“Experts and Novices”: can participative approaches to learning help the lonely academic writer?

Introduction

The writing of a well structured, critical review of academic literature is a staple element of both masters and doctoral studies (Gordon et al., 2002; Boote and Beile, 2005; Green and Bowser, 2006) and can be useful in the business world to understand current thinking (Zorn and Campbell, 2006). Despite its importance, however, there is a paucity of literature to guide and instruct students (Boote and Beile, 2005; Green and Bowser, 2006).

The aim of this study is to investigate whether a learning and teaching initiative: “Experts and Novices”, based on a participative learning approach, can improve the perceived abilities of a group of masters students to develop well-structured, critical reviews of academic literature.

The paper will review current thinking on the writing of a literature review and introduce the theory behind participative learning which led to the development of “Experts and Novices”. Research into the perceptions of students of the usefulness of the initiative will be reported, including some suggestions of how the initiative might develop in the future.

Current thinking on the writing of a literature review

Establishing the theoretical framework for research, drawing upon both conceptual and empirical studies is normal for both masters level dissertations and doctoral theses and fulfils several purposes. Initially a review of existing understanding can provide an overview within which to locate the current study and its contribution to the knowledge base. A review can also help formulate a research problem and can offer guidance in research design, highlighting techniques which may yield different types of data (Merriam, 1998). A review of the literature can help define the scope of the research (Boote and Beile, 2005) and can establish a collective understanding of what has been done before. Indeed, the literature review is accepted to be a part of developing into an academic, of becoming an “expert in the field” (Hart, 1998, p1). Far from being an appendage, or an ad-hoc “add-on” (Gordon et al., 2002), a review of literature ensures that the researcher appreciates the debates in a field, helping to develop an argument and an explanation of how they are extending existing knowledge (Zorn and Campbell, 2006).

That a literature review is more than a list of papers is well-established: Hart’s (1998) reference to “thinnily disguised annotated bibliographies” (p1) is supported by Boote and Beile’s (2005, p 3) description of a poor literature review as “merely an exhaustive summary of prior research”. Despite its importance, several studies note that the literature review is often the weakest element in a study (e.g., Berthon et al., 2003). However, despite a broad consensus about what the literature is (and what it is not), few research methods text books devote substantial sections to the literature review. Indeed, Green and Bowser (2006) note that in spite of acknowledging its centrality, the body of literature is quite small and that the literature review is given the “least instructional consideration among dissertation chapters” (Green and Bowser, 2006, p188).

Explicit guidance for students that does exist is largely limited to search, retrieval, writing and referencing, with less emphasis on explicit help with organisation and synthesis. The field of information science has been traditionally associated with search and retrieval (Gordon et al., 2002) and there is often collaboration between faculty and librarians to develop skills in this area (Green and Bowser, 2006). However, gathering and referencing
resources is only part of the literature review process; students also need strategies for organising and synthesising materials to avoid accusations of “brief catalogues of previous research” or “article –by-article reports” (Nairn et al., 2006, p259). Often student are left wondering how to treat materials once assembled (Green and Bowser, 2006). In terms of organisation, Berthon et al. (2003) propose that students use the notion of a “paradigm funnel” to categorise and organise articles. With a practical focus and a working example, the paper does offer students a tool which can develop understanding of some of the deeper requirements of a literature review. Attempts have also been made to provide exercises to help students understand and develop synthesised arguments (e.g., Zorn and Campbell, 2006). Writing advice on developing a clear argument is present in the literature (e.g. Zorn and Campbell, 2006) but the lack of explicit guidance suggests this type of support is assumed to be covered in texts which purely focus on writing skills.

An alternative type of guidance is offered by text books and studies which develop and test the use of rubrics and marking criteria for literature reviews (e.g., Hart, 2003; Boote and Beile, 2005; Green and Bowser, 2006). Whilst it is clear that a rubric can help students understand the criteria for assessing a review, it is unlikely that a rubric alone can tell a student how to synthesise and therefore lead to better literature reviews (Boote and Beile, 2005).

