

LITERATURE REVIEWS: ADVISING DOCTORAL STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of available information has created new opportunities and challenges for today's research students. Academic and public libraries have developed sophisticated electronic databases to better manage knowledge to make it more accessible to researchers. Literature reviews are a major challenge for doctoral students. The focus of this discussion is to share advice for helping individuals with their literature reviews.

The Challenge of Doctoral Dissertations

The doctoral dissertation is one of the most intense academic experiences that individuals encounter during their graduate studies. One of the tragic moments in the academic community is when individuals are not able to complete their dissertation. The initials ABD-All But Dissertation is a reminder of the difficult journey to earn the coveted doctoral degree. Curran-Downey (1998) related "being in graduate school and making it all the way through the classes, the exams and the defense of the dissertation is ---take your pick--- marathon, wasteland, jungle, rat race" (para 6). The high attrition rate for students in American doctoral programs reflects the dark side of doctoral education that continues to plague the higher education community. This institutional failure in properly guiding dedicated individuals represents a huge waste of human talent that often undermines career plans. An important step in developing a research plan is facing the fears associated with writing. A major issue for some students is a negative mind-set about research writing. Some view the dissertation project as an impossible task because they doubt their research skills and fear of their dissertation proposal rejected. Severe emotional turmoil

may undermine a student's confidence to work through the more difficult phases of his dissertation. The lack of confidence can halt proposal writing and even cause some students to abandon their degree program. Jensen (2005, para 5) encourages a student to identify when, what she calls the Inner Critic is attacking, by being alert to three negative signs:

- ? **Mental signs:** self-criticism, procrastination, excessive worry, negative thoughts about your options, black and white thinking, confusion, feeling stuck.
- ? **Emotional signs:** loss of motivation, discouragement, feelings of failure, depression, low self-esteem, fear, feeling powerless.
- ? **Physical signs:** lack of energy, fatigue, sickness or injury.

It is important to implement strategies to overcome mental or psychological barriers to keep the dissertation process moving forward steadily, forward towards completion. The key is to be proactive and a dedicated researcher who creates a study plan that breaks the dissertation into manageable parts. Maxwell (1999) recommends measuring commitment by examining study priorities and affirming that certain goals are worth great sacrifices. Morris (1994, p. 286) developed seven principles of success that help individuals to formulate goals for their personal and professional lives.

- ? We need a clear conception of what we want, a vivid vision, a goal or set of goals powerfully imagined.
- ? We need a strong confidence that we can attain

our goals.

- ? We need a focused concentration on what it takes to reach our goal.
- ? We need a stubborn consistency in pursuing our vision, a determined persistence in thought and action.
- ? We need emotional commitment to the importance of what we're doing, and to the people with whom we're doing it.
- ? We need a good character to guide us and keep us on a proper course.
- ? We need a capacity to enjoy the process along the way.

Research Skills

The huge expansion of electronic information has exponentially increased research opportunities. Students face the challenge of effectively using the new technologies. Hart (1998, p. 5) has identified two basic types of essential research skills:

- ? Core skills and abilities- while the differences make subject disciplines distinctive, there exists a common core of skills and attitudes which all researchers should possess and should be able to apply in 24 different situations with different topics and problems.
- ? Ability to integrate theory and method- research for all disciplines involves an understanding of the interrelationship between theory, method and research design, practical skills and particular methods, the knowledge base of the subject and methodological foundations (Hart, 1998, p. 5).

Graduate degree programs are an excellent place to develop and refine research skills. Hart (1998) states, "it is important that research education and training does produce researchers who are competent and confident in

a range of skills and capabilities and who have an appropriate knowledge base" (p. 6). Students create projects that demand effective skills in conducting a literature review, developing a research design, writing and presenting their study. Therefore, students must have effective research skills to produce quality work. Scholarly writing reflects literature investigations involving a diversity of skills. Individuals become effective in using their imagination and creativity to read and interpret arguments, organize ideas, identify useful knowledge within different academic disciplines and effectively write and present their ideas. The researcher's mind-set must be open to new and innovative research methods and they should be willing to experiment with information and ideas. The skill of integration is valuable in scholarly work. According to Hart (1998), "integration is about making connections between ideas, theories, and experience. It is about applying a method or methodology from one area to another; about placing some episode into a larger theoretical framework, thereby providing a new way of looking at the phenomenon" (p. 8). Integrating ideas and theories demands a comprehensive study plan based on patient re-examining and interpreting knowledge while being open to new perspectives on existing theories.

