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## THE LITERATURE REVIEW - *NOT SINKING, WRITING.*

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*If it's not written, it's not research (Evans & Gruba)*

### Introduction

Most graduate candidates are fairly confident that they understand the role of the literature review. They see it as the backbone of their thesis, the launching pad for their own ideas, the scene setter that lays out the lie of the intellectual land. It is also a device that settles them into their research, that allows them to progress, and that increasingly justifies the direction they are taking. They will no doubt look to the literature review to eventually demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of an area, and to allow them to set clear boundaries on what they are going to attempt in their thesis. Indeed their whole justification for their thesis can 'fall out' from the review where it highlights significant gaps in the literature and the field that need addressing. Candidates may be less aware that the examiner will be looking for the literature review to serve a pragmatic purpose, namely to show a review of a field of literature that is 'substantial, relevant and up-to-date' and that justifies a unique, worthwhile research effort<sup>1</sup>. So the literature review plays several roles, *structural* for its positioning of the thesis, *contextual* for its scene setting, *inspirational* for helping develop an argument, and *operational* for defining scope, limitations and originality. It provides the theoretical and methodological background for the thesis,<sup>2</sup> as well as the context for the candidate's work by identifying and discussing literature and problem solving that will lead to his or her own research efforts<sup>3</sup>.

Supervisors need to be aware that the candidate is more reliant upon them during the literature review than at any other stage, so the support they give will set the course for the rest of the thesis and determine its likely success or failure. Supervisors need to explain the stages involved in candidature, where the literature review fits, the role that it plays in thesis conceptualisation and construction, and the importance of the written review in confirming that the candidate has the capacity to continue. It is also probably the most enjoyable stage of the thesis, indeed perhaps of an entire academic career, so candidates should be encouraged to make the most of it. It is entirely possible that a candidate has prior familiarity with their topic of research, or that they are well enmeshed in a research culture or team from their honours year, but it is still critical to make sure that they are undertaking an exhaustive review. From this exhaustive mapping of the field, the supervisor needs to judge when, indeed perhaps how early, to steer the candidate away from mapping and towards the more systematic ordering, synthesising and criticising part of the review. This sifting stage will

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<sup>1</sup>M. Kiley and G. Mullins 2006 'Opening the Black Box: How Examiners Assess Your Thesis' in C. Denholm and T. Evans *Doctorates Downunder: Keys to Successful Doctoral Study in Australia and New Zealand* ACER Press, Camberwell Victoria, p. 202.

<sup>2</sup>K. Stevens and C. Asmar 1999 *Doing Postgraduate Research in Australia* Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Melbourne, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>D Evans and P Gruba 2002 *How to Write a Better Thesis* 2nd Edition, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Melbourne, p. 73.

eventually provide the outline for the written review chapter to be completed by at least the end of the first year, with revision and updating needed until the thesis is submitted to keep the review current and relevant.

This chapter provides supervisors with advice and guidance on all the points above.

### **Getting the Candidate Started**

It is very tricky for supervisors to strike the balance with new candidates during the literature review stage, between supporting their investigation and the development of a viable thesis project, and ensuring that they keep moving forward. Candidates will have varying degrees of self confidence at this stage, varying degrees of conviction about potential research trajectories, and varying levels of skill in being able to pursue valid lines of inquiry and relevant literature review material. It is critical that they have confidence in their supervisor at this stage, and that their supervisor can at least anticipate the terrain ahead, and so provide meaningful guidance, explicit advice and access to expert knowledge and experience. It is also important for the supervisor to appreciate that this stage may be daunting and frightening for the candidate, not knowing exactly where their thesis is headed until the literature review is complete. Getting started for the candidate may feel as Herculean a task as an explorer setting off on some sort of territorial conquest in the days before maps, aeroplanes and ocean liners. The mapping of encountered terrain, the making of the unknown known, and the pathway that the explorer strikes while moving on would be quite some exercise, and it has parallels with the production of the literature review. The graduate research candidate has to map out a field of research as they plot their own way through it, which is a very tricky exercise of skill and timing that could make or break their candidature.

### **Staging a Thesis**

It may help the candidate to firstly understand where the literature review fits in the broader scheme or plan of the entire candidature, i.e. typically in the first year full time with the written review completed by at least the year's end. A literature review may also be formally submitted and reviewed by a candidature committee to confirm that a candidate is capable of continuing on and completing research at a doctoral level. The candidate should understand that they will still be required to update and refine the written review throughout their candidature, not only to accommodate new material, but also to reflect their evolving critical and analytic skills as a researcher. In terms of staging the thesis, Evans and Gruba describe the literature review as an early, preliminary, background chapter which sits between the introductory chapter and subsequent chapters on the candidate's own work. Whether the review is kept to a single chapter or not, it sits in the stage of the thesis that typically begins with description of material, then moves on to reviews of existing theory/practice, and concludes with preliminary hypothesis formulation. Literature reviews are discipline specific, as well as specific to the type of problem that the thesis is addressing, so generalisation is not gospel and the supervisor needs to impress upon the candidate what their discipline requires and what an examiner will be looking for in their review. There may also be discipline specific staging within the review year itself that the supervisor must convey to the candidate from the very outset.

