the "attachments" to which Felski attributes the enduring relevance of literary texts and textual experiences. Our strategy has been to use social annotation technologies to make the attachments students form with texts "visible" (Levine, 2014). Such systems, from Google Docs to Hypothes.is to purpose-built teaching tools like Perusall, allow large numbers of people to read and comment on digital documents at the same time. In recent years, such systems have integrated the "emoji" used in online messaging and social media contexts, so it is now possible to invite students to annotate texts not by making remarks or observations in language, but via iconic representations of emotional states. Though those emojis may have specific meanings in particular contexts (Stark, 2015), and may not embody precisely what readers are feeling (Bai, 2019), nonetheless they are non-linguistic representations of affect.

Indeed, emoji use has been demonstrated to increase readers' sense that a text carries an emotional charge (Danesi, 2017; Riordan, 2017).

By asking students to annotate with emojis, we intended to accomplish more than making students' affective responses to texts visible. We also looked to moderate the institutional focus on "close reading" understood as the prime "disciplinary literacy" in the literature classroom (Moje, 2007; Moje, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2022). Felski has long argued that in addition to showing how texts emerge within contexts, or even how texts act to structure discourses, "The significance of a text . . . is also a matter of what it makes possible in the viewer or reader . . . what affective bonds it calls into being" (2011: 585). While these bonds can be of many kinds, affective engagements are among the reasons that particular texts circulate among audiences, even hundreds of years after their original reception. While our intervention begins with asking students to annotate with emojis, we bear in mind that in *Hooked*, Felski has been at pains to indicate that "attachment" to texts is not limited to affective or emotional responses (2020). Indeed, she argues specifically that interpretation as conducted in school and university settings can be just as much a form of attachment as is an intense emotional response. Yet it has long been clear that her plea has been for a practice of reading and teaching which is "less censorious of everyday experiences of reading" (Felski, 2011: 585)—in other words, one which does not privilege critical detachment at the expense of everyday attachments like crying with a character or loving a book.

These reflections became relevant to social annotation practices in the course of a previous study of social annotation in literature education undertaken by one of the present authors (Clapp et al. 2021). In general, students' responses to social annotation during that study confirmed other recent survey results, which demonstrate that students across learning contexts appreciate social annotation exercises, prefer them to other kinds of exercises, and believe that social annotation helps them learn (Kalir et al., 2020; O'Dell, 2020; Chan and Pow, 2020). However, the observations of instructors and the comments of students during focus group interviews turned up three points in which instructors' expectations differed from students' responses. First, our students experienced social annotation tasks as more challenging than anticipated, especially as they tried to choose what to annotate. Second, students reported a substantial degree of concern about the instant visibility of their writing to other classmates and instructors. Third, where instructors expected that social annotation would provide students opportunity to respond organically and personally to texts—and specifically asked students to do so—student annotations often resembled conventional forms

of literary analysis (e.g. identifying textual features as examples of “literary techniques”). That these responses diverged from instructors’ expectations suggested to the present authors that social annotation in the literature classroom might benefit from an assignment design that could not be interpreted as a request for a display of “close reading.” The idea to annotate with emojis was also intended to lower barriers for students who felt themselves to be performing for both peers and instructors. Finally, it was intended to adjust students’ expectations about what kinds of response can be valued as part of disciplinary literacy in literary studies.

Background

Research into the use of social annotation for education purposes has been accelerating, especially during the pandemic. An early metaanalysis (Novak et al., 2012) concluded that while social annotation tools seemed promising for education purposes, their integration into higher education was still “evolving without sufficient evidence whether their use indeed enhances learning and motivation” (49). This research deficit has been erased. In a 2019 metaanalysis of 71 further studies of social annotation in higher education, Ghadirian et al. concluded that social annotation tools readily conduce to “collaborative knowledge production and improvement of learners’ reading comprehension” (147). In a 2020 metaanalysis of 39 studies of the use of social annotation technology in online learning, Zhu et al. clarified that previous research had consolidated into five major patterns of use for social annotation technologies, including “processing domain-specific knowledge; supporting argumentation, inquiry and knowledge construction; improving literacy skills; supporting instructor and peer assessment, and constructing online learning spaces” (268). Morales et al. have emphasized that social annotation enables knowledge construction across disciplines (2022). Social annotation has also been shown to have discipline-specific applications in literature education, because it connects to the “underlying value commitments” of such courses (Clapp et al., 2021: 295). Porter (2022) has closely studied the comparative advantages of the platform we used, Perusall, for collaborative online annotation.

Our study also responds to the impact of a widespread “affective turn” in education studies. The turn moves educators to ask where and when their practice privileges cognitive and discursive dimensions at the expense of other human capacities (Vincent, 2004; Zymbelas, 2013). Others have asked whether education can be understood as a cultivation of empathy via affective potentials (Anwarrudin, 2015) and have inquired into the affective

dimensions of works of art and students' response to them (Hickey-Moody, 2013). Research in aesthetic theory has made clear that readers' experiences of literary texts are mediated by their affective engagement (Feagin, 1996; Robinson, 2005; Miall, 2006; Burnett, 2021).

