THE ANATOMY OF A BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Few papers have been published that describe how authors go about writing book reviews. This article provides an account of the procedures used to write one specific book review. Examples are given to illustrate what is basically a three-stage procedure: making notes; creating a rough draft; and polishing the final version. Some comments on the language of book reviews are included.

INTRODUCTION

I usually read completely the books I am reviewing (so as to be sure that I do not misunderstand them), marking parts that I think are particularly meaningful. Then I start by saying what the book is about and the intended audience (since having this information first may allow readers who are not interested to skip the rest of the review, and readers who are interested to raise their attention). Next I outline how the topic is developed, as concerns facets of content and depth of treatment. Then I point out what are in my opinion the points of strengths and weaknesses of the book. Finally, I try to give a global evaluation of my appreciation and possible usefulness of the book. Finally I polish the form and try to bring it to the required length. This writing phase lasts usually around two hours. [1]

The example quoted above is one of the few accounts that I have been able to find that describe how authors go about writing book reviews. And, like some others, it is not very detailed [2]. In this article I provide a fuller account of how I

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wrote a book review in the hope that it might be more helpful for novice writers. This particular book review was perhaps a little unusual in that it was for a three-volume text containing over 1,700 pages [3], and I was allowed to write at a greater length than is normal for the journal concerned (*British Journal of Educational Technology*).

Essentially the process involved three main stages:

- reading, scanning and making notes about the text;
- writing an initial rough draft of the review; and
- editing and polishing this several times to produce a final version.

In this article I elaborate on these stages and provide illustrations of the notes, the early draft, and the final version. It is important to realize, however, that these illustrations are but snapshots taken at each stage. In reality, the notes were added to and amended during the writing of the draft, the rough draft was used as a basis for deciding about the order of the contents and the length, and the final version shown here was in fact the fifth version of what I termed the "final" version, as I am a compulsive editor.

The Aims of a Book Review

But first, what are the general aims of a book review? Miranda [4] suggests that the key features of successful reviews are those where the reviewer:

- evaluates the contribution of the text;
- sets the work in a larger, broader context;
- identifies the strengths and weaknesses or the arguments, and
- involves the reader in the discussion.

Table 1 suggests that readers seek different information in book reviews according to whether or not they are specialists in the Arts, the Sciences, or the Social Sciences. And such information, of course, depends in part upon the nature of the text being reviewed. Other authors have described book reviews in terms of the typical stages—or sequences—that authors use in finalizing them. Table 2 provides an example.

Writing the Review: Making Notes

Appendix 1 shows the notes I made on screen while initially trying to get to grips with the text. Some of these notes were made later than some of the others, but they were interspersed on screen with earlier ones according to where the topics covered were likely to be introduced in the review. Some ideas noted at this stage were not pursued and did not feature in the final text.

Table 1. Items that Should be Included in Book Reviews Chosen by Writers of Book Reviews, and in Rank Order[a]

Modal rating			
Arts	Soc. Sci.	Sci.	Item
1	1	1	Clear writing.
1	1	1	An early paragraph saying what the book is about.
1	2	2	A critique of the argument of the book.
2	1	2	An evaluation of the book's academic credibility.
2	1	3	An attempt to position the book in its historical context.
3	1	2	Information about the book's intended audience.
2	3	2	A comparison with other books in the field.
3	2	2	An assessment of the book's usefulness for its intended audience.
4/5	3	2	How well the text is supported by tables/diagrams/illustrations.
4	4	3	A chapter-by-chapter account of the content.
5	3/4	3	Information about the format (e.g., paperback).
5	4	3	Information/comment about the price.
5	4	3	Information about the length (i.e., page numbers).

[a]Each item was rated on a 5-point scale where 1 = highly valued, 3 = neutral, and 5 = not valued. Arts respondents, $N = 48$, Social Sciences, $N = 42$; Sciences, $N = 36$.

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The First Draft

Appendix 2 shows the first draft of the text (after some cleaning up and re-positioning of items). The word length (shown below the text) of 1,200 words was longer than that allocated by the journal (800-1,000 words) so some cutting—or editing and polishing—was required.

