

A systems thinking-based review of the topic on *an applied business research project background (ABB)*

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Abstract:

Developing a well-thought-out introduction section for an applied business research project could initially appear straightforward for postgraduate business students to carry out. This article argues otherwise. To do well in exploring and presenting a well expressed account on an applied research project background (ABB), i.e., a proper research proposal introduction section, a researcher needs to strengthen his/her intellectual competence on problem-situation exploration, notably by learning some pertinent ideas in the systems thinking field. With such intellectual knowledge, a researcher is more able to identify and formulate useful management concern and topic statements covered in the research proposal section on the ABB. Mastering this ABB investigation skill is (i) valuable for doing applied business research and (ii) vital for the effective employment of the agile literature review approach I (ALRA I), which has recently been proposed by the writer (Ho, 2017a, 2017b). How to conduct the ABB exploration is elaborated on in this article.

Key words: An applied research project background (ABB), contemporary systems thinking, the ABB topics, the agile literature review approach I (ALRA I)

INTRODUCTION

When writing up an applied business research proposal, many part-time MBA students of this writer have expressed

difficulties to figure out what is required, even though the written proposal length can be relative short at about 1,500 words. More often than not, the university module guide of applied business research offers very brief information on this topic. With the students having attended some workshop on applied research methods, it should be a straightforward task to them, is it not? This article argues otherwise. Here, the writer primarily focuses on intellectual ideas from both the research methods and systems thinking fields in order to inform the preparation of the introduction section of the proposal; it will not discuss all the issues involved in the whole research proposal preparation. This article has pedagogical value to applied business research teachers, like this writer, and students doing applied business research. It also contributes to the newly launched research theme of this writer on the agile literature review approach (ALRA I) I (Ho, 2017a, 2017b). Specifically, an intellectual review on the topic of "introduction section of research proposal", which works out an account of an applied business research project background (ABB), is taken up in this article. This article recognizes that producing a well-thought-out ABB account offers a researcher a stronger sense of direction to conduct his/her research project. At the same time, the discussion on the ABB topic has academic value by contributing conceptually to the newly developed research theme of the agile literature review approach (ALRA I) from the writer. It is for this latter objective that the writer chooses to primarily examine the introduction section concern of an applied business research proposal work, and not on the preparation of other sections of a research proposal, such as that of literature review and research methods.

The content coverage of the introduction section in an applied business research proposal

The university requirement to students on the writing of an introduction section of a research proposal could appear

uncomplicated. For example, the proposal form of a university that the writer has been teaching for has only one sentence as an instruction for writing a proposal's introduction¹: "*Project Background: Rationale for selection – importance and potential impact of the strategic project for an organisation or business sector. Word Guide approximately 500*". Further clarification, still brief, of the content considered relevant to the introduction section can be found from the university module guide on the introduction chapter of the dissertation report: "*.... a Strategic Project overview developing and enhancing the first section of the proposal covering the rationale for the project and its importance to an organisation or business sector. This may be expressed in terms of sustaining competitive position or improving that position. This section might usefully consider the subject from the threats, opportunities, and business contextual factors. It should avoid too broad a scope. This might discuss improvement to internal business processes..... (Approximately 500 words)*". (Re: An MBA dissertation project module guide from a university [name undisclosed].) Regarding this guidance, phrases such as "sustaining competitive position" and "improvement to internal business processes" could be developed to become more specific management concerns or management topics (i.e., management themes) but they are not further discussed with more intellectual reasoning there. To be fair, students are expected to learn research skills by studying the relevant academic readings e.g., Gill *et al.* (2010: chapter 2) and Saunders *et al.* (2016: chapter 2) and, and not chiefly by reading universities' module guides. Thus, some research methods knowledge, including on how to choose a research topic and formulate research objectives, etc., are explicit research knowledge requirement for doing an applied business research project. All the same, module guide instruction does point to the importance of identifying specific management concerns and

¹ To maintain the anonymity of the university, the writer does not provide a reference for the quotation here.

