

Teaching How to Write a Review of Literature

ABSTRACT

Some graduate seniors who have been practicing for years have lost touch with the academic side of social work. In teaching a research class of MSW students who are long time practitioners, I learned that they (as a group) had a significant problem in understanding the function and purpose of a review of literature as part of a Master's thesis. This article outlines a strategy employed to assist these students. Since using this teaching strategy with MSW students, it has been utilized for BSW research students as an effort to prepare those who wish to pursue graduate study.

Introduction

An objective for an MSW research course required students to write a review of literature. Unlike most classes, well over half of the students had been out of college practicing social work for over 10 years. In addition to distant experience in academic life, as a group they were unlike other students enrolled in the School Social Work in at least two other ways. First, all were employed in full time social work positions. Second, all were enrolled as part time students. These class characteristics produced some unusual problems. One major problem was that most of the students were confused about the purpose and function of a review of literature for their pending MSW thesis. Simply stated, most of the students could not successfully write a review of literature.

The Strategy

Reflecting on this problem, I decided that students should receive instruction on the purpose and function of a review of literature. Very little is written on this topic. Most importantly, the citations I used [DePoy & Gitlin, 1994; Katzer, Cook, & Crouch (1991); Krathwohl (1988); Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman (1987); Madsen (1992); and Miller & Taylor (1987)] proved to be of little assistance. For example, I could not find an adequate definition for the concept of "Review of Literature." DePoy and Gitlin's (1994) chapter provides the most

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extensive explanation for review of literature, but these authors do not address the central concern of entry-level MSW students – *format*. Some students desperately need insight on how to organize their thoughts and material. Authors who address the topic of reviews of literature seem to assume that MSW students have this skill *or* do not need guidance to develop it. Their assumption is contrary to my experience.

My educational task was threefold. First, I had to offer a definition of “Review of Literature.” Obviously, students will best understand a concept after it is defined. Second, I discovered that offering a mere definition would not provide the students the required insight in order to write such a paper. A typology of formats needs to be developed, presented and employed. A typology of reviews of literature coupled with a definition would provide a firm foundation for understanding the concept. Third, students need reinforcement. That is, they need an assignment in which they employ the definition and typology to prepare them to write a Review of Literature.

The Definition

At the beginning of our class discussion of reviews of literature, students are informed that this type of manuscript is a common part of scholarly activity. It is an essential part of most dissertations and thesis within all professional and academic programs of a graduate education.

At this point, a definition of “review of literature” is offered:

A review of literature is a manuscript or a section of a manuscript that is a systematic exploration of material written on the research being addressed. Since the “research question” drives the structure of the literature review, there are no formulas or systems for writing one. However, there is a typology we can use to organize our thoughts.

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A definition alone is not adequate in conceptualizing the purpose and function of review of literature. Thus, students are offered a typology that can be employed for systematically categorizing this form of scholarly literature.

A critical issue is immediately apparent. Readers will acknowledge that all dissertations and thesis do not include a traditional review of literature. Some employ literature as data. These strategies require a great deal of creativity of the researcher who already has a profound understanding of a review of literature. In my more naïve days, I thought that Picasso's abstract art was a joke. After some study, I realized that he had a profound understanding of the human condition and was able to clearly portray it on canvas. He did not begin his artistic life with such profound insight or style. Like Picasso, they must be encouraged to begin their scholarly journey at an entry level. The typology is an effort to get MSW students started.

The Typology

To integrate the learning process with previously introduced material, the review of literature is linked to three models of research: exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. These are introduced within both of BSW (i.e., Marlow, 1997) and MSW (i.e., Rubin & Babbie, 1996) textbooks. The typology was developed by systematically examining published, refereed, review of literature journal articles, and seeking and establishing a pattern. Generally speaking, the central focus of these articles is to synthesize material in a highly specialized area [i.e., paradoxical therapy (DeBord, 1989)]. To ground the typology in a realm directly related to their future task for the class assignment, examples of reviews of literature from dissertations and these are employed. Efforts were made to encompass a range of qualitative and quantitative

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research.¹ After completing this exercise, 10 types was categorized into one of the three models and defined.

Explanatory

These types of reviews of literature are typically employed with qualitative research. These provide a framework to write a review of literature when little has been written directly on the subject being addressed.

