Use of a Literature Review to Inform Evaluation

Literature reviews are often included in evaluations as they provide information on best/leading practices or different service models. A literature review may also be conducted to collect background information on the target population or the specific disorder/problem the service is designed to address. It can also help in the development of evaluation questions and indicators. Ideally, the literature review will be carried out early on in the evaluation and can inform or shape the service being delivered.

A literature review is a systematic, explicit, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluations and interpreting the existing body of recorded work produced by researchers, scholars and practitioners. A literature review will provide an understanding of what is already known about a topic (Fink, 1998). The degree of coverage within a review ranges from exhaustive, which includes all articles on a topic, to only including the central or pivotal articles in a field (Cooper, 1988).

A literature review discusses published information in a particular subject area and sometimes this pertains to a certain time period. A literature review usually has an organizational pattern and more commonly contains a summary, as well as, a synthesis of information. Synthesis of information requires reorganization, or a reshuffling of that information. It may lead to a new interpretation of old material or a combination of both new and old interpretations (http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html).

Stages of development of a literature review parallel the process for conducting primary research and include (Cooper, 1984, as cited in Randolph, 2009):

1. Problem formulation—this stage begins with determining the questions that will guide the literature review, followed by determining the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of studies/articles.
2. Literature search and data collection—collecting extensive, representative or important and relevant articles and documenting how the literature was searched and data were collected. When the reviewer can convince readers that every effort has been made to identify all the relevant articles and a point of information saturation is reached, this process can stop.
3. Data evaluation—determining which literature makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the topic.
4. Analysis and interpretation—making sense of the extracted data. This may involve performing a quantitative, qualitative or mixed-method synthesis, depending on the type of data extracted.

5. Public presentation—determining which information is more important to be presented and discussing the findings and conclusions of important and relevant literature.

**Structuring a Literature Review**

Literature reviews commonly include the following sections (adapted from Paton, 2010):

1. **Executive Summary:**
   This section allows the readers to become familiarized with the larger body of material without having to read it all. It presents an overview of your most interesting/important findings. This section is usually written last and should be short (e.g., 1 to 3 pages).

2. **Introduction:**
   An introduction to a literature review provides the reader with a very brief explanation of the problem identification process that led to a request for a literature review. It may also place the literature review in the larger problem context. A literature review is usually part of a larger undertaking. This section may include an overview statement or a short summary of what is currently known and unknown (current state review).

3. **Forming a Question**
   A good question is essential to any good literature review. It is very hard to find relevant evidence if a question is unfocused or unspecific. The SMART question format may be used as a first refinement tool.
   A question should be:
   
   **S** = specific (Define the terms in detail)
   **M** = measurable (Is it likely there is evidence to answer the question?)
   **A** = actionable (Is there local readiness to act on your findings?)
   **R** = relevant (How important is the issue to stakeholders?)
   **T** = timely (Is this a good time to consider changes?)

   If the question is not SMART – if most stakeholders consider the issue not very important, or if there is no readiness to act/change – then it may be necessary to revisit the need for a literature review.
4. Searching and Selecting Literature

Several factors may limit the scope of the review, including time and resource limitations. If time is very limited, you may choose to only use databases that provide the full text of articles, and select only the most current information; i.e. those no more than 5 years old.

It is important that readers understand how you searched for and selected literature, whether you do a basic annotated bibliography or a detailed systematic review. If it has value to you, it is likely to have value to others. A reader should be able to duplicate your results and build on your review.

Before beginning a search, organize your process:

1. Decide how to organize your material to track search results and selections. If you have more than one question, set up a process for each question.

2. Develop a basic table/document outlining search strategy and general results before you begin your search.

3. Develop a basic set of selection criteria (what will you use to decide which articles to include) before you begin your search. This ensures you use the same basic process for all results. Basic inclusion criteria should be few and simple.

This process will assist your search for relevant literature. It will also guide you in refining or expanding initial searches. This should let people know what terms you searched and on what basis articles were included in, or excluded from your review.

Search strategies include:
- Paper journals or electronic databases, or both
- Search terms and combinations of terms
- Identify where you searched (both electronic and paper sources)
- Time period covered, and why
- Consulting with colleagues or experts, web sites

In literature selection process, in addition to determining your inclusion and exclusion criteria, you need to consider who will do the selection and how, as well how agreement on selection will be reached and how differences will be resolved.

In comprehensive reviews, a first stage will include literature based on a broad screen of titles and abstracts. A second stage will be a strict screen of full text articles that passed the first stage and may involve more detailed criteria.
5. Extracting Evidence from the Literature

Once you have gathered a selection of articles that meet your general criteria, you begin a more detailed analysis of each article. Depending on the type of literature review, you will focus on more specific characteristics such as methodology, outcomes and statistical analyses in quantitative reviews, or feelings, behaviours, thoughts and actions in qualitative reviews.

Remember that studies/articles that do not address your original question(s) may not be useful to you. You may need to consult with colleagues if you are unsure how to assess certain articles. Large reviews often include multiple reviewers.

6. Summary of Literature

There are several common ways to organize a literature review. In health care practice, thematic or conceptual reviews are commonly used.

**Thematic/conceptual reviews** are organized around a topic or an issue. As an example, one might examine a question to determine where knee surgery rehabilitation services will be offered:

What are physiotherapist attitudes and preferences to service location for knee surgery rehabilitation?
One would examine
- Service location: inpatient, outpatient, community
- Provider opinion
- Economic assessments of the locations
- Patient opinion

The search strategy and data collection in this case would focus first on literature that looked at positive and negative aspects related to service location and at provider assessments and preferences. Economic assessments would be useful for comparing costs. While patient opinion was not part of the initial question, you might decide to include it, if you find it to be an important consideration appearing in your searches.

The summary section might provide a comparison of the findings in which location of service was the main theme; ease of access, cost/benefit, age and/or gender differentiation and community preference with regards to service location could be considered as concepts/themes which would further inform your summary and interpretations.
Some literature reviews are organized in a chronologic/historical fashion, from oldest to newest, to show the intellectual progression of a topic. Methodological reviews, on the other hand, focus on the approach a researcher or writer takes to the topic, rather than content. The latter two formats are not commonly used in current health care provision/health care policy work.

7. Interpretation

In interpreting results of a review, always relate summary and assessment back to the initial question or questions.

Summary and interpretation may be done separately or as a single section. It will form the bulk of your report and the basis for any recommendations. Provide a full picture by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each item.

Consider the audience when writing this section. All readers should understand how the literature has been used to answer the question(s).

8. Recommendations

If asked to provide recommendations, you will need to briefly review the current state and identify possible changes. Provide the options that you can identify from the literature and the main points supporting or against each option.

- Limit your recommendations to those most closely related to the question(s).
- Link recommendations to strong, relevant evidence.
- Be aware of context around social, economic, environmental, and political issues that may impact how recommendations are received.
- Keep recommendations concise.
- State clearly whether cost analysis needs to be added.
- If you have a recommendation based on the literature that was not part of the initial question, but seems strong in the evidence, present it in that context.
- Be honest in your assessments of options.

9. References

All literature included in your review needs to be included in the reference list. Use a single common referencing style such as APA, AMA, Chicago or MLA.
References