Creating the Final Version: Editing and Polishing

Appendix 3 shows the final version that I submitted to the journal's book reviews' editor. This final version was achieved through numerous overlapping steps. These involved:

Table 2. Rhetorical "Moves" in Scholarly Book Reviews

MOVE 1   INTRODUCING THE BOOK

Sub-function 1. Defining the general topic of the book
Sub-function 2. Informing about potential readership
Sub-function 3. Informing about the author
Sub-function 4. Making topic generalizations
Sub-function 5. Placing the book in its field

MOVE 2   OUTLINING THE BOOK

Sub-function 6. Providing a general view of the organization of the book
Sub-function 7. Stating the topic of each chapter/section
Sub-function 8. Citing extra-textual material

MOVE 3   HIGHLIGHTING PARTS OF THE BOOK

Sub-function 9. Providing specific evaluation

MOVE 4   PROVIDING GENERAL EVALUATION OF THE BOOK

Sub-function 10. Definitely recommending the book
Sub-function 11. Recommending the book despite indicated shortcomings
Sub-function 12. Neither recommending or disqualifying the book
Sub-function 13. Disqualifying the book despite indicated positive aspects
Sub-function 14. Definitely disqualifying the book

Source: Table based upon Motta-Roth [5] as presented by Nicolaisen [6]. Copyright 2002. Reproduced with permission of ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, CA.

- re-sequencing parts of the text to make it flow better;
- introducing new thoughts that occurred over time and which, in turn, led to more re-sequencing;
- deciding not to analyze the details of any one chapter in particular but to write only in general terms, and
- correcting details that I found on re-reading the text to be overstatements or erroneous.

The most typical activity at this stage was to print out separate revisions of the text to see how it read, and to see where further cuts and refinements might be made. Each of these printouts was edited by hand, and then corrected on screen and reprinted again at least five times. The whole procedure lasted several days—because, for me, writing book reviews is an enjoyable activity that I intersperse between other more mundane tasks.

The Language of Book Reviews

Book reviews provide classic examples of where academics evaluate the work of others, and use particular forms of language in which to do so [7]. Most reviews are generally positive, although there are some well-known negative ones (e.g., [8]). But the language used in such reviews can become a code: what is said is not always what is meant. Table 3 illustrates some of these common phrases and how they might be interpreted by their readers.

I have not attempted to analyze the book review presented in Appendix 3 in these terms because they are not the focus of my thinking when I write reviews. However, we might note the following phrases that might have a hidden message:

This blockbuster of a text	This is an enormous book
I hoped that I would learn	I didn't learn much about
One might expect	One lives in hope
And therein lies the rub	This is not what it seems
A grand recycling is going on here	This is a confidence trick

DISCUSSION

Most commentators on writing book reviews focus on the content and what they think is important for book reviews to contain (e.g., see [2, 4-6, 9]). Few comment on how reviewers write reviews. In this article, however, I have tried to do the latter. As noted above, the process of book reviewing for me typically follows the path outlined in this article:

- I make notes (or mark on the text) of possible points for inclusion in the review;
- I decide (because of space considerations) which points to include and which to leave out;
- I write a first draft that sequences this material and includes as many of the main points as possible to see how long my complete text is going to be;
- I then shorten this to the required length by cutting some points and re-sequencing the material; and
- I edit and polish the final text several times in order to make it more readable.

One thing I do not (or very rarely) do is to show the finished book review to colleagues before submitting it for publication. Maybe I should—for colleagues might suggest the need for clarifications, omissions, and additions. However, I prefer to think of reviews being a personal contribution rather than a shared one.

I do not know how much these procedures are typical of other reviewers. In 2006 I reported that over half of writers that studied in the arts (out of 48), the social sciences (out of 42), and the sciences (out of 36) claimed that the ways in which they wrote book reviews varied according to the book in question [2].

Table 3. Phrases in Book Reviews that Actually Mean Something Else

"This is a surprising book"
   This is much better than expected

"A mixed bag"
   Not much in this but one or two chapters worth thinking about

"A useful book for the library"
   Not very exciting

"The discussion is somewhat abstruse"
   I could not understand much of this

"For the most part this is a thorough, lucid, and well argued book but a few weaknesses can be noted"
   That's done the praise bit, now lets get down to the criticisms

"In my view more scholarly references would be better for the readers of this text than the par-boiled information referred to on web sites"
   This is a light weight text and/or MY scholarship is superior to that of the authors.

"The author has presented opposing views fairly, although instances of bias are detectable by the mission of some critical references"
   He has left out my key paper on . . .

"This is a useful account of unastonishing work"
   Oh dear

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In writing this particular book review there were two aspects that were unusual. First of all, the "book" itself comprised a three-volume set, and was much lengthier than that covered in a "normal" book review. And second, I was allowed more words than usual to accommodate this. This led me to adopt an unusual practice (for a book review) of starting with an opening "vignette." I worried a great deal over this. Did I have space for this? Should I start with something better known? Would a tale about 09/11 be more dramatic—surely e-collaboration was crucial there? But I wanted to involve my readers by making them think about something less well-known, and to draw them in to the review before they had time to switch off! A vignette is a popular tool for doing this in the introductions to academic articles [10] and in the articles of certain well-known journalists in the United Kingdom (e.g., [11, 12]).

