

## Reading: Purpose and Positionality

### CHAPTER SUMMARY

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Criticality
- 3 The critical literature review
- 4 Critical interpretations of events
- 5 Being critical in your own research

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By studying and doing the activities in this chapter you will:

- 1 have an understanding of *radical reading*
- 2 develop an awareness of the place of criticality in radical reading of both texts and practices
- 3 have explored examples of critical responses to literature
- 4 have responded to examples of critical readings of events
- 5 have developed your own definition and synopsis of the place of criticality in your own research

## Introduction

*Radical reading* provides the justification for the critical adoption or rejection of existing knowledge and practices.

In this chapter we discuss the centrality of the literature search and Review and the ‘readings’ of the research settings in which researchers work.

Building on our argument that social research is *purposive* and *positional*, we argued in Chapter 2 that *radical reading* is a process which exposes the *purposes* and *positions* of both texts and practices. By using the word ‘reading’ here we are concerned both with the understanding of written texts and the more metaphorical ‘reading’ of situations – ‘How do *you* read this or that action or event?’ How, that is, do you interpret the events in the theatre of enquiry?

### Activity 5.1

Take a moment to reflect on our definition of *radical reading*. How does this concept help you in your research study? Make some brief notes in your research journal. Remember that it is important not necessarily to agree with our position, but rather to engage with it.

## Criticality

*Criticality* – ‘being critical’ – describes the attempt to show on what terms ‘personal’ and ‘public’ knowledges are jointly articulated – and therefore where their *positional* differences lie.

Any critical account seeks to be *rational*, but will also reflect the values and beliefs of its author. It is the presence of the *persuasive* in a critical account which reveals the full range of values at work.

In Chapter 1 we asked, *What is research?* and outlined the specific characteristics of social research as *persuasive*, *purposive*, *positional* and *political*. Alongside these important *characteristics* of social research it is necessary to establish an operational understanding of the phases involved in any research study. Such an understanding of the *constructural features* of social research becomes central at this point in our discussion. In a simple operational definition we could say that social research consists of six steps.

We want to demonstrate here how *radical reading*, is inseparable from the other three radical processes discussed in elsewhere in this book, and show how it is essential in realising the six steps presented in Figure 5.1. In the following scheme (Figure 5.2) we connect these six steps, with the various *radical processes* in the conduct of *critical enquiry*.

**Operationally, research consists of:**

- 1 *framing* a research question;
- 2 *finding out* what existing answers there are to that question;
- 3 *establishing* what is 'missing' from those answers, then,
- 4 *getting information* which will answer the question; and,
- 5 *making meanings* from the information which helps to answer your research question,
- 6 *presenting a report* which highlights the significance of your study.

Figure 5.1 *Six steps in critical social science enquiry*

**Activity 5.2**

Think about the simple six-step operational structure opposite. Can it be applied to your own study? In which ways can the various radical acts of critical social science enquiry be identified as present in your own study?

## The critical literature review

In this section we shall examine what *radical reading* means in relation to the literature. First we shall describe practical strategies for *radical reading* of research reports. Second we suggest how research questions will inform the literature search decisions. Finally we shall look at some examples of demonstrating a critical response to such reading in the writing of research reports.

Practically *radical reading means asking the following questions of what you read:*

- *What is the author trying to say?*  
What is the real point here? What is the central argument?
- *To whom is the author speaking?*  
Is this account written for academics? Policy-makers? Practitioners? Is the author really speaking to me?
- *Why has this account of this research been written?*  
Does s/he have a political point to make? How does this relate to current policy

Operational step	Radical processes
1 <i>Framing</i> a research question;	This cannot be successfully achieved without some <i>radical reading</i> of the research literature and/or the 'theatre' of research
2 <i>Finding out</i> what existing answers there are to that question	Essential here is engagement with the research literature – <i>critical reading</i>
3 <i>Establishing</i> what is 'missing' from those answers	Some <i>radical looking</i> is necessary here – seeing beyond the known – to find the precise focus of the study which makes your study unique. Criticality in the <i>radical reading</i> of literature and 'theatre'
4 <i>Getting information</i> which will answer the question	More reading of the literature and <i>radical listening</i> and <i>looking</i> in the generation of data
5 <i>Making meanings</i> from the information which helps to answer your research question	<i>Radical looking</i> and <i>radical reading</i> of the meanings within the evidence at the stage of analytical interpretation of data; <i>critical reflection</i>
6 <i>Presenting a report</i> which highlights the significance of your study	Telling the research story. Accounting for the findings through the research report in <i>persuasive</i> ways which make explicit the findings, the <i>purpose</i> or the study, the <i>position</i> of the researcher and the <i>political</i> nature of the research act. The research report brings together these <i>radical processes</i> of <i>Looking, Listening, Questioning</i> and <i>Reading</i> and ultimately <i>justifies</i> the enquiry

