■ *Research Note*

On the Agile Literature Review Approach for Practising Managers: A Proposal

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Literature review skill as covered in the subject of Research Methods is not only useful for doing dissertation projects in academic programme study but also valuable for informing practising managers to cope with actual workplace management issues and concerns. To make literature review easier for practising managers to carry out, the writer proposes the agile literature review approach (ALRA), primarily for applied business research and practices. The main ALRA aim is to promote a complicated understanding of a management topic and its associated management concern by the ALRA user. Although the agile approach is lightweight, its effective application requires endorsement of contemporary systems thinking; this thinking is theoretically profound, thus requiring long-term engaging intellectual learning to master. Copyright © 2018 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

To underscore the value on the theme of this paper about literature review, this writer recounts two questions raised to his part-time students in one of his recent lectures on Applied Business Research for an MBA class in Hong Kong: 'How many of you have conducted literature search and literature review to inform you when coping with management problems and issues that you encounter in your workplace?' The response from the writer's class was unambiguous: none. The next question this writer posed to them was

'In general, how many academic articles are regularly published in refereed academic journals each quarter in the management field these days?' The students were not certain about it but reckoned that it cannot be a small number. The point that the writer intends to raise is this: it is a preposterous situation with tremendous ongoing intellectual effort being made to produce academic knowledge without pervasively benefiting practising managers. One of the explanations from the academic community is the existence of the relevance gap in management research (e.g. Starkey and Madan, 2001; Ghosh *et al.*, 2010 ; Heracleous and DeVage, 1998). In the business management field, the relevance gap basically implies that academic knowledge produced holds low actionable value to

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practising managers for addressing their management concerns in the real world. Other reasons offered by students of this writer are mainly two: too time consuming to read academic articles and too tired to read them. In the words of one of these students, 'I easily fall asleep when attempting to read academic articles'. From what this writer can tell, many of his part-time students in Hong Kong experience time poverty. As reported in the public media, for example, Chung (2017) and Gable (2012), Hong Kong people are busy. For this reason, there is a need to make literature review as covered in the subject of Research Methods for Business Students an accessible and practical exercise, that is, not just for doing dissertation projects but also for informing students, who are very often practising managers, to grapple with problems and issues in real-world workplace settings. In response, this writer proposes a literature review approach that endorses approach agility and contemporary systems thinking. Accordingly, the objective of this paper is to elucidate the agile literature review approach (ALRA), which offers a systems thinking-based and agile means to make the treasure of intellectual insights more easily usable to students doing applied business research dissertation projects and coping with real-world management issues.

AN ACCOUNT OF THE AGILE LITERATURE REVIEW APPROACH

The ALRA was recently formulated by this writer out of his teaching experience, especially on Applied Research Methods for MBA students, and his own research experience on contemporary systems thinking. It involves four steps to be carried by the approach user:

- *ALRA step 1—ideas search*: Collect ideas from diverse sources to frame a management topic, for example, psychological contract, organizational learning or leadership, that is associated with a management concern of yours. It has clear concern ownership; the management concern can overlap with one or two management topics, for example, high staff turnover and low staff morale for a particular company; staff over and staff morale have also been researched on as generic management topics. For students doing applied business research dissertation projects, four main idea sources are identified, namely, (i) the academic literature, primarily from academic publisher websites; (ii) the writings from professional journals; (iii) newspaper articles; and (iv) personal experience and interest (or simply called the personal voice).

- *ALRA step 2—ideas collection*: Browse through the ideas collected from step 1; copy and paste contents that are basically comprehensible to you and that interest you in a computer document with proper reference information on these extracted contents. The result is a document file comprising a list of academic references, each with a number of extracted contents; these contents represent basically intelligible and interesting ideas from your perspective that you have collected from browsing these references. (It is important to specify the references so that you are able to trace the ideas back to the reference sources.) The ideas collected could be all about one management topic, for example, leadership and teamwork, or one management concern, for example, high staff turnover and low staff morale in your company; or in the process of gathering and learning from the extracted contents, you broaden your scope of search to include two or more related management topics and concerns.

