

Ongoing Forum: Using Book Reviews as a Teaching Tool – University of Minnesota – Twin Cities, Department of History, History 8015 Scope and Methods of Historical Studies

Professor Ann Waltner (with input from students in History 8015, University of Minnesota, fall 2015)

The book reviews which follow are the first installment of a series of 14 book reviews written in the context of “Scope and Methods of Historical Studies,” a required course for first-year history graduate students which I taught at the University of Minnesota in the fall of 2015.

I structured a set of assignments to prepare students to produce publishable reviews. I first asked them to read five book reviews (of their choice) and post a paragraph on the class website about what made a good book review. After the students selected the books they were to review (which were by and large selected from a list I provided), I assigned a second reader to each book to serve as an “expert” peer reviewer. I did this at least in part because I knew I would not have time to read all fourteen books within the fairly tight time frame I had set and I wanted each student to have feedback from someone who had read the book. We devoted an entire two and a half hour class period to peer review; students received feedback from their “expert” reader as well as from other students. I also gave the students extensive comments, which focused on sharpening arguments and making the reviews more reader-friendly. Several students came by my office to discuss process of writing the reviews. I graded a “final” version of the reviews which took into account the comments from their peer reviews as well as my comments. I did one more round of editing before I sent the reviews to Professor Liang.

The book review assignment was productive in a number of ways. The initial assignment of reading and writing about book reviews provoked students to think critically about what a book review is and does. In general there were no surprises: students agreed that a good book review summarized the argument of the book and placed the book in a historiographic context. There was consensus that a good review is concise and clear. Many of them commented that a good review should enable the reader to know whether or not the book under review was worth reading. But reading the reviews did raise some questions in the students’ minds. How critical should a reviewer be? How much of him or herself should a reviewer insert in the book review? The question of how a reviewer, especially a junior scholar, should articulate criticisms of a book in a way that is thoughtful and respectful remained one we discussed throughout the process of writing and revising.

The peer reviews were an important stage in the process of revising. The strategy of assigning “expert” readers was particularly effective. Students reported that feedback from someone who had read the book was enormously useful. One student commented that it was particularly useful to have a reader who was not an expert in the field: the non-expert questions pushed him to clarify points in the review. Another student wrote “I struggled with how to work with unfamiliar material and having an informed viewpoint was really the only way forward.”

Students also found the experience of being a peer reviewer to be useful, in some cases surprisingly useful. They commented that seeing their peers' strengths and weaknesses was helpful to them in structuring their own reviews. And more than one student suggested that it was useful to see how their peers struggled in writing book reviews. It made the process of writing more transparent.

The process of peer review also enhanced the collaborative atmosphere of the classroom.

The most important outcome of the assignment, though, is happening on these pages as you read the reviews. As the students were writing the reviews, they were thinking about you, the readers, and that gave a different value to the process of writing. Most student writing is seen only by the instructor; sometimes it is read by classmates. This sort of writing gives students the skills to develop ideas, to hone writing skills. But it is an exercise which communicates only within a limited circuit. We are training students to communicate, to interact with a larger scholarly world, to understand how to express themselves effectively. There is no better way to learn how to write for an audience than to do it, and to do it in the context of a classroom, with input from classmates and an instructor.