Stories of Assessment Episode Four
Brittany Adams, Literacy
Interviewers: Krystal Barber and Melinda Shimizu

We want to welcome you to our stories of assessment podcast series. Thank you for joining us. Our goal is for faculty to learn from other faculty about specific strategies for assessment they tried. Especially in light of the fact that many of us have had to change our strategies due to the shift to online hybrid learning environments. Welcome.

(Music)

KB: Welcome to our fourth episode of our student learning outcome podcast series, called Stories of Assessment. My name is Krystal Barber and I am from the Childhood/Early Childhood Education Department.

MS: Hi. I'm Melinda Shimizu. I'm from the Geography Department and today we have Dr. Brittany Adams from the Literacy Department. Welcome.

BA: Hi. Great to be here.

MS: Could you please introduce yourself Dr. Adams and give us some background information regarding what you teach here at Cortland?

BA: Sure. My name is Dr. Brittany Adams and I am a visiting assistant professor in the Literacy Department. I teach undergraduate elementary reading methods courses and then graduate courses for the reading specialists master's program.

KB: Okay, great. Can you start by just giving us some background about what was your motivation for choosing the assessment strategy you'll share with us today? Maybe did you have a specific issue that you were addressing in your class?

BA: Well, I was searching for ways to bring in more collaboration opportunities, really for two big reasons and like several smaller reasons. First, our master's program, the reading specialists master's program, is online and asynchronous, yet the reading specialist position in K-12 schools or districts is highly collaborative in nature. And second, I knew that because of the covid-19 pandemic, our students were spending significantly more time alone or with, you know, a few immediate people, and that kind of isolation can be really hard on one's mental health. So, social annotation, the strategy that I'm sharing with you today, really just felt like an organic adaptation to get students talking around our shared text and co-constructing knowledge.

KB: Awesome. That sounds really important. I know it's so hard to think about ways that we can be collaborative when we're online and it sounds like you are doing that in a really unique way.

MS: Yeah. I'm excited to hear about this because I struggle with getting my students to work with each other. Can you describe the strategy a little bit more? How did it go and did it address what you were hoping to?

BA: Absolutely. So, like I said, it's called social annotation. You may hear it called collaborative annotation, but I think in the literature, it's pretty consistently called social annotation. And there are many ways to do it and, really, a lot of tools out there. But, basically, it's having your students read and annotate a shared digital text. So they're highlighting, making comments, asking questions, answering questions. I have been using the site Perusall, which was developed by Harvard

and it's free to anyone with an edu email address. All I do is, I upload articles to Perusall, I create annotation assignments. And those assignments have largely replaced a lot of my post-reading tasks that students would normally complete, like discussion boards, flip grid videos, whatever it is. So, instead of posting to a discussion board after reading, they all go on Perusall and they annotate the same shared text and they can all see one another's comments and reply to each other and have discourse around the text. And it went surprisingly well, honestly. There was some struggles in the beginning, but after the first couple of assignments, it was really smooth and not only did it offer that collaborative, social aspect, several students reached out to me to tell me that they were getting so much more out of the reading because of how closely they had to read in order to annotate well.

MS: That's awesome.

BA: Yeah. I mean, my impression is that it's a little bit like eating your vegetables. It's not super fun, maybe, and it does make their reading more time consuming for them. But, they recognized that they're better for it. So it's definitely a strategy that I'm going to continue using and honing.

KB: So you're going to continue using it in the fall you think, for sure?

BA: Yes. Absolutely.

KB: Yeah, that's great. I mean, discussion boards are, you know, have their own use, I think, in courses and classrooms, but it can be hard. Even as an instructor, sometimes, it's overwhelming to look at all of the discussion posts and to see how students are responding to each other. So it seems like this is a way that they can still do that activity but it's much more streamlined. Just a quick follow-up, is it easier as a faculty member, or an instructor, when you're looking at these things, is it easier to kind of see how they're responding? Or is it still something that it's a little challenging?

BA: So I will say that it makes grading and assessment a little bit more time consuming, but it does make it more interesting in terms of material to grade. At least in my opinion. Because it's formative, right, it's formative assessment so it puts their thinking as they're reading on display. So I get to see their understanding in process. I get to see where they pause and ask a question and then two pages later, they answer their own question. Or, maybe I see how other students chime in and answer that student's question, or like, you know, really think about the question and push it further. You know, Vygotsky believes that knowledge develops as the learners, and you know, learners use language to engage and communicate their understanding and to me that's very much on display with the social annotation. There's value in, there's definitely value in discussion boards and flip grid videos. Those will never be something that I don't use. I just think that this is, it's additive. There's something else here that you get from that in-process, thinking in the annotation and the discussion around the text that, I think, it's just a little bit different in terms of their sense making, than the summative discussion board post.

KB: Right, right. Yeah, it feels, it seems like it would be a little bit more interesting and engaging. Kind of like, more natural in how they're thinking about as they're reading the questions that are coming up, which I really like that component of it. Can you talk for a few minutes about how this strategy has either impacted, or enhanced, student learning in your course?