- *ALRA step 3—ideas categorization*: Go through the content in your computer document created in ALRA step 2 to gain an overall grasp of the ideas gathered; then group them into a number of idea categories through a kind of crude open-then-closed coding endeavour. The idea categories should emerge from your review of the extracted contents. From the writer's experience on this exercise, idea categories could be (i) ideas related to factors that affect evolving interest in a particular management topic, (ii) ideas related to definitions and theories that help in deepening understanding of a particular management topic under

investigation, (iii) ideas on recommended practices related to a particular management topic and (iv) ideas about learning from practices related to a specific management topic. If you have a particular management concern in mind, as is typical in applied business research, your set of formulated idea categories should reflect your management concern and personal voice. In this case, for instance, the idea categories may consist of (i) ideas on independent input variables, (ii) ideas on a set of intermediate variables on internal mechanism of the system-in-focus, (iii) ideas on output results, (iv) ideas on outcome results and (v) ideas on idiosyncratic contextual factors. Works from the writer, posted in a blogger (Ho, 2017a), illustrate how ideas are extracted from the academic literature on management topics and subsequently grouped into idea categories. On the whole, the *ideas categorization* step is academic literature-aware, albeit subjective and unscientific. Nonetheless, it improves comprehensibility and familiarity of the set of ideas gathered in ALRA step 2 by imposing some form of organization on these ideas.

- *ALRA step 4—ideas systemic diagramming*: Link up the idea categories from step 3 into a cognitive map (Eden *et al.*, 1983) or a loosely constructed theoretical framework, based on the general understanding by the ALRA user on the chosen management topic. (The understanding by the user is considered general, that is, shallow yet broad-based, at this preliminary and short-lived literature review stage.) In this case, the idea categories are represented in the diagrams as connected nodes with terse labels. It is also useful to include a few more ideas based on your experience and interest into the diagram to make it more situation-specific from your perspective. The nature of the connection can be correlation, cause–effect relationship, producer–product relationship, conceptual association or task dependency between the nodes of idea categories. The diagram is encouraged to be constructed in a way that underlines the justifiable inter-relatedness of the nodes. [Readers are referred to the *online diagramming tutorial supplements* in Systems

Thinking for further information on systemic diagramming (Open University, n.d).] The diagram produced with this step can be considered as a visual model (or a theoretical framework), a concrete output of the literature review exercise. A crude relational analysis to explore the relationship among the nodes of your diagram can also be done at this stage. Afterward, the diagram is to be used to (i) make explanation, evaluation and prediction with regard to a management concern and (ii) inform research methods to be employed in a dissertation project or in management solution formulation (without anything to do with dissertation works). In due course of using the systemic diagram for research and investigation, ALRA users might revise, enhance and supplement the diagram with extra systemic diagrams. The following two figures are illustrative. Figure 1 is on a simple cognitive map (Ho, 2017b), and Figure 2 is on a loosely constructed theoretical framework.

Regarding Figure 1, the four variables could be considered as four idea categories (re: ALRA step 3).
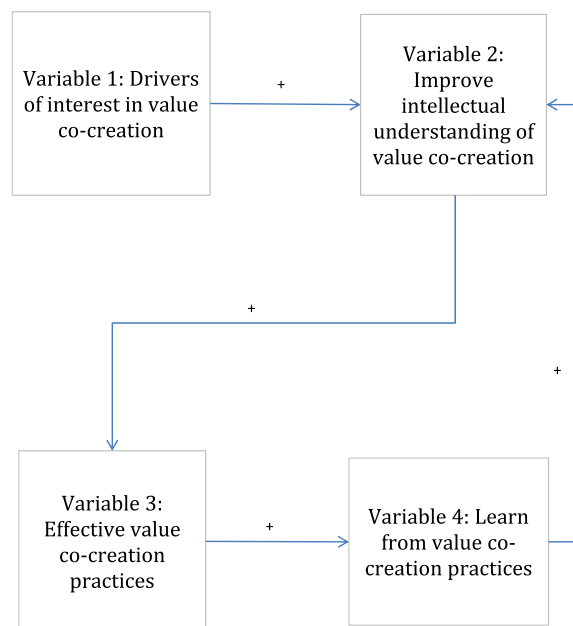