Some previous work has already connected affect with social annotation. In another meta-analysis of social annotation research, Sun *et al.* noted that most survey-based studies have inquired into not only cognitive gains, but also the affective dimensions of learning—like motivation—that are activated by SA practices (2022). While social annotation research has been connected broadly to the affective turn in education studies, Sun *et al.* also note that a line of inquiry first opened by Gao (2013) into “the specific behaviors and experiences of students when using SA” (2022: 334) has been relatively understudied, and they specifically recommend that “SA platforms enable emoticons, so that students and teachers may express their thoughts and feelings in not only words, but also in other visual and expressive ways” (2022: 342).

While our study responds directly to the new functionalities unlocked by the integration of emojis into social annotation systems, our emphasis on affective attachment in literary studies differs in some respects from previous research. While we expect that social annotation engenders an affectively mobilized learning and teaching experience, our specific concern is with the way that affect *as embodied in literary texts* passes from those texts into students' experience. The hypothesis is similar to that of Michaelinos Zembylas, who has suggested that emotions move between objects and subjects in classrooms, thereby producing affective connections (2016). Finally, some previous researchers have asked how abstract conclusions about affect can be parlayed into effective literature pedagogies. One promising technique is the “Up-Down-Both-Why” (UDBW) thinking-aloud protocol, which invites students reading literary texts to identify affectively charged words or phrases, assign them an emotional valence (*up* or *down* or *both*), and explain why they have this valence (Levine, 2014). This protocol has been demonstrated to lead to more interpretive and nuanced accounts of literary texts, especially with students who more habitually offer plot summary or evaluative statements without textual linkages (Levine, 2021). Such “affective evaluation” provides a useful parallel to our own intervention and will be discussed further below.

Implementation

The present authors teach a two-semester pair of courses entitled *Literature in Context 1: 1789-1914* and *Literature in Context 2: 1914-2000* at the Education University of

Hong Kong. These core courses are required for students studying Bachelor of Arts degrees in Language Studies and Bachelor of Education degrees in English Language. In 2021/22, there were 54 students in each of the courses. During each week, students meet together for a one-hour lecture; later they convene in smaller tutorial groups for two-hour discussions.

We have been using social annotation exercises in *Literature in Context* since 2017/18. In academic year 2021/22, we implemented social annotation using emojis in both semesters of the course sequence. To learn more about students' approach to our classroom, we began the academic year with a survey about attitudes toward reading literature in school contexts (which we defined as reading assigned texts with the expectation of assessment). Students then used Perusall, a popular social annotation system built for education, to annotate four texts in the first semester and five in the second semester. For context, Table 1 shows which texts they annotated.

Semester 1	Semester 2
Keats, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"	Eliot, "The Waste Land"
Shelley, <i>Frankenstein</i>	Woolf, "Kew Gardens"
Rossetti, "Goblin Market"	Hansberry, <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i>
Dickens, <i>A Christmas Carol</i>	Achebe, <i>Things Fall Apart</i>
	Kingston, <i>The Woman Warrior</i>

Table 1. Texts annotated by students in *Literature in Context I* and *Literature in Context II* at the Education University of Hong Kong.

Students were asked to read the course texts before class and were provided in-class time to conduct the annotation exercise (addressed to an excerpt). This assignment design, based on several years of previous experiences, was intended to promote higher response rates and fuller participation. The assignment we gave was identical each time:

While re-reading the text in Perusall, think about your emotional response. Your feelings could range from delight, excitement, or happiness to sorrow, confusion, anger, or disgust. Then use an emoji (only human ones please) to annotate selected word(s), line(s), or excerpt(s). The emoji should represent your feelings about the selection(s) you are annotating, which may be the same or different from a

character's feelings. Once you have done this, return to one or more of the emojis and add a textual annotation explaining your feelings.

The request that students “add a textual annotation explaining [their] feelings,” is a carefully considered element of the assignment. While it might appear that this procedure could obviate the benefits of asking students to make an affective, nonlinguistic response to the text, we were aware of Rita Felski’s articulation of overlapping and multiple forms of attachment. Our assignment design was therefore intended to jointly engage affective and cognitive dimensions of literary attachment. Another impetus was to create a bridge between the emoji annotation process and the course’s other processes of writing and assessment. We theorized that this bridge would be created by individual students as they documented an emotional response to a text and then worked to articulate how or why that emotional response emerged. Finally, we looked to create an archive of such responses that could be useful to other students in their own processes of reading, thinking, and writing. The stipulation about “human” emoji was also considered and discussed with our students. We asked that students respond to texts with iconic representations of the human face because these seemed most directly connected to the affective attachments in which we were interested.

At the end of the two-course sequence, we again administered the survey about reading literature in school contexts. We added to the survey five questions about social annotation and four questions about annotating with emojis. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with five student volunteers.

Finally, we coded the student annotations. Several previous scholars have used coding techniques to analyze student annotation data. Sprouse (2018) used a coding strategy to identify four different kinds of reading purposes in the social annotations produced by first-year composition students. In the *Frankenbook* project, instructors coded students’ annotations of Mary Shelley’s novel by topic (2018). Traester et al. (2021) coded student social annotations using standard taxonomies of education outcomes, both cognitive and affective. Morales et al. (2022) used a coding strategy to analyze how student social annotations reflect seven different dimensions of knowledge construction. Our approach is similar, yet we were specifically invested in understanding how students “explain [their] feelings” when annotating literary texts with emoji. In other words, the features of the

annotations in which we were interested were not affective dimensions of education itself, but instead specific affects that emerged as students encountered literary texts.

