Literature Review

John R. Turner

Literature Reviews

> What do we know now that we didn't know before, and why should we care? Why should we consider your answer credible?
>
> (Yorks, 2008, p. 139)

This editorial presents the key components to any literature review: focus, goal, perspective, coverage, organization, and audience. Each of these key components is discussed along with how each applies specifically to submissions to *Performance Improvement Quarterly*. The importance of synthesizing the literature is also provided, along with some recommendations on how to get started with this process. Recommendations for evaluating literature reviews are presented, as are references to evaluation tools to be used by students and researchers.

A literature review is probably the most common academic writing activity performed by researchers and students. Imel (2011) identified a literature review as being either part of a larger study or as a research effort of its own. Torraco (2016) acknowledged that literature reviews are "conducted for different purposes and take different forms for various audiences" (p. 405). As part of a larger study, the literature provides "the foundation for the study" (Imel, 2011, p. 145). In presenting the foundation for a larger study, a literature review sets the "context of the study, clearly demarcates what is and what is not within the scope of the investigation, and justifies those decisions" (Boote & Beile, 2005, p. 4). As a stand-alone research method, literature reviews can identify future research, highlight gaps or discrepancies in the literature, expose unresolved issues, and provide new perspectives (Imel, 2011).

Unfortunately, despite the fact that a literature review is a "precondition for doing substantive, thorough, sophisticated research" (Boote & Beile, 2005, p. 3), too many doctoral programs fail to adequately instruct students on the importance of, and the mechanics of, conducting proper literature reviews: ".. . we cannot blame them for their failure to demonstrate what we. .. have not clearly articulated or valued" (p. 3). However, regardless of these shortcomings, the editorial team at *Performance Improvement Quarterly* (*PIQ)* hopes to clarify what is expected in a literature review section for any submitted article, regardless of whether the literature review is part of a larger empirical study or a stand-alone literature review (e.g., an integrative literature review; Torraco, 2005, 2016).

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Taxonomy

Literature reviews have been categorized into many different types based on their stated purposes. Cooper's (1982, 2003) taxonomy identified six main categories for literature reviews: focus, goal, perspective, coverage, organization, and audience. The primary focus for a literature review has been identified as consisting of four areas: "research findings, research methods, theories, and practices or applications" (Cooper, 2003, p. 3). In most cases, a literature review will have more than one area of focus. In the context of *PIQ* publications, for example, a literature review will primarily be focused on theories (or models) and practices as they apply to the performance improvement (PI) field of study. However, in empirical studies, a literature review will also need to focus on reporting previous research findings, making the literature review a multifocused review.

Literature reviews should present the researcher's goal: What does the author(s) intend to accomplish with his or her review of the literature (Cooper, 2003)? The categories for a literature review's goals include *integration*, consisting of generalization, conflict resolution, or linguistic bridge building; *criticism*; or *identification* of central issues (Cooper, 2003). For *PIQ* publications, literature reviews are expected to integrate past research relating to a topic of interest to the PI industry. Here, literature reviews can (a) aid in formulating logical statements that build on developing testable hypotheses, (b) provide support for theory/model development efforts, or (c) bridge the gap between the PI field and another similar discipline (e.g., multidisciplinary research).

The third taxonomy includes the author's perspective (neutral representation, espousal of position; Cooper, 2003). In most cases, *PIQ* submissions will require authors to take a neutral representation to present a nonbiased point of view. Also, submissions to *PIQ* will need to identify the philosophical perspective for the research study (e.g., postpositivism, constructivism, transformative, pragmatism; Creswell, 2014). Identifying the philosophical perspective is critical, in that this aids in presenting a *diversity of perspectives* to the PI community: ".. . such diversity is invaluable in uncovering and overcoming bias throughout human science" (Szostak, 2003, p. 74).

