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Research: Proposal and Practice - A Manual for Beginners

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Abstract
This paper is a product of a persistent need of a simplified reference manual for learners beginning a research component of their required accomplishments for their respective degree programs at a University. The author draws from a constantly witnessed struggle the students go through when developing research proposals for their dissertations, in the end finding themselves falling trap of recycling past works with trivial adaptations. The author-cum examiner experiences show that students have problems at all levels of a dissertation project, from the identification of the agenda for research to final reporting, let alone the conducting of research itself.In that context, the intention of this brief paper is to help the novice students for a better beginning of their dissertation assignments. The draft guidance in the paper intends to shift the students' attitude from viewing research as a torturous examination exercise, to an enjoyable and beneficial academic exercise for development of an inquisitive mind n a person. The paper takes a pragmatic instructional approach in a very simplified language so as to minimize the demand for assistance.
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1. Introduction

This paper is an address to quality assurance (QA) focusing on a component of practice in the dimension of learners. It is an extension to the QA processes applied in institutions of higher learning. It is a somewhat deviation from the monitoring approach (Morales, 2016, p. 157), to mentoring for quality output, taking into account that rapid population growth in absolute terms continuously amounts pressure on education from the early stages to high levels of learning. Accordingly, this and other initiatives are demanded to help learners advance skills out of constraints of place and space. At hand is an input for quality and knowledge custodianship, aiming to provide a guided mentoring of the learner practitioners.

A research component is a requirement in many higher institutions of learning (HIL) for graduating from undergraduate, and a necessity in post-graduate studies. This paper provides a guide for developing a research proposal that can take one to field work with ease. To limit the work within a reasonable beginning scope, the actual field practices and approaches to tackling investigations and data collection are not unshelled, leaving that as a room for further work.

1.1 A Research Project

An impressive research project begins with a well written background (BG) which sets the ground for the rest of the work. A BG should build an impression for the need to investigate the phenomenon in the problem statement. The BG should explicate both, the ideal situation and what is not ideal in the phenomenon that arouses researchable questions. For example, it is supposed to be rainy in the seasons of Spring in East Africa (extending March to May). That is the ideal. If rains are missed in that season in one year, that is questionable. If it so happens again in another year, the question becomes a persistent one (Schuitmaker, 2012), arousing a need for investigation or research. It can be developed into a researchable question.

Depending on the discipline involved, or the field of study such as science, business or society, many ideal and non-ideal situations can be identified. A learner has to also understand that, there are situations which may not be of the ideal and non-ideal nature, but just new phenomena which need investigation/exploration to gain knowledge about. Others yet, are situations existing but to which there are no explanations to why they exist, while we need to know why they exist. The nature of the observed situation for investigation casts light on the research strategy such as pointed out by Creswell 2013 (cited in Johannesson & Perjons, 2014) that include exploration, explanatory/experimental, survey, case study, grounded theory, phenomenology, correlational, ethnography, or action research, that should be adopted in the field following the proposal stage.

A misconception exists among beginners. That research is about solving a problem. Research is about gaining knowledge about a phenomenon. Then solutions can be designed on the basis of that gained knowledge, and the recommendations of the researcher.

As a rule of thumb, a research project has three phases: development of a research proposal, the field work, and report writing. This is in line with other observations such as Goertz & Mahoney (2012) as cited in Basias and Pollalis (2018, p. 92) that a research process usually consists of research stages such as: define research questions,

collect data, process/analyze data, answer the research questions and present the findings. Take note that a research is 'one work' from the beginning to the end. See the abstract by Grant and Osanloo (2014, p. 12) positing: "….. theory-driven thinking and acting is emphasized in relation to the selection of a topic, the development of research questions, the conceptualization of the literature review, the design approach, and the analysis plan for the dissertation study". What does this mean? A research should be tied to an agenda, and that agenda has to be the focus of the writing from the background, to the conceptualization of the problem and a concise problem statement, to the literature reviewed, to field work, and finally reporting.

Each of the three phases has its own difficulties to the beginner. The phases form the main sections of this guide to allow for a self-directed reading and practicing. Exhibits are given enough space and detailed illustrations to the satisfaction of the learner.