Figure 1 A cognitive map on value co-creation. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Management concern: To find out how teamwork can be improved by transformational leadership in order to enhance competitive advantage and internal & external information sharing thus achieving internal & external customer satisfaction in
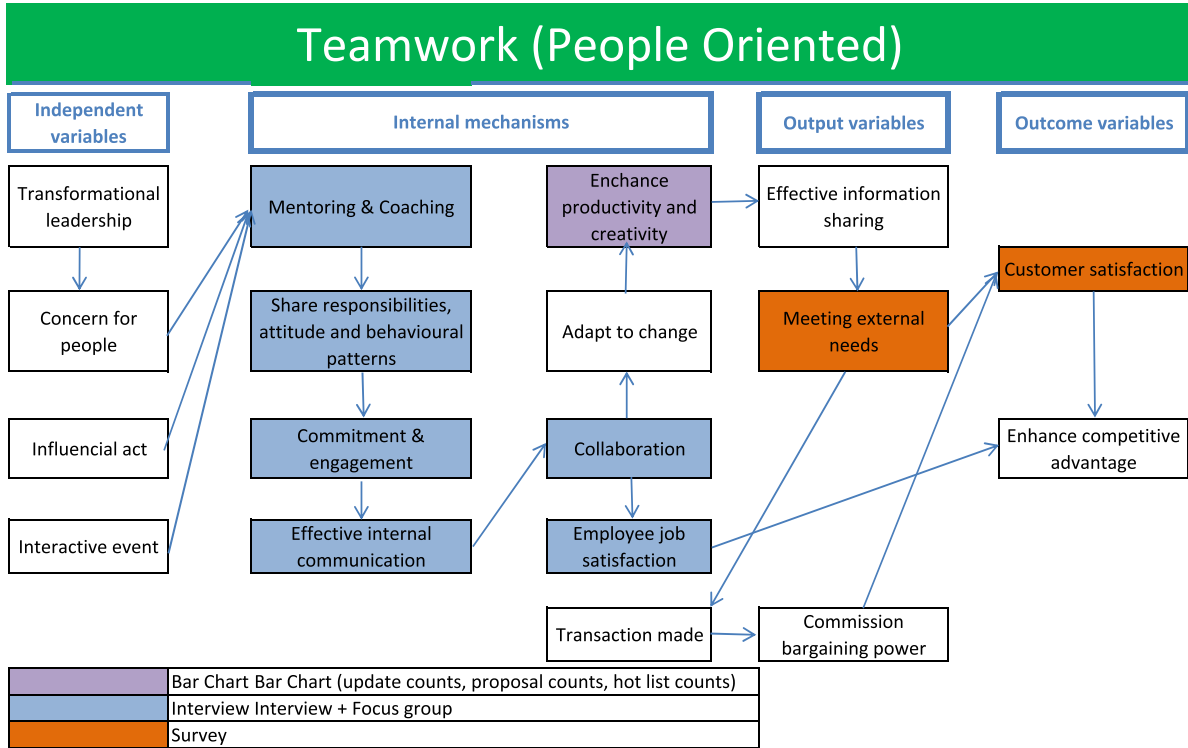

Figure 2 A theoretical framework on teamwork produced via the agile literature review approach for a case study research on a property agency company in Hong Kong by a part-time MBA student. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

For Figure 2, the theoretical framework, in initial draft stage, represents a tailor-made conceptual framework (re: ALRA step 4), synthesizing both intellectual notions and ideas of the ALRA user's own voice (re: ALRA step 1), for explaining and evaluating a management concern of the ALRA user.[1] (The framework of Figure 2 also indicates how a few research methods are intended to be used to cover specific nodes of the framework; however, this topic related to research design is outside the discussion scope of this paper.)

The set of ALRA steps is intended to be a heuristic device, carried out in an iterative, context-sensitive, entrepreneurial, snowballing, agile and spiral fashion. The approach user is reminded not to be complacent with some early 'small wins' with the ALRA exercise. The four steps of the ALRA are plainly not intended to be performed once in waterfall style. On the contrary, continual idea refinement and idea snowballing to gain more intellectual understanding of a management topic and associated management concern via ALRA spiralling is expected; The ALRA has of late been taught to the writer's students to conduct preliminary literature review for their applied business research works. It has also been employed by the writer lately to review a broad range of management topics, for example, innovation, technology transfer, teamwork and corporate culture (see, for example, Ho, 2017a). So far, the ALRA has been practised on an individual, not team basis. Reasonably, coaching support, for example, from a dissertation project supervisor, to the ALRA user(s), is highly valuable. For instance, quite

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[1] The MBA student who constructed the diagram (re: Figure 2) has agreed to let this writer use his diagram in this paper for illustration purpose.

some MBA part-time students need teachers' guidance on constructing diagrams as required in ALRA step 4 (ideas systemic diagramming). The steps involved in the ALRA are not particularly innovative nor heavily rule based.

