

Using Bourdieu's theory of practice to understand ICT use amongst nurse educators



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SUMMARY

Background: Implementing changes in practice in either clinical or educational settings remains challenging. In the context of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) adoption, the literature focuses either on organisational factors influencing its implementation, or on individual factors influencing its adoption into practice. Separately both fail to examine the issue holistically. Bourdieu's theory of practice provides a method for reconciling the two.

Objective: To provide a practical example of how Bourdieu's theory of practice can be employed to better understand nurse educators' responses to ICT.

Design: Exploratory descriptive design, using a Bourdieusian case-study to guide a documentary analysis.

Methods: In 2009 a two-part study was conducted within a Department of Nursing (DON) in higher education (HE) in England. First Bourdieu's theory of practice was used to develop a case-study; then nurse educators were recruited for a Q-methodology (Q) study. This paper focuses exclusively on the case study and the use of the theory of practice to interpret the findings from the Q-study.

Results: Nursing's transition into academia, promotions criteria in HE and the value placed on research over teaching have influenced educators' responses to technology.

Conclusion: The use of Bourdieu's framework provides a rich and contextual backdrop for understanding how organisational factors interact to influence individuals' responses to technology adoption.

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Introduction

Implementing new and better ways of practicing in clinical or educational settings remains a challenge across the globe. It requires a holistic analysis of different factors at macro-, meso- and micro-levels. When it comes to adopting new technologies, there is a plethora of literature reporting on either the critical success factors (CSF) (Selim, 2007) required when implementing technology across institutions, or those related to its integration into practice. Yet both are two critical phases of the same multifaceted process.

The macro- and meso-levels demand an examination of the political-economic and institutional context required to implement an e-

learning strategy (see Selim, 2007; Bruner, 2007; Legris et al., 2003; McPherson and Nunes, 2008); whilst the micro-level looks at academics' intentions to use technology in their courses (see Walker and Johnson, 2008; Liaw et al., 2007; Mahdizadeh et al., 2008). Neither approach alone, however, provides a holistic view of how these different levels of analysis interact.

In 2009, a research study addressed this by examining technology adoption through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's socio-cultural framework (theory of practice). Bourdieu's three main concepts (*habitus*, *capital* and *field*) were operationalised for data collection and analysis. A case-study was developed to examine the *field* surrounding e-learning adoption in higher education (HE), and to identify the recognised forms of *capital*. The third concept, *habitus*, was operationalised using Q-methodology, the results of which are described fully elsewhere (Petit dit Dariel et al., 2010; Petit dit Dariel et al., 2012). The advantage of using Bourdieu's (1977) theory is that it challenges the dichotomy noted in the literature between the institutional factors and the individual factors offering a model for reconciling these two perspectives. This paper focuses on the use of Bourdieu's framework to develop a case-study for the analysis of the Q-study findings and post-sort interviews.

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Background

ICT Adoption in HE

Understanding ICT adoption in teaching practice remains complex. Many studies have employed university-wide, cross-disciplinary surveys (such as in Mahdizadeh et al., 2008 and Zhen et al., 2008) that identified a number of generic factors (e.g. lack of time, training and limited infrastructure). Yet most fail to examine the underlying issues causing these generic factors to influence some groups of educators but not others, and more importantly, do not recognise the impact of disciplines on these choices. Other studies approach technology adoption only from an individual perspective, focusing primarily on internal factors (e.g. computer competence, perceived usefulness), without taking into consideration the organisational factors. This paper seeks to provide a practical model for combining both external and internal factors by examining the influence of socio-cultural structures on individual behaviour using Bourdieu's theory of practice.

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

When exploring social systems, both social psychology and sociology are useful to examine behaviour within structural constraints. Yet these two approaches tend to focus on either macro- or micro-levels of analysis. Bourdieu argued that analysing objective structures at the macro-level inevitably carried over into the analysis of subjective micro-level responses, thus destroying this artificial division (Bourdieu and de Saint Martin, 1982). Bourdieu's theory of practice thus enables this dualism to co-exist by linking behaviour to social structures through three main concepts (Vaughan, 2008) that are central to understanding practice: *habitus*, *field* and *capital* (Fig. 1).

