

Crafting a Visual Review of the Literature

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author acknowledges that completing a literature review can be a difficult process, and explores creative methodological possibilities for exploring published findings. The author draws on their own experiences, as well as salient voices from the research literature, to present two overall methods, print-based and digitally-afforded, for constructing a literature review, and for working through this process. Descriptions and examples are included for each of these approaches. In keeping with the mission of this article to add to the conversation of professional literature, the piece is written with such discourse in mind. In particular, the author highlights the affordances of locating a seminal voice in the literature, and of seeking reasonable limitations around what fits best for a review of the literature to be completed. The piece is intended for scholars at any level who wish to seek more information about constructing this part of the research project.

KEYWORDS: Qualitative methods, arts-based inquiry, literature reviews, research process.

The literature review, or chapter two of the research exercise in a Master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, sometimes presents challenges for writers. Particularly, writers may find themselves overwhelmed with questions or where to begin or how to develop a system for locating what has been published on a particular topic. Returning to my early experiences with locating sources, I remember my first search in an online database, resulted in hit after hit, before learning more about how to strategically go about the search. Some of this work of demystifying the literature review can be addressed through the relatively fast filter features located in online search engines, as well as the work of media specialists in providing instructional steps about locating sources. I further suggest a few creative steps that writers can take once they begin sifting through literature as a way of revisioning this aspect research process. These steps stem from an arts-based approach to research methodology that invites creativity (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2017; Leavy, 2017) and alternative representation through artistic expression/creation (Rolling, 2010). This work also stems from my own qualitative research studies focused on the use of film and comics in classroom spaces.

Filtering can be an initial challenge, while granting one's self permission to explore research creativity might be another. The tendency to lean heavily on the words of the researchers without including a sense of the researcher's voice can be daunting, and I recall the practice of quoting long blocks of article text in search of my own voice. Even later in the research process,

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as I worked to craft chapter four, I fell into the same trap again, returning to the words of scholars whose steps felt so much sturdier than my own.

But what if researchers could approach literature and analysis conversationally and artfully, seeking to find their own voices? This process-oriented question is the one which guides the current work, and which examines a process statement within the traditional structure of a problem statement. This is the most appropriate moment to tell the reader that this idea is not unique to me; rather, I am building on a previous conversation through the references that authors have shared in their work that I will share more about as these paragraphs form. To begin, Schenstead (2012) has pointed to the potential longevity and generativity of such work through their own reflexive analysis. It is this step backward and sense of taking stock which can serve as an initial step when considering the range of literature published on a topic.

Following on this question and initial source, in this article I explore the creative possibilities of exploring research literature through artistic, visual, and multimodal means, and provide examples of ways to approach this work. These examples are merely meant to inspire, and are surely not intended to limit.

Expanding Beyond the Book Report

In keeping with the spirit of literature reviews, I now return to one of the salient and seminal sources of the topic by noting the work of Boote and Beile (2005) in centering the literature review as a valuable piece of the research project, and one that is sometimes not executed well. Maxwell (2006) added to this conversation by further examining the notion of literature reviews as comprehensive approaches to examining published material, noting that there are differences between the literature review that is written for a dissertation project and literature reviews written for publication. It can be difficult to know the boundaries of how far to travel into existing research, and Maxwell (2006) suggested that not all elements of what has been read and processed need to be presented in the review itself. With such important work ahead, including dissertation defense processes and exploration of venues for sharing findings, the researcher has important decisions to make regarding the voices represented in published work. This question also points to the notion that there are scholars whose identities are minoritized and whose work is sometimes overlooked. Fully considering a research question and showcasing the range of voices in literature is an important consideration, as well.

Werkmeister Rozas and Klein (2010) noted that the literature review can serve a variety of purposes, including locating patterns, as well as missing pieces, in published literature. It is important to remember that even an emerging voice in research is needed in order for a literature review to serve as a weaving together of sources with specific connections to a topic, rather than stitched-together pieces of other people's words.

Much has been made of attempting to fill a research gap, which in turn can result in an endless search for the missing element of a field of inquiry. As with others in the research field, I advocate for a research project that seeks to advance the conversation in new contexts and new ways, demythologizing the search for the missing piece of the puzzle and positioning this search for a gap as a continuing of an existing conversation – perhaps in new contexts, from new voices, and with fresh perspectives to reify or critique and thereby expand on existing knowledge.

Werkmeister Rozas and Klein (2010) further suggested that the literature review should be written in a way that is manageable and in a way that can be accessed by the reader. Following the thread of research might be a seemingly endless endeavor, but locating the voices that are palpable is part of the sifting and sorting that the researcher engages in when attempting to work from the foundation of what has already been explored. This aspect of the research project might be

conceptualized as a conversation between new voices and those that have already been in the field, an invitation to further explore and contextualize information and, perhaps, to suggest that some issues that have been researched continue to be of concern and are still fruitful for exploration.

