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Using a Crosswalk to Organize the Literature Review

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Abstract

A literature crosswalk is a valuable tool for researchers, whether novice or seasoned scholars, that can be used in organizing and synthesizing existing literature. This article provides practical advice for creating a literature crosswalk and how to use the tool to develop a literature review. Benefits of using a literature crosswalk include organizing a great deal of information in an easily searchable format, developing deeper understanding of the literature, and finding trends across multiple research studies in regard to methodology, theories used, types of participants, settings, and so forth.

Keywords

Undergraduate Students, Graduate Students, Literature Review, Crosswalk, Research Skills

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Using a Crosswalk to Organize the Literature Review

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A literature crosswalk is a valuable tool for researchers, whether novice or seasoned scholars, that can be used in organizing and synthesizing existing literature. This article provides practical advice for creating a literature crosswalk and how to use the tool to develop a literature review. Benefits of using a literature crosswalk include organizing a great deal of information in an easily searchable format, developing deeper understanding of the literature, and finding trends across multiple research studies in regard to methodology, theories used, types of participants, settings, and so forth. Keywords: Undergraduate Students, Graduate Students, Literature Review, Crosswalk, Research Skills

Undergraduate and graduate students who are just beginning a relationship with research reap many benefits from digging into literature related to their study interests. For example, a thorough examination of the research literature is essential in determining the direction of one's study, exposes gaps in one's knowledge, helps in determining which research methodology would be best for a particular study, and guides the development of the research question(s). However, many undergraduate and graduate students become overwhelmed with the volume of literature collected and become almost frozen in undertaking a synthesis of the literature. The purpose of this article is to present a tool to assist novice and experienced researchers in culling through and making sense of the existing research literature.

The first author, a university faculty member at a state institution, was the dissertation chair for the second author, who received a doctorate in curriculum and instruction. Having guided several dissertations and teaching both introductory and intermediate qualitative research methods courses, the first author noted that organizing the literature review was a major concern for graduate students and has personally experimented with several different ways of making sense of research literature. Specifically, in reviewing qualitative literature, graduate students became overwhelmed with summarizing the findings which often included multiple themes. This article outlines how to develop and use a literature crosswalk as an organizational tool. The second author has provided a student perspective in sharing reflections and impressions on using this organizational tool in the process of compiling a literature review and completing a dissertation. Examples from the second author's dissertation have been used in discussing how to develop and use a literature crosswalk.

Literature Reviews

Researchers have emphasized the importance of conducting thorough literature reviews (e.g., Cooper, 1989; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012) and noted how difficult the task is for students (e.g., Cisco, 2014; Feak & Swales, 2009; Ridley, 2008). Novice researchers who are learning to synthesize existing articles and other pertinent literature must develop a process of organizing the literature they examine. According to Bruce (2001), "Within this process, they

need to be able to think critically about the relevance of information is very important” (p. 158). While there exist a variety of ideas about how to determine the scope and coverage of a literature review (e.g., Bruce, 1994; Cooper, 1989; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012; Pautasso, 2013), each researcher makes the final decision about what literature to include while “focus[ing] on establishing connections and meaning in relation to their own research” (Bruce, 2001, p. 158). Each researcher organizes the literature in a certain way to prioritize the facets of the research that are applicable to his or her particular focus.

There have been several studies that have addressed issues of undergraduate or graduate students undertaking the literature review. For example, Benson et al. (1992) surveyed 260 associate and full professors who had chaired multiple theses and/or dissertations. Benson et al. (1992) developed and implemented a 15-item survey based on Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956) version of the taxonomy. Benson et al. (1992) asked the faculty members to rate the first and last draft of a literature review created by an “average” student. The 15-item survey addressed five sections of the taxonomy: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, and synthesis. Each section of the taxonomy was addressed by three specifically focused questions. Benson et al. (1992) found there were improvements in the first and last drafts, but the degree of the students’ strengths decreased most significantly for both the first and last drafts in the areas of analysis and synthesis. Benson et al. (1992) concluded that analyzing and synthesizing the literature were difficult skills for the graduate students.

