Kingston Festival of Learning

Theme: Ensuring student success

The Thematic Analysis Grid: a strategy for successful literature review writing

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Introduction

We often require students to draw upon academic papers on a given topic to develop a literature review, sometimes as part of a dissertation, other times as a standalone assessment. This can often present a challenge for students. Despite help and guidance with search, retrieval, recording, referencing and writing skills, students are rarely provided with practical guidance on synthesizing concepts and ideas to produce a coherent, critical, well-linked literature review. In response to this gap, “The Thematic Analysis Grid” was designed to help students in the Faculty of Business and Law when writing an academic literature review.

Existing guidance on writing a literature review

Whilst guidance on literature review writing is often to be found in text books on dissertation writing (e.g., Biggam 2011; Murray 2007; Swetnam and Swetnam 2010) there are also examples of text books wholly devoted to the literature review (e.g., Hart 1998). This type of guidance tends to focus on search, retrieval, recording and referencing. The emergence of the systematic literature review has led to sound guidance on search and recording of papers (Cronin et al. 2008; Tranfield et al. 2003) and often collaborations between faculty and librarians result in published guidance in this area (Green and Bowser 2006). Within institutions, workshops and support sessions are also often offered by academic and library staff, for example, on the use of journal databases.

However, a strong review of academic literature is not achieved simply by sourcing and reading relevant papers and knowing how to reference properly. Guidance on the vital organising and synthesis of materials is rare and as such, students often revert to producing a review which is simply an annotated list of the major works on a particular topic. This has led to accusations of “brief catalogues of previous research” or “article-by-article reports” (Nairn et al. 2007, p259). Yacobucci
(2012) does provide some guidance here, although the focus is on systematically recording methodologies rather than overall themes in the literature.

The Thematic Analysis Grid

In an attempt to provide some practical help with synthesis the authors developed “The Thematic Analysis Grid”, a tool which enables students to record key ideas from the literature with a view to linking them with other ideas. In this way students are able to approach their literature review from an overview perspective rather than building it up from individual papers.

In brief, The Thematic Analysis Grid is a matrix with papers listed in the rows (in date order) and themes in the columns. Students are encouraged to identify possible themes from their cursory reading of abstracts, but to be prepared to introduce new ones as their reading progresses. Within the cells of the matrix students can make notes about the papers’ content on each of the themes. By using a numbering system, they can cross reference the noted comment with where it is to be found on the paper itself. This approach allows students to keep meaningful notes on their reading, but more importantly enables them to review all ideas at once and see for themselves the consensus and contradictions amongst authors. A final column prompts them to think critically about the papers, in particular to look at the methodology used in an attempt to work out which studies might be more credible than others.

The Thematic Analysis Grid has been successfully used with students for several years. Although formal evaluation has not been carried out, many positive comments have been received through module evaluations:

“For me the grid helped to bring the key ideas and themes together. It was good to write the main points down in one place and be able to visualise them easily. So for that reason it is a method which would really benefit visual learners. The grid also really helped to save time as it meant I did not have to browse through my literature papers when I needed to find a specific quote/theme” (Dissertation student, 2014)

In summary, The Thematic Analysis Grid appears to be a helpful tool for encouraging synthesis and supplements the existing support on search, retrieval, referencing and writing skills.

References


