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Article:

**Reading literature: Critical pedagogies and Talis Elevate in online learning
communities**

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic radically transformed higher education, which required many educators and students to adapt their learning and teaching practices in a short space of time. The emergency transition to online teaching during the pandemic created many learning opportunities by encouraging educators to rethink pedagogical practices, but also posed challenges and widened inequalities in education and society. In this article, I use critical pedagogies to reflect on my experiences of facilitating collaborative reading activities

in a fully online environment during the pandemic, using a first-year core module in English Literature as my case study. I discuss the opportunities and challenges that emerged from the emergency transition to online teaching and learning, paying attention to issues of accessibility and inclusion. I advocate for the collaborative annotation tool Talis Elevate as a method of promoting critical pedagogies that empower students to engage in 'deep reading' and critical discussions surrounding inequalities in literature and wider society. I conclude by arguing that Talis Elevate, when combined with critical pedagogies, creates democratic and critically engaged learning communities by enabling students to find their voices and co-create knowledge about the subject matter.

Key words: Critical pedagogies, Talis Elevate, teaching and reading literature, inclusive online learning communities

Introduction

In March 2020, many higher education teachers were unexpectedly tasked with moving their teaching online with minimal experience of this style of delivery. While this 'emergency phase' was a challenging time, it also provided opportunities to rethink our pedagogical practices in ways that are critically attentive to the new and diverse teaching and learning contexts in which we suddenly found ourselves and the students we teach (Cooper et al. 2020, 1). Attention to these contexts encourages us, as educators, to create student-centred educational environments that respect the diversity of learning communities and support all students to participate in learning experiences. Many of us are used to setting in-situ learning activities that attend to the diverse learning needs of students, creating opportunities for students to participate in active learning and critical discussions independently and collaboratively with others. How can we facilitate these important teaching and learning activities in online settings to promote critical pedagogic practices in the time of COVID-19 and into the future? This question is important to consider, since the pandemic has radically transformed the ways we teach, learn, and interact with one another. Indeed, many higher education institutions are set to take a more blended approach to teaching and learning from now on because of the lessons we have learned from the pandemic (Maguire et al. 2020, 6).

This article focuses on my experience of teaching a first-year core module in English Literature online during COVID-19 in attempt to grapple with this question. In doing so, the article advocates for the use of learning technology – specifically the collaborative annotation tool Talis Elevate – to create critical pedagogic practices that produce more inclusive, dialogic, and socially-engaged spaces of learning in an online environment, ones that are attentive to the politics of subject matter (i.e. social issues in literary texts) and the ways that

students learn about that subject matter (i.e. teaching and learning practices).¹ The creation of democratic, collaborative, and politically aware learning communities within an English Literature context, as this article will demonstrate, has the pedagogical potential to empower students as active participants in shared learning processes, as well as to engage them in 'deep learning' and critical analysis of injustices in the literary texts and society more broadly.

To explore these issues, the article begins with a brief introduction to critical pedagogies and some of the challenges presented by the emergency transition to online teaching and learning in the wake of the pandemic, before introducing Talis Elevate as a pedagogical intervention that helped to address these challenges. After outlining my method of integrating Talis Elevate into online seminar teaching to promote critical pedagogies, the article discusses the pedagogical implications of using Talis Elevate for these purposes. It concludes by reflecting on some of the limitations that emerged from my engagement with Talis Elevate in a fully online education context, in the process proposing potential solutions that can enrich student learning and foster inclusive teaching practices in online or blended learning environments going forward.

Critical pedagogies: Definitions and challenges

Critical pedagogies can be broadly defined as pedagogies that view education and social justice as intrinsically linked. Critical pedagogues such as Paulo Freire (1968) and bell hooks (1994) approach teaching and learning as opportunities to foster agency and awaken what Freire calls 'critical consciousness', through which we become attuned to social injustices. From this perspective, teaching and learning are not ideologically or politically neutral activities (hooks 1994, 170); rather, for critical pedagogues, they enable students and educators to work together to identify and address inequalities in policies and practices within and outwith higher education.