Cisco (2014) noted that information on writing literature reviews has focused on “collecting and organizing sources” (p. 43) but has lacked depth on the process of actually writing the literature review. Cisco worked in a university writing center and often assisted students in writing literature reviews. Cisco (2014) noted,

Even though the literature review is a hallmark of scholarly research, students may have difficulty even defining the term. Furthermore, students find it challenging to synthesize works in a literature review and thus are unable to write a coherent review. (p. 42)

Cisco (2014) developed a Literature Review Lesson (LRL) that focused on 4 steps: identifying incorrect approaches (e.g., summarizing studies by individual authors); visual representation of theme creation; the theme-based literature review; and an example of discipline specific literature review. Cisco (2014) taught the lesson to 14 undergraduate students in one-on-one tutoring sessions. The students were interviewed before and after the LRL lesson. One year later, four of the 14 participants agreed to a follow up interview to determine the lesson’s impact on the “literature review assignment and whether the lesson promoted their writing in other academic contexts” (Cisco, 2014, p. 44). Students had a better understanding of the process of writing a literature and how to synthesize the material after the LRL lesson (Cisco, 2014).

The literature crosswalk that is described in this paper assists students in organizing information from journal articles and other sources in preparation for analyzing and synthesizing the literature. Literature reviews should synthesize the existing research on a topic “in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated” (Torraco, 2005, p. 356). Using a method for recording the features of the studies makes the subsequent organization of themes and ideas less difficult. Researchers are better able to

distinguish what has been undertaken and what needs to be undertaken, identify variables that are relevant to the topic, identify relationships between theory/concepts and practice, distinguish exemplary research, avoid unintentional and unnecessary replication, identify the main research

methodologies and designs that have been utilized, identify contradictions and inconsistencies, and identify strengths and weaknesses of the various research approaches that have been utilized. (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012, p. 1)

Boote and Beile (2005) instructed, “A substantive, thorough, sophisticated literature review is a precondition for doing substantive, thorough, sophisticated research” (p. 3). Boote and Beile (2005) pointed out that generativity – the ability to create new research built on the scholarship of other researchers – was enhanced when a researcher familiarized him/herself with previous work in the field. Undergraduate students, graduate students, and “doctoral candidates are novice researchers almost by definition and do not have the luxury of being assumed to know the literature” (Boote & Beile, 2005, p. 7), however by completing a literature crosswalk, one’s knowledge can become deeper as patterns and characteristics are identified.

What is a Literature Crosswalk?

In educational settings a crosswalk is often used to compare and contrast main elements or features of related materials. Conley (2011) stated that a crosswalk was a tool for the purpose of examining relationships between elements using a matrix format. The American School Counselor Association (2005) in its *ASCA National Model*, described a crosswalk as a useful tool to compare disparate standards, activities, or program components in order to determine what is missing or not being addressed. For example, when seeking to adopt textbooks for a specific content area, it is often prudent to create a spreadsheet sort in order to be able to compare various elements of the textbook series. Often the adoption of new educational standards results in the use of a crosswalk to articulate the changes in the versions of the standards. As an organizational tool for a literature review, a literature crosswalk can uncover historical trends in use of research methodology, quickly identify studies using specific groups of participants or setting, indicate the theoretical frameworks used in studying the topic, and so forth.

Steps for Creating a Literature Crosswalk

The following section provides insights for creating a crosswalk of the existing literature. In brief, these steps include:

- 1) Locating and gathering articles related to your research topic.
- 2) Deciding what aspects of the topic are important to analyze and synthesize through the crosswalk.
- 3) Creating a spreadsheet that includes the information for each category for each article or study.
- 4) Updating the spreadsheet from time to time to ensure the literature review information remains current.
- 5) Analyzing and synthesizing the information on the literature crosswalk.

The reader is free to adapt or modify this set of directions on creating a literature crosswalk based on their own needs and level of expertise. While the literature crosswalk shown in this article uses an Excel spreadsheet, similar tools could also be helpful in organizing the information gleaned during the examination of the literature.

Locating and Gathering Articles Related to Your Research Topic

Proceed with collecting articles and other sources for the literature review by **conducting an exhaustive keyword search**. Employ Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT, or AND NOT) and symbols (*, quotation marks, parenthesis) until a wide array of articles have been collected. Write down in your researcher's reflexive journal the search terms and symbols that were used and how many articles resulted from the search(es) or create screen captures with the terms included. Lincoln (2000) shared that "The reflexive field work journals are, admittedly, intensely personal sets of writing. They are, however, a necessary tool of qualitative researchers" (p. 251).

