

The Write Place/Social Work 3308: Literature Review workshop

A Writing Resource created by Vidya Natarajan for The Write Place

Step by step: my research and writing process, and the skills I needed

1) I **unpacked the question**

The question, appropriately for a 3000 level course, is **complex**, with different **parts**. It requires

- a comprehensive literature review of the **issue** (**tip**: I chose an issue I find really compelling: equitable post-secondary educational participation for Indigenous students and indigenization of education)
- looking for TWO research or policy gaps related to the issue (**tip**: I chose a hotly debated issue, with many unresolved questions)
- proposing TWO policy directions (**tip**: I really want to see change in these areas)
- a minimum of 6 references, 3 from last 10 years (**tip**: I scanned at least 20, and stayed within the last 5)
- critical analysis, NOT summary (**tip**: I chose sources with *different approaches*)
- max 2500 words, APA references (**tip**: I used the [OWL Purdue APA](#) resources as I began to write)

2) I clarified the purpose and audience for the assignment in my own head:

Social science knowledge is built when researchers look at past studies, find a 'gap' or shortfall, and do new research to fill the gap. A literature review can be a **process** through which I identify a research gap in the field, to help me narrow my research focus. It can also be a **product**: an essay containing my findings about the gap, with reasons why the gap exists (critique) and how it can be filled. Either way, I use it to demonstrate my own scholarly approach to the 'traditions' of the field, and the homework I have done towards responsible policy making, to an **audience of fellow scholars and policy makers**.

3) I began my **research process**

a) I defined the areas in which I lacked knowledge, and decided where I would find it

- Facts and figures, statistics: the most useful site was one [newly created on the Cardinal Carter library](#) website, which gave me [this link](#) (Google Canadian Documents, Carleton University) with up-to-date policy statements issued in Ontario as well as by the Federal govt.
- Theoretical frameworks of various kinds: i) for understanding broad concepts related to inequitable social structures and racism: I drew on Lundy and Hick et al for this; ii) for understanding of more specific structural and systemic barriers to aboriginal post-secondary education, choosing the concepts of postcoloniality, Eurocentrism, tokenism, unconscious bias, "disciplinary silences" and Indigenous self-determination; ii) for understanding [the political/ethical roles non-aboriginal people can play](#) in supporting aboriginal education (how to be a responsible ally)

b) I chose **keywords** and began searches for the different aspects of my paper; after several tries, I used combinations of the following: aboriginal, Indigenous, First Nations, Indian; post-secondary education, university, college; transition, retention, support, barriers; social policy, public policy

d) I began **skim-reading**: I needed to cast a wide net at the selection stage

e) I identified key players, **key debates** by reading at least ONE current overview of the field from the Government side, and also ONE from an Indigenous scholar

f) I narrowed and refined my topic by identifying the sub-field within which I wanted to propose two policies

g) I began **detailed reading** for evidence and arguments, taking notes

h) While note-taking, I began to **synthesize and categorize** my sources under various headings, examining the relationship of sources to each other, and framing them within significant debates in the fields of structural social work theory/practice/policy analysis

- I put like and like together, thinking in **patterns** or trends, and ask **why** they arise
- I related the trends to structural social work theory/practice in Hick et al and Lundy
- I explained departures from the norms

i) for each source, I noted context, stated goals, approach, research methods, implications for policy

j) I also took notes that would contribute to my critical **analysis**,

- I decided the grounds for my critique of sources:
 - theoretical rigour: are the research and its findings theoretically sound?
 - validity of research methodology, data, sampling, analysis of results (is the sample size adequate? Is the discussion of findings convincing? Why/why not?)
 - biases/assumptions if any
 - ethical or political issues (from a structural SW framework)
 - applicability
- I assessed the source's strengths and weaknesses in relation to the research's goals
- I critiqued the goals themselves, if appropriate
- I situated my research in relation to all this—how does my research avoid the weaknesses or draw on the strengths of an approach?