Noting that in *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, Rita Felski presents three distinct valences of attachment to literary texts, we elected to code the annotations with reference to her distinctions. We each coded the data set, and then cross-checked one another's coding, seeking to intuit how Felski's divisions could help parse the main elements of students' responses. After repeated passes, we were able to understand most students' annotations as examples of what Felski describes as *attunement*, *identification*, and *interpretation*.

For Felski, *attunement* is a broad category of attachment that describes any kind of engaged attention that turns a reader toward a literary text or aesthetic performance:

Attunement is not a specific affect, but a state of affectedness . . . It is not a feeling-about but a feeling-with: a relation that is more than the sum of its parts. . . .

[A]ttachment is about things resonating, aligning, coming together. Reading the opening lines of a novel, hearing a song on the radio, we may be gripped by the strength of a felt connection. (42)

When coding for attunement, we looked particularly for those annotations where students' indication of their own emotional response seemed to resonate with the passage they had chosen to annotate. A common element of annotations we coded as attunement was the identification of a mood, tone, or ethos to which the student felt themselves to be responding—including, for example, those which suggested they sympathized with characters enduring cold weather.

One of Felski's objectives in *Hooked* is to defend *identification* with characters against those who would see it as a problematically naïve kind of literary response. She focuses on aspects of identification like "*allegiance* (a felt affiliation or solidarity with certain others) and *recognition* (the struggle to know oneself and be known)" (2020: 84). Whereas the first kind of experience suggests a felt connection between reader and character, often based on shared characteristics, the latter suggests that characters help readers understand themselves as individuals. In coding our data, we understood identification to occur when students were led to "explain [their] feelings" by focusing on what characters are doing and saying, how these actions reflect those characters' personalities, and how these characteristics

related to those of our students and others in the world around them. In some “identification” annotations, students referred directly to their own experiences of injustice and inequality.

Finally, Felski understands *interpretation* not as the assumption of a distanced, objective critical stance, but instead as a discourse of “relating.” While not categorically distinguished from attunement or identification, Felski does regard identification as “a distinctive kind of activity”:

Interpretation is . . . *deliberate*, a product of will and intent. Experiences of identifying or becoming attuned . . . are often shaped by factors beyond one’s control; they cannot be summoned into existence by sheer force of will. Yet it is possible, as any student knows, to interpret something without caring very much about it. Furthermore, interpretation is *deliberative*; it is not just a matter of assigning meaning but of weighing up the processes by which meaning is assigned. (128)

We coded students’ annotations as interpretive ones when “deliberate” and “deliberative” processes set the agenda. One strong indication of this kind of disposition was students’ use of phrases like “this indicates” or “it shows” in their annotation. Students used these phrases to announce their explication of a passage. Of the three types we identified, these annotations are most like the discourse students produce elsewhere in literature education.

Results: Student Annotations

We provide a summary of student annotation practices and emoji use during the project implementation. During the year, 1433 annotations were created, 1205 of them by students. Of the student annotations, 545 commence with emoji. Of these, 345 continued with a substantive “explanation” of students’ feelings. These annotations were usually responses to our nine specific presentations of the assignment described above. The remainder of the student annotations were replies to one another, general remarks, and queries directed to instructors. Remarkably, within these 345 annotations, students chose 99 different emoji to indicate their feelings. Table 2 below shows the emoji students chose to use most frequently (10 or more times). It is important to note that in practice, students do not encounter the emoji using their Perusall names (which differ slightly from their Unicode names), but instead interact with them as graphic representations of the human face.

Emoji	Emoji Name in Perusall	Instances
🤔	thinking	37
😞	pensive	34
😭	cry	26
😬	cold_face	19
🙄	face_with_raised_eyebrow	17
😨	fearful	16
😍	smiling_face_with_3_hearts	16
😟	worried	16
😞	disappointed	13
😏	frowning2	13
😍	heart_eyes	13
😮	open_mouth	12
😫	anguished	11
😌	relieved	11
😵	dizzy_face	10
😶	hushed	10
🙏	pleading_face	10
😏	slight_frown	10
😢	smiling_face_with_tear	10

Table 2. Most frequently used emoji.

The usage suggests some patterns. One observation is how distributed students' choices were, with no specific emoji dominating. Another trend is the slight predominance of what might be described as negative emotions over positive ones. An amusing result is the many “cold faces”: in every case these were responses to icy scenes in *Frankenstein* and *A Christmas Carol*. The most distinctive and unanticipated result, however, is the predominance of emoji which indicated that students felt themselves to be “thinking”, selecting not only that particular emoji, but also “face with raised eyebrows,” “open mouth,” “dizzy face,” “hushed,” and to some extent, “pensive.” Of the 345 annotations we analyze here, more than 20% seem intended to articulate what we have termed “the feeling of thinking.” We discuss this result further below, because it tends to bear out Felski's contention that enfranchising affective response need not come at the expense of cognitive response.

