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Using Writing to “Process” Readings: Two Methods

Students commonly report that they attempt to “read everything” and then write a literature review, only to find that they have remembered very little and have to begin reading again. We do not usually think of reading as a skill that needs to be taught beyond elementary school, but graduate students often find themselves needing more sophisticated reading strategies than the ones they developed in college or professional settings. Reading skills turn out to be particularly critical to the process of reviewing literature.

In a remarkable study, Jaidka, Khoo, and Na (2013) took 20 literature reviews from a single journal and tracked backward to find all of the sources cited in order to determine how the writers selected material, which sections of the original article the authors used, and how they transformed the source material (paraphrase, summary, higher level synthesis). One the things they found was that students who performed higher level synthesis (creating what they call “integrative reviews” rather than “descriptive reviews”), specifically drew from materials beyond the abstract, introduction, and research methods. This suggests that teaching students to engage productively with the more complex elements of the text and to think synthetically during the reading process can help students avoid reading “passively” and producing literature reviews that are more synthesis than summary.

These are two methods that can be adapted by students to suit their needs.

I. Spreadsheet Method

This method often appeals to students who are working on quantitative studies and/or who are more comfortable with quantitative approaches. This method pushes students not only to record study summaries, but to identify and record “synthesis moments” as they read rather than trying to synthesize after reading.

Source Citation	Study Summary	Main Arguments/Findings	Relevance to other Sources	Relevance to my Study

Here is an example of a similar chart that appears as part of a published literature review article, illustrating that published scholars also use similar techniques.

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JMLD Vol. 3, No. 2, 2015

Table 1 A Summary of the Studies Examining Attentional Focus in Rehabilitation and Older Age^a

Study	Participants	Tasks	Method/Focus instructions	Results
Ankle sprains and ACLR				
Gokeler et al. (2015)	16 patients after ACLR; at least 16 years of age, > 4 months after injury	Single leg hop for distance	-5 jumps on uninjured leg followed by 5 jumps with injured leg -IF: on jumping as far as possible while thinking about extending knees as rapidly as possible -EF: on jumping as far as possible while thinking about pushing oneself as hard as possible from the floor	-Mean jump distance, knee valgus angle at initial contact, peak knee valgus angle, valgus ROM: EF = IF -Knee flexion angles at initial contact, peak knee flexion angle, total ROM, time to peak knee flexion: EF > IF (better) on injured leg
Laufer et al. (2007)	36 males and 4 females with first or recurrent grade 1 or 2 lateral ankle sprain (age: 19–33 years)	Maintaining balance while standing on the leg with the injured ankle (tested on a Biodex Stability System)	-Pretest, three training sessions on the Biodex on three consecutive days (20 practice trials of 20 s each per session), posttest, and retention test 48 hr after training -IF: keep balance by stabilizing the body -EF: keep balance by stabilizing the platform	-Acquisition: difference between posttest and pretest: EF > IF, particularly in less challenging stance positions -Retention: differences between EF and IF maintained
Rotem-Lehrer & Laufer (2007)	36 males with first or recurrent grade 1 or 2 lateral ankle sprain (age: 19–33 years)	Maintaining balance while standing on the leg with the injured ankle—tested on a Biodex Stability System with foot platform that can be adjusted from 8 (most stable [easy]) to 1 (least stable [difficult])	-Pretest, three training sessions in levels 6 and 4 (easy and moderate, respectively) on the Biodex on three consecutive days (20 practice trials of 20 s each per session), posttest, and retention test 48 hr after training -IF: keep balance by stabilizing the body -EF: keep balance by stabilizing the platform	Acquisition and retention: -Levels 6 and 4 on Biodex -EF > IF -Transfer task (level 2, untrained, difficult to balance): EF > IF -IF showed no improvements from pretest to posttest

Ziv, G., & Lidor, R. (2015). Attentional Focus and Motor Learning in Clinical Settings and in Older Age: A Review. *JMLD*, 3(2), 123-139.

II. Narrative Method.

I call this the Quotes and Notes Method. This method involves identifying and “conversing” with key quotes from a text in order to think through how the ideas fit in relation to each other and to one’s evolving thinking. The selection of quotes in itself involves a first-level selection of material deemed important and relevant to the student’s project. It often appeals to students who gravitate toward narrative and qualitative methods. Again, what we find here is not just note taking in the sense of recording or summarizing, but active dialog with the text in the context of the student’s emerging questions. I point out features of this dialog in the side comments.

Used with permission by Ph.D. candidate Tara Goddard.