4) I began to write my first draft

k) I wrote out my working "thesis," making sure I remembered the need to connect my thesis and my policy proposals

l) I organized my review by outlining it:

Outline could be based on chronology (earliest to most recent), on themes (trends and patterns), on type of research (e.g. qualitative studies, quantitative studies, and mixed method studies, or field research vs. theoretical sources), on successful vs. unsuccessful models, or on relevance to policy proposals (least relevant to most relevant)

m) I filled in my body paragraphs and wrote a strong conclusion that did not just restate the Introduction

5) I revised and later edited my essay to create a second, cleaner draft

n) I created a "reverse outline" to make sure the paragraphs all linked to my main argument and had logical flow

o) I edited for grammar, removed surface errors, and added citations

p) I checked the formatting and visual set-up against OWL Purdue's APA model

Remember, while you look at the model on the following pages, that there is more than one way of approaching this task!

Closing the Post-Secondary Gap: A Literature Review and Policy Proposals Ensuring Full Participation for Indigenous Students

While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action (2015) include a number of statements about full participation of Indigenous students in post-secondary education, data published by Statistics Canada (2016) shows a significant though gradually narrowing gap between the graduation rates of Indigenous people and those of non-Indigenous Canadians. The literature on this subject makes it clear that a significant number of systemic barriers remain in place, including geographical barriers (remoteness of communities), psycho-social barriers (racist prejudices and mistaken assumptions about Indigenous cultures and peoples), and what we may call epistemological barriers (the Eurocentrism of university education, which leaves little room for Indigenous world-views). As Indigenous intellectuals and political leaders like Leanne Simpson (2011, 2016) and Greg Coulthard (2007) come up with a viable framework for self-determination, and as the Government of Canada gradually accepts partnership rather than assimilation as the basis of Canadian relationship with Indigenous peoples, there is an urgent need to create policies that will break down these barriers in reality rather than in intention. My review of the literature on the subject of policy-making for Indigenous post-secondary education draws attention to two directions for development. **The first policy direction, drawing on the central principle of self-determination, related to the Indigenous perception of post-secondary education as a right, based on treaty interpretation. Creating a Canada-wide (macro level) policy that recognizes this right through a) curricula and b) stable funding for Indigenous individuals and Indigenous-run post-secondary institutions may seem inequitable to the majority of Canadians; but it is a form of affirmative action that could go some way towards redressing the historical legacy of colonialism, the geographic barriers to post-secondary education, and the psychosocial obstacles to full Indigenous participation in post secondary education. The second policy, at a more mezzo/local level, arises from the fact that the Indigenous population in Canada is generally too small to ensure bargaining power, and that for historical wrongs to be righted, Indigenous-non-Indigenous alliances are important (Davis, 2010).** An institution like King's University College, whose Strategic Plan (2018) references justice for Indigenous peoples, can and should create policies that make the post-secondary environment more welcoming to Indigenous students, and begin by defining a viable set of steps administration, faculty, staff and students can take towards incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing into the curriculum.

Before I proceed, I would like to define the term "Indigenous" as used in this essay, and account for my choice of this descriptor... (definition). I would also like to situate myself as a non-indigenous researcher who is exploring the role of a responsible and open-minded ally.

Give a good two-part title!

A clear intro that summarizes the issue:

define the **context** of the selected issue (place, time, history, demographics, reasons for choice of issue—why is this research field important?)

give an **overview of your findings about studies on the issue**

create a thesis that that responds to your assignment prompt: "Based on these findings, the research gap lies in the areas of ___ and ___ (TWO gaps), and this demonstrates the need for (mezzo-/macro- level) policies that will address ___ and ___.

Give definitions or a road map: what will your essay contain?