The assignment instructions asked students to annotate with an emoji and then “explain [their] feelings.” These explanations made it possible for us to better understand what it means for students to engage with literary texts via emoji annotation. We therefore coded and analyzed the 345 emoji annotations which continued with a substantive explanation. Table 3 presents our coding scheme with definitions, prototypical examples, and a sense of which kinds of annotations were most common. While some annotations were double coded in some passes through the data, we found that the majority evinced one primary form of attachment. To give a fuller sense of student practices and our coding, Figures 1 through 4 present examples of annotations in context.

<i>Aspect of Attachment</i>	<i>Examples</i> Annotating “La Belle Dame sans Merci”	<i>Examples</i> Annotating <i>A Christmas Carol</i>	<i>Frequency</i> N = 345
<i>Attunement</i> <i>Student explains their feelings by referring to a sense of “felt connection” with an element of the text.</i>	😞 It actually makes me feel sad and it gives an atmosphere that they are reluctant to be apart. The lady knows they have to part so she cries yet the kisses seem like comfort.	😱 It must be a pretty shocking and scary scene for Scrooge, seeing the people he knows had rested uneasily after their death.	91 (26.4%)
<i>Identification</i> <i>Student explains their feelings by referring to an affiliation or solidarity that indicates a sense of alignment with or recognition of a character that leads to a connection with the student and their experience.</i>	😊 This stanza obviously described an image of a beautiful woman, but it also made me personally realise the depiction of beauty (long hair, wild eyes) in women back then. these days, more people are open to accepting beauty in diversity as compared to the romantic period where men were seen as strong heroes and women are told to be like “fairies”.	😊 This could truly be described as a face of pure bliss, there is no form of purer or more earnest expression than this. Scrooge went from hating Christmas to sending love and blessing to all that breathe. People are probably going to think he lost his marbles but the happiness he's feeling is really contagious. I also find the fact that he's greeting the world as a new person really great.	102 (29.6%)
<i>Interpretation</i> <i>Student explains their feelings by providing a “deliberate” or “deliberative” articulation of how elements of the text</i>	😞 The final line of the commencing and concluding stanzas are consequential in cultivating an ultimate, perennial, all-enveloping stillness. I find this critical to the poem enhances the stifling hollowness of both the speaker and the environment. The juxtaposition here also	😞 Scrooge still doesn't believe the ghosts are real, and tries to deny their existence by closing and locking the windows. A double-locked window symbolizes his stubbornness and unwillingness to change at that point of the story.	152 (44.1%)

<i>construct its meaning.</i>	emphasises this emptiness that I feel is at the crux of the poem.	But the pause when he tries to say his catchphrase "Humbug", may hint that there is a part of him that is trying to change for the better.	
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Table 3: Coding scheme with examples.

The major result of this coding was to show that students do in fact understand their affective responses to literary texts in three ways that can be described as *attunement*, *identification*, and *interpretation*. A large minority of students (44%) produced scripts that we felt could best be described as *interpretation* with the remainder evenly divided between *attunements* and *identifications*. In what follows we introduce some further examples of each kind of annotation and discuss the extent to which these kinds of response inform and interpenetrate one another.

Figure 1 shows what we consider to be two students' *attunements* to a passage in "Kew Gardens," a short story by Virginia Woolf. The students have identified a distinctive "ambience" or "atmosphere" between two young people visiting the gardens together. The annotations typify one kind of response we encountered: an observation about a scene, and about how observing the scene impacts students' own feelings. We note that the two students may be using the emoji slightly differently, with "C" reflecting their attempt to understand the "ambience," while "K" indicates more directly the sense of a romantic encounter gone awry. While similar in purpose and purport, these responses are more fine-grained than the identification of positive or negative connotations encouraged in the UDBW think-aloud protocol (Levine, 2014). An affordance of social annotation systems with emojis is that they allow students to externalize affective responses that are specific, yet without necessarily imposing a cognitive burden related to how to express those emotions in language.

