Book review

Annotation

Remi Kalir
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This compact book, **Annotation**, is one title in the MIT Essential Knowledge Series. The series aims to offer principled understandings of foundational knowledge, to better understand the world we live in, as synthesised by leading thinkers (i.e., compared to abundant and often superficial information or opinions offered in this digital information age). The title under review focusses on the concept, practice, and benefits of annotation, with clear associations to the concepts of learning.

The authors Remi Kalir (University of Colorado Denver) and Antero Garcia (Stanford University) build upon the work of others to unpack and discuss annotation. Their work details various benefits of annotation with express links to both informal and formal learning

practices. To get a sense of this, we need only to think about how many times we have benefited from our own or others' annotations. A recipe book inscribed with corrections to a chocolate cake recipe. An old newspaper cutting with pen notes offering a date and a contextual note. A comment added to a DIY video on YouTube. Not surprisingly then, Kalir and Garcia position annotation as an everyday activity (or, arguably, an action within everyday activities), and from this, they draw out a range of learning benefits.

The strength of the first chapter of the book, *Introduction*, is how Kalir and Garcia give a comprehensive overview of annotation. Synthesising a range of prior work, they arrive at a simple skeletal definition of annotation, and then methodically expand this to what it might mean in practice. The definition the authors settle upon has wide applicability to physical and digital media despite its simplicity, that of "A note added to a text" (p. 12). The authors then unpack the constituent components. A *note* can be words, symbols, tally marks, or another element to "mediate the relationship between reading and writing" (p. 15). The *text* being annotated can convey a message in various media types (e.g., paper, image, audio, video, computer code), while the notes may also be expressed via various media types. The act of *adding* involves the agency of the annotator, where they may talk back to the text in a way that anchors their note to a specific segment of the text. Annotations can be private or shared, and the sharing can be serendipitous. For the latter, I recall my delight 20-plus years ago when I read Catherine Marshall's (1997) curiosity about college students' preference for pre-loved annotated textbooks. Her results aligned with the increased value I attribute to marked-up books and journal articles compared to new, unmarked works. Marshall's work is indeed referred to in Annotation (e.g., Chapter 6).

The introduction establishes the motivation to read on. Annotation is established as an action that can aid active engagement with a text and is positioned as something that matters for personal meaning making of text or text-related artefacts. Five key affordances of annotation are synthesised, which form the themes for the next five chapters:

Annotation provides information, making knowledge more accessible. Annotation shares commentary, making both expert opinion and everyday perspective more transparent. Annotation sparks conversation,

making our dialogue—about art, religion, culture, politics, and research—more interactive. Annotation expresses and questions power, making civil life more robust and participatory. And it aids learning, augmenting our intellect, cognition, and collaboration. This is why annotation matters. (Kalir and Garcia, 2001, pp. 7–8).

Chapter 2, *Annotation Provides Information*, discusses the first of the five key affordances. This detail is essentially about how annotation adds value to the source artefact. Recorded annotations may be the bridge to providing the context for understanding an historical or culturally complex text; however, historical annotations may themselves be open to interpretation. Kalir and Garcia explain how some historical hand-written acts of annotation have evolved into standard components in formally published texts, such as a glossary, an index, and commentary or footnotes. Beyond books, the act of editing text into the film reel of silent movies has now evolved into stylistic options (e.g., the opening to the original *Star Wars* movie), or subtitles or captions as accessibility options. Labelling is offered as an information provider, such as distinguishing between jam jars, timestamping a photo, or labelling computer code. Additionally, open web annotation is discussed, for example, its use within various communities to fact check information. Much of this added information we take for granted in day-to-day life, yet it can be very informative and assistive.

In the third chapter on *Annotation Shares Commentary*, a point emphasised is that not all annotation is commentary, yet annotation can enable commentary and sharing of commentary. The enabling and sharing aspects are discussed through a range of lenses, with social media being the most obvious, however, use in ancient scripts, chess games, and scientific fact-checking are also detailed. One of the benefits of sharing commentary is through using annotation as evaluation. In adult education, two obvious examples that come to mind for adding and sharing comments are during the evaluation of students' work and blind peer review in journal article acceptance/rejection processes. Each of these evaluative examples can form a conversational tone between the writer and the reader and hold inherent potential for formative development. "When annotation is shared for the purpose of evaluation, notes can help to critique or improve ... [and are] understood to serve a particular need for a given group" (Kalir & Garcia, 2021, p. 80).