Relatedly, where should I place the main criticisms of the text? These were given in paragraph 3 of the first draft but I moved them to form the penultimate paragraph in the final version. It seemed more appropriate to place them here so I could conclude the review more forcefully.

Finally, what worries me now when reflecting on the whole process, is that in creating this structure I actually said very little about the actual content of the text—which was remarkable for its voluminous coverage of complicated issues.

APPENDIX 1: Rough Notes (on Screen)

Kock, N. (Ed.) *E-Collaboration* [3]

Blockbuster

One in a series of some dozen similar collections produced by the publishers under the title of "Contemporary Research in Information Science and Technology."

3 volumes, Preface; Introduction by the editor; 8 sections; 125 papers; 1,730 pages; international authorship—26 nationalities—majority from USA. Collection of papers assembled from previous publications (book and journals) published by the same publisher in 2007 and 2008—a grand recycling?—that means that few of the references cited by the authors in these papers were published after 2004. Despite the claim in the preliminaries that "all work contributed to this book set is original material"

Definition: E collaboration is a short-hand term for "collaborations among individuals engaged in a common task using electronic technologies" p. 919. Such tasks can vary from students writing an essay to people producing a daily newspaper and to terrorists organizing vandalism.

Section titles:

1 Fundamental concepts and theories
2 Development and design methodologies
3 Tools and technologies
4 Utilization and applications
5 Organizational and social implications
6 Managerial impact
7 Critical issues
8 Emerging trends

Some papers in these sections are very long (over 30 pages) and some very short (under 4 pages).

Book the appropriate form for this?—a free institution wide online version, with additional and updated text, is available if you buy a copy of the book.

Each separate volume contains the preface, contents pages, and content index for the three volumes as a whole
  – quality of index? – content only – no name index – limited number of entries?

Running heads don't give volume and chapter numbers—which would help readers to find their way around this enormous work (as too might different colored covers for each volume).

No e-mail or electronic contact addresses for authors. No biographical information for authors although there is for the editor.

Check where papers appear—in books, journals?
Most papers from Kock's Encyclopaedia follow same format—they are short and include a list of key terms.

Interesting set of papers on group collaboration and decision making but largely in a managerial/business context.
See 1.8–1.11

Most articles are reprints from sources (N) previously published by this publisher.

So where to start? Much of the content of this book lies in the fields of computer science, electronic engineering, and management information systems. However, for purpose of this review I shall concentrate on those sections that are more directly relevant to education, to my own specialist interests, as well as ones of general background interest. The text opens with two pieces by the editor—a preface and an opening chapter—a basic definition of E-collaboration and its underlying concepts. The preface expands the meaning of the section headings, and summarizes their content.

Surprising omission—to me—is that when over 70% of the papers are written by two or more authors (the most being seven) there is little discussion of collaborative writing.

Add an opening vignette? How to get readers involved before they are turned off by the typical dull account of content. Is the one chosen appropriate? Maybe one on terrorism?

Procedure—scanning the text, selecting chapters with educational slant, sequencing to produce first draft, re-sequencing, checking, counting, correcting

errors/erroneous assumptions, work on one or two paragraphs as a time, spread over several days—at least 2 weeks—interspersed with other activities—thinking about it coming back fresh to polish.

Print out in one-and-a-half spacing to aid editing toward the end.

APPENDIX 2: The 1st Draft

Note paragraphs are numbered to facilitate comparison with the final version in Appendix 3.

1. In July 2009, in the UK, there was much discussion over the propriety of a national newspaper paying some of its journalists to hack into the private phones of well known people: indeed one had been sent to prison for listening to the phone calls of aides to the royal family. Does such activity demand electronic collaboration—the topic of this book? It surely does. E-collaboration in this text is a short-hand term for "collaborations among individuals engaged in common tasks using electronic technologies." Such a broad-based definition encompasses tasks that vary from students writing essays to terrorists organizing vandalism. And this is the problem. E-collaboration is so commonplace and so all pervasive that we have to talk about myriad representative examples and issues, rather than consider e-collaboration as a separate topic. It might be helpful, for example, to discuss some e-tools *per se* (such as *Google*) as collaborators, so that one person using them is in a sense collaborating, and then to discuss collaboration between two or more individuals using e-tools to enable their collaboration.

