Working with literatures

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2 authors:

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184 PUBLICATIONS 3,122 CITATIONS

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Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

Professional Doctorates View project

What happens to young people who were educated in Alternative Provisions? View project
Summary
- Mapping the field
- Identifying texts that are most pertinent to the research
- Creating the warrant for the research
- Key theorists and writers
  - Howard S. Becker
  - Christopher Hart
  - Barbara Kamler
  - Pat Thomson

Key concepts
Work with literatures is an integral part of scholarship. There are four key tasks accomplished through engagement with texts that others have produced. These are:

1. To map the field or fields relevant to the inquiry. This is likely to involve both showing something of the historical development of the field(s), discussing its empirical and theoretical bases and biases, as well as identifying major debates, key figures and seminal texts.

2. To establish which studies, ideas and/or methods are most pertinent to the specific research being undertaken. No project starts from scratch – new research both uses and builds on existing findings. These pre-made building blocks are acknowledged through scrupulous citation practices.

3. To create the warrant for the research. This may involve identifying gaps, bringing together ideas and approaches which have previously remained separate and/or speaking to a particular difficulty, puzzle or debate within the field.

4. To identify the particular contribution that their research will make. Work with literatures allows researchers to name the conversation(s) which they will enter into and to articulate the ‘chunk’ of knowledge they are offering to the scholarly community.

Scenario
It is for these reasons that when doctoral students begin their studies, they are told to read and read a lot. This is in part to help define their research question. But there is also an expectation that this reading will become the basis of ‘the literature review’. Students rapidly become anxious about this open-ended and never-ending task. Where to start? What are the key texts? How can pivotal authors be identified? How many texts are sufficient? When does reading stop? Too often the focus on reading is so overwhelming that the significance of writing about and with the literatures is overlooked. And while students do have a sense that someone, somewhere, sometime – The Examiner – is going to read what they have written, the question of what it means to write for a reader is often not considered.

We want to explore the notion of the reader. Imagine an examiner sitting down with a completed...
manuscript. They open the big book, read the abstract and then check the table of contents. They skim the introduction, then move to the list of references, spending time scanning each page of bibliographic data. To the uninitiated this might seem odd; as if the reader is simply looking to see if their own work is cited. Even if this is the case, something else is going on here. In this brief engagement, the examiner has accomplished a series of tasks. They can see the argument that is to be made in the thesis – or not – and they can see if the work is logically structured – or not. They know the field in which the candidate is working and the kinds of scholars they have drawn on. They will form an opinion at this early point, and as they read the text from beginning to end, they will confirm whether this impression is justified – or not.

What is clear from this scenario is that the reader-examiner is not checking to see if the doctoral researcher has read everything. They are checking to see whether they have read sufficiently; too little reading is a sign that the research may be conceptually thin. They are checking to see if the references are technically correct; sloppy referencing may be a sign that the candidate has not grasped the required scholarly conventions. They are also getting a sense of the candidate’s positioning within the field, with whom they appear to be in conversation and what the potential contribution of the research might be. The bibliographic references act, together with the list of contents and the abstract, as a kind of map for the reading ahead and they create a strong impression of the scholar who is to be encountered.

We’ve indulged in this scenario not because we want to add to the agitation that emerging academic researchers might feel about ‘the literature,’ but because we want to examine the complex work it accomplishes. Rather than literature work being a technical matter – simply reading a lot, summarizing and grouping books and articles and then writing a chapter as a series of thematized lists – we suggest it is more helpful to think that:

(1) The literature is not a monolith, it is plural. Many researchers find that, in order to position, legitimate and connect their work to that of others, they need to use a range of texts – policy documents, professional reading, articles from the popular press and web-based documents as well as books and journal articles that are ‘scholarly’. In some instances, the range may even include novels, films and cartoons. And the texts may well straddle a number of different fields. We suggest, therefore, that it is appropriate to talk about the literatures, rather than imply that there is a single homogenous corpus.