Dissertation students should focus on developing skills that foster integration in their work. They should realise that it might take time and substantial effort. Creative researchers and authors are often hard working individuals. Howe (1999) observes, "like ordinary men and women, major authors have had to invest large amounts of time and effort in order to become unusually skilled. Their heavy dependence on training and preparation is one of the many aspects of the human experience that creative geniuses share with other people." (p. 175)

The Literature Review Process

Reviews vary in the scope and depth of material

examined. Selecting a topic is a key decision and students should avoid selecting topics that transcend the academic expectations of their degree programs.

A primary reason for studying the literature is to display familiarity with research in the field and establish the significance for the individual's current investigation. The literature review should be reflectively build on the basis of work conducted by other researchers, who are part of a larger intellectual community (Neuman, 1997).

The dissertation committee expects students to produce literature reviews that uphold high academic standards. Neuman (1997, p. 89) described four major literature review objectives:

? **To demonstrate a familiarity with a body of knowledge and establish credibility.**

A review tells a reader that the researcher knows the research in an area and knows the major issues. A good review increases the reader's confidence in the researcher's professional competence, ability, and background.

? **To show the path of prior research and how a current project is linked to it.**

A review outlines the direction of research on a question and shows the development of knowledge. A good review places a research project in a context and demonstrates its relevance by making connections to a body of knowledge.

? **To integrate and summarize what is known in an area.**

A review pulls together and synthesizes different results. A good review points out areas where prior studies agree, where they disagree, and where major questions remain. It collects what is known up to a point in time and indicates the direction for

future research.

? **To learn from others and stimulate new ideas.**

A review tells what others have found so that a researcher can benefit from the efforts of others. A good review identifies blind alleys and suggests hypotheses for replication. It divulges procedures, techniques, and research designs worth copying so that a researcher can better focus hypotheses and gain new insights.

The literature review helps the student to understand the historical and theoretical context of their subject while focusing on current research efforts (Hart, 1998). Literature reviews offers opportunities for students for learning how to identify areas of concern and it increases their awareness of any neglected issues. Literature reviews can stimulate student to make changes to their topic choice because during the literature review, individuals sometimes discover a more important topic to address in their doctoral research. Also, the literature review can help a student to develop data collection methods for their own study. Reading the literature provides insights into major theories and ideas that guided previous researchers. Students must have a good working knowledge of the key concepts and terms in their field of study to communicate their ideas (Hart, 1998).

Literature reviews should cover the material related to the research problem. A wise researcher will conduct a review involving eight sequential steps:

? Analyze the problem statement.

? Search and read secondary literature.

? Select the appropriate index for a reference service or database.

? Transform the problem statement into search language.

? Conduct a manual and/or computer search.

- ? Read the pertinent primary literature.
- ? Organize notes.
- ? Write the review (Introduction to educational research, 2003, p. 73).

Students must systematically explore the literature and cover both electronic and print sources of information. One part of the plan should contain a basic record keeping technique that will help to organize their work while developing leads for future research and avoid losing valuable data. For instance, students can save the links of Internet articles as favorites or bookmarks in their web browser. This makes it much easier to find specific articles for future use. Students can improve their cognitive recall of important ideas by creating a basic set of questions before reading an article (Locke, Silverman & Spirduso, 1998).

A review of the literature requires a systematic analysis and appraisal of each research article, and it can be began by creating a descriptive summary of the study. Next, the article has to be analysed understanding the author's purpose and decisions. Hart (1998) notes "you are aiming to make explicit the nature of the connections between the methodology choices an author has made and the data they have collected through to the interpretations they have made of their data" (p. 56).

Researchers must cultivate reflective reading skills and explore issues such as methodological assumptions, aims, and purposes of the research and evidence presented. The critical analysis of articles demands that students must discern the quality of work produced within the field (Hart, 1998). Students should strive to display a thorough investigation and display on awareness of theories and diverse arguments and recognize both their strengths and weaknesses. A balanced review affirms the usefulness and merits of a theory and at the same time explore areas that need improvement. Research criticism involves arguments

that identify inadequate or flawed evidence or reasoning. Students may be able to apply information acquired through their reading and develop their own synthesis of ideas and offer new perspectives on their subject matter.

