Fall March 27, 2018

Literature Reviews.pdf

Prof Shelley Kinash, University of Southern Queensland

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/shelley_kinash/254/
Literature Reviews

Dr. Shelley Kinash
skinash@bond.edu.au
Acting Director
Quality, Teaching, and Learning

Bond University

There are lots of reasons why students and academics construct literature reviews. With respect to students, sometimes your instructors will ask you specifically to write a literature review. Even if your university instructor does not specifically call your assignment a literature review, an ability to review the literature and present it in a concise, comprehensive manner is an important skill in almost every paper you will write at university.

Academics have three main purposes for reviewing literature:
1. when academics are designing a new course, or updating their current course, they need to know what is being written about in the field, what issues are emerging, and whether new research has contributed to the state of knowledge;
2. a solid literature review is a publishable journal article, and;
3. literature reviews help researchers make decisions about the questions to be asked, in that reviewing the literature helps the academic to identify gaps in knowledge that require pursuing.

So what is a literature review? Let us turn the order of the two words around. It is simpler to understand a review of the literature. A review of the literature presents the key themes written about a topic, and cites the sources. A literature review presents a perspective, and often a critical view, of the state of information on a given topic.

Let us examine an example. I was invited to conduct a research study on Prader-Willi syndrome. A mother of a daughter with Prader-Willi
syndrome identifies this condition as, “a genetic condition in which people gain approximately 20-30% more weight on 50% less calories, and have an ability to eat all of the time due to an overly developed food drive” (Kinash, 2007, p. 2). Where did I begin my research journey? With the literature! I wanted to know what had already been established in Prader-Willi syndrome, and wherein lie-the-gaps. In other words, what would my greatest knowledge contribution to the field look like? Here is what I concluded.

The majority of literature with respect to PWS is situated in the context of medicine. People with PWS are called patients and the manifestation of the syndrome is presented as cases rather than stories. This reflects the dominant societal beliefs that PWS is a tragedy and the primary goal is prevention and cure. When people read about PWS through this framework, particularly when the authors are respected authorities such as doctors, this interpretation of PWS is reinforced. Professionals and families characterize persons with PWS as victims and overshadow the characteristics of PWS as the essential components of their personhood.

The goal of this book is to make a new contribution to the literature, and thus, what it means to have PWS and how people with PWS see themselves. This book was informed through the stories and perceptions of people with PWS. They are the experts on their own lives. They stated that it is difficult to have PWS, but that this is only one facet of who they are. There are so many other facets making up their identity as a person. We can only appreciate the importance of this book’s unique contribution to the literature on PWS if we compare and contrast it with the current body of literature. (Kinash, 2007, p. 27)

Please note that this is not the literature review itself. These two passages are the introduction to the literature review. These paragraphs explain why the literature review mattered to the research I conducted on Prader-Willi syndrome.

Now that we have examined an example of a rationale for completing a literature review, let us examine an example of an actual literature review. The following is a brief example. Remember that literature reviews vary in length. For example, the literature review for my doctoral dissertation took up a whole chapter. This literature review is one that you will see within a scholarly journal article.

In fact, this is an actual literature review from one of the articles I have authored entitled, *Animating inquiry-based teaching and learning in grade-school classrooms.*

*The professional development extended to teachers informing this research was grounded on a conceptualization of inquiry as pedagogical*
stance. This is one of three conceptual frameworks described by Schulz and Hall (2004),

as social inquiry (where knowledge is constructed collaboratively by all stakeholders);
as ways of knowing in communities (inquiry as stance, central to which is the idea that the work of inquiry communities is both social and political);
as practical inquiry (generating or enhancing practical knowledge).

The second model presented above, ways of knowing in communities, is uncommon throughout the literature and difficult to define. As a result, those turning to the literature for clarification model their approaches on one of the other two conceptualizations. Inquiry as social model is dominant among research literature. For example, Preissle (2006) used the term qualitative inquiry to signify a community of practice differentiated from quantitative methodology. Application of the concept of scientific inquiry characterizes the third conceptualization as practical inquiry and is prevalent throughout the literature. For example, Hapgood, Magnusson, and Palincsar (2004) presented an extended case study illustrating the application of the scientific method with a group of primary school students. They defined the three skills of inquiry as, “using data as evidence, evaluating investigative procedures, and making sense of multiple forms of representations” (p. 455).

Teachers are encouraged to engage in a process of teacher inquiry. Dawson and Dana (2007) described the linear process as progressing through the identification of a critical question deriving from day-to-day teaching and learning, through data collection, analysis, recommendation, and action application. While inquiry as pedagogical stance is not explicitly defined in the literature, there is an emerging body of research and theory urging teachers to “teach thinking skills” (Baumfield, 2006, p. 185) and to conceptualize schooling as “an adventure of the mind” (Strother, 2007, p. 17).

