

Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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CHAPTER 14

SYNTHESIZING WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW

Literature Reviews

Many reviews, in fact, are only thinly disguised annotated bibliographies. (Hart 2018, 2)

A quality literature review should not just reflect or replicate previous research and writing on the topic under review, but should lead to new productive work (Lather, 1999) and represent knowledge construction on the part of the writer. (Imel 2011, 146-47)

In response to the rapid growth of the body of literature in higher education, Malcolm Tight (2018b, 607) suggested that “it may be time to spend more effort on synthesising and disseminating what we have already learnt, rather than, or before, undertaking fresh research.” Rather than choosing to only generate new research or only synthesize what we have already learned, we suggest, as we do throughout this book, taking a both/and approach. Bringing literature together in a review is a particularly useful endeavor in writing about learning and teaching, where the literature is dispersed across SoTL, educational research, and discipline-based educational research publications. Drawing on scholarship, literature reviews offer an exciting opportunity to synthesize what is known about a topic and reveal what else we can learn.

Our main focus in this chapter is on *freestanding* literature reviews, as opposed to reviews embedded in research articles, theses, and other genres (e.g., Ridley 2012), though much of what we say applies

to those as well. As the first quote at the beginning of this chapter indicates, a common error in writing literature reviews is to produce what is effectively an annotated bibliography, sometimes along the lines of A said, B said, etc. In contrast, a quality review, as the second quote above suggests, adds to the literature by producing new insights from existing literature, often contributing “new frameworks and perspectives on the topic” (Torraco 2005, 356). In other words, a good literature review is more than the sum of its parts.

Whereas empirical research articles (chapter 12) are expected to present original data and theoretical and conceptual articles (chapter 13) afford opportunities for speculation and argument, literature reviews integrate previous studies within a new frame. Each of these genres importantly informs the others. As Chris Hart (2018, 11) points out: “It is the progressive narrowing of the topic, through the literature review, that makes most research a practical consideration,” and David Boote and Penny Beille (2005, 3) suggest that “a thorough, sophisticated literature review is the foundation and inspiration for substantial, useful research.” A few journals, such as the *Review of Educational Research* and *Educational Research Review*, specialize in publishing freestanding, critical, integrative reviews of research literature on education, but most higher education journals publish reviews relevant to their focus.

A variety of terms may be used to describe literature reviews, including research reviews, integrative reviews, and research syntheses (Imel 2011). In this discussion we do not include meta-analyses, which use a statistical procedure for combining empirical data from multiple studies to measure effect sizes, such as John Hattie’s (2008) systematic review of over 800 meta-analyses of the influences on achievement in school-aged students. We also exclude discussion of *how* to undertake the literature search and literature analysis, just as we omitted consideration of data collection and analysis, and research methods, in the chapter on empirical research articles. Our focus is rather on demystifying the *writing* of the literature review. To that end we present a flexible guide to the organization and composition of a literature review.

The Nature and Purpose of Literature Reviews

Harris Cooper (1988, 2003) developed an influential taxonomy of literature reviews in education and psychology. His “taxonomy categorizes reviews according to: (a) focus; (b) goal; (c) perspective; (d) coverage; (e) organization; and (f) audience” (1988, 104). We summarize these six characteristics:

- *Focus* – Most authors of literature reviews in education focus on research findings, research methods, theories, or practices and applications.
- *Goal* – The primary goal of a literature review is synthesis or integration. Other goals are a critique of the existing literature, a discussion of strengths and limitations, and the identification of central issues and gaps in the literature.
- *Perspective* – There is a difference between the reviewer advocating a position or remaining neutral. Check whether the journal you are submitting to has a preference for one or the other of these.
- *Coverage* – This concerns the extent to which the author attempts to find and include relevant literature. The coverage can be exhaustive, exhaustive with selective criteria, representative of core material, or dictated by the reviewer’s goals.
- *Organization* – Reviews may be organized historically, conceptually, or methodologically.
- *Audience* – Reviews can be written for groups of specialized researchers, general researchers, practitioners, policymakers, or the general public.

See also Grant and Booth (2009) for another classification of literature reviews.

Reviews of relevant literature have a range of purposes. Chris Hart (2018, 31) identifies twelve:

1. Distinguishing what has been done from what needs to be done
2. Discovering important variables relevant to the topic
3. Synthesising and gaining a new perspective
4. Identifying relationships between ideas and practice

5. Establishing the context of the topic or problem
6. Rationalising the theoretical or practical significance of the problem
7. Enhancing and gaining the subject vocabulary
8. Understanding the origins and structure of the subject
9. Relating ideas and theory to problems and questions
10. Identifying the main methodologies and data collection tools that have been used
11. Placing the research into an historical context to show familiarity with state-of-the-art developments
12. Having a body of knowledge to which you can relate your own research findings.

Although Hart claims these purposes are equally important, which ones are relevant vary between different studies and different types of review. For example, Joseph Maxwell (2006) argues that the purpose of a freestanding review is to present a review *of* research, while the objective of an embedded review is to present a review *for* research. This distinction has an important bearing on how the quality of the review is judged. Maxwell (2006, 28) argues that, whereas *thoroughness* is a key indicator of quality of a freestanding review, *relevance* is “the most essential characteristic” of the embedded literature review. Literature reviews can also expose both dominant and silenced voices and perspectives (Walker 2015). It is also important to remember that there are ethical issues involved in undertaking and writing literature reviews (Kara 2019).

