

NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Collaboration and Community Building with Print and Digital Platforms in the Remote Classroom

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<1>The pandemic reality of a fully remote Fall 2020 semester was the crucible that compelled me to try COVE (Collaborative Organization for Virtual Education), a digital platform I had long been curious about and a bit afraid to try. Since my university, a small, private religious institution, was fully remote all semester, we used a combination of synchronous and asynchronous meetings. I needed to find a way for my students and me to see passages together on a shared screen. COVE, in combination with my typical use of Broadview scholarly editions, offered the solution. In a small, upper-division, Romantic Literature seminar, I combined Canvas (my university's LMS), a shared Google folder, COVE, and four Broadview scholarly editions of Jane Austen novels. Despite teaching remotely, I remained committed to the print texts of our course novels to support publishers of scholarly editions like Broadview Press and to stay connected to the tactile pleasures of books. While I was excited about the flexibility and shared digital platform COVE would offer us once we were members, I meant for my students to see the value of scholarly editions that offer critical material designed to deepen their close reading of the primary text. My students wanted print copies of their own anyway, and my requiring them helped us to reduce our screen time as well.

<2>To accommodate the work in the digital platforms (COVE, Canvas, Google Docs, and Zoom), I limited my choices to four novels, a much smaller set of readings than I have typically required. We needed extended time with each novel to ensure several things: adequate time for close reading of the novels and the critical apparatus for each; time to digitally annotate the novels after reading them; time to prepare and deliver presentations of the critical material for all four novels; and time for the mini-conference-like discussions that followed their presentations. Four novels proved to be a manageable choice and helped offset the demands of technology learning curves for the students and for me. As it turned out, putting the print and digital texts side by side, with the goals of deliberate systematic annotation and culturally-informed close reading, created the perfect scenario for several productive transgressions across the digital and print boundaries. Doing so also created a sometimes flipped and routinely collaborative classroom space.(1)

<3>The reality of our distance from one another brought on by the pandemic intensified our commitment to maximizing our back-and-forth interaction on Zoom. Our flipped classroom tracks with Li Cheng et al.'s definition in "Effects of the Flipped Classroom Instructional Strategy on Students' Learning Outcomes: A Meta Analysis" (2019): "students learn[] with instructional videos and supporting materials before class and then engag[e] in interactive and collaborative learning activities that facilitate them to understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create during class" (795). Not only did my decision to transgress in content and strategy create a more accessible learning environment that deepened the students' excitement for and ownership of their learning, but it also helped address their personal well-being in terms of time management and screen fatigue. Certainly, it supported my feminist pedagogy, exposing just how automatic and thin a "romance plot" reading was, but it also clarified to my students and me just how necessary it was to spend time reading and discussing the contextual secondary sources together in class, even if these readings were at first not as exciting. Ultimately, four powerful epiphanies emerged: (1) the necessity of annotating to close reading; (2) the value of scholarly editions to understanding cultural and historical contexts, and thus the primary text itself; (3) more substantive evaluations of both textual formats; and (4) insight into my students' reading habits.

COVE Annotations and Engaged Close Reading

<4>For my students to use the digital annotation platform in COVE, I required the ten-dollar individual membership as one of our course texts.⁽²⁾ With their COVE-only memberships and mine through the North American Victorian Studies Association (NAVSA), we had access to COVE Editions, which features timeline, map, and gallery builders, and to COVE Studio, which features the anthology builder. COVE Studio allowed me to create our course anthology, which stored digital copies of each novel that we annotated. COVE Editions allowed us to collaboratively build the timeline for Jane Austen's life and work, and build four geographic maps, each one corresponding to a different Austen novel. COVE founder Dino F. Felluga and the COVE team offered phenomenal support via Zoom workshops, email, and even individual coaching to help me learn how to navigate the anthology, timeline, and map builders. I did not use the gallery builder, nor did we explore the connections to peer-reviewed articles in *BRANCH (Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History)*, but I may do so in future classes. Several members of the COVE team worked diligently to upload "True"⁽³⁾ digital copies of the four Austen novels I chose: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), and *Persuasion* (1817). While COVE began as a Victorian repository, it is no longer strictly limited to British Victorian texts, which made working with Austen's Regency/early-Romantic texts possible.