(2) The literatures comprise a field or fields of knowledge production. The purpose of reading the literatures is to ascertain what is known about a particular topic. We read to see the categories that are used by others to sort, sift, foreground and background the field. We look to see what previous work has been mobilized and what has been ignored. We evaluate the methods used to generate the data and the argument; we might ask, for example, who are the research participants – how many, when, where and how were they involved? We also look to see what view of knowledge underpins each text. Taken together, these questions allow us to compare and contrast and to develop a view of the ‘clumps’ of literatures which share common characteristics or approaches.

(3) The task is not to review. While it is necessary to summarize texts and to make lists of findings and arguments, this is only a first step in constructing what is commonly called ‘the literature review’. We think the notion of review is unhelpful because it implies that what is required is to produce a list of summarized texts. This summarizing often results in the ‘he said, she said’ laundry list formula, where each sentence begins with the name of the researcher, as in this example.

There are significant differences in opinion on how to define school improvement. Gray et al. (1999) point out that school improvement secures year-on-year improvement in the outcomes of successive cohorts of similar pupils. Improvement is measured in terms of raising attainment of all students over time (Chapman, 2002). In other words it increases the school’s effectiveness over time. In contrast, Mortimore (1998) describes school improvement as the process of improving the way a school is organized, its aims, expectations, ways of learning, methods of teaching and organizational culture. For Gray et al. (1999) student outcomes are pre-eminent, whereas for Mortimore (1998) it is the process that is vital. Hopkins (2001) combines these two ideas, i.e. school improvement and school’s capacity, by describing school improvement as a ‘distinct approach to educational change that aims to enhance students’ outcomes as well as strengthening the school’s capacity for managing change (p. 23).
What this writing clearly lacks is a point of view and an evaluative stance from the writer. The listing technique may be inclusive, but it can obscure the ideas being discussed because they remain so disconnected.

The task is to map the field. The job of engaging with the literatures is to locate the place for the research and decide which conversation the research is joining. The task is to clarify and make explicit the contribution that the research will make and its relationships with prior scholarship. This example of an introductory paragraph to a literature chapter effectively signposts the mapping that is to be undertaken.

I turn now to what is already known about teenage pregnancy and education. I look first at why, according to the literatures, pregnant and mothering teenagers are viewed as educationally vulnerable and I detail the policy guidance to local authorities and schools that has resulted. I note the minimal focus on education in the lives of teenage mothers relative to other research and also the limited work which foregrounds the views and experiences of young mothers themselves. It is this gap to which I aim to contribute.

The writing clearly identifies the topic of the research and announces its intention to address patterns and types of knowledge and their sources. In doing so, a space is created to situate the research. Below we delete the content from this passage in order to make explicit the syntactic moves that have been made.

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This ‘syntactic skeleton’ is one of several strategies we’ve developed to help researchers attend more closely to language and to understand alternative ways of thinking/writing about literatures (see Kamler and Thomson, 2006; Thomson and Kamler, 2010 for further examples and strategies).

Alternative approaches to work with literatures

Situating and mandating the research through engagement with literatures is not simply a matter of learning new techniques and new tricks. Rather, the approach to literatures we’ve described is underpinned by three key concepts: (1) writing as discursive social practice; (2) writing as dialogic; and (3) writing as text work/identity work.

Writing as discursive social practice

Academic writing does not occur in a vacuum. It is productively understood as a discursive social practice, embedded in a tangle of cultural, historical practices that are both institutional and disciplinary. Using Fairclough’s (1992) three-tiered model of discourse, we see writing as shaped ‘not only by the local circumstances in which students are writing, but by the social, cultural and political climate within which the thesis is produced’ (Clark and Ivonic, 1997: 11). Seeing research writing as discourse makes visible the complex ways in which it is regulated and constituted by discipline-specific conventions and protocols, by conversations with supervisors, mentors or colleagues who embody the discipline and institution, and by prevailing higher education policy regimes that constrain what can be researched and written about. Such discursive practices take time for academic writers to understand and put into practice.