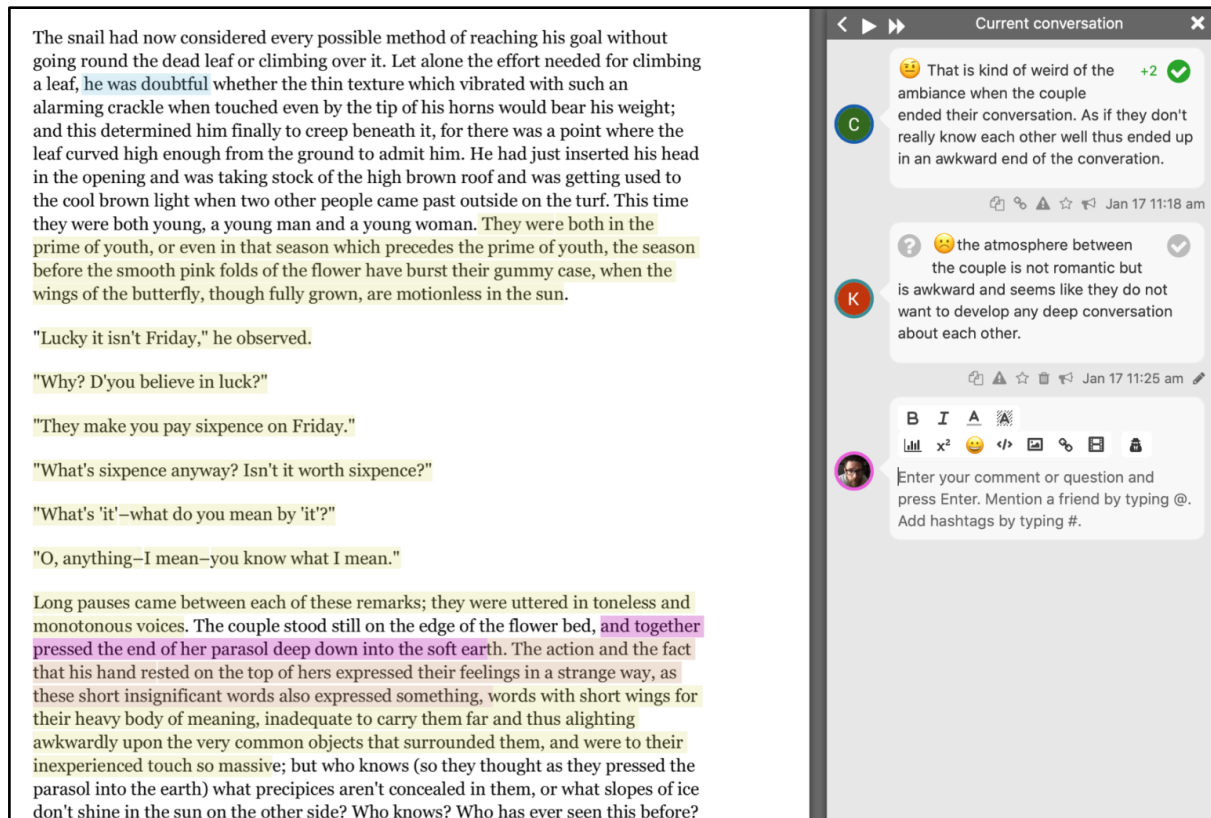


Figure 1: Annotating "Kew Gardens" by Virginia Woolf.

Figure 2 presents an example of a student *identifying* with the same passage from "Kew Gardens." While the emoji offers a vivid impression of how the student is feeling in response to the scene before them, the emphasis in the explanation falls differently than above, with the student putting the scene in parallel with their own past experience, sense of self, and thoughts about social reality. The annotation also suggests some overlap between what Felski describes as "attunement" and "identification." Generally, we saw attunement as an attachment to a scene and its ethos, whereas we understood identification as an attachment to a character and their actions. However, we also understood attunement as an affective resonance in which the student documented a "feeling with," whereas we understood identification as a "recognition" in which the student referred to their experience or knowledge. As in Figure 2, these two ways of thinking about forms of attachment did not always align.

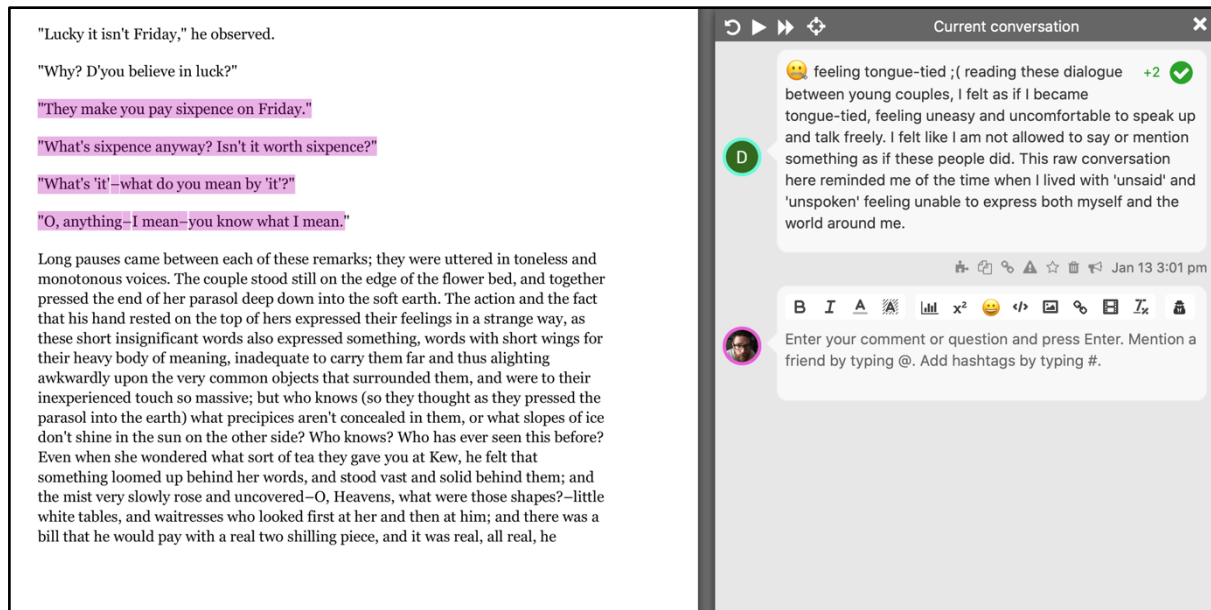


Figure 2: Annotating "Kew Gardens" by Virginia Woolf.