While many annotations remain private and/or anonymous, Chapter 4, *Annotation Sparks Conversation*, builds upon Chapter 3 for how the act of annotating can be social and dynamic. A similar caveat is noted; not all annotation is conversation, yet annotation can enable or stimulate conversation. The affordance of web technologies enables conversations that can feature "an explicit collaborative purpose that requires annotators to collectively gather, often across physical space and time, to produce new meaning together because of shared affinity" (Kalir & Garcia, 2021, p. 93). A theme I am drawn to centres on scholarly dialogue. *Frankenbook* is used as an example where hundreds of online annotations have sparked conversation around the book *Frankenstein*. These annotations are tagged or labelled to "correspond to eight prominent themes relevant to the book" allowing readers to filter for annotations on a particular category and join a themed conversation (Kalir & Garcia, 2021, p. 96). Relatedly, the use of such markers can provide explicit guidance to students on how to annotate via analysis categories, signalling themes of things to notice in a source artefact (Colasante, 2016). Benefits of using annotation to spark conversation include sharing of expert knowledge and/or reader agency in professional arenas for collective meaning-making processes, to ultimately advance understandings – or to at least keep the conversations going. An example given is for sparking conversation between teachers and university researchers for civic writing around equitable school learning opportunities.

Chapter 5, *Annotation Expresses Power*, takes a counternarrative turn. It reveals how annotation can have a productive force in revealing an alternative or minority voice. The dialogic quality of an annotation may not wield power in and of itself, but an annotation can express power and enable the dialogue to be shaped and contested.

Annotation—like a megaphone, tweet, spray paint, or poster—is a tool used purposefully by an annotator for a particular reason, whether that annotator is a climate scientist refuting baseless claims, a teacher evaluating an assignment, or an artist critiquing bias and injustice. (Kalir & Garcia, 2021, p. 115-116)

Annotations can transcend the original intentions of a medium to allow those marginalised or those pointing out injustices to surface an alternative narrative. This is exemplified via several examples,

including annotated posters for the #BlackLivesMatter movement, redacted justifications of perpetrators to reveal hidden intent in the #MeToo movement, and an ironic yet socially critical review of a prison by a former inmate on a social rating platform. The empowering affordance of annotation highlights "how annotation expressing power can be productive for new knowledge and discourse" (p. 123) yet asks important "questions about who gets to annotate" (p. 129).

Chapter 6, *Annotation Aids Learning*, resonates with my interest in annotation for learning, particularly in relation to video annotation. Kalir and Garcia's references to Marshall's study of annotation and MIT's *Annotation Studio*, remind me of the inspiration I achieved from reading Marshall's (1997) work and an introduction to MIT's early work in video annotation in their *XMAS Shakespeare Project* (MIT, 2005). This inspiration, coupled with my then colleagues' enthusiasm for media annotation, led to the design and design testing (Colasante & Fenn, 2009), development, piloting (Colasante, 2011), and rollout of a video annotation tool called *MAT* across RMIT University (e.g., Douglas, Lang & Colasante, 2014). The prudent caveats by Kalir and Garcia for appropriate learning circumstances resonate, given the complex relationship between annotation and learning, and that annotation alone does not guarantee increased learning engagement. Several learning benefits are noted, including social annotations for purposeful discourse around an artefact to build meaning or to work towards consensus or change.

In the final chapter, *An Annotated Future*, the future of annotation is framed within a "vague but exciting" context, imagined through the extension of ideas from work noted elsewhere within the book.

Kalir and Garcia regularly encourage their readers to annotate their text. This is encouraged by way of conventional pen annotations within the printed book, or via using #AnnoConvo on social media. The latter was used for a draft version of the book, allowing for a range of the digital annotations made via this hashtag to be explicitly and visibly incorporated into the final 2021 published book. I chose to annotate the printed book as I read, with pen markings and marginal notes on almost every other page. These annotations were useful to refer to while writing this review.

For the Australian Journal of Adult Learning audience, I have been considering who might benefit from reading this book. For active annotators like me, who like engaging actively with texts and other artifacts through markup, you will devour this compact book. For an adult learning focus, Chapters 4-6 are key. That annotation can have key roles in sparking artefact-focussed conversations, enabling expressions of agency in the face of power and injustice, or otherwise directly aiding learning with its participatory and interactive affordances is indeed why annotation matters. Additionally, the current 92 titles in the Essential Knowledge series offer other reads, including various complex ideas aligned to culture (e.g., **Whiteness**), technology (e.g., **Algorithms**), and more (MIT, 2022). Beyond the current title under review, the readers of this journal might gravitate to **Critical Thinking** (Haber, 2020) and or **MOOCs** (Haber, 2014).

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