
Reviewing Reviews: a controversial issue?

Convenor: Andrew Pollard (TLRP)

Speakers: Harry Torrance (IoE, MMU), Judy Sebba (Sussex), Maggie Maclure (IoE, MMU), David Gough (IoE, London)

Discussant: Catrin Roberts (Nuffield Foundation)

This symposium will address an issue which generated enormous discussion at the 2004 BERA Conference – the nature and status of particular forms of ‘review’ and approaches to ‘reviewing’. It builds on two TLRP-sponsored follow-up seminars at which a selected group of researchers and research users, holding a very wide range of views, came together to wrestle with the issues. Participants included the convenor, speakers and discussant listed above and also Diane Elbourne, Becky Francis, Seamus Hegarty, Richard Pring, Catrin Roberts, Gary Thomas and Geoff Whitty.

The group has affirmed the need to recognise diversity in the academic community, diversity in likely audiences for and purposes of research reviews, and the importance of debate in scholarly advance. However, it similarly recognised the value of demonstrating the strengths of the educational research community, of summarising ‘what we think we know and understand’ and of making appropriate contributions to policy-making and practice.

The group has been exploring the extent to which such dilemmas might be resolved by being very clear about the purpose of different forms of review: ‘scholarship’, ‘blue skies research’ or ‘applied research’ for example. In relation to each form, they plan to consider how ‘high quality’ might be understood, identified and worked towards.

A report of the group’s work will be introduced for discussion. Additional, and perhaps illustrative, contributions may be made by other members of the group.

Notes from the invited seminar 'Reviewing Reviews',

organised by Andrew Pollard, Judy Sebba & Harry Torrance, Institute of Education, University of London, 27/01/05; sponsored by TLRP, chaired by Andrew Pollard.

Present: Diane Elbourne (am), Becky Francis, David Gough, Seamus Hegarty, Maggie MacLure, Andrew Morris, Andrew Pollard, Richard Pring (pm), Judy Sebba, Catrin Roberts, Gary Thomas, Harry Torrance, Geoff Whitty.

Please note that this account of the meeting itself reflects the challenges of the issues under discussion. Harry produced the first draft and Judy commented. Finally, Andrew completed the account – and personally apologises for any errors. It is not offered as a definitive record but will hopefully jog memories and help to structure future discussion.

Introduction

The meeting agreed to address the 'Purposes' of research reviewing in the morning session (Why?), and 'Approaches' to reviewing (How?) in the afternoon.

Purposes of reviewing: 'Why?'

There was some initial discussion about whether 'systematic reviewing' was becoming an orthodoxy. This included some questioning of the use of the word 'systematic' itself, thereby positioning other approaches, by implication at least, as 'unsystematic'. It was acknowledged in discussion that this may not be the intention of 'systematic reviewing'. The early origins of systematic reviewing in the Campbell and Cochrane Collaborations were reviewed and ways in which it could be, and had been, developed and broadened, for example through EPPI, were suggested. It was felt that systematic reviewing should not be characterised as hegemonic. Indeed, it was accepted that those who are particularly interested in systematic reviewing foreground issues of quality, transparency and reliability. It was anticipated that discussions of such characteristics, and how they may be appropriately secured, will continue to develop through academic work of many sorts.

It was agreed that research reviews do indeed serve different purposes and audiences; e.g:

What one might term the 'traditional' academic purposes of locating a study in a disciplinary field (e.g. PhD); or conceptualising an issue; alongside more specifically commissioned reviews for policymakers and practitioners who wish to make judgements about what practices are problematic, what policies are effective and thus what new empirical research, if any, needs to be commissioned. This latter purpose might be said to be addressing the need to build research knowledge within the policy-making community, rather than have each successive generation of decision-makers start from scratch.

It was agreed that these various purposes might be summarised in terms of:

- the practice of 'scholarship' and critical engagement with a field – i.e. identifying issues and exercising expert judgement about their importance to inform practice.
- 'applied research' – reviewing what is known to inform policy development and research commissioning.

- 'blue skies research' – reviewing important theoretical and substantive problems to identify key advances that require attention.