Figure 5.2 Six operational steps and their radical processes of critical social science enquiry

- *What does the author ultimately want to achieve?*  
Does s/he want to bring about some change? Does s/he want to make a difference? To what?
- *What authority does s/he appeal to?*  
Disciplinarity? Policy evidence? Political mission?
- *What evidence does the author offer to substantiate the claims?*  
Participants statements? Observations/documentary analysis? Is there any 'missing' evidence?
- *Do I accept this evidence?*  
Is it sufficient to support the claims made in the report? What else could I ask to see?

- *Does this account accord with what I know of the world?*  
Is there a match between my experience and my reading and what I am reading?  
Does it matter if the report is disconnected from my own world? Can I learn something from that disconnection?
- *What is my view?*  
Based on what principles/ideology/pedagogy/life experiences . . . and supported by which authors . . . ?
- *What evidence do I have for this view?*  
How can I substantiate my own view? Do I draw on what I am reading here?  
What other sources and experiences have formed my view?
- *Do I find this account credible within the compass of my experience and knowledge?*  
Taking my responses to the above questions, does my reading of this research report lead me to decide that it should 'count' in my own study? Should it be included as part of the bank of information and evidence which shapes my own study?

It is perhaps helpful to think of radical reading as posing two sets of questions: questions to the author and questions put, as it were, 'to myself'. The questions in Figure 5.3 can be used when reading any piece of research literature and offer a distinct and straightforward strategy for making a critical response to what you are reading.

<b>Questions to 'ask' the author . . .</b>	<b>Questions to ask myself . . .</b>
Why did you write this?	Why am I reading this?
Who did you write this for?	Was it written for 'me'?
What was your purpose?	What am I looking for ?
What questions were you asking?	What questions am I asking?
What answers did you find?	Do I find those answers credible?
What is your evidence?	Do I accept that evidence?
What is your conclusion?	Do I agree with those conclusions?
	<i>But above all . . .</i>
	What have I learned?
	<i>and</i>
	How can I use it?

Figure 5.3 Critical reading: some questions

**Activity 5.3**

With the questions in Figure 5.3 in mind, try reflecting on something you've read recently – a magazine or newspaper article perhaps.

To what extent do you use the strategies for critical reading suggested above to decide on the usefulness of the piece *for your purposes*?

**The 'Crowsfoot' questions**

In Chapter 2 we showed how our students arrived at two research questions which would help them to respond to issues raised by the headteacher at Crowsfoot School. The questions were:

- 1 To what extent do the attitudes of staff affect the inclusion of children with learning difficulties in Crowsfoot School?
- 2 What steps might be taken to develop more inclusive attitudes and practices at Crowsfoot?

These questions are pivotal in planning a suitably focused *literature search* and in writing a critical *literature review*. One technique for planning a literature search from research questions is to map the key themes on to a Venn diagram. It can help to try to identify three key themes from the research questions in order to develop sufficient focus for the search. The most likely key themes for the Crowsfoot study literature search are: teacher attitudes, inclusive education and learning difficulties. If these are mapped on to the Venn diagram as in Figure 5.4, the precise focus of the literature search becomes clear. This is the literature which lies in the intersection of the three key themes (marked 'LS' in Figure 5.4).

This means of focusing in, from the research questions, to the key themes in the literature and finding what lies at the heart of the study provides a simple but effective tool for identifying the key terms for a literature search and for making decisions about what to include and what to leave outside the scope of the study.

**Literature and positionality**

Finally, in this section, we want to consider the role of the literature in demonstrating positionality. Typically, all research reports (especially those written for award bearing courses) include some form of literature review. One function of the *critical literature review* is to locate the *positionality* of the research being reported within its field and to identify how that research is *unique*.