topics to be clarified, albeit briefly, in the research proposal and, subsequently, in the final dissertation report in more elaborated form. These matters on management concerns, management topics and organizational settings together make up an applied business research project background (ABB). With them in mind, the main ABB topics proposed by the writer are three: (i) the site setting of the client organization chosen to study, (ii) the main perceived management concern statement(s) chosen to study with regard to the site setting, and (iii) the main management topic statement(s) considered relevant for evaluating and making recommendations on the management concern(s). For topics (ii) and (iii), instead of talking about management concerns and topics, which are too broad for our review exercise, the writer puts forward that our attention be directed toward formulation of management concern and topic statements as it offers a much clearer way to express management concerns and topics for research purpose. In brief, to make a well-thought-out account on the ABB, we need to take a closer look at several pertinent ABB topics that enable a researcher to conduct ABB exploration with more intellectual depth. Nonetheless, a higher level of intellectual complexity is involved in this ABB exercise and an intellectually serious learning is required on thinking about the ABB in order to write up a well-reasoned introduction section of a research proposal.

An exposition of the identified topics in an ABB exploration

To conduct an ABB exploration with more intellectual depth, the writer specifically suggests three ABB topics to study. They are: (i) the site setting of the client organization chosen to study, (ii) the main perceived management concern statement(s) chosen to study with regard to the site setting, and (iii) the main academic management topic statement(s) formulated to study the management concern(s) under

investigation. These ABB topics need to be reflected on with intellectual competence so as to obtain a clear sense of direction for a researcher to formulate the main applied research approaches and the associated research objectives of a research project. The prevailing proposal requirement by the universities is that the academic management topic statements and the research project objectives/ research approaches chosen need some additional elaboration in the sections of literature review and research methods in a research proposal. An exposition of the ABB topics is as follows:

(i) *The site setting of the client organization chosen to study [ABB topic 1]:* This topic comprises a brief description of the client organization unit and its specific site setting under investigation. For instance, the client organization unit could be a business enterprise, or a department of an enterprise. The site setting includes a specific site boundary, a particular time period covered, as well as an intangible organizational cultural, political and climate condition. In an ethnographic sense, a site setting is “the stage on which the social processes under study take place” (Burrell, 2009: p. 182). It is possible that a research project might cover multiple sites and/or a virtual site. However, “the practical work of defining a field site remains understudied” (Tunçalp and Lê, 2014) so there is as yet not a well established way to describe it.

(ii) *The main perceived management concern statement(s) chosen to study with regard to the site setting [ABB topic 2]:* For applied business research, management concerns mainly arise from the managerial consideration of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of a company. Thus, they can be strategic issues that managers are worried or excited about. It is also possible that the management concern is invoked by the entrepreneurial intuition of a manager in the client system. Nevertheless, different stakeholder groups, including managers at various hierarchical levels, might focus on different concerns or perceive a management concern in

diverse ways in a particular site setting. Out of this grasp of the overall problematic site setting, certain management problems, reflecting specific management concerns are abstracted by the researcher for study. For the applied business research purpose, those perceived management concerns chosen to be addressed should be operationalized as management concern statement(s). Examples of management concern chosen for investigation could be: (i) high staff turnover, (ii) low staff morale, (iii) the company's product range too narrow, (iv) exposure to very high business risk due to existing IT outsourcing arrangement, and (v) inability of the company in innovating its business model to adapt to the increasingly competitive business environment. To inform a researcher on management concern selection, there needs to be a reasonable grasp by the researcher of the underlying problematic problem-situation facing the organization, from which the perceived management concern arises.

(iii) *The main management topic statements that can be formulated to study the management concern under investigation [ABB topic 3]:* Management topic statements are formulated by drawing on ideas from the academic realm. These statements are conceived as involving a theory-driven evaluative exercise to generate knowledge of actionable value, thus constructively responding to the chosen management concern(s). Examples of academic ideas, from which more specific management topic statements can be made, are: innovation capability, empowerment, team leadership, servicescape and managerial role theory. Sometimes, management topic statements share the same key words with that of management concerns, e.g., staff turnover, employee morale, and teamwork, although the meanings of these words from the academic source and the real-world stakeholders of a particular organization can be dissimilar. Academic readings on management topics are mainly gathered via the literature search on Google Scholar and university e-libraries. Very often,

a researcher may formulate a management topic statement that covers more than 2 academic management topics, e.g., "how to strengthen *teamwork* in our organization so as to improve *customer satisfaction*". The two terms covered in this management topic statement are (i) teamwork and (ii) customer satisfaction. Finally, there are recommended criteria for evaluating the quality of management topic statements from the research methods filed. For example, Gill *et al.* (2010) has identified a number of them, i.e., access, achievable in the time available, symmetry of potential outcomes, student capabilities and interest, financial support, and value and scope of the research.

