
The bookcase at the end of the thesis: revising a literature review

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Abstract

Almost twenty years ago Baudrillard (1988, p 95) warned, 'We live in a universe where there is more and more information and less and less meaning'. Since this unheeded warning, we have produced a far greater mass of information, further constraining our inner search for meaning. Many of us have become estranged from ourselves and the natural world we inhabit. As well, concepts of text, author and reader have been shifting. What then, is the role of literature in these times? In this paper I explore the relationship and nature of the Literature Review to research and the researcher by examining the importance of three literary authors in particular during the journey into, during and beyond the doctoral thesis.

As the world becomes increasingly interdependent, so too does its literature. Many literary writers, theorists, educators and students are engaged in dialogues concerning the changing contexts and roles of author, text and reader. While interrogating these notions within political and sociocultural arenas, it is also necessary to debate how these reframed ideas are impacting upon the approaches taken to the Literature Review in thesis writing. Migration and access to text have historical echoes. Believed to be the bearer of 'truth' for the privileged few, texts once held a privileged position as Scriptures in the inner sanctuaries of learning. Yet now, in the Western world, the broad access to texts – their sheer quantity and blurred forms, and the contested nature of their content – impact greatly on the researcher and the research.

It is essential for researchers to examine what constitutes a text, whose stories are being told and whose stories are being silenced. Fragmentation and distrust of the grand narratives (the stories cultures tell themselves and live by) have produced a seamlessness between the real and the imagined, between truth and fiction. This fragmentation occurred as certainties have been called into question. As children we quite naturally moved between the dimensions of the real and imagined; between truth and fiction in playful exploration and thought. Today we are empowered as co-authors of the world's stories, and knowledge is a consensus. For, if we view the

world as a text to be spoken, heard, written, read, viewed and danced by all its participants, the very nature of literature alters. I believe that co-authorship frees the researcher to have a far greater presence in the literature.

I have written this paper in an attempt to initiate discussion and invite critique about what it means to research and write a Literature Review in a postmodern world. Enormous weight is still placed on tradition in the research process. What constitutes a Literature Review and its role in the overall thesis are governed by steadfast rules and regulations propagated in times past. Researchers are required to survey only scholarly articles, books and sources relevant to their particular issues. I hope to contest and unsettle some of these traditional practices. The co-construction of texts, the dimensions of knowledge and interweaving of insights, along with the range of genres, provide an array of generative knowledge. What are the challenges and benefits inherent in crossing disciplines and cultural boundaries; in selecting texts, and deciding how and when to read them?

It is acknowledged that the benefits of a Literature Review are numerous, because a researcher undertaking a study can gain considerable clarity, focus and support with the assistance of the literature. It is essential for researchers to examine the origins of current thinking, learn about the tensions inherent in various approaches and beliefs and how other researchers have attempted similar issues, and broaden overall knowledge in the field(s).

A case in point

Allow me to illustrate the revisioning of a Literature Review from a personal case written to extend thinking to other researchers, supervisors and examiners. I undertook a qualitative doctoral study in a search to better understand what the world is like for children 5–7 years of age. My research grew out of a sense of longing to reclaim meaning in the everyday world and to rekindle the sense of wonder that I held as a child. To achieve this, I felt it necessary to return to the season of childhood. Children often find the world paradoxical and strange, thus driving their search for meaning. Through my own research pilgrimage, I was joined by a number of like minds who missed what they felt had disappeared from our lives in a technocratic age. Heidegger (1971, p xv) defined technology as ‘a destitute time, the time of the world’s night in which man has forgotten that he has forgotten the true nature of being’. Many individuals yearn for a far less ordered and rational world than the natural science model has provided. Although philosophical ideals cannot answer all our questions, they have the power to show us the common things in our everyday lives that we no longer witness.

To help me reveal how children experience the world, I used a multidisciplinary, multimodal approach to construct the research. The conceptual framework was derived in part from van Manen’s phenomenological writings, art, music, and an array of literary authors and the world itself. I came to the research as a virtual stranger to phenomenological ideals yet, once introduced to this methodology, I felt certain it could help me move closer to my research question.

