Planning a social reading lesson with eComma

From the Center for Open Educational Resources and Language Learning

Installing eComma

See instructions on the Teacher page https://ecomma.coerll.utexas.edu/teacher-page/.

What is social reading?

The purpose of eComma is to read socially. With social reading, a book or a text is "a gathering place, a shared space where readers record their reactions and conversations. Those interactions ultimately become part of the book too, a kind of amplified marginalia".[1]

Students access a text online in eComma and annotate it with comments (reactions, questions, analyses), and tags, freely conversing about the text and building on the ideas of their peers. Readers' annotations become a record of the way they have experienced the text.

As silent private reading became a common practice with the prevalence of print media, social reading has emerged as a result of the new digital environment. This digital reading practice is not meant to replace print practices, but offers a new, more collaborative and participatory form of learning. As a result, it is particularly well-suited for foreign language teaching: students work together to crowdsource knowledge and to distribute the mental effort of interpreting a new target language text. Students who pick up on the reading quickly can share their knowledge with students who might be struggling, and all students receive new ideas from each other. The online reading space allows easy access to other online tools for research and creates a seamless pre-reading, reading, and post-reading experience. The students' annotations also bring out patterns in their reading that can offer insights into the process of interpreting a text. [2]

Read more about social reading on the eComma website https://ecomma.coerll.utexas.edu/.

eComma features

Read about comments, tags, tag clouds, word clouds, comment clouds, user lists, heat maps, and comment downloads on the "Features" page of the eComma website.

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[1] Howard, Jennifer. "With 'Social Reading,' Books Become Places to Meet." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 Nov. 2012, www.chronicle.com/article/Social-Reading-Projects/135908/
[2] Blyth, Carl S. "Exploring the Affordances of Digital Social Reading for L2 Literacy: The Case of eComma." *Digital Literacies in Foreign and Second Language Education* CALICO Monograph Series 12 (2014): 201-26. CALICO.

Choosing a text

The eComma tool cannot hold large texts. A 200 word text is recommended for faster page loading, but an annotation text can hold up to 500 words. You may choose a short text in its entirety to fit one page or choose a longer text, or one or more excerpts of a longer text, to be read consecutively on separate pages.

A text can be anything: a poem, a fictional story, a biography, a news article, an editorial, a blog post, etc. But the type of text you choose will inform how you organize the lesson with your students. Classes of advanced writers can even annotate texts written by their classmates.[3]

> *For more inspiration about all the ways users can annotate texts, try reading through comments on song lyrics on Genius.com (also available in French, German, and Polish!) or example classroom annotations on hypothesis.com.*

Preparing the text – reading for teaching

Before asking students to read the text, take some time to read it closely yourself.

Here are some questions[4] to consider while you're reading:

- What strikes you about the text?
- How does the text make you feel? Do you feel addressed? Is there evaluative language?
- What experiences or ideas does it express? What perspectives, points of view, or beliefs are expressed? What types of action are represented?

If you are hoping to have students unpack literary elements of the text and understand playful uses of language or genre that go beyond grammar and usage, focus on what stands out or seems odd about language use or textual organization.[5]

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[3] Dean, Jeremy. "Back to School with Annotation: 10 Ways to Annotate with Students." *Hypothes.is*, 25 Aug. 2015, hypothes.is/blog/back-to-school-with-annotation-10-ways-to-annotate-with-students/.

[4] Based on M.A.K. Halliday's textual, interpersonal, and ideational metafunctions, referenced in Warner, Chantelle et al. "The FLLITE Approach: Activity Design, Assessment, and Publication ." *FLLITE*, COERLL, 15 July 2016, fllite.org/wp-content/uploads/FLLITE2016Workshop_Folder.pdf.

[5] There is more about this approach to reading on the website for another COERLL project, "Foreign Languages and the Literary in the Everyday".

Deciding on lesson objectives

How you use eComma depends largely on your objectives. So ask yourself what you want your students to be able to do at the end of the eComma activity. Will your focus be on meaning, or form, or the interplay of the two?

Structuring your eComma lesson

Students will notice new things each time they read the text and should therefore read it multiple times. Begin with simpler tasks of comprehension and observation, and if you want to go deeper with students, move on to more analytical tasks.

Social reading is a good opportunity for students to discover the text without too much overt guidance – find a balance between leading them and stepping back to watch what they come up with. If you want to take a more active role, you can prompt them through your own comments in eComma. For example, you could use annotations to focus students on the textual function of specific words or grammatical structures.

Here is a collection of ideas for tasks, which move from more basic observational tasks to more involved analytical ones. **It is up to you to decide which of the ideas below you like and how you will connect each step to form a simple, quick activity or a more elaborate lesson.**

The tasks suggested here are categorized into a sequence of three main reading steps:
1. reading the lines (exploring the literal meaning of the text),
2. reading between the lines (looking at the way language is used in order to find make inferences about metaphorical or nuanced meanings), and
3. reading beyond the lines (identifying the broader meaning of the text).[6]

For further inspiration, read eComma case studies from language teachers.

