

Book Review

The Literature Review: Six Steps to Success, (3rd edition), by Lawrence A. Machi and Brenda T. McEvoy (2016)

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Abstract

The literature review is one of the essential stages of a research project. It is a core part of any master's thesis, doctoral dissertation or academic article. Initially, it provides the researcher with background knowledge about the research topic. Further, it contributes to determining what has been already done in the topic area. Thus, the literature review is important in enabling the researcher to discover the gap in previous research that requires a new contribution to the field; it also provides the research findings with evidence. In addition, the literature review is used to underpin the theoretical and methodological basis of the topic, setting an appropriate theoretical framework. Moreover, the importance of the literature review appears in informing and narrowing the research questions, thus enabling the researcher to take further manageable steps in the research process.

Because the literature review requires various academic skills, such as critical reading, critical writing, note-taking, time management, massive searching on databases, and referencing skills, some postgraduate students face challenges in conducting it effectively. Therefore, postgraduate students can benefit from practical guidance, such as that given in this book, to lead them through their literature review phase.

Introduction

Writing a literature review is a key pillar in any research undertaking because it determines what is known about a topic and then moves on to add a contribution to the field. As a researcher in the field of education, I have read many books related to how to conduct a literature review. One of them is “*The literature review: Six steps to success*” by Machi and McEvoy on which I am writing this review.

To begin with, the experience of the authors appears clearly through the contents. I found a positive intermixing between Machi’s and McEvoy’s different fields of experience and also their major areas of expertise. This combination between organisational leadership, which is a major subject of Machi, and teaching history and science and assessing students' writing, which are major subjects of McEvoy, created a logical and readable sequence to the book. Further, they added motivational sentences and proverbs to encourage readers, most of whom are postgraduate students or researchers, to read the book with enthusiasm. The authors write in simple language to make their book easy to understand and to simplify the complex process of conducting a literature review. Additionally, they augment the book with arguments, colourful charts and logical evidence.

This third addition includes eight new ideas to increase the clarity of their arguments and give the reader practical and logical guidance to carry out a literature review. For example, they have expanded the sections on critical thinking skills and graphics and added examples and online guides to support researchers’ critical skills. However, the most noticeable additional element is the inclusion of key vocabulary words at the beginning of each chapter, and a glossary at the end of the book with brief definitions of forty essential words. Also, each chapter ends with three remarkable ideas, checklist, short summary, and reflective insights. The book is written in a readable font and has a reasonable distance between lines, making it easy to scan.

Summary of the content

This book consists of six main chapters preceded by a fifteen-page introduction. The introduction introduces a short definition of the term ‘literature review’, explains the purpose underpinning it,

And shows in a colourful manner the six critical processes of conducting a literature review. It also highlights the essential issues that may face the researcher when they choose a research topic.

Chapter one focuses on the step of selecting a topic, a common challenge for most researchers. It introduces the expression "personal interest to formal research topic", meaning that the researcher first has to have their interest sparked by a topic and then reformulate it to be researchable without subjectivity or bias. To simplify the process of conducting the literature review, every chapter starts with a diagram to identify the stage reached. Further, this chapter consists of three tasks: identifying a subject for the study, translating the researcher's personal interests or concern, and linking the research query to the appropriate discipline. These three tasks are explained in detail to lead the reader to narrow their focus until they reach a researchable topic.

Chapter Two concentrates on how to develop the arguments to support the topic. It includes seven main concepts, starting from identifying the basic arguments in the article to the evaluation stage. This chapter also sheds light on reading and writing critically, which are core skills for any researcher. The authors provide many specific details such as tables, charts, classifications and criteria to aid in building up arguments. These will help the reader understand the processes of planning and developing their arguments.

Chapter Three addresses the literature search. It starts with Julius Caesar's well-known quotation: "I came, I saw, I conquered". The authors use the term "you saw" to mean that you knew how to build your arguments, and "you conquered" is that your interest. The core concept of this chapter is that conducting the literature review includes some activities such as: managing the data, scanning and skimming the literature, mapping the references, and creating a subject memorandum. The conclusion of this chapter concerns returning to the topic and reformulating it based on what the reader has learned during this information-gathering process.

Chapter Four surveys the process of reviewing the literature. There are three main tasks addressed here: assembling the data, organizing the mass of information, and analysing the pattern of the data. Practical guidance is introduced in how to organize the data through the literature review matrix on page 87.

Also, for example, a chain of reasoning is explained on page 93 which simplifies the process of identifying an emerging pattern and linking the arguments to build a theme. Through this process, an initial outline of the literature can emerge.

Critiquing what has already been done on the topic is addressed in Chapter Five, including eleven common mistakes that the researcher should be aware of and avoid. Further, the authors recommended nine implicative logic types, providing examples. The assessment of the literature review can be achieved not by providing an argument of proof but by providing the necessary evidence to describe the implications of the article or thesis.

Writing the literature review is the final process. In this step, the researcher has to write, audit and edit in a circular process in order to clarify the ideas for the reader. Thus, Chapter Six deals with the actual writing and it differentiates between writing to understand and writing to be understood; seven activities are proposed in order to accomplish these two goals. Briefly, in order to write to understand, one should review notes, do some exploratory writing, outline, and then write a preliminary draft. However, to write to be understood, one needs to write a first draft, revise it, and complete a final draft.

Evaluation

In conclusion, I found this book easy to read and useful to follow because it has practical guidance for conducting a literature review. From my experience, I would recommend it for postgraduate students and researchers at the beginning of their journey. It has many examples and techniques that can help save the researcher's time when they are looking to write their literature review. Nevertheless, although the book is a wealthy resource in the field, it does not mention any appropriate software to help manage the massive amount of data a researcher may accumulate, such as NVivo which can be very useful in managing literature review resources.

References

Machi, L. A., & McEvoy, B. T. (2016). *The literature review: Six steps to success* (3rd ed). London: Corwin Press.

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