Phenomenology derives from the Greek word *phenomenon*, which means to 'show itself'. Researchers employing this approach are asked to close off what is known or thought to be known, in order to remain open to the phenomenon before them. Although the world is already teeming with meaning, the researcher's task in considering that world is to experience it, find its essence(s) or nature, and ultimately render it in unfamiliar ways. It is here, when writing up the research, that Heidegger (1971) calls on the poet, for he believes it is through the poet that language speaks.

Throughout the research journey, I grappled with this phenomenological enterprise. The more I read about phenomenology and the wonder of children, the more my bookshelves filled, yet I found that scholarly reading also created a chasm between theoretical thought and the phenomenon under investigation. The literature can lull researchers into a false sense of knowing, and shield them from exploring their terrain in unfamiliar ways. It can certainly shape the view of what is being experienced. As Bruner (1983, pp 3–4) asserts:

Once we 'intend,' once we set a course for ourselves, we no longer go it alone. We commit ourselves to institutions and traditions and 'tool kits' which, if our stars read right, will both amplify our powers and lock us in our path.

It has been almost three years since I completed the thesis. To an outsider, visiting the upstairs bookcase in my home, the texts housed for the thesis remain intact. However, a cursory glance will suggest that they are in a state of disarray – some are upright on the shelf, but most are prone, or hidden. There is no apparent order.

Once released from the shelf, the texts emerge with pages creased, with spines often bent dreadfully out of shape; passages highlighted or attached to yellow and orange sticky notes indicating something of interest; and frail words worn by overuse alongside passages untouched, words pristine. Many texts hold echoes and images of my distant and selective memories.

Yet the sheer diversity of texts housed on the shelves, and their multi-voiced authors, suggest a radical departure from traditional practices of studying scholarly texts alone. While conducting the Literature Review, I felt as if I had entered a vast kingdom of wisdom built up by those who had ventured before me. The guardians of the kingdom were the storytellers who had marvelled at children's propensity for wondering. The task I undertook caused me to wander in the uncertainty of others' tellings (Latham 2001). Throughout the doctoral study, the authors remained active participants affecting my personal and professional life. An eclectic assortment of restless thinkers, these authors actively provided a range of theoretical lenses in which to re-position their readers. Upon re-examining their place in the bookcase, I gave thought to them as informants who guided – yet also at times, subverted – the research.

During the long research journey, I sat in the study quite close to these texts, seeking comfort, wisdom, inspiration and solace. At times, I felt hopelessly lost in their dissenting dialogues. Yet, at other times, I found direction. The shelves hold a

myriad of text types: seminal works, academic texts, novels, poems, historical documents, newspaper articles, online papers, theory-based journal articles, visual maps and drawings, conference papers, monographs and recorded oral stories. There are also many professional journals that house my thoughts, and collections of other journals and remembrances. I am only now, three years on, able to stand back, examine and begin to critically reflect upon how their diverse forms and characters intertwined and knitted my thoughts together over several years.

Text selection

As my journey into the literature progressed, I paid strong consideration to the interaction that occurs between the selector, reader and the text. Some texts (oral, written and visual) appealed more than others, for it seemed that the author/storyteller and at times, the illustrator, brought me closer to their thoughts. This nearness was enticing, and I followed these texts and read or listened to them in deeper, more concerted ways than others. Yet now I wonder: what wisdom rested in the texts waiting to be studied – what messages had I not taken up? I know I was far more comfortable in a Eurocentric theoretical frame, and wonder what other texts would have helped me to move beyond this frame. And, within the texts I did select and study, what wisdom did I appropriate? How did I problematise the ideas? What notions became my own?

Bakhtin (1981) reminds us that wisdom only becomes our own when we can give it its own expressive intention. And not all words easily yield themselves to another audience; some words sit on the line and remain alien to the reader.