1.2 Research proposal

The writing of a research proposal begins with the identification of a researchable problem. Beginners at this stage fall trap of attempting to reproduce studies done elsewhere, without consideration of their relevance to place, time and context.

Learners need to understand that identifying a researchable problem is a process that takes constant observation and reflexivity. It is a dynamic process. It involves tracking issues in the field of interest. As a matter of fact, a research agenda can be detected from every emerging issue for an experienced researcher. A research agenda refers to the underlying factor which needs to be brought to surface as the explanatory factor of the observable phenomenon.

As an example, the emergence of the motorcycle transport business sector in Tanzania is known to be contributing a lot to the country's economy. It is contributing to GDP, It is a quick and easy absorber of the youth labor force and 'energies' that could be used unfavorably elsewhere, thus reducing youth un-employment. However, a researchable agenda from this example is; If it is contributing to GDP, how much is it contributing? To answer this, a researcher has to conduct a research for cost benefit analysis. The sector has its own costs in terms of increased accidents for instance, which have to be deducted from the generated revenues to be able to meaningfully ascertain the sector's contribution to GDP. The same applies for reduced un-employment. The researchable agenda is how much un-employment is curbed, and so on.

An agenda for research can be based on purpose where six purposive areas can be exemplified.

i) Complementarity – where a research is conducted as a follow up to gain additional insights about the existing phenomenon. It could aim at building upon previous findings by contributing additions, or extending on them.

ii) Completeness – a study can be aroused by the need to bring an unfinished business to completion in the feelings of the researcher

iii) Collaborative programs – where the study emerge from outside seeking collaboration

iv) Developmental – where a study is conducted to develop constructs and hypotheses on /or technical advances

v) Comparability – comparative studies developed to compare explanations for convergence of diversity, and

vi) Confirmation – Studies emerging for the purpose of confirming previous studies on the basis of differing theories interpretive schemes, methodologies, places, etc.

1.3 How to set objectives

A research objective is a clear, concise declarative statement of the results sought by the researcher, from data. Research objectives are the drivers of the study. However, they are driven in the context of the anticipated theory, or hypothesis. This means, before they are formally stated, a learner needs to undertake a preliminary homework on the relevant theories attempted in the past to explain the situations related to the phenomenon at hand. When convinced that none exists, then the approach for research will be determined accordingly, such as following a philosophy among the grounded theory (Rieger, 2019) approaches.

Research objectives in research are at two levels. Level one is the statement of the general objective. This is the main objective, or the main question that the study targets to get answered. The phrasing of objectives at this level use words such as: to assess; to evaluate; to explore; or to investigate.

Below level one is the lower level, where specific objectives or specific targets are stated. At this level, any general objective is analyzed into smaller actionable objectives. Intuitively, specific objectives build up contribution to the realization of the general or main objective. The phrasing of level two objectives should be stated using action verbs that are specific enough to be measured, for example: to compare, to calculate, to assess, to determine, to verify, to calculate, to describe, to explain, to identify, to analyze, and so on.

Using action verbs serves to cultivate the sense of engagement between the actor and their work. At the same time, this approach helps the actor to evaluate their final work as having accomplished the research objective, or not.

On setting objectives, a learner has to take into account the reasoning pattern that will be followed in working them out. The pattern here means the 'philosophy' that the research will follow. It starts with the researchers belief

on how is reality formed. There are two lines of belief on this. That reality is socially constructed (Bogna, Raineri, & Dell, 2020), thus subjective to research participants. Research based on this belief strives to explore the conceptual schemes owned by individual research participants, how they construct the structures and abide to their social contracts. Or reality is objective. It exists independent of the social individuals. They only find themselves in it and get plied according to its forms, structures, and its existence precepts. The forma is a foundation for interpretivist research mostly of qualitative nature, while the later underlays positivist research which guide measurements and quantitative research. The objectives to be set have to have this at the back of the mind.

The objectives of qualitative research are to focus more on target audiences' range of behavior and perceptions that drive it rather than facts and statistics that govern quantitative research. Qualitative research aims to get a better understanding through first-hand experience, truthful reporting, and quotations of actual conversations. It aims to understand how the participants derive meaning from their surroundings, and how their meaning influences their behavior. Accordingly, the scope of qualitative research aims and objectives have a wide reach than quantitative counterparts.