The contemporary literature addressing transformative teaching and learning within grade-school classrooms often describes implementation through digital technologies (e.g. Rakes, Fields, & Cox, 2006; Shields & Rogers, 2005). While infusion of technology into kindergarten through grade twelve classrooms is recognized as critical (Jacobsen and Lock, 2004), the current research is premised on the belief that the incorporation of technology in and of itself does not improve learning. Technology can only benefit learners when infused as one element of inquiry-based learning (International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement, 2003; Shields & Rogers). Further, the principles of inquiry-based learning, including infusion of technology,
can only be actualized in the presence of intentional, collaborative, ongoing professional development (Fox, 2007).

You will notice that there are citations of 11 scholarly articles within this 420 word literature review. The oldest date is 2003 and the most current is 2007, in a paper published in 2007. Notably, in other reviews seminal articles are also important to include. Some of the articles included in the above literature review are described fairly extensively, such as Schulz and Hall, 2004, whereas others are only cited in support of a statement such as Rakes, Fields, & Cox, 2006. The focus of the literature review is on: 1) conceptual frameworks of inquiry, and; 2) implementation through digital technologies. The focus of the literature review is consistent with the research topic. Here is the abstract from the article,

This paper describes interpretive empirical research with five teachers who: a) articulate their pedagogy as defined by an inquiry-based stance, b) use digital technologies within their teaching, and c) engaged in online and/or face-to-face professional development with the Galileo Educational Network (GENA). Four questions guided the inquiry: what does inquiry mean to teachers; what is it like to be an inquiry-based teacher; what supports teachers in fostering inquiry, and; what is the relative impact of the three models of supports offered through GENA – face-to-face only, online only, and combination face-to-face and online. Analysis revealed that meaningful and regular connection with GENA staff serving an animation role superseded the support model; it did not matter whether the supports were provided at a distance or face-to-face. Recommendations derived from the experiences of the five teachers inform the professional supports necessary to nurture teachers’ inquiry-based stance and approaches.

Note that the literature review addresses two of the three conditions of the informant selection criteria –
1) an inquiry-based stance, and
2) implementation of digital technologies.
3) The third condition (professional development through GENA) cannot be addressed by the literature review.

The literature review summarises the key points made in the included articles. However, the review makes two additional contributions to the readers’ topic knowledge. First, the literature review organises the literature into an overarching framework. For example, the literature review inserted above organises the articles by conceptualization of inquiry. The articles that demonstrate a conceptualization as social inquiry are clustered and reviewed together. As another example, all of the articles that address both inquiry and technology are clustered and described in the final paragraph.
The second important knowledge contribution of a literature review is in the critique. The author of the literature review considers her own experiences, observations, and reflections as she interprets the content of the literature. For example, the literature review included above concludes that “inquiry as pedagogical inquiry is not explicitly defined in the literature.” As another example, my literature review on Prader-Willi syndrome demonstrated the assertion described within the introduction that the professional literature was dehumanizing. It is important to remember that all evaluative statements must be supported directly and explicitly.

If you are authoring a literature review as a portion of your research, then the function of that literature review is to establish a strong rationale for the research to follow. You might have determined that there is a gap in the research. This was the case in the Prader-Willi syndrome (PWS) research as presented above. From extensively searching and reading the research, I determined that the voice of the person with PWS and his/her family were missing from the literature. Discovering what is missing from the literature compels the researcher to make a contribution to this domain.

If you are writing a stand-alone literature review, such as for an academic paper, then it remains important to ask the question of “so what.” What matters about the conclusions you have drawn through conducting your review of the literature? For example, I was invited to write a chapter on Supporting the disabled student for the Handbook of Distance Education. Here is an extract of the portion that describes the methodology my colleague and I used in our literature review,

*In a comprehensive search, we found 67 publications released between 2000 and 2006 that were situated at the intersection of distance education and disability. In this review, “publications” are defined as journal articles, government and newspaper reports, and full-article conference proceedings.*
Here is a portion of the derived conclusions,

At least one subset of the student population – disabled adults – does not seem to be well-served by the postsecondary system. Students with disabilities are underrepresented. ... The small amount of literature that informs what it is like to be a disabled postsecondary student indicates an unwillingness to make courses accessible to disabled learners, and/or to accommodate particular support needs (when they emerge).

The so what statement of this chapter is critical. The majority of people reading this book will have never considered the disabled online learner. The careful literature review rigorously presents the evidence. A succinct conclusion including what matters drives home your key points.

