Discovering the Territory

2

Exploring Others' Expertise

A t this point, you may have a wonderful and exciting practitioner inquiry project ahead of you, but you may be wondering about its importance, relevance, or direction. There is an entire world of information out there that can help substantiate your idea and lead to new ways of planning your next steps. This chapter discusses the purpose and methods of exploring others' expertise, which is both the foundation for your research and the gateway to your project.

WHY GATHER SUPPORTING INFORMATION?

As a consumer of products, whether they are educational or not, you probably appreciate reading reviews that discuss the quality and nature of the product rather than just taking the seller's word for it. With practitioner inquiry, the idea is similar: you want your reader to grasp the importance of the topic, understand the landscape of the topic, and appreciate the benefits of addressing the topic. You can do this by gathering information that has already been collected and summarizing it in your own format. There are essentially three steps: (1) gathering relevant literature, (2) reading the literature, and (3) writing a summary of the literature. Writing

a summary at the start of your practitioner inquiry project may appear to be a time-consuming undertaking, but there are several benefits.

EXPLORING OTHERS' EXPERTISE

While there are a number of reasons to become familiar with the work others have done, we've identified four core benefits.

A Sense of Knowing What Is Going On "in the Field." To establish your inquiry project as valid, it is important to convey that you have solid knowledge of the issue being explored. You will quickly learn that reviewing others' work on the same or a similar topic provides a sense of understanding various aspects as you get to know it from different angles. Reading others' work will expose you to some of the historical information (e.g., what has gone on previously in this arena), central findings, and major influences. You, in turn, will write a review of the material you come across, thereby summarizing the scope of your topic and demonstrating that you do indeed have the essential background information needed to launch your idea.

Insight Into How Others Have Addressed the Problem. As you read information describing problems addressed by others, you will also discover measures that have been applied and evaluated. You may gain a new perspective for addressing the problem you are exploring: How did other schools address the same problem you have identified as an issue in your school? What specific methods were implemented and did the results point to success or failure? What aspects of their plan would they recommend doing differently or the same? Authors of published research frequently include suggestions for future consideration that may coincide with ideas you are considering for your project.

An Understanding of the Factors Involved in Cause and Effect, Correlations, and Other Associative Relationships. Reading about previous investigations allows you to observe relationships. How do others describe their findings and to what do they attribute their

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conclusions? What other factors seem to influence or have an impact on the issue you want to explore? It is important to ask yourself, How do I go beyond common sense associations of the topic I am addressing? For example, it seems logical that dropping out of high school would be associated with lower earned wages over a lifetime, but where is the evidence for such a claim, and how strong is it? Many educators comment they have observed a significant increase in diagnoses of ADHD in children over the last 10 years, but where is the evidence, and how much of an increase has there truly been, if any? Is it really sensible to think that small class size has a positive impact on learning for students, and why would we draw that conclusion? Previous research will provide you with a foundation to substantiate your claims for the importance of your topic and the factors surrounding it.

A Model for Your Own Practitioner Inquiry Project. While others' work can contain helpful information, it can also serve as a model of organization and writing style as you begin to design your own practitioner inquiry project. Notice the way others have planned and carried out their studies. How did they inform their decisions as they developed and implemented their project? What did they consider as they selected the participants, setting, data, and evaluation aspects of their study? What sorts of data indicators did they select for their particular topic? How did they access, analyze, and discuss data? How did other authors write about their topic, their projects, and their findings? What voice do they utilize in their writing, and how might the audience differ from study to study? Are there consistencies in the organization of material you are reading and reviewing? How do you as a reader respond to the different writing styles and content, and what do you prefer? The more you read, the better ideas you will have to carry out, write up, and present in your practitioner inquiry project.

As you can see, reviewing others' expertise is an important aspect of your entire practitioner inquiry project; you can glean helpful ideas from previous work that can be implemented in your own project. Also, the written component of your project articulates critical background information for your chosen research topic. Let's discuss the steps to a quality search for information.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

While we are going to go into detail about the various methods and resources for locating information to use in guiding your work, we know one of the basic rules of the practitioner inquiry process is to keep the project simple and relevant to your needs. With that said, there are no requirements as to the amount and type of information you need to support your journey on this topic. Yes, your exploration will be more scholarly if you use a large number of refereed journal articles (journals in which articles for publications are reviewed by scholars in the field) and books. But is that what you want or need for your practitioner inquiry project? Perhaps all you need is information regarding previous research pursuits in this area, a few supporting articles, and a few examples of others' data to create a foundation to frame your project. Know the eventual audience and the purpose for your project, balance your available time and resources, then make decisions about the amount of research you need to gather. You will need to explore others' work in your area of concern to substantiate and convey a rationale for your project, but the extent and scope are up to you.