Freire famously outlines his vision for critical pedagogy in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). In this groundbreaking book, Freire argues against the traditional banking model of education, which treats students as 'empty vessels' into which knowledge is deposited, memorised, and regurgitated (2014, 72). In doing so, he puts forward a case for 'problem-posing education' where 'people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist*

¹ While this article focuses on my use of Talis Elevate in an online learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, Talis Elevate existed pre-Covid and has proven pedagogically useful in a range of teaching and learning contexts. See, for example, Jamie Wood, Matt East, and Hope Williard's chapter in *Designing Courses with Digital Technologies* (2021), which outlines the use of Talis Elevate in History at the University of Lincoln before and during the pandemic.

in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation' (83). Freire's words are echoed and developed by hooks, when she advocates for an 'engaged pedagogy' that promotes 'self-actualization' to enable 'people to discover who they are and to find their voice' (hooks, quoted in Troutman 2020, 307). By creating opportunities for students to find their voices, engaged or critical pedagogic practices become bound up with processes of emancipation through which people are liberated from oppressive structures and ideologies perpetuated by banking education. These processes have the potential to create politically engaged learning communities, where students and educators along class, gender, and racial lines are empowered to engage in critical discussions, pose questions, and share knowledge to contest oppressive structures in education and society more generally. In doing so, critical pedagogic practices promote democracy in and beyond the classroom by guiding students and educators to reflect critically on inequalities in the environments in which we live and work.

The need for critical pedagogic practices remains as urgent today as it did fifty years ago when Freire first published *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, especially in light of a global pandemic that not only exacerbated and made visible existing inequalities but also created new ones. The emergency transition to online teaching and learning was not immune from widening and producing inequalities. Digital poverty, among other issues including 'Zoom fatigue' (Bailenson 2021, 1), competing work and/or care responsibilities (Cooper et al. 2020, 6), and unsafe or unsuitable spaces to work (Barber et al. 2021, 67), are among the issues that resulted in some voices dominating conversations in online learning environments and others being absent or silenced, thus replicating hierarchical power dynamics critiqued by critical pedagogues such as hooks and Freire. These are all issues that educators need to be aware of when working to create inclusive learning environments that challenge, rather than replicate, patterns of inequality by creating conditions that promote equitable participation.

Jesse Stommel, Chris Friend, and Sean Michael Morris' work on critical digital pedagogies is particularly helpful in thinking through these issues, since it encourages educators and students to 'dismantle (*criticize*) institutional and societal impediments to learning' (Stommel et al. 2020, 3). Like Freire and hooks, Stommel, Friend, and Morris place people at the centre of critical pedagogic praxis in an attempt to promote democratic and emancipatory dialogue geared toward creating more just classrooms and societies. As Morris and Stommel argue elsewhere, 'A Critical Digital Pedagogy demands that open and networked educational environments not be merely repositories of content; rather, they must create dialogues in which both students and teachers participate as full agents' (2018, 9). Talis Elevate, as I will discuss, provides a great opportunity for the production of critical digital pedagogic practices that not only attend to social injustices in the subject matter but also in teaching and learning practices. In other words, Talis Elevate helps to create online learning environments in which all students are empowered to participate and pose questions that implicitly *and* explicitly challenge oppressive power structures at and beyond university. Before discussing the main outcomes of using Talis Elevate for student learning this

semester, it is necessary to provide an overview of the tool and how I integrated it into seminars throughout the module.

Talis Elevate

Talis Elevate is a digital collaborative annotation tool that enables students and educators to annotate the same document, which means they can read and respond to one another's comments about the text, image, or video being annotated. Students can access documents on Talis Elevate asynchronously and synchronously; as a result, students can interact with the learning materials during and outside of live sessions. Comments can be added publicly or anonymously on Talis Elevate; they can also be added in the 'class comments' section for everyone to view and engage with or in the 'private notes' section. Educators have access to analytics for each module and document on Talis Elevate, allowing us to monitor active engagement with resources. For example, educators can view who has interacted with the resources, for how long, and which parts of the document gained the most – and least – engagement, helping us to check student understanding and identify areas of uncertainty that would benefit from further teaching.