It appears that when readers study literature – whether in their home language, or another – they are translating it; sifting it through their own knowledge, experiences and biases. Also, a suspension exists between the text and the self, even when co-authoring occurs. Re-searchers, as poets, hum with the tensions they create with the literature.

Literary shepherds

Scholars from disciplines as diverse as medicine and anthropology draw upon novels, poetry, autobiographies and biographies as a rich source of wisdom for their research. These literary texts can provide vivid experiences about the human condition and evoke detailed descriptions of particular lives not often available in theoretically driven texts. Further, narratives allow readers the opportunity to enlarge their lives by living through the lives of others.

Literary texts became a hearty component of my literature review, and I became aware of the kinship I developed with some authors. Relationships were also established in part by reassembling the stories I had read and heard and those that I had amassed during my lifetime, in order to understand their relevance to the overall study. I read many of the authors who influenced the study's work in my early twenties, at a time when I was contemplating life's mysteries and my place in the world. It became evident that many fictional characters had fostered and

strengthened current thought – a reminder that we are seldom at the beginning of ideas. These writers became mental shepherds who would share a place in my Literature Review. I will now illuminate three authors in particular, to illustrate their importance in my research journey.

The first of these authors is Italo Calvino, a Cuban-born novelist of Italian parents who lived much of his life in Paris. This whimsical naturalist and philosopher invited me to return to the everydayness of the world. Whilst traveling alongside his eclectic array of characters, many questions and new understandings emerged for me. For instance, the character Mr Palomar (Calvino 1981) helped me understand the necessity of studying my inner landscape before writing about the outer geography. In one instance, as we walked along in dialogue with each other and our surrounds, Mr Palomar contemplated some of the complexities of understanding:

How can you look at something and set your own ego aside? Whose eyes are doing the looking? As a rule you think of the ego as one who is peering out of your own eyes as if leaning on a windowsill, looking at the world stretching out before him in all its immensity. So then: there is a window that looks out on the world. The world is out there; and in here what is there? The world still, what else could there be? (p 102)

Although Mr Palomar never revealed what we bring to this seeing, he moved me closer to an answer by raising the question and indeed other questions about the natural world. This character and others allowed me time to find my own clarity in emerging thoughts. Calvino also assisted me to learn about phenomenological writing, encouraging me to remove the weight from my language and consider its multiplicity. As a polyphonic (Bakhtin 1981) author, Italo Calvino radically restructured the traditional novel with coexistence of multiple voices and interactivity between characters, and between characters and the reader in dialogue.

With Calvino's characters, I took many walks through the landscape of my own life stories. Walking became a powerful means of uniting the forces of the stories I was amassing. By walking, I remained a participant and an observer. For most of my life, walking has been my main mode of transport. The landscape itself is a text, its burgeoning terrain to be studied. I questioned how landscape might manifest in a literature review. When treading the earth, a spiritual harmony exists between mind and body.

Husserl (1913/1931), the founder of modern phenomenology, believes that, through walking, a core world is built up out of fragmentary appearances. He suggests 'the near sphere of familiar and accessible appearances and the far-sphere of unaccessible unfamiliar appearances are brought together in a spacio-temporal *ensemble* when one walks' (pp 245–246). I wondered: how might I include the landscape as a text in the Literature Review?

Novelist and eco-theologian Annie Dillard also informed my research and writing. Revisiting her novels taught me about the natural world. Dillard is an American writer who grew up in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, a city I where I held my first teaching position. She taught herself to go back to the things themselves, and

has become a keen observer of nature. Through her novels I learned how to see what was before me – to be ‘in’ nature consciously. In nature, Dillard finds mystery, newness, energy and an intricate landscape to think upon. She then transforms this mystery in her writing.

Dillard (1990, p 459) suggests:

When you write, you lay out a line of words; the line of words is a miner’s pick, a woodcarver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year.

I found myself pouring over the transcripts of young children. Then, quite meticulously, I lifted out the words and laid them in a line. I read and re-read them, listening for their music. It was also necessary to listen to the silence, pregnant with meaning and the gestures conveyed.