2. But this is not what *E-Collaboration* does. This blockbuster of a text uses the term e-collaboration in a variety of ways and it comes in three volumes containing 125 chapters totaling 1,730 pages, and costing $. The authors comprise 26 nationalities, although the majority are from USA.

The text is divided into the following eight sections:

1 Fundamental concepts and theories
2 Development and design methodologies
3 Tools and technologies
4 Utilization and applications
5 Organizational and social implications
6 Managerial impact
7 Critical issues
8 Emerging trends

Some papers in these sections are very long (over 30 pages) and some very short (under 4 pages).

3. This book is one in a series of some dozen similar multi-volume sets produced by the publishers under the title of "Contemporary Research in Information Science and Technology." And therein lies the rub. The papers in this book are not

original. All 125 of them have been assembled from some 50 previous books and journals published by the same publisher during 2004 and 2009, and approximately 30 of the shorter papers are from the *Encyclopedia of E-Collaboration* (2008) also edited by N. Kock. So, despite the claim in the preliminaries that "all work contributed to this book set is original material," this is not true. There is a grand recycling going on here. Furthermore, this means that very few of the references cited by the authors in their papers were published after 2005, and that current fashionable concerns—like the use of *Twitter* or *Tweets* in higher education do not figure.

4. The text opens with two pieces by the editor—a preface and an opening chapter—a basic definition of E collaboration and its underlying concepts. The preface expands the meaning of the section headings, and summarizes their content. Much of the content of this book lies in the fields of computer science, electronic engineering, and management information systems. However, for purpose of this review I shall concentrate on those chapters that are more directly relevant to education and to research—and these appear scattered throughout most sections.

5. Although there are chapters on computer supported collaborative learning scattered across the three volumes of the text, most of the chapters on the educational implications of e-collaboration focus on how e-collaboration is changing the nature of learning in school and university, both locally and internationally. Not only do learners, teachers, and administrators collaborate much more by using new technologies but the process itself produces unforeseen curriculum planning and organizational problems. E-collaboration suggests/implies a fundamental shift in the balance from education being handed down to education being personally acquired from the bottom up. Such a shift has implications for managers, planners and architects as well as for teachers and students. Some papers that illustrate this well . . . are 2.12, 4.13. 4.14, 5.12, 5.20, and 8.7. And X and Y 2.13/8.11 provide more specific examples in the field of graduate education.

6. Other topics of interest, with a direct relevance to education, are papers on individual and group blogging (3.10-3.13) wikis . . . 8.8 and virtual reality (3.15 & 3.21). Few papers present any actual data on these issues, but one or two do. One (3.22) provides some data on first-year university students' attitudes to these tools (in 2006). The authors found that wikis and discussion forums were quite popular, but that web blogs were not. Another paper presents data (7.2) on factors that promoted online discussions and collaborative learning among three groups of approx. 20 students each in a web-based course delivered by Blackboard. Somehow, the grand discussions that go on about these issues seem to go way beyond the data provided from such small studies.

7. Some other specific topics covered that are relevant to the educational field are those of learning styles (3.23) 5.12, cross-cultural studies (of which there are many), and gender issues (of which there were few –5.21). There are also several papers on foreign language learning (e.g., 7.1, 7.2, 7.3) but none on special needs.

There was some limited discussion about the changes to written communication brought about by instant messaging and multi-tasking (6.6) and the advent of collaborative writing systems/programs (6.15) but this struck me as missing an opportunity when over 70% of the papers in the book were written by two or more authors (the most being seven).

8. When I acquired this text I hoped that I would learn a good deal more about how people conduct research in this particular area, and to find some comparison studies reporting on the advantages and disadvantages of e-collaboration versus non e-collaboration (if such a thing exists these days). One might expect, for example, that there might be different obstacles to communication with face-to-face collaboration and e-collaboration, and that there maybe different outcomes. And, indeed this is discussed in paper no. But, although I did absorb a good deal about these issues while reading about how the authors of particular papers had gone about their tasks, I was disappointed in that few papers specifically addressed methodological issues. There were no papers, for example, on how to design electronic questionnaires, or how to analyze the data obtained from the reams of print-out collected in electronic studies. There *was* one paper of interest in this regard that did discuss network analysis (3.6) and one other (8.3) that discussed using the net to carry out ethnographic studies—although I can't commend the ugly term "Nethnography."

9. The three volumes of this text are attractively produced and have some useful features. The full contents page, the preface and the (limited) index, for example, are provided in each volume. However, it would help the reader if electronic addresses were provided for each author and the running head for each paper indicated its chapter, section and volume number. And it might also be useful if the three volumes came in separately colored covers rather than each one being exactly alike.