Pre-reading preparation

Before assigning a social reading, prepare your students for working effectively in a collaborative digital environment:

> #### Digital Citizenship
> Social reading is a great opportunity for a lesson on digital citizenship, on topics such as online etiquette and citing sources. Try Common Sense Media's Digital Citizenship resources for ideas.

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[6] Gray, William S. "The Major Aspects of Reading." *Sequential Development of Reading Abilities*. Ed. Helen M. Robinson. Vol. 90. Chicago: The U of Chicago Press, 1960. 8-24. Print. Supplementary Educational Monographs.

Assigning roles

Assign roles to students to structure their initial interaction with the text. For example, each student labels a specific literary device or grammatical structure (see Classifying and labeling section for more details), or does a different task (summarizing, researching, asking questions, making connections between other stories or a real life experience, creating a visual representation, making observations, challenging assumptions, etc.).

For a more interactive class dynamic, have students work in pairs on the same computer to oblige them to annotate the text in a more collaborative manner.[7]

Reading the lines

The first time the students see the text, focus on simple tasks that address initial reactions and comprehension.

Predictions

Students predict what the text will be about by observing the word cloud of the text and discussing their predictions together in class.

Glossing

Students gloss the text together, by searching for meanings of unknown words/phrases and writing definitions and glosses in the comments. This saves time because students don't have to look up every unfamiliar word themselves but can rely on the "power of the crowd."

To streamline this even more, make each student responsible for glossing a specific part of the text or part of speech.

Summarizing

Students summarize the literal content of the passage – what the text directly states – as it proceeds from beginning to end. What situation is being described in the text, and by whom? What happens?[8]

Red flagging

Ask students to read the text with their "gut": whenever they experience a point of tension – surprise, annoyance, curiosity, disappointment, disapproval, confusion or emotional distance – they should flag the word or passage by

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[7] This idea comes from Evelyn Cervantes, as referenced in Schwartz, Katrina. "Strategies to Help Students 'Go Deep' When Reading Digitally." *KQED Mind/Shift*, 16 Oct. 2016, ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2016/10/16/strategies-to-help-students-go-deep-when-reading-digitally/.

[8] This language borrows from the framework in Barrish, Phillip, et. al. *Close Reading Interpretive Tool*, The University of Texas at Austin, laits.utexas.edu/crit/handout.pdf. See the Licensing and attribution section for more information.

highlighting it. Then, they should write a comment that identifies their reaction and the source of tension that produced it.[9]

This instinctual reading brings out parts of the text that might be important to explore further. It also helps teachers to determine quickly what parts of the text might prove problematic for language learners.

A logical follow-up to red flagging is to ask students to research the tension points in a text, as described below.

Use the heatmap tool to see which parts of the text the students comment on the most.

Writing headings
Students highlight key ideas and write four-word headings for each section of the text in the comments. In pairs, in small groups, or as a class, have students compare their headings and recognize differences, justifying and defending their interpretations. Alternatively, ask them to come to a consensus in groups about which heading is the most representative of the main ideas.[10]

Reading between the lines
Students identify potentially significant features of the passage's language or form – that is, those textual elements that contribute to the passage's overall meaning, purpose, or effect – and decide how the parts fit together to make a coherent whole. [11]

Classifying, labeling, and identifying patterns
Students label specific literary devices (metaphor, synecdoche, alliteration, juxtapositions, etc.), grammatical structures (subjunctive tense, independent clause, etc.), or rhetorical strategies[12]. It's best to do this using the tagging feature, so they are easier to sort, but students can also use comments. After classifying and labeling, they can begin to identify patterns in the use of language, for example in punctuation, verb tenses, pronouns, or register, and note the patterns in comments or tags.

If students want to elaborate on their tag, they can refer to it with a hashtag in the comments.

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[9] Excerpted, with modifications, from Luks, Joanna "FLLITE Interpretation Strategies and Social Reading." *FLLITE*, COERLL, 2016, http://goo.gl/F9CmDQ.
[10] This idea comes from Devin Hess, as referenced in Schwartz, Katrina. "Strategies to Help Students 'Go Deep' When Reading Digitally." *KQED Mind/Shift*, 16 Oct. 2016, ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2016/10/16/strategies-to-help-students-go-deep-when-reading-digitally/.
[11] Barrish, Phillip, et. al.
[12] Dean, Jeremy.

Contextualization

Students think about contexts for the passage. Contexts are facts or broader circumstances external to a text that are important to its production, reception, or understanding; for instance: literary, biographical, political, or historical information. Students use knowledge from past learning, from you the teacher, or from research, in order to identify potentially significant contexts for the passage – that is, those contextual frames that contribute to the passage's overall meaning. [13]

Comparisons

Students write comments that compare and contrast the text to another text they've read, or that compare L2 cultural or linguistic features to their own culture/language.

Invite native speakers to annotate the text, and ask the students to compare their responses to the native speakers', both linguistically and culturally.

