



Research Paper

## Reconstructing Academic Literature Review and Writing: A Paper on Graduate Student Research

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### ABSTRACT

Literature review and writing form the basis of research to which it is indispensable. Its systematic process however, remains mysterious, complex and problematic especially to postgraduate students most of whom undertake research for the first time at graduate level. This paper explored the challenges, strengths and mysteries with which literature review and writing was undertaken by graduate students at both master's and Doctoral levels. The paper used primary sources to gather data from graduate students' theses and proposals. Data from those sources revealed how literature review and writing showed different patterns depending on the nature of the research, and the specific objectives of the study. Similarly, different approaches were found to be suitable to different research contexts and methods. The challenges in writing and reviewing literature mainly springs from the failure to clearly define the research problem which propels clarity in the presentation of literature.

**Key words:** Academic writing, Literature review, Research

Received 03 Feb, 2021; Revised: 15 Feb, 2021; Accepted 17 Feb, 2021 © The author(s) 2021.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

As an academic undertaking literature review and writing demand systematic and comprehensive analysis driven by focus on specific objectives and adequate provision and access to relevant material. The paper which is essential to postgraduate students and academics who must undertake the process within critically stipulated timelines.

The art of literature review and writing are responsible for the preservation of knowledge within academic disciplines. Literature review and writing are indispensable aspects in research and continue to gain more traction within research areas. Since the two components of research set standards within relevant disciplines, a reviewer has to precisely provide systematic methods in the search for materials, their evaluation, assessment and replication for future use. Thus, effective literature review and writing are enormous tasks which demand multiple engagements that relate to searching for materials from various sources, careful choice of relevant materials and obtaining specific data, as well as critical thinking about the literature, summarizing and making appropriate citations.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite being the basis of research work, literature review and writing continue to pose enormous challenges to students undertaking research in different fields. This is because the process is practically confusing, time and resource consuming especially for inexperienced short time researchers such as graduate students. Since research is often characterized by conflicting assumptions, most graduate students end up re-writing stories, with little focus on their subject of concern and often concocting what others have done. There are cases of lack of proper interpretation of how to plan and embark on proper literature review in relation to the

disciplines for which the writing is intended. Against this background this paper examines the process reviewing and writing and the challenges therein.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER**

The paper sought to examine the literature reviews and writing of graduate students research to reveal their strengths, weaknesses and challenges in order to demystify the process by evaluating the purpose and structure of literature reviews.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

The paper used qualitative method to collect data from primary sources in the form of postgraduate proposals and theses. The classifications, steps, purpose, quality, determinants and mappings of literature reviews and writing were drawn from postgraduate students proposals and theses. The identity of the students whose work formed the basis of the paper were however concealed for purposes of confidentiality.

### **DEFINITION AND INTERPRETATION OF LITERATURE REVIEW AND WRITING**

There is little debate as to what literature in literature review refers to as well as what literature review is. Literature refers to a collection of writing on a topic such as government pamphlets, and magazines. A literature review therefore refers to an account of the publications on a topic with a view to communicating the knowledge and ideas established on a topic along with their strengths and weaknesses. It is a discussion of published information in a subject area within a given period of time. A literature review involves surveying scholarly sources to provide an overview of a particular topic based on the thesis statement and goals of the topic, Anson and Robert, 2010).

Literature is a distillation of the knowledge accumulated in a field and reflects the perspectives contributed by many investigators over the years. Familiarity with literature allows an investigator to build on existing work and contribute something new. Literature reviews demand meticulous preparation and careful considerations in order to foster the growth of a field (APA, 2007).

Hart (1998) describes literature review as a selection of obtainable material, ideas, information and written proofs from a definite source which are to be used for the purposes of conducting an investigation in relation to a problem or research question with the aim of finding a definite source of action. It is thus a written argument (Machi and McEvoy, 2016). It bears a thesis stand point through the construction of a logical case based on proofs obtained from reviewing previously conducted research. A literature review identifies and depicts background knowledge on a topic by topic by giving the current state of knowledge with rational proof. Literature review depicts logical argument based on comprehensive understanding of prevailing state of knowledge about a topic. Generally, literature review synthesizes available and current knowledge in relation to a topic or research question.