The reflexive journal is important in notating questions and ideas that come from the researcher's reading of the literature, guiding the researcher to narrow or expand the scope of studies to include or exclude from their own literature review. It is also a convenient place to keep notes about the development of the crosswalk and the literature review that arise within the researcher's mind.

While working with the various databases, **determine the type of sources you want to include** and eliminate those that are not helpful. For example, book reviews are generally not helpful at this stage, and consider carefully the inclusion of dissertations and conference proceedings. These documents may make sense in an emerging field or with new tools and technologies. However, there may have been a publication from the dissertation or conference, which would be the preferred source to use. Record the sources and any rationale for their inclusion in the researcher's reflexive journal. This information should also appear in the literature review chapter or section of your manuscript, thesis, or dissertation.

Intentionally, **search for published meta-analyses and literature syntheses** that have already been compiled, as they can quickly provide a deeper understanding of the availability of literature. A meta-analysis of articles or a literature synthesis also provides an overview of the critical ideas and issues other researchers may have been examining. Some of the categories that are important in your study may have already been summarized by others. Thorough researchers will also notate demographical information from the studies, such as number of participants, setting, gender, and so on in the article.

While reading the meta-analyses and literature synthesis, take notes on what the researcher(s) used for the **inclusion and exclusion criteria** for the studies that were included. This will help in determining what areas have been previously researched and indicate where there are gaps. Additionally, having an idea of what to include or exclude while searching the literature and why can be very helpful in collecting quality research studies.

Read the abstracts or quickly scan the articles that result from the literature search to determine if the resource is appropriate. Initially, the number of articles collected will be large. Select articles that address the focus of your research, especially those that give qualitative results applicable and comparable to your study. Make sure to **download the articles** that contribute to the literature review for further examination. If necessary, request documents that are not readily available. Taking a screen capture of the citation will be helpful in completing the document request(s).

Finally, **sort the articles into stacks** such as "must read," "may be applicable," and "not applicable." The "must read" articles would include those seminal studies dealing with your topic. Any article that has findings that lend information to your study would also be important. Those that "may be applicable" may have less information or take a different approach to the topic at hand. Those "not applicable" would be studies that you find lack any information that is helpful or applicable to your topic. Then read through several of the research studies systematically in order to become aware of specific aspects (e.g., methodology, participants) of the study. Having located, downloaded, and acquired a sense of what is in the

literature, the next step is to decide on which information to record on the literature crosswalk spreadsheet.

Deciding what Aspects of the Topic are Important to Analyze and Synthesize Through the Crosswalk

You may not initially know what to include as column headings on the spreadsheet, but at the very least, **record the reference citation, setting of the study, and information about the participants**. As for other column headings, **include specific information** such as: methodology, theoretical framework, key terms and definitions, research questions, summary of major findings, implications for practice, recommendations for future studies, and application to your own study. The application of the literature to your study could be quite varied. For example, specific data collection techniques or theoretical frameworks may inform the development of your study. This broadens the examination of the literature to include more information than just summarizing the findings. The information from the other columns allows the researcher to more quickly determine the most applicable studies.

Add other columns to the literature crosswalk as needed. A literature crosswalk is not a one-size-fits-all tool. Make notes in the researcher's reflexive journal as to columns were added. The second author summarized her actions in the following excerpt.

Because I already had located several meta-analyses, I already had the authors' names for each article, so I began filling in my crosswalk with those references, along with the date of the article. The dates helped me compare study results over time. My study was going to be a rural one, so I decided to note whether the study was rural, suburban, or urban. My study was qualitative, so I wanted to know what type of study was involved for each article. I soon noticed that these components (setting and type of study) were not explicitly described in many of the articles, so I had to make an educated guess about them. For instance, if there were a large number of participants noted, I knew that this was probably not a qualitative study. Similarly, thousands of students in special education was an indication that this was not a rural setting. (SA Reflections)

Creating a Spreadsheet that Includes the Information for Each Category for Each Article or Study

Create columns in the Excel spreadsheet for easy sorting of the information. The first few columns should contain the appropriately formatted reference for the article (e.g., MLA, APA, Chicago), with separate columns for the year of publication; research questions; type of methodology; number of participants; age, gender, and/or ethnicity of the participants; theoretical framework; important definitions; and major findings. Table 1 shows a section of the crosswalk the second author completed for her dissertation (Warren, 2018, p. 188).