Apparently, to achieve useful academic and practical results, the ALRA needs to be performed as an engaging endeavour with sufficient intellectual curiosity. Beyond that, it is recommended that not to solely conceive it as a lightweight heuristic device for literature review. Additionally, it should be grounded on contemporary systems thinking so as to accomplish outstanding academic and practical results in its application. This ALRA requirement to be systems thinking based is not apparent at first sight to its casual users; often, students hold a machine age image on the subject of applied business research methods, and this image restricts the thinking process in the ALRA exercise, which considerably lowers the outcome quality of the ALRA. Because of this, this ALRA requirement needs to be further elaborated on in the next section.

THE UNDERLYING SYSTEMS THINKING OF THE AGILE LITERATURE REVIEW APPROACH

A major goal of the ALRA, this writer maintains, is to enhance the ALRA user's understanding of a management topic in response to a specific management concern. The ALRA user can only claim that he or she benefits from the literature review endeavour if the exercise succeeds in uplifting his or her knowledge on the management topic and associated management concern. The resultant enhanced knowledge is expected to include knowledge with actionable value to the ALRA user(s). And, armed with the actionable knowledge, actions subsequently taken up to cope with a chosen management concern could exude simplicity while the understanding of the concern context gives off systemic complexity. This leads the writer to postulate a specific aim of the ALRA: to promote a more complicated understanding of the ALRA user on a chosen management topic and associated

management concern. (Occasionally, a set of related management topics and concerns can also be considered.) In this vein, complicated understanding is associated with a number of attributes on such understanding, namely, comprehensiveness, criticalness, innovativeness, context-sensitiveness and holism. In turn, to achieve this aim, the ALRA user needs to give determined support to contemporary systems thinking, in particular on the following three systems concepts/topics:

a *Expansion*, that is, to increase understanding (in our case on a management topic and concern) via 'expanding the systems to be understood, not by reducing them to their elements' (Ackoff, 1981); this notion encourages a more holistic grasp of management topics and concerns.

b *The four levels of complexity II*, that is, level 1 (complexity), level 2 (systems and people), level 3 (number of parts, number of relations, interest, capabilities and notions/ perceptions) and level 4 (nonlinearity, broken symmetry and nonholonomic constraints) (Flood and Carson, 1988); in our case, these complexity level attributes sensitize the ALRA users in the construction of complex diagrams to express their complicated understanding of their management topic(s) and concern(s).

c *Critical systems thinking*, including its three commitments, that is, critical awareness, improvement and pluralism (Jackson, 2003). It promotes and sustains exploratory, critical and systemic intellectual curiosity in literature review to realize academic and practical relevance for applied business research and management practices.

The reason for singling out these three systems thinking concepts and topics here is that they more directly encourage the ALRA user to be open-minded, critical and ambitious to take in and synthesize a larger number of ideas and concepts via this literature review exercise. In a nutshell, contemporary systems thinking is the underlying theoretical perspective encompassing the whole ALRA (i.e. all the ALRA steps), with the explicit objective to gain a complicated understanding on a chosen management topic and

associated concern. Consequently, it enables the ALRA user to produce in a diagram, for example, as a cognitive map or a loosely constructed theoretical framework, to visually capture a more complicated understanding of the management topic and associated management concern via the ALRA application (re: ALRA step 4). Producing more than one diagram is acceptable, if necessary. Such a complicated understanding by the ALRA user enables formation of context-specific management knowledge of high level of actionable value and creative holism. (The creative holism topic is explained in Jackson, 2003's book on contemporary systems thinking.) Regarding the topic of employing cognitive mapping to synthesize academic notions and more context-specific ideas to gain a complicated understanding of a topic, for example, management topic, and/or associated situation (re: ALRA step 4), readers are also referred to two dated works from the writer as illustrative: Ho and Jackson (1987) and Ho (2015).

