Ten Questions for Critical Analysis of a Text

The following ten questions are derived from Critical reading and writing for postgraduates by Mike Wallace and Alison Wray (2006).

1. What review question am I asking of this text? (e.g., What is my central question? Why select this text? Does the Critical Analysis of this text fit into my investigation with a wider focus? What is my constructive purpose in undertaking a Critical Analysis of this text?)

2. What type of literature is this? (e.g., Theoretical, research, practice, policy? Are there links with other types of literature?)

3. What sort of intellectual study is being undertaken? (a) How clear is it which intellectual project the authors are undertaking? (e.g., Knowledge-for-understanding, knowledge-for-critical evaluation, knowledge-for-action, instrumentalism, reflexive action?) (b) How is the intellectual project reflected in the authors’ mode of working? (e.g., A social science or a practical orientation? Choice of methodology and methods? An interest in understanding or in improving practice?) (c) What value stance is adopted towards the practice or policy investigated? (e.g., Relatively impartial, critical, positive, unclear? What assumptions are made about the possibility of improvement? Whose practice or policy is the focus of interest?) (d) How does the sort of intellectual project being undertaken affect the research questions addressed? (e.g., Investigation of what happens? What is wrong? How well a particular policy or intervention works in practice?) (e) How does the sort of intellectual project being undertaken affect the place of theory? (e.g., Is the investigation informed by theory? Generating theory? Atheoretical? Developing social science theory or a practical theory?) (f) How does the authors’ target audience affect the reporting of research? (e.g., Do the authors assume academic knowledge of methods? Criticize policy? Offer recommendations for action?)
4. What is being claimed that is relevant to answering my review question?
   (a) What are the main kinds of knowledge claim that the authors are making?
       (e.g., Theoretical knowledge, research knowledge, practice knowledge?)
   (b) What is the content of each of the main claims to knowledge and of the
       overall argument? (e.g., What, in a sentence, is being argued? What are
       the three to five most significant claims that encompass much of the detail?
       Are there key prescriptions for improving policy or practice?)
   (c) How clear are the authors’ claims and overall argument? (e.g., Stated in an
       abstract, introduction or conclusion? Unclear?)
   (d) With what degree of certainty do the authors make their claims? (e.g., Do
       they indicate tentativeness? Qualify their claims by acknowledging
       limitations of their evidence? Acknowledge others’ counter-evidence?
       Acknowledge that the situation may have changed since data collection?)
   (e) How generalized are the authors’ claims – to what range of phenomena are
       they claimed to apply? (e.g., The specific context from which the claims
       were derived? Other similar contexts? A national system? A culture?
       Universal? Is the degree of generalization implicit? Unspecified?)
   (f) How consistent are the authors’ claims with each other? (e.g., Do all claims
       fit together in supporting an argument? Do any claims contradict each
       other?)

5. To what extent is there backing for claims?
   (a) How transparent are any sources used to back the claims? (e.g., Is there
       any statement of the basis for assertions? Are sources unspecified?)
   (b) What, if any, range of sources is used to back the claims? (e.g., First-hand
       experience? The authors’ own practice knowledge or research? Literature
       about others’ practice knowledge or research? Literature about reviews of
       practice knowledge or research? Literature about others’ polemic? Is the
       range of sources adequate?)
   (c) If claims are at least partly based on the authors’ own research, how robust
       is the evidence? (e.g., Are there methodological limitations or flaws in the
       methods employed? Do the methods include cross-checking or
       ‘triangulation’ of accounts? What is the sample size and is it large enough
       to support the claims being made? Is there an adequately detailed account
       of data collection and analysis? Is there a summary of all data that is
       reported?)
   (d) Are sources of backing for claims consistent with the degree of certainty
       and the degree of generalization? (e.g., Is there sufficient evidence to
       support claims made with a high degree of certainty? Is there sufficient
       evidence from other contexts to support claims entailing extensive
       generalization?)

http://my.napier.ac.uk/Library/
6. How adequately does any theoretical orientation support claims?
   (a) How explicit are the authors about any theoretical orientation or conceptual
   framework? (e.g., Is there a conceptual framework guiding the data
   collection? Is a conceptual framework selected after the data collection to
   guide analysis? Is there a largely implicit theoretical orientation?)
   (b) What assumptions does any explicit or implicit theoretical orientation make
   that may affect the authors’ claims? (e.g., Does a particular perspective
   focus attention on some aspects and under-emphasize others? If more
   than one perspective is used, how coherently do the different perspectives
   relate to each other?)
   (c) What are the key concepts underpinning any explicit or implicit theoretical
   orientation? (e.g., Are they listed? Are they stipulatively defined? Are
   concepts mutually compatible? Is the use of concepts consistent? Is the
   use of concepts congruent with others’ use of the same concepts?)

7. To what extent does any value stance adopted affect claims?
   (a) How explicit are the authors about any value stance connected with the
   phenomena? (e.g., A relatively impartial, critical, or positive stance? Is this
   stance informed by a particular ideology? Is it adopted before or after data
   collection?)
   (b) How might any explicit or implicit value stance adopted by the authors be
   affecting their claims? (e.g., Have they pre-judged the phenomena
   discussed? Are they biased? Is it legitimate for the authors to adopt their
   particular value stance? Have they over-emphasized some aspects of the
   phenomenon while under-emphasizing others?)

8. To what extent are claims supported or challenged by others’ work?
   (a) Do the authors relate their claims to others’ work? (e.g., Do the authors
   refer to others’ published evidence, theoretical orientations or value
   stances to support their claims? Do they acknowledge others’ counter
   evidence?)
   (b) If the authors use evidence from others’ work to support their claims, how
   robust is it? (e.g., As for 5(c).)
   (c) Is there any evidence from others’ work that challenges the authors’ claims,
   and if so, how robust is it? (e.g., Is there relevant research or practice
   literature? Check any as for 5(c).)

9. To what extent are claims consistent with my experience?

10. What is my summary evaluation of the text in relation to my review
    question?
    (a) How convincing are the authors’ claims and why?
    (b) How, if at all, could the authors have provided stronger backing for their
        claims?