Harnessing the Prior Ideas: New Researchers' Challenges of Finding a Research Gap in Review of Literature

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Abstract

This article examines explores the problems that novice researchers encounter while conducting a review of literature. Anchored to this common problem, this article aims at assisting how beginner researchers can review the existing body of knowledge in their chosen field of research. It has been framed around three specific rhetorical moves: first, it identifies the problems that student researchers encounter; second, it shows how the problems can be addressed; and lastly, it draws a conclusion and suggests useful recommendations. So, beginning with the first move, the paper examines that students of research writing generally fail to trace the gap in the literature to articulate their stance. The article's second move emphasizes that the most effective way to identify gaps in the current body of literature is to develop a systematic and preplanned strategy. In its last part, the article concludes that writers new to research writing cannot produce a well-reasoned research study because they lack the skills to argue their case cogently. Informed by the views of prominent theorists on research and that of a review of literature, this article argues that novice researchers struggle to pinpoint gaps and inconsistencies in past literature and fail to integrate their research with the ongoing and past scholarship. On the basis of this argument, the paper recommends that novice researchers should seek feedback from the senior supervisors from related departments in the process of writing a literature review. To discuss this argument, the paper follows the qualitative research design prevalent in the Humanities and English Studies and draws relevant data from the secondary sources that examine how naïve researchers should conduct a review of literature to construct an argument in their research papers.

Key words: gap, knowledge, point of departure, review of literature, sources

Introduction

Embarking upon new research scholarship entails creating a concrete foundation for intellectual and conceptual framework. A new perspective or inquiry is characterized by the degree of contribution and novelty it lends to the prevailing body of knowledge. Pertaining to this, Lovitts & Wert (2008) state that the two key components of any research are "significance" and "originality" (p. 4-5). Although there is no accurate yardstick to measure what counts as significance and originality, particularly in qualitative method of research, these two properties of research should be understood in terms of their direct or indirect advancement and exploration of knowledge in their related fields of inquiry. Thus, what distinguishes research from an ordinary or commonplace observation is the systematic persistence with which a researcher pursues his/her inquiry to dig out new insights of a phenomenon or reality.

The bottom line for any ideas to germinate, flourish and expand is a thorough exploration of what already exists or what is incomplete or inconsistent in a field of inquiry. This is a preliminary step of any research undertaking. In this regard, Creswell (2009) emphasizes that a review of literature "helps to determine whether the topic is worth studying, and it provides insight into ways in which the researcher can limit the scope to a needed area of inquiry" (Review of the Literature, para 1). Creswell points out that a literature review involves two-fold processes: deciding the viability of a research area and gaining a focus on it by restricting the general topic.

Reviewing is a response to an ongoing or past scholarly debate, showing that a researcher is on a course to join what is called a research or scientific community. Bound by a common goal and attitude, a team of research fraternity is "a professional community –a group of interacting people who share ethical principles, beliefs and values, techniques and training and career paths" (Neuman, 2007. P. 8). This signifies that researchers have their own distinct niche through which they discover ideas or make contribution. They make a statement about their findings which are warranted by their own data and information, supported by a thorough examination of past scholarship. In this sense, every researcher is a pioneer in the related field of scholarship. Through their claims and assertion about their findings, they make their presence felt as authentic researchers in the research fraternity. By establishing a dialogic partnership with their prior counterparts paving a way for future research, researchers' aim is to communicate what they have achieved and contributed.

Statement of the Problem

A tentative study of the review of literature of research students shows that although they make an elaborate study of their topic, they fail to demonstrate their assertive position in their research work. Unless a subject is connected with current affairs of knowledge, all studies remain episodic and incomplete. It is generally found that such research writers shy away from articulating their voice in their research project. This is a common problem that nascent researchers encounter. Although they seem to make an extensive study, their writings show that they cannot assert their claims boldly. Their research reads like a haphazard jumbling of ideas, which fail to show connection between the reviews they are writing and the claim that they wish to establish. Against this scenario, the discussion of this paper hinges on the argument that if researchers want to stay in focus in the discussion in a sustained way, they have to be able to demonstrate their distinct ideas clearly and express their voice cogently.

Research Questions

This paper poses the following two specific questions:

1. What problems do nascent researchers encounter while doing a review of literature? What strategic steps should nascent researchers adopt to detect the gap while doing a review of literature?

2. How can beginner researchers detect a gap to pitch their argument for their point of departure?

Research Objective

The general purpose of this paper is to point out the errors that novice researchers commit while reviewing previous scholarly works. The two specific objectives are as follows:

1. First, this article intends to show the strategic steps that guide new research authors to discover a gap or lacuna while doing a review of literature.