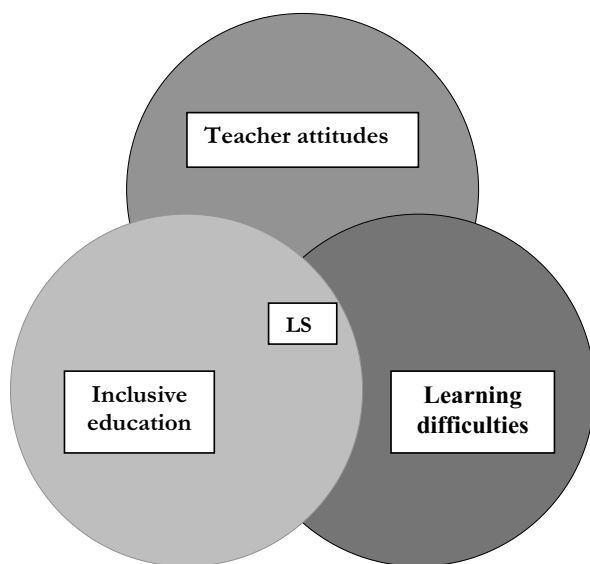


Figure 5.4 Identifying the focus of the literature search

The following extract from a research journal shows how Hannon and Nutbrown (1997) summarised the literature in their field of study and identified what was *unique* in their own research report. We have included the 'Abstract' so as to give an overview of the whole article and then the 'Introduction' which uses the literature to position the research and its researchers and, in the final sentence to state the uniqueness of the study being reported.

### **Teachers' use of a Conceptual Framework for Early Literacy Education involving Parents**

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**ABSTRACT** Changes in literacy education regarding the importance of early years and the role of parents have implications for teacher professional development which have not yet been fully addressed. This article describes a conceptual framework intended to give early childhood educators a way of thinking about the role of parents in children's early literacy development and how teachers can work with parents. The conceptual framework was offered to a group of teachers through a professional development programme of six seminars. Four sources of data were used to evaluate the meaningfulness of the framework, its perceived usefulness to teachers, and its impact on practice. Findings indicate that the framework largely

achieved its intended purposes but some issues requiring further development and investigation are identified.

### **Introduction**

Two aspects of literacy education have changed radically in recent years: first, recognition of the importance of the early stages of children's literacy development, particularly in the pre-school years; and second, acknowledgement of the value of parental involvement, again in particular in the early years. Both have implications for the professional development of early years teachers. In this article we argue that the need is to offer teachers concepts for understanding early literacy development, the parents' role in that development and the teacher's role in relation to the parents. We propose a particular conceptual framework to aid understanding of these issues and report an evaluation of it which involved investigating teachers' views of the framework and studying how it enabled them to develop new practice in early literacy education.

Recognition of the importance of the early stages of children's literacy development has come about as a result of several lines of research. Simple measures of literacy development at school entry (e.g. ability to recognise or form letters, book handling skills) have been shown to be powerful predictors of later attainment – better, arguably, than other measures of ability or oral language development (Wells, 1987; Tizard et al. 1988). Other predictors from as early as 3 years of age include knowledge of nursery rhymes (Maclean et al., 1987) and having favourite books (Weinberger, 1996). The teaching implications of these findings are not straightforward (for it does not follow that concentrating directly on any of these things will, in itself improve later literacy attainment) but it is at least clear that early literacy experiences of some kind are important. Research has also given us a fuller appreciation of the nature of literacy development in the pre-school period – what Yetta Goodman has termed the 'roots of literacy' which, she argues, often go unnoticed (Goodman, 1980, 1986). Particularly interesting is what children learn from environmental print – a major feature of the print-rich cultures of the Western world – which for some children may be more influential than books. Children's early writing development can also be traced back into the pre-school period, especially if one looks at children's understanding of the function of writing as well as its form (Teale and Sulzby, 1986; Hall 1987). Other aspects of early literacy development to have been highlighted by researchers include phonological awareness (Goawami and Bryant, 1990), understanding of narrative and story (Meek, 1982; Wells, 1987), and decontextualised talk (Snow, 1991).

