

1.2t: Module text companion website

Video 1: How do you define Critical Reading?

Critical reading means looking for the claims that authors make about what something is or what it should be in the social world and checking that they've got adequate backing to justify or warrant those claims being accepted.

And if we are going to engage in critical reading it's probably best done with what we call 'frontline text'; these could be research articles, theoretical books and so-on rather than what we call 'support texts', encyclopaedias, internet encyclopaedias of course or text books and alike because there isn't really space for the authors to provide the evidence for the various claims that they are relaying in giving an overview of what people have claimed in their field and so-on. So support texts are a brilliant way of beginning to get your understanding of a new field for you, but fairly soon you need to be addressing front line texts, people's journal articles and so on where you can expect them to provide the evidence that justify the claims they make about what they found out.

So critical reading I suppose can be thought of essentially as discernment. It's when you read something, you see that somebody makes a claim about the world, about something they've found and it's just thinking, ok that's what you've claimed so how do I know that's right, how do I know that I should take that seriously and perhaps build my own research on it, is that a reliable claim? And so you're thinking how do you know that and ok that's where you tell me how you know so what have you done exactly can I so tease apart bits of the assumptions that you've made or the kind of data you've used and say am I satisfied that that really does back up the claims that you have made? And very often it will but it's simply that you are taking a sceptical approach if you like. Come on, come convince me if you can convince me I'm willing to go with it and then I will know that I'm building my own research on something that is reliable. But once you read something and you think 'Do you know what? I just think it's just the way you've collected that data or it's the way you've interpreted what's been said, that I'm not sure I agree with that and I've read this other thing maybe that makes me think if you'd read that then you'd think about this differently so I'm not going to put quite so much weight on that for my own research because I am not satisfied that that as reliable as you think'.

Video 2: Why engage in Critical Reading?

~~made, what underlying assumptions are there that were taken into that research or have been drawn out of the research that not everybody~~
might agree with? If somebody else came along and did that research how might they see it differently? What might they do differently? And it's that critical, that discerning approach that's going to give you some way of prying underneath the claim to see the limits of it, the boundaries of it, the way, the places where other people might come in and say no-no if you do it differently you'll get a completely different kind of way of seeing things. So you can question the assumptions, you can question the values that people are taking in and just check that you understand how that's shaping the claims their making.

Video 3: What is the difference between an opinion and an argument?

Well if we start at the very basic level, we all have opinions in all the things we do every day; that's absolutely fine. It's only a question of what's appropriate for when you're doing your research. So when you have an opinion about it, it's a view that you've developed on the bases of your experience and your values, the things you think are important.

When we get into research those things can inform the way we think, but we need a little bit more before we make a claim. So when we make a claim in our research, we want it to be something where others can look at that and say 'yeah I can see that pretty well anybody who looked at that bit of evidence would come to the same conclusion' and with opinions that wouldn't necessarily be the case. So you're looking for something a little bit more objective, even within the social sciences where everything's contentious, suddenly we can say 'well look the reason I think this is this, this and this and I've worked this out and it all seems to add up to meaning this' and that's a little bit stronger than just saying 'I think' 'I've a hunch that's the case' so we're looking for something where the research is working for you, to enable you to draw conclusions.

More formally perhaps an opinion is just one or more claims that something is or should be true; for example students who engage critically with the literature get good marks for their dissertation, that's just a statement.

Whereas an argument would be one or more claims but this time it would be backed by some form of evidence so it might be something like 'students who engage critically with the literature get good marks in their dissertation because in my experience as an examiner they demonstrate that they have meet fully the criteria for assessment about adopting a critical approach to the study'. So here the evidence is the reported experience of the person who's making the claim, the examiner.

Now, while an argument can be about a single idea and expressed in a single sentence, a lot of the philosophy works at that level, we've found that it's not that helpful; we're most interested in the overall argument that somebody is developing throughout a whole paper, or a whole

that something is or should be true. But on its own a conclusion is just an opinion, so what makes it the conclusion of an argument? That's where you have the warranting, or backing the support from some form of evidence. So one might say I've looked at the literature and other people report these findings or from my own research; these are the findings that I've got that support the claim I'm making in my conclusion.

So an argument consists of two parts, a conclusion and the warranting in some sort of evidence.

Video 4: How can I focus my literature review?

You wouldn't be surprised to know that everything depends on what you want to know. There's any amount of literature saying any amount of things so you need to focus. We recommend as soon as you can try to specify a clear review question that will help you frame your search for literature and know how to choose stuff that is both relevant and in total manageable.

