

The need to uncover



The need to uncover what is already known in the body of knowledge prior to initiating any research study should not be underestimated (Hart, 1998).

Novice researchers tend to approach the literature review as nothing more than a collection of summaries of papers or an elaborated annotated bibliography of multiple research manuscripts (Webster & Watson, 2002). A meaningful literature review is much more.

Hart (1998) defined literature review as “ the use of ideas in the literature to justify the particular approach to the topic, the selection of methods, and demonstration that this research contributes something new” (p.). J. Shaw (1995) noted that the process of the review should “ explain how one piece of research builds on another” (p.

326). Webster and Watson (2002) defined an effective literature review as one that “ creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge. It facilitates theory development, closes areas where a plethora of research exists, and uncovers areas where research is needed” (p. 13). From these definitions it is clear that an effective literature review should include the following characteristics: * Methodologically analyze and synthesize quality literature, * Provide a firm foundation to a research topic, Provide a firm foundation to the selection of research methodology, * Demonstrate that the proposed research contributes something new to the overall body of knowledge or advances the research field’s knowledge-base. According to (Richard Nordquist, about.

com) literature review is the process of reading, analyzing, evaluating, and summarizing scholarly materials about a specific topic. It is a critical and

evaluative account of what has been published on a chosen research topic.

A literature review is a text written by someone to consider the critical points of current knowledge including substantive findings, as well as theoretical and methodological contributions to a particular topic. It can also be a “critical analysis of a segment of a published body of knowledge through summary, classification, and comparison of prior research studies, reviews of literature, and theoretical articles”. A review of literature considers the state and progress of current literature on a given topic or problem by organizing, integrating, and evaluating previously published books and articles.

Furthermore, a review of literature is a critical evaluation of material that has already been published.

The APA Publication Manual (1994) explains that a review of literature: defines and clarifies the topic or problem; summarizes previous investigations in order to inform the reader of the current state of research; identifies relations, contradictions, gaps, and inconsistencies in the literature; and suggests the next step or steps in addressing the topic or solving the problem. (p. 5). When organizing a review of literature, the goal is to inform the reader about the main trends and patterns in the literature under survey.

In short, a literature review is a description of the literature relevant to a particular field or topic. It gives an overview of what has been said, who the key writers are, what are the prevailing theories and hypotheses, what questions are being asked, and what methods and methodologies are appropriate and useful. As such, it is not in itself primary research, but rather it reports on other findings. It is also not an argument for the importance of

what topic is being researched on. While it is necessary to explain what the primary purpose of the research is, the reader of a literature review will assume that the need for undertaking the research has already been established.

Thus literature review is not a descriptive list of papers or summaries. A literature review is organized around ideas, not the sources themselves as an annotated bibliography would be organized. The researcher should assess previous studies and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. The researcher should also think about which themes and issues the sources have in common.

In writing the literature review, the purpose is to convey to the reader what knowledge and ideas have been established on a topic, and what their strengths and weaknesses are. As a piece of writing, the literature review must be defined by a guiding concept such as the research objective, the problem or issue being discussed, or the argumentative thesis. A literature review discusses published information in a particular subject area, and sometimes information in a particular subject area within a certain time period. It can be just a simple summary of the sources, but it usually has an organizational pattern and combines both summary and synthesis. A summary is a recap of the important information of the source, but a synthesis is a re-organization, or a reshuffling, of that information. It might give a new interpretation of old material or combine new with old interpretations.

It might also trace the intellectual progression of the field, including major debates and depending on the situation, the literature review may evaluate the sources and advise the reader on the most pertinent or relevant. If the researcher has limited time to conduct research, literature reviews can serve as an overview or act as a stepping stone. For professionals, reviews of literature are useful reports that keep them up to date with what is current in the field. For scholars, the depth and breadth of the literature review emphasizes the credibility of the writer in his or her field.