In another research initiative, I was inquiring into what it means to be blind. I suspected that this perspective was under-represented in the literature and practice, and turned first to the literature to confirm these suspicions. In addition to other contemporary literature, I analysed recent issues of the leading journal in the field of blindness – The Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness. I categorized the articles into: a) original empirical research, and b) didactic and/or opinion pieces. I cross-analysed the literature into methodology of: a) quantitative, b) qualitative, c) literature review and/or meta-analysis, and d) interpretive. I then analysed the topics of the papers into ten topics, the most frequent of which were: a) rehabilitation, b) psychology, and c) orientation and mobility. Here is an extract from my conclusions,

What does the categorization of the papers published in JVIB in 2005 mean? What are the implications? First, the papers being submitted to JVIB in consideration of publication and/or the papers that pass peer review and thereby appear in the journal are predominantly reporting results of quantitative research. ... the near absence of interpretive papers (1/40 2.5%) leaves a huge gap in knowledge. ...

With respect to the topics most frequently represented, it is obvious who has control over what information is circulated in the matrix of blindness and visual impairment. The dominant voice is the professional and/or the professors. The highest proportion of papers addresses rehabilitation; papers are about intervening or changing (doing to) people who are blind or visually impaired. The human services industry is perpetuated and sustained ...

As with the example from The Handbook of Distance Education, presented above, this example of blindness literature emphasizes the importance of drawing the literature together into an articulate, explicit depiction of what matters about the message that the body of literature is conveying.
The conclusion of the literature review is frequently a call for research and/or social action.

If we are to conceptualize the organization of a literature review, two images come to mind. The first option is that of a Venn diagram.  

The conceptual framework of a Venn diagram is often an effective means of organising your literature review. For example, in the example of the Supporting the disabled student chapter described above, the literature review utilised the Venn diagram organisational strategy. The review presented and analysed the literature in the domains of distance education, disabled post-secondary students, and their intersection. The first circle of the Venn diagram was distance education. The second circle was disabled post-secondary students. The crux of the review lay in the overlapping portions of these circles, wherein literature addressed both domains.

An alternate organisational framework for literature reviews is represented in the image of the funnel.

In this case, the reviewed research begins at its broadest point, focussing as the analysis continues until it concludes at the point at which a research focus is established. For example, one of my graduate students is also researching in the domain of blindness. Her literature review was steeped with powerful literature presented with a careful analysis. However, the organisational thread was difficult to follow. I suggested that she reorganise following the funnel strategy. Specifically, she would review the literature with the content of: 1) empowerment of adults with disabling conditions and then, 2) empowerment of blind adults. Following the funnel, and thus defining her focus, she would then review literature
specifically presenting the voice of adult blind self-advocates. This funnel approach would allow her to state her conclusion that there is a paucity of research in this domain. The funnel approach thereby guides the reader, and prepares them for the research and/or social action recommendations to follow.

**Steps in the Literature Review Process**

This description and these examples of literature reviews are intended to help you conceptualize and begin writing your own carefully crafted literature review. Perhaps at this point, you might be wondering how to begin and then how to proceed. Here is one recommended process for preparing a literature review. Please note that there are other ways of proceeding, and you will refine your own process as you complete multiple reviews.

1. **Define your search terms.**

   Start by writing down what it is you are wondering about. For example, you might be wondering what the literature has to say about early learners and play in multi-aged classrooms. Now you have your search terms. They are: 1) early learners, 2) play, and 3) multi-aged classrooms. Sometimes you may need to refine your search terms, when, for example, no literature emerges when these particular terms are used. For example, you might substitute preschool children for early learners.

2. **Access your search engines.**

   Keep track of the search engines you decide to use. You will need to describe these if you are going to make a claim that a paucity of literature exists in a given topic area. For example, in a chapter entitled *Storied by children: Authored by adults*, I wrote,

   > My search for case study research situated in grade-schools almost exclusively evoked primary classrooms in the USA. I conducted the literature search through EBSCOhost MegaFILE Premier which includes: Academic Search Premier; EJS-E-Journals; ERIC, and; Professional Development Collection. The search specifications were: research manuscripts; scholarly (peer-reviewed) journals; 2005-2008 publication year; search terms – school and case study. Sixteen documents emerged in the results list. Six of the sixteen documents were situated in post-secondary, or addressed issues specific to the teachers and administrators rather than the students. Ten of the sixteen manuscripts described case study research with respect to students in grade-school classrooms (Barnett, Elliott, Wolsing, et.al., 2006; Dwyer, 2007; Guglielmo, & Little, 2006; Haywood, & Megan, 2007; Kjellon, & Wennerström, 2006; Mangan, & Gerald, 2006; Plaut, 2006;
Pressley, Solic, Gaskins, et.al., 2006; Purcell, Horn, & Palmer, 2007; Zandbergen, & Green, 2007). Of these ten, eight were situated in classrooms in the USA. One was set in Europe, and one in Australia. Six were situated in primary classrooms. Two were set in early childhood environments, one across early childhood and elementary, and one in secondary. Only one case study explicitly identified a non-urban context. This review indicated three gaps in the classroom case study literature: 1) beyond the USA; 2) beyond traditional primary classrooms, and; 3) outside urban contexts.