Field

When exploring social phenomena Bourdieu argued that it was insufficient to look only at what was said or what had happened. To understand behaviour, or practice, it was necessary to examine the social space in which it took place (Bourdieu, 2005). Developing the *field* is therefore a significant area of investigation in research projects underpinned by Bourdieu's theory as it helps in explaining the behaviour of the actors within it.

The *field* is often described as a "game" defined by rules or forces exerted by actors playing it (James, 1998). All actors bring *capital* to the game providing them with more, or less, power to influence these rules. The game results in a fluid and shifting mix of alliances, negotiations, agreements and conflicts between the actors. The *field* is never static but changes over time as power dynamics challenge its boundaries and the recognised forms of *capital*. Bourdieu describes the interactions occurring within the *field* as "struggles," in which actors strategically operate to maximise their positions. This is not always necessarily for financial gain (economic *capital*), but can include any attempt to improve their acquisition of different forms of *capital*.

Capital

Bourdieu's *field* is described as highly competitive, with actors competing to maintain or improve their position. At stake is the accumulation of *capital*, which is found in four different forms: 1) economic

(salary, tuition); 2) social (peers, networks); 3) cultural (education, socio-demographic); and 4) symbolic (reputation, respect, status). The volume and composition of *capital* that actors possess, and the degree of valuation of that *capital* within the *field*, allow different actors to "wield power, or influence, and thus to exist, in the field under consideration" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.98). Differences in actors' acquisition of *capital* equate to differences in power, which is itself dependent on the structure of the *field*, their specific location within it, and on the personal, social and career trajectories (*habitus*) by which they have arrived in the *field* (Vaughan, 2008).

Habitus

Habitus is Bourdieu's solution for incorporating culture and tradition into his theoretical framework and explains features of social life that are not always explicit (Thompson, 2008). *Habitus* is defined as the set of dispositions embodied as a result of personal experiences, backgrounds, professions and circumstances and is manifested as the interplay between the individual and the collective. As such, *habitus* is seen as underlying actions as dictated by the unconscious relationship between *capital* and *field*.

When employing Bourdieu's theory, the *field* should not be perceived as a single structure but rather as a series of smaller *fields* of social practice. Fig. 2 illustrates how a collective of individuals within a subculture (H – for *habitus*), in this case nurse academics, operates within layered *fields* each conferring different levels of influence on the collective within them. The first *field* is a department within a university system, which itself is contained within a wider *field* and influenced by external forces, such as regulatory bodies like the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). At the macro-level the capitalist system influences the socio-economic and political *fields* which exert a global influence on the internal *fields*. The smaller circles (H) are seen as being influenced by both subjective and collective factors and the external influences of the wider *fields*.

The Study

Objective

The aim of this paper is to provide a practical example of how Bourdieu's theory was employed to provide greater insight into the interaction between context and behaviour, using technology adoption amongst nurse educators as an example.

Design

The two-part study adopted an exploratory descriptive design, combining a Bourdieusian case-study with Q-methodology (Table 2 for Q-statements). The case study offered a backdrop from which to analyse the Q-data and explore how the context (*field* and *capital*) had influenced nurse educators' responses (*habitus*) to ICT. It is this application of Bourdieu's theoretical framework that is the focus of this paper.

Setting/Population

One institution of HE in the UK (renamed Hillgate University or HU) and its Division of Nursing (DON) were used to develop this in-depth case-study.

Data Collection

This Bourdieusian case study was guided by Vaughan (1996, 2008) who reconstructed the events leading up to the launch and explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger in 1986. This tragic event occurred despite protests by engineers over the Solid Rocket Boosters and demonstrated a clear case of managerial neglect, poor judgment and flawed

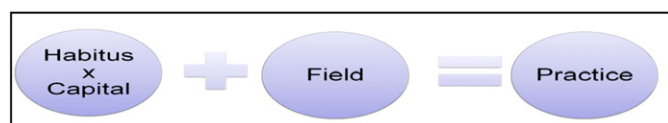


Fig. 1. The relationship between habitus, field and capital in influencing practice (Bourdieu, 1984, p.101).

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