Newsletter

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Literature review: why is it important?

Working with literature is an essential part of the research process in Higher Education. Reviewing literature is the very basis of any research and it can be considered as the platform on which the researcher will build his/her research argument. It places the research in context within the researcher's discipline and demonstrates how the research improves his/her discipline.

Reviewing literature and literature review are two different things (O'Leary, 2004). According to O'Leary reviewing literature is informing yourself what is happening in the field while the literature review is informing your audience what is happening in the field. Again reasons for reviewing literature are gaining a level of topical and methodological knowledge and expertise, finding potential gaps in the literature that may point to potential research questions, critically evaluating common/typical methods, facilitating the development of your own methodological approaches. The purpose of the literature review are establishing your credibility as a knowledgeable and capable researcher, arguing the relevance and the significance of your research questions, providing the context for your own methodological approach and arguing the relevance and appropriateness of your approach.

Most find writing of a literature review as a difficult task that takes patience, practice, drafts, and redrafts. The literature review is not a study-by-study, or article-by-article, description of studies previously done by researchers, a re-statement of the studies previously done or a brief overview of articles. A good literature review is an argument that is more purposeful than a simple review of relevant literature.

Simply the literature review can define as a description of the literature relevant to a particular field or topic. The literature review illustrates, summarizes, appraises and clarifies the literature relevant to the

research topic. Further it gives an overview of the field of inquiry: what has already been said on the topic, who the key writers are, what the prevailing theories and hypotheses are, what questions are being asked, and what methodologies and methods are appropriate and useful. It should give a hypothetical foundation for the research and help establish the nature of the research.

The importance of the literature review cannot be denied because it is a review of writing on a subject. Reasons for the importance of the literature review can be explained as follows: Literature review helps to find new ways to figure out any ambiguity or flaws in earlier researches and it portrays the link of each work to the others. Literature review resolves any contradictory findings, or gaps in previous studies and most importantly, it leads the way forward for further research. Finally it adds the understanding and knowledge of the particular field.

A literature review should discover the areas of controversy in the literature. It should explain how each work is similar to and how it varies from the others. Again literature review should be well-structured around and directly linked to the research questions. Literature review should present an overview of the subject, issue or theory under consideration, along with the objectives of the research.

Introduction, body and conclusion are the basic parts of any literature review. In the introduction part it is essential to define the topic, together with reasons for selecting the particular research topic. Here there is a need to point out overall trends, gaps, particular themes etc.

Literature sources should be discussed in the body. Writers can organize the discussion chronologically, thematically or methodologically. When organizing the body chronologically, literature should be presented or arranged in the order in which events occurred. Writers can also decide particular themes in the literature when it is organized thematically. For example in the literature review of small group teaching, the writer can take the themes of the prevalence and structure of small groups, stages of small groups, advantages and disadvantages of small group teaching, etc. When literature is arranged in the Methodological way the focus is on the methods of the researcher eg. qualitative versus quantitative approaches.

In the conclusion writers should summarize the major contributions, evaluating the current position, and pointing out flaws in methodology, gaps in the research, contradictions, and areas for further study.

Five basic steps can be introduced when writing a literature review. First the writer/researcher should find relevant information from literature sources such as books, journal articles, newspaper articles, historical records, government reports, theses and dissertations, etc. These literature sources can be either in printed form or in electronic form. Library catalogues, directories, indexes and other lists of information sources can be used as information searching tools. Especially when information is searched for via electronic media or Internet, the searcher should be thorough in both efficient search engines and information searching techniques such as simple searching, phrasal searching, truncation and Boolean Operating system.

The second step is managing literature. It also pays to be organized and diligent when it comes to keeping references. When

managing literature it is essential to keep and file copies of relevant books, articles, etc. related to the research topic. At the very beginning of the literature review it is necessary to find out the recommended referencing style which should be adhered to from the start. Some popular reference styles are Harvard or author-dated reference style, APA style, Chicago style and the numerical system. Annotating literature also comes under managing literature. Annotating the literature sources provides a record of relevant literature. It should include the citation, articulation of the author and audience, a short summary, critical commentary, notes on relevance that remind you of the significance, accuracy, and quality of the sources cited.

The third step is evaluating information sources. Both printed and electronic information sources are now evaluated by information scientists using five criteria. These criteria are Accuracy, Authority, Objectivity, Currency and Coverage. This becomes more critical when evaluating electronic information sources from millions and millions of pieces of information available on the World Wide Web.

- if the web page lists the author and the Institution that published the page, and it provides a way of contacting him/her;
- if the page lists the author credentials and its domain is preferred (.edu, .gov, .org, or .net);
- if the page provides accurate information with limited advertising and is objective in presenting the information;
- if the page is current and updated regularly (as stated on the page) and the links (if any) are also up-to-date and
- if the searcher can view the information properly (not limited to fees, browser technology, or software requirement)

then that kind of online information sources can be identified as high quality information sources. When compiling a literature review it is advisable to select high quality information after a proper evaluation of the literature.

The final step of writing a literature review is using information. Literature is used for disparate purposes throughout the research process. Whether it is focusing interests, defining questions, arguing a rationale, theoretically informing the study, developing appropriate design, or writing a formal literature review, every stage of the research process demands literary engagement.