<5>I designed the COVE Annotations Assignment (see [Appendix 1](#)) to run throughout the semester. Using the digital copies of Austen's four novels, which comprised our course anthology in COVE Studio, students would highlight the passages they wanted to annotate, type their annotations into a text box, select share, and save. I organized a Google Sheet with tabs (see [Appendix 2](#)) for each novel so that the students could sign up for the chapters (and later the appendices) they wanted to be responsible for annotating and then presenting during class discussion. While COVE Studio does allow for multiple annotations of the same passage, given the length of novels, it was important for their annotations to cover the whole novel. Using a

Google Sheet facilitated this coverage. I simply listed the chapters of each novel by volume and asked the students to sign up for two-to-four chapters per volume and to make sure their choices also spanned the multiple class sessions of our reading schedule. I did not restrict the maximum number of annotations they could make in their chosen chapters (or the rest of the novel), but I did restrict the number of annotations they could present in class discussion to allow adequate time for everyone to present. My students repeatedly remarked on how much they liked choosing their own chapters because it allowed them an additional way to manage their workloads as well as to talk about what they found engaging in the novel.

<6>Class discussions functioned like informal presentations and created a remote classroom space that was both collaborative and increasingly rigorous. I graded the annotations for completion credit to affirm students' first attempts and to encourage them. These were public annotations, after all, and, as such, anxiety-raising. I did, however, require added scholarly precision as we went along, asking for more use of the COVE tags in the annotation boxes and more evidence of knowledge gained in their annotations (i.e., attention to social class elaborated in mini-lectures, and use of a feminist theoretical frame for examining cultural constraints informing characters' negotiations around marriage). Doing so was more than adequate to motivate and develop students' engaged reading and annotating. Scaffolding the assignment in this cumulative way allowed the students to gain confidence rather than being overwhelmed in the already overwhelming reality of the pandemic. It also required them to make increasing connections between annotating, close reading, literary analysis, research, writing, and publicly sharing that work (all key student learning outcomes laid out in the syllabus). Most fundamental for me and for their learning was to make this a doable, confidence-building assignment. Of course, as they watched each other present, they gained respect for each other as scholars, presentation designers, and oral communicators, and they willingly helped each other out with tech hacks. In turn, our class became a place where we all shared our expertise, learning, and questions—a flipped classroom, in which the students (not exclusively the professor) got to be experts too in presenting their annotations and later their appendix material.

<7>In addition, I also added my own digital annotations for each novel with two pedagogical aims in mind. First, I provided initial annotations to model both what I was expecting to see in the students' annotations and how to use the annotation feature in COVE. Second, after the students had presented all their annotations for a section of the first novel, or if I felt we had not adequately dealt with a textual or cultural-historical issue during class, I would add annotations to that same portion of the novel and ask the students to go back through it to read my annotations. This follow-up was easy and effective in COVE. Students shared that it was both fun and informative to read my annotations because they could see how I did my own close reading, what was possible to see in a given passage, and thus broaden their own close readings. (Interestingly, this observation pairs with the same realization they had when they read the Broadview introductions of each novel, again illustrating the importance and power of annotation to literary research/scholarship.) I had one student in particular who expressed their strong reluctance to write in their books as a general rule, but who was eager to annotate the digital texts. The freedom of the digital platform is what enabled them to discover the importance of annotation to close reading. Students responded positively to doing their own annotations and reading or hearing presented those of their peers. Many observations were repeated refrains:

- “to finally do annotations, it’s not something I did regularly”
- “discover[ed] meanings that I would not catch had I not been annotating”
- “helped me ingrain and remember pivotal information from the texts, and it helped me pay more attention to the footnotes and their importance in my understanding of a text”
- “loved being able to have other class members lead discussion on different chapters than I chose and being able to encounter analysis I might not have been inclined to notice on my own.”
- “learned that we all read differently . . . We all pick up on different concepts and key components of the texts.”
- “[was r]eally useful for finding relevant information and quotes when I was writing my research paper”
- “got to effectively watch my mind transform continuously as I interact[ed] with a text and reflect[ed] on the history of my thoughts on the novels”

<8>As mentioned earlier, my students were pleased and motivated to choose their own chapters to annotate and present. In fact, they gave strong end-of-course feedback instructing me not to change this practice in future classes using COVE Studio. This approach also lightened my four-course planning load that semester yet still achieved the coverage of the reading assignment I desired. Here again, the students gave positive, honest, and repeated feedback:

- “really enjoyed being able to choose my own chapters to annotate because it enabled me to schedule out my workload better”
- “liked having the option of diving deeper into a chapter that I resonated with rather than a randomly assigned chapter”
- “appreciated this a lot. If one day I knew I’d have a lot of homework. . . I would choose two chapters that didn’t present on the same day so I could worry about one less thing”
- “really liked it!”
- “appreciated the flexibility and the fun”
- “loved this. If you are ahead of your reading and enjoyed a specific chapter, or picked up on some Austen cleverness, it was so exciting to be able to share what you feel confident in or what you’re excited about!”