Writing as dialogic

The Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bahktin (1981) suggested that texts could be either monologic or dialogic. A monologic text is one that attempts to define meaning tightly, defining and redefining what is intended until the opportunities for readers to create meaning are limited. Monologic prose can be leaden and plodding and/or full of alienating jargon. Ritualistic engagements with literature that read like laundry lists tend to the monologic. By contrast, Bahktin argued, dialogic text is not simply lively and pleasurable to read, but also invites the reader to find within it multiple resonances with other texts, and multiple possibilities for engagement. Dialogic text engages the reader in a conversation.

Writing as text work/identity work

Rather than a set of rules and default structures, doctoral writing is best understood as text work/
identity work. By this we mean that texts and identities are formed together, in and through writing. The practices of academic writing produce simultaneously a scholar and a text. In the academic world, texts and their authors are inseparable. Research as a public and documented inquiry is communicated through texts that are an extension of the scholar and her/his scholarship. Research students, in particular, fret about whether they are interesting or persuasive; they fear that they will not make a contribution to knowledge. Not surprisingly, these stresses often surface in the writing, but are frequently misunderstood as ‘poor writing’, when what is at stake is the difficulty of writing as an authority when one does not feel authoritative.

Stories from the Field

We suggest that the three intertwined concepts of writing as social discursive practice, writing as dialogic and writing as text work/identity work are imbricated in all work with literatures, be it a dissertation literature chapter, a commissioned review or an elaboration of relevant literatures in a journal article. In the two stories we tell from the field we see emergent researchers grappling with literature work. We highlight how their struggles involve not only the technical tasks of sorting, selecting, categorizing and writing succinctly, but are intimately connected with their identities as scholars being formed in specific institutional and disciplinary contexts.

Mapping the field: Denise’s story

Denise is a former school principal. When she began her doctorate she had already decided that she wanted to investigate the reasons why principals leave their posts pre-retirement. She was particularly interested in researching the situation in Anglican primary schools, the sector in which she had worked. She already knew the literatures emanating from the National College for School Leadership and those reported in the national press. As could be expected, her first task in beginning her doctorate was to read, and read widely about the issue.

Denise felt overwhelmed by the quantity of material and she began by simply dividing texts into two categories: (1) that which was the product of scholarly research; and (2) all other texts, including policy documents, media articles, and government reports.

Denise’s reading and writing was scaffolded by an academic writing class at her university, where she followed a set of strategies offered by the tutor. The emphasis in the first part of the course was on making economical summaries. So, as she read she entered each text into Endnote together with brief notes about:

- the aspect of principal supply addressed;
- the research sample (who, how many which sector, country of origin) and method;
- the argument made.

This was a process that the writing course helped Denise understand as reviewing. Denise was also encouraged to develop some initial comparisons of selected texts, in order to understand the basis on which individual texts could be discussed in relation to each other.

The next strategy that the tutor introduced was that of mapping the field – sorting literatures into identifiable groups, with each group addressing a similar aspect of the relevant topic. Denise was daunted by the sheer quantum of material she had collected about the process of principal departure from schools. However, she worked her way systematically through over 100 texts. This was not a rapid process.

Eventually, she identified six ‘clumps’ of texts; she checked out the groupings with her supervisor at this point to see if they made sense to someone with more expert knowledge of the field. She then did three things: (1) she allocated a different colour to each of the six ‘clumps’; (2) she wrote a post-it note about each text in the colour of the group to which it belonged; and (3) she put the post-its onto large A3 sheets on her living room floor. She was then able to sort each A3 sheet of post-its to establish the major themes within each ‘clump’ and then summarize each in written form (see Figure 2.1 for an example of a ‘clump’).

The challenge for Denise was to then develop these ‘clumps’ into an argument. The writing tutor asked her to think visually by putting the clumps onto a map. She was then asked to talk to her peers in the writing class about the relationships between the groups and to argue for her research.

The textual result of this sorting, sifting and clarifying work was that Denise then produced an A3 sheet with post-its organized into six major clumps (Figure 2.2). Denise’s conversation ‘with the field’ went roughly like this: Here are the facts and figures on principal departure (Figure 2.1; Figure 2.2, clump 1). The reasons that are given for retirement are boredom, wanting a new challenge and/or no longer
Facts and figures about supply and recruitment

Want do we know?
- Large numbers of headteachers are leaving their posts (national surveys by Howson, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2008)
- There are predictions of a demographic ‘time-bomb’ (NCSL, 2008; see also comparison in Australia D’Arbon, 2003; Duignan et al., 2001)
- There are difficulties in recruiting headteachers, particularly in Anglican schools (Howson surveys)

Figure 2.1 A ‘clump’ of literatures

feeling competent (Figure 2.2, clump 2) and the changing role of the headteacher (Figure 2.2, clump 3). The effects of boredom and/or the changing role are that principals must choose between sanity and self-sacrifice. Many choose to leave the profession early (Figure 2.2, clump 4). This leads to a haemorrhaging of expertise from the system – although this view is contested (Figure 2.2, clump 5) as well as potential applicants being dissuaded to apply for jobs (Figure 2.2, clump 6).

In addition, Denise identified from policy documents the ‘solutions’ that were being implemented (Figure 2.3). These paid attention to recruitment, rather than premature leavers and the reasons for their departure, which might co-incidentally also be the reasons that put off possible new principals.

There was thus a need to change policy to accommodate what was already known. This set of policy texts became a seventh clump of literatures. (We have not shown this diagrammatically, but it would become a seventh circle in Figure 2.2.) As a result of this literature work, a key question for Denise became: Is what is already known all that there is to be known?

Finally, Denise was able to identify the gaps in the literature that related to her particular research inter-
est. While there was information about shortages in principal supply, there was little disaggregation of data about premature departures. How old were the principals? Where did they go after they departed? How did these two issues relate to the particular Anglican sector of schooling she was interested in? There was no specific research into this sector. It was not clear, therefore, if the major reasons cited for the general departure of principals might also apply to this group, or whether there might be other reasons related to the faith-basis of the schools. On the basis of her mapping of the field, Denise could argue that if there was going to be a change in policy, which existing research recommended, then her research needed to be conducted in order to avoid creating wrong policy solutions for this specific sector.

The example shows how Denise, at an early stage of candidature, has been able to take her professional knowledge base into her doctoral research and use it to assist in building her scholarly project and persona. Importantly, she had substantial support and scaffolding in order to ‘get on top’ of the literatures. The mapping strategy created a space for her research project, constructed the mandate for it, and delineated the contribution to be made. Mapping allowed Denise to focus on the field of knowledge production rather than engage in a technical summarizing and reviewing process. Because she began the research process with a structured approach to the ‘reading’ task, she never produced a laundry list of ‘he said, she said’. Rather, she learned to speak with authority about the various trends, assumptions, empirical bases and debates within the field.

While she has not yet written the literature section of her dissertation, she has produced an extended research proposal, which used this mapping in order to argue for her topic and for its focus. The mapping also became the basis for a powerpoint conference presentation where she argued the necessity for her research. Thus even at this early stage of candidature her relationship to the literatures is authoritative and confident – even if this is not what she feels about her fieldwork and her findings, she knows that there is a firm basis ad argument for her study.

**Conversing with the field: Calvin’s story**

Calvin is a former middle years teacher with extensive expertise in digital and multimodal literacies. His doctoral research adopted a practitioner research paradigm to examine the digital literacy pedagogies he developed with his first- and second-generation Chinese American students. In his thesis he argued that students’ engagement with web-based literacies allowed them to mobilize their out-of-school literacy expertise and also improve their in-school literacy achievement.

After graduation, Calvin gained a full-time position in a university, where he was under pressure to publish from his research and gain a profile in peer reviewed journals. We look at excerpts from an article he submitted to a high profile literacy journal to examine the text work/identity work struggles he continued to experience when working with literatures. Excerpt 1 comes from the introduction where Calvin attempts to situate his study in recent scholarship.

**Excerpt 1**

Part 1 Reading, Reviewing and Reflecting

Multimodality, like multiliteracies has also emerged in response to the changing social and semiotic landscape (Jewitt, 2008). In terms of literacy education, multimodality is about making meaning through a variety of modes (linguistic, image, audio, gestural, gaze and spatial), where no one mode is necessarily privileged. The theory of multimodality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) focuses on all modes of communication and what it is possible to express and represent in particular contexts. Teachers who enact multiliteracies pedagogies apply the theory of multimodality to explicitly instruct students to analyze all modes in any text (linguistic, audio, visual and so on) or communicative event (talk, gesture, movement and gaze) . . .

This text demonstrates many of the problems we have already noted in literature work. There is an extended listing of prominent researchers and a mini exposition on multiliteracies and multimodality theory and pedagogy. This piling up of scholarship is not selective, and continues for six pages where Calvin seems to stand aside and let the experts do the talking. He makes no evaluations and provides no signals about where his work fits. One way to understand this tedious way of writing is to say that Calvin is still ‘stuck’ in his doctoral student identity. He still seems to be writing for examiner-readers and parading his knowledge as a tactic for asserting his credentials as a scholar who knows the field.

Of course, journal reviewers and editors are very different readers than examiners. And Calvin has not yet fully grasped the new readers he is writing for. One of the journal reviewers captured the problem when he wrote:

The paper sets out to connect with the key theories in the first section of the paper. The author tries to use the literature to frame the case study but I don’t think it adds very much to the empirical data and the theoretical ground it covers will be well trdden for the readers of X Journal. The writing suggests the author is much more at home with the study than the literature review aspect of the paper and I would suggest that much of this first section be deleted and/or substantially condensed . . .

This is useful commentary in pointing out the disconnection between previous literatures and Calvin’s own research and the need to delete much of it. Calvin talked with a mentor about how to operationalize the advice and was given articles to analyze how other scholars created an evaluative stance in text. The mentor emphasized the dialogic nature of the writing, the way writers create a conversation with the field: argue, agree, qualify and select in order to situate their own contribution. And they talked about Calvin’s contribution. What prior research had he used and why? What was he adding and where did his work fit in? What was not relevant to the research he was now reporting. Excerpt 2 comes from Calvin’s revision, where he successfully reduced six pages of literature work to one and a half and drastically changed this textual and identity stance.

Excerpt 2

This article describes practitioner-research where I enacted a multiliteracies curriculum (The New London Group, 1996; Walsh, 2006) that required students to engage in a discourse analysis of school and media texts (Albright, Purohit & Walsh, 2006a; Walsh, 2007, 2008). As a teacher practitioner working in the new media age (Kress, 2003), I integrated internet communication technologies with my literacy instruction (Albright, Purohit & Walsh, 2002, 2006b; Kamler & Comber, 2005; Lankshear, Snyder & Green, 2000; Marsh, 2005; Snyder & Beavis, 2004) and asked students to re-represent their literacy learning through multimodal digital design. The paper first outlines the multiliteracies curriculum that provided a new framework to help me cope with the access, production and distribution of digital texts. It then illustrates how digital technologies were incorporated into the curriculum, through a school–museum partnership. I argue that this partnership provided spaces where students could interact, socialize and learn in both the real and virtual world (Beavis & Charles, 2007; Lam, 2006; Marsh, 2003; Sefton-Green, 2006). Importantly, they were able to develop a new set of multimodal literacy practices to talk back to and challenge racist and exclusionary discourses they find problematic.

Here Calvin uses the literature to make an argument for his contribution. A more confident scholarly identity is performed as an informed teacher-researcher trying to make a difference to his students. He uses multimodal theory (rather than parades it) to argue for the new multimodal practices he has designed through a museum partnership. The article was accepted and became a pivotal textual moment in his identity reconstitution, where he felt more able to take his place alongside scholar peers competing for academic journal publication.
Last words

Denise and Calvin are at different stages of their academic careers. One is entering the field and the other trying to emerge from it as an expert scholar. Our two stories suggest that both Denise and Calvin benefited from guidance and support to do literature work. Denise learns early in her candidature the importance of creating a relationship between previous research and her own. Calvin is still learning in a new context of journal writing. He came to see that he could not know which literatures to include or exclude until he was clear about his contribution.

The kinds of literature work researchers need to do change at different stages of a research project. All researchers need to map the relevant field(s), locate their project within it and create the space and mandate for their work. They need to keep the literatures in tension with the research as it proceeds. And finally, they need to peel away the plethora of prior scholarship to foreground the particular contribution they make and highlight the conversation in which they are involved.

The ways in which researchers need to write about the literature also need to change according to the purposes of the writing. While researchers may do the same wide reading for all research, different forms of publication will require different ways of writing. Reviewers of journal articles often despair when they have to wade through a comprehensive section called ‘literature review’, particularly when this comprises massive chunks of literature taken from the dissertation. Writers need to seriously consider their readers and genre (a book, an article, a research report for sponsors, a thesis) and write or rewrite accordingly. What is the best way to create a lively conversation with peers in a journal community and assert the significance of the work? What kind of literature conversation is possible when one has the luxury of a book length manuscript rather than the constraints of a 5,000 word article? And how much detail do sponsors really want about the field in which funded research is located?

The importance of engaging with literatures is not just a ritual or mechanistic process. It is, as we have suggested, always a process which involves understanding the discursive social practice of scholarly research/writing, the dialogic nature of the texts produced and the text work/identity work intricably involved. Ultimately the readership will shape the kind of literatures text that is produced. And because there are different readers and different purposes for different kinds of research texts, there will never be ONE way of writing a literature ‘review’.

Annotated bibliography

Becker’s aptly named chapter ‘Terrorized by the literature’ suggests that students need to think of scholarship as a cumulative enterprise, using the work of others to help build their arguments. The domestic nature of his table metaphor helps take the fear out of engaging with expert scholars.

Boote and Beile argue that a sophisticated literature review is the basis of a good research dissertation. We agree and recommend, in particular, their exploration of standards and criteria for judging a good literature review.

We like Dunleavy’s use of the term authoring. His metaphor of the thesis as front loaded with literature or back loaded with reported results is helpful in pointing out the need to emphasize the ‘core contribution’ of the research. We like the way he argues for not giving too much space and deference to the work of others.

This is one of the few texts that offer ways of conceptualizing how to locate the distinctive contribution in the field.

This is the most cited text on literature work. We have found Hart’s mapping approaches useful.

Herr and Anderson do not spend a lot of time discussing literature per se, but their argument that
literatures are extended in line with cycles of action research is important. So too is their insistence that action research also adds to literatures.


Our book contains two chapters on work with literatures. These offer further strategies and examples of text work/identity work in various fields of knowledge production.


Lillis offers an extended illustration of academic writing as a discursive social practice. She focuses on identity issues experienced by 10 undergraduate non-traditional students in higher education. She shows the complexities and ambiguities required to become an ‘insider’ in a research field.


Wallace and Wray offer a range of strategies for doing the work required to map the field. Their exercises are the starting point for getting a grip on debates and looking for patterns in what might first appear to be a big mess of texts.

Further references


