Crowdsourcing Commentary Project Outcomes Update

The original goal of “Crowdsourcing Commentary” was to “build a platform for collaborative textual annotation, enabling individuals across multiple courses, campuses, levels of expertise, and intellectual approaches to engage in rich, vibrant, multi-layered conversation around a single text.”

We’ve accomplished this goal and intend to go live in January 2014 with a site where readers can engage in collaborative annotation of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden.* The site will be called *The Readers’ Thoreau.*

An explanation of the site’s structure and core functionality can be found on the Digital Thoreau website at <http://www.digitalthoreau.org/the-readers-thoreau/>

We’ve built the site by combining two open-source tools for online collaboration: Commons In A Box (the same platform that supports the SUNY Learning Commons) and CommentPress.

* <http://commonsinabox.org/>
* <http://futureofthebook.org/commentpress/>

Note the advisory on the latter site that “Version 3.5 has been created with the assistance of the [Digital Thoreau](http://www.digitalthoreau.org/) project at SUNY Geneseo.”

Commons In A Box enables readers to join the site and form groups for reading and discussion; CommentPress enables readers to read and leave comments in the margins of texts.

Although both of these tools existed before our project began, they were not integrated. For example, there was no way for members of a Commons In a Box (CBOX) group to read a text *together*, seeing only one another’s comments and receiving notification of one another’s activity in the text. Before our project, CBOX groups could share a group blog; now they can also share a *group text*.

Moreover, before our project, CommentPress did not give readers a way to filter the comments in a text by multiple criteria according to their needs and interests: for example, comments left by a certain category of reader, comments recommended by other readers, or comments selected by an administrator as particularly noteworthy.

These and other affordances are now either included in the CommentPress core or operating on our site while on their way to inclusion. The list of affordances includes:

* Ability for readers to read and participate in all discussion left in public groups
* Ability for readers to request membership in private groups and read/participate in all discussion left in such groups
* Ability for private groups to read *with each other*: for example, a class at SUNY Geneseo and a class at SUNY Brockport
* Ability for administrator(s) to feature selected comments as particularly noteworthy, and for readers to find featured comments in a dedicated space
* Ability for readers to recommend comments to each other by “liking” them
* Ability for members of CBOX groups to see other CBOX members’ comments in their activity stream
* Ability for CBOX members to see the activity of their CBOX “friends” in a given text
* Ability for a selected group of users to leave “authoritative” comments in a text, equivalent to the annotations in a scholarly or teaching edition — i.e., comments visible to all readers but only open to reply by other “authoritative” commenters
* Ability for authoritative commenters to easily include rich media in their comments, such as images, sound files, and embedded videos.

When *The Readers’ Thoreau* launches in January 2014, it will incorporate, in its “authoritative” comments, the annotations from the late Thoreau scholar and SUNY Distinguished Professor Walter Harding’s *Walden: An Annotated Edition* (1995). Readers will come to a text — whether on a desktop, a laptop, a tablet, or a phone — where they can not only find scholarly guidance but also contribute their own interpretations, ideas, and questions. Teachers will have a tool that enables them both to provide a guided reading experience and to engage students in a lively exchange of ideas — within members of the class or across classroom, disciplinary, and even institutional boundaries.

But the single most important result of this project is that *the tools themselves will be available to anyone — within or outside higher education — who wishes to use them for a similar purpose with a different community and different texts.*

Seen from this point of view, the project’s outcomes are really to be found, not on the site that launches in January, but in the modified code of both Commons In A Box and CommentPress, code that now gives anyone with an internet connection, hosting, and a free WordPress installation much greater power to crowdsource commentary.