2. Second, it aims to enable them to answer the inconsistencies in the existing literature by stating

their argument to clearly show their stance.

Rationale of the Study

My argument takes off on the assumption that in the process of browsing information in the past work, novice researchers generally end up cataloguing what they review, piling up ideas after ideas in a heap and failing to dovetail the previous ideas with the issue under discussion. As a result, they cannot pitch their stance clearly in their work, which is the reason that they cannot construct a point of departure for them. Technically, such a lapse on the part of student researchers causes a tremendous problem in various parts of research project. It is, therefore, paramount, that the students who are beginners in terms of the process and technical issue of research should be aware of how to elicit information from their reviews, assimilate it with their topic, identify the gap, occupy the niche and lastly, pitch their argument. Drawing on this concept of writing a review of literature, I want to show that the gap in a body of literature is an opportunity for reviewers to articulate their voice and make their presence felt in what Nueman calls the research or "scientific community" (P. 8).

Methodology

This article adopts the qualitative research approach within the framework of interpretive paradigm of data analysis, a method widely prevalent in the discipline of Social Sciences and English Studies. Drawing on the secondary data gathered specifically from books and journals written about research, this study focuses on archival sources regarding how reviews of literature are conducted. It deals with the way how researchers, particularly, beginners, go about pooling relevant ideas for their topic and find a gap in the existing literature, address it and take a point of departure from that gap. So, the analysis is confined to the concept of literature review only.

Research Tools

Drawing on the information derived from the library sources, this research paper is primarily focused on secondary source of data pooled from scholarly works, academic books, and research articles. The conclusion of how nascent researchers can find out a lacuna and leverage it to articulate their stance in a research work is drawn from the tools of discussion and critical analysis of existing relevant past works. This paper follows a two-fold pattern of discussion: a thorough reading of available works and then coding.

Review of Literature

Research is a coherent, cumulative and recursive project, moving researchers backward and forward incessantly. Capturing the complex process of this phenomena, Booth et al. (2003) state that a research study "loops back and forth, moving forward a step or two, going back and moving ahead again, anticipating stages not yet begun" (p. xi). A key aspect of this movement involves making a connection between the agenda being undertaken with a larger framework of intellectual traditions. Engaging with the past work is to explore relevant and compatible information that not only digs out past knowledge but also casts light on what is amiss. Echoing this concept, Klarer (2004) states that a review of literature begets "a new perspective", illuminates "neglected aspect of a text" and prepares a foundation for "a connection with the state of current research in the field" (p. 103). Clearly, what Klarer points out is that a research work refers back to an accumulated body of scholarship that exists in a related field.

One of the purposes of doing a review of literature involves embedding a topic in question

with its past intellectual tradition and history. As pointed out above, searching information requires reviewers to "look back, repeat, summarize or refer to an earlier state of the text" (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007, p.79). Undertaking a review of literature is also essential to "describe and synthesize the major studies related to the topic of the research" (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007, p. 99). The primary function of conducting a literature review, according to Paltridge and Starfied, is to hook the current work to the knowledge and scholarship already prevalent in the related field of discipline.

As mentioned, contextualizing research to a wider framework of knowledge is a key function of a review of literature. This function allows researchers to examine what has been explored or not explored. Advising their fledging research students, Foss and Waters (2016) writing in a colloquial tone suggests that reviewing previous research " allows you to enter the conversation about a topic in your field by acquainting yourself with what others are saying so you don't have to repeat what they already know and can extend the conversation they have begun" (p. 53). According to Foss and Waters, researchers establish a reciprocal alliance with a vast array of knowledge and research, enabling them to posit a stance in relation to their predecessors. Thus, through a review of literature, researchers forge an interactive relationship with a cohort of past researchers.

A core activity or a challenging task of conducting a review is to demonstrate the results of the materials examined and to show their resemblance with the current topic. Hartley (2008) states that while doing a review of others' works in the qualitative studies, reviewers should focus on three specific activities: "Integrate and synthesize", "evaluate the current state of evidence" and "reveal inadequacies" (p. 91). He further notes that a related function of reading the past literature is expose the ambiguities and inconsistencies "in the literature and point to where further research needs to be done" (p. 91).

Equally related to the idea of Hartley is that researchers should immerse themselves in the vast repository of earlier knowledge and establish a firm stance on the topic being studied. Echoing this concept, Yin (2011) suggests researchers that the aim of doing a review "is to define a niche for your study, situating it in the array of related studies and not just showing how it will differ from one or more individual studies" (p. 63). Both Hartley and Yin maintain that while doing a review of literature, the goal is to point out what is lacking and amiss in past works and demonstrate a significance and originality of the current topic.