THE ALRA AND LITERATURE REVIEW PERFORMANCE

All in all, the agility of the ALRA is realized for the reason that it (i) involves only a few steps without many practice rules (i.e. a lightweight approach) and (ii) embraces contemporary systems thinking concepts, in particular critical systems thinking, thereby encouraging contextual sensitivity and criticality. Because of the lightweightness of the approach, the ALRA user can gain some quick improvement in literature review performance. Specifically, the ALRA user is able to quickly grasp a large number of related ideas relevant to his/her management concerns in a research project with an actual workplace setting. This writer's practice experience is that around 20 relevant academic ideas can be collected in one man-day with the ALRA. As such, the ALRA should be especially appealing to literature review novices contending with time poverty and in need of usable literature review guidance. Nonetheless, to master contemporary systems thinking so as to enable truly effective ALRA practice demands long-term sustainable

intellectual learning on systems thinking—there is no short-cut for achieving outstanding ALRA practice.

THE ALRA ATTRACTIVENESS TO PRACTISING MANAGERS AND THE REQUIRED INTELLECTUAL LEARNING

There are practising managers who are mature scholar-practitioners in management; more often than not, they are already familiar with an array of literature review approaches. Nevertheless, a lot more managers are not that intellectually accomplished. Many of these managers, with difficulty to master practical literature review skill, could benefit from building up intellectual competence if barriers on intellectual learning can be lowered. This writer, as a part-time teacher on management subjects, recognizes two typical learning barriers for this group of students, for example, (i) difficulty on comprehending academic literature, made worse by the relevance gap in management research, and (ii) time poverty suffered by these managers. In this regard, the ALRA is proposed to guide managers to efficiently conduct literature review for enhancing applied business research dissertation project and real-world managerial performance. Busy managers should find the ALRA easy to use due to its approach lightweightness. Other than that, this paper argues for the agile approach to be contemporary systems thinking based if it is to be carried out with outstanding literature review performance. This requirement has implication for long-term intellectual learning by practising managers interested in truly effective ALRA practice. It is realistic to conjecture that a lot more ALRA users would be interested in quicker literature review improvement by following the ALRA steps than those also committed to long-term intellectual learning on systems thinking for the purpose of studying the ALRA. This is by no means to deny the benefit of 'the ALRA attachment to contemporary systems thinking' in significantly promoting ALRA performance. Indeed, the specific combination of the ALRA steps and contemporary systems thinking as

proposed here is rather original in the Applied Research Methods and Contemporary Systems Thinking fields.

Fundamentally, literature review is a kind of intellectual learning, which has to be inner-driven in order to be successful. There is thus a limit of what a literature review approach, including the ALRA, is able to contribute to intellectual learning for its user(s): learning is about mindset on intellectual curiosity, not just an approach to guide it. To stress this point, with prevailing low intellectual curiosity, few practising managers in Hong Kong that this writer has come across do leisure reading on academic journals during holidays. At the same time, unavoidably, it consumes time and effort to employ the ALRA and learn contemporary systems thinking on which it is based. And ideas from less seriously academic sources such as YouTube and newspapers are also valuable for intellectual learning. Hence, busy managers have to adapt their life-style and mindset so as to spare time and effort for an engaging ALRA application as well as the companion life-long intellectual learning. Intellectual curiosity is thus expected in this case. What is more, it is linked to the personal career decision to be a scholar-practitioner, thereby upholding the scholar-practitioner identity/intent. This is especially so on learning the contemporary systems thinking subject, which is theoretically profound and which possesses a substantial academic literature.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, the ALRA has been examined in relation to the Applied Business Research Methods domain and managerial problem-coping/intellectual learning. The set of ALRA steps is conceived as a usable practical-cum-academic heuristic device for practising managers to handle management issues in the business world and for doing dissertation projects while contending with time pressure. Literature review, performed in this way, is simply much more than an ivory tower exercise. Beyond that, the ALRA has managerial intellectual learning importance;

it also has academic relevance to the writer's much earlier research work on the Multi-perspective, Systems-based Research (Ho, 1995, 1996). Briefly, the Multi-perspective, Systems-based Research employs critical systems thinking to conduct literature review on management disciplines with the aim of developing knowledge structures of management disciplines. Nevertheless, how applicable the ALRA is in other social sciences fields, for example, Housing Studies, how the ALRA could work with other mainstream literature review strategies and techniques as described in Research Methods textbooks and, finally, what factors, for example, users' learning styles and project supervisors' styles of support, affect the ALRA adoption have yet to be examined. Lastly, by coaching part-time students to utilize the ALRA with the writer together, and subsequently to reflect on the experience of its usage, the writer has been adopting the Action Research method to develop the ALRA. In this regard, pending research issues on the ALRA can be addressed via this research method, while other research methods could also be tried out in due course.

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