

Structured literature reviews for Business Professional Doctorates: A case study

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Abstract: The first significant piece of writing a Professional Doctorate must undertake is reviewing the literature within their elected field, allowing them to synthesise relevant theories and concepts underpinning their research (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). The task involves searching, assessing, screening and synthesis a significant literature volume. Often this task is perceived as daunting, potentially leading to periods of demotivation, where students feel stuck, particularly in Professional Doctorates (Wisker, 2015).

A basic principle of Professional Doctorates is that candidates contend with the tensions of professional practice and academic scholarship, making sense of the intricacies of crossing intellectual boundaries (Wasserman & Kram, 2009). However, many professional doctorate students have been absent from higher education learning for a long period of time (Allen et al., 2002), to which the literature review process is crucial for doctoral students as it is their opportunity to cross 'conceptual thresholds', which is crucial for gaining new insights into a topic (Wisker, 2015). For professional doctorate students, this process is interconnected with their deep understanding of their professional practice, which drives knowledge production (Costley, 2013).

This paper discusses the characteristics of using structured literature reviews as a pedagogical strategy in a credit-bearing taught module for professional business doctorates. It aims to assess the value of structured literature reviews to improve learning outcomes, doctoral completions and publishing opportunities. The analysis is drawn on a critical case study of the Literature Review module within the Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA) programme at Liverpool John Moore's University. The DBA is used as a critical case study for this research, as it represents the most mature and developed professional doctorate in the University. It reviews the module's internal structure addressing the coherent contents-aims/content-learning outcomes connection and learning techniques (Leger & Sirichand, 2015), the value of research-informed teaching (Joseph-Richard, Almpanis, Wu, & Jamil, 2021), and an exploratory review of students' satisfaction levels (Pickering & Byrne, 2014).

Keywords: Structured Literature Review, Research-Informed Teaching, Professional Doctorate Students

1. Introduction

The Professional Doctorate is distinct in higher education, focusing on complex work-based problems and practical knowledge informed by theory. Part-time study while working in senior positions presents unique challenges. Professional Doctorate students must reconcile detached contexts and engage rigorously with research foundations, relevant theories, theorists, and knowledge contributions. Continuous development of business practice and academic knowledge is crucial (Tranfield & Starkey, 1998).

Even during the research proposal phase, the first significant piece of writing a professional doctorate must undertake is reviewing the literature within their elected field, allowing them to synthesise relevant theories and concepts underpinning their research (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). The literature review is an opportunity to 'join the conversation' established in a particular discipline (Chatterjee-Padmanabhan, Nielsen, & Sanders, 2019). The task involves searching, assessing, screening and synthesis a significant literature volume.

The problem, however, is that professional doctorates are often criticised due to the lack of research-orientated skills and it is common that students have been absent from higher education learning for a long period of time (Allen et al., 2002). This makes the ability to effectively write a literature review a critical incident in the professional doctorate journey.

This paper aims to assess the value of taught structured literature review on a professional doctorate programme, by assessing the module's internal structure regarding the coherent contents-aims/content-learning outcomes connection, learning techniques (Leger & Sirichand, 2015), the value of research-informed teaching (Joseph-Richard et al., 2021), and on an exploratory review of students' satisfaction levels (Pickering & Byrne, 2014).

2. Theoretical background

Professional doctorate students often struggle to immediately refresh and grasp research concepts and applied research learning, due to their relative absence from higher education, and coupled with the high demands of the day-to-day business that they experience in the commercial world (Tucker et al., 2021). This is particularly true regarding their ability to get into a regular habit of reviewing academic literature. Lee and Aitchison (2009, p. 87) argue that writing remains “neglected as a central component of doctoral education”. Writing retreats or the responsibility of the supervision team often conceptualise teaching literature reviews at the doctoral level (Everett, 2022). This perception can be daunting for students, leading to periods of demotivation and feeling stuck, particularly in Professional Doctorates (Wisker, 2015). Developing a sense of competence and offering learning opportunities can help students become more autonomous, which is crucial for all doctoral students, especially for Professional Doctorates, who spend significant time away from the university (McCarthy, 2016).

