

“Tagging” the literature with the Thematic Analysis Grid: a tool to facilitate collaborative research (0287)

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Introduction

This paper will explain how the Thematic Analysis Grid (TAG), a tool designed to help students with the writing of a literature review, has been harnessed for use by staff new to research in a collaborative project.

The Thematic Analysis Grid explained

The writing of an academic literature review is often a challenge to students and in response, there are many sources of help and guidance available in text books and articles. For example, books on research methods often include helpful sections on the literature review (e.g., Saunders *et al.*, 2012). Other texts focus wholly on the literature review (e.g., Hart, 2003). Whilst the guidance on search, retrieval, recording and writing is comprehensive, it is less easy to find help with the synthesis required in a critical review. Accusations of “brief catalogues of previous research” or “article-by-article reports” (Nairn *et al.* 2007, p259) arise as students struggle with drawing together and reviewing a body of literature rather than individual papers.

The Thematic Analysis Grid was originally designed to help students with synthesising concepts and ideas to produce a coherent, critical, well-linked piece of work. In brief, The Thematic Analysis Grid is a matrix with papers listed in the rows (in date order) and themes in the columns. Students are encouraged to identify possible themes from their cursory reading of abstracts, but to be prepared to introduce new ones as their reading progresses. Within the cells of the matrix, notes can be made about each paper’s content on the various themes. By using a numbering system, these can be cross referenced with where it is to be found on the paper itself. This approach allows students to keep meaningful notes on their reading, but more importantly enables them to review all ideas at once and see for themselves the consensus and contradictions amongst authors. A final column prompts them to think critically about the papers, in particular to look at the methodology used in an attempt to work out which studies might be more credible than others.

The Thematic Analysis Grid has been successfully used with students for several years. Although formal evaluation has not been carried out, many positive comments have been received through module evaluations:

“For me the grid helped to bring the key ideas and themes together. It was good to write the main points down in one place and be able to visualise them easily. The grid also really helped to save time as it meant I did not have to browse through my literature papers when I needed to find a specific quote/theme” (Dissertation student, 2014)

In summary, the Thematic Analysis Grid appears to be a helpful tool for encouraging synthesis and supplements the existing support on search, retrieval, referencing and writing skills.

The Thematic Analysis Grid as a collaborative research tool

In 2014, the benefits of the Thematic Analysis Grid for collaborative research became apparent. At the research site, as with most higher education institutions there is increasing pressure to research and publish, even amongst hourly paid lecturers (HPLs). However, most HPLs have little experience of research, although often they will engage in small-scale evaluations of teaching innovations.

Following the acquisition of a small research project fund by a faculty educational research group, it was decided to employ HPLs to carry out the literature search and review stage of the project. This had two benefits: as teaching had largely ended, two members of staff were immediately available to do the work, thereby avoiding the loss of time which often comes at the start of the project with the recruitment of the research team. Secondly, the project provided the HPLs with an opportunity to develop their own research, in keeping with the university’s requirement for all staff to be research active.

It was also apparent early in the project that work needed to be completed promptly. Once the teaching term started again, HPLs would have little available time to be involved in research. The Thematic Analysis Grid was the tool chosen to help the HPLs quickly immerse themselves in the literature, documenting their reading collaboratively. To ensure the whole project team could track the work, a digital dropbox was set up with restricted access. Following the identification of relevant papers, a collaborative Thematic Analysis Grid was developed in Excel, with the opportunity to add more themes as reading progressed.

The results to date have been pleasing. After more than twenty papers on the theme of “transitions” had been “tagged”, an initial draft literature review was written collaboratively by the two HPLs. Other members of the project team could view the work and make comments and suggestions throughout the process. One of the HPLs commented: “as a new researcher, I initially found the task of completing a literature review very daunting. Using the Thematic Analysis Grid really helped me break down the reading and meant I could keep up to date with what my co-researcher was doing. It

is also something I will be encouraging my own students to use whenever they have a large set of information to synthesise”.

Further applications for the Thematic Analysis Grid

The Thematic Analysis Grid has several additional applications. For example, a doctoral supervisor observed the possibility of the grid being used as discussion material during doctoral supervision when supervisors need to be able to discuss a student’s reading in depth. By submitting the grid rather than a literature review early on in the process, supervisors are able to see at a glance the breadth and depth of the reading. Further discussions with a mathematics lecturer developed the idea of using a similar approach to document the concepts studied throughout a maths degree, especially where students need to return to previously studied topics.

Conclusions

In addition to providing a practical tool for students completing a literature review, the Thematic Analysis Grid provides an efficient and practical way of sharing the literature in a particular topic area to produce collaborative research, particularly helpful for staff new to the research process.

References

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