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Recounting the Conversation: Learning How to Write a Literature Review

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TITLE: Recounting the Conversation: Learning How to Write a Literature Review

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ABSTRACT:
This in-class activity gives students practice summarizing, synthesizing, and evaluating information from numerous sources – skills needed when writing a literature review. As a low-stakes, collaborative, in-class writing task, this activity may also help alleviate some of the fears that students may have about writing. Writing manuals like Writing in Sociology (Edwards 2015) and Writing in Sociology: A Brief Guide (Smith-Lovin and Moskovitz 2017), refer to scholarly literatures as “conversations” occurring within a “party” or “room full of people.” Applying this metaphor, this exercise asks students to imagine themselves at a party, overhearing attendees’ remarks. Students get a list of quotes reflecting party-goers’ diverse views about the party theme. In groups, they then must recount the “conversation” in writing for an imagined friend who was not there; the focus of their write-up must align with their friend’s particular interests, as specified by the instructor. Students synthesize the disparate comments into a cohesive, thematically-organized summary, “citing” their sources along the way. They must discuss both consensus and competing perspectives among the sources (i.e. the party attendees), and they also identify gaps in the conversation that their friend could have filled, had they been at the party. After completing their write-up, students read their work aloud and the class can identify strengths and weaknesses and/or similarities and differences in how the groups accomplished this task.

KEY WORDS:
Literature review; writing; research; group activity; summarize; synthesize; evaluate; analyze

LEARNING GOALS:
1. Summarize information from outside sources without plagiarism, demonstrating selectivity in use of direct quotes. Properly attribute the source of outside information.
2. Differentiate between source material that is vs. is not relevant to specific question of interest. Analyze source material to identify consensus and divergent views. Synthesize and present material in a thematically organized way.
3. Evaluate source material so as to identify gaps in knowledge (i.e. “the conversation”) and make informed suggestion for how to add to that body of knowledge.

GOALS ASSESSMENT:
1. The majority of groups write reviews that effectively put information into their own words, demonstrate selectivity in their use of direct quotes, and properly attribute sources.
2. The majority of groups write reviews that focus on their assigned question, organize information thematically, and acknowledge multiple perspectives.

3. The majority of groups demonstrate an ability (through writing and/or discussion) to critically assess source material so as to identify gaps in knowledge and make informed suggestions for how to contribute to that body of knowledge.

USAGE NOTES:
The activity was developed for a course on writing and research design for sociology majors at a regional public university. Students’ final project for the course is a research proposal with a literature review. However, this activity could be used in a variety of courses requiring this type of writing task. The class for which this activity was developed typically has five to fifteen students, but it could easily be implemented in larger classes. Instructors should put students into groups of two to four people, and they should allow 45-60 minutes for the activity. “Recounting the Conversation” is not meant to be a completely stand-alone activity. At minimum, instructors should incorporate lecture and/or discussion before the activity about the purpose of a literature review, common mistakes to avoid, etc. Before completing the activity in my course, for example, students read about and I lecture on the purpose of a literature review. On their own, students progressively fill out a literature review table to help them organize information about their sources (Note: I have developed my own version, but see Arthur’s (2013) “Literature Review Chart” assignment, published in TRAILS). Students read past student papers and/or journal articles, and they identify how the literature reviews accomplish certain key tasks. They also read two versions of a literature review (one good, one not so good), and we discuss the mistakes that the not-so-good one was making. After completing the “Recounting the Conversation” activity, students complete a modified version of Bosch’s (2017) “Literature Review Group Activity,” which requires students to reconstruct a literature review from a published article. Students also turn in a draft literature review and get feedback from me and a classmate before submitting their final version. See the resource document (with expanded usage notes) for more information on implementing the activity.
Recounting the Conversation: Learning How to Write a Literature Review

A lot has been written about how to best teach writing to sociology students, and a variety of tools and best practices have been offered (Burgess-Proctor et al. 2014; Ciabattari 2013; Grauerholz 1999; Migliaccio and Carrigan 2017). Not much has been said, however, about how to teach students to write a literature review. Guidance for writing a literature review is commonly included in research and writing how-to books, but guidance for how to teach this writing skill is limited (Becker 2007; Belcher 2009; Booth, Colomb, and Williams 2008; Edwards 2015; Galvan and Galvan 2017; Northey, Tepperman, and Albanese 2015; Smith-Lovin and Moskovitz 2017). There are currently only two resources in TRAILS which aim to help instructors with this task (see Arthur (2013) and Bosch (2017)), so this activity is meant to address this need.

