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Systematic Literature Reviews

Eduardo Figueiredo

http://www.dcc.ufmg.br/~figueiredo

Systematic Literature Reviews

- SLR are conducted to identify, analyze and interpret all available evidence related to a specific research question
- Its goal is to give a complete and comprehensive picture of the evidence
- It must be conducted in a scientifically and rigorous way

The SLR Process

- The SLR process for Software Engineering were adapted form other areas (mainly medicine)
- It is structured in three steps
  - Planning
  - Conducting
  - Reporting

Planning the Review

- A SLR can be viewed as a research method to making a literature review
- Planning a SLR include several actions
  - Identification of the need for a review
  - Specifying the research question(s)
  - Developing a SLR protocol

The Need for Review

- Motivation for a researcher
  - To understand the state-of-the-art in a research area
- Motivation for a practitioner
  - To use empirical evidence to support making a decision
- Key questions
  - Is there a pre-existing SLR in the area?
  - Were sufficient data reported?

Specifying Questions

- Research questions set the focus for
  - The identification of primary studies
  - The extraction of data from the studies
  - The analysis of the data
- Aspects to be taken into account
  - The population (conference papers?)
  - The object of study
  - The relevance of outcomes

Developing a Protocol

- The protocol should be peer-reviewed
- Relevant items to be covered
  - Background and rationale
  - Search strategy for primary studies
  - Study selection criteria
  - Study quality assessment (checklists and procedures)
  - Data extraction strategy
  - Timetable

Conducting the Review

- Conducting a SLR means setting the review protocol into practice
- It includes
  - Identification of research
  - Selection of primary studies
  - Study quality assessment
  - Data extraction
  - Data synthesis

Research and Primary Studies

- Identification of Research
  - It requires specifying search string and applying them
  - It includes manual and automated search
  - Tuning to avoid too many false positives and duplicates (from different sources)
- Selection of Primary Studies
  - Define inclusion and exclusion criteria
  - It is often sufficient to read title and abstract

Study Quality Assessment

- Published studies may report contradictory results
  - It is important to analyze the causes of contradictions
- Quality assessment may lead to some primary studies being excluded (grey literature)
  - Peer review is usually required to asses the quality of studies

Data Extraction and Synthesis

- Data Extraction
  - Once the list of primary studies are decided, data can be extracted
  - Data extraction is based on the research questions
- Data Synthesis
  - Statistic methods and tools should be used to give an overview of the extracted data
  - Example: Scatter plots and box plots

Reporting the Review

- Results should be reported targeting different audiences
  - Webpages
  - Short summary leaflets
  - Papers (researchers)
  - Magazines (practitioners)
  - (Extended) Technical report
- Lessons learned are important for the research audience point of view

Mapping Studies and SLR

- Mapping studies may be better than SLR
  - Research questions are too broader
  - Field of study is less explored
- A mapping study follows the same principles of SLR, but searches for a broader scope
  - Analysis tend to be more qualitative

Mapping Studies vs. SLR

	Mapping Study	**SLR**
Goal	Classification of a topic	Identify best practice (state of the art)
Research Question	Generic	Specific
Search Process	Defined by a topic	Defined by a research question
Scope	Broader	Focused

Final Remarks

- There is a growth of SLR in recent years
  - Quality of SLR are also increasing
- Search tools (e.g., Google Scholar) make SLR easier
  - It is sometimes required to make SLR manually (e.g., local publications not available online)

Bibliography

- C. Wohlin et al. **Experimentation in Software Engineering**, Springer. 2012.
  - Chapter 4. Systematic Literature Reviews