

Practitioner Research: the Purposes of Reviewing the Literature within an Enquiry

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Reading 'the literature' is a fundamental activity which should inform all phases in the research process and not be confined to gathering enough material to produce a 'literature review'. How can you make the best use of this activity? The overall advice is: be systematic, be critical, and keep reminding yourself of your focus. This paper will guide practitioner researchers into using the literature effectively within small-scale studies.

A TYPICAL REPORT of an enquiry or piece of research tells a story. It has a beginning, where the issues are laid out, arguments initiated, aims identified and research questions specified. It has a middle, where the researcher describes how she or he went about trying to find out more on the subject and what these findings were. And it has an end, where all the evidence is brought together and discussed, conclusions are drawn and implications for practice identified. It is important that these three parts join up to form a coherent argument: raising questions, gathering evidence to support or refute competing answers and drawing inferences as to which answers are the more valid.

The report is the end product, the outcome of the process of enquiry: the actual process of enquiry is, however, rarely as straightforward or linear as most reports tend to convey. Searching the literature, ie finding out what other people have written about the topic being investigated, should be used to structure and support research studies at all stages and not be confined to that section of the report labelled 'the literature review'.

HOW NOT TO USE THE LITERATURE

There are a number of approaches which are unlikely to impress any but the most naive – and certainly not examiners and editors of journals. Here are three of them.

- *The magpie approach*: collecting articles and books which have catchy or interesting titles, in a somewhat haphazard manner. While this may produce an array of colourful and occasionally valuable material, do not be seduced by interesting issues which are tangential to your original purposes.
- *The diamond necklace approach*: stringing together 'gems' of quotations from well-known and authoritative authors, interspersed with a few words of your own. Restrict the use of quotations to a very few and only where the author captures the essence so brilliantly that you could not better it. Try to summarise or paraphrase what

others say – it shows that you have read it, and understood it.

- *The 'dressed to impress' approach*: a long list of titles, usually presented as a bibliography, which is rarely referred to in the body of the text. It looks good but it is much better to stick to a shorter list of titles, as 'references' which are used to support and develop the arguments in the text.

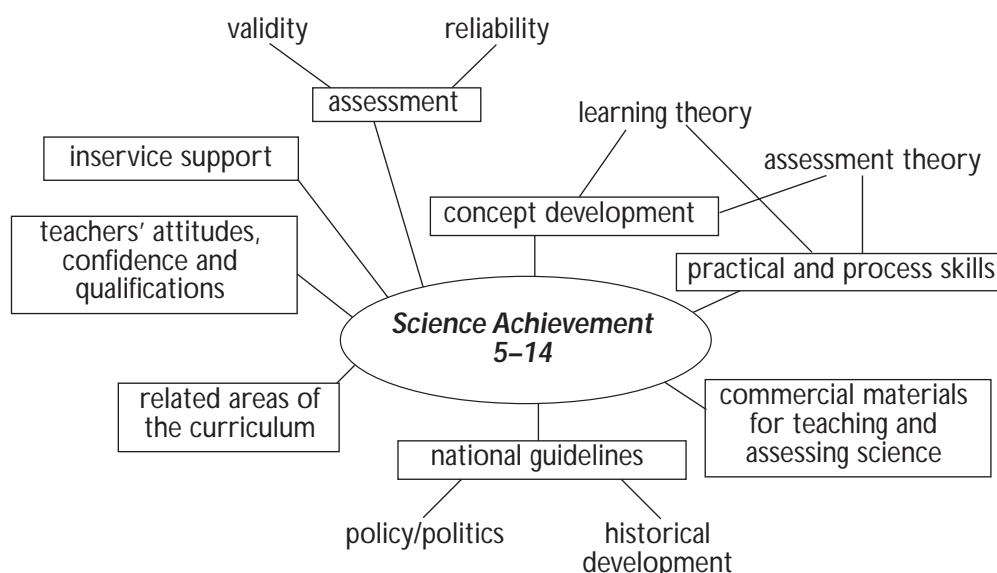
A PRELIMINARY SKIRMISH WITH THE LITERATURE

When practitioners, be they teachers, social workers, nurses or whoever, undertake enquiries into their own professional practice, the focus tends to be on an issue or concern which has emerged from day-to-day experiences. For example, a teacher may have concerns over a new policy or approach which has been introduced, or a growing awareness that aspects of existing practice are not as effective as they might be. A nurse may be interested in the effect which a change in patient care has had on patients' morale and, in turn, their attitude towards recovery.

Where do you start?

The first step is to define the issue more clearly while setting the problem within a wider professional context. Some preliminary reading will assist in this. In this first phase of exploring the literature, you are aiming to determine whether others share your concerns, whether anyone has already attempted to address the problem(s) which you have encountered and whether there really is value in pursuing this line of enquiry.

Through the literature, you should be able to firm up your concerns, discarding, modifying or adding to them as you read. As a result, you will identify a number of themes and sub-themes within your original topic which will provide the framework for your enquiry. Having decided that it is worthy of your time and effort to proceed, studying the literature should become more focused and strategic.