Acknowledgement of the value of parental involvement in the teaching of literacy at all ages has also been the result of a large number of research studies (Dickinson, 1994; Hannon, 1995; Wolfendale and Topping, 1996). In the early years, children do not acquire their knowledge of written language unaided – parents and other family members have a central role. A survey by Hannon and James (1990) found parents of pre-school children, across a wide range of families, to be very active in promoting

children's literacy. Most would have appreciated support from nursery teachers but did not get it. Some parents go so far as deliberately to teach their children some aspects of literacy (Farquhar et al., 1985; Hall et al., 1989; Hannon and James, 1990). However, although virtually all parents attempt to assist pre-school literacy in some way, they do not all do it in the same way, to the same extent, with the same concept of literacy, or with the same resources (Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Wells, 1987; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Hannon et al., 1991). Much of the variation in children's early literacy achievement must be due to what parents do, or do not do, at home in the pre-school years.

There is ample encouragement therefore to involve parents in early literacy education, but how that can best be achieved and the implications for teachers professional development have not been adequately explored (Nutbrown et al., 1991). Part of the problem is that teachers are trained for their role in promoting children's classroom literacy learning. Children's home literacy learning may well be more important but, by its nature, it is usually invisible to schoolteachers, who are not necessarily well equipped conceptually to appreciate its nature or power.

Teachers' concepts of literacy learning have been the subject of several research studies. For example, in adult literacy education there has been research into how teachers' implicit theories structure their classroom practice (Dirkx and Spurgin, 1992). In the school years, studies have also concentrated on teachers' conceptions of classroom instruction and learning (Martin, 1982; DeFord, 1985; Levande, 1989; Wham, 1993; Guimares and Youngman, 1995). Some authors have noted the significance of children's out-of-school or pre-school learning and explored the implications for how teachers conceptualise what they offer in classrooms (Duffy and Anderson, 1984; Weir, 1989; Cambourne, 1995; Barclay et al., 1995; Anderson, 1995), but there appears to have been little concern for how teachers might influence that literacy learning through work with parents. In this article we want to consider how a particular conceptual framework might provide the means for teachers to do just that.

Source: Harman and Nutbrown, 1997: 405–20.

Note how, having reviewed the literature and positioned their own study within that literature, the authors state in the last two sentences what it is precisely that makes this study unique – what contribution to knowledge this *particular* research study in this *particular* research report is making. The article goes on to explain aspects of early literacy development and the four roles which the authors suggest parents can play in their children's early literacy development: providing *opportunities*, *recognition*, *interaction* and a *model* of a literacy user (Hannon and Nutbrown, 1997: 407). They suggest that the various strands of literacy (as identified through the literature review) and the four parents roles can be combined in a heuristic device which they call the ORIM (*opportunities*, *recognition*, *interaction* and a *model*) framework (Figure 5.5).

**STRANDS OF EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT**

		Environmental print	Books	Writing	Oral language
<b>FAMILIES CAN PROVIDE</b>	<i>Opportunities</i>				
	<i>Recognition</i>				
	<i>Interaction</i>				
	<i>Model</i>				

Figure 5.5 *The ORIM framework*  
 Source: Hannon and Nutbrown, 1997.

Having used the literature to establish a theoretical basis for this framework (in Figure 5.5) Hannon and Nutbrown (1997) go on to locate the literature they have reviewed in terms of their framework. They map onto the framework, the studies they have reviewed (Figure 5.6), thus using the framework to critically review the literature they cite in terms of the home-focused early literacy education. This action provides *evidence* – as a result of *critical reading* and a form of *radical looking* – that most work in the field in which Hannon and Nutbrown were working was more narrowly focused than their own and that some cells in the framework had been largely neglected by researchers. Thus the territory in which Hannon and Nutbrown located their own research was established without ambiguity.

Using a similar device for critical reflection, Nutbrown (1997) reviewed a number of measures of literacy in terms of her stated desirable characteristics. Having provided an extensive overview of existing measures she summarised them in tabular form (Figure 5.7) to identify the contribution those particular studies make to the field and – importantly – to demonstrate what was unique about Nutbrown’s (1997) own study.

