

REVIEWING FOR *JTW*

EVINCING CRITICISM AND COLLEGIALITY IN SCHOLARLY REVIEWS

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I am writing to invite you to consider writing a review for the *Journal of Teaching Writing* and to introduce myself as the incoming Reviews Editor. I wish to begin by thanking our editor, Professor Kim Brian Lovejoy, for his generous invitation and this opportunity. Also, I thank my immediate predecessors, Professors Janis Haswell and Kay Halasek, for their fine work as well as the review authors and the *JTW* editorial staff for their important contributions to the journal. These colleagues, especially the review authors, do vital work for our profession. My work here, according to Professor Lovejoy, is to explain my vision and offer advice for potential, and perhaps returning, review authors. I am tasked with offering some ideas and strategies for writing your review—“a piece . . . that gives readers an overview of [my] plans as the new Reviews Editor.”

In preparation, I have done some research on the Internet and within the pages of the *Journal of Teaching Writing*. I am taken by The University of North Carolina’s capacious definition that “[a] review is a critical evaluation of a text, event, object, or phenomenon.” They argue that “[a]bove all, a review makes an argument,” and that “[t]he

most important element of a review is that it is a commentary, not merely a summary.” The major takeaway is that a well-written review “allows you to enter into dialogue and discussion with the work’s creator and with other audiences.” Certainly, dialogue and discussion are worthy goals. Of course, with published reviews, that discussion takes place in public view, and can become influential, even impactful. People will be reading your review and will be deciding what to believe about the work under discussion based, in part, by what you write. Since the spotlight will be on and focused, journal readers will need to contemplate and trust your reading and review of the work. That inspires me to share some ideas for formulating and composing your review.

For one thing, *I hope that you will consider the work’s pertinence to teaching writing*. As you formulate your review, think about the readers’ end(s). Ask yourself, why should they read the work and how might it help them become more effective, more intentional tutors, teachers, or administrators? Let’s think about utility, something that is too often undervalued or disparaged. As a reviewer, you might ask yourself these questions:

- How might readers be able to use your review for their teaching, scholarship, and conversations with colleagues, parents, stewards of scholarly organizations, or the general public?
- What would you like readers to learn, critique, see, or see anew in the work?
- How might *JTW* readers use the work and mine its data, evidence, findings, or argument for their own pedagogical purposes?
- How might readers use the text in their own research projects? What new pedagogical/scholarly work might it inspire?
- What would you like readers to do, think about, consider or re-consider as they read your review and the work?
- How might the work relate to teacher and tutor preparation and renewal?

- What is the work’s relevance to graduate student pedagogical and professional development and scholarship?
- How does the work help us explain our work to the general public and policy makers?

As a reviewer, you can’t know exactly when readers will encounter your review—before or after reading the work—or what they know or have heard about the text and its author(s). However, we can consider our readers’ students, stakes, and goals. If you think about your readers’ colleagues and leadership teams, you might be inspired to consider passionately “interested parties” such as parents, administrators, and campus/policy decision-makers. That would be a good time to *consider what diversity does and could mean in the context of the work’s argument, its methodological approach, its data sample and findings*. Here are some possible approaches:

- You might glean the data, argument, and assumptions critically, re-mining them for oversights and slights as well as for inflations and myopia.
- You might suggest ways that the data could be redeployed and reassessed with an eye toward inclusion. That could mean drawing attention to “minor” passages or ideas that could be amplified and explored in further studies.
- You might scrutinize the Works Cited and notes for areas that warrant more inclusive discussion. This could include LGBTI students, different learning styles, race and ethnicity, gender, class, and student athletes, competing notions of ability as well as other things.
- Think of diverse learners, their strengths, learning styles, and needs. Tell us what the work you are reviewing could mean for, and how it could apply to, working class, elite learners, as well as English Language Learners who could encompass both of those categories (Leki).
- Ask yourself if there are other readers just like you or not like you? Tell us why, and perhaps how, you think

they should read the work in whichever ways you think they should scrutinize, interrogate, or interpret it.

You might also *consider the diversity of the texts you choose to review*. In “Reviews at a Crossroads,” former Reviews Editor Janis Haswell offers us advice on where to look. She recommends “that we expand our horizons” and argues that “scholarship has taken an important turn with the advent of Open Access Publishing—original research provided free (and immediately upon publication) to all on the internet” (120). Haswell also notes that “[i]t is incumbent upon print journals to acknowledge this shift as well as upon English teachers to be familiar with the potential and promise of OA materials . . .” (120). Haswell states that “[t]eachers of writing can learn a great deal from other disciplines in their use of this important opportunity” and that “[a] few Open Access initiatives in other fields may be of interest to researchers as well as teachers seeking access to a wider range of resources . . .” (121). She specifically mentions The WAC Clearinghouse and invites us to review “books from presses that have been ‘underrepresented’ in composition journals . . . publications from outside the U.S., despite active research (particularly in K-12) published in English by European university presses” (123-24). I support that perspective. It would be valuable to bring to public attention underrepresented ideas and works that some readers may be less liable to encounter elsewhere.

