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What is a Literature Review?

Introduction

The process of undertaking a literature review is an integral part of doing research. While this may be considered to be its primary function, the literature review is also an important tool that serves to inform and develop practice and invite discussion in academic work. Whatever its purpose, the task of doing a literature review is often viewed as an onerous and confusing one by students. The aim of this chapter is to provide you, the student, with a comprehensive understanding of what a literature review is and, equally, what it is not. It explores its purpose and relevance and the differences between the literature review and other forms of academic writing. The fundamental steps involved in undertaking a literature review will also be considered. Whether or not you have previously embarked on the literature review journey, this chapter is designed to help you understand the process and skills involved in navigating the literature and reaching your ultimate destination.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- explain what a literature review is.
- outline the differences between writing a literature review and writing an essay.
- describe the steps in undertaking a literature review.

What is a Literature Review? Beginning Your Journey

Whether it is for clinical or academic purposes (or your own innate curiosity!) it is important to understand what a literature review is before you start sourcing and immersing yourself in copious amounts of research and theoretical concepts. A literature review is a synopsis of other research. Moreover, it is a critical appraisal of other research on a given topic that helps to put that topic in context (Machi and McEvoy, 2009). A comprehensive review should provide the reader with a succinct, objective and logical summary of the current knowledge on a particular topic. Therefore, it is not an essay of one's own personal views and opinions. Similarly, it is not a series of quotes or lengthy descriptions of other people's work. Quite simply, the literature review provides a critical discussion on the topic of interest while pointing out similarities and inconsistencies in existing relevant literature. It is important to note that while a literature search is the means of helping you to unearth literature that is appropriate to your task in hand, a literature review is the process of critically evaluating and summarising that literature.

The Purpose of the Literature Review: The Question and Context

ACTIVITY 1.1

Conceptualising the Literature Review

Think of a topic that interests you in clinical practice. Imagine this as a wide-rimmed, intricate crystal vase that tapers to a very narrow stem. There are some imperfections in the crystal. The rim represents the body of knowledge surrounding your chosen topic, and the stem represents your ultimate research question. Imagine the vase as your literature review. What does it mean? What do you need to do?

In the above activity you have already embarked on the process of starting your literature review. By undertaking an initial, broad literature search and then review, you will eventually be at the stage of fine-tuning and narrowing down your research idea or question in the context of other literature. A thorough and critical review of the literature will enable you to do just that. It is important to mention here that some literature reviews are preceded by a pre-determined research question and, therefore, how and when they are conducted varies according to the type of approach used. For example, quantitative research studies are usually driven by the context of previous knowledge, with specific research questions in mind based on conducting an extensive literature review before data collection commences.

Qualitative studies typically adopt a less structured approach to doing a literature review at the outset. They may start with a broad research question or topic of interest that is refined and honed as data are collected. Therefore, while the literature may be consulted briefly at the outset, a more thorough and in-depth review is done based on emerging data rather than pre-existing knowledge. Whatever the approach, the purpose of the review is to provide an analysis and synthesis of all the

available literature on a given subject in a critical fashion. This then allows for further understanding of the subject in the context of what is already known. Furthermore, it can lead to the development of new research questions. Using the analogy of the crystal vase, each individual piece of crystal (including the imperfections) fits with the others to make the vase whole and cannot be viewed in isolation. Similarly, for the literature review to be complete and comprehensive, it needs to be carried out and evaluated in light of all other relevant literature, in order to get the fullest picture possible.

The Importance of Reviewing the Literature

The importance of the literature review is directly related to its aims and purpose. Nursing and allied health disciplines contain a vast amount of ever increasing literature and research that is important to the ongoing development of practice. The literature review is an aid to gathering and synthesising that information. The purpose of the literature review is to draw on and critique previous studies in an orderly, precise and analytical manner. The fundamental aim of a literature review is to provide a comprehensive picture of the knowledge relating to a specific topic. For example, if one is proposing to undertake a research project, then the purpose of the literature review is to situate that project in its relevant context or background. It does this by drawing on previous work, ideas and information. In addition, a good review will extract and critically evaluate the pertinent findings and issues that have emerged from previous work (Hart, 2010). By doing so, it provides justification for the proposed research and demonstrates a thorough grasp of background knowledge. Going back to our analogy of the crystal vase, it is evident that some imperfections exist. These we can take to represent evidence that is not strong and cannot be viewed in isolation. To do so would give an incomplete picture. Therefore, the literature needs to be reviewed in the context of all other information relating to the topic. One single viewpoint or article will not give the full story and may serve to bias the review.