Quantitative research objectives on the other hand aim to establish a relationship between a dependent and an independent variable or a set of them. Quantitative objectives anticipate the use of statistics to work them out. In the setting of quantitative objectives, the actor needs to predict the kind of relationships that exist between the observatory variables such as associations and co-mobility, or course-effect type. Related to that is the classification of the variables into dependent and independent categories in case of course-effect type of relationships, then anticipate the statistical models that will guide the field process.

2. Literature review: How to write Literature review

Literature review is a process by which the researcher enriches their understanding about the phenomenon in the research agenda. Literature review functions to position the research agenda in the existing body of knowledge about the phenomenon, the literal and pragmatic dimensions, the theories that demonstrate how the agenda has been dealt with historically and chronologically, and the unclosed gaps still existing.

Before getting into the actual exercise, it is worth noting the questions to be answered in the writing as:

How does the character of the idea or claim exist? That is, the researcher needs to establish the position of the study, in the main body of existing knowledge.

How the phenomenon is known, or how it is manifested? This means putting the topic of study in context with other important issues; and

What are the consequences of the answers to the phenomenon, meaning the emergent knowledge gap and how it is addressed by the current study.

As a guide, literature review must reflect the research objectives by sections, and research questions in the subsections thereof. The subsections in turn, as they are developed along the research questions, the contents in them must dwell on the discussion of the variables as they appear in the conceptual framework. It is here that the relationships in the variables are argued, explained, criticized or otherwise. In practice, advance arguments around the constructs, explore literature for each construct for evidence and support of arguments. End each argument with a stand. The stand could be a hypothesis/related research question to be investigated. I suggest for making sure that every construct and argument is contributing to the main agenda of the research. This helps to keep the study focused. In essence, literature review is the chapter that should expose the content of the study and all its supporting tools, giving the meaning to why the researcher thinks that the available knowledge is not adequate to explain the candidate phenomenon.

Randolph (2009) identifies the purposes of writing literature review as 'to demonstrate an author's knowledge about a particular field of study'; and to inform the researcher about the research family in the field. The others are more elaborately outlined by Baumeister and Leary (1997) as: 1) survey of the state of knowledge on a particular topic, 2) problem identification aiming at exposing the weaknesses, contradictions, controversies in a particular area of enquiry, 3) theory development where new theory perspectives are brought forward, 4) theory evaluation involving the review of literature relevant to the validity of an existing theory, and 5) to provide a historical account of a theory development in the time space.

Related to the works of beginners is no. 1, which can be expanded upon by the work of Grant and Osanloo (2014) on the approach to selecting and integrating a theoretical framework to structure all aspects of the research process. This is an area very dodgy to the beginners, who most frequently find themselves undertaking exactly what is condemned by the Educational Resources Information Center where it is directed that literature review has to be a process of information analysis and synthesis with a focus on the findings "and not simply bibliographic citations, summarizing the substance of the literature and drawing conclusions from it" (Brandhorst, 1982, p. 85).

Two approaches are known on writing literature review. The 'narrative' approach (Ferrari, 2015; Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006; Juntunen & Lehenkari, 2021; Pautasso, 2019; Siddaway, Wood, & Hedges, 2019), where a researcher has to conduct a thorough reading of the available literature related to the phenomenon, noting the contributions they make, in the process constructing a carefully argued narrative of analysis that aims at

pushing the knowledge wheel forward as a basis for the current research, where current issues and themes get flagged.

The other is known as the systematic approach (Boland, Dickson, & Cherry, 2017; Okoli & Schabram, 2010; Pickering & Byrne, 2014; Siddaway et al., 2019). Kitchenham and Charters (2007, p. vi) describe the approach as "a means of evaluating and interpreting all available research relevant to a particular research question, topic area, or phenomenon of interest. Systematic reviews aim to present a fair evaluation of a research topic by using a trustworthy, rigorous, and auditable methodology". The major power of this is that it can be re-traced for reliability verification. It involves developing a summary of existing evidence by specifying the works dedicated to the study including the observed research gaps in them, and what gap the current research is dedicating itself to (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007; Pickering & Byrne, 2014). It also can be applied to examine the extent to which empirical evidence supports/contradicts theoretical hypotheses (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007).

