An account of the agile literature review approach (ALRA) teaching issues and technique advices of the short-term type

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Abstract

There are short-term teachings as well as practice issues involved in learning and employing the agile literature review approach (ALRA) for the part-time MBA students doing dissertation projects. Based on a review of the writer's teaching and dissertation project supervision experience in Hong Kong, four teaching issues (TIs) as well as three short-term ALRA technique advices (AAs) are offered in this article to those involved in teaching, learning and employing the ALRA, primarily in the context of doing Applied Business Research-type of dissertation projects. The rationales underlying these TIs and ASs are made explicit in the discussion. This article offers some pedagogical and academic values to those who are interested in learning and using the ALRA.

Keywords: ALRA technique advices (AAs), ALRA teaching issues (TIs), Applied Business Research, MBA dissertation projects, the agile literature review approach (ALRA).

Introduction

The agile literature review approach (ALRA) was initially proposed by the writer in 2017 as a literature review methodology to comprehensively support part-time MBA

students' project works[1]. At the outset, it was intended to be employed by the writer to teach and guide his Hong Kong part-time MBA students on Applied Business Research and dissertation projects. This academic venture on the ALRA was considered worthwhile because many MBA students in Hong Kong whom this writer has come across experienced tremendous problems and stress in dissertation projects.

The first publication on the ALRA appeared in 2018 (Ho, 2018a). Since then, the ALRA has undergone a number of conceptual and technique refinements (Ho, 2018b; 2019a; 2019b). A Facebook group, *the agile literature review approach group*, has also been constructed by the writer on this subject (https://www.facebook.com/groups/1789115691385045)

Nonetheless, the ALRA is little known in the academic community, despite the availability of a number of published articles and the Facebook-based e-resource. In this article, the writer reviews the major short-term issues[2] encountered in the teaching and project practice of the ALR. Some technique suggestions are then made in response to the issues. To be able to understand the ideas of this article, readers need to have some prior knowledge of the ALRA, as this article is a follow-up academic work on the subject of ALRA.

Pedagogical and technique issues encountered in the ALRA teaching and practice

ALRA issues are examined under two discussion domains here, namely, the pedagogical domain and the ALRA technique domain. The overall orientation is short-term and quick-fix. On teaching the ALRA to the writer's part-time MBA class on

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[1] It is comprehensive in the sense that the ALRA, besides guiding literature review, explicitly informs works on dissertation project objective formulation, research design, findings and analysis, conclusion and recommendations, as well as dissertation report writing, among others.

[2] The word short-term is emphasized in this article, because the ALRA also deals with the long-term (life-long) intellectual learning support theme (Ho, 2018a; 2018b). The long-term topic in ALRA is not dealt with in this article.

Applied Business Research, the writer observed the following four pedagogical issues:

> **Teaching issue 1 (TI1) - on intellectual comprehension:** Most students have expressed much difficulty to intellectually appreciate the ALRA articles (e.g., Ho (2018a; 2018b; 2019a; 2019b).), thus unable to apply the ALRA ideas in their dissertation works without much supervisor coaching. Arising from this issue on the difficulty to understand the ALRA, students also have trouble to remember the ALRA ideas shortly after the Applied Business Research workshops.
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> **Teaching issue 2 (TI2) - on the availability of a case study***:* Some students have expressed difficulty to access a specific organization for a case study research in order to employ the ALRA[3]. This is especially the case for those full-time housewives, who have not worked in the industry for quite some time. Thus, some students find it not easy to use the ALRA. This need for a case study hinders their ability to learn the ALRA via the dissertation projects.
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> **Teaching issue 3 (TI3) - on proper ALRA diagramming:** Most students experienced much bewilderment when trying to construct the management-concerns diagram and the corresponding theoretical framework level-0[4]. In the writer's view, one reason is the relatively weak intellectual capability of the academic subjects and ideas that are relevant for

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[3] The ALRA primarily works with the case study research (re: https://www.facebook.com/literature.case.study.research/). It is also highly compatible with the mixed methods research (re: https://www.facebook.com/literature.mixed.methods.research/).