“Recounting the Conversation” was inspired by the common description of scholarly writing as a “conversation” (Graff and Birkenstein 2017; Grauerholz 1999; Massengill 2011). Mark Edwards (2015:25), the author of a sociology writing guidebook, extends this metaphor to describe the literature as “a room full of people talking about a particular subject.” Lynn Smith-Lovin and Cary Moskovitz (2017:75) similarly refer to the discipline of sociology as a “party” and different bodies of scholarship as “conversational clusters.” This in-class activity asks students to imagine that they attended a party and have to recount the party conversation to a friend who was not there. In what follows below, I give instructions for how to implement the activity. Expanded usage notes provide additional information such as sample student work and suggestions for pre- and post-activity lectures, assignments, and exercises.

Setting up the activity (5-10 minutes):
Remind students of the “conversation” and “party” metaphors commonly used to describe scholarly literature, and ask them to imagine that they attended a holiday-themed (any and all holidays) party, talking with many different people over the course of the night. Their friend wasn’t able to go and has called them the next day to find out what people talked about. Their task is to effectively “recount the conversation,” and in doing so, to practice skills required in writing a literature review.

Give students the handout with a list of short quotes from hypothetical party-goers (see pages 12-13). Instructors may want to change the on the handout to their own students’ names, as students often laugh about seeing their own names (and those of their classmates) attached to the quotes. Review the instructions together as a class. Tell them that they can feel free to write on the handout.

Instruct students to “summarize and synthesize the information” they heard at the party, making sure to “cite” their sources along the way. Because decisions have to be made about what is or is not relevant to include in a real literature review, tell them that they need to focus their review on their friend’s particular interest: either 1) how people celebrate holidays, or 2) people’s feelings about holidays. Note that this is similar to how a research question should shape the focus and organization of a scholarly literature review.
Emphasize that their review must be organized thematically, with clear topic sentences introducing key themes of the conversation. Just as a good literature review should not be a source-by-source summary, they should similarly avoid simply summarizing the remarks one by one. In synthesizing the material, students should discuss both consensus and competing perspectives among the sources (i.e. the party attendees).

Finally, tell students that they will need to identify gaps in the conversation (just as we aim to do when reviewing scholarly literature). Instruct them to make a suggestion for how their friend could have filled that gap, had they been at the party.

Ask and answer any questions, then put students into groups of two to four people. Once they are in groups, assign them to one of their “friend’s interests” (i.e. either option 1 or 2, stated above). Tell them how much time they have to complete the activity. Instruct students to begin work and to put their final piece of writing on a sheet of paper that they can hand in at the end of class (or if computers are available, they may type and either print or email it to you).

**During the activity (30-40 minutes):**
Visit each of the groups and check if they have any questions. Check on their progress, and periodically inform them of how much time they have left (if you have flexibility, adjust the time accordingly).

Engage with students about their planning and writing process. As time allows, consider asking groups some of the following questions while you circulate:
- What is your friend’s interest?
- How are approaching this task? What is your “plan of attack”?
- How are organizing the information?
- What gaps have you seen in the conversation?

There are a few tasks that students sometimes forget to do when completing this activity. As needed, provide some reminders while you circulate:
- Remind them to focus their writing on whichever one of their friend’s interests they were assigned. Some party-goers’ remarks may be irrelevant to their friend’s particular interest. If so, they do not need to refer to them in their review.
- Remind them to cite their sources.
- Remind them to identify one or more gaps in the conversation and to provide a suggestion for how their friend could have filled it.

**Discussing their written work (10-20 minutes):**
Once groups have finished writing, ask each one to read their work aloud. While they read, take notes and create an outline of their review on the white/chalkboard. If you are short on time or have a large class, you can instead: 1) ask a smaller number of groups to read aloud, and/or 2) ask which interest was their focus, and then ask them to describe how they organized the information, what gap they identified, and what suggestion they made for how to fill it. If a group does not finish their review, ask them to read what they have and then talk about how they would have completed it.
Highlight strengths in their work, as applicable, such as:
- A clear focus on their “friend’s” particular interest
- Clear topic sentences
- Thematic synthesis of information
- Limited/selective use of direct quotations
- Creative suggestions for how their friend could have contributed to the conversation

Make note of any problems, as applicable, such as:
- Lack of synthesis
- Missing topic sentences
- Gap in conversation not identified
- Suggestion for how friend could have contributed not provided
- Over-reliance on direct quotes
- Lack of citations

If time allows, ask students to explain how they would correct any mistakes that were made.