(iv) *The main applied research approach(es) and the associated research objectives of the proposed applied business research project [a topic related to the ABB topics]:* Research approaches and objectives are not the prime topics for the discussion of the ABB. They are certainly required topics to be covered in other sections of a research proposal. However, a well-thought-out account of the ABB, covering the three ABB topics of (i) to (iii), offers an unambiguous indication to a researcher on dealing with this topic (iv). Thus, it is labeled as "a topic related to the ABB topics".

The relatedness of the ABB topics is also stressed in the following two illustrative teaching scenarios on the applied business research subject:

Scenario 1:-

Student A: I intend to discuss *management concern statement 1* and then *management concern statement 2*. What is your advice?

Professor B: Why do you want to talk about them, and how are the two *management concern statements* related?

Scenario 2:-

Student A: My interest is on *management concern statement 1*. For this *management concern statement 1*, I want to consider *management topic statement 1* and, specifically on theory ABC. What would you advise me on these ideas?

Professor B: In what way are *management concern statement 1* and *management topic statement 1* related? Why do you think theory ABC is relevant to the study of *management concern statement 1* and *management topic statement 1*. Does the management statement with its ingredient of theory ABC offers useful ideas that enable you to evaluate and make recommendations on *management concern statement 1*?

The two scenarios, in the form of questions and feedbacks, point to the need to justify with clear reasoning the choice on a specific combination of management concern and topic statements by a researcher. This requirement sounds obvious, but many of this writer's undergraduate and post-graduate students have difficulty to do this task well. This said, the space of imagination of how the formulation of a set of related management concern and topic statements can be done with intellectual vigour and with regard to the researcher's personal voice is very often large. The following table, Table 1, further provides examples to illustrate the relatedness of the management concern and management topic statements. On the right-hand-side column with the statements on management topics, the words in bold are the key academic words to be used by a researcher in literature search.

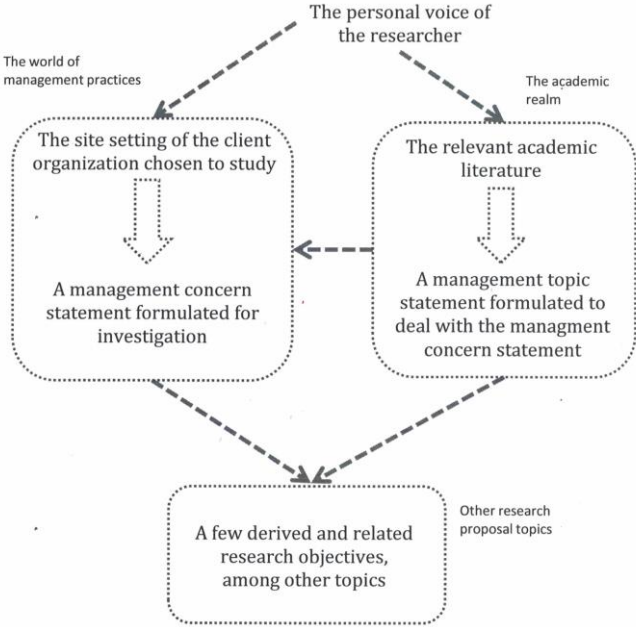
Table 1: Examples of statements on management concerns and associated management topics

Management concern statements	Management topic statements
<p><i>Characteristics</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns/ issues-focused • Expressed in the language of the client system's world • Felt by one or more stakeholder groups in an organizational setting 	<p><i>Characteristics</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solutions/evaluation-focused • Expressed in the language of the academic world • Felt by the researcher to be relevant for working out some recommendations with good actionable value
Examples on management concern statements	Examples on management topic statements
<p><i>Example 1:</i> Product range of the company too narrow and mature [felt by the senior management of the company]</p>	<p>To evaluate and strengthen the innovation capability of the company.</p>
<p><i>Example 2:</i> Company's staff in low morale due to the poor organizational atmosphere associated with the upcoming business process outsourcing [felt by the senior management and the employees of the company]</p>	<p>To evaluate how the organizational atmosphere of the company affects its employee morale and the resultant employees' job performance.</p>
<p><i>Example 3:</i> Salesmen unwilling to share customers' information with their colleagues in their company [felt by the owner of the business]</p>	<p>To evaluate and strengthen the teamwork of the company so as to improve customer satisfaction.</p>
<p><i>Example 4:</i> Some managers considered too harsh to their subordinates [felt by some of the company's middle managers]</p>	<p>To evaluate and improve the management styles and leadership styles found in the company.</p>
<p><i>Example 5:</i> The middle managers and their subordinates of the company are considered unwilling to learn and adopt innovative ideas [felt by the top management of the company]</p>	<p>To evaluate how the existing corporate culture of the company affects its innovation capability.</p>

