



HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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Some Guidance on Doing a Literature Review

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Purposes

This assignment has two main purposes: first, to explore an issue of policy or administrative practice in the research literature, and second, to provide you with the experience of doing a literature review and receiving critical feedback on it prior to writing a research proposal for your doctoral thesis or analytic paper. A literature review is an assessment of a body of research that bears on a question. Doing a literature review is similar to doing any kind of research. It involves framing a question, devising an investigative strategy for answering that question, gathering data, drawing conclusions from the data, and communicating to a reader what you have found and how you have found it. The purpose of this note is to provide you with some initial guidance about how to engage this process.

Framing a Question

Most literature reviews, like most research projects, begin from a basic question. Does heterogeneous grouping of students in classrooms increase student achievement? Does parental choice of schools result in greater parental satisfaction and greater student achievement? Does site-based management in schools result in greater satisfaction of teachers and administrator and increased student learning? Notice that each of these questions contains an explicit, hypothetical causal relationship (e.g., heterogeneous grouping *causes* increased student achievement). Hence, “what is the effect of heterogeneous grouping?” is not a serviceable question for our purposes because it lacks a causal relationship (effect on what?). For purposes of this assignment, then, a good question is one that sharply focuses a causal relationship on which existing research can shed some light.

As with most research, your initial framing of the question will probably not be the one that you eventually use for the final version of your literature review. It is always useful, however, to have a question that you can modify as your understanding of the research deepens. It turns out, for example, that the effects of grouping of students differ significantly, depending on things like the age of the children, the type of grouping, and the subject matter being taught. So, as your review of this literature progressed, your question, or questions, would become more complex to reflect the complexity of the research.

Devising an Investigative Strategy

Just as there are multiple strategies one can use to do research, so, too, are there multiple strategies for a literature review. One approach is to begin with standard comprehensive bibliographical sources -- the index of periodicals, the ERIC system, the HOLLIS library system, bibliographical sources, etc. -- using a topic drawn from your question as the point of departure for your search. This approach almost always means some creative relabeling of key ideas in order to make your question fit with the descriptors used by the source. Another approach is to begin with one good example of the kind of research that exemplifies what you are interested in and “branch” off of that research to create a body of related research. You can, for example, use the citations of one piece of research to develop other citations. You can find other pieces of research on the same or similar subjects by the same author, or by authors who are cited by the author. And you can use terms from the title and abstract of that piece of research as a descriptor for a broader search through comprehensive sources. A third approach is to read other literature reviews that are related to, but not coextensive with, your topic. Introductory chapters of books

on related subjects, literature review sections of articles on related subjects, and separate literature reviews are all useful places to start. Most people end up using some variant of all three approaches, and possibly some others I haven't described. As with any kind of research, the most important thing is to get started in some relatively organized way and then let the data lead you through the inquiry.

Gathering Literature

Much of what you find in any literature search you will not use in your final product. Don't expect everything to pop out of the literature into some predetermined place in your review. You are searching for a body of literature that bears directly on your question, as modified by your thinking in the process of doing the review, not just a bunch of citations that have vague relationship to your topic. Start broadly and then focus, pulling together a core of literature that bears directly on your topic.

Establishing criteria of relevance is one of the most difficult tasks of any literature review. You will have to explain how you got the body of literature you are reviewing, so keep track of the decisions you made in the process.

Think also at this stage about the logic that holds together your argument about what the literature has to say about your question. That is, if you want to argue that the literature demonstrates that heterogeneous grouping works best for children of a certain age in learning focused on certain subjects, then you will want to look carefully at the evidence that supports this claim and see whether it actually does.

Likewise, when you think you have discovered a pattern in the research, you should deliberately pose the opposite pattern and search for research that supports that pattern. You should be looking for evidence that disconfirms your conclusions as much as evidence that confirms them. You will have to explain what conflicting evidence says about your question, and posing contradictory questions to the emerging patterns in your review is a good way to get a footing in the evidence.

This literature review assignment is not intended to be comprehensive, in the sense that you are required to represent every single piece of research that bears on your question. The literature included in your review should, however, be representative of the literature on the subject, and you should explain why you think it is representative – that is, what strategies you used in searching for literature and in testing your major findings to provide some assurance that you're not misrepresenting what the literature says.

Drawing Conclusions and Communicating Them

Writing a good literature review is like producing any good piece of expository writing. It has to have logic and argument, and it has to anticipate your reader's question about what you are explaining. Literature reviews work best, in my judgment, when they are framed clearly around a question or a series of questions – that is, where the writer interrogates the literature on the reader's behalf. Imagine that you are leading the reader through a carefully thought-out exposition of the patterns that emerge from the literature and a clearly drawn set of conclusions about what the research does and doesn't say.

It is often useful to take as your point of departure some article of conventional wisdom – for example, “many teachers believe that students learn better when they are grouped with other students who have similar aptitudes for the subject” – and then proceed to “unpack” the assumptions behind the conventional wisdom and bring evidence to bear on the key issues that emerge from the literature. It is usually better not to tell the story of your search through the literature – “first, I looked at X and found Y, and then I looked at A and found B” – because your reader is usually much less interested in the story of your search than in its final results.

You're shooting for a clearly organized, well argued statement of what the literature does and does not say about some key issue or question. Remember, it is often just as important what the literature does *not* say as what it does say. For example, if the literature does not support wholesale use of heterogeneous grouping, or if the success of grouping practices seems to be heavily dependent on the skill and competence of teachers in implementing them, then it is important to clarify these dimensions, even though they muddy-up your conclusions. Another

respect in which it is good to say what the research does not say is when there is a great deal of uncertainty around certain key questions – say, when five different researches get five different results studying roughly the same thing. It is not your job to make the research look more definitive than it really is. It is your job to portray accurately what the research does and doesn't say.

The Final Product

As noted in the course outline, the literature review for this course is 10-12 pages in length and it should deal with an issue of the relationship between research and practice. For a literature review of this length, you should have no fewer than 20 citations, although the number of citations is less important than the way you use them. If you find you have defined a topic that yields fewer citations, or one that yields many more than you can possibly represent fairly, then you need to tinker with your question.

The final product will be evaluated on the basis of whether it includes a clear question or set of questions, a reasonable description of the body of literature reviewed, an argument that describes what the literature says, and a set of conclusions about what one can reasonably say based on the literature.