As you will note in the example provided above, the search engines used were databases of scholarly publications. You might also want to use topic searches of your local library for books, and/or Google Scholar.

3. Read the abstracts.

Your search will result in a stack of abstracts. Abstracts are brief summaries of the complete article. Read these abstracts. You will discover that some of the abstracts are related to your chosen topic, and some are not. For example, when I use the search term “blind” I derive both articles about visual impairment, and about metaphoric blindness. Sort the abstracts into those that are related to your topic, and those that are not.

4. Use the references of the included articles to derive more on-topic literature.

Print off all of the full articles that inform your topic. Begin reading them at the end of the article; in other words access their references. Scanning the authors and literature of the found literature will help you locate other articles that were missed in your search. Enter the authors’ names and key words from their title to gain access to these articles as well. Print them off.

5. Compose a master reference list in APA format.

I recommend completing this step early in the process. Some of the search engines do not include full citation information on the printouts. It is best to compose your reference list now, while you remember where you found the articles, in case you need to search for missing information. See the reference list below for an example of what your APA reference list will look like. This step will save you a lot of time later on; you will only need to worry about in-text referencing, because your end-text referencing is already complete.
6. Read the full articles.

You now have a stack of relevant literature. Read all of the articles. At this point, I recommend putting the pen to the side and reading only without writing. This bulk-read will give you a general sense of the literature.

After you have read all of the articles, put the stack aside. I like to do something physical at this point, even if it is going for a leisurely stroll. This is the equivalent to eating saltines between sips in wine tasting. It clears the metaphorical palate.

Before returning to the stack of literature, take out a journal and reflect in writing. What messages remain in your memory from that read? What information or tone resonated? Were there any of the articles that particularly stood out? Why?

7. Create a conceptual framework and organise the literature.

At this point, I like to assign a code which I record on the top front of each print-out. You might use the last name of the first author, the year of publication, and a key-word from his title. Next, I make a table. Sometimes this organisational framework is explicitly articulated in one of the articles. Other times, I construct this framework from my reading. Here is an example,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Descriptive</th>
<th>Didactic</th>
<th>Opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-secondary</td>
<td>Asuncan, 2006, Accessibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior-school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Childhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the table cells will have single entries and others will have multiple entries. Various columns and rows will be filled, while others will be sparse. All of this information yields important interpretation.
8. Interpret your table and return to the text of the articles.

Examine your table and interpret what matters about the information in the cells. For example, what does it matter that there are hardly any articles in the research column? Does it matter that there are no articles in the early childhood domain? Now return to the text of your articles. Perhaps the information that you have learned from the literature are explicitly articulated in one or more of these articles. For example, one of the articles might have lamented the under-representation of female scientists in education literature. Your literature review may have confirmed this interpretation. You are now able to make a valid contribution to the literature by reviewing what is and is not present, and a so-what statement about the implications.

9. Write your literature review.

Remember the key principles for composing any article. Tell the reader what you are going to say, say it, and then tell the reader what you said. In other words, use your introduction to introduce the body of literature you are examining, and a thesis statement about that literature. Support your assertion through reviewing the literature. You will likely use some direct quotes. Remember to introduce the quote, insert it, and then apply the quote specifically to the focus of your paper. Also ensure that the central thread runs visibly through the fabric of your paper. Stay on-topic and give the reader navigational cues. Ensure that your conclusion summarises the main tenants of your argument and leaves the reader with a clear sense of so what. Remember to conclude, rather than just stop. Do not introduce anything new in your conclusion.

Do not conclude your journey at the first draft. Edit. Re-draft. Re-consider. Ensure that your paper is clear, explicit, and easy to follow. Ensure that your paper is a pleasure to read, and does not distract the reader with typos or grammatical errors. Ensure that all of your key points are supported, and that all in-text and end-text references are present, and conform to APA. When you think that you are there, ask someone to critically read your paper and provide feedback. Without fail, this process always alerts the author to some further edits.

I hope that you have enjoyed this depiction of how to write a literature review. Authoring a literature review is a rewarding process. I hope that
you find it engaging, fulfilling, and informative.

References