[4] The management-concerns diagram highlights issues that the client organizations are worried or excited about while the corresponding theoretical framework level-0 primarily deals with a set of evaluation tasks in response to the management concerns. As such, these evaluation tasks in theoretical framework level-0 are high-level research tasks, together, serving as a set of literature review agenda for the researcher.

their ALRA diagram construction, especially on the theoretical framework. For example, high-level research tasks related to organizational capability (in zone 2 of the theoretical framework level-0) can be misallocated to organizational outcomes/ solutions (zone 3 of the theoretical framework level-0)[5]; students cannot tell the difference between a capability notion from a performance notion[6]. Another reason is insufficient knowledge about the academic subjects and ideas on the dissertation project process and related problem-exploration approaches[7]. As a result, many students do not know what management-concerns (and high-level research tasks, in the case of theoretical framework level-0) items to include. Essentially, TI3 is about diagram items treatment.

Teaching issue 4 (TI4) - on diagramming imagination: Many students have difficulty to come up with and decide on ideas for the management-concerns and theoretical framework diagram construction. In particular, many of them cannot tell the difference between a management-concern issue (in the management-concerns diagram) and a high-level research task (in the theoretical framework level-0). The consequence is that: (i) the management-concerns diagram drawn by students have insufficient and few properly expressed management-concerns items and (ii) such items very often also appear very granular in

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[5] Both the management-concerns diagram and the theoretical frameworks in ALRA are partitioned into three zones, i.e., zone 1 (environmental drivers), zone 2 (organizational capabilities) and zone 3 (outcomes/ solutions). A four-zones scheme has also been proposed in 2019 (Ho, 2019c), but has not been tried so far.

[6] Quite some students are not familiar with the topics of core competency (a capability notion) and balanced scorecard (a performance notion).

[7] The subject of problem-exploration is especially well developed in contemporary systems thinking, notably in soft systems thinking and critical systems thinking (see, for example, Jackson (2003).).

nature (thus not suitable to be converted into high-level research task items in the corresponding theoretical framework level-0 for literature search purpose). The (ii) item has also to do with TI3. Shortly, TI4 is about generation of sufficient suitable diagram items[8].

These four teaching issues are inter-related; they have much to do with the insufficient managerial intellectual learning capability (Ho, 2014) of the students. Consequently, these issues impinge on the students' endeavour to formulate their dissertation proposals during this Applied Business Research workshop period. The difficulty to teach ALRA [from the teacher's standpoint] and the difficulty to learn ALRA [from the students' standpoint] are two sides of the same coin. The next section presents some technique advices to students; they are useful for helping them to cope with the four learning issues (TIs) encountered at the Applied Business Research workshops.

Additional short-term ALRA technique advice on MBA dissertation works

Some of the students' learning concerns [re: TIs] on the ALRA are dealt with during the writer's workshop. In particular, some additional ALRA technique advices have been offered to the students on the ALRA practices. Basically, they represent some extra short-term explicit technique enhancements to the ALRA, thus contributing to the ALRA learning materials for students and, subsequently, to concrete guidelines for students' dissertation project works. The ALRA technique advices (AAs) on dissertation works are as follows:

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[8] Ho (2019d) offers a list of typical academic ideas , grouped into the three ALRA zones, for students to consider in their ALRA diagram construction. It appears to be useful to deal with TI4.

ALRA technique advice 1 (AA1) - on the number of components in the management-concerns diagram and the corresponding theoretical framework level-0: To portray a sufficiently complicated understanding of (i) the problem-situation under review [as represented by the management-concerns diagram] and (ii) the intellectual response to the problem-situation [as represented by the theoretical framework level-0], it is suggested that there be:

> a. 3 to 4 items[9] in zone 1 [environmental drivers zone] of the diagrams (i.e., both the management-concerns diagram and the theoretical framework level-0);
> b. 4 items in zone 2 [organizational capabilities zone] of the diagrams;
> c. 4 to 5 items in zone 3 [outcomes/ solutions zone] of the diagrams (specifically, half of the items on outcomes and half on solutions);

The rationale of AA1 is to encourage a complicated and balanced comprehension of both the problem-situation and the intellectual response to this situation. Although there are, in most cases, only two items that make up the core-focus-domain in the theoretical framework level-0, it remains important to have a sizeable set of non-core-focus-domain (NCFD) items for the following reasons: (a) these NCFD items reduce blind spots[10] in Applied Business Research project investigation, (b) these NCFD items improve a researcher's ability to comprehend the nature and vitality of the core-focus-domain items[11], and (c) they improve the researcher's ability to comprehend the complexity of the problem-situation encountered. As a result of

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[9] Items in management-concerns diagrams are about worrying concerns and positive opportunities while those in the theoretical frameworks level-0 are about high-level research tasks, often involving evaluation efforts.