1. Historical – Reviews the historical context of the literature leading up to the study presented. This method is most helpful when virtually nothing is written on the subject. Essentially, it examines the literature that leads to the new and/or innovative idea for the research being presented. Saylor (1972) and Locklear (1985) are examples.
2. Typology Development – In this approach, the author examines the literature in order to develop a typology. This approach can only be used when a great deal is written on the peripheral of the subject matter, but not specifically on the subject itself. Typology development is best employed as a method of crystallizing or organizing ideas. Although the work of Marson (1983) is not a dissertation or thesis, the article offers a good example of this approach.
3. Framework Review – When an author is attempting to address a well researched subject from a perspective hitherto never employed, one can review the various theoretical explanations of the phenomena being studied. The review of literature is employed to critique past theories and to substantiate the framework being used within the presented research [see Schmalleger (1974) as an example].

¹ An unexpected secondary gain emerged. Many students were under the false impression that qualitative research is “easier” because it does not typically include statistical analysis. Using qualitative dissertations as examples debunked the myth.

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4. Identification of concepts – An author reviews the literature to extract concepts in order to employ these ideas within the body of research (Bowman, 1983). This type of review of literature is best employed when conducting qualitative research. Here, the researcher need not know the specific direction of the research. The review of literature becomes a critical guide.
5. Question/Answer – One experience that is common among those who are writing a review of literature is “mind questions.” “Mind questions” include questions that the researcher asks him/herself during the process of thinking about the research project. Those questions can be used within the review of literature. The questions can be used as topical heading. The answers come from the literature. An example of this can be found in Marson (2009).

Descriptive

These types of reviews of literature are generally appropriate for survey research and ethnography.

1. Problem Solving – Primarily concern is not about research, but how problems have been solved. Here, the researcher reviews how others have solved a particular problem and suggests that these solutions may [or may not] have merit for the particular research being presented. Used most often in engineering. For social work, strong (1991) is an example.
2. Summary – Some authors summarize the work of others. This approach may appear to be like a series of abstracts and is limited to topics in which there is a great deal written. Rimberg (1959) is an example.

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3. Theoretical – Here the review of literature focuses on data or findings. The data or findings are reviewed within the context of a theory. The theory that is being employed to interpret the data is not necessarily the same theory used in the articles being reviewed [see Marson (1991) as an example].

Explanatory

These types of literature are generally employed for substantiating or providing analytical support for establishing a casual relationship.

1. Identification of Dependent Variables – Focus is solely on the conclusion of past authors. Initially it may appear like the Summary model [discussed above], but the Conclusion model normally does not seem like a series of abstracts. Instead of addressing the totality of past literature, the Conclusions model highlights the outcomes of past studies (i.e., dependent variables). This model is particularly helpful to focus on variables that produced the best explanations [see Roscigno (1996) as an example].
2. Evaluative/Procedures – These approaches are usually accomplished simultaneously – but not necessarily. The Evaluative model critiques quality of previous research. Here, the researcher makes an effort to employ past studies as a spring-board to improve the quality of the research being presented. The Procedures approach reports on the various research methodologies that have been employed to address a research topic. Evaluative and Procedures are place together because if a researcher is going to address procedures, he/she is most likely to critique them. Foulk (1984) is an excellent example that includes both evaluation and procedures.

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3. Identification of Independent Variables – Literature is examined to address how variables (usually independent variables) have been used in previous research. This model is best used when one is replicating past research. Such a review generally focuses on the development of new variables or more robust strategies for operationalizing variables. Marson (1976) is an example.

Two problems are immediately apparent within this typology. First, the types are not necessarily mutually exclusive. One will discover that it is not unusual to find a review of literature that is characterized by multiple types. A “mixture” of several of these perhaps constitutes a tenth type of review of literature. However, when students identify a mixture of several types, it demonstrated they understand the strategy of the author. Thus, the lack of mutually exclusive types benefits the homework assignment. Second, there is no guarantee that the typology is exhaustive. At this point, no one has identified a review that cannot fall inot one or a mixture of the several types. If such a new type does emerge, it can be included in the revised edition of typology.