I used shared Google Sheets to make the format and process of choosing chapters easy and accessible. Sheets are available 24/7 to accommodate students’ individual schedules, and they allow students to edit in real time with just an internet connection, a link, and any smart device. Students even admitted that there were times when they “would text classmates to see if they would trade a chapter” for various reasons—work schedules were a significant one as many of my students work part-time jobs—or took responsibility for choosing chapters late, acknowledging “[t]his was my own fault but still was a bummer” or “it was sad when I was so connected to a chapter that was already chosen.” Even when students could not have the chapters they wanted most because those had already been chosen, they reported, “I had to pay close attention to a chapter I maybe did not want which helped me get out of my comfort zone.”

Scholarly Editions, Contexts, and Deep Reading

<9>Because I required my students to buy the Broadview scholarly editions of our course texts—and only those—I ensured we would all have the same critical material to read and discuss. We read virtually everything in each of the Broadview editions: primary text, appendices, introductions, notes on the text, and chronologies. We also experimented with when to read some of these components. I insisted that the introductions be read *after* having read the novels to avoid plot spoiling. I also wanted students to puzzle out their own close readings first, before reading the editor’s interpretations, and because I knew that doing so would affirm their confidence as close readers. I assigned the introductions before assigning the appendix material because these provided a good model of literary criticism that synthesized secondary source material like that in the appendices and gave students a possible framework for seeing the importance of appendix material to the novel.

<10>Although students did not always follow my advice, they still achieved the learning goals. One student reported, “Reading the introduction was useful to prepare myself for the content of the book, but I found it to be more informative once I had completed reading the novel because of how much the editor references aspects of the story.” I also knew, as my students quickly learned, that the scholarly introductions would show them just how much more there was to see in the texts with a deeper historical, cultural, and linguistic context in mind and so affirm the importance of scholarly editions and literary research in close reading. One student in particular noted her preference for the introductions because they were more like literary criticism, and reading them was “an easy way to get a quick overview of the many literary criticisms that have been made over the years about the works.” Of course, all of these benefits derive from any research of secondary sources and added weight to my recommending the introductions as secondary sources for them to use in their seminar papers. However, for students to realize that a scholarly edition offered such resources helped them see the value of scholarly editions over editions (digital or otherwise) that have only the primary text. Two comments expressed the weight of this epiphany:

- “Using a scholarly edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion* has changed the way I do close reading by encouraging me to seek supplemental information whenever I read non-scholarly editions of books.”
- “I honestly LOVED reading the appendices and it’s inspired me to read the appendices of all the books in my personal library. The Appendix was full of relevant and interesting information that gave context and perspective on the plot, the time period, and Austen’s writing style. Reading the novel with information from the Appendices made me feel ‘in’ on all the references and allusions made by Austen’s characters.”

Students did not present on the introductions. Instead, I used a Canvas discussion board to vary our course activities, to make sure students read the introductions before our Zoom class discussions of them, and to give them an opportunity to practice written discourse that included textual citation. Discussion boards also require more deliberate thought about writing than free flowing class discussion does. While discussion board posting also facilitates thoughtful reflection on the material, replying to peers demands attention to good interpersonal communication in public discourse, a skill so important to the common good.⁽⁴⁾ I also encouraged students to use the introductions as secondary sources for their seminar papers.

<11>As for other components of each Broadview edition’s critical apparatus, I followed no set order in reading or referencing the “Notes on the Text” nor the chronologies of each Broadview edition, instead bringing them into our discussion where and when they were illuminating and recommending them as sources for the timeline assignment. We did, however, experiment with reading the appendix material *before* and *after* reading the primary text. Once the students had experienced both orders, we discussed the benefits and drawbacks of each. Because some of my students are preparing to be secondary English teachers, this exercise was illuminating not only for them as literature students of Austen’s fiction and the Regency Period, but also as future pedagogues. Their comments show just how thoughtfully they grappled with both approaches:

- “Reading the appendices before the novel builds many assumptions in my mind about what will happen and what characters will act a certain way rather than catching it in sync with the novel and allowing for the natural build up of information.”
- “Reading the appendix before the novel is beneficial because it helps us understand the cultural trends of the period that we will be finding traces of in the work. Reading the appendix after the novel is beneficial because we already have the novel’s content in mind and then we are able to make statements with more certainty.”
- “Reading appendices after the novel is helpful because it gives us room to digest the historical conversations in relation with the plot of the novel. However, this also means that we will likely not be able to catch on many important conversations while they are unfolding—we will find certain aspects unimportant that we would have appreciated with appendix content.”