Figure 3 illustrates an annotation which we identified as a form of *interpretation*. We see student "V" responding with sadness to the agonized speech of the creature in Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In the second paragraph of the student's explanation of their feelings, they ask whether this overwrought response might indicate that Shelley is questioning the Romantic elevation of "spontaneous emotion." A second student ("D") then makes a further point about Shelley's critique of Romantic individualism. These responses are more extensive than most of the annotations we understood as interpretative, but nonetheless they explain the initial affective response by reference to literary techniques and course concepts in a way that is distinguishable from explanations that we coded as attunement or identification. One of the learning outcomes of our course is that "*students will be able to show an ability to discuss structures and forms of literary texts in relation to literary conventions of a particular time and place.*" The student annotations in Figure 3 provide evidence of students achieving this outcome, while at the same time responding to an assignment design that required them to "explain [their] feelings." We initially considered that these kinds of responses might indicate that students were following the script of a more conventional disciplinary literacy, rather than documenting their attachment to a text. However, if we emphasize the emoji as an aspect of the annotation, we can also follow Felski in understanding interpreting as a form of "relating."

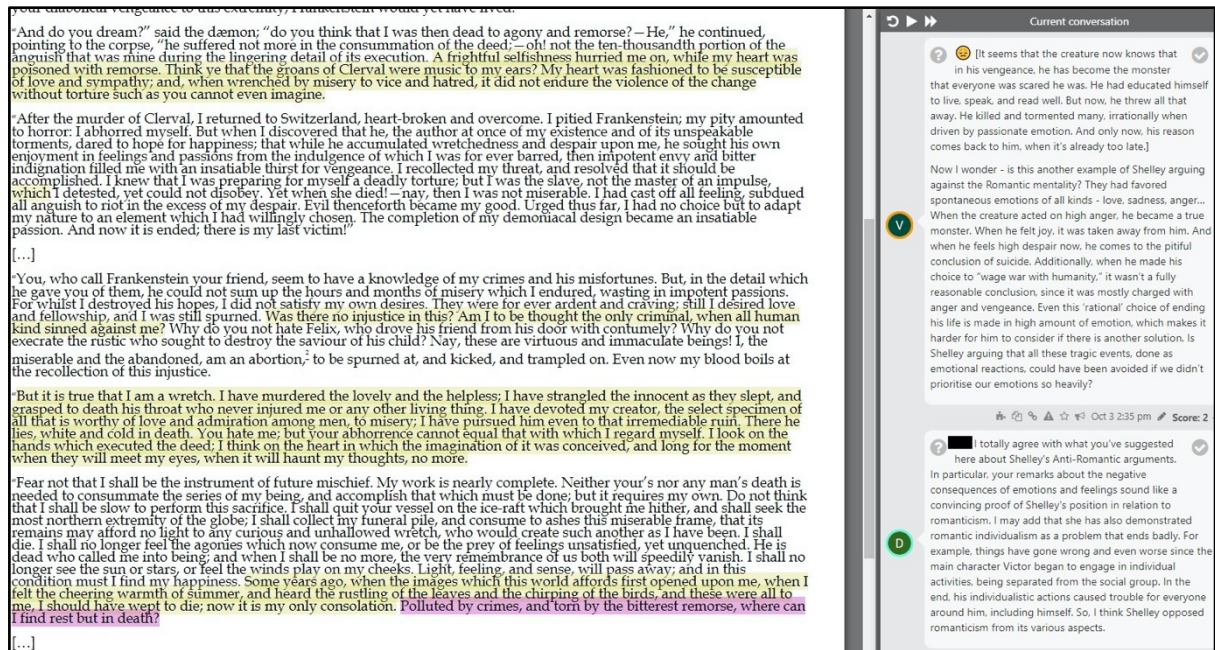


Figure 3. Annotating *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. A student's name is redacted.

Coding the annotations according to Felski's three-part schema of forms of attachment helps summarize and analyze the data, but can also mask the intertwined, recursive aspects of literary attachment. Indeed, our classroom intervention is a response to Felski's call for a reimagining of dichotomies like those between cognition and affect, thinking and feeling:

Could identifying or attuning, for example, be repurposed in the classroom? Is being receptive at odds with being reflective? Can a stress on stance and disposition be squared with a concern for method? . . . Instead of dichotomies of affect versus analysis, we might engage the spectrum of what James Jasper calls 'thinking-feeling processes'—the recursive relations between affect and argument, motivation, and interpretation. (2020: 122)

As Figure 4 suggests, the boundary between types of response is not easily drawn. It initially appears that the student "LF" has offered a technique-focused remark, combined with a piece of information from class discussion, both elements indicative of a "deliberative" interpretation. But the student's rejoinder to the instructor makes clear that the student also feels themselves to be documenting their experience of relief at the end of *The Waste Land*,

more like what Felski describes as “attunement.” The smiling angel emoji refers not only to the notion of “spirituality,” but also to a sense of emotional uplift.