In the next sections, we'll walk through three important steps in gathering your project's supporting literature.

Step One: Gathering Others' Expertise

There are many places to begin looking for supporting information for your project. Consider exploring statewide resources for locating material to incorporate into your review. Look for publications provided by your State Department of Education or public and private organizations known to do work related to your topic. Literature might be in the form of

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- Published reports
- Newspaper articles
- Web pages
- Policy papers

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Professional conferences also abound with information from various presentations and other forums where research is shared among educators.

Literature from national and/or global stages is primarily accessed using two resources: the Internet and libraries.

The Internet. Due to the time constraints of working school counselors and other educators, the Internet is often the first place to turn to when searching for information. The growing access and ease of use, not to mention the vast amount of information available online, make the Internet an essential tool for obtaining resources. A good place to start looking for previous information on your topic is to use an online search engine, such as Google, Yahoo, or Dogpile. There are also Web sites that may be of particular use to educators, such as the federal Department of Education (http://www.ed.gov); the Educator's Reference Desk (www.eduref.org), which provides thousands of educational resources including counseling and family life categories; the No Child Left Behind Web site (www.ed.gov/nclb); The Education Trust (www2.edtrust.org), which provides statistics and information on achievement gap issues and state-to-state comparisons of academic achievement; the American School Counselor Association (http://www.schoolcounselor.org), which maintains an archive of publications and other information for members; and Teaching Tolerance by the Southern Poverty Law Center (http://www.tolerance.org), which shares tools for teaching about diversity in schools. These and other Web sites may point you in the direction of your specific topic.

It is important to keep an open mind when using the Internet as a resource. You will need to pay attention to the various links and recommendations of other resources that may also provide the information you are looking for in your field of interest. The Internet has an enormous collection of information, so it is easy to feel overwhelmed or lost when searching within it. You will undoubtedly make a few wrong turns and hit a few dead ends (see Box Tips 2.1). The key is to be patient, stay alert, and return to the few Web sites that are your favorites for the specific topic you are researching.

Box Tips 2.1   Evaluating Quality Web Sites

Within the endless universe of Internet Web sites, there is quite a range in the quality and content of various online resources. How is one to determine the good from the bad?

Here are a few questions to pose when surfing the Web for research-based resources:

- What person or organization is responsible for disseminating the information posted on the Web site? Is it from a highly recognizable entity or well-known expert?

- What is the process for posting information on the Web site? Are there likely several reviewers ensuring the quality the content before it is posted, or is it a "free-for-all" that allows anyone and everyone to post information?

- How comprehensive is the Web site? Is it dedicated to a particular field, and does it offer links and options to other perspectives within the same general topic?

- What is the purpose of the information? Does it appear to be academically rigorous and objective, or is it casual and subjective?

- How well written is the information? Was time taken to ensure a professional publication, or are there visible mistakes and errors, giving it a haphazard look?

- Does the research you encounter include the original citations that would allow you to locate the same resources for yourself?

- What do you know about the person or organization posting the information? Are there funding sources or supporting bodies with other associations that might bias the information posted?

- Did you find the information helpful? In what ways could you utilize the information to support your practitioner inquiry?

Libraries. Your local public library is a great place to explore for books, newspaper articles, and other media resources. Public libraries use catalog databases containing records for every book and resource held in their building. In addition, most libraries also have an interlibrary catalog system displaying the contents of other area libraries. Patrons can order and borrow resources from other libraries via an interlibrary loan system.

A specialized place to search for literature is at a college or university library. College libraries are even more helpful to educators than public libraries because of the databases available through subscriptions purchased by the college. These databases are collections of journal articles, papers, dissertations, book chapters, and books from fields such as education, psychology, biology, or political science. They are organized by field, which increases the chances you are looking for literature in the right place from the start, unlike the Internet. School counselors and educators often find that databases such as ERIC, Education Full Text, and PsycInfo are among the most useful for locating information in their field. Legal databases may come in handy if you want to look into an ethical or legal topic (e.g., special education, confidentiality, discipline).