Conceptualizing the Conversation

It can be easy to be lost by the stream. Luker (2009) suggested that the early days of “Once upon a time” in reviewing literature was a “stroll in the park” (p. 76). Luker’s (2009) description of this process reads as a journey through the voices best known, whereas in the current context there is simply too much to explore. The amount of published material, along with the accessibility to such material, can result in what this author relayed as the possibility of sitting in front of the screen until “cobwebs started to collect around your ears” (Luker, 2009, p. 77).

Rather than attempting to sift through the enormous piles of reviews, documents, and reports that exist in a given field, Luker (2009) suggested finding a “intellectual nodal point” (p. 84), that is a scholar in the field from which a researcher can explore and work out to other salient elements of what has been published. Ironically, Luker is my nodal point in this work whose reflections have inspired this inquiry. Seeing research as a series of nodes, rather than as a set of monolithic and unattainable steps, is perhaps a useful metaphor.

Having considered the existing literature in this treatment of literature reviews, I suggested that another foregrounding metaphor for the exercise might rest in the kaleidoscope as a means of sifting through literature, capturing the elements that are essential to a proposed study. My work has often focused on the use of film or comics-based media in conveying messages and in potential applications for classroom instruction; hermeneutic phenomenology rooted in artistic expression (Merleau-Ponty, 1964) served methodologically in an initial study on the use of film, and I have recently explored autoethnography (Chang, 2016) and self-study (Loughran, 2007). In my work with comics and film, defining the parameters of study has been essentially a nodal work of relating what is most salient about particular texts in particular contexts. This use of text and context is a two-prong level of consideration that is organic in my work; it is perhaps the case that one element, the other element, or both prongs might be applied to other areas of inquiry. In terms of locating a “gap,” the nodal element that served as the next level of conversation in my dissertation and early research work has been the experience of teachers rather than students in navigating the use of particular texts. While much research has focused on one layer or level of experience, there are yet more stories to be told. Such storytelling work is arguably the vocation of the researcher, whether that narrative is achieved through numbers, words, or a combination of the two.

While a creative approach to sifting through literature might not be limited to a particular methodology, the use of artistic responses has proven beneficial in locating and separating information in literature. Based on the contributions presented above, it is clear that the ideal literature review is not a condensed summary of other researchers’ words, and instead reflects an engaging, dynamic dialogue or conversation among the sources. Although this seems straightforward, accomplishing this is not necessarily intuitive. Some voices from research literature are foregrounded, others are meant to act as support, and others still can serve as the foundational elements that are noted historically or which are used to position an issue through time. The researcher keeps clicking through, image after image, seeking patterns and relationships. Literature can be utilized by the author of the review in a number of ways. Leitch (2006) has pointed to the ways in which an arts-based methodology can serve as a means of considering a question, and providing steps for further inquiry and participant response.

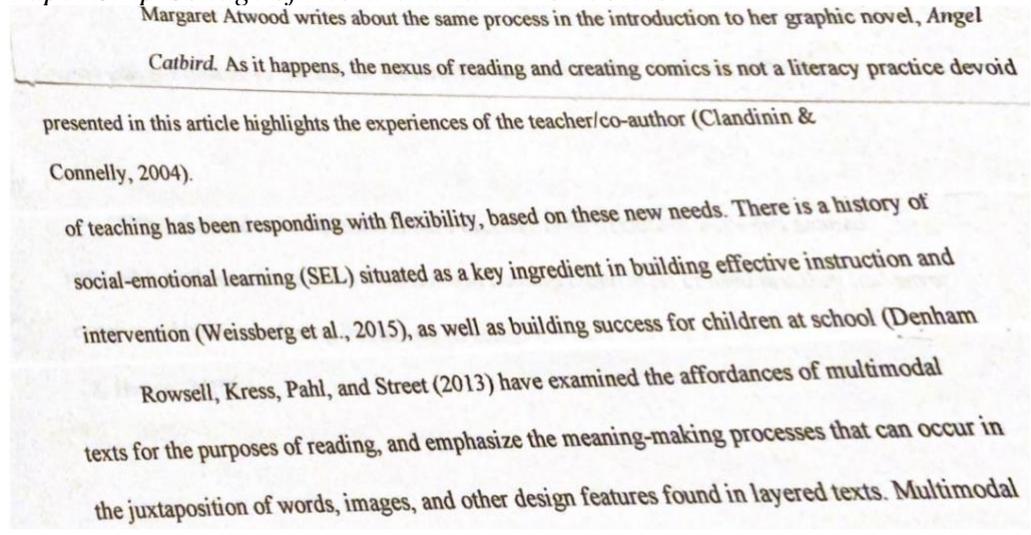
The key, perhaps, is to begin by processing. When I was working on my dissertation, in an effort to help me find my voice in the project, another piece of advice I received was to print out my literature review in its existing form and cut the pages into sentence strips, which could then align with one another in new ways. This visual method may seem to make the puzzle of the literature review into an even greater puzzle, but is also an exercise in putting things that are alike together. A visual method, it was a way of taking a step back from the many voices I was encountering, and think about the relationship of what Luker would call the nodes or nodal relationships present. As I sifted and rearranged strands of information, the steps I took in thinking about interrelationships were those cognitive pieces that needed to make their way into the composition of the review.

