Fall 11-2017

Literature Review Group Exercise for Undergraduates

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I use this literature review activity for two capstone classes (one in Sociology, one in Political Science). The class tends to be roughly 80% Seniors, 15% Juniors, and 5% Sophomores. The classes range in size from 8 to 27 students. Although I use this exercise for the capstone class (where students ultimately have to write a 15-20 page paper of original research), this could be used in *any* class as most undergraduates lack experience writing literature reviews. Although the literature review exercise is derived from a Cultural Criminology study published by Lisa Kort-Butler in 2012 (Rotten, Vile, and Depraved! Depictions of Criminality in Superhero Cartoons, *Deviant Behavior*, **33**, 566-581), my Political Science students enjoy and get as much out of it as my Sociology students.

Most undergraduates lack real training in how to write a literature review. Common problems for students in writing their first literature review include a lack of synthesis (such as writing each paragraph about an individual study) and too many specific details from a given study (e.g., reporting sample size and coefficients). Consequently, the literature review often fails to adequately set up the hypothesis, methodology, and subsequent findings of the student's capstone paper.

To provide students with more guidance before having to write their literature review, I have a special literature review day. First, I give a brief presentation (roughly 10-15 minutes) on how to write an effective literature review (see my slides for details). After discussing things that make for a good literature review (as well as a *not* so good literature review), I provide students with a short example of a literature review that is not well-written, and ask the class "What mistakes does this literature review commit below?" (slide 6). Mistakes include having a topic sentence that is all about an individual study, the literature review contains irrelevant information, and the literature review does not synthesize the paragraph around a single idea. I then show them a "new and improved" version of the same information presented more efficiently and synthesized more effectively and have them tell me why this literature review is better (slide 7).

Once the presentation is complete, I break the class into small groups (3-6 people) and hand each group the boxed citation statements below (which I cut-out, mix up, and give to them in a folder). I then tell students that they are going to re-assemble these 19 sentences back into a working literature review of 4-5 paragraphs, creating a topic sentence for each paragraph. Students typically need 20-25 minutes to complete this task. I let students know that there is no single right way to organize these sentences—students successfully do it in a variety of ways, although it is often around similar themes.

Once everyone is done (or we have reached the time limit), each group shares with the class how they organized the citations and the topic sentences that they gave for each paragraph. If we have time, I have the group write down each of their topic sentences for each paragraph. If time is tight, I simply have them write on the board the topic sentence that they believe is their best. If students contribute to the discussion in their group (and students almost uniformly do), they receive their full participation grade for that class period.

Students generally have very few questions about the activity. The only things that really need clarification are that students do not need to worry about the order of the paragraphs or the

sentences within each paragraph—they simply need to arrange the citations within different paragraphs and write the topic sentence for each paragraph.

I tell my students that writing a literature review is like working on a jig-saw puzzle—there are many scattered pieces and seeing how they fit together can be challenging. If you have trouble finding some pieces, that may suggest that there is an important gap in the literature, which can be a great opportunity for your research capstone paper. By having students put these citations together like a puzzle, the literature review exercise makes that metaphor more concrete to the students.

Students respond very positively to the activity. They enjoy trying to put the paragraphs together as a group. They also enjoy this particular literature review—several students have said that the literature review sounds like it comes from a fun article and have asked for its title. By the end of the activity, they also seem less anxious about writing a literature review, as they have a greater understanding of how to organize paragraphs, synthesize research, and write topic sentences in a literature review.

By the end of this lecture and in-class group activity, students tend to be both more knowledgeable about literature reviews and confident in writing a literature review on their own. This is evident from their group work and the topic sentences that they create. I additionally assess their ability to write a literature review when they submit the first draft of their literature review, which must be 5-7 pages and contain a minimum of 12 different scholarly sources. I found that students' first draft of the literature review tend to be much stronger after I started implementing this exercise.

Learning Goal 1:   Students will better understand how to organize a literature review.
Assessment 1:   Observe small-group discussions and group presentations.

Learning Goal 2:   Students will better understand how to write topic sentences in their
                       literature review.
Assessment 2:   Group presentation of their topic sentences.