The two scenarios and Table 1 underscore the intellectual effort required to develop a clearly articulated reasoning that associates the ABB topics, notably on topics (ii) and (iii). Moreover, the reasoning on the management concern and topic statements should capture "a useful contrast and enough similarities" (Boothroyd, 1984) among them in order for "them to work together" (Boothroyd, 1984). In this respect, it is useful for management concern statements to focus more on the

impact/ consequence condition of a situation and for management topic statements to be more attentive to the driving forces and generative mechanisms that produce the felt consequential condition. Doing so is a way to heed Boothroyd's advice. The relatedness of the ABB topics is further portrayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The relationship among the topics of an applied business research project background



Referring to Figure 1, the researcher needs to explore the problem-situation in a specific site setting in which, time and again, "interconnections are cultural" and "dominated by the meanings attributed to their perceptions by autonomous observers" (Checkland, 1984). The researcher's personal voice

influences this problem-situation exploration attempt. In the ABB exploration process, the researcher will come across a number of diverse management concerns expressed by different stakeholder groups. It is then up to the researcher to formulate a management concern statement out of the concern(s) from one or more of the stakeholder group while heeding his/her personal voice in a way that is associated to the management field(s) he/she focuses. The arrow from "site setting of the client organization chosen to study" to "a management concern statement formulated for investigation" in Figure 1 expresses the direction of perception influence between them. Additionally, in evaluating the choice of a management concern statement, a researcher needs to consider two criteria: (i) the statement's perceived importance, urgency and complexity from a particular group of managers' standpoint as well as (ii) the statement's relevance to the personal voice and academic value conceived by the researcher. The context for the formulation of statements on management concern(s) and topic(s) can be more deliberative with higher level of participation of stakeholders in the project. Having formulated the management concern statement, the researcher has got to construct a management topic statement by also learning from the academic literature. Such literature offers useful insights to evaluate and make recommendations with good actionable practical value as well as certain academic value. Examples of the management concern and topic statements have been provided in Table 1. Oftentimes, managers in a particular site setting are not simply obsessed with a 'well-structure problem'² but rather a number of inter-related problems. In such a problem-situation, a researcher might choose to study a set of several related management concern and topic statements in his/her research project instead of a pair of management concern and topic

² A 'well-structured problem' has "unambiguous objectives", "firm constraints", "established relationships between causes and effects" and "one clear solution" (Rosenhead, 1989).

statements. As Ackoff (1979) reminds us, "Problems are abstractions extracted from messes by analysis". By the time these management concern and management topic statements have been figured out by the researcher, he/she should have gained a clearer sense of direction to work on the research objective formulation and the preliminary literature review. In Figure 1, this is indicated by the two arrows from the factors on the management concern statements and the management topic statements to the factor of "a few derived and related research objectives, among other topics". Also, the writer's suggestion is that a researcher could construct specific research objectives by adapting the management topic statements with some reference to certain ideas or tasks covered in the literature review and research methods study for the research project. Doing so makes the logical association among the ideas involved in the research project's management topic, literature review and research method more explicit. Some examples on research objective statements are now presented in the following table, Table 2:

Table 2: Examples of management topic statements and associated research objective statements

Management topic statements	Associated specific research objective statements
<i>Example 1:</i> To evaluate how the organizational atmosphere of the company affects its employee morale and the resultant employees' job performance.	To evaluate how the organizational atmosphere of ABC Ltd. affects employee morale in the human resource management department and the marketing department by the participant observation research method.
<i>Example 2:</i> To evaluate and strengthen the teamwork of the company so as to improve customer satisfaction .	To explore how teamwork of salesmen in ABC Ltd. could contribute to customer satisfaction improvement by the focus group research method .
<i>Example 3:</i> To evaluate how the existing corporate culture of the company affects its innovation capability .	To evaluate the impact of the corporate culture on the innovation capability of ABC Ltd., using Edgar Schein's Organizational Culture Model .