If the review is a collage, then the voices presented therein can talk to one another, and can do so in ways that align, contradict, and move the conversation forward. This is the very nature of how texts work (Ciecierski & Bintz, 2016). These are the relationships of language and published matter that I center in literacy instruction, and they are not completely divorced from the narrative work of the researcher.

In this first of two examples, I present just such a collage. I do not know, epistemologically, if insight is formed as a result of the moving of pieces into physical place in a collage, or through the consideration of these pieces again and again in themselves, or if this process is simultaneous or oscillating.

Figure 1

Paper Strip Collage of Research and Author Voices



Digital Methods

The use of a visual method may entail digital approaches, as well, and Lubke et al. (2017) have noted such possibilities, given the tools the researchers now have at their disposal. In the same way that a thread of conversation runs through the channels of text messages and comments posted in virtual spaces, so too can conversations be (re)presented by digital means. Ideas can be composed and arranged in text message form, or in one of the many note-taking tools that writers use. Organizing names into such spaces can help the researcher think about the ways that texts interact with one another and this work can be moved around, edited, and deleted as needed. The additional affordance is that ideas can be updated and revisited digitally.

Publishing and design programs can help researchers achieve this post-typographic approach in a range of ways, from the simplistic to the more aesthetic. Depending on the preferred method, once the relationships are solidified, the researcher can proceed with the literal or metaphorical glue of weaving ideas together with their own reflective, reflexive, and even performative commentary (Irwin, 2013).

Major figures or voices can be represented in whatever shapes the designer wishes, and relationships between and among these voices can be represented through whatever means are appropriate to the conversation and available in the design of the digital space, as well as whatever symbols seem to fit (see Jewitt, 2005).

All texts talk to one another anthropomorphically, either by alignment or contradict or an oscillation of both. In this example, I noted the way that Maxwell adds onto the conversation began by Boote and Beile. Drawing upon a design-based perspective, the essential relationships of the texts are represented here in straightforward means. A more complex visual system could be employed, depending on the aims and disciplinary considerations of the researcher. The scholars represented in this diagram were writing in close chronological proximity. The relationship of Luker's text to these threads might be represented by the addition of columns to support the way that I center Luker, or there may be no interstitial textual elements at all to represent these relationships. Writing elsewhere, Ciecierski (2017) noted the many ways that texts exist with one another in alignment or contradiction, and working these relationships out visually might be a helpful way to go about this process.

Ciecierski's (2017) addition to this review again stems from work as a literacy scholar, and points the way to the work of Kristeva (2002) when considering the term intertextuality. This is the moment where I can become lost in the weeds as a scholar and begin investigating every instance of the term "intertextuality" ever, or I can note this textual relationship, seek out Kristeva's cited work so that I avoid using an "as cited in," and enjoy the way one scholar has spoken to another over time and through language.

Conclusions

Scholarship is most certainly a process, and one that involves hearing the voices of those who have become before in an effort to continue conversation. The large amounts of information that must be sorted, as well as the importance of educational and social implications that can result from the work are part of the negotiation that writers undertake. On the other hand, what is difficult and careful work is certainly not to be positioned as impossible or unattainable. Researchers certainly find moments of hiding in the library corners, sifting through volumes, or sorting through available PDFs on library search engines. While the visual nature of my work aligns with creative methods, I suggest further exploration of these methods across disciplines.

Clarity, as well as creative joy, is part of this heuristic process of (re)discovering the foundational voices of literature, as well as the ways that more recently published scholars take up and continue this storytelling work. There are possibilities for connection through virtual conferencing software in recent times (Gray et al., 2020), as well as through the ways that scholars speak to one another "citationally." In this paper, I have explored both a paper-based/collage-like way of exploring content, as well as a digital method. This advice is rooted in the process of stepping back, taking stock of content that has been consumed, and then finding one's own voice in the process.

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