Learning Goal 3:   Students will learn to produce a stronger literature review for their
                       capstone paper.
Assessment 3:   Literature Review Draft #1 of their capstone paper.

Below are the boxed sentences. I have arranged these sentences and given them possible topic sentences for use by the instructor.

[Possible Topic Sentence for Paragraph A: "Ideas about crime and criminals have changed over time, resulting in a more punitive approach in America."]

The punitive law-and-order shift in political and public rhetoric and in American justice policies is made possible by recasting the nature of the criminal. Arguments in favor of punitive policies almost always invoke themes of individual accountability, personal responsibly, and moral culpability (Tonry 2004: 25).

Since the mid-1970s and accelerating during the age of Reagan, the pendulum has taken a decidedly neo-classical (in terms of revisiting the ''rational'' offender) and conservative (in terms of right-leaning policy) swing, and this swing has continued to shape ideology and policy (Hagan 2010; Melossi 2000).

The label of evil or pathological neatly disguises the challenge posed to rationality by criminal behavior and dismisses the specter of social conditions as causal factors (Garland 2001; Presdee 2000).

This shift in the state of Americans' ideas about criminals and crime control has been variously described as changing ''sensibilities'' about penal culture (Tonry 2004), the new ''culture of control'' (Garland 2001), and a ''culture of fear'' (Simon 2007).

[Possible Topic Sentence for Paragraph B: "Criminals are often depicted as being inherently bad and different from other people."]

The criminal is ''the public enemy,'' "a monstrosity," ''morally repugnant,'' and ''a deadly threat to the moral order'' (Melossi 2000).

The criminal is out-and-out bad or has a personal deficit that makes them act badly (Melossi 2000).

Cavender (2004) noted that in the 1970s, coinciding with the shift in political rhetoric, a shift in the depiction of criminal offenders occurred, renewing the process of ''othering'' criminals. Criminal offenders are cast as villains who personify the evil side of humanity.

[**Possible Topic Sentence for Paragraph C: "Television programs similarly depict criminals in dehumanizing ways."]**

Programs like *COPS* also focus heavily on violence and bizarre behavior, emphasizing the sensational rather than the mundane aspects of crime (Koosistra et al. 1998).

In reality shows like *America's Most Wanted*, offenders are shown as dangerous and disturbed, lacking remorse, and described as physically ugly (Cavender 1998).

Gans-Boriskin and Wardle (2005) contended that violent depictions of mentally ill characters in *Law & Order* may suggest that crime is disproportionately committed by people with mental illnesses.

Fabianic (1997) noted that homicides in *Law & Order* were motivated by greed, vengeance, or an attempt to cover other crimes. Some people were simply killers.

Klein and Shiffman (2008) examined the portrayal of assault in cartoons from the 1930s to the 1990s. Their count of implied motives for assault revealed that anger was the most common motive, followed by revenge, self-defense, and mean-spiritedness.

[**Possible Topic Sentence for Paragraph D: "Superhero comic books and television shows also demonize criminals and often focus on violent crime."**]

Based on their study of Superman and Batman comics, Vollum and Adkinson (2003) discerned that criminals tended to represent a threat to social order and were motivated by money, power, or revenge.

In their analysis of best-selling comics and trade paperbacks, Phillips and Strobl (2006) found that violent street crime was the theme most frequently present.

According to Stoddart (2006), comics, such as the Superman and Batman titles, locate the cause of crime in the debased individual who abuses and takes advantages of his/her rights with disregard for victims.

Wilson et al. (2002) analyzed data from National Television Violence Study and found that 97% of superhero shows depicted violence.

[**Possible Topic Sentence for Paragraph E: "Mass media can play important role in how people—particularly children— learn about crime and criminals."**]

For people who have limited non-media sources of information about crime, like the general child audience, the media becomes even more relevant for defining the socially constructed reality of crime (Surette 2003).

Little research has examined the messages about criminality to which people are exposed at an early age.

Wilson et al. (2002) studied how violence is portrayed in children's programs, disaggregating by genre but not by protagonists and antagonists. They found that the most common motives depicted across program types were personal gain, anger, and protection of life.