Table 1. Crosswalk of Transition Services by Activity

AUTHORS	YEAR	N	SETTING	GEND	DISABILITY	RACE	STUDY
Allen et al. ^a	2001	3	NR	67% M	MR	100% W	Qual
Baer et al.	2011	409	NR	52% M	ID	60% W	Quant
Baer et al. ^{b d}	2003	140	ALL	Both	All	18% minority	Quant
Baughner & Nichols	2008	NR	Rural	NR	All	90% W	Qual
Baumeister & Morris	1992	75	Rural	NR	All	NR	Qual
Benz, et al.	2004	29	ALL	NR	All	NR	Qual
Benz, et al. ^{b d}	2000	709	NR	62% M	All	87% W	Quant
Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren ^{b d}	1997	422	NR	63% M	All	92% W	Quant
Berry, Ward, & Caplan ^c	2012	1,697	NR	59% M	All	60% W	Quant
Black ^a	1995	105	Urban	NR	NR	NR	Qual
Blackorby, Hancock, & Siegel ^d	1993	939	NR	62% M	LD, MR, ED	NR	Quant
Bullis et al. ^d	1995	308	NR	NR	Deaf	NR	Quant

(Warren, 2018, p. 188). Reprinted with permission of the author.

Whenever possible, **create dropdown menus** to fill in information. Dropdown menus assist in the sorting of information and will help in avoiding misspellings or using multiple terms to describe the same thing. For example, under methodology the terms qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods or an abbreviation (e.g., qual, quant, mixed) may be used in the dropdown menu. Document such phrases and abbreviations the researcher's reflexive journal. The second author noted,

Not all studies use the same terminology regarding the facets of the study in your crosswalk. It is important to either record definitions or define terms for yourself so that as you peruse the studies, you will be able to categorize different terms under the same heading, because they both fit the definition of the attribute assigned to the column. ... I made notes in my reflexive journal when such instances occurred. (SA Reflections)

Another option is to place a check mark or an X under the standard, characteristic, or practice that is included in that particular article, as shown in Table 2 (Warren, 2018, p. 190).

Table 2. Crosswalk of Transition Services by Activity

AUTHORS	YEAR	SELF-CARE	PLANNING	SELF-ADVOCACY	CAREER AWARENESS	INCLUSION	PARENTAL	COLLAB	SOCIAL SKILLS	VOC ED	WORK EXP
Allen et al. ^a	2001		X								
Baer et al.	2011					X					
Baer et al. ^{b d}	2003					X				X	X
Baugher & Nichols	2008				X						
Baumeister & Morris	1992		X		X			X	X	X	X
Benz, et al.	2004		X					X			X
Benz, Linstrom, & Yovanoff ^{b d}	2000			X							X
Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren ^{b d}	1997				X	X		X	X	X	X
Berry, Ward, & Caplan ^c	2012	X									
Black ^a	1995				X				X		
Blackorby, Hancock, & Siegel ^d	1993	X									
Bullis et al. ^d	1995										

(Warren, 2018, p. 190). Reprinted with permission of the author.

Updating the Spreadsheet from Time to Time

As additional studies are found that addressed those items, include the new data in the spreadsheet. Making a final tally of each characteristic in the spreadsheet at the bottom of the column or sorting the columns may provide insight about the literature that is being examined. Insights could include whether studies used similar theoretical frameworks, participant

populations, or methods of data collection and common themes or characteristics that have emerged across multiple studies. For example, the second author noted:

For my own crosswalk, in the study of best practices for transition services for special education students, I noted the ten different best practices included in the literature. When these columns were organized from least to greatest in number of articles addressing the specific best practices, I was able to better determine which ones to look at for my dissertation.

I then asked rural special education experts to rank the best practices that were prevalent in the literature, [a practice that is known as the Delphi technique (Hsu & Sandford, 2007)]. Their rankings were used to determine the interventions of the study. (SA Reflections)

Some of the information to be added under the columns you may be missing, such as specific statistics you would need in order to conduct a proper meta-analysis. In other cases, the information may not be easy to locate when skimming through an article or may appear in a different section. If you believe the information is important, note this in the review of the literature and let the reader determine the value of a particular study.

Analyzing and Synthesizing the Information in the Literature Crosswalk

Once the literature crosswalk has been completed, it is time to analyze and synthesize the information. The steps involve:

- 1) Creating a second copy of the file for analysis.
- 2) Sorting the columns of information.
- 3) Looking for patterns among the various studies
- 4) Comparing various aspects of studies by looking at each column individually and then across the columns.
- 5) Creating a literature review from the crosswalk
- 6) Viewing your own research study with a critical eye

Creating a Second Copy of the File for Analysis

Make sure to **archive a master copy** or two of the literature crosswalk before starting any sorting of the data so that the information is not accidentally split up across the various fields or columns. Conduct any sorting and reorganizing of the information with a copy of the literature crosswalk. Adding a date to the file name will assist you in keeping track of when you last accessed and used the literature crosswalk.

Sorting the Columns of Information

Sorting and displaying of specific information are facilitated by developing the literature crosswalk in an Excel Spreadsheet. For example, you can create a formula that allows you to count how many articles examined a specific problem, reported a certain finding, used a given population, and so forth (see Table 2). In regard to tabulating columns, reorganizing a specific set of columns from least to greatest or vice versa may help you find trends or patterns in the information. The second author noted,

The benefit to having the ability to manipulate the literature crosswalk information is that new research ideas will emerge as you look at various cross-sections of the data listed within the spreadsheet. For example, being able to filter my dissertation crosswalk by a particular best practice was helpful in determining which best practice would be most beneficial to rural students. Sometimes, after studying the crosswalk results, further areas of research appear as gaps or areas that have not been adequately covered in the studies. The crosswalk is a gold mine for future research topics, some of which you would not have noticed without completing it! (SA Reflections)

Looking for Patterns Among the Various Studies

After sorting the information, **looking at specific columns in comparison to other columns** in the literature crosswalk allows the researcher to build a deeper understanding of the research already conducted in the field. Sorting is also useful in noting changes in the foci of the studies.

The initial comparison should be completed after **sorting the literature by publication date** (see Table 2). Over the years, trends become apparent across studies. For example, a certain methodology might be favored for a certain period of time, and then gradually or suddenly, another methodology rises to the forefront. The focus of studies, the meaning of specific terminology, and the use of data collection tools may change over the years. The second author shared,

The information shown in Table 3 (Warren, 2018, p. 39) helped me to compare special education transition studies from four different periods to see which practices were emphasized in the studies during that time. I first created categories of years spanning about the same length of time, from one decade to the next. There was not a great difference between the number of studies within each decade.

I was able to note changes in the types of disabilities listed in the studies. For instance, between 1985 and 1990, the type of disability in most studies was not even reported and transition services for autistic children did not appear as a research focus until after 2010.

A researcher may find it helpful to construct a timeline of certain changes in society, laws, or events and their connection to the trends in the literature. For example, because of the literature crosswalk, my committee members were able to ask questions that I had not considered such as, “what relationship was there between the passing of federal laws on special education and the types of empirical studies being conducted?” (SA Reflections)

Table 3. Emphasis on Best Practices During Four Periods of Study

<i>Best Practice</i>	<u>1985 – 1990</u>	<u>1991 – 2000</u>	<u>2001 – 2010</u>	<u>2011-2018</u>
	19 Studies	27 Studies	18 Studies	22 studies
<i>Career Awareness</i>	3	5	4	1
<i>Collaboration</i>	6	3	4	6
<i>Inclusion</i>	3	4	6	4

<i>Parental Involvement</i>	3	4	3	8
<i>Planning</i>	4	3	3	3
<i>Self-Advocacy</i>	0	3	6	4
<i>Self-Care</i>	4	2	0	3
<i>Social Skills</i>	9	7	1	4
<i>Vocational Education</i>	13	14	4	4
<i>Work Experience</i>	13	14	9	9

(Warren, 2018, p. 39). Reprinted with permission of the author.

Comparing Various Aspects of Studies

The spreadsheet format of the literature crosswalk means **numerous comparisons can be made among the information contained in the columns**. Engage in a systematic examination of the theoretical/conceptual frameworks; definitions; demographical categories; methodologies; types of interventions/treatments; and major findings or key results. Record this analysis in the researcher's reflexive journal.

The crosswalk facilitates the visualization of trends in reporting information and also how the types of studies and participants have changed over time. As you note themes or subthemes, you may want create columns so that you can manipulate the information into a format that is easily discussed, similar to what is done in quantitative studies by merging data fields or creating or recoding to dummy variables. In many instances the crosswalk information can be converted to a table format or provide ideas for creating tables or figures or items can be copied and pasted into Word documents.

A closer examination of the information presented in Table 4 (Warren, 2018, p. 41) provided suggestions for future studies based on gaps or lack of recent studies.

Using the same decade divisions allowed me to compare demographic information, such as the type of study, location of the study, gender, race, type of disability, and number of participants. The crosswalk facilitated the visualization of not only how the trends in reporting changed, but also how the types of studies and participants changed over time. For example, in regard to gender, the more recent studies appeared to focus on male students, but that is also a historical trend. In addition, there had been an abundance of studies involving white students, which prompted one to want to understand why that has happened.

I noted under the urban settings heading that six out of 10 studies focused on work experience as a best practice, and four out of 10 focused on vocational education. No studies in the urban setting focused on inclusion, collaboration, parental involvement, or self-care. This information suggests the need for another study focusing on some of the gaps in the transition plans for these urban students. (SA Reflections)

Table 4. Reporting Characteristics Changes Between Periods of Study

	<u>1985 – 1990</u>	<u>1991 – 2000</u>	<u>2001 – 2010</u>	<u>2011-2018</u>
	19 Studies	27 Studies	18 Studies	22 studies
Type of Study	2 Not Reported	--	1 Not Reported	--
	12 Qualitative	11 Qualitative	5 Qualitative	--
	5 Quantitative	16 Quantitative	12 Quantitative	21 Quantitative
	--	--	--	1 Mixed
Setting	16 Not Reported	16 Not Reported	7 Not Reported	5 Not Reported
	2 Rural	4 Rural	5 Rural	3 Rural
	1 Urban	6 Urban	3 Urban	--
	--	--	1 Suburban	2 Suburban
	--	1 All	2 All	2 All
				10 NLTS2 Data
Gender	16 Not Reported	11 Not Reported	6 Not Reported	4 Not Reported
	3 Mostly Male	15 Mostly Male	7 Mostly Male	15 Mostly Male
	--	1 Mostly Female	2 Mostly Female	3 Mostly Female
	--	--	3 Equal Number	--
Race	17 Not Reported	16 Not Reported	5 Not Reported	4 Not Reported
	1 Mostly White	9 Mostly White	11 Mostly White	17 Mostly White
	1 Mostly Black	2 Mostly Black	2 Mixed Race	1 Mixed Race
Disability	7 Not Reported	3 Not Reported	2 Not Reported	2 Not Reported
	5 All	13 All	9 All	9 All
	--	1 Deaf	--	--
	--	1 Visually Impaired	1 Visually Impaired	2 Visually Impaired
	--	1 MR	1 MR	--
	4 LD	1 LD	2 LD	3 LD
	--	--	1 Severe	--
	--	--	--	--
	--	--	--	2 Autism

	3 Multiple Disability	7 Multiple Disability	2 Multiple Disability	4 Multiple Disability
Participants	6 Not Reported	--	2 Not Reported	--
	0-100 – 10	0-100 – 10	0-100 – 7	0-100 – 1
	100+ – 3	100-500 – 8	100-500 – 5	100-500 – 11
	--	500-1,000 – 4	--	500-1,000 – 2
	--	1,000+ – 5	1,000+ – 4	1,000+ – 8

(Author, 2018, p. 41). Reprinted with permission of Author.

Creating a Literature Review from the Crosswalk

Comparing the various aspects of the studies included in the crosswalk leads naturally into the creation of the literature review. Your faculty advisor may have a preference as to how the literature review is organized. Some may prefer that you present a historical or chronological perspective of the topic. Some literature reviews are organized by date of publication of the most relevant studies. You can also develop the literature review based on methodology used, trends in the field, or based on themes or key concepts. However, what you really want is to synthesize the literature to show possible relationships as well as areas of disagreement within the literature.