While revealing controversies and debates is a key function of doing prior research on a related topic, another central aim is to convert a vast array of knowledge and ideas into a researchable and manageable topic. Neuman (2007) advises researchers to "narrow down a broad topic" (p. 69) through their study of "how others conducted their studies" (69). Defining a literature review, he says that "in general, a literature review is a carefully crafted summary of the recent studies conducted on a topic that includes key findings and methods researchers used while making sure to document the sources" (p. 70). Another key function of doing a review of literature, as Neuman points out is to "build a context around a specific research question" that the researchers are interested in. (p. 70). He also provides the venue where researchers can find past works: "periodicals, books, dissertations, government documents, or policy reports" (70). Neuman views that a review of literature allows researchers to navigate through past studies, leading them to formulate relevant research questions. He also points out where past studies can be found.

This prior research on the debates, discussion, significance, and purpose of a review of literature represents that at the heart of a review of past works is the challenge of discovering gaps

and inadequacies in the existing body of knowledge in the chosen field of inquiry. While research is incomplete without identifying a gap, tracing it is, however, a daunting task for new researchers. This paper draws attention of novice researchers to this indispensable component of research and provides the preliminary suggestions that their reading of past works should be oriented to finding out inconsistencies in them to articulate their own perspectives.

Discussion

While responding to a pattern of knowledge in the past, researchers are required to be critical in their approach and resist the temptations of including everything that they come across. Many nascent researchers fail to reshape and tailor their ideas in accordance with their research purpose and questions. Consequently, their ideas sometimes spiral out of their grasp and their presentation become elusive and lack clarity. Their research falls flat because they cannot integrate prior studies with their topic. Although they make an elaborate survey and find a gap, they are unable to utilize the gap as a viable opportunity to articulate their voice.

Two main purposes of searching information involves the critical skills of refutation and confirmation. These two activities enable researchers to clarify their line of thoughts. By doing this, they can empower their research agency and identity. Rather than resorting to a cookie cutting technique, which means gathering whatever information is available indiscriminately, researchers have to understand how ideas are contested and discussed. It is necessary to evaluate past information for their appropriateness and viability in the context of research under discussion.

One of the most challenging tasks for a researcher is discovering relevant information and data out of a vast and stupendous repository of past knowledge. Because of this daunting task, it is crucial that researchers map out a clear framework of their purpose, subject, methodology and overall research design quite early on. This systematic approach is extremely useful because it saves the researcher from having to search unrelated information unnecessarily and from being bogged down in overwhelming details. Doing research means invoking a whole lot of past works and voices. As Graff and Birkenstein (2007) aptly portrays the environment of research writing" means engaging the voices of others and letting them in turn engage us" (n.p). The primary goal of reading any past work is to find out what has been neglected or insufficient in the existing knowledge, and after addressing the insufficiency, to bring in a new perspective to broaden the scope of research.

It is also found that researchers leave quotations/data without proper interpretation. Left for themselves such data are what are called orphan because they are abandoned on their own. Such data do not speak for themselves. Novice researchers either forget or overlook the fact that data undergo an intricate process of explanation for them to be meaningful. For seasoned researchers, this is a skill which they have already mastered and therefore, this task is less daunting and challenging for them. The novice researchers, however, are seen to be struggling considerably in this part of research.

There are some simplistic notions about a review of literature that need to be redressed or ameliorated. While conducting a study of past literature, many researchers lack the skill of filtering information that are compatible with their issue or objective. Many reviews of literature look like a junkyard of ideas that are random, incoherent and haphazard. Authors lose sight of what are actually required to enable their studies to advance in a right direction. Their presentation is either vaguely descriptive or narrowly selective. They copy ideas indiscriminately, without evaluating their appropriateness and rationale. Consequently, what should have been succinct, well-crafted and more

importantly viable veers into a text of information that are devoid of substance.

Writing a review that is systematic and consistent with the topic under investigation involves more than just producing a mere summary. First and foremost, it is necessary to know that the fundamental purpose of examining a tradition of knowledge is to join in an ongoing discourse or scholarship. A thorough understanding of what is worth investigation and an acute sense of awareness of the "current state of knowledge" (Murray &Beglar, 2009, p. 49) including what is "conflicting or lacking" (Murray & Beglar, 2009, p, 49) in it lays the first concrete foundation for genuine research. The controversies and paradoxes detected in the past literature is a viable opportunity for researchers to occupy their niche his (gender-biases/sexist language) niche and develop his argument. Precisely, what is insufficient or ambiguous in the existing literature is what is called, in popular parlance, a gap.