As applicable, draw attention to similarities and differences in their organizational choices, noting that there is not only one right way to analyze and synthesize sources. For example, some groups may organize their review by discussing feelings about each holiday (e.g. Christmas, Halloween, etc.), while others organize it around types of feelings (e.g. positive, negative, etc.).

Reiterate parallels between this activity and the work involved in writing a scholarly literature review.

Collect finished work before students leave!
**EXPANDED USAGE NOTES**

The activity was developed for a course on writing and research design for sociology majors at a regional public university. Students’ final project for this course is a research proposal with a literature review. However, this activity could be used in a variety of courses that require this type of writing task. The class for which this activity was developed typically has five to fifteen students, but it could easily be implemented in larger classes.

This activity is not meant to be extremely challenging; rather, it is meant to serve as a sort of warm-up before students begin the more difficult job of working with scholarly sources. This is a strength, as it offers a chance to practice some basic skills, and it may even give some students a needed confidence boost. At the same time, this activity may be too elementary for more advanced students. Instructors should use their discretion and consider the existing skill-set of their students.

Though the quality of their work always varies, students typically do well with this activity. In part, that is by design, as noted above. Reminding them of the various tasks they are meant to accomplish (see discussion in resource above) also helps to prevent mistakes in their final written product. If any problems occur, it is most commonly either running out of time, forgetting to cite, or neglecting to say how the friend could have contributed to the conversation. See below for examples of student work, including some that exemplify such problems.

**Example student work**

**Example 1.** Holidays and the attitudes have about them can be a polarizing subject. After listening to the conversations from the party, I’ve determined that about half of those who talked about how they felt about holidays thought of them in a positive light, while the other half viewed them very negatively (with no one exhibiting feelings that would place in between). I noticed that individuals who felt positively about upcoming holidays associated them with loved ones, family time, and lots of sentiment (Ashton, Josh, Jon, Diana). Those that felt negatively tended to mention corporate greed, financial motives, and loneliness when speaking about the holidays, including Logan, Jemele, and Shelly. Surprisingly, everyone failed to mention how religion and lack of time in one’s schedule ties into a lot of these preexisting feelings toward holiday traditions and expectations. For example, Tara always feels stressed out during Christmas due to rushing and traveling.

**Example 2.** The party had everyone feeling three ways about holidays: positive, mixed, and negative. There are many people excited about the holidays. Jon said he could not wait to go home as going home brought nostalgia of family time. Another party goer was excited for Valentine’s Day as he had plans. Different aspects of family and fond memories had people excited for holidays.

Some were negative as the holidays made them stressed or depressed. Tandyn mentioned going home for Christmas is stressful because switching between parents’ houses is stressful. This was the opposite of Shannon who felt depressed from being alone on the holidays. Jemele was
Example 2 (cont.). negative too. He said, “Most holidays have become totally commercialized. The emphasis seems to be just on buying stuff,” which has nothing to do with people.

Jay was very mixed and provided insight into a deeper look at holidays. Showing us how you can enjoy the holidays but still acknowledging the wrong doings involved with it. This is a good point that the other party goers were limited to a one emotion opinion. It is important to analyze all the emotions people feel about certain holidays.

Example 3. In relation to how people celebrate holidays, there were two main points that came up within the party. First, was that holidays were a group event, and implied that these were not solitary occasions, and that someone else must be in attendance. The only other example would be that of Brandon, who states that “I’m going to dress up as a zombie this year for Halloween.” This statement doesn’t imply a group, but it would be really weird to just dress up on your own so we are going to assume it was a social get together. Secondly, there was discussion over who you spent which holiday with. For Christmas, it would be family, Valentine’s Day with a significant other, and Halloween with friends. All other statements in relation to what they were doing in terms of on a holiday were with a group.

The second part, is that there is a certain event that occurs with the according holiday. For Christmas, it is a gift exchange; for Valentine’s Day, it is a romantic evening; and for Halloween it would be trick or treating or dressing up. The main point of this would be the aspect of something happening that is out of the ordinary, and special in terms of what it is.

The gaps in the flow of the conversation and what we do not know would be along the lines of how these events are different among different groups, whether that be race, gender, ethnicity, religion, etc. These events are not standard for everyone, so what the variations between cultures are would be a good thing for the “friend” to bring up and talk about.