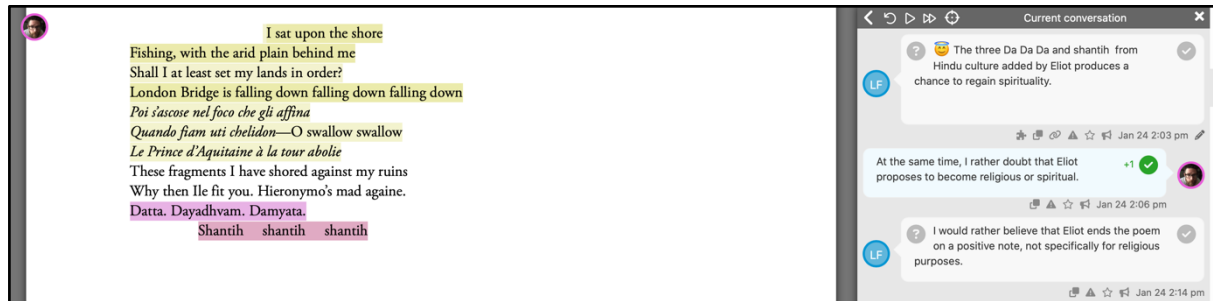


Figure 4. Annotating “The Waste Land” by T.S. Eliot.

Overall, instructors were satisfied with the implementation of this emoji annotation exercise and the different kinds of responses it provoked. Students produced at least three different kinds of emotionally laden annotations, which we have broadly described by deploying Felski’s account of literary attachment as a coding schema. We feel that annotating with emojis offers an unusually concrete, targeted, and iterable way of “engag[ing] the spectrum” (Felski, 2020: 122) of literary attachments.

Results: Student Survey Responses

Our previous study confirmed students’ positive attitudes toward social annotation (Clapp et al., 2021), and we wanted to investigate whether our more specific annotation assignment affected students’ positive appraisal of social annotation. We therefore surveyed students about their experience of using social annotation. Table 4 summarizes students’ responses to statements about using social annotation on a 5-point Likert scale.

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Perusall was easy to use.	17.2%	62.1%	10.3%	6.9%	3.4%
Perusall has helped me to learn more effectively.	10.3%	69.0%	17.2%	0.0%	3.4%
Perusall has enriched my learning experience.	20.7%	58.6%	17.2%	0.0%	3.4%
Perusall increased the amount of reading I did this semester.	17.2%	48.3%	24.1%	6.9%	3.4%
Perusall increased my reading comprehension this semester.	10.3%	69.0%	13.8%	3.4%	3.4%

Table 4. Student responses to using social annotation in the context of the emoji assignment.

These positive results bear out many previous studies of the educational use of social annotation, which broadly conclude that social annotation is an effective collaborative online learning practice. This consensus was substantiated by comments in our interviews:

We could see each other's comments and we could see each other's opinions on the actual text, and it allowed a lot of exchange of information and ideas between the students, and I think I personally learned a lot and I got a lot more ideas because I was able to read my classmates' work, and I was able to read the professor's replies to the work, so it was just overall a better experience.

These results tended to confirm that students' appraisal of social annotation practices when asked to annotate with emoji was similar to their sense of social annotation practices generally.

At the end of the year, we also asked students four questions about their experience of annotating with emojis. The summary of the results, on a 5-point Likert scale, show strong positive evaluation of this practice, as shown in Table 5:

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Annotating with emojis helped me understand the text.	17.2%	55.2%	20.7%	3.4%	3.4%
Annotating with emojis made the text more real to me.	17.2%	48.3%	24.1%	6.9%	3.4%
Annotating with emojis helped me locate meaningful elements of the text.	27.6%	48.3%	20.7%	0.0%	3.4%
Annotating with emojis helped me prepare for literary analysis.	17.2%	58.6%	17.2%	3.4%	3.4%

Table 5. Student responses to annotating with emoji.

These results are marginally more positive than the responses to general questions about social annotation. One of our primary intentions was to use annotating with emojis to provide a low-stakes engagement activity for students who find themselves asked to read, discuss, and write about complex literary texts written at distant points in place and time. For many students, annotating with emojis accomplished this goal. The most relevant evaluation along this line in our interviews indicated that

Sometimes texts can be quite intimidating, sometimes some people may feel like “I don’t want to sound wrong” or “I don’t want to like, you know, write something wrong”, so I feel like the use of [emojis] really helps people to be interactive and interact with the text even just a little bit, because you don’t really have to write anything. You can just say what you feel and like by putting an [emoji].

The student reported that the content and assessment processes of the class were supported by the “simple” and “easy” process of materializing emotional response in the form of an emoji. Another student observed that the process sharpened and specified their response to the text:

We just needed to leave an emoji and it sounds very easy, but it was very helpful for us to determine how we feel about the text. Because we are actually reading, reading like continuously [as] the process is going, we are analyzing something but we always

forget how we feel about the book - I mean we could be feeling something inside, but we don't realize what exactly we are feeling.

The student felt that the process helped because it made their response more visible not only to others, but to themselves. The other major pattern of positive responses to annotating with emojis in the interviews corresponds to the idea of encountering other perspectives. More than one interviewee connected this idea specifically to annotating with emojis:

What the emojis do is that they kind of encourage the students to approach the text through their own personal understanding, I think that's good because it doesn't promote one standard way of looking at the text, because they're asking you how you feel about it so everyone's way of approaching the text can be different but it's all correct, so I think it kind of promotes that type of thinking.