Cresswell (2012) argues that a literature review should describe the past and current state of information on the topic of research in order to establish the research versatility on the topic and the state of knowledge attained on the research problem. In a nutshell literature review combines old and new interpretations while tracing the intellectual progression of the field including major debates. Its focus is to summarize and synthesize arguments and ideas of scholars in a manner that relates to the study under study.

## **III. THE PURPOSE OF LITERATURE REVIEW**

Literature review serves both general and specific purposes of addressing research issues related to research topics. Foss (2017) states:

Literature review is designed to familiarize the reader with key findings from various studies. It is meant to provide contextual knowledge the reader needs in order to understand the findings and their significance. It allows one to enter into conversation about a focal discussion by acquitting themselves with the sentences of other debaters in order to extend their conversation.

Literature review thus positions each material within the right category. It assesses the level and phase of development within a field and traces the connection of the intended research work within the context of previous works. Literature review should explore new methods and resolve contradiction of previous studies (Cresswell, 2012). Literature review serves a handy guide to a reader on a particular topic and gives updates on the state of the field of study. The depth and breadth of literature review emphasizes the credibility of the writer in their field and provides solid background for research investigations. Generally, literature reviews position a research on an appropriate field and context through provision of general idea, evaluation and summary of the question or problem as well as the sources from which materials are explored and justifies the need for and importance of the proposed study (Cresswell, 2012). Literature review articulates the purpose of the study which may include filling a gap in current research or providing the next step in researching the topic.

## **THE PROCESS AND STRUCTURE OF LITERATURE REVIEW**

The process of reviewing and writing literature is defined by definite tasks undertaken by the writer. These tasks determine the quality and relevance of the literature review to the study topic. Belcher (2009) outlines several types of literature sources a researcher could benefit from along with what each source entails. The categories include original or primary literature, derivative or tertiary literature, contextual literature, methodological literature, theoretical or classical literature and related literature. Regardless of the literature type involved, literature review demands special skills that are learnt over time, experience and practice. Cresswell (2012) advocates for literature mapping which aids the writer to collect information from diverse sources relevant to a research topic with the aim of filtering and obtaining suitable ones. Belcher (2009) outlines several strategies that could enable a reader to achieve these. These include limiting the age of the literature reviewed to less than ten years and avoiding contexts and articles not within one's subject, since latest literature ideally summarise previous studies, reviews. Belcher further proposes that a writer establishes their relationship with the related literature and defines their point of entry as necessary aspects enhancing the quality of a review. The writer's relationship to relevant literature addresses issues of citing prior scholarship. This could be achieved by identifying one's general relationship to the literature before proceeding to evaluate the literature.

A writer's entry point defines their relationship with previous arguments. This is one way of getting into scholarly conversation on a topic by acknowledging the conversation and focusing one's thoughts on the prevailing argument. Types of entry points vary and may include addressing a gap in previous research or correcting previous research. Whatever the motivation the review establishes the significance and origin of an argument, defines the approach or methodology and demonstrates one's relationship with what has gone before by referring to various sources of information.

Scholars identify various types of literature reviews. Cresswell (2012) identifies the following models of literature review:

- Thematic
- Integrative
- Historical/chronological
- Methodological
- Theoretical

On the other hand Murray and More (2006) categorise literature review as: simple, complex and oversight.

Regardless of the type of review, Galvan and Galvan (2017) state that every literature review should consider the core reasons for the literature and the target audience which mostly include examiners, the public, supervisors and research panels. These not only determine the types of materials to be reviewed but also search their style and strength. Literature review has three major components namely:

- The introduction
- Thesis statement which provides conclusion based current available knowledge and reasoning.
- The concluding statement that summarizes to the reader the main issues raised in the reviewed material (Cresswell, 2012).

Reviewing related literature is motivated and depends on various factors for success and relevance. These include the existence of sometimes massive literature on a research area or the lack of it which creates challenges in determining the relevance and sufficiency of the literature. At times the available literature could be at variance and in conflict with other existing literature. Similarly, there are incidences in which some existing body of research could appear relevant to the topic making it hard for one to either consider or disregard such literature.

To avoid situations in which there is excessive writing as an evaluation of existing scholarly work a critical review involves evaluating and summarizing articles to identify their relationships, limitations, inadequacies and interpretation. In so doing one is able to establish the origin and significance of an argument besides defending an approach and showing one's relationship with what has been written. Since it is an exercise in which the reviewer interprets information, it demands access to various resources from different fields written within a fairly short period of time before the research. This guards against over citing a single source that creates in a reader the impression of the review being derivative.