Example 4. People celebrate holidays in many different ways, but there were three themes that appeared. An important way to celebrate many holidays is to spend time with those close. For example, for Christmas and Thanksgiving people tend to go home to family (Jon, Tandyn). Halloween often involves others or groups (Ashton), but Valentine’s Day includes intimate pairings like couples (Shannon, Josh). This makes it unfortunate for those who spend time alone. It “is so depressing when you’re single,” as Shelly states.

(This group did not finish their review, but they intended to write about how people also commonly celebrate holidays by eating and exchanging gifts. They noted that party attendees mentioned fairly mainstream ways of celebrating holidays. Their friend could have discussed “weird” traditions that are unique to their own family.)
“Recounting the Conversation” is not meant to be a completely stand-alone activity. At minimum, instructors should incorporate lecture and/or discussion before the activity about the purpose of a literature review, common mistakes to avoid, etc. See below for suggestions of material, activities, and assignments that instructors may incorporate before and/or after completing “Recounting the Conversation.”

**Pre-activity suggestions**

**Lecture overview of the purpose of a literature review and common mistakes to avoid**
I describe a literature review most broadly as an overview of existing knowledge about a topic, knowledge that is relevant to a particular research question. A literature review summarizes existing knowledge and synthesizes it in a thematic, organized way. It also analyzes or evaluates the scholarship, showing where there is consensus among scholars, as well as where there is disagreement or where there may be gaps or flaws. Related to that last point, I tell students that a literature review should help to justify the reasonableness and importance of their research question and support the hypotheses that they put forth (see Babbie 2017; Belcher 2009; Edwards 2015; Smith-Lovin and Moskovitz 2017). Some argue that a key role of a literature review is to identify what studies need to be undertaken in order to advance a body of knowledge (i.e. the notion that finding holes in scholarship should lead to the development of research questions). I agree in part, but I also believe that this model is less realistic for undergraduate students, and in fact, it is not actually how all scholars operate (Edwards 2015). As a result, I encourage students to look for gaps and lack of consensus within the literature, while also recognizing that they may do so after they already have a research question.

Along with providing an overview of the purpose of a literature review, I also highlight some common mistakes to avoid. One of the most common problems is lack of synthesis – summarizing each source one by one, paragraph by paragraph. This “book report” (Arthur 2013) or “patchwork” (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 2008) style often features topic sentences that introduce a single source, rather than topic sentences and paragraphs that focus around a single idea. Other common problems are excessive direct quotations, including too many specific details about each study (e.g. unnecessary detail about data and methods) and not adequately highlighting gaps or ways that their own study moves scholarship forward (see Arthur 2013; Bosch 2017; Edwards 2015; Northey, Tepperman, and Albanese 2015; Smith-Lovin and Moskovitz 2017).

**Read and discuss two versions of a literature review**
After the lecture overview, I give students two versions of a literature review to read. Both use the same sources and deal with the same topic, but one exemplifies the common mistakes discussed above, whereas the other is a better version. After reading, I ask students which version they thought was better, and why. They typically choose correctly and point out that the not-so-good version is simply a source-by-source summary that does not “flow” well. These literature reviews are not provided with this resource, but instructors could use the literature review examples (one good, one not-so-good) provided by Bosch (2017) or create their own.
**Literature review table assignment**
On their own, students progressively fill out a literature review table to help them organize information about their sources. I have developed my own modified version of this table, but instructors can see Arthur’s (2013) “Literature Review Chart” assignment, published in TRAILS, for an example. Students must identify key pieces of information about each article, such as its research question(s), data and methods, and main findings. Putting all of this into a table (wherein each row is a source and each column is a key question about the sources) allows students to more easily see similarities and differences across their body of scholarship.

**Read and discuss literature reviews from exemplary student papers or journal articles**
Either in class or independently outside of class, I sometimes have students read literature reviews from exemplary former student papers and/or from journal articles. I ask them to identify excerpts from the literature review that are accomplishing certain key tasks such as giving an overview of existing research findings and theories, highlighting gaps in the scholarship, or making a case for the importance of that particular research project.