Literature reviews also provide a solid background for a research paper's investigation. Comprehensive knowledge of the literature of the field is essential to most research papers. A literature review process is defined as sequential steps to collect, know, comprehend, apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate quality literature in order to provide a firm foundation to a topic and research method. Before conducting a literature review, the researcher must first understand the place of the review in research (Webster & Watson, 2002). Research is defined as an endeavor that scholars “intentionally set out to enhance their understanding of a phenomenon and expect to communicate what they discover to the reader” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p.

). Two critical considerations stem from this definition; * Research must enhance the reader's current understanding of a phenomenon, or contribute to enhance the body of knowledge. * Research must communicate what was discovered in the new study to the reader. Knowing the current status of the body of knowledge in the given research field is an essential and first step for any research project (Iivari et al. , 2004) The steps involved in the

literature review process include: 1. SEARCHING THE LITERATURE Having selected a topic to research on the next step is to identify in a structured way, the appropriate and related information.

A systematic approach is considered which is most likely to generate a review that will be beneficial in informing practice (Hek and Langton, 2000). Newell and Burnard (2006) suggest that comprehensiveness and relevance are what reviewers need to consider and adds that the more specific the topic or question being searched is, the more focused the result will be. Topics that are too broad will result in reviews that are either too long or too superficial. As a rule of thumb, it is better to start with a narrow and focused topic, and if necessary broaden the scope of the review as the researcher progresses. It is much more difficult to cut content successfully, especially if time is short. In recent times, literature searches are undertaken mostly using computers and electronic databases.

Computer databases offer access to vast quantities of information, which can be retrieved more easily and quickly than using a manual search (Younger, 2004). There are numerous electronic databases, many of which deal with specific fields of information. It is important therefore to identify which databases are relevant to the topic. Existing literature reviews and systematic reviews can also be important sources of data. They can offer good overview of the research that has been undertaken, so that the relevance to the present work can be determined. Manual searches can be performed in respect of journals that are specifically related to the topic of interest or those that are likely to cover the topic.

Generally, journals are regarded as being more up-to-date than books as sources of information. Books can be dated due to the length of time it takes for publication. However, this does not mean they should be excluded as they are an acceptable and valuable source of information. In conducting the literature search, it is important to keep a record of the keywords and methods used in searching the literature as these will need to be identified later when describing how the search was conducted (Timmins and McCabe, 2005).

Another consideration is how much time to allocate to the search (Younger, 2004). 2. ANALYZING AND SYNTHESIZING THE LITERATURE At this point of the process, literature considered as appropriate and relating to the topic will have been gathered. While the focus of the literature may vary depending on the overall purpose, there are several useful strategies for the analysis and synthesis stages that will help the construction and writing of the review. Firstly, it is important to undertake a first read of the articles that have been collected to gain an in-depth knowledge on the research topic.

Most published articles contain a summary or abstract at the beginning of the paper, which will assist with this process and enable the decision as to whether it is worthy of further reading or inclusion. Once the initial overview has been completed, it is necessary to return to the articles to undertake a more systematic and critical review of the content. It is recommended that some type of structure is adopted during this process such as that proposed by Cohen (1990). This simple method is referred to as the preview, question, read, summarize (PQRS) system. This method keeps the researcher focused and consistent as well as ultimately facilitates easy identification and

retrieval of material particularly if a large number of publications are being reviewed.

It is also useful to incorporate comments or key thoughts on the researcher's response to the article after it has been reviewed. For the purpose of good record keeping, it is suggested that the source and full reference are also included. Hek and Langton (2000) focused on the criteria of quality, credibility and accuracy when conducting literature review. Quality and credibility encompassed issues related to the journal, the processes of peer review, the standing of the author(s) and the claims being made.

In addition, content is judged for its accuracy and its coherence with what is already known on the subject. The final stage of appraisal is to write a short summary of each article and may include key thoughts, comments, strengths and weaknesses of the publication. It should be written in the researcher's own words to facilitate the understanding of the material. It also forms a good basis for the writing of the review.