These databases provide the user with a list of references matching the search criteria the user inputs into a template of categories (e.g., dates, keywords, authors, or title names that help to narrow down the search; the amount of information used as search criteria is up to you). See Box Tips 2.2 for ideas to help you navigate a successful search and increase the likelihood you generate a helpful list of references. You can then locate the actual document from online, from the library shelves, or from an interlibrary loan system involving additional regional libraries. Increasingly, these databases provide *full text* resources, which means the entire article or document is available online, and with a click of the mouse you can read it on the screen or print a copy for yourself.

Box Tips 2.2 The Key to a Successful Literature Search

When searching a library catalog for previous information to help inform your work, you will likely use the search criteria features of databases. This allows you to insert information to narrow your search and increase the chances that you find material that is on target with your chosen topic.

One such criterion is the *keyword search* option, permitting you to type the key words, or main vocabulary, that would most likely be found in the literature you are seeking. Say, for example, that you are looking for the topic of "using study skills groups to decrease the number of ninth graders failing one or more classes." What might be the key words contained in the articles, books, or papers that you would like to read on that topic? Maybe *study skills, ninth grader, class failure?*

It seems logical, but many educators find that a keyword search can be among the most helpful and, at the same time, the most frustrating tools in a database search. The issue is that often the keyword you think might be the key to unlocking an extensive list of reference hits isn't the same key programmed into the mind of the database. Sometimes, using "ninth grader" as a key word won't yield any hits, but using "high school students" will produce a multitude of hits. Be patient, be aware of the most commonly used vocabulary in the field, and ask for assistance from a librarian to brainstorm alternative words to use in your search.

So what kind of information would be most helpful for your work? There is no single answer to this question because it depends largely on your topic, your question, and the search resources at hand. Let's discuss the main types of information you may come across and the most likely places to find them.

Journal Articles. Journal articles are primarily written synopses of studies or discussions of previous research conducted by professionals in the field. They are printed in journals, which are collections of

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Books and Book Chapters. Books and book chapters can provide in-depth writings on a broad topic. Some books are authored by a single author in a single voice, while other books are edited, meaning the editor(s) enlist various authors to write individual chapters on a specific topic falling under the scope of a larger topic. Books are also helpful because they may contain additional appendices, such as glossaries, chapter summaries, and extensive resource lists, pointing you toward even more potential information. Books related to educational topics are usually found in libraries, in bookstores, through textbook publishers, and online. Peers and colleagues may also be a source for borrowing books on particular topics.

Published Reports and Papers. Many organizations and professional bodies develop reports or papers and disseminate them to professionals in the field. These writings may speak to issues large and small. They may provide details, updates, or recommendations for new directions in education. These types of publications require a critical eye as to the purpose and source of the writing; there may be a motive for the development of the report leading you to question the merit or objectivity of the writing. Nonetheless, published reports and papers can be extremely valuable documents for use in your background exploration. These are most often found online and in hard copy form from the original organizational or publishing source.

Magazine and Newspaper Articles. These types of articles are snapshots of contemporary issues of the day, often written with a subjectivity

and brevity making for interesting and easy reading. While magazine and newspaper articles are not considered rigorous scholarly material, they do provide useful supplemental information. National magazines often profile educational issues from various perspectives, while local newspapers usually describe issues affecting the immediate geographical area. Both may contain worthwhile background information, descriptive statistics, or anecdotal accounts of the topic you are reviewing. Magazines can be difficult to locate unless the publisher keeps a thorough archive of past issues. Newspapers are usually archived regularly either in a library or within the publishing company, although you may be required to purchase copies rather than obtain them free. One suggestion is to maintain a file of appealing educational articles that you come across, cut out, and put away for future use.

Step Two: Reading the Literature

Now that you have gathered the relevant research, reading it all may seem like a daunting and detail-oriented process. The goal in reviewing others' work is to build links between the past and your present practitioner inquiry idea. Keeping this in mind will help you sift through the reading in a timely and purposeful manner.

We have developed a list of questions to help guide your reading and help you readily identify the most useful information for building your case. While the questions do not pertain to all information sources, they do offer starting points for reading and reflection.

