Reviewing Books

Scholars in all areas are called on to review books in their specialties. Although reviewing new books in a field provides a way to keep up with the growing literature and so may be rewarding, it is time consuming and a task that many scholars avoid. Yet if more scholars in education produced more and better book reviews, the field would benefit from these early analyses of the potential of new books. The availability of brief, carefully crafted reviews allows members of a field to deal with the increasing volume of books being prepared and published.

Perhaps if there were a more general understanding of the strategy for providing a scholarly review of a new book, there would be greater willingness to prepare reviews. With this in mind, I will consider the basic elements of a book review. There can be as many approaches to reviewing a book as there are reviewers. In what follows, I do not mean to constrain reviewers from approaching the review in their own unique way; I only want to outline an approach that will work for most readers, and particularly for those scholars asked to prepare their first review.

A review of a new book in a field of study should begin with basic descriptive information about the book. This information includes the title, author or authors, city of publication, publisher, year of publication, price, and total number of pages. This, of course, is followed by names and affiliations of the authors of the review. This information allows readers to locate a book if they decide to read it.

Following such introductory material, the review should provide the reader with a description of the elements of the book. These elements might include the structure of chapters and sections as well as an overall sketch of the topics covered. This material may constitute a considerable portion of the review, depending, of course, on the structure of the book under review. Reviewers should keep in mind that one service they are providing is a quick and relatively easy way for readers of the review to understand the ground covered in the book. This should help readers determine whether they wish to read the entire book or a portion of the book themselves.

In addition to describing the organization of the content in the book, reviewers may also offer some discussion of the intellectual tradition in
which the book is rooted. This will allow readers to know how the author of the book has located and interpreted his or her contribution. In addition to the theoretical orientation of the author in the book, in the case of books reporting on empirical investigation, reviewers should be sure to discuss the major methods employed in the studies covered in the volume.

Many reviewers conclude the discussion of the contents of a book by providing a summary of the book’s contribution to the field. Books differ in the nature of the contribution they make. Some books contribute to new knowledge; others summarize existing knowledge and place it in a perspective; still others do both. Books may also apply the unique perspective or voice of an author to a particular set of issues or questions. Readers will find it useful to know what a particular book is trying to accomplish along these lines.

A book review that is descriptive may conclude at this point. Many short reviews provide these concise descriptions of a book, and they are very helpful for scholars trying to keep informed about a broad variety of new materials.

Book reviews often go beyond the description of the contents of the book to provide some assessment of the effectiveness of the presentation and its likely impact on the field. Reviewers sometimes ask whether the reviews published by a journal can or must be critical. Journals differ in their approach to this question, with some seeking reviews that are analytic without being overtly critical and others interested in more critical readings of the books under review. Evaluative sections of book reviews take different forms depending on the nature of the book.

Books that present new empirical evidence require reviewers to pay attention to methodological issues and to let the reader know how sound the research actually is. The evaluative criteria applied by reviewers in these cases is quite similar to the criteria used in reviewing empirical research reports submitted to academic journals. Reviewers assess the breadth and depth of the evidence, the care with which it was assembled, and the connection between the available evidence and the conclusions drawn.

Sometimes authors use book projects to develop and refine their views on an established research base or to redefine the meaning of previously assembled evidence. Books that provide a new perspective on previously published evidence challenge the reviewer to understand both the evidence and the interpretation being offered, and often require the reviewer to be aware of major debates and issues in a field. In such cases reviewers can endorse or critique an author’s position, and in the latter case may even offer an alternative interpretation of the evidence.

Books that center on new theoretical ideas and aspire to influence investigators to redirect or reshape future inquiries call on the reviewer to comment on the degree to which such attempts to influence others are
sound and worthy of consideration. Readers will want to know if the reviewer was persuaded by the author’s presentation.

Certain kinds of books present reviewers with special difficulties. For example, edited volumes require reviewers to deal with multiple authors presenting often disparate chapters. When these edited volumes are handbooks or large compilations, the task of the reviewer is even more difficult as he or she tries to capture a lengthy text prepared by many authors in a short review. The reviewer’s critical analysis may lead to different assessments of different chapters and sections, and readers will want to know which aspects of the collection are strong and worthy of attention and which are less impressive.

Reviewers are sometimes invited to prepare essay reviews—longer discussions of individual books, collections, or edited volumes, or even of sets of related books on a topic. Essay reviews allow reviewers considerably more latitude for discussion primarily because they typically are longer. For example, while a regular book review might run 700 to 1,000 words, an essay review might exceed 5,000 words. The essay review form allows the reviewer to develop ideas at greater length and provide additional material and perspective.

There are some fundamental issues that reviewers should understand about the process by which editors issue invitations to review books. Editors typically select for review only a small subset of the books published in a discipline in any one year. The large volume of new books means that editors exercise judgment about which books deserve to be brought to the attention of their readers and further judgment regarding the length for the invited review.

When asked to prepare a review, the reviewer can assume that the editor has reached at least a preliminary conclusion that the work has something to offer. This does not mean that the book is beyond criticism, for most editors select books for review based on limited information supplied by publishers or authors. The first judgment that a scholar makes after agreeing to review a book and beginning to examine it is to determine whether it merits a review as the invitation suggests and whether the length of the review suggested by the editor is appropriate. Reviewers may decide that the book does not deserve to be reviewed either because inspection reveals it to be seriously flawed or on a topic of little importance to most scholars working in an area. Reviewers may also decide that the book deserves more or less review space than the editor suggested.

If a reviewer determines that the book assigned should not be reviewed or that the length of the review suggested by the editor is inappropriate, the reviewer can contact the editor and recommend an alternative course of action. Although the editor may face certain constraints that make it impossible to honor the suggestion of the reviewer, it is often possible to
change the terms for the review before it is actually prepared. Of course, if afterward the review evolves to be a different length than agreed to by the editor and reviewer, then the author can only alert the editor to this development when submitting the review and hope that the editor can deal with the change.

Reviewing books is truly a service to the community of scholars. Those who prepare careful reviews should be commended for their efforts. If all of us take the time to review books now and then, the resulting catalog of reviews will offer an efficient entree into our growing literature.

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