Evaluation is key to literature review. It calls to question thinking about the relationship between diverse reputable scholarly articles. A review provides an explanation of how previous scholars justify their assertion while acknowledging their allegiance to existing disciplinary communities, with a view to demonstrating similarities, differences, the known, the unknown as well as the variables that have been established as important.

## **THE STRUCTURE OF A LITERATURE REVIEW**

The process and structure of literature is discernible from one's writing or from discussion with individual writers. For example Mache and McEvoy (2016) identify six steps of effective literature review. These steps include: selecting a topic for the study, developing a logical argument for the study, searching for the literature to be reviewed, surveying the literature, critically evaluating the literature and writing the review. These steps are closely connected with Cresswell (2012) who proposes that reviewers first identify the key terms for searching the relevant literature before proceeding to trace relevant literatures by interacting with various sources. This is succeeded by several activities including critical evaluation of the selected material, arranging the material through notes before writing the review report. The scholars thus present literature review as a systematic process which requires critical planning to ensure not only relevance but adequacy as well. Essentially, literature review should serve specific studies on specific researchable topics and should provide updated data on the topics of interest deeply and interestingly to enrich readability. This should be based on academic traditions and established on critical engagement on the works of academics. The extent of the critique is determined by the level at which the writer is able to justify presented claims. This is the premise on the assertion that critical reading is centred on evidences contained in the work, logical flow of the writer's arguments to the conclusion of the work and the relation between the reviewed writer's and the researcher's assertions (Wallace and Wray (2016) Machi and McEvoy (2016).

Critical thinking, reading, writing and analysis are thus integral to literature review though they vary depending on the type of literature under review (Mohammed and Ahmed (2019). For a deeper understanding of the literature it is imperative that the reviewer studies materials beyond ordinary reading, thinking, analysis and writing. These convince readers to understand and agree with the reviewer's assertion through convincing grounds (Wallace and Wry, 2016).

## **THE ETHICAL DIMENSION IN LITERATURE REVIEW**

Ethics in research is about principles. These assist community of researchers in making ethical decisions. Christen, Johnson and Turner (2011) categorise ethical issues in social and behavioural research along the lines adopted by Diener and Crandall (1978) into three major areas viz (1) relationship between society and science (2) Professional issues (3) Treatment of research participants. In literature review the overriding ethical dimension revolves around professional issues that touch on research misconduct. These include falsification, fabrication or plagiarism. The ethical principles applied to literature review are meant to regulate the process to achieve set objectives within systematically defined tenets. Machi and McEvoy (2016) list ethical principles that ought to guide literature review which include:

- Avoiding taking data out of its main context
- Independence of reviewers
- Conducting one's own review without depending on reviews of other people.
- Avoiding presenting undisguised facts or information
- Addressing all aspects of a problem
- Avoiding plagiarism and acknowledging all citations.
- Limiting the services of research assistants to outside core activities, of thinking, reviewing, writing or analysis.

## **STUDY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Five theses of postgraduate students were randomly picked for the study of which two were master's theses and three were doctoral theses. All the candidates had designed different studies on educational issues that included instruction, performance, school management and learner behaviour. The literature was analysed to determine the structure, content and intended purpose to reveal themes relevant to the paper.

## **STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION OF LITERATURE**

Regardless of the level the structure of the reviews displayed uniform features. Each review had an introduction which in most cases provided a bird's eye view of the content of the chapter. They further explained the source and nature of the information which the chapter dealt with. For example Literature Review One which was a doctoral thesis reported:

Literature review in the study basically deals with issues related to the various variables under investigation and seeks to show the need for the study. The sources of the literature explored include: books, journals, research articles, scholarly reports, web publications related to the study.

Literature Review Two another doctoral thesis introduced the section on literature review by indicating the purpose of the study and its justification. Cases abound in which the investigator uses the introducing section to highlight the subtopics of the literature review which often reflect the variables contained in the research objectives. The similarity in the content of the introduction could be attributed to the format which different

school faculties and universities adopt in preparation for theses for them to communicate clearly. One such common format with some universities is the American Psychological Association publication manual which provides commonly accepted guidelines in the preparation of manuscripts. The slight differences especially in the treatment of the depth of the introduction is attributed to the different interpretation by individual writers.