As you read, examine the literature for the following information:

1. Determine the type of literature and where it comes from (e.g., journal article, book chapter, magazine article, manuscript, review, brochure).

2. Is there a summary at the start or the end of the document (e.g., an abstract, introduction, synopsis, or outline) providing an overview of the reading? If yes, read it first to determine if it is relevant to your topic.

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3. How is the main topic defined or described, what does it look like, or what does it mean according to the author?

4. How do the authors build support and summarize background information throughout the reading?

5. If it is an article that describes a study, what did the study involve (e.g., participants, setting, instruments, data analysis, results) and how were the hypotheses resolved? For more suggestions for reading research studies specifically, see Box Tips 2.3.

6. For other types of reading, what were the main ideas addressed and what kind of details were provided that appealed to your interest in the topic?

7. What evaluation methods were developed or implemented to address the main topic?

8. What did the authors conclude at the end of the reading?

9. What do the authors recommend or suggest to improve professional practices?

10. Did the reading have any statistics or descriptors that support the importance of the topic that you want to address in your research?

11. Are there aspects of the writing style that you particularly enjoyed? Perhaps the organization and composition were easy for you to follow or the graphics helped you understand the findings. Could you use some of these same writing strategies to convey your ideas when you write up or present your project?

12. After reading all of the literature you have gathered, think about the logical connections among the sources. How are they consistent or not? Do they start to naturally connect or do they separate into various categories? How might you use them in your literature review?

Box Tips 2.3 Guidelines for Critically Reading a Journal Article

These tips assume a basic knowledge of reading and understanding research studies, whereas the rest of this manuscript does not take any knowledge for granted.

- Read the abstract and determine whether the article is relevant and appropriate for your practitioner inquiry topic.

- Determine whether the study described is experimental or not (was anything manipulated?).

- Determine whether the study is quantitative (objective) or qualitative (subjective).

- Determine if procedures were appropriate (e.g., subject selection, group or number of subjects, group distribution, length of study).

- Determine if there is sufficient information regarding the measures or instruments. A thorough article will include a description of the instruments, the administration procedures, the training procedures, the testing procedures and scores, the validity and reliability of information, and steps the researchers took to minimize concerns for bias in the study.

- Make a list of the basic findings from the results section. Reread this section or add any notes that help you understand the meaning of the results. It may be helpful to focus on the big ideas before you tackle the numbers and statistics.

- Read the discussion section. Are the implications discussed valid? Are the implications relevant for your research? Are there any implications that were not addressed? Did the author(s) address any limitations of the study? Does your research idea fit in with any of the proposed future research?

- Last, highlight any relevant articles cited in the reference section. This is a great way to find additional pertinent articles that you can then retrieve and read for yourself.

Step Three: Writing the Summary

As you embark on writing your literature review, let's consider the major purposes of the written summary:

- To define any main terms or key concepts important to your practitioner inquiry project
- To discuss and compare particular points you observe in others' work as they relate to your project
- To point out the strengths and limitations of the previous work
- To include ideas relevant to your proposed practitioner inquiry project idea
- To build a case for your practitioner inquiry project
- To show that you have an understanding of existing work that informs your practitioner inquiry topic
- To identify your own community of scholars (Where do you fit philosophically within the landscape of the topic and with whom do you align?)

It is also important that you know some of the basics as you start to write the summary. Be sure to know the expected use for the finished summary. Is it going to be part of a lengthy or brief write-up of your entire project? Will it be reviewed by a school board or school administrators? Will it become a presentation to a particular audience? Is it an assignment for a course? Do you hope to publish your practitioner inquiry project eventually? Think of your written summary as a way to present your ideas logically and professionally to the reader, whether your audience is your school community, a professor, or a publisher. A 2005 preservice student wrote the following summary of her inquiry of others' work in her area of interest, predictors of college attendance. Specifically, she was interested in exploring the number of students taking the PSAT in her particular school.