One way of determining the scope and direction which your reading should take is to attempt to map out the main elements. Shown above is the beginning of such a map where the focus is on 'science achievement in the primary school'. This map already shows a number of areas for an in-depth investigation of the literature. These include: theories of learning and assessing science (psychology); the educational values and beliefs of the policy-makers which underpin the policy documents (philosophy); and elements of education such as pedagogy, curriculum development and management, as well as the professional development of teachers, both pre- and in-service. Similar maps can be drawn for almost any topic and should include a range of sources of information across policy, theory and practice.

KEEPING TRACK OF YOUR READING

The key to using the literature successfully is, firstly, to be systematic throughout – keep a careful record of all you read, including exact bibliographic references. One well-tried method of keeping track of reading is to use a card index file. Each time you find a book or an article which you think will be useful, note it down on a card, remembering to record a full note of the author, etc. Where you have a number of sub-themes to your literature review, you can colour-code the cards accordingly. (You may have an electronic version of a card index system on your computer or you can create a small database for the purpose.)

You should include a few notes for each reference to remind you of the main issues raised by the author(s) when you return to it. For example:

Millar, R. and Driver, R. (1987) Beyond Processes. In: *Studies in Science Education*. Vol. 14, pp. 33–62.

- critique of current emphasis on process and materials used;
- distinctions between 'science processes'/ 'the methods of science' and cognitive processes
- contrast between 'learning science' and 'scientists doing science'.

If you come across a statement which you might wish to quote, or one which you feel sums up the issues well and you might wish to refer to, make sure you write down a full reference, *including the page number*. This will help you to find it again and, if you use the quotation in writing up the study, you should cite the page number.

Eraut, M. (1994) *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence*. London: The Falmer Press.

Theme in enquiry: Developing theories from experience

The only image we are given of the process of learning is that of the gradual accumulation of memories of cases. The problem of how this huge volume of knowledge is selected, organised and retrieved is not addressed...

(Eraut, 1994, p. 128)

AN IN-DEPTH SEARCH

Reading in greater depth allows you to identify competing perspectives within each sub-theme, to set them one against the other and to identify strengths and weaknesses in the views given. The search, guided by the sub-themes, may include books, journals, policy statements, professional journals and other publications, including electronic ones. While books are important, journals tend to be more current in their treatment of the issues which you might wish to pursue. Many of the articles available on-line through the Internet are highly topical. Unless you are doing a historical study, a good rule of thumb is to go no further back than the previous eight or ten years.

Be critical of what you read. Most writers have a particular viewpoint on an issue and you should consider the validity and reliability of statements made, the authority of the author(s) and the professional relevance of the issues raised. Some journals are more authoritative than others; some are more theoretical while others are very much aimed at practice – good ones should achieve a balance of both. Read reviews of books and reports in journals and follow up those which seem promising.

Ask yourself questions about what you read:

- presentation – is the style appropriate, clear, readable?
- authors – who are they and where are they from?
- audience – is it aimed at practitioners, academics, researchers?
- relevance – does it raise significant issues?
- evidence – what is the evidence for arguments made?
- evidence – did they gather the evidence? is it appropriate? do you have enough information to know if they drew appropriate conclusions?
- plausibility – does it convince you?

If the focus of your enquiry is the effectiveness of a new policy within your area, for example, on learning and teaching in schools, it will be important to understand and analyse policy documents as well as any other relevant official publications. This will give you a somewhat one-sided view of the issues, however, and it is desirable that you balance this by reading about aspects of, for example, philosophy (child-centred education), psychology (how children learn) and sociology (deprivation and inequality).

Very often, reading one article identifies further sources which you feel you must pursue. Take care however, as searching the literature can take on the characteristics of a snowball rolling down hill – growing steadily larger until you are buried under a mass of printed material. Self-discipline is required as temptation will come your way, but keep reminding yourself of the main themes you identified. If you have colour coded your index cards matching each article or book to one (or more) of your main themes and find that a particular article or journal cannot be readily colour-coded, perhaps you don't need it!

The aims of your enquiry should appear to emerge, almost naturally, from your consideration of the literature – the issues raised, assertions made, omissions and differences of opinion, should inform their development and these aims, in turn, should be reflected in the questions which you establish for the enquiry.

DESIGNING YOUR STUDY

You will also need to consult literature of a different kind, or at least with a different focus, to devise your research strategy (eg case study, survey, action research) and select the appropriate tools to employ (eg questionnaires, interviews, observations). There are many books on methodology which highlight the strengths and limitations of different approaches and you should consider these carefully, choosing the strategy which is most likely to help you achieve your aims. Most practitioner research tends to be small-scale and close to home where an in-depth understanding of a particular situation is required. While the methodology literature will provide you with the principles, reading about other research in the same area provides practical detail of how others have approached similar enquiries.