**Critical interpretations of events**

So far we have discussed the role of *radical reading* in terms of developing a critical response to literature. Otherwise, and in the actual field, many aspects of research involve ‘reading’ the research setting as well as reading the literature in the substantive and related fields of enquiry. But what does it mean to take a ‘reading’ of a research situation? At its simplest level, it involves the researcher in reading – literally – from noticeboards, institution policy documentation, corridors of public

**STRANDS OF EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT**

		Environmental print	Books	Writing	Oral language
<b>FAMILIES CAN PROVIDE</b>	<i>Opportunities</i>	<b>J</b>	<b>B C D E G H I J K L M N</b>	<b>E F J</b>	<b>A N?</b>
	<i>Recognition</i>	<b>J</b>	<b>E G H I J M N?</b>	<b>E J</b>	<b>N?</b>
	<i>Interaction</i>	<b>J</b>	<b>B E G H I? J M N</b>	<b>E F J</b>	<b>A N?</b>
	<i>Model</i>	<b>J</b>	<b>E? H J</b>	<b>E? F J</b>	<b>A</b>

Figure 5.6 *The ORIM framework: analysis of previous research studies*  
 Source: Hannon and Nutbrown 1997: 409.

Key:

A = Wade (1984); B = Swinson (1985); C = McCormick and Mason (1986); D = Griffiths and Edmonds (1986); E = Lujan et al. (1986); F = Green (1987); G = Edwards (1989); H = Goldsmith and Handel (1990); I = Winter and Rouse (1990); J = Hannon et al. (1991); K = Segel and Freidberg (1991); L = Wade and Moore (1993); M = Arnold and Whitehurst (1994); N = Toomey and Sloane (1994).

buildings and other signs and signals – as well as more subtle data such as body language in interviews or meetings or other interactive settings. The interpretation of silences and well as spoken responses also form part of taking a ‘reading’ of the setting. Such (in-part) ‘intuitive’ data is often disregarded but can play a powerful role in forming the researchers’ response to work with/in the research setting. Experiences which require an interpretational ‘reading’ in order to understand the actions and interactions within the situation must also be considered in the forming of research questions and the making of research decisions.

What follows are two examples of writing which emanate from the researchers ‘intuitive’ reading of research settings. They are based on data gathered through *radical reading* of each research setting: graffiti, local newspaper reports, postures of staff in meetings, of pupils as they moved around a school, of shop windows, boarded-up buildings, school and community noticeboards, school inspection reports, parents meetings, the look of the streets, the makes and condition of cars parked locally, the state of the telephone box, the stray dogs roaming the streets. ‘Readings’ such as these enable a researcher to ‘take a reading’ of the setting and to compose a written response to that reading.

Test	Sets tasks in meaningful context	Covers knowledge of environmental print	Covers knowledge of books	Covers writing	Can be repeated	Has a scoring system
Jones and Hendrickson 1970	–	✓	–	–	?	–
Clay 1972	–	–	✓	✓	✓	✓
Thackray & Thackray 1974	–	–	*	–	?	–
Downing & Thackray 1976	–	–	*	–	?	–
Ylisto 1977	✓	✓	–	–	?	✓
Brimer & Raban 1979	–	–	*	–	?	✓
Goodman & Altwerger 1981	–	*	*	*	✓	–
Downing <i>et al.</i> 1983	–	*	*	*	✓	✓
Clymer & Barratt 1983	✓	–	*	–	?	✓
Heibert 1983	✓	–	✓	–	?	–
Goodhall 1984	✓	✓	–	–	✓	–
Manchester 1988	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	–
Barra <i>et al.</i> 1989	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	–
Waterland 1989	✓	–	✓	–	✓	–
Sulzby 1990	✓	–	–	✓	✓	✓
Kent LEA 1992	–	–	*	–	✓	✓
LARR 1993	–	*	*	–	✓	✓
Wandsworth 1994	✓	–	*	*	✓	✓
Desforges Lyndsay 1995	✓	–	*	*	✓	✓
SCAA 1996	✓	–	*	*	✓	✓
Vincent <i>et al.</i> 1996	–	–	*	*	✓	✓
Nutbrown 199	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Key:     –     no  
           \*     Minimal coverage  
           ✓     adequate coverage

Figure 5.7 Review of measures of literacy in terms of Nutbrown’s desirable characteristics

Source: adapted from Nutbrown 1997 p. 68 and p. 109)

### Activity 5.4 'Taking readings'

Read the following two examples of research accounts which derive from 'radical readings' of research settings. After your reading try to note down the various things which the researcher 'read' in order to assemble the account.