WRITING THE LITERATURE REVIEW Once the appraisal of the literature is completed, consideration must be given to how the review will be structured and written. The key to a well conducted literature review is the ability to present the findings in such a way that demonstrates the researcher's knowledge in a clear and consistent way. The basis of good writing is to avoid long and confusing words and limit the use of jargons. Sentences should be kept as short as possible with one clear message. Spelling and grammar should be accurate and consistent with the form of English being used in the research.

The organization of material in an objective manner and the structure of the review are crucial to its comprehensiveness. It is important the researcher is very logical and key elements are included in the literature reviews.

Primarily, the written review should include an introduction, body and conclusion (Burns and Grove, 2007). The length of literature reviews vary and word limits must be considered in the overall construction of the written review. If the literature review is a standalone review, an abstract may also be necessary.

An abstract is a short summary of the findings of the review and is normally undertaken last (Hendry and Farley, 1998). 3a. INTRODUCTIONThe introduction should include the purpose of the review and a brief overview of the ‘problem’. It is important that literature sources and key search terms are outlined. Any limits, boundaries or inclusion and exclusion criteria should be clearly described. Some comment on what was found in the literature should be clearly stated, that is, whether there was a dearth or wealth of literature on the topic.

This gives the reviewer some insight into the breadth and depth of the literature sourced and goes further to facilitate judgments with regards to the validity of claims being made. 3b. THE MAIN BODYThe main body of the report presents and discusses the findings from the literature. According to (Carnell and Daly, 2001) there are several ways in which this can be done.

That is: * Dividing the literature into themes and categories. * Presenting the literature chronologically. * Exploring the theoretical and methodological literature. * Examining the theoretical and empirical literature in two sections

Regardless of the manner in which the main body of the review is framed, there are key points that must be considered. Literature that is central to the topic should be analyzed in-depth in the main body. When discussing empirical or research literature, a critical review of the methodologies used should be included.

Care must be taken, however, that the review does not end up just as a description of a series of studies. In addition, it is best to avoid broad sweeping statements about the conclusiveness of research studies. Polit and Beck (2006) suggest that when describing a study's findings, it is best to use language that indicates the tentativeness of the results rather than making definite statements about the research. Similarly, it is necessary for the reviewer to remain objective about the literature and personal opinions about the quality of research studies should not be included.

Neither should it be a series of quotes or descriptions but needs to be written succinctly in the writer's own words. The review should include a critical evaluation of the information available on the topic, highlighting and comparing results from key sources. Inconsistencies and contradictions in the literature should also be addressed (Colling, 2003) as should the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the body of literature. The role of the reviewer is to summarize and evaluate evidence about a topic, pointing out similarities and differences and offering possible explanations for any inconsistencies uncovered (Polit and Beck, 2006).

3c. CONCLUSION The review should conclude with a concise summary of the findings that describes current knowledge and offers a rationale for

conducting future research. In a review, which forms part of a study, any gaps in knowledge that have been identified should lead logically to the purpose of the proposed study. In all reviews, some recommendations or implications for practice, education and research should be included.

4. REFERENCES The literature review should conclude with a full bibliographical list of all the books, journal articles, reports and other media, which were referred to in the work. Regardless of whether the review is part of a course of study or for publication, it is an essential part of the process that all sourced material is acknowledged. This means that every citation in the text must appear in the reference or bibliography and vice versa.

The reference list may be a useful source of literature for others who are interested in studying this topic (Coughlan et al, 2007), and, therefore, every effort should be made to ensure it is accurate. To conclude, literature review is central to the research process and can help refine a research question through determining inconsistencies in a body of knowledge. Similarly, it can help inspire new research innovations and ideas while creating greater understanding about a topic. It can enable a novice researcher to gain insight into suitable designs for a future study, as well as providing information on data collection and analysis tools.

Various types of literature reviews may be used depending on the reasons for carrying out the