For the beginners, the main target of this guide, it is important to be guided on how to integrate a theoretical framework in a research project.

A theory driven academic research must use the selected theory to inform the research agenda right from the problem statement, to the research objectives, to the argumentation surrounding the subject of research, to methodology, findings and discussion thereof. In that context, the theory is used to determine the variables for investigation, the conceptual framework and the reporting pattern.

That is one aspect, but the other should aim at exploring theories that exist, their conceptual interactions and departures, and their related evolutions for the purpose of locating the current research in the prevailing body of theories, or exposing the gap for theorization in case a fitting theory to explain the phenomenon at hand does not seem to exist. Cooper's (1988) positing on the task is that "theoretical review can help to establish a lack of theories or reveal that the current theories are insufficient, thus working to justify that a new theory should be put forth."

Literature review is goal driven and goal seeking. The host study may be interested in building a big picture, manifesting the extent to which the research issues have been addressed in the knowledge content available by integration of knowledge, or to explicate the line of argumentation or discourse concerned.

A review has to critically analyze the body of knowledge, identify central issues, and explicate un-answered area of interest that the study can undertake. Hypotheses and research questions generate from such emergent areas. It is at this juncture that a study can make its contribution conspicuous. In a nutshell, Levy and Ellis' (2006, p. 183) summarization on making an effective literature review can be correctly generalized and applied in this manual as striving to achieve the following: a) methodological analysis and synthesize of quality literature; b) providing a firm foundation to a research topic; c) providing a firm foundation to the selection of research methodology; and d) demonstrating that the proposed research contributes something new to the overall body of knowledge (Levy & Ellis, 2006).

2.1 Malpractices on literature review

Though not a general rule, there is an approach to literature review where it is partitioned in two main sections: Theoretical literature review and, Empirical literature review. The stance of this paper on the approach is that a body of knowledge over any subject matter is one, while the approach undermines knowledge synthesis. In that understanding, theory and practice function to update each other. Empirical works enrich understanding, and contribute to theoretical conceptions in existing literature. Thus, the separation is deemed to be not important, as it is expected that the arguments will always be relevant when they are hinged on up to date available information to the best knowledge of the author. This way any researcher can be able to explicate a knowledge gap with ease.

Among the weaknesses in student's writing of literature review is the misunderstanding of the term 'theoretical literature review'. By observation, students tend to think that the term refers to revisiting of existing theories one after another in abstract. In the process, the learners literally reproduce theories they see to have a mention of their research concepts in one way or another at random. In the end, no any theoretical underpinning to the research agenda in question is achieved. Theoretical underpinning should explicate how the theory applied fits to guide the exploration, explanation, description, or predictions in the research phenomenon.

2.2 Empirical Literature review

Where the partitioning of 'theoretical literature review' and 'empirical literature review' is a mandatory presentation style of the host institution, empirical literature review aims at exploring the gained knowledge through scientific enquiry in the field of the study concerned. It involves developing a concise presentation of what the body of investigative activities has achieved, and what gaps, or questions remain uncovered. In the other words, the exposition of what is already known, and what is yet to be known. A good coverage of these two sections of literature review should vividly expose the knowledge gap. It helps to eliminate, or at least minimize repetitions. As a prospecting researcher, a student's targeted knowledge gap should be laid open at this stage beyond doubt.

3. The approach to the study – Research methodology

At the start of the research methodology chapter of the proposal, it is fundamentally important for the researcher to present the foundation for knowledge, or the way the audience can make sense of the presentation of field observations and data. In the other words, the expression of the respective researcher's world view that underlies the way they organize knowledge. This is the philosophy guiding the research.

Scholars identify three major philosophical perspectives in research, namely: positivism, interpretivist, and pragmatism, also referred to as 'research paradigms'.

Positivism begins with a belief that there is a single reality out there, which can be scientifically measured, studied and known through such processes. The point of departure is therefore a descriptive theory, a guess or assumptions, then making observations and measurement in the premises of the predetermined theory parameters. That is known as a deductive approach. Studies in this paradigm seek to explain deviations from the norm in the context of the standing theory. Where it is a new phenomenon, experimental designs get put into action.