Use of outside sources for research related to the text

Students leave the text in eComma and do outside research on anything that has come up in their reading, including linguistic concepts, or the cultural, sociological, or historical background of the text. They return to the comments in eComma to report their findings, which also emphasizes the importance of citing sources. They rephrase their findings, ensuring that what they find in their research is consistent with what they find in the text. [14]

This research task will be especially useful for students who have already red flagged the text, as they search for background on what stood out to them, and their citations may come in handy for writing a paper later.

Reading beyond the lines

Students take into account everything they have noticed or researched about the text and come to a conclusion about the theme and wider implications of the text.

Depending on how many students are annotating, and how deep you want them to go with their analyses, students might have to leave eComma to begin elaborating their ideas, but they can keep referring to their comments and adding new ones as they continue to generate hypotheses.

To begin analysis, students review features and contexts that they have identified in previous steps as making potentially significant contributions to the passage's meaning,

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[13] Barrish, Phillip, et. al.

[14] Luks, Joanna "FLLITE Interpretation Strategies and Social Reading." *FLLITE*, COERLL, 2016, http://goo.gl/F9CmDQ.

purpose, or effect. Then, they choose a few of the textual elements and/or contextual frames, and elaborate on how each is significant.[15]

To build an argument, students re-read the text and their comments. Using their observations and analyses, they develop an interpretation of the passage that includes a main thesis, and then they support that thesis by presenting evidence. This should integrate and build upon their previous analysis, to arrive at an interpretive conclusion about the passage as a whole.

Post reading
Annotation can be a jumping off point for a discussion, a paper, a project, or related readings.

Meta-cognitive reading
Once students have read and commented on the text, they should look back on their comments and their peers' comments. Students will become more aware of their reading process by consulting the heat map, which shows the most heavily annotated parts of the text.

Reflection
For a final reflection, students read the passage a final time and answer the following questions: [16]
- What aspects of the passage do you still find confusing?
- What elements of the passage does your interpretation neglect or set aside?
- What parts of your argument now appear to you debatable or dubious – that is, what objections could a reasonable person raise to your interpretation of the passage?

Other considerations

Comment language
Depending on the purpose of the assignment, the linguistic complexity of the task, and the students' proficiency, decide whether they should annotate in English or the L2. If the goal is for students to make meaning out of text (comprehension) then meta-level thinking needs to be done in English at the introductory levels and perhaps bilingually at the intermediate levels. See the eComma case study, "Using L1 in L2 Reading" for more details.

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[15] Barrish, Phillip, et. al.
[16] Barrish, Phillip, et. al.

Comment format

You may wish to consider finding ways for students to make comments in a creative style that fits the genre of the text. When reading a surrealist text, for example, ask students to share surrealist images, or when reading a poem, ask students to write their comments in poetic verse. Jeremy Dean has more creative ideas in his list of 10 Ways to Annotate With Students.

Synchronicity

Working synchronously and asynchronously afford different experiences with social reading and scaffold different skills. Both approaches are important and can be applied to different types of activities.

1. Have students work synchronously (in class or at a designated time outside of class) to promote interactions that support *discovery*, for example, when red-flagging or reacting to a text.
2. Have students work asynchronously for homework so that they can annotate at their own pace to support activities that require research (e.g. glossing), classifying/labeling, and analysis.

Moderation

What is the role of the teacher with social reading? eComma lessons allow you to observe your students reacting, thinking and interpreting meaning in real time, which means that you can better assess where they are having trouble and why. Whether the activity is synchronous or asynchronous, you can choose to jump in and provide feedback/corrections in real time or sit back and observe in order to provide feedback afterwards.

Digital reading awareness

Some studies have concluded that people read differently on screen than in print. Awareness of the differences can go a long way in improving digital reading comprehension and training the brain to read digitally.[17] See more in this *New Yorker* article, "Being a Better Online Reader" by Maria Konnikova.

Assessment

Assess students with criteria that match the activities you have assigned. Social reading will require different criteria than solitary reading. For an example of a social reading rubric, see page 7 of Joanna Luks' "FLLITE Interpretation Strategies & Social Reading" guide.

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[17] Konnikova, Maria. "Being a Better Online Reader." *The New Yorker*, 16 July 2016, www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/being-a-better-online-reader.

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Introductory paragraphs from the "Reading the lines", "Reading between the lines", and "Reading beyond the lines" sections, and the "Contextualization" and "Reflection" subsections, use text, slightly modified, from "The Close Reading Interpretive Tool (CRIT)" guide from the English Department at the University of Texas at Austin. https://laits.utexas.edu/crit/handout.pdf. CRIT was developed in the Department of English at UT Austin by Professors Phillip Barrish, Evan Carton, Coleman Hutchison, and Frank Whigham, and Ph.D. students Sydney Bufkin, Jessica Goudeau, and Jennifer Sapio. CRIT is a product of a Course Transformation Grant generously funded by the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost. CRIT is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.