[10] Significant blind spots in research projects inevitably lead to major research quality defects.

[11] Researchers can comprehend better the nature of the core-focus-domain items within a broader context of analysis, which comprises the relevant non-core-focus-domain items.

such a sizeable set of items for research purpose, the researcher is able to obtain a fuller understanding of the topics under investigation and, consequently, to formulate more effective ways to cope with the problem-situation involved in the client organization (Ho, 2019e). In this case, analysis problems arising from a highly restrictive view[12] of the problem-situation to be studied are reduced.

ALRA technique advice2 (AA2) - on the choice of items for the core-focus-domain in the theoretical framework level-0: It is suggested that:

> a. two items from the organizational capabilities zone (zone 2) be chosen from the theoretical framework level-0 to constitute the core-focus-domain of the theoretical framework[13];
> b. the two items so chosen be not very similar in nature, e.g., strategic human resource management and talent management.

The underlying rationale of AA2 is to focus on the critical investigation topics that the client organization needs to understand and, subsequently, strengthen (i.e., on organizational capabilities) in order to be capable of introducing effective improvement measures (i.e., on solutions). In turn, these measures allow the organization to respond more successfully to the major environmental challenges (i.e., on environmental drivers in zone 1) facing the client organization.

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[12] There is a danger that an ivory tower perspective to do applied business research will unintentionally foster a highly restrictive way to investigate real-world important managerial problems which tend to be complex and wicked.

[13] In this case, the two core-focus-domain high-level research tasks also make up the primary objectives of the dissertation project.

*ALRA technique advice3 (AA3) - on time management of doing dissertation projects***:** It is suggested that students should start to work on the construction of the management-concerns diagram and the theoretical framework level-0 for their dissertation projects early on in their Applied Business Research study. From the experience of this writer, most student doing dissertation projects spend more than half of their dissertation project time working on the ALRA diagrams, i.e., the management-concerns diagram and the theoretical framework set (level-0, level-1a, 1b and 1c), and the underlying literature review. On the other hand, novice researchers of dissertation projects very often direct their initial primary attention to research methods to use for their dissertation projects; such prime attention is premature, because students are only in a position to do so after they have worked out their management-concerns diagrams and theoretical framework sets[14].

The rationale of AA3 is that, a management-concerns-driven literature review, which is time-consuming and intellectually testing, can only begin with a clear sense of direction once a properly formulated set of management-concerns diagram and theoretical framework level-0 is available. Thus an appropriate time management arrangement is to kick-start the dissertation project by working on the management-concerns diagram and the theoretical framework level-0 early on. Doing these initial diagramming inevitably requires intensive coaching from the dissertation lecturer/ supervisor, from the writer's experience.

Altogether, there are four teaching issues and three ALRA technique advices. They are mainly related to short-term managerial intellectual learning and dissertation project

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[14] In ALRA, the research design topic mainly comes up during the construction of theoretical framework level-1c. Students need to have a properly produced management-concerns diagram, theoretical framework level-0, 1a and 1b, before they are able to work on the theoretical framework level-1c construction.

techniques to cope with the immediate ALRA learning and practice issues. Short-term type of technique advices are valuable to students who need to work with a tight dissertation project deadline. Realistically, one cannot recommend students to spend five man-months to study applied business research and the ALRA if they have only 3 months to do their dissertation projects on a part-time basis. The existing ALRA literature has already examined the ALRA strengths and weaknesses, as well as its relevance to both short-time and long-term intellectual learning. Thus, they are not repeated here.

Concluding remarks

There are specific short-term issues involved in the ALRA teaching, learning and practices in the context of applied business research-type of dissertation projects by the part-time MBA students in Hong Kong. They have been examined here. Moreover, some short-term technique advices have been offered by the writer, based on a review of his 2-year experience in teaching the subject as well as in supervising dissertation projects with ALRA application. This article should thus be a useful reading to students doing dissertation projects with th ALRA as well as to readers having an intellectual interest in the ALRA.

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