Professional Doctorates are characterised by the tensions between professional practice and academic scholarship, requiring candidates to navigate the complexities of crossing intellectual boundaries (Wasserman & Kram, 2009). The literature review process is crucial for doctoral students to cross "conceptual thresholds" and gain new insights into their research topic (Wisker, 2015). For Professional Doctorate students, this process is closely interconnected with their deep understanding of their professional practice, driving knowledge production (Costley, 2013). Moreover, Yang (2022) provides a range of international examples where, to fulfill the demands of the knowledge economy, doctoral programmes with a partnership between universities and industry have been promoted by governments. Hence, where professional doctorate students are situated within the "triple helix" of university-industry-government collaborations, adding to the complexity of engaging with academic literature (Thune, 2010). With the multidisciplinary nature of many Professional Doctorate programs, managing the process of collecting, obtaining, and sorting literature can be particularly challenging.

While specific sessions focusing on writing skills have been recognised as important for developing literature writing skills (Chatterjee-Padmanabhan et al., 2019), understanding how to engage with and approach literature reviews as a process should also be considered. Research on literature reviews at the doctoral level often emphasises specific writing approaches, but there appears to be anxiety around collecting, obtaining, and sorting literature. This anxiety may be heightened for Professional Doctorate students, many of whom have been out of higher education for a substantial period. Considering this, we propose that students should have the opportunity to master the literature review process, specifically through structured approaches, to enhance their ability to engage with their disciplinary areas effectively.

3. Methods

A single-holistic case study strategy (Yin, 2017) was utilised, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of students studying a DBA program at Liverpool John Moores University, including the introduction of a structured literature review module. It is argued that the DBA is a unique/pioneering case (Yin, 2017), as it represents the most mature and developed professional doctorate in the University. The case had about 50 enrolled doctoral students who participated in 4 week-long workshops in the first 3 years of study that guided them through.

The Structured Literature Review module aims to i) develop advanced knowledge and understanding; ii) enhance critical analysis and synthesis skills; iii) foster research proficiency; and iv) promote scholarly writing and communication. Other research-informed teaching strategies are used, such as active learning sets (Michaelsen, Knight, & Fink, 2002) et al., 2002), online peer learning and collaboration (Wilson, Arshad, Sapouna, McGillivray, & Zihms, 2022); integration of technology (Jones, 2016); and finally, formative assessment and feedforward provide by module teams and supervisors (Leger & Sirichand, 2015).

A multi-method qualitative approach was taken (Creswell and Tashakkori, 2007) consisting of two phases: creative visual methods and a qualitative survey were employed to gather data on students' challenges, processes, and satisfaction (Braun, Clarke, Boulton, Davey, & McEvoy, 2021; Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017). The survey was constituted of open-ended questions, and one closed question using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not useful) to 5 (very useful). The qualitative survey approach allowed for diverse perspectives and ensured participant anonymity. Thematic analysis in N'Vivo 12 revealed key themes from the data (Terry et al., 2017). The study adhered to ethical guidelines and obtained approval from Liverpool John Moores University's Ethics Committee (23/LBR/013). This comprehensive approach provided valuable insights into DBA students' literature review journey (Tranfield & Starkey, 1998).

4. Findings

4.1 Students learning processes – challenges, achievements and satisfaction levels

Data collected through creative visual methods prior to implementing the *Structured Literature Review* module revealed doctoral students' challenges (represented by the triangle symbol), achievements (represented by the plus symbol), and satisfaction (represented by the heart symbol) in the Doctor of Business Administration programme (Figure 1). Qualitative survey data corroborated these findings, highlighting challenges such as information management, distractions from irrelevant information, word length and topic coverage concerns, lack of confidence in writing a quality review, literature and author selection, structuring, and starting points. To address these challenges and provide better support, a systematic approach to literature reviewing was introduced through the Structured Literature Review module.

Students from years 1, 2 and 3 of the Doctor of Business Administration programme provided their feedback regarding challenges, achievements and satisfaction levels with the literature review stages and the contribution of the Structured Literature Review module (Figure 2).

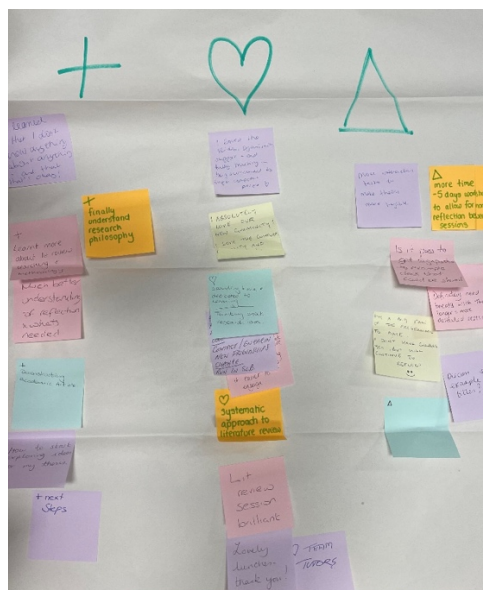


Figure 1: Diagnostic data on doctoral students' challenges, achievements and satisfaction levels. Source: Primary creative data collected by the authors in the classroom