10. Who would want to read such a book? Maybe potential researchers in the field? But is a book like this the best way of sharing the information contained within it? Interestingly, the publishers offer free institution-wide online versions, with additional and updated text, if your library buys a copy of the book.

1,205 words

APPENDIX 3: The Final Version

The original paragraph numbers are provided to indicate how the sequencing of the text changed, and how the text was shortened.
(Figure reproduced with permission from *British Journal of Educational Technology, 40*:6, pp. 1146-1147, 2009. Copyright: Wiley Blackwell.)

1. In July 2009 there was much discussion in the UK over the propriety of a national newspaper paying journalists to hack into the private phone calls of

well-known people: indeed one had been sent to prison for listening to aides of the royal family. Does such an activity demand electronic collaboration—the topic of this book? It surely does. Collaboration can lead to negative consequences as well as positive ones.

1 (cont). E-collaboration in this text is defined as "collaborations among individuals engaged in common tasks using electronic technologies." This broad definition encompasses a huge array of tasks that vary from students writing essays to terrorists organizing vandalism. And this is the problem. E-collaboration is so pervasive these days that we have to discuss myriad examples and issues involving collaboration, rather than consider e-collaboration as a somehow separate topic.

2. And this is really what *E-Collaboration* does. This blockbuster of a text describes e-collaboration in a variety of ways over 1,730 pages, 125 chapters, and three volumes, at a cost $1,450. The authors share 26 nationalities, although the majority are from USA.

The three volumes are divided into eight sections:

1 Fundamental concepts and theories
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8 Emerging trends

Some chapters in these sections are very long (over 30 pages) and some very short (under 4 pages).

9. All three volumes are attractively produced and have some useful features. In each one, for example, there is a contents page, a preface, and a (limited) index for all of the three volumes. Nonetheless, it would help readers if there was an electronic address for each author, and if the running heads for each chapter indicated the chapter, section, and volume numbers.

4. Most of the content of this book lies in the fields of computer science, electronic engineering and management information systems. However, I shall concentrate on those chapters that are directly relevant to education and research.

6 and 7. Some of these chapters cover e-collaboration in cross-cultural studies (of which there are many), foreign language learning, learning styles, and gender issues (of which there are few). There are two chapters that discuss changes to written communication brought about by instant messaging, multi-tasking, and collaborative writing systems. There are several chapters on

individual and group blogging, wikis, and virtual reality. Special needs, however, are neglected.

5. The key theme in this text, however, is how e-collaboration is changing the nature of learning at school and university. Not only are students, teachers, administrators collaborating much more by using new technologies—both locally and internationally—but the process is producing unforeseen curriculum and organizational problems. E-collaboration between and within these groups requires a seismic shift in thinking about teaching and learning—a shift from instruction being handed top-down to being acquired bottom-up. Such a shift has implications for managers, planners, architects, teachers, and students. Numerous chapters illustrate this in the context of secondary and tertiary education, and two provide examples from the field of graduate education.

8. When I acquired this text I hoped that I would learn a good deal more about how people conduct research in this particular area, and possibly find some comparison studies reporting on the advantages and disadvantages of e-collaboration versus non-e-collaboration (if such a thing exists these days). One might expect, for example, that there would be different obstacles and disadvantages to e-communication compared to face-to-face collaboration (and vice versa), and that there might be different outcomes. However, few chapters present such comparison data, and the majority of the data-driven chapters (about 25 in total) simply describe the outcomes of limited case studies or surveys.

3. *E-Collaboration* is one in a series of some dozen multi-volume sets produced by the publishers under the general title of "Contemporary Research in Information Science and Technology." And therein lies the rub. The chapters in this book are not new. In a remarkable feat of editing, all 125 of the chapters have been assembled from some 50 previous books and journals published by the same publisher between 2004 and 2009. Approximately 30 of the shorter ones can be found in the *Encyclopedia of E-Collaboration* also edited by N. Kock and published by Information Science in 2008. So it is not true to state, as it does in the preliminaries, that "all work contributed to this book set is original material." A grand recycling is going on here. Furthermore, this recycling means that few of the references cited by the authors in this "new" book were published after 2005.

10. Who then would want to consult such a text? Maybe potential researchers in the field? But is a three-volume text costing $1,450 the best way of disseminating information these days? Interestingly, if your library buys a copy, the publishers will offer you a free institution-wide online version, with the promise of additional and updated text.

820 words

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