This literature review makes recent studies on full participation of Indigenous students in post secondary education its starting point, taking for granted the contribution of two other important types of sources: aggregations of data (StatsCan, 2011 & 2016; Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Ontario’s documents, such as *Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education*, 2011) and sources that provide broad theoretical/ethical frameworks for these debates (Hick et al, 2009; Lundy, 2012; Sandel, 2012; Taylor, 2008; the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s *Calls to Action*, 2015). The subset of literature on participation falls into three different categories, depending on the positioning and theoretical approach of the researcher. The first category includes studies that propose technological and administrative solutions to educational obstacles such as the geographical remoteness of communities (Simon et al., 2014) or focus on retention of Indigenous students through targeted academic and psychological support systems (Smith, 2016; Brown et al., 2017). The approach tends to be practical and the research typically quantitative and empirical. The second category includes empirical studies analyzing the continued failure of such measures to close the education gap, leading to more philosophical theorizing of problems related to eurocentrism in research models and curricula, inhospitable program design, assimilationist policy initiatives, tokenism at the institutional level, and so on (Restoule et al. 2013; Gallop, 2016). Such studies critique the persistence of the ‘integration’ model of education (Pidgeon, 2016), see links between the high suicide rates among aboriginal youth and educational barriers (Gardam and Giles, 2016), and propose tentative ameliorative solutions (Parent, 2017). The third category includes theorists like Stonechild (2006), Simpson (2011, 2016) and Coulthard (2007), who identify as Indigenous, whose work draws on personal narrative and uses alternative research models (for instance, ‘sitting with’ or learning from elders) and who emphatically support self-determination for Indigenous nations, including in the field of education.

Organize the sources (and your essay paragraphs) under categories, and show the relationship of key sources to each other (which sources were ‘seminal’—big influences? Which ones caused small changes in the field? Which ones fell into opposing camps?) By doing this you will be **considering different viewpoints** (see your rubric).

BODY of the essay: detailed responses to the sources

Smith (2016) and Brown et al. (2017) provide a useful overview of the issues in the support of Indigenous students at post-secondary institutions, care of the elderly. Brown (date) identifies trends in and offers a detailed analysis of federal initiatives with regard to funding for Indigenous education. In their carefully researched statistical study and articles, Brown et al. take the position that...; similarly, Smith proposes that...

Write out a critical literature review with six or more sources (not just summaries). In each source, what do you find valuable, and what do you reject? Why?

In some ways similar to the empirical research and practical focus, found among the researchers above, the study by Restoule et al. (2013) y undertakes a qualitative and quantitative analysis of a sizeable sample of Indigenous students at Ontario universities (n = 250) through an online study. The starting point of the study is a clear perception that Indigenous students do not feel welcome at post secondary institutions: the authors list the reasons for this lack of ‘fit’ both comprehensively and convincingly. Applying Anishinaabe research methods, the researchers offer an implicit critique of the assimilationist theoretical model

Comparing the research methods of E and B, it is possible to account for the completely incompatible findings... Moreover, E’s sample size is insufficient to produce a credible result... However, B’s research has limited applicability...

Identifying the gaps (how to transition from the Lit. Review to the gap)

Whether the researchers identify as Indigenous or non-Indigenous, the review of the literature on Indigenous students' participation in the post-secondary education system makes it clear that significant barriers exist. Theorists like Simpson and Coulthard assert that Indigenous self-determination would be the framework for a viable education, and this future can be realized in two ways: first, by Indigenous institutions that teach a modified and less eurocentric curriculum; and second, by funding Indigenous student access to post-secondary education. However, when the *policy literature* is reviewed, neither of these theoretical positions is matched by any practical initiatives. The macro-level gap, then, is founded on the non-recognition of education as a treaty right for Indigenous students; this then also leads to the fragility of the funding system for both individuals and institutions, and the durability of alternatives remains a concern. The policy change that would fill this gap, then, is

At a more mezzo or local level, at King's, Indigenous education...

Policy outlines

Conclusion

References

- Assembly of First Nations (1988). *Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of Our Future*. Vol. 1, Ottawa: Assembly of First Nations, 1988
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- Simon, Jesse, Kevin Burton, Emily Lockhart, and Susan O'Donnell. 2014. Post-secondary distance education in a contemporary colonial context: Experiences of students in a rural first nation in Canada. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 15, (1) (02), <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/cgi-bin/ezpauthn.cgi?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1634296432?accountid=15115> (accessed October 24, 2018).
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