The literature review is further divided into subsections with each section bearing a numerical code. The numerical codes are separated by a period punctuation mark. The first figure details the chapter followed by the subsection and other minor sections mostly to a level of three for example:

- 2:1 Introduction
- 2:2 The English Grammar
- 2:3 Approaches to Teaching Grammar
- 2:3:1 Teaching Grammar Deductively

Such coding makes access to the work easy and clearly distinguishes the different sections of the content of the chapter. This enhances the readability of the review. The various subsections are thus complete and communicate a complete sense of the section of the literature review.

Another notable feature of the organization of the literature review evident from the theses is the use of boldface to highlight the subheadings. This is done mostly in lower case to avoid double highlight. Functional words of the subtitles are initiated in the upper case as in the following examples:

- 2:1 English Language Skills
- 2:3:4 Teaching English Grammar through a Contextual Approach
- 2:4 Instructional Resources for English Grammar

The headings of the main concepts of the literature review outline the ideas the candidates present and convey the sequence and levels of importance. This approach enhances the reading of the articles as they relate to the organization and relative importance of the diverse section of literature reviews. For example one of the candidates has organized their review under the following headings:

- 2:1 English Language Skills
- 2:1:1 Writing Skills
- 2:1:2 Reading Skills
- 2:2 Teaching Skills and Approaches
- 2:2:1 Product Based Approach
- 2:2:2 Process Based Approach

Similarly, while studying the utilization of teaching and learning resources in the instruction of social studies in Teacher Training Colleges, a candidate organizes their literature under the following headings and subheadings:

- 2:1 The Concept of Teaching and Learning Resources
- 2:2 Types of Teaching and Learning Resources
- 2:3 The Influence of Teaching and Learning Resources on Delivery of Social Studies

The organization of literature within definite organizational structure provides a candidate with the leeway to show how familiar they are with the topic. They equally demonstrate to their readers the existing state of knowledge about the selected topic through providing information about the nature of researches conducted within chosen areas. The candidates hence provide relevant information that enable them set the study in the context of prior studies which would provide them with the basis of discussing the results in relation to the studies earlier conducted (Christensen, Johnson and Turner, 2011).

#### **IV. CONTENT OF LITERATURE REVIEW**

How candidates select content relevant to the concepts which inform studies demonstrates the writer's capacity to evaluate and isolate the works which informed their study. One of the challenges that the students face in determining the kind of literature search demanded of them, revolve around where to start from and how to locate and handle information available to them. In this respect, the volume of literature presented and the style adopted significantly differ among the writers. There are cases in which candidates review demonstrates the existence of massive literature which vary depending on the primary sources. The candidates are thus made to merely state the contents of such articles without critically presenting the relationships, limitations and inadequacies in a summarized evaluation stance. The reviews mainly fail to categorically define the topic to yield original arguments, which identify the objectives of the study. The candidates demonstrate wide reading of various sources even though some are undermined by overciting of sources, misattributing information and presenting a lot of quotations. The general conclusion appears to be that literature review is not simple due largely to a myriad of decisions one has to make for the review to be informative, efficient, exhaustive and conclusive. To minimize yet present a well crafted literature review, reviewers demonstrate the relationship

between various articles and scholars and explain how the scholars justify their arguments, claims and novelty yet acknowledge debts by displaying allegiance to disciplinary communities (Bolcher, 2009). The candidates mostly present arguments side by side in an effort to determine the similarity, differences, the known and what remains to be known to them. This approach makes apparent variables that have been established as important with attendant concepts and theories.

The studied pieces reveal a fair mix with regard to the structure. Candidates structurally romanticize with a mix of structures with the work presented. Candidates mix up their presentation chronologically, thematically, methodologically by trend or by publication. Hardly do they stick to one of this as argued by Belcher (2009). This is a manifestation of a lack of understanding of the structure of literature reviews.

The mode of presentation impacts on the quality of the reviews that end up being less evaluative and critical since the candidates fail to provide an interpretation of the information sourced from various sources.