<12>I used Google Sheets to divvy up the appendix material for each novel as well and to let the students choose which appendices they wanted to present (just as we had done for the chapters). I designed the Appendices Presentation Assignment (see [Appendix 3](#)) to mimic a conference presentation style and framework. Doing so allowed me to reinforce the idea that we were a small scholarly community and that our oral communication skills were central to delivering our scholarly findings and interpretations to one another in professional and compelling ways. It also provided practice in an authentic and quasi-professional writing situation and gave me an opportunity to offer them clear strategies for delivering such information. As such, the assignment consisted of specific and professional guidelines for the presentations, including number of slides allowed, time limit, reminders of best practices for public speaking and professional writing, and two key questions they had to address in their four-to-five minute summary presentation of the appendix material. These questions were (1) Why did the editor include this material? and (2) What context in or about the novel does this material support and/or amplify?

Substantive Evaluation of Digital and Print Formats

<13>Initially, I had thought that our course anthology in COVE Studio would mostly supplement my students’ close reading of the novel by making their annotations easy to do, easy to access, and easy to share publicly. The pairing of the digital and the print text, however, impressively amplified the differences between the two text formats and sharpened my students’ abilities to evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of each format. The digital text made annotating and searching for precise passages much easier for them than they had expected. They

discovered that both their digital annotations and the digital format of the novels helped them select topics for their seminar papers and find relevant passages from the novel for the textual evidence they needed for their arguments. In turn, they realized that the critical apparatus in each novel, and sometimes across the four novels, gave them immediately accessible secondary sources for their research as well as giving them insight into key issues in Austen's novels and culture. Perhaps most illuminating was their realization of just how much they did not know or deeply understand about the world of the novels without the critical apparatus provided in the scholarly editions. This realization provoked one student to reach out to me over Christmas break to tell me they were watching the recent Netflix series *Bridgerton* (2021–) and could understand it so much better than they would have done without having learned what they did in our course.⁽⁵⁾ Several students told me that gaining the knowledge from the critical apparatus made them feel like they were scholarly insiders who could now get the inside jokes.

<14>To be fair to Broadview Press, their editions are available digitally as e-books, which makes the content provided in their scholarly editions available in digital format, but we did not use the e-books. I chose the print versions for reasons already noted. Had we done our comparisons of non-scholarly and scholarly editions all digitally, we would not have been able to compare digital and print formats nor would I have been able to accommodate for the stresses of the pandemic-compelled remote formats. Moreover, my students told me they did not want to do all their reading on a screen and that they wanted to begin building their own physical personal libraries. In our case, the lack of any critical apparatus in the digital texts we did use showed the students (and me) just how much the contextual and historical information deepened their understanding of the novels, and how limited to a “romance plot” reading frame their default readings had been. This epiphany confirms a shift in pedagogy for me. I can no longer off-load all of their research reading to homework hours devoted to the research paper. I must devote significant time in the undergraduate classroom for the reading of critical apparatuses in order to model for students how to do scholarly close reading and to illustrate how inextricable the connection between literary reading and cultural-historical reading is.

Insight into Bolstering Students' Reading Habits

<15>The paired use of digital and print textual modalities revealed three surprising realities in my students' reading practices. First, the love of books for some of them went hand-in-hand with a reluctance to write in them altogether. Thus, they were trying to do—and *thinking that they were doing*—close reading without annotating their texts. Using COVE's digital annotations did away with this reluctance and revealed just how essential annotating was to close reading.

<16>Second, requiring them to use a scholarly edition of Austen's novels expanded their understanding of the forms that annotation may take in such an edition. Annotating digitally caused them to read the footnotes in their print editions and to see the intersections between the “annotation” of a footnote and the “extended annotation” of historical and cultural readings found in the appendices. As one student reported, “Using scholarly editions was the push I needed to start making annotations in the margins of the books I read. A lot of the references to the Appendix and the little facts I wouldn't have known otherwise were located conveniently at the bottom of the page.” Seeing these intersections between the literature and the critical materials emphasized students' excitement for deepening their linguistic, chronological,

historical, biographical, societal, and geographical understandings and, by extension, for comprehending the context in which Austen was writing and thus the subject matter she wrote about. In turn, their inductive discovery about their own reading lacunae exposed just how subtle, complicated, and incisive a feminist critique Austen was making of her society and its gender constrictions. It upped their reading game to something much more rigorous than choosing between “Team Darcy” and “Team Wickham” in the romance plot.