Such responses suggest that, because emotions are themselves individual and personal, annotations to texts made with emojis are more individual and personal, and the resulting interpretations more diverse. Though intuitive, this was an interesting and unexpected result of the interview data in this study. Overall, an important result is that, unlike in our previous study, students did not emphasize the difficulty of social annotation, either in selecting elements of the text to annotate or in finding something to say about it. Because relieving some of this cognitive difficulty and social anxiety was a key consideration in our implementation of social annotation with emojis, this was a desirable result.

Discussion

The primary purposes of our intervention were to make visible students' affective attachments to literary texts and to broaden students' approach to social annotation beyond "literary techniques" and "close reading." We would thereby validate these affective engagements as elements of students' learning experiences and disciplinary literacy. The intervention originated with a common-sense technical enhancement—the availability of emoji in social annotation systems. However, it was also motivated by our specific learning and teaching situation. As the instructors of two courses entitled *Literature in Context*, we have with interest considered the reception, discussion, and even dispute around Rita Felski's approach to literary studies and critique, particularly as embodied in the title of her

programmatic essay “Context Stinks!” (2011). In that essay, Felski argues that when we contextualize works of literature, understanding them as elements of particular cultural, social, and historical situations, we tend to diminish their ability to speak to readers beyond those situations. This argument implies that asking students to offer literary interpretations based on contextualizing information means distancing them from course texts. Indeed, our classroom discussions and student scripts have sometimes suggested as much, with students stating that they do not or even cannot understand the meanings of works, precisely because the lives and perspectives of their authors seem remote.

We wondered, however, whether such remarks were actually typical of students’ sense of things. Did students’ experience of our course assignments result in a zero-sum exchange, trading personal engagement for content knowledge? As part of this project, we administered a survey to students at the beginning and at the end of the year with the intention of gauging changes in their general approach to “reading literature in school.” As it happened, over the course of one year few of the students’ responses to statements like “I like reading literature in school” or “I am good at literary analysis” showed statistically significant changes. Notably, however, students did report a statistically significant difference in response to the statement “When I learn more about when and where a text was written, I relate more to a text”:

“When I learn more about when and where a text was written, I relate more to a text.”	Before the courses (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree)	After the courses (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree)
<i>Mean</i>	3.74	4.14
<i>Standard deviation</i>	0.76	0.64

Table 6. Survey results.

Our *Literature in Context* courses present abundant information about historical events and processes, like the industrial revolution and the US civil rights movement, which we frame as the historical contexts of literary texts like “Goblin Market” and *Raisin in the Sun*. Most students do not feel that this kind of literary contextualization impinges on their engagement with literary texts—contrary to what Felski and other critics have sometimes seemed to suggest. Indeed, more recent work like *Hooked* appears to take a more nuanced perspective,

especially insofar as it identifies interpretation as a one mode of attachment and relation, rather than a distanced and objective dissection opposed to relation.

Our implementation did not have an experimental design, so it is not possible to discern whether social annotation, or annotating with emojis, or even our courses, changed students' sense of how contextual information shaped their relationships with texts. We may, however, be able to connect this welcome indication to another unanticipated outcome of our implementation, namely the surprising frequency with which students chose emoji which indicated a sense of thoughtful consideration as their affective state when annotating. We initially considered that our assignment was in two parts—an emoji indication of affect, followed by a more cognitive explanation. But the emoji set proves to contain a considerable number of images that represent the “feeling of thinking,” and these images were the most popular with students asked to represent and discuss their emotions. Where we expected course texts to provoke sympathetic tears and grins, we did not anticipate that students would use emoji to report their experience of how it feels to think, or to be puzzled, or to be brought up short. This result suggests that students participating in this exercise became aware of and began leveraging a set of affective states which participate in “recursive relations between affect and argument, motivation and interpretation” (Felski, 2020: 122). As readers we intuit that neither “interpretation” nor “contextualization” simply depletes our strong affective ties to particular characters, works, or authors. The value of the present study lies in showing that social annotation provides a specific way of instrumentalizing those intuitions, and Felski's arguments, in the literary studies classroom.

Conclusions

Classrooms, online or in person, are social spaces where affect circulates. Indeed, in *Politics of Affect*, Brian Massumi has stipulated that “Affect, as the openness to being affected, is directly relational. It is pure sociality” (2015: 205). As affect circulates, it creates what Felski terms “attachments”: connections, more or less intense, more or less durable, of various kinds, among not only students and teachers, but with words, sentences, characters, scenes, works, authors. These attachments, while not necessarily purely affective, decisively include students' emotional responses during the experience of reading. We wanted to explore how social annotation with emojis could surface a crucial dimension of literary experience which is all too often discounted or suppressed.

The connections among social annotation, affect, and pedagogy await further and fuller exploration. An implementation of emoji annotation with an experimental design could offer evidence about whether this practice directly affects the accomplishment of learning outcomes. Further analysis of student annotation scripts themselves could offer geographies of emotional response to particular texts, authors, or genres. While the value of social annotation as a pedagogical technique seems well-established, both by our own practice and in the research literature, there are ready avenues for further exploration of social annotation as an affective pedagogy, particularly in the literary studies classroom.

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