Cases of lifting information verbatim were also revealed. In such contexts previous researches are narrated in a manner that fails to connect the relationship between various studies with what the candidate set out to study. For example a candidate sought to study the classroom implications of teaching writing either as a process or product. In their review, an entire section was dedicated to the teaching of language skills with specific reference to writing. Several works were cited whose relationship with the study variables were not given a thought. Reading the review gave the impression that the candidate neither understood what they set out to study nor determined the essence of literature search. This approach gave the impression of one's inability to establish the significance and origin of arguments traced to various sources. The approach only succeeds in increasing the volume of the research document but fails to convince its readers that another body of research could illuminate the study topic by addressing the limitations and various dimensions of what might have been studied. This points to a failure by the candidates to determine beforehand the purpose of literature reviews.

A critical aspect in review of related literature is acknowledgment of sources of information cited in the review. Basically, two major forms of acknowledgement appear in the students' writing namely intext citation and the reference or bibliography. The presentation of the reference list at the end of document is uniform. The reference list which provide information necessary for identifying and retrieving sources are uniformly given. These include citing the author's surname followed by the initials of the other names, the year of publication in brackets, the title, the place of publication and the publisher. This uniformity is attributed to the fact that universities and schools adopt a common referencing style which students are expected to adhere to. This gives the research theses from such universities a unique identity. In the current paper the theses adopted the American Psychological Association (APA) publication mode. This mode outlines how books, magazines, abstracts and journal publications among other sources have to be acknowledged. The style also provides information on labeling of tables and figures which the candidates demonstrate a fair amount of faithfulness to. The literature reviews demonstrate myriad challenges candidates. These include:

- Failure to acknowledge any sources that are cited within the text.
- Failure to distinguish between primary and secondary sources
- The use of inappropriate punctuation marks especially the full colon, the comma and the full stop.
- Treating different types of sources uniformly without adhering to publication details of each

One such source whose acknowledgement presented challenges to the candidates were papers published in journals. Most of the challenges were attributed to the fact that this section was taken for granted and students did not take time to acclimatize themselves with their dictates.

There were also cases where candidates did not acknowledge all the intexts in the reference. This could be attributed to the failure to prepare a card on which all texts cited in the course of the review are written down and kept for use in the preparation of reference list. Closely related were cases in which sources that were not in the text were cited in the reference.

This was attributed to the failure to distinguish between a reference and a bibliographic list and the failure to acknowledge which of the two was recommended by the institution where the candidates took their studies from. According to the American Psychological Association Publication Manual (2007) authors only sources which were used in the preparation of a review when preparing a reference list. A bibliographic list on the other hand acknowledges sources that might not have been cited within the text but which could have been read and gave impetus to the writing of an article. This distinction is significant in determining the honesty of the studies in remaining faithful to the sources cited. Candidates need to familiarize themselves with the dictates of the awarding institution to avoid misrepresentation.

## V. CONCLUSION

Being critical to research, literature review should systematically identify, locate and analyse materials that provide data which relate to the research question through depicting research gaps and areas of contention, identifying findings from various sources and clustering studies based on their findings. Despite the availability

of varied sources, library sources should be at the centre of any search in a manner that renders it easy to manage references and citations.

That candidates demonstrate knowledge of the centrality of literature search and review in research is not in doubt. The need to familiarize themselves with various modes of literature review is not in doubt. This would give room for candidates to provide a review that is efficient, exhaustive, evaluative and communicative of the various facets of the studies undertaken. Primacy should be given to the ability of the candidates to express their entry point in various discussions. Apart from focusing on the writer's point of view, an entry point aid illuminate the candidate's contribution to ongoing conversation on issues they wish to research upon. Similarly, there is need to develop a discernible plan that will aid mark the boundaries of literature reviews.

Candidates introduction of literature review section of their thesis demonstrate an understanding of the details of the overall topic and provide orienting information which directs the reader's attention to the contents of the review. They further organize the review along the lines of chapters, themes and elements of theoretical framework thus demonstrating a logical flow of ideas. Reviews depict the research as a logical development that emerges out of previous research and supported direction. Consequently, there is an element of organized principle which follows evidence that support methodological choices which the candidates make. Literature review is thus a demonstration of the key elements in the research study.

Finally, regardless of the review principles adopted the subsections and sections supporting conclusions and themes are based on the overall argument of the research.

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