BA: Well, this is probably the most interesting part for me. The way I think about it, social annotation takes this normally solitary active reading and thinking about a text, and allows students

to do it in community with one another. And I have found that this makes their reading more active and it makes it more visible because it creates this visual representation of their process to extract important information during reading which improves their comprehension. So, it enables them to engage with text, engage with ideas, and each other, in deeper and more meaningful ways. And, like I said, they have to read closely in order to annotate well and doing so forces them to be really meta-cognitive. And it becomes very apparent if they aren't being meta-cognitive because their annotations are shallow and as a literacy educator, in particular, I find this offers a lot of insight into the process by which students construct meaning and regulate their understanding of a text as they're reading. And so, I get to see the type of reading strategies and behaviors they engage in during reading and those behaviors shed a lot of light on their thinking about literacy concepts and pedagogical practices, so that has been invaluable to me.

MS: Has that sort of insight impacted your teaching or how you approach the course, or adjust the course as you go?

BA: Definitely. I would really say it has impacted the entire department when we get together and talk about how, you know, we're recognizing patterns in how our students are thinking about these different concepts and it informs our teaching and how we approach things, even if it's just "oh, next time that I talk about this, I know that I need to preface it with one or two statements to help frame it and to help contextualize it." So, whether that's just to interrupt, you know, potential confusion, or orient them to a topic, I think it's been valuable to the entire program and how we think about constructing that knowledge over multiple courses.

KB: Great. Yeah, it sounds very valuable for students and for you as an instructor as well. What would you suggest to a colleague who maybe wants to try this strategy? Maybe what resources or where might they go to learn more about it?

BA: Well, like I said, there is a body of literature on it. There are other tools besides Perusall. Perusall has some resources. They're okay. They're mostly, like, how to use Perusall. I don't know that they're that valuable for ensuring that your students are reading and annotating well. But, I know I've published on it. My colleague, Dr. Nance Wilson, and I have an article that came out last year in the Journal of Educational Technology Systems. We have another article under review at a different journal and we also, recently, did a professional development workshop on social annotation for another conference. I would be happy to share any materials that we generated for that. But, my biggest piece of practical advice, if you're looking to get started, is plan to model for your students early and often, what good annotations look like, what your expectations are in terms of how many, how much. Are there specific strategies that you want to see? You know, do you want to see your students making text to text connections? Do you want to see them asking questions of the text? And then, allocate time for feedback, especially in those first few times because that's when you are setting the tone and the procedures, almost, on those for your students and that sets you up for success for the rest of the class, I think.

MS: That's super helpful. Thank you. Was there a specific SLO that you were trying to assess with this strategy?

BA: Well, yes and no. So, this takes it a little bit meta, but the class that I taught this past semester in which they did this was Literacy in Society, and one of the objectives is to be able to see yourself as a cultural being, and others as cultural beings, and recognize that we approach, if you think about reader response theory, that you approach reading in anything from your specific, you know, experiences, you know, your world view. So one of the things that I have them do is, after we

had done a few annotation assignments, I had them go back in and look at their annotations and then look at their peers' annotations. And, at first, we just talked about it in terms of "what reading strategies do you see?" because this is a literacy course, right, this is a literacy program. So, "What reading strategies do you see?", "Which reading strategies do you think were the most powerful in terms of comprehension and insight?", and then try to extrapolate a little bit out, especially when you see people making text to self connections. You know, what does this tell you about how they're thinking about these issues versus how you're thinking about these issues? Because, some of the texts that we read are intentionally conscious raising. They talk about issue of equity. They talk about varying experiences, whether you are in an urban setting or rural educational setting, and I think that that was really meaningful for my students to realize even within their, what they feel is, maybe, a homogenous group of peers, that they had very different experiences and thought about teaching, and thought about literacy, in different ways. So, in that sense, I mean, like I said, it's a little meta, but I do think that it helped them to recognize we are, you know, social creatures. We are, like, all individual and our experiences and our behaviors are a combination of everything that we've ever experienced in all of the circumstances of our lives. So, yeah. I don't know, I feel like it's kind of roundabout, but I do think that it helped them to realize that "Oh, I'm reacting this way and my peer's reacting this way, and they're really disturbed by this thing it said in this article, and I'm understanding that...". I almost think it gives them some insight into what it'll be like to work with teachers when they go out into, you know, schools and districts, and think about not assuming that your experience is the universal experience. Not assuming that your perspective is going to be the shared perspective, I guess.

MS: Yeah, that sounds really useful for developing empathy, which is so helpful for everyone, I think.

KB: Awesome. Well, I just want to say thank you so much, Dr. Adams, for joining us today. I think this is such a useful and unique strategy that I'd love to learn more about it. I'm going to check out some of the resources and we can make the resources that you've mentioned, maybe a link to the Perusall and then also some of the other things you mentioned, we can make those available along with this podcast. So, thank you so much!

BA: Absolutely! Thanks for speaking with me today.

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