These diverse purposes could result in products as varied as textbooks for students, to research proposals for funding, to reviews for government departments. It was felt that it is important to distinguish between the initial purpose identified for a review and subsequent usage once published.

It was noted that these broad categories might be construed in terms of overarching characteristics such as 'summarising' on the one hand and 'problematizing' on the other, but equally could be sub-divided further - for example, depending on user purposes, needs and capabilities. Utility and speed were also mentioned, and the push for so-called 'rapid reviews'. In this context, the complex conditions under which policymakers engage with research evidence was raised as a somewhat unexplored issue. Funder opportunity costs were also mentioned – are funds best spent on a research review or new empirical research?

There was also discussion of whether or not these sorts of categorisations of reviews were helpful at all – the issue being not so much one of drawing up a putative taxonomy, but of recognising that the reality of reviewing in different contexts for different purposes is likely to call for different approaches at different times.

It was noted that there significant epistemological differences underpinned much of the discussion – with different assumptions being made about what it is possible 'to know' and about the degree of confidence in conclusions that different forms of review imply for particular contexts and applications.

Approaches to reviewing: How?

Following the discussion as to whether or not it was helpful to try to identify distinctly different purposes and hence derive different approaches from different purposes, it was agreed to try to identify general qualities that we might wish to see reflected across all forms of review.

A level of agreement emerged with respect to:

1. The need to contextualise any review

Why this review? Why now? Why this (set) of review questions? Where did they come from? Who was involved in determining them? It was agreed this was partly about delineating the scale and scope of the review, but also partly about justifying it in terms of purpose, audience, and significance – why is it important to do conduct *this* review *now*?

2. The sufficiency of evidence

There was substantial discussion about the concept of 'exhaustiveness' and broad agreement that reviews probably don't have to be exhaustive in terms of finding and reviewing (or not) everything in a field, but rather should satisfy criteria of 'relevance' and 'sufficiency' with respect to the review question. Some parallels were drawn with the inductive notions of grounded theorising and 'category saturation' – there being no need to continue to search 'the data' if no new categories are emerging. However, the application of inductive processes in reviewing was felt to require further explication. It

was also noted that consciously searching for negative instances, disconfirming cases or alternative explanations was an important element of such an approach.

3. Clarification of review questions

A key point to emerge was that if a review was to be specifically oriented to policy, or was commissioned by a policymaking body, then prior negotiation over the review question would be important, with multiple inputs from diverse stakeholders. This 'prior negotiation' would also be important in itself with respect to the communication and indeed creation of knowledge across stakeholder communities (researchers, policymakers, etc).

4. Membership of review groups

With respect to constituting review groups, it was agreed that policy and user stakeholders may bring particular interests and perceptions of what was important to the discussion; just as academics may bring particular perspectives on theory, conceptualisation and methodologies. The key challenge in reviewing, as in other forms of analysis, was to engage with the evidence with an 'open' (or at least 'reflexive') mind and to apply appropriate criteria and judgement to its evaluation and synthesis. The involvement of colleagues with different primary responsibilities and expertise could be valuable.

5. Reviewing for policy making

It was noted that 'reviewing' can mean different things within the policymaking community itself - it is by no means homogenous, operating with different information needs, different timescales, and different responsibilities/priorities with respect to reviewing and/or commissioning research. Discussion also explored the notion of a review of a 'policy field', rather than of a particular review question *per se*. It was felt that this called for a wider-ranging review with a higher degree of judgement of significance.

6. Resources and models

It was agreed that extensive review procedures could be time-consuming and potentially very expensive. Further discussion began about different models for the conduct of reviews involving consultation, group and expert activity and the use of protocols to structure judgements. It was agreed that more work was needed on this.

In summary, although a lot of issues remained unresolved, a commitment to 'multi-vocalism' in review processes was noted. A range of types of review will meet different purposes for different audiences and require different 'fitness for purpose' methods. If multiple perspectives cannot be sought through a group, then researchers should seek literature offering alternative and challenging views. Similarly, a commitment to a self-conscious reflexivity on the part of review groups and reviewers about the formulation of the review question and process was identified as an important part of such a process.

First version, Harry Torrance, February 2005

Revisions, Judy Sebba, April 2005

Final version, Andrew Pollard, June 2005