I will discuss the implications of these features later in the article, but it is worth noting at this point that Talis Elevate has the potential to make 'the hidden aspects of students' academic reading visible through collaborative annotation' (Wood et al. 2021, 68), in the process 'validating student perspectives and opening up new interpretative possibilities' (67). Understanding and discussing these 'hidden' elements of academic reading is of critical importance for students and educators. As Angela Rhead observes, this knowledge and dialogue 'helps students better understand the relationship between reading and enquiry' (2019, 1), shifting 'their attention away from the strategic assignment passing and towards the pursuit of deeper understanding' (10). At the same time, greater awareness of students' reading practices 'helps academics better understand their students' reading challenges' (1), encouraging them to incorporate teaching on academic reading into module design and thus support students in reading critically (9). The aforementioned features of Talis Elevate help to create more democratic, dialogic, and critically engaged learning communities that are integral to critical digital pedagogies and the success of collaborative reading activities in the first-year core module into which Talis Elevate was embedded.

Module description

Playing Parts: Studying Drama and Poetry (hereafter Playing Parts) is a core first-year undergraduate module in the School of English at Keele University. As the module handbook states, Playing Parts 'aims to introduce students to the critical study and evaluation of drama

and poetry through close attention to issues of performance, voice and style'. Focusing on a range of plays and poems from the seventeenth century to the present day, the module encourages 'a reading of literary texts with respect to the historical, formal, and cultural contexts informing them'. As a core module at Level 4, the module is designed to support students in developing their reading and analytical skills to equip them with the skills necessary for their degree in English and/or other disciplines, as well as their work beyond university.²

Students engage in a mix of lectures, seminars, and assessments to help them achieve the module's learning outcomes. Playing Parts typically comprises a one-hour lecture and seminar per week, though COVID-19 altered the delivery structure to weekly asynchronous mini-lectures and bi-weekly, two-hour synchronous seminars on MS Teams. Students are assessed through a close reading paper, in which they critically analyse an extract from a literary text studied on the module, and a seen exam. The exam contains two parts: a close reading paper (as above) and a comparative essay. Talis Elevate was particularly useful in preparing students for these assessments, since they were able to engage in the following activities on a regular basis: practice reading and analytical skills, test ideas, gain insight into other interpretive possibilities by reading annotations made by peers, and receive constructive feedback on work. As a result, students were able to engage in collaborative close reading activities that typically take place during in-situ seminars, deepening their understanding of the assigned readings when learning online and enabling them to develop the analytical skills required for assessments.

Integrating Talis Elevate into English Literature seminars

Talis Elevate is a versatile tool that enables people to annotate multiple media (e.g. text, image, and video), making it an ideal space to engage students in various independent and collaborative reading activities.³ For the purpose of this article, I will discuss my approach to integrating Talis Elevate into the synchronous seminars for Playing Parts to encourage

² Keele University is renowned for enabling students to complete a dual honours degree; therefore, it is not uncommon for students in English modules to undertake modules in other disciplines. The reading and analytical skills developed throughout Playing Parts are transferable to other subject areas and even beyond university into the workplace.

³ For further inspiration on the types of activities that can be undertaken on Talis Elevate, see Wood et al. (2021), Wood (2021), Merrydew (2020), and Cooper et al. (2020). The website Talis Elevate contains a helpful archive of open access resources related to the use of Talis Elevate in teaching and learning across the UK higher education sector, including recorded presentations from the Teach. Learn. Collaborate. Repeat. Conference in 2021.

collaborative reading and critical analysis, though it was used by students for asynchronous reading activities throughout the module.

As with any learning technology, it is vital that students understand how to use Talis Elevate for them to engage with it in meaningful ways for their learning. Therefore, the first stage of integrating Talis Elevate into Playing Parts involved some training to build students' digital literacies. I provided students with written step-by-step instructions and a short video tutorial on Talis Elevate; this approach enabled students to choose a format that aligns with their learning needs and preferences. Using these materials, students were asked to log into Talis Elevate in advance of the first seminar to familiarise themselves with the tool; to aid this introductory process, the module convenor assigned a reading task on Talis Elevate during the first lecture and populated the document with questions for students to respond to when annotating the poem. This activity ensured that students were familiar with and knew how to use Talis Elevate for their learning by the time they attended their first seminar, in which we used Talis Elevate extensively. Students were encouraged to reach out to their module tutor should they need some support in accessing and interacting with resources on Talis Elevate.

