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Editorial

Guest Editorial: Reading literature and literature reviews

Most scholars would probably agree that literature reviews are key building blocks of good research articles in Library and Information science (LIS). Yet current practices in conducting these reviews may not necessarily be conducive to innovative research because they emphasize the science of the process rather than the art. At the beginning of the 21st century, the act of doing a literature review is typically conceptualized according to rigid principles of research in the sciences and social sciences. There is little room for thinking of it as a process requiring a modicum of art—the art of browsing and reading widely in journals and books that may have little relationship to one’s specific area of research interest and that may, in addition, be considered old (i.e., published before 1990). Certainly, science should always be a significant component of the literature-review process, but art should also play a crucial role. Infusing art into the review process and imaginatively incorporating the review’s findings into the fabric of a research project may be the difference between a ground-breaking study employing unique perspectives gleaned from highly diverse sources and an ordinary study that confines itself to easily located, predictable, and therefore pedestrian sources.

The scientification of the literature review can be seen in a popular text such as *Conducting Research Literature Reviews* (Fink, 2005). Here, a good review is defined as “a systematic, explicit, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing [an] existing body of completed and recorded work” (p. 3). The ability to replicate the review is of singular importance, since “[t]his enables someone else to reproduce [the reviewer’s] methods and to determine objectively whether or not to accept the results of the review” (p. 17). This type of review is contrasted with “more subjective examinations of recorded information,” which “tend to be idiosyncratic” because “[s]ubjective reviewers choose articles without justifying why they are selected, and they may give equal credence to good and poor studies” (p. 17). In other words, research professionalism is inseparable from a science-based approach.

For Fink, then, there is no doubt which type of literature review is better, and she outlines a series of steps to ensure its achievement. Summarized in a flowchart that appears in every chapter, these steps include: choosing acceptable bibliographic databases and Web sites to be searched; selecting the search terms to be used so as “to get appropriate articles, books, and reports”; and setting rigorous “practical” and “methodological quality” screening

criteria to find the “best available studies” (pp. 3–5, 55). One such practical screen is for the date of publication. Here, Fink provides three examples, all of which suggest that there is no need to search for pre-1990 items. Indeed, two of the examples show that searches confined to the 2000s (i.e., two or three years before the time of the search) are sufficient (pp. 56–58). And even if pre-1990 items are not filtered out in practical screens, they will still be discarded once Fink’s stringent methodological screens are applied because older items sometimes do not contain the kinds of detailed methodological information reviewers are trained to seek (pp. 59–98, 165–175). Hence they cannot be thought of as “sound evidence” (p. 93).

Although her ostensible goal is to improve the end-product of the literature review by demystifying the attendant process, Fink’s approach ironically reduces that process to a formulaic and mechanical undertaking whose result is a review consisting of a limited and homogenous range of items. This is especially true when she recommends that planned search terms replicate those used by authors of trusted articles (p. 23) and that reviewers engage in “manual or hand searches of the references” in those articles that are located through database searches so as not to miss relevant items that the authors of those articles cited (p. 17). Moreover, because researchers typically outsource literature reviews to trained assistants and thus personally read only a small fraction of the items already reviewed by assistants (pp. 165–177), the mechanical nature of the process is further exacerbated.

Taken together, these circumstances produce conditions in which researchers are failing to find “relevant texts whose keywords they cannot specify in advance” (Mann, 2005, p. 50). Yet it is these “outlier” items that often provide the intellectual spark that enables a given research question to be viewed from a more creative and ultimately satisfying angle. But, as literature-review procedures undergo scientification in the name of professionalization, researchers rarely have at their disposal eclectic literature from fields and disciplines far removed from their own specialties. As a result, they do not even have the opportunity to apply that literature to their current projects.

How has this situation come about? One answer is that the focus on ever-narrower academic specialties means that few scholars read books and journals (both within and outside their own fields and disciplines) from cover to cover, or even single articles or chapters therein. Everyone is too busy; no one can afford to spend time on something that may not have a measurable positive impact on their research productivity. The art of “general and focused browsing” has all but disappeared (Mann, 2005, p. 63), and with it the notion of serendipitous discovery. As Menzies (2005) points out, the contemporary corporatized university, with its “[s]tandarized reporting and accountability procedures,” has produced an invidious “space-time compression” such that many researchers “no longer read as broadly and interdisciplinarily as they used to and as they’d like” (pp. 192, 191, 193). Instead, they engage in “mining” journal articles and books “for selected bits of information that they could use in their own work” (p. 193). Reading books and journals that may not be immediately useful—but may serendipitously prove meaningful at some future date—is far down their list of priorities. In this pressure-filled environment, the possibility of wisdom and understanding is sacrificed on the altar of data and information “mined” according to scientific principles.

There are, however, exemplary cases where the literature review deftly interweaves science and art. Lleras-Muney (2005) is one such instance. Winner of the Dorothy S. Thomas award in 2002 and reprinted in *Modern Classics in the Economics of Education* (Belfield, 2006), Lleras-Muney's dissertation-based article was so thought-provoking that it was prominently reported in the *New York Times* (Kolata, 2007). Discussing Lleras-Muney's finding that higher levels of education are associated with longer life spans, Kolata emphasized that her work was greatly enriched by extensive reading, especially in older journals and books. Particularly important were three items from 1955, 1969, and 1978, without which her research would not have taken the direction that it did. Indeed, an analysis of Lleras-Muney's (2005) bibliography shows that, of her 65 references, nine (13.85%) were from the 1980s; six (9.23%) from the 1970s; and five (7.69%) from the pre-1970 period (three from the 1960s; one from the 1950s; and one from the 1920s). To be sure, 37 references (56.92%) were from the 1990s and eight (12.31%) from the 2000s, but the pre-1990 references comprised a not insubstantial 30.77% of the total.

Here is a small instance of the way art can contribute to the literature-review process. It alerts us not only to the riches offered by older literature – the type of literature that Fink would screen out – but also to the fact that reading widely (and even idiosyncratically) can propel individual research projects onto unanticipated and untrodden paths that would otherwise lie obscured. Of course, Lleras-Muney's bibliography displayed the science-based professionalism recommended by Fink, but it was her “value-added” and artful use of pre-1990 items – the fruit of general and focused browsing and sustained reading in the kind of neglected sources that a purely scientific and formulaic literature review likely would have overlooked or rejected – that earned her work lasting recognition.

LIS researchers might do well to ponder the unexpected benefits of committing themselves to a concerted program of browsing and reading outside their own specialties and subspecialties. How might LIS research be affected if authors who, for example, publish in *Library & Information Science Research* or the *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* regularly read *Libraries & The Cultural Record* and *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*; diligently browsed old issues of *Library Quarterly*; and kept up with the articles in *Isis*, *Osiris*, and *Technology and Culture*? What if the insights gained from such a reading program were synthesized in literature reviews where art and science co-exist? The result may be inspired research that, by making intriguing connections with work being done in other fields and disciplines, is reciprocally drawn upon by other fields and disciplines.

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