Box 1.1 Defining Your Research Question

In health and social sciences, research questions usually stem from practice and serve to inform and develop practice. Defining your question can be a difficult task. Think of a particular area of practice that interests you. Ask yourself what you know about it. Now think, what is it you want to find out? For example, you may have an interest in the impact of type II diabetes. Ask yourself, Why? What? Who? Where? How? Decide what your question is and keep close to it. Your literature review should proceed from the known to the unknown, guided by your research question.

The importance of the literature review cannot be overstated. It is the tool to advancing practice. Furthermore, it can help to inspire and generate new ideas by highlighting inconsistencies in current knowledge (Aveyard, 2010). Literature

reviews are not undertaken solely for the purpose of doing research. They have an important function in evaluating current practice and making recommendations for policy development and change. They are also useful for exploring existing theoretical or conceptual frameworks concerning a given subject. Similarly, they facilitate the development of theoretical or conceptual frameworks through exploration and critical evaluation of existing knowledge. The manner in which the review is written is a crucial component of understanding what a literature review is and often poses the greatest challenge to students. Before we discuss the steps in undertaking a literature review we need to examine what differentiates it from other types of academic writing.

Essay Writing versus Writing a Literature Review

Essay writing is a process that communicates ideas to an intended reader, and is usually written according to pre-determined academic conventions. An essay may have many purposes but its basic format is structured as an introduction, main body and conclusion that convey information relating to the essay question. The question serves to focus and direct the student as to what is required in the essay. For example, the question may require the student to produce a general overview of a topic. On the other hand, the purpose of the essay may be to produce a specific analysis of a particular subject; therefore the question will be phrased differently. Words such as discuss, explain, describe, analyse and assess may be an integral part of the question and will determine what approach to writing should be adopted. In some instances, a particular topic may not have been assigned and, therefore, it is up to the student to decide the purpose of the essay and what they are trying to achieve – that is, is the purpose to inform or educate, or perhaps create a persuasive argument?

Common essay types include judgement essays, exploratory essays and reflective essays (Shields, 2010). Judgement essays typically defend a particular argument or viewpoint and attempt to persuade or convince the reader to adopt the writer's stance. Judgement essays are based on an evaluation of relevant evidence and theories surrounding a topic and are written with the intention of constructing a sound argument that defends the writer's viewpoint. The judgement essay requires the writer to produce a subjective account of an issue, based on a discussion and interpretation of existing evidence. In contrast, exploratory essays do not require the writer to adopt a particular stance. This type of essay is concerned with producing a reasoned explanation of a given subject or phenomenon. It explores an issue in a logical and thorough fashion and presents and explains factual information in a balanced manner, without defending a particular viewpoint. The exploratory essay is concerned with a review, comparison and discussion of theories relating to a specific subject area. Both judgement and exploratory essays require a level of critical analysis of the essay question (Shields, 2010). The reflective essay is based on the premise that learning occurs and is enhanced through reflection. While reflective essays require a format similar to other essays, this is typically less structured as reflection is personal to the writer and so the style and language used will differ from more formal essay writing. Reflective essays are not based on a question but

tend to focus on description and analysis of a personal incident or experience with a view to learning from that event. While reflective essays are descriptive in nature, it is necessary to discuss relevant theories and concepts relating to the event in order to analyse it.

So what then of the literature review, and does it differ from other types of essay writing? There are some similarities. As when writing an essay, one needs to have a structure and focus when undertaking a literature review. There is a sequence of events that should be adhered to in order to create a comprehensive review. The style and language must adhere to academic convention. Sections need to be cohesive and flow logically. Concepts and theories should be compared and contrasted, grouped for similarities and inconsistencies. Evidence needs to be analysed and discussed in relation to its context and significance.

The difference between essay writing and writing a literature review is that while the purpose of essay writing is generally to discuss ideas with respect to the essay question, the aim of the literature review is to summarise and synthesise all that is published on a given topic. The literature review is undertaken to present results of research and key information in an objective and discursive manner. In contrast to the essay, the literature review should summarise the key concepts, theories and empirical studies while discussing their strengths and limitations. If this is done for the purposes of research, then it needs to be focused, in-depth and relevant to the research question. Critical discussion is a crucial component of writing a good review. A literature review is not a descriptive, exploratory essay. Similarly, unlike the judgement essay, it does not seek to defend a particular viewpoint, nor does it offer personal opinion or speculation, as does the reflective essay. It is not a criticism, but rather is a critical review that goes beyond description to the level of critique, analysis and synthesis. Writing a literature review can be considered difficult when one has been accustomed to essay-style writing. The basic structure of introduction, main body and conclusion still applies, with some specific additional steps that serve to further differentiate literature review writing versus essay writing.