### Example 1

NICK, PAUL AND ME

In one of the Midlands schools we studied, we spent something like 300 days over two years mainly talking to staff within the scope and schedule of the project. Now this school was of great interest: a big (about 2000) students) place fairly downtown in a big city tired with industrial collapse; fitfully tense – in this retrenchment – with a substantial Pakistani community brought to many years ago thousands of miles indifferently as so many operatives; and made slightly famous by local politicians who polarized each other into caricatures of left and right (one Labour councillor described the Tory leader – in his presence – as 'itler wi' knobs on'; this without a smile).

Of a staff of over 140, some eight were employed full time as special educators, mainly supporting children in mainstream classrooms; a further eight worked as language support teachers with the many students whose first tongue was not English. This is by any standard a high proportion of teachers in support-for-access roles.

I shall tell the whole story elsewhere, but in brief there were many mutterings about these support departments, and in particular about the special needs organisation; it was falling apart and was becoming friable as its head of department.

...

Few structures held the department together beyond those which organized his own spirit. To be sure, there were timetables, a policy of sorts, schedules for staff to refer children for help. But I insist that these were contingent, mere stuff that routes Nick's energy.

Source: Clough, 1995: 132.

### Example 2

I've met my father and his sons in so many Special Schools.

A man I was really frightened of was a miner from Bresswell; he had served in the post-war Army, mainly in Germany, and named his son Klaus in honour and memory, I presume, of a greater life, culture and identity than he enjoyed in this bleak mining

village. He had a bayonet over the fireplace. His wife – the mother – had left years before and he had brought Klaus up largely alone with some help from his nearby mother. He was in all respects what would be called, I think, ‘a man’s man.’

He was five feet eight or so, but broad, and naturally fatty, but strong, too. His face was clearly made to be young – you could see him easily at 20, a sort of Irish look – but had been badly spoiled with hard work, drink and tobacco . . .

...

My job was to liaise between home and the special school which Klaus attended in respect of his maladjustment. I made my first visit to the house during the half-term holiday in February. Bresswell is low, somehow; there is a severe grid of council estate painted on top of the slight wold of the east Midland. The miners and their families live over the shop: quite beneath the estate is their work, so these are single story bungalows laid out as Coniston Drive, Langdale Close, Bowness Avenue and so on.

I had written – twice – that I was coming, but there was no sign of life when I arrived at 11. The curtains were drawn at all the windows and this was the only bungalow where there was no smoke from the chimney though this was a February morning. I knocked and banged and I would have gone just as the door opened . . .

Source: Clough, 1996: 75.

### **Activity 5.5 Taking ‘readings’ in the field of enquiry**

Try ‘reading’ your own institution, or your morning bus queue or the supermarket.

As you reflect on your ‘reading’ of the situation think about the following:

- What did you ‘read’?
- What skills and strategies did you use?
- What assumptions and responses did you make to what you saw?
- How did you make decisions about the meaning of your reading?

## **Being critical in your own research**

This chapter has focused on critical responses to the literature and to the interpretation of research settings. Before we leave the theme of radical reading we want to suggest a final form of critical response to texts and situations in respect of your radical reading of your own research report. Whilst writing your dissertation or theses, bear in mind the skills of radical reading which you brought to bear on the writing of others and employ these to read your own writing within a critical frame.

**Activity 5.6**

Revisit the questions to ask the author in Figure 5.3. Can you respond to them in respect of your own writing?

We shall return to the issue of critical research writing in Chapter 8 which focuses on the research report.

**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

In this chapter we have:

- 1 Defined and demonstrated our view of radical reading in research and argued the importance of radical reading in the research process
- 2 Outlined of the place of criticality in radical reading of texts and practices
- 3 Discussed how research question can be used to define and refine the focus of a literature search
- 4 Demonstrated, through two examples of research different dimensions of 'radical reading'
- 5 Drawn together the practices of radical reading of the texts of others with the need to adopt such a response to your own research writing

**FURTHER READING**

Hart, C. (1998) *Doing a Literature Review*. London: Sage.

Contains useful ideas and strategies for planning and carrying out a literature search.

Hart, C. (2001) *Doing a Literature Search*. London: Sage.

Contains useful ideas and strategies for planning and writing a good literature review, includes some practical examples.

Pink, S. (2001) *Visual Ethnography*. London: Sage.

This book offers a critical response to 'visual' research methods with some suggestions about analysis and ethical considerations.