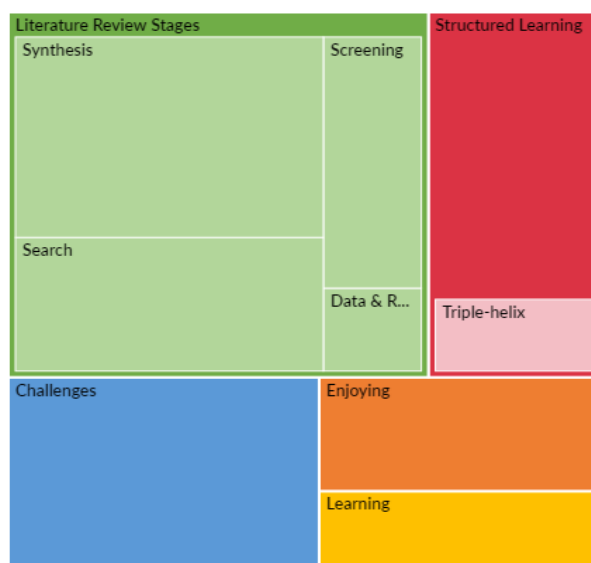


Figure 2: Qualitative survey open-ended question thematic analysis by code density. Source: Qualitative Survey "Literature review - Doctorate in Business Administration."

The students reflected a range of emotions and attitudes towards conducting literature reviews, ranging from negative to positive. Some students perceived it as daunting due to the longer word count and anxiety-provoking due to the fear of missing important elements and excessive editing. Other students expressed feeling comfortable, and interested but needing more structure, confident in their ability to complete a literature review but uncertain about its quality. Others perceived it as a standard and helpful process, feeling confident and enjoying it but acknowledging the need for improved structure.

Respondents highlighted the benefits of breaking down areas of interest into parts, which helps provide a clear outline. A well-executed literature review was considered essential, as it provides a rationale for the problem's existence and presents credible sources in an accessible format. Considering different perspectives and breaking down complex problems into various constructs were identified as valuable outcomes of structured literature reviews. Organising the literature into themes was also helpful for highlighting different areas and facilitating understanding.

4.2 The value of research-informed teaching

Students participating in the *Structured Literature Review* module were asked to assess the usefulness of a series of research-informed teaching strategies (e.g., practice case studies). Participants found practical activities, case studies, theoretical approaches, shared resources, group discussions, and individual reflection useful, with ratings ranging from 4 to 5. It indicates their positive perception and engagement, suggesting the effectiveness of this research-informed teaching in facilitating learning and understanding of structured literature reviews (Figure 3).