Once you have selected your strategy, you need to identify how to gather the kind of evidence which will help you to answer the research questions in a reliable and valid

Sundry advice

- Go to the library before the bookshop. Books are dear and you should only buy those which you are sure you will find of fundamental importance in the longer term. However, some libraries may not have the most recent texts in your field and you should look further afield.
- Make a friend of the librarian. Most librarians are only too pleased to help and many libraries, particularly academic ones, produce leaflets to help readers negotiate their way through the books, journals and other publications stocked. Collect such leaflets and *read* them.
- Ask about electronic databases of journal articles, such as ERIC and the British Educational Index. There are databases for a wide range of disciplines – check out which are carried by the library and learn how to search them.
- Learn to use the Internet. Databases such as ERIC can also be accessed through the Internet and many publishers are now putting their journals 'on-line' so you can access the articles directly. Many organisations, governmental, academic and commercial, have established websites where you can access a broad range of information.
- Keep a record of your search through the literature. This can seem time-consuming and tedious at the beginning, but can save hours of tracking down an indispensable reference at the writing-up stage.

manner. Again, you should refer to the literature in making your decisions. While you may feel that a questionnaire is the appropriate tool to gather evidence in your situation, you should be able to justify this with support from the literature. Again, the 'theories' behind different approaches to evidence-gathering are readily available in books on research methods; other people's research indicates how these work in practice. For example, questionnaires tend to be printed so that they can be readily administered to more people than it would be possible to interview. This makes them problematic for use with young children who may lack reading or writing skills. One study got round this by using drawings and 'smiley faces' to stimulate responses from young children. An adult read out the questions and each child responded by ticking the box beside the drawing preferred.

COMING TOWARDS THE END

Once you have undertaken the research and analysed your findings, you will have evidence of your own with which you should be able to begin to address, at least in part, the questions you posed at the start. The literature has a role here also as you evaluate your findings against the evidence you gleaned from your reading. Do your findings agree with or contradict what others have said about this area of concern? If they do agree, then you can have some faith in the reliability of your evidence (but beware of regarding it as unequivocal substantiation of your views). If they do not, this does not mean that you should discard your own evidence. Consider carefully whether the context in which

Use the literature throughout the research process...

► Literature review → →	The enquiry/research → →	Discussion/conclusions → →
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an analysis of what others have said or found out about the area in question 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what you did and what you found out about the area in question • literature on methodology used to justify what you did and how you did it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the extent of the match and mismatch between the evidence in the literature and that from the enquiry • possible explanations for such findings

you were working is directly comparable with that of the original study. Perhaps there are significant differences in the ages or backgrounds of the children or adults involved, the ways in which you gathered evidence or analysed it. These are matters to reflect on as you write up your report. Remember too that the world will not have stood still while you did your study. Others may well have been aware of the same issues and undertaken investigations into some or all of the aspects which concern you. It is therefore important to continue reading throughout the length of an enquiry, to ensure that you keep up to date throughout.

WRITING UP YOUR ENQUIRY

When you are 'writing up' the enquiry, what you have read will form the basis of that section which is typically presented as 'The Literature Review'. This should not be a random collection of the views of others but should be structured so that each section follows on logically, building up the weight of evidence from the literature such that it culminates in a clear set of issues which form the foundation of the research questions and, in turn, determine the methodology adopted. Each sub-section should clearly relate to one or more aims within the study, showing the basis for the direction you took.

The purpose of the report is to communicate what you found out and so an important question to consider is 'Who am I writing this for?'. If it is for an award such as a degree, do not make the mistake of writing solely to impress the assessor – the report should be accessible to and presented in such a way that it takes the interest of other practitioners in your field. You will have to convince readers, however, that what you have found out is relevant, accurate and worth their attention. This can only be done by providing sufficient information to enable them to judge the weight that can be attached to what you say and by showing how it relates to other studies in the same area.

Reading other people's research, whether reports or articles, can help you to improve your writing style and appreciate the need to be clear and coherent. No matter how complex the concepts and arguments are, they should be capable of being expressed in simple, accessible language.

REFERENCING THE LITERATURE

When drafting a report of your findings you should ensure that all sources are identified in such a way that they can be located by those who wish to seek them out for themselves. The 'notes for authors' in a journal or the list of references in one of the key texts you will be consulting will give you an idea of the information to include and how to present it. There are conventions for referencing sources of evidence from the literature (eg the Harvard system) and if you are undertaking the enquiry as part of a programme of study leading to an award, you should make sure you know, and abide by, any rules which the awarding institution has.

SUMMARY

The 'literature' in its various forms is one of the fundamental building blocks of any kind of research or enquiry. It can give you ideas, broaden your perspective and make you more critical of some of the taken-for-granted practices around you. It will form the reference point against which you test your concerns, findings and arguments at the beginning, during and as you come to the end of your study. And it will help you raise more questions for the next one.

All through a study you are making choices: you choose to study a particular topic; you home in on specific issues; you select a strategy and tactics for exploring further; you decide how to make sense of your findings; and you identify the important conclusions and make recommendations. Each choice should be justified using other people's writings to support your decisions and to help you argue your case.

THE VERY LAST WORD

While reading 'the literature', you will have been alternately frustrated, inspired, excited, bored, irritated and motivated. Learn about good writing from your reading because, looking beyond the study, you too will hope to influence practice within your profession, mostly through papers, reports, articles – ie through your own writing. Writers need readers – try to ensure that they too are inspired, motivated and excited.

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