### **The Literature Immersion**

Candidates will typically share the fears that there is no way that they can ever cover all the relevant research in their review, that they will miss out on a significant part of the field, or that they will find their project has already been done. Nothing makes a task more daunting or inspires lack of confidence more than when it is only perceived in its entirety. A way of allaying candidate fears is to encourage or direct them to immerse themselves in the very immediate, less daunting tasks of searching, reading, note taking and reflecting on the

literature. This is a stage to be really enjoyed, where the candidate becomes immersed in their reading, where they can chase down interesting concepts, and where they can think laterally and creatively. The supervisor should encourage the candidate to follow their instincts in the beginning stages as this is more often the key to academic discovery than is 'plan following'. Some candidates will find it very helpful to have a specific task or hypothesis in mind, while others will find that being too specific too early only narrows their thinking in too constraining a fashion. It is very important for the supervisor to check that the candidate is actually doing the reading, not just collecting it, that they are absorbing themes and approaches, and that they can articulate these back in discussion at candidature meetings. The candidate may need some reassuring that the connecting points to their own thesis proposition will gradually emerge.

## **Reading Theory**

It stands to reason that if a candidate is to make an original contribution, then they will need to have an exhaustive familiarity with their field of research in both theoretical and empirical terms. In order to get that, they will need to read broadly at first and then read increasingly deeply and more specifically. This is true even if they are following on from their honours year research, joining an established research team or taking on a project predetermined by linkage funding for example. What tricks do you, as a supervisor, employ to ensure that this is so? This is not a stage that can be skipped because it is boring, or too taxing, or mind-numbing, and it is worth asking the candidate how they spend the day when they are reading theory. You may discover that they don't have any sort of efficient system for collecting reading, reading it, recording details or reflecting on its relevance to their own work. You may discover that they don't read when they are at their freshest, or that they persist for unreasonable periods without a break. They may not have thought to have less taxing tasks to hand when they are tired, or they may not be recording any impressions because they think they will have the time to revisit the work. The supervisor needs to offer guidance here and to impress upon the candidate that reading theory will help them develop their own analytic framework and project.

## **From Review to Critique**

Sooner or later the supervisor needs to ensure that the candidate is shifting gears in their literature reviewing from the mapping and contextualising stage, to the critical review stage. Evans and Gruba (p. 73) describe this as a shift in three parts:

- 1) The literature review begins by covering or mapping theoretical terrain, i.e. the background information needed to contextualise the extent and significance of the research problem.
- 2) The review moves on to identify/discuss attempts by others to address/solve similar problems. The candidate will have read more material than they need by now, but they will be well informed.
- 3) The candidate begins writing 'mini-reviews', summarising/critiquing the contribution of various authors to their field of research, building up a respect for various approaches before moving to describe theirs.

Part of the role of critical analysis is to identify a gap in the theory that the candidate's thesis may then propose to address; or to propose making some other original contribution, perhaps a novel application or configuration of the theory. Candidates need to be warned here that more is not better, but more focused is. All the way through their initial, broad review of the literature the candidate will have been asking basic research questions as they read, looking for the points of connection and divergence in the literature. They will reach the stage where they be able to convey their critical appraisal of their field to their supervisor, by sorting and synthesising what they have read into logical subsets of information.

## **The 'Tin Tacks' Stage**

Moving from literature review-to-critique-to-project development seems ruthless to some candidates who become overly engrossed in, perhaps even addicted to, the information chase, particularly the mind numbing aspects of web searching. Yes there is endless information out there, but strategic searching and good supervisory guidance will have narrowed down what is actually relevant, what is of interest but not that relevant, and what is just a distraction. The candidate is now at Evan and Gruba's (p. 75) 'tin tacks' stage. Having surveyed, ordered, discussed, and critiqued key theories, and identified any gaps, the candidate is ready to introduce, and to justify, the approach/ experiment/ design proposed by their own research. The supervisor should have been encouraging the candidate to keep good retrievable notes on their research thus far, with a documented survey of the field emerging in various iterations, and with an increasing movement towards their own proposal. Although the candidate should feel somewhat of an authority, they have not yet conducted their own research, and in that sense, as Dunleavy (p. 58) warns, they have no proven critical credentials and should compose their literature review accordingly. When an examiner is reading the review, they will expect that, having documented, ordered and synthesised key aspects of a field of research, that the candidate will 'value add' with their own proposal. The whole point of the review is, having conveyed a confident grasp of the literature, its components, strengths, and weaknesses, to conclude with the candidate's proposed contribution.