The Assignment

In order to demonstrate that students understand how to write a review of literature, they must read them. They are given the following assignment:

Select three “reviews of literature.” These can be selected from the bibliography on the syllabus or students may find their own. All citations not included on the syllabus must be approved by the professor. Read the article and word process a short essay that: 1) summarizes the article; and 2) identifies the type of review of literature. Your assignment is to categorize three articles and explain why the

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article fits into the category you selected. The summary cannot be longer than one paragraph.

Most students do not have the skill of differentiating which journal articles constitute a review of literature. Thus, I wrote and maintain a bibliography that is divided into three parts: 1) Dissertations and Thesis; 2) Monographs; and 3) Journal Articles. The bibliography is found in the Appendix. The list of dissertations, thesis, and monographs is used during lectures for the purpose of illustration. The list of journal articles is used in the assignment. Although students are not required to employ the bibliography to complete the assignment, they quickly learn that seeking out a review of literature is a time consuming effort.

Summary and Conclusion

Earnest, thoughtful and hardworking graduate student who have been out of touch with the academic world for a long time may have greater trouble capturing the essence of some assignments that are intellectual exercises rather than applied social work activities. These students need to be encouraged. They have a major contribution to make to the profession. The assignment of writing a review of literature is a case illustration.

A systematic exploration of published reviews of literature assists student in writing. They are required to read reviews of literature for the basic content, style, and, most importantly, purpose. When students thoughtfully experience the reviews of literature of others, they will be well on the road of successfully writing their own review of literature for their thesis.

APPENDIX

CITATIONS USED ON SYLLABUS²

Examples: Dissertations and Thesis

- Bowman, J. R. (1983). *The organization of spontaneous adult social play*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus.
- Foulk, R. C. (1984). *Child maltreatment: An examination of models of causation and the issue of standardization measurement*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus.
- Haga, F. (1990). *Staying in or getting out: "Importation," behavior, coercive program assignment and length of stay in juvenile training schools*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, North Carolina State University, Raleigh.
- Locklear, V. S. (1985). *A cross cultural study to determine how mental health is defined in a tri-racial country in southeastern*. North Carolina Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus.
- Marson, S. M. (1991). *The utility of a Marxian framework for sociology of aging*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, North Carolina State University, Raleigh.
- Marson, S. M. (1976). *Identifying variables related to successful treatment in an alcoholic inpatient rehabilitation facility*. Unpublished master's thesis, Ohio State University, Columbus.
- Rimberg, J. (1959). *The motion picture in the Soviet Union: 1918-1952: A sociological analysis*. Published doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, New York.
- Roscigno, V. J. (1996). *Race, place, and the reputation of educational disadvantage: The Black-White gap and local structures of opportunity*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, North Carolina State University, Raleigh.
- Saylor, J. (1972). *Intelligence, personality, and demographic correlates of orientation and mobility skills, personal-social skills and vocational skills of blind persons*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus.
- Schmallegger, F. (1974). *The sociology of dreams*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus.
- Strong, J. (1991). *A study of the Pitt County mental health center adolescent substance abuse program: Aftercare follow-through and client outcomes*. Unpublished master's thesis, East Carolina University, Greenville.

Examples: Monographs

- Brown, M. (1973). *Collective behaviour: A review and reinterpretation of the literature*. Pacific Palisades, Calif., Goodyear Pub. Co.
- Carbino, Rosemarie. (1980). *Foster parenting: An updated review of the literature*. New York: Child Welfare League of America.
- Cornish, D. (1978). *Gambling: A review of the literature and its implications for policy and research* London : H.M.S.O.
- Goldstein, B. (1967). *Low income youth in urban areas: A critical review of the literature*. New York, Holt Rinehart and Winston.

² Readers who desire to employ this review of literature as a course assignment are invited to reprint part or all of the appendix on their syllabus.