It is evident from past research that there are many variables that one can examine to predict a student's likelihood to attend college. One common component throughout these predictors is the role that guidance plays in helping students achieve school success as well as post–high school success. Ideally, a student will find guidance from parents, peers,

teachers, counselors, and various others throughout their school experience thereby strengthening their academic potential. Unfortunately, research illustrates that a large percentage of our students are not receiving adequate guidance. As school counselors it is our job to plant the seed of high expectation and academic success in all of our students. One way to do this is through encouraging students to participate in taking the PSAT in order to help them see college as a long-term goal. (Matteri, 2005)

COMPONENTS OF THE SUMMARY

Introduction

The introduction should address the following:

- What is the purpose of your practitioner inquiry project idea?
- Why is your practitioner inquiry topic important, in general?
- What is the goal of your practitioner inquiry project?
- What are the benefits of your practitioner inquiry project?
- What is your passion for your practitioner inquiry project?

Main Body of Summary:
Others' Expertise and Your Project

The body of the summary should address the following:

- Define any main terms or key concepts important to your project.
- Discuss, critique, and compare particular points you observe in others' works.
- Point out the strengths and weaknesses of the previous studies. Refer to Box Tips 2.3 for ideas when reviewing an article.
- Articulate and support the themes and major findings.
- Describe the relationships between factors found in others' work.
- Mention the most frequently cited studies and worthwhile groundbreaking studies.

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- Address important historical issues of the topic, describe trends over time, and end with contemporary issues involving the topic.
- It may be helpful to write in a way that organizes the information and builds support from the material you gathered. You may want to ask yourself these questions:

  1. How does this topic impact individual children or adolescents?
  2. How does this topic impact the school community, including students, teachers, counselors, staff, administrators, parents, school boards, or school districts?
  3. How does this topic impact communities or society at large, and what might be the long-term consequences or implications associated with the topic?
  4. What solutions have been developed or implemented to address this topic? What are examples of ideas, programs, interventions, or important considerations utilized by other schools? What are the goals or outcomes of solutions cited in the previous literature?
  5. What diversity issues should be considered?
  6. What achievement gap issues should be considered?

- Remember to stay focused by writing about ideas relevant to your proposed project idea. If it isn't relevant, don't write about it.
- Keep in mind that you are assembling the informational summary to establish support for your action project idea. Arrange the literature review so that it flows well and is coherent.

Conclusion

The conclusion should

- Briefly summarize the big concepts, main themes, and consistencies you found during your review of others' information and data.

- Give an overview of the major ideas and point toward future directions for the topic.
- Demonstrate you have a solid understanding of the project topic.
- Set up your practitioner inquiry project, sensibly tying your project idea with the information you have reviewed and presented.

Exploring others' expertise should be a thoughtful and careful process, from the search to the reading and finally to the writing. It is the foundation of your project, a proclamation of the many logical considerations substantiating your project as a necessary and constructive endeavor. A sense of confidence and validation is the sign of a well-written summary. You have now paved the way for the remainder of your practitioner inquiry project.

Dianne's Journey Begins

How did Dianne explore others' expertise? She followed the KISS principle: keep it simple Sally. She knew volumes of educational strategies existed in the field for students who were underperforming on tests. However, Dianne's intuition told her that this issue was beyond the development of student-focused interventions (e.g., study skills groups) and needed to include a wider audience. She began to look beyond the individual students and to listen to what others had to share from their perspective.

Her previous professional experiences tugged at her to think about family and community influences on students' lives. The supervision class for her licensure program was reading *Common Purpose* (Schorr, 1997). Many of the discussions in the book were readily applicable to what Dianne was experiencing with the discerning data. Something seemed to be telling her that this was bigger than an intervention led by one person but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

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What more did she need to know about the students? Were there issues in the classroom? Between students? Between teacher and student(s)? Dianne visited with her colleagues about their insights into the students and their poor test performances. After her discussions, she began to view the data through a different lens and began to formulate some additional questions. Where did the failing students live? Exactly what was or was not going on in the homes? How many students had no supervision before or after school? Were there other individuals who had similar concerns? Who in the community might be able to provide some insights? To begin to find answers to some of these questions she talked with administrators, faculty, and the liaison to the Community Partners for Affordable Housing. The liaison was able to give Dianne some much needed insight into the community at large as well as contact information and suggestions for how to work with the individuals and groups in the community. Thus began a journey that would prove to have a positive impact on both the school and community.

The **Reflective**
School Counselor's
Guide to **PRACTITIONER**
RESEARCH

Skills and
Strategies
for Successful
Inquiry

)oks-McNamara

–Danielle Torres

Vicki Brooks-McNamara
Danielle Torres