Whilst some aspects of developing a literature review can be supported by specific experts, such as librarians and writing teachers, support for a dedicated class on literature review writing is difficult to find. Instead, proposals have been made for literature reviewing to be integrated throughout a programme, with a focus on pre-dissertation coursework (Boote and Beile, 2005).

In summary, there is no doubt amongst scholars that the development of a well-structured, critical review of the literature is a crucial aspect of study at both masters and doctoral levels. Responsibility for delivering sessions on writing literature reviews appears to be shared between faculty and librarians. In the literature, the focus of guidance is largely on search, retrieval, writing and referencing with less on synthesis and critical evaluation, much of it emerging in the field of information science. Developments of rubrics and marking criteria have attempted to clarify matters for students, although they stop short of instructing students how to synthesise.

Throughout the literature reviewed so far, much of the focus (with the exception of Freer and Barker, 2008 and Gordon et al., 2002) assumes that individuals will work alone or at most will engage with peers in a virtual classroom or in the review of their work. Given the number of articles reviewed in this study alone in which the work is authored by more than one person, it seems strange that we still assume students should work in such an isolated way. With this observation in mind, the research question asks whether learning and teaching initiatives based on participative learning can contribute to students’ perceived abilities to develop well-structured, critical reviews of academic literature, with a particular focus on their ability to synthesise and critically evaluate academic journal articles.

An initiative to improve the development of a literature review

During 2008-9, the author trialled a new approach to helping MA Marketing students to write an academic literature review. The initiative was named “Experts and Novices”. Based on the idea of learning as participation, each student was asked to come to one of three classes as an “expert” on a given topic (which would ultimately be the topic for an assessed literature review). To qualify as an “expert” they had to have read five academic journal articles,
selected by themselves and come to class prepared to share their reading with a group of “novices” who had only read the relevant chapter of the core textbook. As an expert, they were asked to identify arguments and viewpoints in the literature for discussion in order to lead a debate amongst the group.

The approach adopted in the “Experts and Novices” initiative is based on a view of learning which sees a shift away from a “standard” paradigm of learning to an “emerging” paradigm (Hagar, 2004), where, instead of the acquisition of abstract ideas, learning is based on participation. The “standard paradigm” views learners as “acquiring” knowledge by filling up a series of containers with universal context-free knowledge. In the standard paradigm, there is a view of “learning as product” (Hager, 2004a p.5) where what is learned is relatively stable over time, can be recorded in texts for transmission and measured by examination. In the “emerging” paradigm of learning, learning is characterised as action in the world in which, as a result of learning, both learners and their environment are changed. In this emerging paradigm the main change is not the altered “cleverness” of the learner, but the creation of a new set of relations in an environment.

Research methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen as the best way to investigate detailed perceptions and opinions of the students who had taken part in the “Experts and Novices” sessions. Focus groups had the advantage of generating data quickly, which was important in order to speak to students soon after the process and before they became engrossed in their next assignments.

Focus groups were facilitated by a member of the teaching team, using a semi-structured research guide. Mason (2002) suggests that as qualitative researchers regard knowledge as situated, then it is likely that interviews or discussion will draw on social experiences or processes rather than abstract questions. With this in mind, wherever possible, participants were asked about their own personal experiences of writing the literature review.

The wide universe for this research can be described as all students who were enrolled on the full time MA Marketing and associated programmes at a UK university in 2009-10. This was the second cohort to participate in the “Experts and Novices” sessions. The course is diverse internationally and the sample includes students from 19 countries. There is also a diverse range of prior undergraduate experience, with students from many different subject areas and institutional cultures. Recruitment of the participants was based on convenience and interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. In total, 28 students participated in the focus groups.

All group discussions were recorded (with the participants’ full knowledge) and transcribed by a professional transcriber. This stage of the research was funded by an Academy of Marketing and Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Business, Management, Accountancy and Finance teaching research and development grant, awarded to investigate initiatives linked to international students’ learning.

Findings

Focus group discussions revealed a widespread lack of understanding of an academic literature review. Some saw it as simply a “summary”, and most struggled with the status of their own opinion in the review. Past experience was varied (both in terms of the diverse international contexts experienced and in terms of the subject disciplines) and as a result,
some students were used to starting with their own opinions, others felt their own views had no place in their work. Defining the scope of their literature review also posed problems:

...the question was quite clear but then I found gathering all the literature, that was the first challenge and I think because the topic was clear but you didn’t know to what extent you have to cover the whole topic.