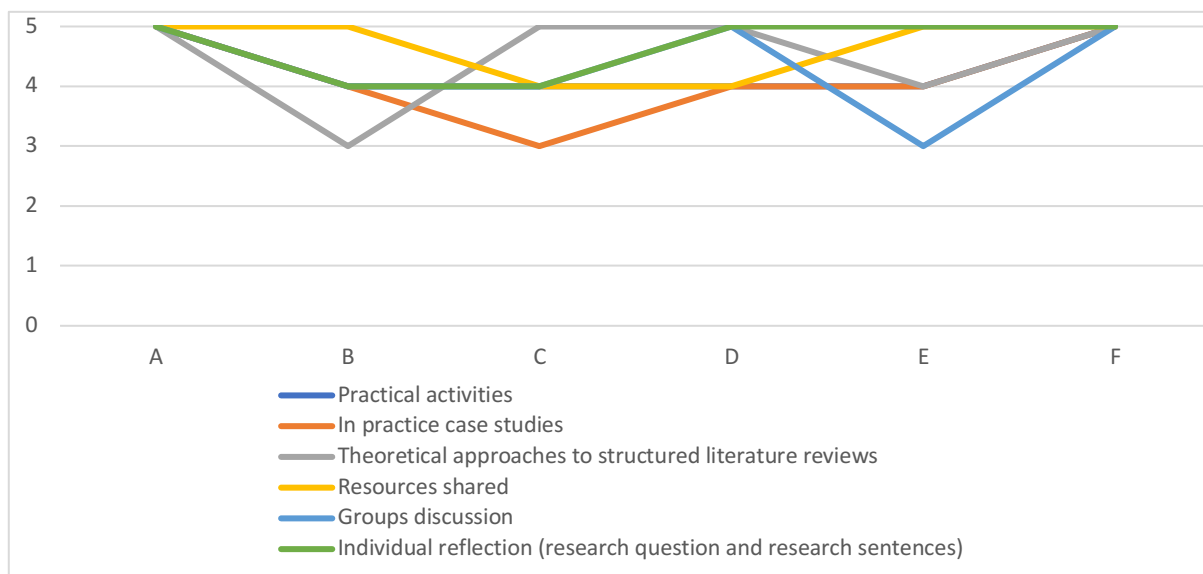


Figure 3: Doctoral Students' satisfaction level with research-informed teaching practice for Literature Review (n=6). Source: Qualitative Survey "Literature review - Doctorate in Business Administration."

The main learning outcomes highlighted were the ability to write critically, establish a clear research thread, and ensure relevance to their study. Participants value learning about developing effective search strategies, screening literature, conducting a comparative analysis, and considering source credibility. Practical tips such as breaking down key areas, utilising Excel for screening, and employing software like EndNote for referencing received positive feedback for efficient reference and data management. Students expressed a strong interest in attending additional sessions to enhance their learning opportunities.

Finally, respondents expressed the need for further support using bibliographic software or tools to effectively organise and analyse collected literature sources. Peer review and one-to-one coaching sessions throughout the writing process were seen as valuable support. Participants also emphasised the importance of avoiding isolation and engaging in topic-specific discussions to generate new ideas. Workshops on efficient searching and examining example literature reviews were mentioned as beneficial.

5. Discussion

This critical case study of a literature review credit-bearing taught module for professional business doctorates addressed the module's internal structure and learning techniques (Leger & Sirichand, 2015), reviewed the students' learning processes regarding challenges, achievements and satisfaction levels (Pickering & Byrne, 2014), and, finally, assessed the value of research-informed teaching (Joseph-Richard et al., 2021).

The findings highlighted students' diverse range of emotions and perceptions towards conducting literature reviews, encompassing both positive and challenging aspects. Once again, this reiterates the need to implement structured literature reviews as a pedagogical strategy to overcome challenging emotions and attitudes (Rowley & Slack, 2004; Wisker, 2015). The qualitative data suggest that structured approaches to literature reviews offer valuable support in understanding complex work-based problems and contribute to supporting professional doctorate students to navigate between university–industry–government ("triple helix") and disciplinary boundaries (Thune, 2010). Research-informed teaching practices facilitate learning and understanding structured literature reviews (Zhu & Pan, 2017). It enhances the quality and effectiveness of teaching by ensuring that instructional strategies, content, and assessments are based on robust empirical evidence. Research-informed teaching promotes student engagement, critical thinking, and deep learning, as it aligns with best practices and pedagogical advancements. This approach also fosters a culture of continuous improvement and innovation in education. References to current research provide credibility, enhance the relevance of course materials, and equip students with up-to-date knowledge and skills (Chatterjee-Padmanabhan et al., 2019). It ultimately enhances the overall learning experience and prepares students for real-world challenges.

Given the longevity and depth required from a doctoral study, structured literature reviews, as a pedagogical strategy in doctoral business education, offer a systematic and rigorous approach to searching, screening, and synthesising literature in a specific field of business administration, following a predetermined methodology (Rowley & Slack, 2004). By following a systematic search and scoping review principles, doctoral students are taught to document what is already known about a topic and then focus on identifying gaps, niches, and disputes to create an agenda for future research (Webster & Watson, 2002). Through structured literature reviews, students learn to identify, analyse, and synthesise existing research to address specific research questions, challenges, or gaps in the field. Additionally, they learn to delineate critical concepts, questions, and theories to refine their research questions and justify their chosen approach. This comprehensive approach enhances their ability to conduct evidence-based research (Leger & Sirichand, 2015). It provides the necessary methodological support for successfully completing the literature review stage of their dissertation, thus avoiding potential periods of demotivation and dropout (Wisker, 2015).

6. Conclusion

This critical case study supports structured literature reviews in Professional Doctorate Business Administration programs. The findings emphasise the benefits of structured approaches in addressing students' challenges, enhancing their learning experiences, and promoting research proficiency. The study highlights the importance of developing students' competence in the literature review process and providing structured learning opportunities. The findings contribute to the existing knowledge and can guide the development of more effective teaching strategies. Recommendations include support with bibliographic software, peer review, coaching, and workshops for efficient searching and synthesis. These suggestions will be considered in future iterations of the Structured Literature Review module.

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