Collaborative reading activities during synchronous online seminars typically involved the following process:

- Students were tasked with reading a poem or extract from a play, which was uploaded to Talis Elevate;
- Students were assigned into small groups of 3-4 people, using the breakout room function on Teams, and asked to complete the reading activity together on Talis Elevate in fifteen to twenty minutes (Figure 1);
- Students were provided with question prompts to guide their annotations and ensure they were making critical connections between social issues in the text and contemporary society;
- Students were asked to take on a role within the group to promote equal participation and ensure everyone knew what they needed to do, e.g. leader, annotator, time-keeper, and presenter.⁴
- After approximately twenty minutes, students were invited back into the main seminar room on MS Teams to discuss and debate the annotations as a whole group. Each small group's annotations were visible to the whole group, so long as they were added in the 'class comments' section as per instruction.

This process was repeated, though the activities varied, in each seminar throughout the module, which not only created a sense of familiarity for students at a time of uncertainty during a global pandemic, but also enabled us to co-create a bank of knowledge that students were encouraged to return to and develop beyond seminars and in their assessments. On that note, let us turn to some of the pedagogical outcomes and

⁴ See Seburn (2015) for more information on academic reading roles and how they enable students to co-create knowledge about texts.

implications of integrating Talis Elevate into this first-year English module, with particular focus on how it promoted critical pedagogic practices.

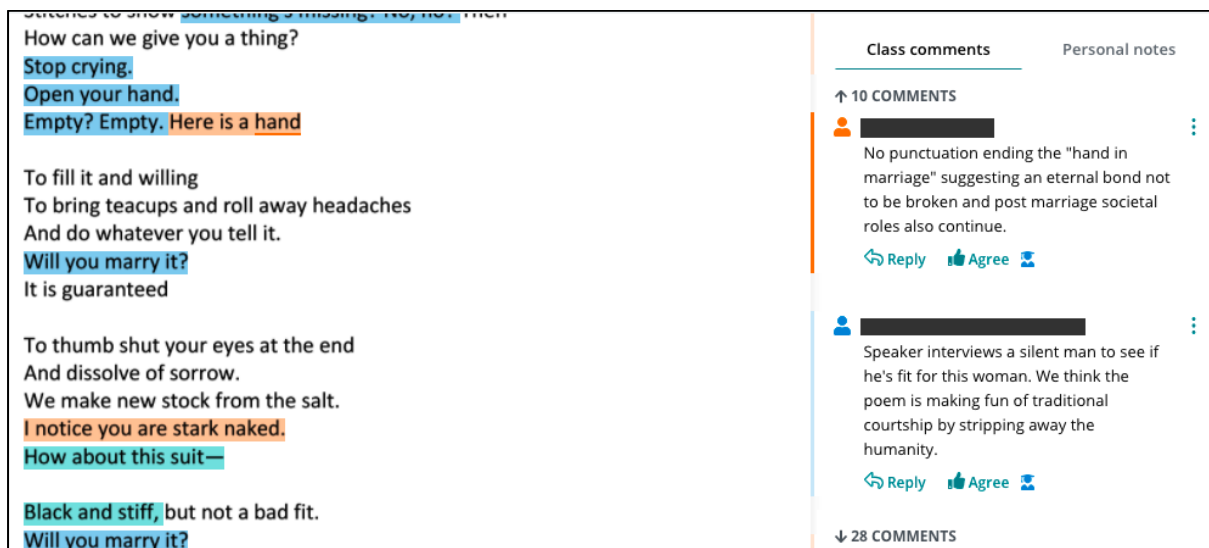


Figure 1: Screenshot of a structured reading activity on Talis Elevate during an online seminar for Playing Parts: Studying Drama and Poetry.

Pedagogical outcomes and implications of using Talis Elevate in seminars

There are multiple pedagogical benefits of using Talis Elevate in teaching and learning, including the promotion of active participation and 'deep reading' (Wood et al. 2021, 66). In what follows, I identify a series of additional outcomes and implications from a critical pedagogic perspective following my integration of Talis Elevate into seminar teaching for Playing Parts. The discussion focuses on two overarching areas: 1) Talis Elevate's role in creating inclusive learning communities that empower students to participate actively in seminar discussions and 2) the potential for Talis Elevate to facilitate collaborative reading practices that enable diverse students to share their perspectives and gain insight into new and multiple interpretations of social issues in literary texts.