Since the organization of the literature review can be presented in many formats, one suggestion is to list the various themes that appear in the crosswalk and use them to develop an outline. You may find that one theme leads naturally to another theme or can be divided into various subthemes, which should then be reflected in your outline. As you actually write each section, sort the crosswalk to find all the related articles so that you thoroughly discuss one concept and cite all appropriate studies before moving on to the next one. Focus on both summarizing the literature, including providing the context (e.g., location, participants), themes emerging from the findings, and indicating possible relationships the major findings.

Using the various headings in the crosswalk, I was able to compare and contrast articles within the headings and use those headings as sections of my literature review. The crosswalk improved the cohesiveness of the literature review, since my thoughts were already organized within the context of the headings developed. In addition to the standard literature review, there was enough information gained from examining the trends and issues covered over the course of time in the articles I had found, that I was able to write a separate chapter focusing on the crosswalk itself. (SA Reflections)

Viewing Your Own Research Study with a Critical Eye

A literature crosswalk also serves as an important training tool for novice researchers in learning to critique research studies. When strategically reading research studies for various information, specific elements of studies emerge. If key information is missing or lacks depth, the purpose of including such a study in the literature review needs to be carefully considered as to the implications as to the rigor or validity of the study's findings. In some cases, you may decide that the study should not be included in the literature review or you

should inform the reader as to possible weaknesses if you choose to include the study. The second author noted,

One of the frustrating aspects of examining the research studies for my dissertation was how much of the vital demographic data (e.g., number of participants, gender) remained unreported by the researchers, especially in earlier years. For the earliest studies in transition services, very little about the setting, gender of participants, ethnicity or race, or even the disability of the students was included in the study [see Table 4]. The lack of this information creates issues for anyone trying to replicate the same conditions in another setting or comparing of the findings. Additionally, not all researchers include their theoretical framework in the article, so the reader does not know the lens or perspective of the researcher(s).

There were other areas in which key information was missing in some of the studies and could not be easily included in the crosswalk. Several times the methodology used in the study was not clearly articulated, nor were the types of locales, such as rural or urban settings. In some cases, discovering the details of the study required reading between the lines to make an educated guess about the demographics, participants and/or methodology. Noticing this omission of information in the work of other researchers causes the serious scholar to take a second look at the important data in his or her own study with an eye to providing that important demographic data for those who will follow. (SA Reflections)

The Crosswalk as a Living Tool

Used from the outset of starting a literature review, a great deal of time will be saved as well and developing a literature crosswalk that can be added onto when additional related studies are found.

Even though I was hesitant to begin the process of the crosswalk initially, I now have a file that will be invaluable for future study in my research interest. Comparison of the literature is a daunting task for most researchers but beginning a crosswalk and allowing it to grow over the course of a study (or several studies) makes comparison doable. Before I was introduced to this tool, my method of organization consisted of saving articles to Dropbox and trying to keep notes about their contents. I was going in circles. (SA Reflections)

The literature crosswalk is a living document and will be relevant to future research efforts if you regularly look for current articles on your topic and add them to the crosswalk. If a new area of interest emerges, add more columns and insert the new information. Also refer back to the relevant previous studies to update the crosswalk to include that information. Once you become accustomed to using a literature crosswalk, you may want to create additional crosswalks on various topics or even subtopics. These topics can be added to the original crosswalk document by adding on to sheets or a new file can be created.

A technologically savvy individual may want to make many other additions to the literature crosswalk, such as creating links to the articles themselves, which would facilitate re-examining specific studies for additional details. Therefore, you are encouraged to make any modifications you deem helpful to make the crosswalk a tool that facilitates your research endeavors.

While the crosswalk is a helpful organization tool for graduate students, researchers of all levels can benefit from creating literature crosswalks. Since the information in the crosswalk can be sorted in various ways, this facilitates writing literature reviews for manuscripts that focus on similar topics but with different contexts or populations. Additionally, a more seasoned researcher could locate key information, identify changes in methods or findings that have happened over time, recognize if specific researchers were engaged in similar research interests, and pinpoint areas in which there is opportunity for further research.

In conclusion, when you have a specific research agenda in mind, creating a literature crosswalk could aid you in being more productive in reviewing the literature. The advantage of the literature crosswalk tool is organizing a great deal of information, which facilitates a deeper analysis of the literature. To summarize, the benefits gleaned from completing a literature crosswalk are:

- 1) Organizing the data in a searchable format
- 2) Finding trends across research studies
- 3) Gaining a deeper understanding of the literature and relationships between studies

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