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**Author(s)** Christina R. Davidson, Charles Sturt University; Gillian Busch

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## **“Struggling with It? I’m an IT Teacher”: Doing Online Category Work about an Educational Issue**

Research that examines the uptake of digital technologies in classrooms provides a body of literature on the issue from the perspectives of education stakeholders such as teachers and students. This study employs the sociological perspective of Membership Categorization Analysis to examine the ways that numerous perspectives on the issue are drawn together in response to a news website article about the use of digital devices in classrooms. The analysis examines the ways categories, and category related activities, were used to inform and justify what a range of people said and inferred about the perspectives of others on the issue. Categories are shown to be important for *in situ* “sense making” that underpins and enables the doing of social life online.

### **Objectives**

The failure of digital technology to achieve its potential in education is an ongoing concern (Author, 2009; Blackwell, 2013; Falloon, 2013). This has been attributed to factors such as teachers’ lack of knowledge and expertise (Peluso, 2012); teachers’ mindsets about the place of digital technology in learning (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007), inappropriate pedagogy (Willett, 2007), and the physical challenges associated with digital technology use, such as availability of computers and access to the internet (Author A, in press). Adoption of digital devices has been touted as one answer to these perceived problems (Crichton, Pegler & White, 2012; Falloon, 2013).

Emerging research on digital devices indicates their benefits across curriculum areas and various aspects of learning. This includes special needs (Flewitt, Kucirkova, & Messer, 2014; Retter, Anderson & Kieran, 2013; Watts, Brennan & Phelps, 2012), early learning (Blackwell, 2013; Pellerin, 2014) and literacy (Walsh & Simpson, 2013). Use promotes more active engagement from students (Chou, Block & Jesness, 2012) and, importantly, makes learning available for “low-income families” and helps to “advance digital equity” (Chou, Block & Jesness, 2012, p. 14).

Despite the benefits of digital devices, concerns continue about their potential to bring about education transformation. So called “media hype” (Crichton, Pegler & White, 2012, p.12) has been blamed for creating unreal expectations of what tablet technology can achieve. Challenges associated with the newest technology “on the block” continue, in particular the need for training and support of teachers (Blackwell, 2013; Chou, Block & Jesness, 2012). The perspectives of teachers, parents and students have been important in delineating issues (e.g. Hoffman, 2013). However, less attention has been given in education research to the matter of how members of the broader public conceive of, understand and debate these issues.

This paper provides an analysis of online commentary in response to a news website article about the uptake of digital devices in classrooms. While interested in what commenters wrote about the issue, our focus is on the particular ways people referred to themselves, and others, to explain their perspectives. The aim is to understand how various perspectives were presented as common-sense by a range of people through reference to who they were, their

experiences and why these were relevant to the particular issue at hand - the classroom uptake of digital devices.

### **Perspective of Membership Categorization Analysis**

Membership categorization analysis was developed by Harvey Sacks (1995). He took an ethnomethodological perspective focussing on ordinary members' "sense-making and reasoning practices" (Butler, 2008, p. 28) for organising social action. Conceptual tools developed by Sacks include: membership categories, membership categorization devices, and category-bound activities (Author B, 2011).

Membership categories are classifications used to describe people (Hester & Eglin, 1997, p. 3) and are located and assembled within and through interaction (Baker, 1997). