Discipline-Based Variations in the Literature Review in the PhD Thesis: A Perspective from the Discipline of History

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Available resources on writing the literature review in the doctoral thesis suggest that there is a generic format that applies to all disciplines. As this format is generally based on the sciences, the aim of this research was to find out whether it applies to disciplines in the Humanities, more specifically, to History. The study revealed that the doctoral literature review in this discipline has many characteristics that distinguish it from the generic format. The results suggest that special courses need to be developed to assist doctoral candidates in History to write literature reviews that are acceptable to the discipline.

Introduction

The literature review takes a central place in the doctoral thesis. It is seen as the fundamental task of thesis and research preparation (Boote & Beile, 2005). As the PhD demands a significant contribution to be made to a field of research, the thesis requires the scholarly analysis of a body of research (Holbrook et al., 2007). More importantly, the literature review is treated as a critical indicator of the quality of the thesis research project (Holbrook et al 2004; Mullins and Kiley 2002). Having a good grasp of the full extent and implications of the relevant literature is treated as an important factor that distinguishes theses which require revision from those that do not (Lovat et al., 2002; cited in Holbrook et al., 2004).

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Although the literature review is seen as a significant element of the doctoral thesis, research shows that some doctoral candidates have an incorrect idea of what the literature review is about (Bruce 1994), and that literature reviews in most doctoral theses do not achieve an acceptable standard (Boote & Beile, 2005; Fitt, Walker & Leary, 2009). It has also been found that doctoral candidates spend too much time on the literature review at the expense of their research (Dunleavy, 2003). This could impact on the timely completion of the doctoral degree, which has become a key discussion point in the doctoral research environment today (Hall, Evans, & Nerad, 2006; Wright & Cochrane, 2000; Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2001; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2005). In addition, research methods textbooks in some disciplines do not pay adequate attention to how a researcher finds, evaluates and integrates past research (Cooper, 1989). To address the issues related to writing the literature review, it has been suggested that doctoral candidates should receive adequate assistance on how to write a good literature review prior to undertaking their research (Boote & Beile, 2005).

Available Information on the Literature Review

An important first step in providing assistance to doctoral candidates with the writing of the literature review is to find out what information is available about the literature review at present. A variety of resources such as books, study guides, handouts, and websites have been published for this purpose. They focus on a range of different aspects such as the purpose, the nature, key features, the organisation, rhetorical patterns and the schematic structure of the literature review.

The purpose of doing a literature review has been defined in many different ways. Some of the important reasons identified are establishing the context of the topic or problem, rationalizing the significance of the problem, identifying recommendations for further research, gaining a new perspective and new lines of inquiry, identifying the main methodologies and research

techniques that have been used, and avoiding fruitless approaches (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Hart, 1998). Although these resources show the value of doing a literature review, the purposes outlined seem to point to situations where a substantial amount of previous research is available.

The literature review has been compared to other research-related genres in order to describe its nature. Masters, Thomas, and Zografos (N.D.) compares literature reviews to research essays and annotated bibliographies. Although literature reviews are similar to research essays and annotated bibliographies in some respects, they are considered to be different from these genres in other respects. For example, while research essays require writers to support their own arguments, literature reviews require them to critique the arguments of others. While annotated bibliographies are primarily descriptive, literature reviews are primarily analytical (Masters, Thomas, & Zografos, N.D.). While acknowledging that the literature review is different from an annotated bibliography, or a literary survey, Obenzinger (2005) also distinguishes it from an argument constructed solely to convince the reader of the importance of the research topic. These resources highlight the evaluative nature of the literature review.

Critical evaluation of the literature is considered as the defining characteristic of the literature review (Masters, Thomas, and Zografos N.D.). This is described as scrutinising studies to determine their strengths and weaknesses, using criteria such as relevance, expertise of author, viewpoint of author, intended audience, evidence and when the study was published. Flinders University (n.d.) provides a matrix to help with evaluating the literature. The matrix consists of criteria under several categories such as content, context in discipline, methodology, author and relevance. While emphasising the importance of critically evaluating the literature, University of New South Wales (N.D.) emphasises the importance of the researcher's perspective, position or standpoint being clearly identifiable in the literature review.

Monash University (2006) draws attention to what should be covered in the literature review. It highlights the importance of focusing on key areas of interest, including research which provides a background to the topic, but being selective with what is included. Researchers are advised to place themselves in the role of film directors and provide their readers with long shots to give a good picture of the background, middle distance shots to bring the key studies and aspects clearly into view, and close-up shots to shed light on the precise focus of their research. This resource offers valuable information about the scope of the literature review.

The literature review is seen as a well-organised piece of writing. Some common organisation patterns are the chronological organisation (ordering of studies according to a historical or developmental context), the Classic studies organisation (outlining of the major studies regarded as significant for the area of research), topical or thematic organisation (division of studies according to concepts, themes, issues etc.), the inverted pyramid organisation (ordering of studies from a broad perspective to a narrow perspective that increasingly focuses on the research question), and the methodological organisation (organising of studies according to the research methodology used) (University of New South Wales N.D.; Craswell, 2005).

The literature review may constitute several rhetorical patterns. Obenzinger (2005) identifies and describes several patterns in informal terms, some of which are the Road Map (tracing the history of knowledge in the field to show how previous studies point to the current work); Swiss Cheese (presenting current knowledge to identify gaps in the field and to show how the current research helps to bridge the gaps); Battlebots (identifying various lines of argument, debates and trends in the field to situate the current research within that context and to show the importance of the current study's position), which is largely found in literary and historical studies, though not uncommon in social and natural sciences and philosophical research; and Eyeballswitch (introducing a new analytical or theoretical

framework or approach which changes the way the research is conducted), which is often used in literary studies.

Although the rhetorical patterns described above give some idea of the content of the literature review, the descriptions do not provide any information about the schematic structure of the literature review. This could be because the provision of this kind of information falls into the purview of discourse analysis. Consequently, there is no information about the schematic structure of the literature review that is equivalent to the move-step analysis worked out by Swales (1990) for the introduction of research articles. The closest that is available to this kind of analysis is a sequence of rhetorical patterns identified in some resources (Craswell, 2005; University of Queensland Student Service, N.D.; Evans & Gruba, 2002).

Craswell (2005) points to a sequence of four rhetorical patterns: a survey of the literature; a critical review of the literature; a discussion based on the review; and positioning the research in relation to the literature, including a substantial description of each. University of Queensland Student Services (N.D.) specifies three patterns organised in a sequence: familiarisation (outlining what has already been done and what is already known), organisation and critical review (organising studies around themes, issues, questions etc. instead of presenting as individual studies and evaluating them to find out methodological weaknesses, controversies, gaps, and new ways of putting things together), and placing the research within the field. Evans and Gruba (2002) identify a sequence of three rhetorical patterns: providing a map of the territory that is intended to be covered; discussing attempts made in previous studies to solve similar problems; and examining approaches employed in previous studies to solve these problems.

The organisation patterns and rhetorical patterns discussed above suggest that the literature review in the doctoral thesis is a distinctive piece of writing of some length and appears as a prominent, easily recognisable element in the thesis. However, the

Monash University (2006) observes that instead of appearing as a stand-alone element, the literature review may be segmented into a series of chapters on several topics or be embedded in the discussion. Obenzinger (2005) notes that the literature review may exist as an explicit or overt item in the thesis or as a covert or implicit one. It tends to be explicit in the natural sciences and many social sciences where a specific chapter or section is devoted to the literature review. It tends to be implicit in literary and historical studies, where secondary sources are raised in the body of the essay during the process of discussion or analysis, when it is necessary to make a point or identify a gap in the field.

The resources discussed above provide useful information about many aspects of the literature review in the doctoral thesis. However, only a few pay attention to its schematic structure which is the element that provides a step-wise guide to writing it. Also, almost all of these resources appear to be written with the underlying assumption that the purpose and nature of the literature review, its key features, and its organisation are common to all disciplines. Even the few resources that show its schematic structure suggest that it is a generic format that applies to all disciplines alike.

The concept of the literature review that comes out in these resources may have been derived from the sciences. Cooper (1989) notes that due to the cumulative nature of science, reliable accounts of past research are required for systematic knowledge building. The value of any single study depends not only on its intrinsic properties but also on how it fits with and builds on previous work. Therefore, a doctoral thesis based in the sciences reviews the related literature before presenting and discussing the results of the research. This practice may not necessarily be followed in other disciplines such as the Humanities where the pursuit of knowledge is not a cooperative and interdependent process as much as in the sciences.

Similarly, the resources discussed above seem to have been written for situations where much previous research is available.

They do not take into account situations where researchers investigate new areas of research where little or no previous research is available. Investigating previously unexplored territory is a fairly common phenomenon in the Humanities disciplines, where researchers may depend totally on primary sources. The different nature of research in the non-science disciplines raises the question whether the literature review is written in a different way in these disciplines.

Purpose of the Current Study

The purpose of this study was to find out whether the common conception of the literature review that emerges from the literature applies to disciplines in the Humanities, more specifically, to the discipline of History. The discipline of History was chosen as research in this discipline is not based on experimental studies. In addition, it is an area of research that attempts to break new ground and depends to a large extent on primary sources. Therefore, it was considered to be useful to find out how researchers engage with secondary sources in this discipline and whether it is similar to what is described in the resources. To this end, the study addressed the following two questions: (1) What are the external features of the literature review in History?; and (2) What is the schematic structure of the literature review in History?

Method

Data for the study was gathered from two sources – literature reviews written in recent History PhD theses at the Australian National University (ANU) and informal discussions with research supervisors in the area of History at ANU. To this end, literature reviews in ten recently completed PhD theses were analysed to find out their characteristic features. The analysis was done in terms of the external features of the literature review and in terms of the schematic structure of the literature review. Discussions were held with several research supervisors in History to find out about their perceptions of the literature review in their discipline and challenges faced by PhD candidates when writing the

literature review. These conversations focused particularly on how primary and secondary sources are used in History doctoral theses and how candidates acquire the ability to write a literature review that is acceptable to the discipline.

When analysing the literature reviews, several external features were considered. They are the location of the review in the thesis, headings or other words that signal the review, the context of the review, the length of the review and the number of studies dealt with in the review. Each of the ten literature reviews was examined to gather information under these external features.

The location of the review was examined in terms of the chapter in which the literature review occurred. This involved examining whether there were one or more chapters assigned to the review, and if so where exactly in the thesis the literature review chapter(s) occurred. In the event that no separate chapter(s) were assigned to the review, the thesis was examined to find out whether the review was embedded in a particular chapter. The manner in which the literature review was signalled was also examined. For example, if the literature review occurred in a separate chapter or chapters, were these chapters simply named the Literature Review or were they given other titles? If the literature review was embedded in a chapter, was it signalled by a section heading or at least by words that referred to the review in some way? When the review was embedded within a chapter, the exact location of the review in that chapter was also examined. This was done by examining what specific information went before and after the review. The length of the review was examined by counting the number of pages devoted to the review.

The schematic structure of the review was analysed in terms of a framework consisting of four successive steps or stages. The framework was based on information gathered from published sources about how a literature review should be written (Craswell, 2005; Evans & Gruba, 2002; University of Queensland Student Services, N.D.). The four steps in the framework are a) a survey of the literature; b) a critical review of the literature; c) a discussion

based on the review; and d) positioning the research in relation to the literature. The four steps are characterised by the following features:

- *Survey of the literature:* This provides a map of the territory that will be covered by the thesis. It gives an account of who did what and when. It is a presentation of facts without going into their consequences and implications.
- *Critical review of the literature:* This provides a full critical evaluation of the relevant literature. It considers what has been done and how the various past studies relate to each other; what the different studies have contributed to the field and what is particularly useful about specific studies; what limitations the studies have in terms of procedure, techniques, data-gathering and analyses, the theory or methodology being applied etc.; and whether certain studies are limited despite their usefulness for the field. This section is clearly structured, according to chronology, methodology, or around key themes, concepts, key issues or debates.
- *Discussion based on the review:* This provides an analysis of the similarities and differences among the sources. It also brings out the writer's opinion, but by keeping the literature in the foreground and letting the writer's point of view emerge from the review. This is in contrast to developing an argument supported from the literature, similar to making a formal argument in a research essay.
- *Positioning the research in relation to the literature:* This draws out key issues or questions that are being addressed in the thesis. It shows how the current research ties in with what has already been done in the particular research field. Most importantly, it communicates the value of the research and the contribution it is expected to make to the research field.

Findings and Discussion

This section reports on the external features of the literature review and the schematic structure of the literature review that surfaced from the analysis of History doctoral theses, and the information that surfaced from conversations with supervisors of History doctoral candidates.

External Features of the Literature Review

The examination of the external features of the literature review revealed that there is no separate chapter called the literature review in the theses examined. The literature review is embedded commonly in the Introduction and very rarely in the Conclusion. It was also found that headings or other words were not used to signal the literature review.

The location of the literature review in the Introduction was found to be inconsistent. The Introduction consisted of some or all of the following elements: introduction of the topic, reasons for choosing the topic, purpose of the thesis, field of study where the thesis belongs, existing misconceptions in relation to the topic, central themes and arguments of the thesis, theoretical issues in relation to the topic, significance of the thesis, methodology, thesis structure, and engagement with the literature. No specific order was followed in sequencing the above elements in the Introduction. Consequently, no specific location could be identified for engaging with the literature. It sometimes occurred early on in the chapter soon after the introduction of the topic, but sometimes occurred towards the end of the chapter.

It was found that the length of the literature review varied, the longest being thirteen pages and the shortest being four pages long. The number of studies dealt with ranged from a minimum of three to a maximum of seventeen.

Although the literature review was embedded in the Introduction or the Conclusion, secondary sources were also used along with primary sources throughout the thesis to support the writer's view

point. As in a research essay, writers sometimes agreed with the literature and sometimes contradicted the literature to support their views. However, the use of literature for this purpose was different from how it was used in the literature review.

Schematic Structure of the Literature Review

The analysis of the schematic structure of the History literature review revealed that it has three patterns: a) one that has some resemblance to the generic literature review identified in the framework; b) one that resembles the research essay, and c) one that resembles a bibliography.

The pattern that resembles the generic literature review has only one or two features of the generic literature review. It constitutes the positioning of the research in relation to the literature, with or without the survey of the literature. Positioning the research in relation to the literature consisted of showing how previous studies provide a context for the research, surfacing areas or aspects not covered in the literature, and overtly distinguishing the research from previous studies to explain its significance and originality.

When the survey of the literature was combined with positioning the research in relation to the literature, the former provided a chronological or thematic survey of the field. The survey gradually gave way to the latter by giving an account of the literature closest to the writer's topic. While showing how these studies provide a context for the research, it also overtly distinguished the research from these studies and explained its significance and originality.

The pattern that resembles the research essay constituted building an argument as in the research essay and occurred either in the introduction or the conclusion. There were two strands within this pattern – arguing from the sources, that is, using the literature to advance the writer's position or neutralising arguments in the literature that counter the writer's position. In the latter, arguments put forward in one study were used to refute those put forward in

another. In addition, information from primary sources was also used to refute arguments in previous studies. Therefore, it appeared to be a more complex piece of writing than the former. Although it critiqued approaches used in previous studies and implicitly distinguished the research from these studies, it was different from the step of positioning the research in relation to the literature identified in the generic literature review. Firstly, it was not just a critique of the approaches used in one individual study after another, nor was it an attempt to surface gaps in the literature. It was an intricate piece of argumentation written with the purpose of introducing a fresh perspective to an existing problem in order to see it in a different light, and constituted the central argument of the thesis.

The pattern that resembles a bibliography constituted a list of studies that helped the writer to research different aspects of the topic. This was sometimes combined with an explanation of the thesis structure to indicate which studies enriched which sections of the thesis. Sometimes, the list was accompanied by brief annotations very much like an annotated bibliography. This pattern was different from the literature survey identified in the framework because while it gave details of studies such as who did what and when, it was more than a general survey of the field organised chronologically or thematically as that found in the generic literature review.

Information from Supervisors

Supervisor comments reveal that History doctoral theses are written differently to doctoral theses in the sciences. Firstly, in History, theses do not follow the structure of an introductory chapter followed by chapters on background, methodology, results, discussion and conclusion. The structure of the thesis is determined by the sources that are available. For example, a chronological structure may be used if this is the nature of the other studies that are done in the area or if the thesis is done on the life of a person which is common in History. Therefore, there is no separate chapter called the literature review in History theses.

Secondly, references to primary sources play an important role in History theses as the focus in on primary sources. The purpose of the thesis is to come up with a new finding based on primary sources.

Sometimes there may be only a few secondary sources to engage with in the thesis. Then it is usual just to mention what secondary sources were used, why they were chosen, how they are relevant to the topic that is under investigation, and why so few studies have been done. These could even be just the sources that inspired the researcher to undertake the project.

When there are many secondary sources, they are usually reviewed, focusing on what arguments/theories are put forth and whether the writer agrees with them or not. The purpose of the review is more to explain how previous work has generated a problem that now needs to be solved rather than to look for a gap in the literature. However, the review of secondary sources is usually short, not more than a few paragraphs. Secondary sources are also used frequently in the body of the thesis when it becomes necessary for the writer to agree with or disagree with past studies.

In the discipline of History, a high quality literature review is one that creates a sense of urgency and excitement. It makes a comprehensive survey of the literature, although what is comprehensive varies from thesis to thesis. It is not unnecessarily critical of previous work for the sake of finding a gap in the literature. It is also one that is able to develop a coherent argument. The last feature is something difficult to master because turning good ideas into precise arguments is challenging for most candidates, both domestic and international candidates alike

Doctoral candidates acquire the ability to write a good literature review largely through the feedback provided by the supervisor on the candidate's writing. The feedback identifies what the problems might be so that the candidates can focus on the broad characteristic problems instead of simply following the directions provided on the text.

Significance and Implications

The results of the study reveal that the literature review in History doctoral theses does not fit in with the generic model presented in the literature. The History literature review is neither overt nor covert. It is not overt because a whole chapter is not allocated to the literature review, nor is it signalled by a heading or any other means wherever it appears. It is not covert because writers engage with the literature in the Introduction or Conclusion, instead of merely using secondary sources to support their views in the body of the thesis, as suggested in the literature (Obenzinger, 2005). Critical evaluation of secondary sources, which many found to be the defining characteristic of the literature review, is also not regarded with the same esteem in History literature reviews. Again, practices such as doing a survey of the literature or a bibliography, or merely constructing an argument to convince the reader of the importance of the research topic which are discouraged in the resources (Obenzinger, 2005; Masters, Thomas, & Zografos, N.D.), seemed to be acceptable practices in the examined History theses.

In addition, the results reveal that the schematic structure of the literature review used in the History theses varies considerably from the four-step framework of the generic literature review. Due to this variation, it may be more appropriate to refer to the patterns that emerged from the examined theses as 'engagement with the literature' rather than as the 'literature review'.

Of the three patterns that emerged from the literature review in History theses, only one resembles the generic format and the resemblance is minimal. The results suggest that the generic format does not suit the discipline for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the purpose of research in this discipline is not to broaden an area of research by adding knowledge incrementally but instead to explore issues from a new perspective or open up a totally new area of research. Engaging with the literature does not mean so much critiquing previous studies to surface gaps, but rather indicating where the originality of the research is by distinguishing

it from previous research, or explaining how the research is enriched by previous research.

The results also reveal that there is considerable variation within the discipline not only in terms of the schematic structure of the 'literature review', but also in terms of where the literature review is placed in the thesis, the level of attention devoted to the review and the extent of the literature that is dealt with. Also, even when the literature review is placed in the introductory chapter, there is much variation in terms of its context. When compared with the introduction of journal articles analysed by Swales (1990), the introductory chapter of the theses not only seems to follow quite a different pattern, but also does not seem to follow any specific pattern. The three moves Swales identified in journal articles (establishing the territory, establishing a niche, and occupying the niche) were not present in their entirety in any of the thesis introductions. Although one or two of these moves were used, all three of the moves were not used together in any of the theses. Moreover, when they were used, they were interspersed with other elements that were not found in the introductions of journal articles. While the thesis Introduction constituted a range of elements, it was not a requirement for all the elements to be present, and more importantly, no specific pattern could be identified in the way the elements were sequenced.

It is interesting that one of the schematic patterns that emerged from the History literature review shows some resemblance to the generic format of the literature review. This could mean that it is still going through an evolutionary process and is in a stage of transition at present. It may be moving more towards the generic format or moving further away from it. The pattern that is furthest away from the generic format is the one that resembles a bibliography.

Comments of research supervisors suggest that engaging with the literature is a creative process in the discipline of History. Due to its individualistic nature, this part of the thesis is quite different from the literature review format usually used in the sciences. In

fact, the generic format is seen as an alien element by History scholars and academics. Supervisor comments suggest that it is not possible to lay down a prescriptive format for the History literature review, nor that it is easy to describe the many different moves that constitute the literature review in History doctoral theses.

Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that generic courses developed to assist doctoral candidates with writing the literature review may not be of much use to candidates in History and also possibly those in other disciplines in the humanities. It is particularly useful therefore, to find out what type of academic skills courses would help to reduce any difficulties History doctoral candidates encounter when writing the literature review. Research candidates work very closely with their supervisors to engage with the literature in an appropriate manner. Therefore, when developing an academic skills course to help with writing the History literature review, it is important to work in close collaboration with academics in the area.

As there is considerable variation in how History scholars engage with the literature in the introductory chapter of the thesis, a starting point would be to show candidates the existing variations. Providing assistance to acquire the features of a good literature review identified by supervisors would be another beneficial exercise. Also, given that argumentation plays a key role in the Introduction of History theses, providing assistance with the writing of this sub-genre would also be helpful. This was confirmed by some History research supervisors who were of the view that developing precise arguments is a challenge for most research candidates.

More research needs to be done into the literature review in doctoral theses. What is particularly needed is to find out how the literature review is written in different disciplines. This can be

done by examining theses in different disciplines to understand the format of the literature review and by talking to research supervisors in these disciplines. This should also include the sciences to investigate whether the generic model based on the sciences has changed or is undergoing change.

It is also useful to find out the expectations of examiners in relation to the literature review in the different disciplines. This can be done by examining comments on the literature review found in examiner reports and by interviewing examiners. Although there is some research that refers to examiner comments on various aspects of theses, they do not shed much light on the literature review.

Another area that needs to be researched is the research candidates' perceptions of the literature review, how they approach the task of writing the literature review, the challenges they face when writing the literature review, and how they address these challenges. This is confirmed by the findings of previous research done in relation to the literature review in doctoral theses (Bruce 1994; Holbrook et al 2004). It would also be interesting to investigate whether domestic and international students face the same kind of challenges in relation to the literature review.

The evolution of the literature review in History theses would be both an interesting and useful area of investigation. Results that emerge from such longitudinal investigation would show whether the History literature review is moving towards or further away from the generic model of the literature review.

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