1. Accessibility

The pandemic has made students' learning practices and circumstances more visible, with a recent survey demonstrating that a significant number of students are accessing learning on their smartphones either by choice or necessity (Killen et al. 2020, 6). However, as Jenae Cohn (2021) and Christine Fyfe (2014) demonstrate, students were engaging in learning activities, including academic reading, on smartphones and other devices long before the pandemic.⁵ Having an awareness of the contexts in which students learn is vital for educators if we are to create accessible learning materials that all students can engage with. Talis Elevate can be accessed on a range of devices, including smartphones, which meant students could access and interact with the collaborative reading activities during and beyond seminars regardless of what device they were using.

However, access to technology is not the only barrier some students – and educators – face when learning online. Internet access has also been an issue (Barber et al. 2021, 65), one that has negatively impacted some of the students I taught in *Playing Parts*. For example, some students were unable to access MS Teams on several occasions throughout the module due to internet connectivity issues, hindering their learning by preventing them from participating in the synchronous seminar that week. In these instances, Talis Elevate provided a means for students to engage in seminar discussions asynchronously by enabling them to access, respond, and add to the group's annotations on the sources by logging into Talis Elevate once they had a more stable internet connection.⁶ Talis Elevate was integral to this process; as a low bandwidth activity, it enabled students to engage in collaborative reading activities without incurring expensive broadband or mobile data costs. As a result, Talis Elevate helped to create an accessible learning community by making it possible for students to access the seminar discussions and engage actively with the readings both synchronously and asynchronously.

⁵ There are various reasons why students engage in digital reading for their learning, including accessibility and customisability (McNaught and Alexander 2014), convenience (Walton 2014), portability (Marques 2012), collaborative annotation (O'Brien and Voss 2011), as well as affordability and environmental concerns (Grajek 2013). There are, however, issues associated with digital reading, such as eyestrain and reading fatigue, distraction, and surface – rather than deep – reading (Casselden and Pears 2020). I follow Cohn in advocating for educators to embed digital reading literacies into the curriculum to teach students to be more effective and critical digital readers, which can help to overcome these issues and enhance student learning. In *Playing Parts*, I used Talis Elevate as a platform to model 'deep readings' of literary texts, as well as to engage students in collaborative reading activities that enabled them to develop their own digital reading literacies and critical analysis skills.

⁶ It should be noted that all students were encouraged to engage with sources on Talis Elevate beyond synchronous seminars to promote deeper engagement with the subject matter; as a result, some students interacted with sources on Talis Elevate asynchronously even when they attended the seminar for that week.

The ability to access resources on Talis Elevate before and after scheduled seminars additionally benefited students who had to miss seminars due to illness or time differences (i.e. living in another time zone), as well as students whose first language is not English. Students generally appreciated Talis Elevate for creating opportunities to access and interact with the sources within and outwith seminars at their own pace, especially because it gave them ‘time to think about ideas rather than being put on the spot’ (as one student reported in the anonymous feedback form). The accessibility of Talis Elevate not only empowered students to participate in critical discussions of literary texts, but also boosted their confidence by providing more time and space to process ideas before contributing them to live discussions on MS Teams following the collaborative annotation activities. Taken together, these instances demonstrate the tool’s potential to promote critical pedagogic practices by enabling educators to centre the individual needs and circumstances of diverse students when designing seminar activities, thus addressing some of the institutional and social barriers to online learning such as unequal access to technology.

2. Inclusion

As a module, *Playing Parts* encourages students to consider *who* speaks in the literary texts and *whose* perspectives are silenced or absent. How these power dynamics play out in wider society was integral to seminar (and lecture) discussions. These issues are also important for me, as an educator who is guided by critical pedagogic principles, to think about in terms of considering who speaks during seminars and, crucially, who feels empowered to speak. As Nancy Fraser argues in relation to social justice more broadly, ‘[o]vercoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction’ (2009, 16). This point applies to higher education and is crucial for the creation of inclusive learning communities.

Talis Elevate is, by design, well-suited to overcoming some of the barriers that hinder student participation and interaction. One feature on Talis Elevate that has been invaluable in this regard, particularly for quiet and socially anxious students, is anonymous commenting. Students have the option to annotate sources publicly and anonymously in the ‘class comments’ section; at the same time, students are also able to use the ‘private notes’ section to annotate the documents independently, which only they can view. The ability for students to *choose* how they annotated sources alleviated the pressure that some students experienced when communicating with others during seminars, creating a more inclusive learning environment that supported student participation in several ways. For example, in anonymous feedback at the end of the module, multiple students praised Talis Elevate for enabling them to feel part of the learning community without needing to attach their names to their annotations; the tool was also commended for empowering students to share and gain feedback on their ideas without having to speak publicly during whole group discussions on MS Teams, in the process helping to validate and expand their knowledge through

anonymously engaging in critical conversations with others in the wider group. Talis Elevate was instrumental in creating an inclusive community in which students were able to participate in seminars, as it enabled them to take ownership over the means through which they communicated their ideas and engaged in discussions.