A gap refers to an area of research which has remained uninvestigated in various ways. Murray and Beglar (2009) point out that a researcher can identify a gap in five specific areas. They encompass "Knowledge-based", "Relationship-based", "Theory-based", "Methodological", and "Analytical" (p. 49). This division shows that researchers can make contribution to knowledge in five specific domains and a clear help for researchers to discover how to detect a gap in the literature.

However, there lies a challenge. Discovering a gap calls for a meticulous and planned examination of past literature. The danger is that researchers make a tentative or trivial study on the basis of their insufficient or fallacious reading and claim a gap that makes no significant or substantial contribution. Hence, a thoroughly and detailed reading of past literature is required. Pertaining to the importance of conducting a literature review, Williman (2011) writes that the process of detecting a gap necessitates researchers to "trawl through all the available information sources in order to track down the latest knowledge, and to assess it for relevance, quality, controversy and gaps" (p. 52). Therefore, discovering a gap calls for a sedulous attention to the value and relevance of past literature, which in turn provides a point of departure for the researchers.

Once a gap is identified, the next crucial move is to construct an argument of the research. Anchored to the gap, an argument is an assertive statement that clearly presents a thesis around which all the components of a research revolve. An argument establishes a case that is sustained, and provides a focus to a research project. Technically, building an argument refers "to the process of making a logical case for a particular position, interpretation, or conclusion"(Cochran, Stamper & Cochran, n.d. 37). According to Fabb and Durant (2005), an argumentative statement should consist of three parts: "prominence, commitment and claimed significance" (p. 77). This three-fold component of an argument means that it should focus on one particular case accompanied by justification for a significant and original contribution.

Findings and Conclusion

The discussion reveals that completing a research work is a multifaceted task. One dimension of this convoluted process is carrying out a thorough and systematic review of literature. In this regard, what intrigues new researchers is that they cannot blend their reading of past works with their own research because they cannot detect gaps. As a result of this failure, they fail to craft arguments and cannot utilize gap as a space to take their point of departure.

Based on the facts presented, this study finds out that novice researchers cannot produce a coherent and relevant review of literature which is required for their research. Although they have

a tentative conceptual idea of what constitutes a literature review, they lack the skills evaluating the relevance of information. Moreover, they fail in contextualizing their work and do not know that the gap in literature is an opportunity for them to present their points of view. They do not know how arguments have been constructed and at times fail to identify contradictions, ambiguities, and inconsistencies in the past work. On the basis of this assumption, I have argued that researchers can stay in focus in the research in a sustained way, only by demonstrating their distinct ideas distinctly and expressing their voice cogently.

A review of literature is a vital component of any research writing. Among different purposes of doing a literature review, eliciting relevant information for a work of research is the most primary aim. Researchers involved in research must examine the status of a particular agenda by visiting related field of inquiry in the past. By being engaged in a network of knowledge, they extend and deepen their ideas with the information assembled from the previous body of thoughts. A sufficient and adequate review well prepares researchers to take control of their train of thoughts and steer them along the arguments they wish to build. A failure to capture the nuances of information renders a work of research flat and unauthentic.

Reviewing entails more than just summarizing the past works, not just listing out information. It should familiarize readers with not just data but also point out the inconsistencies and lapses existing in the current body of knowledge. A review of literature requires researchers to take a critical stance on a body of literature and arrive at a conclusion about the agenda in question. Researchers, particularly the ones who are new to research writing, cannot distinguish between essential information and that which is redundant. So, they should make a critical evaluation of the significance and rationale of the sources they are using, which means judging the relevance and appropriateness of the information required for a research work.

Recommendation

The role of a supervisor or a senior researcher is very crucial. As pointed out, novice researchers struggle in terms of finding a credible source and information for doing a literature review. They are just overwhelmed by the volume and bulk of information that they simply cannot choose what is appropriate and right for their purpose. Indeed, online databases have even worsened their situation. In this situation, they should determine the reliability and authenticity of the number of sources available in diverse places. While the effortless accessibility of information offers numerous advantages, the problem is how to determine their credibility and validity. Here comes the need for institutional and departmental support. For confused researchers feedback from such sources can be of immense value. The sources to find the accurate facts and data is largely dependent upon the subject in question. There are some places that experienced researchers and supervisors have long relied upon such as college or university library. Departmental libraries that contain resources according to respective disciplines are also the sources for reliable sources. But seeking the feedback and advice of supervisors or experienced researchers definitely ensure a smooth ride for the fledgling researchers.

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