Writing a good review requires reading a few good reviews, writing critical annotations and developing a structure. It is also required to write purposefully and use the literature to back up research arguments. Without restricting the reviewing of literature at the first stage of the research process, it is mandatoryt to continue review and write throughout the research process and get feedback essential to redraft accordingly. According to O'Leary (2004) "writing a good literature review can be likened to holding a good dinner party conversation". Because they both require individuals who can engage, learn, debate, argue, contribute, and evolve their own ideas, without being hypercritical or sycophantic.

References

O'Leary, Z (2004) The essential guide to doing research, London:SAGE

Report on workshops (WS) conducted in the Northern Province.
Meeting to disseminate information on SLAIHEE
and the 7th joint SDC/SLAIHEE conference 2011
Workshop on Effective Teaching and Learning through Constructive alignment
University of Jaffna, Vavuniya Campus: 8th September 2010 , 9 am to 12 noon

The SLAIHEE ex co members conducted two workshops in the University of Jaffna in September 2010.

The first of these was in the Vavuniya Campus of the Jaffna University on 8th September 2010, from 9 am to 12 noon. The activity commenced with a meeting to disseminate information on SLAIHEE and to introduce participants to the 7th joint SDC/SLAIHEE conference 2011. The president of the association welcomed the 30 participants and introduced the members of the visiting team of resource persons. She also thanked Dr. T Mangaleswaran, Director SDC , Vavuniya Campus , for his enthusiasm and commitment in organising the infrastructure facilities to conduct the Workshop.

While introducing the vision and nature of SLAIHEE, a handout was distributed to the participants with details of the aims and objectives and activities of SLAIHEE.

Thereafter, the Workshop on Effective Teaching and Learning through Constructive alignment was conducted .

The Workshop outcomes identified were that participants will be able to describe the principles of constructive alignment, apply constructive alignment in teaching and learning and formulate objectives and identify teaching learning methods and assessments to constructively align teaching and learning.

The first plenary was on levels of thinking about teaching and the components of constructive alignment followed by an interactive session which discussed stakeholder expectations to be considered in a curriculum, and the need to align teaching–learning towards curriculum objectives. The three domains of learning, were explained with the hierarchy of understanding, and action verbs used.

This was followed by a plenary/interactive session on teaching learning methods designed to meet intended learning outcomes. Teacher directed, self directed, teacher and student based learning methods such as simulations and role play, journal clubs, work-based teaching, seminars and peer directed (facilitated by tutor or independent) eg. Journal clubs, case presentations were shown as examples. Different learning style of learners and development of a lesson plan to suit different learning styles was shown.

The third plenary discussed assessment methods designed to assess intended learning outcomes, variety in assessments, reporting results and the blue print.

In the final plenary, the different perspectives of university teachers , the importance of climate conducive to learning and the importance of mentoring were discussed . Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was examined in the context of the climate we create for interaction with students.

Feedback from participants were taken and the workshop closed around 1 pm with assurances from the participants to join SLAIHEE and participate in the forthcoming annual conference in 2011.

**Meeting to disseminate information on SLAIHEE
and the 7th joint SDC/SLAIHEE conference 2011
Workshop on Higher Education Research- University of Jaffna
Jaffna Campus: 9th September 2010**

The second Workshop was conducted in Jaffna on the following day, 9th September 2010 from 9 am to 1 pm in the Faculty of Science. The pre-workshop preparations were done by Prof. M Sinnathamby, Director SDC, Jaffna Campus. Unfortunately communication problems and an intervening holiday due to a local festival resulted in poor attendance for the workshop. However the resource persons undeterred went ahead with the planned activities and were rewarded by the enthusiasm displayed by the participants though few in number. The activity once again focused on disseminating information on SLAIHEE and the 7th joint SDC/SLAIHEE conference 2011 at first, which was followed by a Workshop on Higher Education Research. The expected outcomes of the Workshop were to motivate participants to engage in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in addition to their discipline-based research for enhancement of the quality of higher education, propose a possible research topic/ area to (later) develop as an abstract for the 2011 conference and identify the tasks/activities to be completed to submit an abstract on time for the next SLAIHEE conference.

The topics and activities scheduled were as follows:

Topic/activity
Welcome and introductions - " All about SLAIHEE " and 7th Annual Joint SDC/SLAIHEE conference 2011 - Date, venue, theme and participation
Plenary - Research in Higher Education, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Issues in teaching/ learning , Links to relevant literature
Plenary- Identifying areas for action research, SEDA values 'KOLB' cycle
Group work to generate research ideas and develop an action plan to formulate proposal, conduct research and develop as an abstract for the 2011 conference
Plenary - Abstract writing / scholarship, ethics and avoiding plagiarism
Closing session – Format of submitting a research paper to the SLAIHEE/SDC conference/Feedback from the participants

Resource persons:

Prof. Nelun de Silva , Prof. of Microbiology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Ruhuna

Dr. Nilukshi Abeyasinghe , Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo.

Dr. Prasanna Ratnaweera, Senior Lecturer, Dept of Civil Engineering OUSL, Sri Lanka

Dr. Enoka Corea , Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo.

Mr. Hasitha Pathirana , Lecturer, Faculty of Humanities , University of Kelaniya,

Ms. Sajeewani Somaratne Assistant Librarian, Faculty of Science, University of Colombo.