Imagining the specific somewhere in which writing instruction occurs could lead reviewers to *consider the work’s pertinence to the institutional contexts and working conditions in which students, staff, and teachers labor and learn*. In her “Writing a Review for *JTW*: Reflecting on Scholarship in the Field,” Kay Halasek argues for recognizing institutional variety and reviewing works that discuss literacy development “in and out of the classroom with students of all ages” (102). She explains that she “can make a small contribution to this P-20 collaboration by soliciting from colleagues reviews of books, webtexts, websites, and educational software that represent the needs and interests of all *JTW* readers, facilitating a greater understanding of theory and practice across these contexts” (102). I

think we would do well to pursue the provocations and possibilities Halasek outlines by examining how the work's ideas can become dialogic with the institutional contexts K-12 and beyond.

Along with diversity, you might discuss *how the work resonates with important topics in millennial education and academe*. Some topics may include: classroom instruction, online learning, writing centers as well as relevance to professional best practices and policy statements or educational and learning theory. Along with discussing the opportune moment, you might consider such perennial topics as undergraduate research, assessment, digital humanities, student persistence and retention, writing curricula, writing program and/or writing center administration, as well as writing across the curriculum initiatives. In discussing the work's relationship to these issues, you might offer ideas and caveats for colleagues, teachers, graduate students, librarians, advisors, staff, and administrators across units and departments. Some discussion points could include how well the work responds to the cultural moment or to longstanding, and perhaps understudied or unseen, issues related to teaching writing and literacy acquisition. For instance, does the work point to a current or emerging need? Does it amplify something previously ignored?

Whatever you do, recognize that you have influence as a reviewer and exercise due diligence. Kay Halasek discusses “the immense value of public review of scholarship—for individual readers and the profession as a whole” (101). She notes that “[t]hrough our collective assessments of one another’s work in book reviews and review essays, we engage one another in conversation about and collaborative assessment of the research that defines our field—determining the merits and contributions of our colleagues’ work.” Halasek illuminates the stakes by arguing that “[r]eviews ... create a space for the community to reflect on the field and its research” and that “[a]lthough certainly not equal to the driving force of publishers’ editorial boards that determine *what* gets published, book reviewers nonetheless provide a valuable descriptive and evaluative function about what *has* been published” (101).

To Halasek’s comments, I would add that well-written and well-argued reviews may be catalytic of what might or should be published

as reviewers inspire readers to begin their own research to build work they have read. Halasek explains the array of benefits reviews afford readers: “Composing reviews certainly provides reviewers themselves a means of keeping up with current thinking—but *reading* these reviews keeps all of us aware of theoretical and pedagogical innovations across that span of nearly twenty years when students sit in our classrooms” (102). According to her, “We all become better stewards of our students and their educations through greater understanding of the work that we all do—whether it’s in a reading readiness program, primary language arts classroom, first-year writing class, or an advanced writing seminar” (102). While I would be remiss not to mention that reviews are sometimes imbricated in vexed, complicated, and even shady aspects of academia, I would add that, as reviewers, we are poised to become better stewards of our colleagues as well.¹

As an influencer, you might *use your review to teach us*. If you remember our journal’s title and emphasis, you might see your review as a site of questioning and conversation and, most of all, of teaching. I invite you to take seriously your pedagogical role and to see yourself as a guide, instructor, and even an advisor for your readers. That means writing a review that is fair (e.g., quoting accurately and in context), judicious, and sensitive by attending to textual nuance.² That involves *evincing intellectual hospitality when you find something to praise and critique*. Our colleagues at UNC pose a set of questions for giving credit where it is due:

- How is the work’s argument set up?
- What support does the author give for her/his findings?
- What is the main idea of the work?
- What makes it good, different, or groundbreaking?

One of *The University of Southern California Research Guides* offers this important refinement for when a work appears groundbreaking. It states that “[t]he question of whether the book breaks new ground does not necessarily refer to some radical or overarching notion of originality in the author’s argument ... contemporary scholarship

in the arts or humanities is not about completely reorienting the discipline, nor is it usually about arguing a thesis that has never been argued before....” The message is that “[i]t is more likely that the author of a scholarly book will look at the existing evidence with a finer eye for detail, and use that detail to amplify and add to existing scholarship. The author may present new evidence or a new ‘reading’ of the existing evidence, in order to refine scholarship and to contribute to current debate. Or the author may approach existing scholarship, events, and prevailing ideas from a more nuanced perspective, thus reframing the debate within the discipline.” That nuanced discussion of value will, I hope, prove useful to your review.

