

Collaborative Book Reviews: Mentoring Students in Agroecology Courses

Introduction

Critical reviewing skills used to assess the value of books and literature papers are essential for students in agroecology and other disciplines. One traditional way of building this skill is to assign books to be read and reviewed, with these assignments evaluated and graded as one part of course requirements. Some students today challenge us with the idea that, "If it is not on the web, it does not exist!" Many of us with an academic background grew up frequenting the library, with endless opportunities of browsing the stacks and uncovering numerous books that broadened our education and contributed perspective to a thesis or dissertation. We remain committed to enticing students to follow this path, as well as the more common 'surfing the web' to come up with information. Although the web exploration is analogous to browsing the library, and probably more efficient, we insist that the classical book review assignment is one incentive to get students into the library – on line or in the physical building.

In an agroecology class two books are recommended for students to review: *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1962) for the farming systems and environmental impact part of the class, and *Fast Food Nation* (Schlosser, 2001) for the food systems part of the class. These classic books continue to provoke useful discussion in a class inhabited by mostly majors in Agronomy & Horticulture and in Natural Resources. For those who have read these books for another class, and would find the exercise repetitive, I allow them to choose another book that is relevant to the theme and use this as a substitute. In Spring, 2013 I had a number of books awaiting review, and decided to share this opportunity with select students who were identified from previous written exercises as perceptive, diligent and appropriately critical of the written word. I offered these students the chance to review a book that I would also review, and suggested that we combine the two and submit a co-written review for publication. There were eight books reviewed, and the reviews submitted for consideration by journals; seven have been accepted for publication. A literature review of what is important in book reviews, the process we used in class, and the comments of student co-authors about the results are summarized.

Methods

There are numerous ideas in the literature about the importance of quality reviews and guidelines for how to conduct such an exercise. This is an important skill for students to practice, since they will be continuously evaluating published information for veracity and relevance. Particularly important is the skill developed by graduate students prior to doing comprehensive literature reviews for a thesis or dissertation project. If such skills can be developed in classes prior to thesis work, students will be much better prepared to be critical analysts of what they read.

According to the Indiana University writing center, an ideal book review will describe the content of a book, and then analyze how well the writing achieves the purposes stated by the author, and finally the personal reactions of the one doing the review (Writing Tutorial Services, 2004). In describing personal opinions one can include comparisons to other books on the topic, the logical organization of the book, and the credibility of the author. One humorous account describes 'how not to write a review', quoting two scathing reviews of Keat's poetry, and refers to Aristotle in making the same telling points listed above that focus on what the book is about, then how the author describes that content, and then what the reviewer thinks about the review (Pinsky, 2011). Northedge (2005) considers critical thinking one of the key skills for academic success, and one that should be applied in analyzing and evaluating whatever we read in science. Several questions that are raised include:

- Is the argument coherent and is the sequence of presentation logical?
- Are the conclusions clear and do they flow from the analysis presented?
- Are there indications of bias or use of emotional appeal in the language used?
- How do the conclusions agree with or differ from others in the same field?

For reading critically, the same author (Northedge, 2013) offers a series of logical steps in the evaluation of academic texts, whether these are journal articles or books:

- First identify the arguments, and the author's main line of reasoning.
- Then analyze and criticize the argument. Are reasons sufficient? Is it logical? Is the style objective?
- Also assess the evidence. What types are presented and are they valid?
- What are the conclusions and are they supported by the evidence?
- Are alternatives presented? How does this report agree or disagree with other reports?

Results

Several agroecology students read and reviewed contemporary books on farming and food systems, and wrote reviews to submit to fulfill their class requirement. When they returned the books, I did a similar task and then combined the two reviews. There was some exchange between instructor and student as we rationalized differences between our interpretations, especially on how well the authors had met their stated objectives for each book and our personal opinions about the content and approach. Seven of the reviews have already been published since they were submitted after the end of spring semester, for example Avery and Francis (2013), Stewart and Francis, (2013), Pirog and Francis (2013), Yerdon and Francis (2013), and Roché and Francis (2013).

During the review process, including responses to editors, proofing galleys and providing copyright forms, I kept the students involved in each step. They uniformly expressed amazement at the rigor and organization of the submission and review process, and especially at the time involved in moving a publication through the steps needed to reach print. The students were also unanimous in their excitement at being involved in publishing work from their class assignment, and felt this was a valuable dimension of education that would contribute directly to their professional futures.

Conclusions

From this experiment in one semester, I conclude that sharing responsibility with students for writing book reviews is a mutually rewarding experience. Students gain practical skills in reading, analyzing and writing a review that will communicate with potential readers the value of acquiring a book to expand their general knowledge or improve specific professional expertise. The value to an instructor is the opportunity to work with mentoring students in new ways. The level of responsibility is raised when the joint review is intended for publication in a credible national or international journal. Such a win-win situation is the type we should pursue in academia.

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