Interpretivist tends to be qualitative and subjective. The researcher recognizes that the social world or context of participants cannot be separated from research, as participants construct reality (Constructivism). This is an inductive approach. It moves from observation and data to theory.

Pragmatism is perceived as a go between positivism and interpretivist. The focus of the researcher here is on what and how of the research problem, then applying interpretivism to understand the problem. Pragmatism believes that reality is continually interpreted and renegotiated against the backdrop of new and unpredictable situations.

Research paradigms refer to beliefs (ontology) and assumptions (epistemology) that provide a way for the research design. As seen above, a research paradigm as a worldview that guides the research process and the whole research plan.

Ontology is the study of the nature of reality. Is there a single reality (objective reality perception), multiple realities (constructivist social reality), or no reality at all, are the questions that orient ontology. Any line of belief among those will determine the way a study is to be designed.

Epistemology is the study of knowledge and how we can know reality. After agreeing on the form of reality (single, multiple or none), the next question is epistemological. How to gain understanding on that perceived form of reality. Example, if a researcher is conducting an experimental study involving the effectiveness of an introduced economic policy in addressing an economic issue, the outcome is either effective or not. This calls for objective type of test where data is collected and subjected to a test. This will essentially be a quantitative positivist study. If however, the phenomenon under study is immersed in behavioral context, then the context itself forms the lab and observations are to be made within that context. Multiple realities can be expected, calling for a qualitative/subjective study.

Methodology relates to how the investigation is done, in turn providing a way for the validation of the knowledge gained. It describes the process to go through for the discovery of reality, and proof/disproof of the theoretical assumptions.

3.1 Research design

A research design is the blueprint for the reasoning (logical flow), collection, measurement, and analysis of data in ensuring that the research problem is addressed through the outlined objectives or research questions.

Constructing a design for a research program is a task for advanced researchers. In many cases, beginners in the field choose among the existing. Making an appropriate choice is what challenges beginners for reasons of: not knowing the range of designs available, and how to relate or match design to the research context at hand. In this case, majority of learners have embarked on 'case study' design, but, unfortunately, without maintaining the appropriate protocol that go with the design. Obviously, little learning is achieved due to the fact that a lot of truth is lost.

There are confusions, where learners use the phrasing: "A case of" in place of a case study approach, and "A case study of" where the study is not adopting a case study design per se.

In a nutshell, a proper case study analysis has the advantage of immersing the actor in real-world scenarios, in which they gain an opportunity to act as participants in problem solving, or even practicing their knowledge. Cases are used to observe facts in their real settings. Researchers are cautioned to focus on most important facts, from which they can draw key issues and problems, and be able to identify alternative courses of action.

Types of designs are many. They fall under categories of quantitative and qualitative research. Care has to be taken when choosing quantitative type of design. To be meaningful, one has to first understand that models and quantums say nothing unless attached with appropriate literature. In the other words, a researcher has to be well equipped with the respective theory of a phenomenon under study, variables involved, and variable relationships. For example, when conducting regression analysis, regression will almost go in anything even if it were relating rate of birth in place X with the use of fertilizer in place Y cotton fields! You will get coefficients, etc. etc., then as usual the interpretation based on coefficients will be "there is a significant relationship between X and Y as the

beta coefficient demonstrates!!!. This has no vested sense in it, but it is happening in a number of naïve studies. On the other hand, comparing fertilize usage and cotton yield in the same places where the two data items come from tells a different story.

4. Conclusions

This paper was mean to be a simplified guide to learners who have a research component as a requirement for their certification at undergraduate and garuate programs. It is designed to be a quick reference for the preliminary work involving development of the concept note, and a research proposal. It is a contribution to the already existing body of other tools, however drawing from experiences of the author as an educator in institutions of higher learning, specifically in Tanzania.

The guide is not exhaustive, but comprehensive with simplicity in language intended to cross the barriers of third language speaking in learners. It covers the preliminary chapters of a research program that constitute a proposal, specifically targeting the areas where learners get it wrong. For other issues the learners are referred to the other existing works. Thanks be to the knowledge sharing capabilities of the internet.

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