Dillard says:

The line of words is a hammer. You hammer against the walls of your house. You tap the walls, lightly everywhere. After giving many years attention to these things, you know what to listen for. Some of the walls are bearing walls; they have to stay, or everything will fall down. Other walls can go with impunity; you can hear the difference. (pp 549–550)

Like a hammer, the words tapped away as they went on long walks with me; sometimes running ahead, sometimes hiding. They also lined my study, just hanging around or playing up. Some of them left home. Others begged to stay, clamoring for attention. Sometimes, the words nailed shut a path, while at other times they opened up unforeseen possibilities. While the words spilled forth in a number of directions, I set forth some actions. By day, I attended to my senses on the long walks. I collected images and aromas and textures and sounds around me in a desire to open myself to the world. By night, I followed and charted the moon.

The storyteller Dillard, among others, enriched my walks. We conversed about our surrounds or merely walked in stunned silence, taking in its presence. We opened our senses to the creation of a textured, multidimensional world.

England’s Poet Laureate, Ted Hughes (1994), was yet another literary shepherd. I first came upon his writings in the early 70s when he worked on a project called *Orghast at Persepolis* with theatre director Peter Brook. Persepolis, the former capital of the Persian Empire, was the backdrop for a unique piece of theatre. Brook employed actors with a range of backgrounds and native languages, believing that this would produce something new. The project at Persepolis was to create and perform a play with a new language – a language that would unite sound, gesture and word in a powerful story. Brook argues that before anything of merit can come into being, we must begin our storytelling in an empty space with accessible language.

Ted Hughes wrote and translated this experimental piece. While journeying through the thesis, I returned to the Persepolis project, and reread Ted Hughes' poems and stories. His work taught me how to peel away the language in my thesis to get to its visceral self. For, in phenomenology, the writing is made meaningful when it reaches down to capture the essence(s) of the experience in a deep and penetrable way.

Hughes speaks of the potential power of words:

Something of the inaudible music that moves us along in our bodies from moment to moment like water in a river. Something of the duplicity and the relativity and the merely fleeting quality of all this. Something of the almighty importance of it and something of the utter meaninglessness. And when words can manage something of this, and manage it in a moment of time, and in that same moment make out of it all the vital signature of a human being – not of an atom or of a geometrical diagram, or a heap of lenses – but a human being, we call it poetry. (p 24)

As Hughes highlighted the enormity of the struggle to find the language that unlocks wisdom, he also inspired me to find a way.

Almost three years after completing the thesis, these authors still render a consciousness. Patrick Suskind (1997) has helped to explain this consciousness by suggesting that, through reading, consciousness is changed in such a manner that the reader is hardly aware of it. Research should tell a good story – and who better to instruct the art of storytelling than its tellers?

Critically examining the literature during the research study allowed me to create a union between mind and body while inhabiting a collective voice. Each small thread of understanding altered the research. In order to minimise bias and deal ethically with the texts in this phenomenological study, it was necessary for me to conduct the review alongside collecting the data. My intention was to create an interactive approach to the literature in light of the issues under consideration. As issues arose in the life world of the children I studied, the literature helped me to clarify and illuminate my thoughts.

CS Lewis (1961, p 137) tells us that 'Literature enlarges our being by admitting us to experiences not our own. My own eyes are not enough for me ... Even the eyes of all humanity are not enough'. Thus I have emerged a fuller, more enriched being by keeping company with these authors.

Considering a broad spectrum of text types across a wide range of disciplines pose challenges to the researcher. Which texts should be selected from the massive assortment, and when and how should they be read? The boundaries and scope of my Literature Review kept expanding, challenging the rules for what constitutes a Literature Review.

Tensions

The literature one reads often presents a series of tensions as well as harmonies. For instance, there is a tension between learning about life from the source as opposed to learning about life from behind screens – the print world as opposed to the natural world. Both forms of knowing are alive and an individual can derive understanding from them. They need not be in conflict with one another, but harmonise in a fuller realm of ‘knowing.’ Suzuki’s (1997) texts, for instance, offer moral arguments for an ecological self – urging a delicate relationship with nature.

