

Annotating as an Assessment Tool

The following excerpt comes from *So What Do They Really Know? Assessment That Informs Teaching and Learning*, by Cris Tovani (Stenhouse Publishers, 2011).



Annotating as a viable assessment opportunity is easy to dismiss because it is so simple to use. Yet I continue to use this instructional strategy as my number-one source of trustworthy data, mainly because it puts learners in the driver's seat when it comes to showing me what they understand.

Annotating helps readers...

- engage with the text when their minds are tempted to wander.
- hold thinking so it can be referred to later.
- recall thinking so they can share with an expert what they need.
- remember what they thought was important at the time of the reading.
- notice patterns, synthesize new thinking, and ask questions to build more background knowledge.

Annotating helps the teacher . . .

- distinguish who is actually reading and who is “fake” reading.
- “see” what strategies readers are using to access meaning.
- diagnose what learners need in order to better comprehend the text.
- assess what learners understand about the content and how they determine what is important.
- notice how the reader is using strategies to construct personal meaning.

Annotations as a Pretest

Asking students to annotate thinking at the beginning of a unit is an efficient way to assess what they know and what skills and information they need. Sometimes when working with math and science teachers, I ask learners to annotate the chapter test the day we start the unit. Students are instructed to do their best. This means that they should solve the problems or answer the questions they can. Questions or problems they can't solve need to have an annotation next to them so that teachers can gain some insight into student needs. Typical annotations include connections to previous chapters or questions about big concepts. Sometimes students will partially work a problem or answer only a portion of a question because they get stuck. When they get to this juncture, they are instructed to isolate their confusion by asking a question. These annotations help the teacher figure out what is causing difficulty for the student so he or she can better target what the student needs.

Colleagues who try this quickly discover that there are some concepts and skills that the entire class needs. They also learn that some of the material can be skipped because everyone already knows it. The best part of using annotations as a pretest is that it helps teachers know where they need to differentiate their instruction. Analyzing what students know and don't know from the pretests will make it much easier for teachers to form small groups for enrichment or targeted intervention. When I don't have to waste time teaching skills that students already know, I can spend more time teaching them something new.

Annotations for Real-Time Feedback

Annotated thoughts in the margins of texts are gold mines of thinking. Teachers can see questions and connections that allow them to assess readers' levels of background knowledge and understanding. When misconceptions arise, teachers can quickly detect them and begin reteaching the concept. Reading and quickly responding to students' annotations is preferable to grading the same answer to the same question time and time again.

I don't respond to every annotation, only the ones that provide an entry point for useful feedback. Typically I reply to only two to five annotations, depending on how long the assignment is. Sometimes the feedback is about improving the way a student uses a thinking strategy. Other times I add a bit of information that deepens the student's knowledge about the topic of study. Sometimes I ask a question to push deeper. On some occasions, I clarify or answer a question that a student has asked. I can also name or give specific praise about the way a student has demonstrated thinking in hopes that he or she will do it again.

When students know the goal isn't to answer questions but to increase comprehension, they are more apt to engage in the process of reading. By not looking for and rewarding one "right" answer, teachers can honor students' attempts to construct meaning. Providing quick feedback to students' annotations supports student thinking about the content. In a short time, this symbiotic relationship leads students and teachers to work together as co-constructors of meaning. Responding to students' annotations emphasizes that comprehension is a process: meaning does not arrive; it has to be constructed.

Annotations as Comprehension Checks

When I want to check comprehension quickly and figure out what kids need next to make sense of their reading, I copy a couple of pages out of a text that they have previously been assigned. I explain that I am doing a comprehension check and want to see what they understand and what is causing them confusion. Depending on the size of the text, I give them a specific number of annotations that I want them to shoot for. I explain that it is important for them to show me not only how they are thinking, but what they understand.

From their annotations, I can see different strategies that students use to construct meaning. I can also see where I need to shore up their thinking. Often these comprehension checks give me several different options for lessons that I can choose to teach during the following class.