Further nuances apply to specific purposes. For example, authors often identify filling gaps in the literature as both purpose and outcome of a freestanding review or as an argument justifying their study in an embedded review. Pat Thomson (2019a) is critical of the gap-filling justification because “the gap filler, no matter how much they struggle to be appreciative, starts from a deficit position. Here is what the field doesn’t do. Then the gap filler is going to sort this out. They will fix this important omission.” She goes on to argue that a gap in the literature is not an adequate justification for a study

(Thomson 2019b): “It isn’t necessarily significant that nobody has written about a particular topic in this specific way before. Nope. The topic may just not be interesting or important enough for anyone to have bothered.” A better justification for a study, she suggests, is its *significance*: identify the nature of the topic or problem you are studying and how your review contributes to understanding it better or answering a problem that you or others have recognized. Along these lines, Thomson (2019a) suggests either a “next step” or a “what if” approach to justifying the study:

The next stepper positions themselves as part of the field and about to make a positive contribution to what has gone before. The what iffer is also positioned as part of the field but as someone who would like to do a little creative work to see what experimentation might have to offer.

We see the logic of Thomson’s arguments, although, as Ronald Barnett (personal communication, July 28, 2019) notes, “gap-fillers can be collegial and what-iffers can be isolated on their desert islands.” So, when considering the purpose of your literature review, take into account what approach might be at once collegial *and* contribute to or create inclusive and generative conversations.

Prior to undertaking a literature review it may help to undertake a scoping review. These are “a form of knowledge synthesis that addresses an exploratory research question aimed at mapping key concepts, types of evidence, and gaps in research related to a defined area or field by systematically searching, selecting, and synthesizing existing knowledge” (Colquhoun et al. 2014, 1292, 1294).

Writing a Literature Review for Publication

A good indication of the standards and criteria involved in writing a literature review, whether it is published in a journal or as a book chapter, is given in the *statement of the aims and scope of the Review of Educational Research*:

The *Review of Educational Research (RER)* publishes critical, integrative reviews of research literature bearing on education. Such reviews should include conceptualizations, interpretations, and syntheses of literature and scholarly work in a field broadly relevant to education and educational research.

The standards and criteria for reviews in *RER* are the following:

1. Quality of the literature. Standards used to determine quality of literature in education vary greatly. Any review needs to take into account the quality of the literature and its impact on findings. Authors should attempt to review all relevant literature on a topic (e.g., international literature, cross-disciplinary work, etc.).
2. Quality of analysis. The review should go beyond description to include analysis and critiques of theories, methods, and conclusions represented in the literature. This analysis should also examine the issue of access—which perspectives are included or excluded in a body of work? Finally, the analysis should be reflexive—how does the scholar’s framework constrain what can be known in this review?
3. Significance of the topic. The review should seek to inform and/or illuminate questions important to the field of education. While these questions may be broad-based, they should have implications for the educational problems and issues affecting our national and global societies.
4. Impact of the article. The review should be seen as an important contribution and tool for the many different educators dealing with the educational problems and issues confronting society.
5. Advancement of the field. The review should validate or inform the knowledge of researchers and

guide and improve the quality of their research and scholarship.

6. **Style.** The review must be well written and conform to style of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th edition). Authors should avoid the use of unexplained jargon and parochialism.
7. **Balance and fairness.** The review should be careful not to misrepresent the positions taken by others, or be disrespectful of contrary positions.
8. **Purpose.** Any review should be accessible to the broad readership of *RER*. The purpose of any article should be to connect the particular problem addressed by the researcher(s) to a larger context of education. (*Review of Educational Research*, “**Aims and Scope**”)

As this list of standards and criteria indicates, high-quality literature reviews in higher education should provide provocative new insights into key issues. But writing such a review is a highly skilled task involving several stages:

Authors of review articles are expected to identify an appropriate topic or issue for review, justify why a literature review is the appropriate means of addressing the topic or problem, search and retrieve the appropriate literature(s), analyze and critique the literature, and create new understandings of the topic through one or more forms of synthesis. (Torraco 2005, 356–7)

Unlike a theoretical or conceptual article, which draws on literature to provoke the forward-looking generation of new concepts, a literature review looks back at what has already been written and presents it in a new way. So, while it looks back, it also influences thinking—and, potentially, practice—going forward.

In “Guiding Questions for Planning, Revising, and Refining a Literature Review,” we identify a series of questions that break this task down into more manageable steps, illustrated with examples from higher education freestanding reviews. A version with only the

questions included is [available in the online resources](#). You may find it helpful in planning your literature review.