The following nine categories are useful to evaluate information (Lawlor & Gorham, 2004, p.17):

- ? Authority - Who is the author of the material?
- ? Date of publication - When was the information published?
- ? Type of publication - Is the material published in an academic article, a newspaper or a textbook?
- ? Relevance of content - How relevant is the material to your research?
- ? Hypotheses/Purpose - What led the author(s) to their hypotheses? What is the overall purpose?
- ? Methods employed - What methods were utilized by the author(s) and why?
- ? Results - What results were obtained?
- ? Support for hypotheses - Where hypotheses supported?
- ? Conclusions/Recommendations - What were the author(s) conclusions/recommendations?
- ? References - Does the author provide a detailed list of references/bibliography?
- ? Cited or reviewed - Has the article, book or website been cited or referred by other authors?

Literature reviews demand being patient while diligently selecting and examining research studies. Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) highlight seven common mistakes that people could make during their reviews:

- ? Do not clearly relate the findings of the literature review to the researcher's own study.
- ? Do not take sufficient time to define the best descriptors and identify the best sources to use in

reviewing the literature related to one's topic.

- ? Relies on secondary sources rather than on primary sources in reviewing the literature.
- ? Accepts the value of another researcher's findings and interpretations uncritically, rather than examining critically all aspects of the research design and analysis.
- ? Do not report the search procedures that were used in the literature review.
- ? Reports isolated statistical results rather than synthesizing them by chi-square or meta-analysis methods.
- ? Do not consider contrary findings and alternative interpretations in synthesizing qualitative literature (pp.161-162).

Dissertation students sometimes err in their approach of studying the literature by striving to read material even if it is only remotely related to their topic. This results in wasting their time on trivial articles and studies. A good literature review will focus on the most important and relevant documents. Students spend so much time in reading it, and they fail to write about their project. People sometimes focus on reading because it seems intellectually easier than writing. Yet, writing is a valuable endeavor and offers another way to reflect on ideas and foster a better understanding of specialized knowledge (Language Center, 2004).

Literature reviews build on established knowledge. Researchers read other studies to obtain insights from the academic community that provide direction for their own work by noting any gaps or weaknesses in previous investigations. Modern literature reviews can be diverse in their scope and depth of knowledge. Dissertation reviews must transcend being merely familiar with the material. The literature review is a scholarly essay that affirms research

significance. Wise researchers will create a specific review focus that offers the best perspectives on important studies related to the research problem. Neuman (1997, p. 90) highlights six review types:

- ? Self-study reviews - Increases the reader's confidence.
- ? Context reviews - Places a specific project in the big picture.
- ? Historical reviews - Traces the development of an issue over time.
- ? Theoretical reviews - Compares how different theories address an issue.
- ? Methodological reviews - Points out how methodology varies by study.
- ? Integrative reviews - Summarizes what is known at a point in time.

The six review types reflect different approaches and research goals. Self-studies represent a more informal investigation that would not be a part of a doctoral dissertation. Students must devote adequate time to study primary and secondary sources to avoid missing significant information related to their research problem. It is wise to be patient and open-minded when evaluating materials to avoid hasty interpretations or generalizations. The authors encourage students to use the following literature review checklist to improve the quality of their work:

- ? Show a clear understanding of the topic
- ? Cite and discuss all key landmark studies
- ? Develop, through gradual refinement, a clear research problem
- ? State clear conclusions about previous research using appropriate evidence
- ? Show the variety of definitions and approaches to the topic area

- ? Reach sound recommendations using coherent arguments based on evidence
- ? Show a gap in existing knowledge (Hart, 1998, p.198).

Conclusion

Writing the literature review is a challenging experience. Educators and mentors can provide relevant research and writing advice. Students must design and implement an effective research plan. Students can strengthen their research skills through consistent self-evaluation of their work and application of instructor suggestions. Students will be more excited and motivated to complete their doctoral dissertation when they learn how to effectively share their passion and expertise with others.

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