How about offering criticism and in public view? We know they put effort into their work, yet there is no need to shy away from offering criticism when it is there to share. Some say offering criticism is a central “Law of Genre” (Derrida and Ronell) and the hallmark of a scholarly review. The Writing Center UNC offers this perspective: “You can offer agreement or disagreement and identify where you find the work exemplary or deficient in its knowledge, judgments, or organization.” They add that you can and should “... challenge an assumption, approach, or argument.” They advise us to “[be] sure, however, to cite specific examples to back up your assertions carefully.” The goal is always to “... present a balanced argument about the value of the book for its audience.” To me, that means being neither deliberately picayune (e.g., employing an “it’s all good” approach), nor blue sky in order to help readers.

Think of your review as evincing collegiality and criticism. While this may seem like antithetical advice, to be both generous and critical, I think we can do that by offering *JTW* readers our most thoughtful counsel about why a work is meritorious and where it falls short. I recommend that we see any criticism we advance as a service to our colleagues: peer, junior, senior, and future. We might also see that criticism as an act of feedback to authors, publishers, and schools who chose this book or digital source over others and who invested time, intellect, energy and other resources (e.g., paid leaves of absence and project subvention) to bring the work to public fruition. In short, I trust you to be both critical and conscientious, to critique

the work without necessarily castigating the project or author(s). As we offer criticism, let's strive for a tone and approach that is open, collegial, and receptive. Don't shy away from offering criticism. Just offer it with example and integrity. Speaking of collegiality, our colleagues at The Writing Center UNC offer us this important advice: "Review the book in front of you, not the book you wish the author had written. You can and should point out shortcomings or failures, but don't criticize the book for not being something it was never intended to be." Whatever criticism you advance, write as though you would read your review to the author(s)' faces and not magnify perceived flaws just for the satisfaction and dubious status of being critical in public.

As you review, ask yourself if there might be *something about appreciation within the criticism you offer*. Even if you disagree with the author, perhaps especially if you disagree with the author, try to see what reviewers and publishers saw in the project, if not the "finished" manuscript. If the work is not a complete success, perhaps there is discernible value in the attempt, if not the realization. Another way would be to explain the missed opportunities and leave bread crumbs for future studies and scholarship. You might enact a collegial turn by pointing out potential work that lies ahead for *JTW* readers to do.

One way to consider writing your review is *to engage in self-reflection*. I hope you will consider your situated reading and reader response to the work you are reviewing. Perhaps you have only read this text by that author? Maybe you know their scholarly contributions or have worked with them in professional contexts? Each has its own strengths and limitations and potential influence on your review. Eschew the idea of reviewer neutrality. You can be a reliable reviewer without being a dispassionate one. If you do that, be transparent. I hope you will consider putting something of yourself into your review by examining and revealing your investments. I am thinking of Michael Polyani's argument about the "personal coefficient" in *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. Here I invite you to consider your own preferences and biases and to disclose a bit so *JTW* readers can better understand your perspective. As you

reflect on your aversions and, perhaps more importantly, your alliances, you might consider these questions:

- What inspired you to write your review? What interested and still interests you?
- Think about your involvement with the argument and data: what attracted or distracted you?
- What were you looking to find in the work?
- If you were disappointed in the work, how did you feel when you did not find what you were looking for?
- Following that train of thought, what inspired you to look for that in the work anyway?
- How do your beliefs about what the author(s) should have done hold up under scrutiny and multiple or counter readings?

Personalizing your review is one way to “own” what you say publicly. Finally, if you could write the author(s) a note about revising or expanding their work, what would you say? You might consider concluding your review by asking questions of the author[s], readers, and publishers. You might offer suggestions and ideas for further work or projects.

You are welcome to contact me at jjanang@luc.edu. If you are interested in writing a review, please list your areas of interest and send me your CV. Thank you. I hope these ideas are helpful to you. While I cannot pledge to recommend every review for publication, I welcome the chance to hear from you.

Notes

¹Haswell elaborates on the professional stakes and politics of book reviews, stating, “Few of us who write or edit academic books will be recognized in *The New York Times Review of Books*, but we all hope to be reviewed in a scholarly journal” (119). She explains that “... a journal's review policy can enhance and solidify its reputation as being dedicated to a particular emphasis” and contribute to its branding (119). Haswell also points out that reviews may be imbricated in professional politics and author status: “We also know that books published by ‘big names’ in the field will always be reviewed,

sometimes by several journals, occasionally even twice by the same journal, whereas other books of equal merit by lesser-known scholars may never be reviewed....Note on Ominous Practice: And the decision not to review certain books is one of the ways our profession censures ideas and writers" (120).

²The UNC and USC web sites offer valuable ideas for formulating your review.

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