Guiding Questions for Planning, Revising, and Refining a Literature Review*

1. What is the focus and aim of your review? Who is your audience?

Identify your focus and, if appropriate, clarify your target audience, as the authors of this review of the literature on the concept of excellence in teaching and learning do:

The literature review set out to address three main questions: How is the term “excellence” used in the context of teaching and the student learning experience? What are the key conceptualisations of excellence? What are the implications of usage and conceptualisations for future policy in relation to promoting or developing excellence? (Little et al. 2007, 1)

2. Why is there a need for your review? Why is it significant?

Tell readers about the importance of the topic or problem and why a literature review is an appropriate way of addressing it.

Mentorship is a defining feature of UR [undergraduate research]. As more and different types of colleges and universities strive to meet student demand for authentic scholarly experiences, it is imperative to identify what effective UR mentors do in order to ensure student engagement, quality enhancement, retention, and degree-completion. (Shanahan et al. 2015, 359)

3. What is the context of the topic or issue? What perspective do you take? What framework do you use to synthesize the literature?

A good literature review is creative. Describe the context and your perspective and framework, as these authors do in this quote from a literature review on designing educational development practices:

Their conceptual review yielded a framework with six foci of practice (skill, method, reflection, disciplinary, institutional, and action research or inquiry) that was drawn from an analysis of the design elements of the educational development practices in the research they reviewed and from an analysis of the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical literature cited by those articles. (Amundsen and Wilson 2012, 90).

4. How did you locate and select sources for inclusion in the review?

Provide details of the sources you selected and your selection criteria so that readers can assess your conclusions. Search engines are not neutral (Noble 2018). Consider tracking and reporting the search terms and resources you used to find the materials in the review, because words matter. For instance, in the past US authors often used the term “freshman” for first-year students; scholars from other areas of the world didn’t. Searching different databases can lead to differently skewed results. Consider snowball searching as well: start with base articles, then follow who cites whom and who is cited by whom. This approach reduces the problem of overly restrictive keywords, especially in fields where terminology is changing. For example, a review of teacher identity in universities focused van Lankveld et al.’s (2017) search:

On the basis of title and abstract screening, we selected the following studies: empirical and review studies published in the English language in peer-reviewed journals that were concerned with adult university teachers and that focused principally on teacher identity. . . . We

chose to limit our search to 2005–2015. (van Lankveld et al. 2017, 327)

5. How is your review structured?

Inform the reader how you have structured your review. Try where possible to use informative headings rather than generic ones. For example, the authors of this review of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) literature structured their report as follows:

- Introduction
- Defining SoTL
- SoTL in the disciplines
- SoTL and educational development
- SoTL recognition and excellence
- National and international SoTL initiatives
- Student engagement with SoTL
- Main findings and recommendations

(Fanghanel et al. 2015, 2–3)

6. What are the main findings in the literature on this topic?

By providing both an overview of findings already documented in the literature and a framework for your synthesis of those findings, you help readers make sense of what is already known. For instance, a review of the literature on students as partners found that:

Trends across results provide insights into four themes: the importance of reciprocity in partnership; the need to make space in the literature for sharing the (equal) realities of partnership; a focus on partnership activities that are small scale, at the undergraduate level, extracurricular, and focused on teaching and learning enhancement; and the need to move toward inclusive, partnered learning communities in higher education. (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017a, 1)

7. What are the main strengths and limitations of this literature?

By assessing the main strengths and limitations of the literature you provide a critical analysis rather than a descriptive summary. A Norwegian analysis of the research–education nexus argued that:

Overall, the evidence reveals a highly complex and multidimensional picture on the research–education relationship at different levels such as national, organisational/institutional, curriculum and individual. This complexity and multidimensionality and the lack of unambiguous definitions of the two core terms, research and education, make it challenging to define a clear set of measurable indicators to measure the impact of the research–education relationship on study quality. We thus argue that it is important to distinguish between and combine three types of indicators, i.e., input, process and output indicators, highlighting the importance of student–active learning forms. (Elken and Wollscheid 2016, 8)

8. What conclusions do you draw from the review? What do you argue needs to be done as an outcome of the review?

Identify your main conclusions and the areas where further research could usefully focus. A study of professional identity development concluded that:

Further research is needed to better understand the tensions between personal and professional values, structural and power influences, discipline versus generic education, and the role of workplace learning on professional identities. (Trede, Macklin, and Bridges 2012, 365)

**As with other sets of guiding questions in this book, select those questions that are relevant to your context, add others as appropriate, and decide the order in which you will address them to communicate effectively with your audience.*

Over to You

Writing a quality literature review can be a challenging but also an inspiring venture. Most research begins with a review of the relevant literature, but standalone reviews need to be more systematic and add to knowledge and understanding. In other words, a freestanding review needs to be more than simply a summary of the pre-existing literature; to contribute to the scholarly conversation, it should also provide new insights that will guide the future development of the field. As you consider the steps that we and others provide for writing a review, also keep in mind how this work draws on and reveals your own identity, either implicitly or explicitly. Questions to ask about writing literature reviews include:

- What topics will be of interest and significance to others as well as fascinating to you—enough for you to consider writing a standalone literature review?
- Which of our Guiding Questions do you think you need to address to write your literature review? What other questions are important for you to tackle?
- What is the extent, scope, and significance of the existing literature as it deals with your question or problem?
- What outlets might be interested in publishing your literature review?