The potential for students to comment anonymously, in turn, alleviated some of the anxieties I experienced at the start of the pandemic surrounding student participation (i.e. not always being able to see students to monitor engagement). I could view comments and use the analytics page to gauge who interacted with the sources. If students were not actively engaging with sources on Talis Elevate, I could reach out to them privately and offer support to encourage participation. Talis Elevate taught me that students need not be 'visible' on camera to be actively engaging in learning. There are other activities that can be used to promote active participation, such as collaborative reading activities on Talis Elevate. Given ongoing debates surrounding visible participation and camera usage in online teaching and learning (Finders and Muñoz 2021), I was surprised at how many students added comments publicly on Talis Elevate and chose to speak on microphone and/or camera during synchronous discussions on MS Teams.⁷ Talis Elevate played an important role in creating an inclusive learning community in which students felt confident to speak on microphone and/or camera. It provided them with more time to process their ideas during small group close reading activities and space to develop their knowledge by reading other people's annotations, building their confidence to discuss and debate their ideas more widely during the whole group discussions on MS Teams. In doing so, Talis Elevate empowered students to speak and to share their ideas with others, demonstrating the potential of the tool to promote critical pedagogic practices that produce more equitable, inclusive, and dialogic learning environments.

3. Shifting the teacher-student power dynamic

Talis Elevate opened up spaces for democratic and dialogic critical pedagogic practices during seminars by empowering students to share their thoughts through collaborative reading and annotation activities. By using Talis Elevate to add and respond to comments on shared documents, students were able to co-create knowledge and help shape discussions about the readings. As a result, my role in the seminars was to facilitate and participate in, rather than dominate, discussions by posing questions, offering my own (subjective) interpretations of sources, and prompting further analysis when necessary. Students

⁷ I did not enforce a camera or microphone policy for online seminars on MS Teams; such policies could prevent some students from engaging in discussions for various reasons, including lack of reliable internet connection, social anxiety, privacy concerns, and cognitive overload. Instead, I provided students with the opportunity to choose their preferred communication method, e.g. speaking on microphone, camera, and/or instant messaging via the Chat function on MS Teams.

responded well to this more dialogic and democratic approach to teaching and learning, as it allowed them to debate and develop ideas in conversation with one another. Talis Elevate encouraged students to take ownership of their learning and to become active participants in knowledge creation, which enhanced their critical thinking skills and helped them to prepare for their assessments in which they were required to present arguments about the primary texts.⁸

4. Diversifying knowledge

The potential for all students to engage in discussions via Talis Elevate meant conversations were more reflective of the diverse learning community. The diversity of the group, in turn, encouraged students to diversify their knowledge of the literary texts, as well as the wider social issues explored within them, by providing them valuable insight into multiple approaches to reading and interpreting the subject matter. Students could share their perspectives and learn new ones by reading and engaging with the annotations of their peers – a democratic and dialogic process that, as I have argued, is key to critical pedagogies. The opportunity to encounter different perspectives through critical pedagogic practices has broader social implications, as it encourages students to move beyond what Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) calls ‘single stories’ of people, places, and issues in literature and society more generally. As Adichie demonstrates, ‘single stories’ in literature can result in critical misunderstandings and harmful stereotyping by causing readers to make generalised assumptions about heterogeneous groups of people in literary texts and, by extension, society.

