Social reading
Under the covers

History of the project
One of the key affordances of e-reading platforms is the social reading environments they provide. Highlighting and annotating text is a standard feature in all e-reading devices. We are interested in exploring how these comments and highlights can be shared socially within the e-reading platform and how social learning applications, in effect, provide a space in which discussions about the text and close analysis of it can take place inside the text. We wanted to use this new environment for sharing, discussion, and collaboration inside the text to provide new ways of supporting students, from all parts of the physical ability and achievement spectrum, in their engagement with books and their close reading of them.

In the 2012-13 academic year, Alison, Zoa, and Cath began experimenting with social reading in a second-year English Literature module: A2E5205 Introduction to Critical and Cultural Theory. It is fair to say that in this first year of experimentation, we were very much figuring things out as we went along. Our understanding of the technical and pedagogical aspects of e-reading and social reading was limited at first and emerged through a process of trial and error. It was only with the assistance of students who participated in the experiment that we were able to really understand what social reading might mean and how it might work. In several instances, it was only through the students’ nous and tenacity that technical solutions and workarounds were identified. It was this collaborative relationship—between academic tutors, librarians and students—that ensured these early experiments in e-reading and social reading were so successful.

Literature review
In medieval times, shared annotation referred to as margalla was a common practice amongst scholars (Wolfe, 2002). This custom diminished with the rise of the printing press and the ready availability of books for individual purchase. Notes made within books are usually done for personal use rather than group discussion. In the advent of Web 2.0 technologies such as e-annotation tools, the use of collaborative learning environments as critical forums for debate. Social annotation (SA) technology (Hylighter, Diigo, EDUCOSSM, eMargin, DigeRite etc) have been used in educational settings (Su et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2010; University of Leicester, 2012). These tools usually contain three features: annotations, highlights and a collaborative online platform (Novak, 2012, p. 40). The development of e-readers, such as the Kindle and Kindle App, means that readers can also share highlights and notes with fellow readers. This can now be done outside the context of the text.

Several studies have been conducted to investigate whether the introduction of these technologies have stimulated the development of higher order skills such as critical thinking and analysis (Johnson et al., 2010; Noelleinen et al., 2005). The tools have a positive effect, although further study should be carried out on students’ annotation behaviours and assess whether the use of the tools had lead to an increased motivation to learn (Novak et al., 2012). The Itagginana project examined the technological affordances of the tools. Feedback from students indicates the most important affordances were offered by eMargin with the top three being having the facility to read others’ comments; write your own comments as well as being able to see what others had highlighted.

Reference list
University of Leicester (2012) Itagginana blog. Available at: https://sites.google.com/site/tagginnana/ [Accessed 24 August 2012].

Future plans and possible funding
We have applied for external funding from the Higher Education Academy to support further work on this project. This project aims to identify how social reading may offer an effective means of supporting students in the development of their critical literacy through social reading. To do this it focuses on the principle of folksonomy: the practice of collaboratively categorizing and annotating content. In the context of social reading, this enables students to collaboratively annotate texts (which in the discipline of English literature are principally primary texts) in order to discuss and closely analyse them. The shared and open nature of this social reading environment allows students from across the achievement and physical ability spectrum to work together, thereby creating organic and authentic peer learning environments, while also being guided, supported and challenged by their tutors and librarians.

If funded, the project will work with students as partners as mentors and consultants. While tutors and librarians will bring specific expertise to a social reading environment, ultimately the only people who can identify why, how, where and when social reading can be of benefit to student learning is students themselves.