This was a recurring theme in the discussions, although several students had developed their own solutions, such as starting with a text book chapter to gain a feel for the possible scope and structure and using mind-mapping software to develop an approach. Referencing was an additional problem identified by the groups, again magnified due to the diverse geographic and educational backgrounds of participants.

Discussion of the “Experts and Novices” sessions did reveal some positive views. The necessity to source and read five journal articles in advance of the submission of the assessed literature review was seen by several students as a beneficial “kick-start” to the whole process. There was also evidence of a developing confidence:

I read the five journals, read the textbooks and you know brought out the most important parts of the journals and sort of I don’t know I feel like there was actually quite an interesting debate going on, people were asking me and I could actually answer them and things like that...

I think the thing is you can test yourself whether you have understood it when the novice asks very interesting and clever questions, you can then think oh well I haven’t really got behind that yet and I need to focus a little bit more and I had a very good intelligent novice who asked very good questions but because I prepared well I thought okay I can explain this to him and helped him...

This was seen as particularly beneficial to some of the quieter members of the class:

I think the system of experts analysis they’re good for people who are shy. For example during the lecture they don’t understand something and they’re afraid to raise their hand and ask the lecturer, and in this way it’s more relaxed situation, you can ask because you’re doing with your class mates.

There also appeared to be a perceived benefit in the sharing of sources:

“The other thing I found very useful was actually sharing the best journals because when I get to do my literary review I did have a couple of journals that I really liked and then my talking to other people and they started sharing, oh this is the best one for me and so I got actually the best ones and that’s why I could argue about my topic so I think that was the best part”.

In terms of developing the critical evaluation skills needed for a successful literature review, there was some positive evidence to suggest that the “Experts and Novices” approach was helpful:

I think it’s a good way to develop critical evaluation because you get other ideas...you think in a different way because you get a new idea and have to evaluate it and maybe you didn’t think about it before.

There was also some evidence that the approach did help towards a deeper understanding:
I was thinking about that because for example before the session I read the chapter from the book, and I gathered that it was a bit hard to understand, but then in class when experts explained it I found it really easy to understand. And also before the first session I thought that it could be a bit boring, but then I found it really useful.

However, despite some very positive perceived benefits of the “Experts and Novices” approach, it should be noted that where students had not prepared in advance, the experience was not seen as helpful:

the person who was the expert hadn’t done any reading, he didn’t really know anything about it and we kind of sat there twiddling our thumbs not really knowing what to talk about.

This participant had experienced one very well-prepared “expert” and was able to contrast the excellent learning in this session with the unsatisfactory contribution of the unprepared student.

Conclusions

Overall, in answer to the research question: did the “Experts and Novices” approach improve the perceived abilities of a group of masters students to develop well-structured, critical reviews of academic literature, the evidence suggests that the approach was perceived as helpful in several ways. The sessions provided opportunities for participation from all types of students, including those usually too shy to speak out. Having to read and discuss five journal articles meant that students got started earlier than normal on their assessed assignment and the sharing of references helped students to identify useful articles for their literature reviews.

However, the experience was very dependent upon the contribution of the “experts”. Whilst this is a valid point, it should be noted that when developing the “Experts and Novices” initiative, the author saw the greatest benefits being accrued by the “expert” in that they would have to identify themes and arguments in the literature and be able to explain why they were more convincing than other arguments. All of this should contribute to a successful, well-synthesised, critical evaluation of the literature. From the focus groups, it has emerged that students were expecting to gain as much from the sessions in which they were “novices”. Future developments of this initiative will need to take this into account when briefing the sessions, by clearly identifying the benefits of being both an “expert” and a “novice”.

Overall, the study concluded that whilst the writing of a literature review is largely an individual exercise, there are benefits to be gained from a participative approach such as “Experts and Novices” during the early stages of a literature review assignment. Further research is planned to evaluate this initiative further, including in-depth discussions with individual students who have not experienced “Experts and Novices” to uncover how they approach writing a literature review.
References