Coverage, the fourth taxonomy, involves four categories: exhaustive, exhaustive with selective citation, representative, and central or pivotal (Cooper, 2003). Exhaustive coverage is rarely provided in typical publications, partially due to space considerations. Dissertations provide near-exhaustive coverage of the literature. However, most dissertation studies provide more of an exhaustive with selective citation coverage rather than a pure exhaustive coverage. For most submissions to *PIQ*, researchers should have an exhaustive with selective citation coverage or a representative coverage. Both types of coverage will provide enough detail of the literature relating to the context and focus of the research study. At a minimum, researchers will need to (a) identify the coverage that the literature

review provides, (b) show how the coverage is representative, and (c) provide evidence that the coverage is exhaustive enough to show that the authors have a command of their field of study (contextual knowledge).

Organization of the literature involves categorizing the literature either historically, conceptually/theoretically, or methodologically (Cooper, 2003). The organization of the literature review will, in most cases, depend on the focus of the literature review. For example, if a theoretical literature review (Turner, Baker, & Kellner, in press) were to be conducted, the organization of that review would be either chronological or theoretical. For empirical studies, a comprehensive review of the methodology chosen for the research study will also be expected. For submissions to *PIQ*, literature reviews will most likely be organized theoretically/conceptually, but a methodological review will also be required to support the researcher's decision for choosing the methodology and statistical techniques used in their study.

Last, the audience for a literature review should be practitioners, scholars, and students in the PI field. Cooper (2003) provided four categories for the audience; specialized scholars, general scholars, practitioners or policymakers, and the general public. For *PIQ* submissions, the audience will most likely be primarily practitioners, followed by scholars and students.

A Synthesis of the Data

All literature reviews must provide more than just a summary of the literature; they must provide new knowledge by synthesizing the data. Researchers and students alike must be able to "critically synthesize ideas and methods in their field" (Boote & Beile, 2005, p. 7). Not providing a synthesis of the literature, Torraco (2016) writes, is a weakness: "The lack of emphasis on synthesis in literature reviews is a weakness in most existing literature on the topic" (p. 409). Synthesis is a creative process using critical thinking skills. Synthesis has been defined as integrating "existing ideas with new ideas to create a new formulation of the topic," in which the author "recasts, combines, reorganizes, and integrates concepts and perspectives on the topic" (Torraco, 2016, p. 420). Synthesizing the literature is a method of providing new knowledge and can be conducted using many methods: taxonomy, conceptual framework, meta-analysis, metatheoretical reflection, and a critique of literature (Torraco, 2016).

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To help synthesize the information you have gathered from your research, Leedy and Ormrod (2005) identified the following guidelines:

- Compare and contrast varying theoretical perspectives on the topic.
- Show how approaches to the topic have changed over time.

- Describe general trends in research findings.
- Identify discrepant or contradictory findings, and suggest possible explanations for such discrepancies.
- Identify general themes that run throughout the literature (p. 79).

Cooper (2010) provided the following steps for research synthesis:

- Formulating the problem.
- Searching the literature.
- Gathering information from studies.
- Evaluating the quality of studies.
- Analyzing and integrating the outcomes of studies.
- Interpreting the evidence.
- Presenting the results (p. 12).

Conclusion

A poorly written literature review reduces the chance that an article will pass the peer-review process. Boote & Beile (2005) presented research that highlighted this point: "a poorly conceptualized or written literature review often indicates for them [reviewers] that the rest of the dissertation [article] might have problems" (p. 6). A literature review must provide, in detail, all information identified in Cooper's (1982, 2003) taxonomy, as presented in this editorial. Also, any literature review, either as a stand-alone manuscript or as part of a larger empirical manuscript, must provide new knowledge and a synthesis of the literature rather than only summarizing previous studies. To aid researchers in writing literature reviews, Torraco (2016) included a checklist for integrative literature reviews. This checklist should be used as a guide for all submissions to *PIQ*. All-in-all, literature reviews should lead the field, "leading to new productive work, rather than merely mirroring research in a field" (Boote & Beile, 2005, p. 6).

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