

Undertaking a Literature Review
Notes For a Presentation at *The Practicalities of Completing a Degree in HSD*

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*** what is a literature review?**

* “*the literature*” being reviewed consists of the published and unpublished research that others have conducted in a number of areas that are relevant to your own research question: will likely include articles in journals, books or chapters in edited books, conference papers, documents published on the web

* in your review of the literature, you present a summary of, and commentary on, the these materials; your discussion may include an account of the positive contributions that existing work has made to your thinking as you have pursued your own research questions, as well as the absences or shortcomings in existing research that your own work is designed to address

* the literature review, then, is a context within which you locate your own work in relation to other peoples’ research; it may be helpful to think of it as your contribution to an *ongoing conversation* with other researchers and their work

*there are both *empirical* and *theoretical* literatures: a review of the literature will often draw on both

* for example, one student in the Multidisciplinary Masters Program wanted to understand various aspects of smoking as an activity taken up by many adolescent girls: what purposes does smoking serve in girls’ lives? what meaning do girls who smoke make of this activity? what factors influence their smoking behaviour?

* her literature review included attention to the *empirical literature* on smoking (research on who smokes; for what reasons? with what consequences?); in her presentation and commentary on this literature she noticed that, while there was some research on smoking among adolescents, there was little that focused specifically on adolescent *girls*; she also noted that some of the research on the meaning smoking holds for *adult women* pointed to some interesting concepts and ideas for thinking about *girls’* smoking behaviours

* her literature review also discussed a number of the *theoretical literatures* she had found useful in framing her inquiry: these included analyses of the relationship between oppression and addiction by both feminist and non-feminist researchers, and feminist analyses of femininity as discourse shaping the lives of young women

* her literature review thus established some of the features of existing research that had helped to shape her research questions and her analysis; it also established the gaps in the existing literature that her research focus on smoking in the lives of adolescent girls would address

*** what purposes is a literature review intended to serve?**

- * to assist you in developing your research question(s) and in making meaning out of what you discover
- * to locate, for readers of your work, your approach, interests and findings in relation to the approaches, interests and findings of others
- * another way of saying the above is that a literature review provides a frame within which your own research can be understood: part of what you are doing in your literature review is constructing an argument that the empirical material you present in your thesis, and your analysis of it, is of interest to particular audiences and has implications beyond the immediate context in which it was conducted
- * to demonstrate to your committee that you are able to do the above

*** the task of undertaking and presenting a literature review is as much an art as a science**

- * “literatures” generally do not exist as neatly tied bundles with labels attached to them; the boundaries between *this* literature and *that* literature are not clearly demarcated; part of your work in developing your literature review is to select the materials that you see as comprising bodies of literature relevant to your research interests, and to develop an organizational framework for presenting their principal themes, strengths and weaknesses in an organized fashion
- * there is no definitive set of choices about which literatures, or which authors, to include in your literature review; the directions you choose to pursue will depend on what you find interesting and useful (for example, if you were particularly interested in understanding what types of programs or supports facilitate adolescent girls’ quitting smoking, you might include some of the same literatures referred to above but you would also likely include a review of the literature dealing with smoking cessation programs; a related example: your interests and ideas might lead you to the literature on the role of peer-group interactions in affecting adolescents’ decision-making around smoking, rather than the literature on oppression and addiction). Your committee members may encourage you to engage with particular literatures and authors that they believe may be helpful to your inquiry.

*** how to proceed?**

- * a good way to become more familiar with what a literature review involves is to have a look at some examples. You can find copies of Master’s theses and doctoral dissertations that have been completed in the Faculty of Human and Social Development in the University library system; copies of many Master’s theses are also available for short term loan (please return them !) from Barb Egan in the Dean’s Office (HSD A102).

* you will also see literature reviews of varying lengths and degrees of complexity at the beginning of articles in journals and chapters in edited books. In some cases, these are explicitly labeled as the “literature review”; in others they may be in sections with titles such as “theoretical framework” or “context of the research”; in others still, the literature review is not set off as a separate section. You will also come across reviews of the literature in books written by a single author, usually in the first or second chapter.

* you may not have discovered everything there is to know about the literature(s) relevant to your research by the time you submit your thesis proposal. Your initial review of the literature will assist you in shaping your research questions, but you may also discover that your research findings prompt you to explore additional literatures in order to assist you in making sense out of your data. Your research and writing process, and your movement between “the literature” and “the data” will most likely be much “messier” in the doing than the orderly, chapter-by-chapter presentation of your analysis in your thesis or dissertation would suggest. Don’t forget that a similar journey from chaos to order lies behind the well-organized, smoothly flowing discussion in the completed articles, theses and books that you read while completing your courses and thesis research !

* resources for identifying and tracking down relevant literatures include: members of your committee; other students doing research in related areas; the literature review sections in the literature you are reading (reference lists and footnotes can be very helpful in this regard); library databases and indexes; librarians