**Post-activity suggestions**

**“Literature Review Group Activity”**
After completing the “Recounting the Conversation” activity, students complete a similar activity that instead requires them to work with scholarly sources. Bosch’s (2017) activity, published in TRAILS, asks students to reconstruct a literature review from a published article. The literature review is literally cut up into pieces (sentences), and students reassemble those sentences into paragraphs and come up with a possible topic sentence for each paragraph. This activity encourages students to synthesize and think thematically about information from multiple sources. I have developed a modified version of this activity to better meet the needs of my students. Students in my course are expected to organize their own literature review by first discussing their dependent variable and then discussing their independent variable (and its relationship with the dependent variable). I found an article with a literature review that more closely follows this model (Carter, Carter, and Corra 2016), and I selected key sentences from several paragraphs. In order to reinforce these organizational expectations, I ask students to try to put their paragraphs into the order in which they would have appeared in the original article.

**Peer reviews of literature review draft**
Students in my course submit a complete draft of their literature review several weeks before their final proposal paper is due. They are then given a literature review written by one of their classmates, and they complete a peer review of that draft. Rather than line-editing, they complete a peer review form with specific questions/prompts to which to respond (e.g. “How well does the literature review synthesize existing scholarship?” “Identify a problematic sentence in the paper. Suggest a different way of writing it.”). In addition to sharing the completed peer review form with their partner, they meet during class to discuss the feedback, ask questions, and offer clarification as needed.
REFERENCES


Practice “Effectively Recounting the Conversation”

Imagine you’re at a holiday-themed party, making your way around the room to say hello to everyone. You drop in on many different conversations over the course of the night. Your friend, who wasn’t able to make it, calls you the next day and asks what people talked about. What do you tell them? Specifically, your friend is most interested in either 1) *how people celebrate* holidays or 2) *people’s feelings about* holidays.

**Your task:** Exercise your creativity and authority by summarizing, synthesizing, and evaluating the conversation. In an organized fashion...

- Summarize and synthesize the information you heard, keeping your friend’s particular interest (option 1 or 2) in mind. You may include direct quotes, but be selective and focus more on summarizing/paraphrasing.
- Organize the information thematically (i.e. *not* source-by-source), and include clear topic sentences.
- Show where there was consensus, as well as disagreement or divergent perspectives, among the party-goers.
- Identify gaps (missing elements) of the conversation and suggest a way that your friend could have contributed to the conversation, if they had been there.
- “Cite” your sources either by referring to them by name in your writing, and/or by inserting parenthetical citations with the names of the party-goers to which you are referring.

**The conversation:**

*Hunter:* Remember when in elementary school everyone swapped Valentine’s Day cards? Do kids today still do that?

*Jon:* I can’t wait to go home for Thanksgiving! We make a huge meal and I play games with my family.

*Sally:* Kroger was all sold out of red roses when I tried to buy flowers for Valentine’s Day last year. I had to buy sunflowers instead.

*Jay:* I have mixed feelings about Thanksgiving. I look forward to eating pumpkin pie, but sometimes I also get sad thinking about the displacement of so many Native Americans.

*Mitchell:* Did anyone else watch that Netflix Valentine’s Day special with Michael Bolton? It was hilarious.

*Tara:* Going home for Christmas is always so stressful. I have to go back and forth between my mom’s house and my dad’s house, and it really gets tiring.

*Josh:* I love Valentine’s Day! It’s a special day for lovers! I’m planning a special date-night for me and my sweetheart – dinner out and a movie.
Logan: I heard that Valentine’s Day was invented by chocolate companies just to boost their sales in the winter. Lots of people make New Year’s resolutions to eat healthier, so I think chocolate sales typically go down in January.

Jemele: Most holidays have become totally commercialized. The emphasis seems to be just on buying stuff. Pretty sad, in my opinion.

Ashton: My partner and I are going trick-or-treating with the kids this Halloween.

Brandon: I’m going to dress up as a zombie this year for Halloween.

Chelsea: My favorite Valentine’s Day candies are those little hearts with sayings on them. They used to say things like “Be Mine”, but now they say things like “Text me”! I’ve heard that you can even get personalized messages.

Shannon: I think Valentine’s Day should be a national holiday. But instead of focusing on couples, it could just be a general celebration of love.

Diana: My kids made me the cutest Thanksgiving cards. I think they must have made them in art class.

Katie: Did you know that Valentine’s Day first became associated with romantic love in the 14th century?

Mark: What should I get my girlfriend for Christmas this year? Last year I got her lingerie, which I liked, but I’m not sure if she did. She said she didn’t need any presents, but don’t you think she’ll be upset if I come home empty handed?

Shelly: Valentine’s Day is so depressing when you’re single. Last year I was home alone, crying into a box of chocolates.