Another tension lies between oral and written texts. Native knowledge and scientific knowing exists; there are sacred stories and there is scientific re-search. Artists and scientists observe the life around them. Levi-Straus (1966) sees the two forces of shaman and scientist as parallel modes of acquiring knowledge about the universe. Both forms of knowing are alive, and we can derive understanding from them. They need not be in conflict with one another, but harmonise in a fuller realm of knowing.

After all, scientific wondering begins in story. I suggest that there is also a harmony between myth and experience; and that *logos* (the grammar of experience) and *mythos* (the grammar of myth) compliment each other (Bruner 1962).

Thus, the task I had undertaken enticed me to wander in the uncertainty of others’ tellings. Each time I turned another corner, I found myself in new terrain. The ground underfoot was suspiciously familiar, yet the perspective differed. Crossing borders and boundaries was very beneficial to my quest, for it forced me to examine the ways in which things are perceived. Wittgenstein (1953) wants us understand in new ways that which is already in plain view. In all the ‘hurly-burly’, he illuminates our struggle to see the background as well as the foreground; the gesture and feelings behind the saying.

The concepts we appropriate vary from one culture to the next, and from one time to another. What presence would oral stories have in my Literature Review?

As researcher, I approached texts as a productive rather than re-productive activity. Together, the text and the interpreter co-construct meaning. Ricoeur (1981) believes that the text has a career beyond the author. Texts open themselves to a variety of readings situated in varying sociocultural settings. The term ‘text’ derives from the root word meaning to weave. Thus, oral discourse can be thought of as weaving or stitching: or *rhapsodic*, meaning to stitch songs together. However, as we weave meaning, a metamorphosis occurs and new meanings are created.

Oral and the written texts

Oral tales are only present in my bookcase in written form. The sounds, breaths and animated faces of the storytellers have been lost in time. I understand the immense value of passing stories from one person to another, yet the oral tradition is becoming distant. Experience is less valued. Plato warned about the dawn of writing, arguing that it destroyed memory and, as it is a manufactured product, it is

unresponsive. In an eloquent reflection on the noble storyteller, Walter Benjamin (1968) laments the disappearance of the oral tradition. He says that storytelling is falling in stature because the epic aspect of truth is dying:

It [storytelling] is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they [stories] are being listened to. The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself. This then is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled. This is how today it is becoming unravelled at all its ends after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship. (p 91)

Eliade (1958), Ong (1991) and Abram (1996, 1997), among others, further illuminate Benjamin's reverence for the oral tradition. Eliade (1958) asserts that oral culture sounds the psyche of an individual in a deep and penetrable way. The cosmos goes on and on with man at its centre; 'man is the *umbilicmundi*, the navel of the world' (1958, pp 231–235). Ong (1991) extends Eliade's notion of the oral by noting that, as a word exists only in sound, these sounds enter the psyche of individuals and define and unify them and their cosmology. Abram (1996) concurs with Ong (1991), suggesting that we use oral language as property of the sensuous world not merely between humans, but also between humans and the cosmos. A reciprocity exists between humankind and nature, a relatedness.

If oral tales are to be preserved, they must have a presence in the Literature Review. Where was their home on my shelves? Solely reading scholarly texts meant searching out published studies that uncovered knowledge of only one kind. It seemed necessary to move through different types of literature, with the many selves they afforded me.

It is time for supervisors and examiners to develop new criteria – new ways of visioning a Literature Review in thesis writing. It is time to contest notions of what constitutes the 'worthy' texts; be they oral, written, viewed, heard or experienced. Researchers must be encouraged to study and include a wide array of authors from a variety of disciplines and cultural dimensions in their review. Barthes (1986) warns of tradition, suggesting that when method becomes 'law', it often produces sterile work. Allowing researchers multiple dimensions and levels of textual study provides possibilities for them to produce a dialogically rich, complex and highly readable Literature Review.

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