Hauer (1994) Better to be Dead Than Stuck in Traffic?

“with the turn of the ignition key all drivers indicate that the benefit of the journey is greater than the finite probability of dying in its course.” (pg 110)

This quote nicely introduces the topic of acceptable risk. What is highly relevant here is just how well people estimate risk to themselves, in particular with respect to driving. The statistics show – driving is more dangerous than most of our other daily activities, and traffic crashes account for one of the top causes of death for all ages groups, and the top cause for ages 5-44 [that’s not quite the right age range, need to go back to epidemiology presentation from ALR]. Yet not only do we still drive without hesitation, we often do it with a nonchalance or inattention that you would like we would reserve for the armchair recliner. And as car technology (seat belts, roll bars, air bags, etc) has improved, I wonder whether our sense of safety when driving has increased at a disproportional rate.

Even though there can be no preferences for posthumous consequences, it is said that people can have preferences amongst options when one feature is the probability of dying. This liberating distinction is usually attributed to Schelling (1968). It has become the foundation of risk evaluation or at least one of its central tenets. The distinction is between the cost (or value) of a death and the cost (or value) of changes in the probability of dying. (pg 111)

This is an interesting philosophical question. Basically, Hauer is saying that one cannot put a value on one’s own life, because we cannot experience the consequences of dying. I don’t want to go too far on a tangent into existentialism or other philosophical discussions about death, but it IS relevant in the sense that we, collectively, make or at least support decisions that balance the probability of death with more minor inconveniences (that admittedly have economic implications) like traffic delay. And yet the people making these decisions are unlikely to even conceptualize the philosophical dilemmas.

Daveena Tauber 8/5/2016 12:16 PM

Comment [1]: Enough citation info to re-find the source easily

Daveena Tauber 8/5/2016 12:19 PM

Comment [2]: Quotations from the source appear in italics.

Daveena Tauber 8/27/2016 11:03 PM

Comment [3]: Very important to list page numbers with all quotes and paraphrase! I have seen students who don’t do this waste time trying to re-locate their quotes. Failing to record page numbers can also lead to inadvertent plagiarism.

Daveena Tauber 8/5/2016 12:17 PM

Comment [4]: Writer actively poses questions about the implications of the text.

Daveena Tauber 8/5/2016 12:18 PM

Comment [5]: Identifying what is “interesting” is a seemingly mundane but actually important distinction on the part of the reader.

Daveena Tauber 8/5/2016 12:19 PM

Comment [6]: Restates the author’s point—an excellent active reading strategy.

when it comes to the valuation of an option which will cause death to some, people in the ensemble of potential victims must be able to correctly assimilate into their preferences both the probability of their death and its value. But it remains impossible to have preferences for an option involving the death of the deciding organism and it is meaningless to speak about them. Moreover, people have no sensors for probabilities. As is well known, even after extensive instruction people have difficulty with judgments involving probability. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that preferences expressed by potential victims are as whimsical as would be the preferences of potential rest area users who do not know what a rest area is and have no idea how frequently they might use it (or of persons guessing the mass of the earth). Estimates of value of life derived from such whimsical preferences are likely to be spurious. A spurious estimate of the value of life is likely to be inconsistent with a valid estimate of the value of time. (pg 112-113)

So here Hauer addresses my earlier point, at least partially, that people are unable to conceive of probabilities or estimate the value of life. He doesn't address the role that technology plays, or culture in venerating driving while downplaying or outright ignoring its risks. But it certainly supports my theory that trying to get people to actively change their driving habits or behaviors based on safety stats or information is unlikely to be effective. Like many public health interventions, passive approaches (that is, the targets don't have to actively choose the healthier behavior so much as the environment or culture supports it) may be best.

The essence of legitimacy is consent. (pg 114)

This leads off a discussion of using a "direct legitimacy machine" (p 115) to make decisions about individual roadway projects (he uses the example of replacing a STOP sign with a YIELD sign). However, he saves discussion of the practical application for this for another paper.

Jaidka, K., Khoo, C. S. G., & Na, J.C. (2013). Literature review writing: how information is selected and transformed. *Aslib Proceedings*, 65, 303-325.

Daveena Tauber 8/5/2016 12:21 PM

Comment [7]: The writer has a sense of her evolving stance or argument. She is actively looking for evidence and thinking through implications.

Daveena Tauber 8/5/2016 12:22 PM

Comment [8]: The writes notes what is NOT in the text—very important in identifying gaps in the literature.