The research objective statements in Table 2 serve as illustrative examples on this type of statements. Apparently, the examples did not cover all types of research objective statements, since some being general while others specific (Patidar, 2013). They do convey the writer's view on the rather inconspicuous difference between management topic statements and research objective statements. We now move on to another review of these topics in the next section by drawing on some contemporary systems thinking ideas.

A look at the relevant intellectual ideas on management concern and management topic statements via the contemporary systems thinking lenses

From the perspective of contemporary systems thinking, management concerns can be treated as perceptions owned by certain stakeholders of a particular problem-situation. For Jackson and Keys (1984), a problem-situation can be conceived differently by different stakeholder groups, which can be depicted as unitary-simple, unitary-complex, pluralist-simple, pluralist-complex, coercive-simple or coercive-complex in type. The writer would also suggest that the subject of management concern statements can be more easily understood by locating them in Phase 1 (The problem situation unstructured) and Phase 2 (The problem situation expressed) of the early version of the Checkland's Soft Systems Methodology (CSSM) (Checkland, 1981; Wilson, 1984). The CSSM is a systems thinking-based problem-solving approach very often employed in an Action Research mode. It is thus quite applicable in applied business research project - a topic this article deals with. These two CSSM phases could be labeled collectively as the CSSM "Finding out" stage (Wilson, 1984). A technique employed in this stage is the rich picture building technique of the CSSM, which has also attracted quite some academic interest to study per se, see Ho (2015). Using the rich picture building technique, diverse, and often incompatible concerns of

stakeholder groups are recognized so as to reveal the soft complexity of the problem-situation of the client's site setting. Other systems thinking strands, notably, critical systems thinking (Jackson, 2000), are more prepared to perceive a situation as coercive, wherein certain concerns could be suppressed, thus not discussable, by the powerful stakeholder groups. Being sensitive to these aspects of a problem-situation, sometimes obscure themselves, is also important for a researcher to explore the ABB of his/hers. As to the subject of management topic statements, its nature could be better comprehended by positioning them in phase 3 (root definitions of relevant systems) and phase 4 (conceptual models) of the CSSM. These two phases make up the stage of "systems thinking about the real world" in the CSSM (Wilson, 1984). For our present discussion on applied business research, this stage is more appropriately dubbed as "academic thinking about the real world as related to certain chosen management topics". One notion from the CSSM associated to this stage is that of root definition, which is a statement expressing an insightful idea relevant for alleviating a problem-situation. Furthermore, the root definition, as an expression on a human activity system, can be studied by figuring out its ingredient CATWOE elements, i.e., (i) customers, (ii) actors, (iii) transformation process, (iv) worldview, (v) owner(s) and (vi) environmental constraints (Checkland, 1981; Wilson, 1984). Specifically, this suggestion encourages making management topic statements as root definitions with some ingredient academic management notions that offer relevant insights to alleviate a problem-situation. All in all, an examination on the subjects of management concern and topic statements via the systems thinking lenses reveals the intellectual complexity of these ABB topics, despite, very often, the brief instruction of them in universities applied business research module guides. The contemporary systems thinking-based review underlines the importance of avoiding the machine age thinking to unitarily

comprehend a problem-situation which, very often, exhibits soft complexity. [Note: Machine age thinking chiefly encourages efforts to discover "well-structured problems" in a specific problem-situation even when the problem-situation is messy.] Mainstream research methods textbooks, e.g., Gill *et al.* (2010) and Saunders *et al.* (2016), do not discuss management topics and concerns from this systems thinking perspective. The discussion here, on the other hand, underscores this perspective's relevance. In the regard, this review is novel and makes some additional intellectual contribution to these research methods topics. Now that the ABB exploration theme has been discussed at some length, the writer now takes up the task of explaining how a well-thought-out ABB account is able to inform a researcher to conduct the agile literature review approach I(ALRA I) in an applied business research project.

