

Weaving, not cataloguing: A playful way to teach the literature review



Yenn Lee, SOAS University of London

Background

I work at a research-intensive university in London, where my primary responsibility is to teach research methods to postgraduate research students across the social sciences, arts, and humanities. This includes a semester-long, credit-bearing module on research project management, which all new students are required to complete in their first year, prior to their upgrade from MPhil to PhD candidacy. The cohort is large, typically comprising over 90 participants from highly diverse backgrounds and subject areas. As a result, I need classroom exercises that are disciplinarily agnostic and conducive to peer-led discussion.

One such exercise I use is in teaching the literature review. It is a task that tends to preoccupy students, largely because it forms a significant part of the assessment for their PhD upgrade. Yet many tell me that the nuts and bolts of how to approach it remain deceptively opaque.

When I first created the exercise several years ago, my goal was to help students realise that conducting a literature review is not simply a matter of reading extensively and demonstrating that they have done so before moving on to the 'real' research. Instead, its true value lies in the researcher's ability to interpret and synthesise what they have read into a coherent narrative while situating their own project within that narrative.

There is no shortage of resources that emphasise this point. A recurring piece of advice is to avoid presenting one's reading as a 'laundry list': Author A said this; Author B said that; and so on. However, despite these warnings, students often fall into exactly that pattern. In this context, I developed this exercise to interrupt that tendency and encourage a more critical and creative approach.



Ice Age (2002)	The Da Vinci Code (2006)	The Avengers (2012)	Bridget Jones's Diary (2001)	Spy Game (2001)
The Day After Tomorrow (2004)	Despicable Me 2 (2013)	Rise of the Planet of the Apes (2011)	The Bourne Identity (2002)	Suffragette (2015)
Kingsman (2014)	Men in Black (1997)	Jurassic Park (1993)	Wall-E (2008)	The Hunger Games (2012)
Notting Hill (1999)	Skyfall (2012)	Rush Hour 3 (2007)	Her (2013)	

'Weaving' exercise

Many possible ways to weave a narrative

As shown in Figure 1, a slide from the session, this exercise involves providing a pre-selected mix of 19 film titles and asking students to discuss how they might 'weave' them into a narrative before presenting their approach back to the whole class. There are no other prescriptions. Students are encouraged to team up with colleagues sitting near them, likely from disciplines and cultures different from their own, and if there are films that they have not seen, they are free to ask others who have or to look up synopses online together. The list also includes a 'wild card', allowing each group to add one film of their choice if they feel it will strengthen their narrative.

It has been a pleasure to encounter fresh perspectives each year. Some groups have chosen to cluster the films thematically, while others have focused on chronological developments to

identify patterns over time. Some have attempted to reverse-engineer how the list came about in the first place, whether by commercial success, critical acclaim, or other criteria.

Recurring themes include critical observations that the selection is overly focused on Hollywood productions and could be made more 'decolonised'. Other themes often explored include the use of technology, both on and behind the screen, evolving portrayals of women, and, more recently, the climate crisis. The emergence of the climate crisis as a connecting thread is particularly interesting, reflecting a growing concern among students about global challenges facing their generation—something I had not anticipated when I first created the list.

Depending on the directions students take, I can introduce additional points for discussion: How important is it to have actually watched these films for this exercise? How do we justify the time span covered by this selection, namely from 1993 to 2015? What should we do with titles that do not fit easily into the narrative we are aiming for? Conversely, are there films that students wish were included (besides the wild card)? How should we handle franchises, such as whether to include sequels released after the list was compiled? Given that some films are adapted from books, should we consult the original sources to inform our interpretation?

If fellow teachers wish to adopt a similar activity in their classrooms, they can, of course, create their own mixes to suit the composition of their students and their research interests. The exercise has broad applicability.

Why this exercise works

Having run this exercise numerous times over the years, I am pleased to share that student feedback has been consistently positive. Many have said it helped them grasp what it means to integrate various sources and position their own projects in relation to those sources. Others have found that it prompted them to rethink their literature reviews, realising, for example, that their drafts read more like annotated bibliographies than developing arguments.

A key factor in the exercise's effectiveness is that there is no single correct answer or approach. Working with these seemingly random film titles alleviates the pressure of 'getting it right' and invites a playful yet purposeful engagement with form and argumentation. Using film titles also detaches the task from disciplinary jargon and content expertise, allowing students to focus on how to justify the inclusion or exclusion of certain material and communicate clearly with their

intended audience. It mirrors the literature review process in that researchers must work with what is available, decide what to prioritise, and reflect on the frameworks they use to connect disparate pieces into new insights.

Moreover, the exercise builds confidence in learners who may feel intimidated by the reality of having just embarked on a multi-year PhD project. Few have seen all 19 films; instead, everyone begins with the same dataset and negotiates the subsequent steps collaboratively. For international students or those unfamiliar with UK academic conventions, it also provides an accessible entry point into critical discussion and peer interaction. By creating a low-stakes environment, the exercise enables students to identify patterns, tensions, and connections without feeling they must be fluent in methodological terminology from the outset.

When I close the session by reiterating that the literature review is an irreducible part of research, demanding the same critical thinking and analytical skills as data collection and analysis, many students nod in recognition, as if seeing the task in a new light.

Literature review in times of AI

This exercise has also stood the test of time. Students are increasingly exposed to AI-powered tools that promise to speed up the literature review process. These tools, which range from suggesting relevant articles to generating summaries or thematic maps, can be useful, especially for managing large volumes of information. However, they also promote a procedural approach to reviewing the literature. Researchers may begin to see the task as one of extraction: input a few keywords, retrieve relevant papers, and summarise each in turn.

While the debate continues about whether, and to what extent, it is acceptable to outsource reading to such tools, what is often lost is the sense of the literature review as participation in a scholarly conversation. This exercise reminds students that whatever tools they use, or choose not to use, it is their responsibility to make sense of complexity, not merely to catalogue it. This is why each group's final woven narrative (tapestry) differs, even when they begin with the same set of film titles.