The sort of questions we often come up with go something like 'What's already known about this?' 'How well is it known?' 'What are limits of what is known?' one could even say on the end of that 'What don't we know but we need to know next about the particular area of study?'.

So having got a question it's fairly easy to search these days the academic literature electronically and so-on. A lot of people use key words searches and then I would recommend that once you have a few papers and so-on that you begin scanning, skimming and then intensive reading of some of them; you're bound to come across references where you think 'oh I'd like to know more about that, that's relevant to me' and so you essentially snowball from there. You pick up that reference find the material and go on from there. So it's a mixture of methods that help you search for what you need.

So I think the hardest bit is really when you're starting because you've got that whole wealth of a library full, a world library full of stuff; how do I know what to read? I can't possibly read everything. Now I think at the very first stages you have to accept you're going to have to do a little bit of just general background reading, just to get your head round what it is you're looking at. But as soon as possible you want to get away from that, because that can just absorb so much time. And so you, need to figure out the precious things you want to know and go in with a review question, or more than one question where you're saying 'I'm reading this because I want to find this thing out'. And the important thing about that is that because you go in with a question and you're reading these things saying 'how is this helping me answer my question?'

Then there comes a point when you realise that you're reading more, and you're not really finding out more answers to the question. It's starting to consolidate into an acceptable answer to that question and then you can stop and move onto the next thing. Because as soon as you accept

move into a new area.

Video 5: What makes a literature review critical?

First of all, what is a literature review? Well obviously you're going to look at the research literature to find out what's in there, but rather than thinking of it as being just a description of this person said this, this person said this. I always find it's quite useful to think a bit like a detective story.

So Poirot comes in and he says 'Aha there's the dead body in the library; my job is to find out who killed this person' and then he goes out with a set of questions. And he's asking questions, and he's gathering information in order to come to a conclusion. So he's driving everything that he does, all the data he's collected from wherever from talking to people, whatever else in order to help him to come to a conclusion. And if you drive your literature review that way, you have a lot more power and a lot more voice in it because it's not simply a description of things that is done before you can get into the real nitty gritty of your thesis. It is the nitty gritty of your thesis, this is part of your research. It's just that the data happens to be other people's claims rather than data that you've gone out and collected in the field.

So that's what a literature review is, and then what makes it critical? Well this is to do with being discerning in what one reads and how one interprets it. So one doesn't want to simply just describe one thing after another, you've got to find some way of understanding whether what is described is convincing or not.

On the other hand, you don't want to go to the other extreme where you're saying that you're critical of everything. You know it's easy to be in one extreme where you say 'it's in print so it must be true' and then you think 'I've got to be critical because it's in print it can't be true'. Well I mean that's obviously not going to be the case either. It's much less about what's right and wrong and much more about what is this telling me that's relevant to what I'm trying to find out.

A critical literature review is in a way, it's a bit like the kind of conversation you would have with a good friend of yours who's opinions you respect but who you don't really, you're not sure about in this particular instance. So they say 'Oh cabbage is just amazing' and you're kind of going 'What? Come on you've got to convince me that cabbage is amazing' and then you'll be saying 'How did you cook it?' 'Where did you have it?' 'What kind of cabbage was it?' because those questions will help you to understand why that perhaps slightly alarming claim in the first place suddenly starts to make sense. And they would give, have the chance to answer back. Now of course when you're reading the literature

But it means that all the way through doing your literature review, even in those very early stages when you're just reading for information. You need to be annotating with those questions like 'Why do you say that?' 'What about this?' 'Is that, why did you think that was good evidence?' So you're thinking all the time, whenever you're reading you're engaging your brain with thinking of what questions would I ask if they were in the room? What do I want to know? What do I think they would answer? What can I infer from what they tell me in the paper about what they might answer if I ask them those question?

A critical literature review is a product of the reviewer's critical imagination, and everybody will come to their own different, their own view point about an area of literature that they've read according to the kinds of judgements that they make. So it's worth thinking that a critical literature review does express the voice of the reviewer who's taking a position in relation to the literature being interviewed.

So what do you have to do? You have to develop your own argument about what the literature suggests, is known, what the limits are of what's known and so-on about the review question that you've asked in the first place. So you're going to focus your review by asking that review question, search for the relevant texts, evaluate the authors' arguments about what they claim to have found out and draw your own conclusion. Where you give your answer to your review question, having provided the evidence that will warrant your own conclusion in reporting your critical engagement with the text you've actually reviewed.

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