The contribution of a well-thought-out ABB account to the ALRA I application

The agile literature review approach (ALRA) has been elaborated in Ho (2017a, 2017b). In particular, it expounds on an idealized process of conducting literature review in an agile way with some awareness of systems thinking, which is called ALRA I. [ALRA II is more related to managerial intellectual learning using ALRA I, thus outside the scope of discussion for the article.] As a brief introduction of ALRA I to the readers, the following table, Table 3, tersely summarizes the main ALRA I ideas in the form of an ALRA I practice guide:

Table 3: A practice guide on ALRA I

The ALRA I Steps	Tasks and deliverable	Relevant resources and support
<i>ALRA Step 1 - ideas search</i>	<p><u>Tasks</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify relevant key words on the formulated <i>management topic statement</i> that responds to the <i>management concern statement made</i> (re: Table 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suggestions of relevant academic ideas for key word search from academic advisors and supervisors Library facility, notably e-library for accessing academic publishers'

	<p>1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature search • Browsing and screening contents found • Ideas snowballing <p><u>Deliverable</u> A folder for storing the relevant literature, primarily in pdf form</p>	websites
<i>ALRA Step 2 - ideas collection</i>	<p><u>Tasks</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect ideas from the literature and save them into one or more documents on different topics • Quick reading of the literature materials collected from Step 1 <p><u>Deliverable</u> A set of <i>study notes</i> on a chosen set of topics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computer • Brief evaluative comments and advice on the content of the <i>study notes</i> from academic advisors and supervisors • e-resources on study notes [for illustration]
<i>ALRA Step 3 - ideas categorization</i>	<p><u>Task</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review ideas on each study note on a particular topic and group the ideas from the study note into a number of categories that are relevant for addressing one or two management concerns under examination <p><u>Deliverable</u> A set of categories for grouping the ideas in each study note</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-resources on cognitive mapping-based literature review • e-resources on mind mapping-based literature review • e-resources on coding in qualitative research
<i>ALRA Step 4 - ideas systemic diagramming</i>	<p><u>Task</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link up idea categories to produce a theoretical framework/ ideas systemic diagram <p><u>Deliverable</u> A theoretical framework/ ideas systemic diagram</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-resources on theoretical framework • e-resources on systemic diagramming • e-resources on coding in qualitative research

Referring to Table 3, readers are specifically drawn to ALRA I Step 1, which makes use of the formulated *management concern*

and *management topic* statements (re: Table 1) as major inputs to launch the required literature search covered in this step. It should be reminded again that, sometimes, both the ABB exploration and the ALRA I Step 1 do not simply involve the handing of a pair of management concern and topic statements (which can still be done to reflect a researcher's voice involved in a specific research project), but rather a set of related management concern and topic statements. This is at times necessary in order to be able to comprehend the messiness of a research project setting encountered. Studying a set of related concern and topic statements in this case enables a more holistic comprehension and a more complicated understanding of the connected concern and topic statements. Doing so therefore is in line with the contemporary systems thinking that the ALRA endorses. In actual research works, very likely a researcher would perform an ABB exploration and the ALRA I at the same time, using the ALRA I practice guide as an idealized reference framework. By now, the significance of an ABB exploration done with intellectual competence to the ALRA I is made clear.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The ABB exploration as presented in the introduction section of an applied business research proposal is an intellectually complicated topic albeit having often been treated briefly in universities' applied business research module guides. When more informed by learning from the relevant academic literature, i.e., from the research methods and the systems thinking fields, a researcher is able to build up stronger intellectual competence to do the ABB exploration. Beyond that, a well-thought-out ABB account is required for the application of the agile literature review approach I. In summary, for the purpose of (i) providing an introduction section of research proposal, covering the ABB, with good

quality and (ii) providing good quality inputs, i.e., management concern and topic statements, for the employment of the ALRA I, a better understanding on the intellectual knowhow on ABB exploration is much desired. The study in this article is a contribution to this understanding. In particular, students doing applied business research or similar assignment exercises should find this work informative. Finally, as a critical reminder, throughout the discussion on project background exploration, the writer's attention is directed at applied business research. This kind of research as documented in universities module guides, mainly aims at "addressing the presumed pragmatic concerns and presumed business needs of practising managers" (Gill *et al.*, 2010), and much less at "investigating and understanding the structures and processes of oppression and injustice, that are the taken to be part of organizing in a capitalist society" (Gill *et al.*, 2010). This standpoint of study in this article needs to be made explicit. Nevertheless, showing awareness of the critical and emancipatory perspectives is much desired for business research, including applied business research.

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