As part of my critical pedagogic practice, I spoke openly with students about the importance of engaging in critical discussions that resist homogenising groups of people in order to move beyond ‘single story’ perceptions of subject matter (and to be critical of instances whereby assigned authors and poets present one-sided cultural representations that reinscribe harmful stereotypes). Students were encouraged to consider the complexities and nuances of identities and issues through set discussion questions, which prompted them to identify multiple themes and perspectives when annotating the sources on Talis Elevate. For instance, in one collaborative reading activity, students debated whether Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* (1982) upholds or challenges gender and class stereotypes. In another activity, they engaged in critical discussions about race and identity in Fatimah Asghar’s ‘Map Home’ (2018), concluding that the crossword form of the poem reflects the multiplicity of identities in the context of immigration. These conversations took place in breakout rooms during small group collaborative reading activities on Talis Elevate, through which the groups responded to question prompts by adding their arguments and reflections as annotations on the shared documents. The annotations were visible to everyone in the seminar group, creating opportunities for students to view texts and issues from multiple perspectives. In the above instances, Talis Elevate was integral to the promotion of critical pedagogic teaching and

⁸ For further critical discussion on the power dynamics of collaborative annotation activities, see Brown and Croft (2020).

learning practices by encouraging students to transcend – and contest – ‘single story’ narratives that perpetuate harmful stereotypes of perceived group homogeneity, precisely by enabling them to read other people’s annotations and interpretations of social issues within texts.

Inspired by critical pedagogy, I encouraged students during the aforementioned activities to consider their own positionalities and how personal experiences impact our approaches to reading literature. The attention to our own subject positions not only resulted in multiple interpretations of social issues in literature and contemporary society, but also empowered students ‘to find their voice’ – to borrow hooks’ words – and employ it as a critical lens through which to read texts, share ideas, and diversify their knowledge by encountering additional perspectives contributed by others. Talis Elevate was appropriate for this task, since it enables students to annotate the same document and thus records multiple interpretations in one space, which students can return to when exploring these issues further in assessed essays. Students appreciated the ability to read their peers’ interpretations, with several students reporting that it helped them to expand their knowledge of the literary texts and think critically about a range of social issues such as classism, racism, and misogyny. The enhanced awareness of social issues and ability to approach subjects from multiple angles via collaborative annotation activities on Talis Elevate encouraged students to become critically engaged citizens, precisely by fostering respect for differences and promoting critical reflection on social inequalities in literature and the societies in which we live.⁹

Limitations and opportunities of using Talis Elevate for student learning

Upon reflection, there are limitations surrounding my approach to integrating Talis Elevate into Playing Parts, including accessing readings after seminars, limited types of activity, and potential information and technology overload. In what follows, I outline these issues and offer some solutions that can enrich students’ learning experiences when engaging with Talis Elevate.

1. Provide clearer instructions

Some students struggled to access documents on Talis Elevate after seminars, though they were able to do so via the hyperlinks in seminar worksheets in the designated MS Teams channel. Going forward, I will provide clearer instructions on how to access and annotate documents asynchronously to avoid further confusion and ensure all students can revisit readings in their own time should they wish to deepen their understanding of the subject

⁹ See Bali et al. (2020) for further analysis of the social justice implications of collaborative annotation activities.

matter. From a critical pedagogic perspective, this approach will help to remove barriers to learning and create a more equitable educational environment by enabling all students to access and interact with the materials at their own pace outside of scheduled seminars.

2. Diversify reading activities

In *Playing Parts*, Talis Elevate was primarily used for collaborative reading activities during synchronous seminars, though there were occasions where students interacted with Talis Elevate asynchronously. Through these activities, I observed a marked improvement in students' analytical abilities both during seminar discussions and in written assessments; nonetheless, students would benefit from engaging in more collaborative reading tasks outside of synchronous seminars. Asynchronous collaborative reading activities have the potential to enhance students' knowledge of the subject matter and foster an even greater sense of community, which helps to create an environment where students feel more comfortable engaging in conversation and co-constructing knowledge together (Adams and Wilson 2021, 251). Going forward, I plan to follow in Wood, East, and Williard's footsteps by setting more asynchronous reading activities to deepen students' understanding of the reading and support them in preparing for seminar discussions (2021, 67). These activities will, in turn, enable me to develop my critical pedagogic approach to teaching by creating further opportunities for students to share their ideas and become active participants in knowledge-making processes. Such activities will vary according to the intended learning outcomes, i.e. they may be undertaken independently or collaboratively.