## **What does a Literature Review Look Like?**

Every discipline is different, and it would be advisable for new candidates to read several reviews in their discipline and then discuss their impressions with their supervisor. The length of a literature review should not blow up to the extent that it distorts the final thesis structure in top heavy fashion, leaving too little space to present a candidate's own empirical material, analysis, and conclusions. Neither should the candidate cut to the chase of their own work too soon as a way of avoiding the literature review and the challenges of theory, perhaps because they are so convinced of their own approach that they don't want to justify it. In Dunleavy's opinion, in terms of length and proportion, the examiner is not looking for a large literature review, nor a brief review, but one that is appropriately focused and balanced in the thesis. A thesis may require a review of both theoretical and empirical material and perhaps more than one chapter, however this should be carefully justified. The very worst of theses, in Dunleavy's view, are those with two, three, four and sometimes even more literature review chapters that chart the work undertaken during candidature in sequential rather than analytic fashion. Doctorates in the physical sciences can suffer from the reverse problem, namely too 'terse a specification of the research question' (p. 59) with a too compressed literature review, but at least with greater scope for show-casing the candidate's own research.

## **What Can Go Wrong?**

How many candidates never finish their literature review, never write a word either descriptive or critical on anything, or, having finished the review or lost their supervisor, decide to change topics and do another one? Most supervisors appreciate the myriad of potential dangers of the literature stage. Just as Odysseus was blown off course in returning from Troy and spent years in aimless wandering, so a candidate may become lost, subject to compelling distractions, or conspired against, so it seems to them, and kept from their work. Many things can go wrong and the supervisor must anticipate this and act early. The candidate may never settle into their work. They may be unable to find enough time to research. They may develop bad time wasting habits, or no good reading habits. They may be impatient to get onto 'their thesis'. They fail to appreciate that their work must evolve from an established body of scholarly work, of which they must develop and demonstrate a

confident command in their literature review. They may develop a syndrome that they need to know everything and that they inevitably can't. They may hesitate to write and get away with that. They may be allowed to drift and not follow a proper timetable. They may never make the shift from collecting to critiquing. They may become intimidated by and reverential towards the literature. Because the candidate is so reliant upon the supervisor in this early stage, it is the supervisor who must mentor good habits, give clear directions and offer the necessary guidance.

### **Is the Review Publishable?**

It is a major distraction to even consider this before the thesis has been completed. The candidate is only at the beginning point of their research, and the supervisor should not encourage publication of the literature review until the thesis has been submitted and is perhaps awaiting examination results. At this stage, a candidate may be well advised to revise their review into a publishable form if it can be seen to stand alone, and to make a positive, unique contribution to the field. Once a candidate's own research is complete, they are also able to revise the literature review with more authority having achieved their own research credentials and having developed more critical capacity. There may well be good grounds for publication at this time. The candidate may already be well published and find a rewrite of the literature review, and a stating of the contribution it makes, very straight forward. Perhaps the candidate is indeed the only person to comprehensively present the theory as they have, thus making a significant, novel contribution. Whilst at the beginning of candidature, when the candidate is reliant upon the supervisor, the advice should probably be to avoid publication, at the end of candidature it will become the candidate's own decision. But it is appropriate for the supervisor to offer advice on publication at this completing stage.

### **Concluding Comment**

We used to teach kids to swim by throwing them into the water with no support. That was a traumatic experience that destroyed as many potential swimming careers as it may have perversely inspired. These days there is a careful building of skill levels and confidence, and a lot more fun had by many more kids in the water. If a candidate is not travelling well through the review stage of the thesis then the supervisor needs to check that they have not somehow failed to provide support. The candidate may well be sinking in the literature review experience not swimming. Exclusive candidate-supervisor time is critical and group sessions are no substitute. Active guidance is more important at this stage than at any other and the supervisor must be prepared to watch for warning signs and to intervene where needed. The candidate benefits from practicing verbalising their project behind closed doors in the relative safety of their supervisor's company without any external pressures. They are then better prepared in all sorts of ways to move on with their research. There is no one best format for a review, although instinctively a supervisor will recognise an outstanding example, just as there is no one formula for failure, but that also will be instantly recognisable. The questions below are designed to stimulate a good discussion amongst supervisors and to harness collective knowledge with the hope that the supervisory experience can grow increasingly more supportive.

### **Questions for Supervisors**

What are the elements of a *good* literature review in your discipline?

What are the elements of a *poor* literature review in your discipline?

How can you be sure a candidate knows how to do a literature review?

How can you be sure that your candidate is actually reading literature?

How best can you support a candidate's shift from reviewing to critiquing?

What are the early warning signs that a literature review is not going well?

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