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- Fisher, J. H. (1966). *The medieval literature of western Europ: A review of research, mainly 1930-1960*. [New York] Published for the Modern Language Association of America by the New York University Press.
- Lang, K. (1972). *Military institutions and the sociology of war: A review of the literature with annotated bibliography*. Beverly Hills, Sage Publications.
- Lester, D. (1986). *The murderer and his murder: A review of research*. New York: AMS Press.
- Cross, E. Y. (1994). *The promise of diversity: Over 40 voices discuss strategies for eliminating dicrimination in organizations*. Burr Ridge, Ill.: Irwin.
- Kiernan, C. (1982). *Signs and symbols: A review of literature and survey of the use of non-vocal communication systems*. London: Heinemann Educational Books for the Institute of Education, University of London.
- Taber, M. A. (1980). *The social contest of helping: A review of the literature on alternative care for the physically and mentally handicapped*. Rockville, Md: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, National Institute of Mental Health; Washington.
- Rosenberg-Dishman, M. B. (1975). *Women and society: A critical review of the literature with a selected annotated bibliography*. Beverly Hills, CA Sage Productions.
- Examples: Journal Articles**
- Anderson, J. L. (1989). The nurse's role in cancer rehabilitation: Review of the literature. *Cancer Nursing*, 12(2), 85-94.
- Baker, D. J. & Paterson, M. A. (1995). Marketed sperm: Use and regulation in the United States. *Fertility and Sterility*, 63(5), 947-952.
- Benson, B. A. & Gross, A. M. (1989). The effect of congenitally handicapped child upon the marital dyad: A review of literature. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 9(6), 747-758.
- Berger, R. J. (1989). Female delinquency in the emancipation era: A review of the literature. *Sex Roles*, 21(5/6), 375-400.
- Blai, B. (1989). Health consequences of loneliness: A review of the literature. *Journal of American College Health*, 37(4), 162-167.
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- Early, T. J. & Poertner, J. (1993). Families with children with emotional disorders: A review of the literature. *Social Work*, 38(6), 743-751.
- Engs, R. C. & Hanson, D. J. (1990). Gender differences in drinking patterns and problems among college students: A review of the literature. *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education*, 35(2), 36-45.
- Evans, L. K., & Strumpf, N. E. (1989). Tying down the elderly: A review of literature on physical restraint. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 37(1), 65-72.
- Frong, R. & Mokuau, N. (1994). Not simply "Asian Americans": Periodical literature review on Asians and pacific islanders. *Social Work*. 39(3), 298-304.
- Frasciello, L. M. & Willard, S. G. (1995). Anorexia nervosa in males: A case report and review of the literature. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 23(1), 47-58.

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- Frederick, B. P. & Olmi, D. J. (1994). Children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder: A review of the literature on social skills deficits. *Psychology in the Schools*, 31(4), 288-294.
- Garton, L. & Wellman, B. (1995). Social impacts of electronic mail in organizations: A review of the research literature. *Communication Yearbook*, 18, 434-453.
- Grubb, H. J. (1989). The bi-polar prepubescent adolescent: A literature review and clinical case study of an eleven-year-old black female. *The Journal of Black Psychology*, 15(2), 129-147.
- Gruber, J. E. (1989). How women handle sexual harassment: A literature review. *Sociology and Social Research*, 74(1), 3-16.
- Hart, S. (1996). The cultural dimension of social movement: A theoretical reassessment and literature review. *Sociology of Religion*, 57(1), 87-97
- Horsman, J. M., Sheeran, P. (1995). Health care workers and HIV/AIDS: A critical review of the literature. *Social Science & Medicine*, 41(11), 1535-1568.
- Jones, L. (1993). Decision making in child welfare: A critical review of the literature. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 10(3), 241-152.
- Kim, C. R. & Rickman, L. S. (1988). Psychological aspects of the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome: A case report and review of the literature. *Military Medicine*, 153(12), 638-640.
- Koch, P. B. (1988). Diabetes and female sexuality: A review of the literature. *Health Care for Women International*, 9(4), 251-258.
- Kronick, R. F., Morton, J. & Preston, L. (1989). Dealing with dropouts: A review of the literature and preliminary findings. *Education*, 110(1), 123-129.
- Lester, D. & Smith, B. (1989). Applicability of Kubler-Ross's stages of dying to the suicidal individual: A review of the literature. *Psychological Reports*, 64(2), 609-610
- Lovejoy, P. E. (1989). The impact of the Atlantic slave trade on Africa: A review of literature. *Journal of African History*, 30(3), 365-379.
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- Lyons, P. & Wodarski, J. S. (1996). Risk assessment for child protective services: A review of the empirical literature on instrument performance. *Social Work Research*, 20(3), 143-156.
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- Marson, S. M. & Della Fave, R. L. (1994). A Marxian review of gerontological literature. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 21(2), 109-126.
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