Steps in Undertaking a Literature Review

A literature review is an essay of sorts; however, it tends to be more formulaic in nature. The key steps to undertaking any literature review firstly involve developing a structure for the review. This entails selecting the review topic, carrying out a literature search, reading, critiquing and analysing the literature, and finally writing the review. The approach to writing a literature review will vary slightly according to the type of review undertaken. For example, a systematic review will have a specific format that must be adhered to throughout (Cronin et al., 2008). The different types of literature review and their purpose will be discussed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3. Structuring the review so that it is presented in a clear, coherent and consistent manner is vital, and it is necessary to develop a framework for this before starting to write. A well-organised literature review will consist of an introduction, a main body that critiques the findings of previous work, addressing both theoretical and empirical literature, a discussion and a conclusion.

Selecting a topic to review is the first step in the process. Selecting a topic is guided by your overarching research objective or the problem you wish to explore. Carrying out a literature search involves using both primary and secondary sources, as well as theoretical or anecdotal papers relevant to the topic. The search strategy and terms used should be stated in order to provide evidence that the review was thorough and comprehensive. It is important to narrow down the review topic or research question to avoid generating overwhelming amounts of information. A general idea of the area of interest is a good starting point, but it is necessary thereafter to hone this to a specific aspect of interest in order to make the review manageable. Searching the literature effectively will enable you to do this. The importance of a thorough literature search cannot be overstated, as this will enable you to broaden your knowledge of your chosen topic. It also helps situate the research question in the context of existing knowledge. A comprehensive literature search facilitates better understanding and awareness of the appropriate approach for your own study (Ridley, 2008). Selecting a topic and the various approaches to literature searching are explored in depth in Chapter 4.

Searching and reading the literature is a continuous process in the early stages of doing a literature review. Reading will inform your searching and direct you to new areas to explore. Similarly, a thorough literature search will influence your research question and provide direction for your writing. At the preliminary reading stage, it is useful to summarise what you have read by note taking and keeping records of what sources of literature are pertinent for the review. This will help to focus the review, refine your own ideas and assist in the final write-up. Organising the literature for easy retrieval is an essential task that will also help in the writing-up stage. Chapter 5 examines strategies for reading and organising literature in more detail.

Analysis and synthesis are the next stages in the process of doing a literature review, and at this point all of the relevant information should have been gathered. Once an initial overview has been done, it is necessary to critique and critically analyse the literature in order to obtain a critical review of the content. When writing the final review it is important that key information is critically evaluated, rather than described. Evidence needs to be summarised and presented logically, comparing and contrasting findings, and offering new insights where possible. Chapters 6 to 8 discuss how to analyse, synthesise and write the review.

Box 1.2 Putting it Together

A checklist is useful to have when undertaking a literature review. In order to stay focused throughout the process, think about the following issues:

- Have you identified a specific research question?
- What type of literature review are you conducting?
- How will you conduct your literature search?
- What is the scope of your review? What type of publications will you use and from what discipline?
- Have you identified the type of literature that will help you address your research question?

- Has your literature search been extensive enough to include all relevant material? Has it appropriate breadth and depth?
- Have you critically analysed the literature and discussed its strengths and weaknesses?
- Have you identified conflicting findings and offered possible reasons?
- Is your literature review balanced and objective?
- Have you discussed the significance of the findings?
- Is your literature review written in a logical and succinct manner?
- Have you identified and discussed implications for practice and further research?

Summary

A literature review is a critical evaluation of extensive research and theory relating to a specific topic. It is the process of analysis and synthesis of previous work in order to produce a summary of the knowledge on that topic. It gives insights into the background and context of a proposed study and is a logical, coherent argument that arises from a critical analysis of the state of knowledge in a specific topic area. This chapter has addressed the concept of what the literature review is and its importance and relevance in practice and research. We have also explored how it differs from other forms of academic writing. The steps involved in undertaking a literature review have been outlined and discussed briefly.

Key Points

- A literature review is a critical evaluation of knowledge of a topic.
- The literature review may be used as a basis for research, practice and policy development or academic purposes.
- The steps to undertaking a literature review involve selecting a topic and literature searching, reading and organising the literature, analysis and synthesis, and writing up the final review.