I am also interested in diversifying the types of media that students read and annotate on Talis Elevate. For *Playing Parts*, students collaboratively annotated poems and extracts from plays on Talis Elevate during synchronous seminars. However, I have set asynchronous collaborative reading activities in another module within the Masters in Higher Education Practice (Keele University) that involved annotating a journal article and short video on Talis Elevate. The ability for students to *choose* what type of document they read and interact with (e.g. text and/or video) has the potential to promote critical pedagogic practices not only by enabling students to take ownership of their learning but also by ensuring that learning materials are tailored to the individual learning needs and preferences of diverse learners. It also exposes students to the various types of academic sources available for them to access and engage with in their own work, helping to promote equitable academic literacy development.

3. Avoid technology overload

The increased use of technology in higher education during the pandemic created many learning opportunities, but also posed challenges in terms of information and technology overload. *Playing Parts* was, to my knowledge, the first module at Keele into which Talis

Elevate was embedded, meaning that it was a new tool for most students.¹⁰ While students valued the ability to use Talis Elevate for their learning, they had to invest time into learning how to use it before they could engage with it in meaningful ways for their studies. I provided students with written instructions, a short video tutorial, and collaborative reading activity for them to work through as part of the first asynchronous lecture, with the aim of streamlining training and familiarising them with Talis Elevate as a learning tool without taking too much time to complete. These instructions were appreciated by many students, especially for supporting their early use of Talis Elevate. Yet, time is a resource that not all students have equal access to, meaning some students may not have the capacity within their workloads to learn new technology such as Talis Elevate in their own time. Upon reflection, my decision to deliver training through asynchronous activities may have exacerbated time-related pressures for some students – particularly those with competing priorities – and prevented them from engaging in necessary training, both of which run counter to the critical pedagogic principles explored throughout this article. In the future, I plan to provide training on Talis Elevate during scheduled sessions where possible. This approach promotes equitable access to training and creates equal opportunities for students to use the tool for their learning, enabling me to develop my critical pedagogic practice in ways that better account for the needs and circumstances of diverse learning communities.

However, further issues arise when considering students will undoubtedly have to learn how to navigate additional tools for other modules, which could cause some students to feel overwhelmed by the amount of technology they have to learn about in addition to learning module content. To avoid overloading students with technology and adding to the aforementioned workload issues, educators can work in partnership to integrate the same technology across their modules and thus reduce the amount of training students need to undertake. Talis Elevate presents an exciting opportunity in this regard, since it allows for a wide range of activities and media that will enable educators to adopt the tool without compromising module aims. Students were enthusiastic when using Talis Elevate throughout *Playing Parts* and wanted to use it for their learning in other modules, which demonstrates the value of educators working together to embed Talis Elevate into their modules across programmes and the university more widely.

Conclusion

¹⁰ I used Talis Elevate to engage students in asynchronous reading activities for one session on the Masters in Higher Education Practice course in November 2020, which I was invited to teach as a guest lecturer. However, Talis Elevate was not used again on the module that academic year. Talis Elevate will be piloted at Keele University in September 2021, creating opportunities for educators and students across the institution to use it for teaching and learning.

This article has reflected on the opportunities and challenges that came with the emergency transition to online teaching and learning in a first-year core English Literature module during the COVID-19 pandemic, using critical pedagogies as a lens through which to explore these issues. In doing so, I advocated for the use of the collaborative annotation tool Talis Elevate to promote critical pedagogic practices that facilitate active learning and critical discussions surrounding patterns of inequality in literature, education, and wider society. Engaging students as active participants in knowledge-making processes not only creates more democratic learning communities but also enhances their abilities to think critically; in both instances, Talis Elevate, when used for critical pedagogic purposes, facilitates critically engaged collaborative reading activities that not only prepare students for the remainder of their academic studies but also for life outside of university.

There is a lot of educational technology at our disposal, which can be overwhelming for educators and students. By using technology intentionally and with learning goals at the forefront of our minds, educators can ensure that technology *enriches* rather than *hinders* meaningful teaching and learning experiences. Educational technology, as with any learning activity, needs to be approached critically, which involves thinking about *why* a particular activity is best undertaken on Talis Elevate (or another tool) and *who* will benefit from engaging in *this activity on this platform*. As I have demonstrated in this article, Talis Elevate enables educators to place people and pedagogy at the heart of annotation activities, which helps to create inclusive learning communities that meet the needs of all students and empowers them to find their critical voices. Students responded well to the use of Talis Elevate for their learning and were eager for it to be embedded into other modules. I look forward to working in partnership with students and educators in the future to continue our shared exploration of using Talis Elevate to create more just classrooms and societies.

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