

Ms Charlotte Beck, Liaison Librarian, University of British Columbia, Vancouver

Research partner and methodology expert: the role of the librarian in the Systematic Review

The Systematic Review is not a literature review. It is a relatively new research method with an explicit and accountable methodology and the same rigor as primary research. Although its origins are in the health sciences, its systematic methodology is increasingly used in other sectors e.g. economics, public policy, computer science, and engineering. Additionally, in these areas, the Systematic Review methodology is evolving into different renditions such as Scoping, Rapid, and Mixed Methods Reviews.

‘A Systematic Review attempts to identify, appraise and synthesize all the empirical evidence that meets pre-specified eligibility criteria to answer a given research question. Researchers conducting systematic reviews use explicit methods aimed at minimizing bias, in order to produce more reliable findings that can be used to inform decision making’ (Higgins & Green, 2011).

Key characteristics are transparency, the elimination of bias, and reproducibility. To achieve this, it has clear objectives and inclusion criteria for studies, explicit and reproducible methods, systematic search strategies to identify all eligible studies, assessment of studies found, and a systematic presentation of the synthesis and findings. The review team is advised to ‘...seek the guidance of a local healthcare librarian or information specialist, where possible one with experience of searching for systematic reviews’ (Higgins & Green, 2011).

The role of the librarian ranges from being a full member of the review team to that of consultant and trainer. In whichever capacity, the professional’s knowledge and skills are necessary at the planning, searching, recording and writing stages of the Review. As a new methodology, it’s not universally taught in research methods courses, and the librarian is frequently the methodology expert who advises and trains the research team on the process and requirements.

In order to contribute to this research and be active partners in its production, librarians need to seek opportunities to gain the requisite expertise. They need to be knowledgeable about the process, tools, databases and search methods required by the Systematic Review methodology, and as consultants and trainers, able to teach research assistants and graduate students these skills.

This paper discusses the role of the librarian as methodology expert and co-author, highlights Systematic Review tools and resources available for professional development, and examines the challenge of embracing this extended role within existing service models.