<17>Third, using a digital Timeline and Map Assignment (see [Appendix 4](#)) empowered my students to identify the necessity of geographical and spatial knowledge to deep reading. While I had expected certain gaps in knowledge given my students’ distance from Austen’s period and location, I was surprised at the ways my students had simply overlooked or accommodated those gaps, hesitating to do the necessary research to build their knowledge base. One of them admitted to not knowing where London was. Another said they just used their own home as the spatial layout for the homes in Austen’s novels, certainly not the layout of the estates and homes in Austen’s fictive world. Others were surprised to discover the distances between locations. All of these gaps hindered a full materialist-feminist understanding of the social realities depicted in Austen’s novels (and by extension other literature as well).

<18>The Timeline and Map assignment took the place of a midterm exam yet still required understanding of historical and cultural context, textual knowledge, professional academic writing, and so on. What this assignment required—something that a typical exam does not—were multiple modes of contextual learning—visual, spatial, cartographical, digital, and technological—along with research and collaboration. Incidentally, though not required, memorization did result from their timeline and map building as one measure of internalized knowledge. Key things my students reported learning by creating COVE timelines for Austen’s life and four novels were

- “how to contribute literary data into a collaborative, deep-dive effort. I have never worked in a classroom setting that has this sort of independent yet collaborative effort, so it opened my eyes to a new way of researching literature.”
- “the importance of biographical and historical context to understanding literature.”
- “how to research publication information”
- “the direct ties that Jane Austen had to her characters and how she referenced locations . . . from her own experience.”

By creating COVE maps, students discovered

- “the importance of basic geographical knowledge when approaching literature from other countries.”
- “the control the British Empire had on the ocean. Their maritime power was much wider and more dominating than I had expected and emphasized how the British Empire was able to sustain colonies.”
- “what locations were real [and] fictional . . . [and] more in-depth understanding of class, trade, and the representations of each estate’s correlation with wealth. (I am

geographically challenged, so wow this task was helpful! I know way more than I ever thought about the London map.)”

The students’ own comments about what they learned affirmed the power of blurring the boundaries between individual and collective, literature and geography, narrative text and map, the imaginative and the spatial.

<19>While I announced none of these pedagogical strategies or course assignments as explicit experiments in feminist analysis, my students and I created the feminist classroom together because we were building shared knowledge in a class community that facilitated students’ gaining and demonstrating expertise. In turn, the pairing of the print and digital modes enriched and supported the learning we were creating together in ways far exceeding my initial hopes to maintain the textual closeness of a face-to-face classroom. Annotating became essential to and routine in my students’ close reading. Students grounded their developing literary scholarship more deeply in knowledge of history, biography, geography, cartography, empire expansion, military power, wealth, and class because we devoted several class days in the course calendar to reading, presenting, and discussing appendix material in the Broadview scholarly editions. Their work was not only collaborative, but also more informed and scholarly because we worked in COVE, and they were able to critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of both digital and print platforms. By using both, I saw into my students’ reading habits more precisely and was able to augment them more strategically. Despite the disembodied remote classroom, our crossing of the boundaries between expert/novice, print/digital, primary/secondary, and literary/non-literary facilitated transformative learning in content and pedagogy for my students and for me.

Notes

(1)In my pedagogical training and experience, a “flipped classroom” is a relatively current term to describe more student-centered and collaborative classrooms and assignments.(^)

(2)The membership commences annually on January 1, so if you are going to require COVE in both semesters of an academic year, students will have to purchase it twice, once for fall and then again for spring terms.(^)

(3)COVE distinguishes between “True” and “False” copies of the digital texts in their libraries, which means that any COVE member may upload a digital copy of a text without it being vetted by the COVE staff.(^)

(4)See Dickison in this special issue for a discussion of how social, cognitive, and teacher presence are essential to meaningful discussion board exchange.(^)

(5)The series is based on Julia Quinn’s novels set in Regency-era London.(^)

Appendix 1: COVE Annotations Assignment

[PDF](#) | [DOC](#)

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Appendix 2: Google Sheets for Chapters and Appendices Selection

[PDF](#) | [DOC](#)

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Appendix 3: Appendices Presentation Assignment

[PDF](#) | [DOC](#)

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Appendix 4: Timeline & Map Assignment

[PDF](#) | [DOC](#)

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Appendix 5: Close Reading Organizer (CRO)

[PDF](#) | [DOC](#)

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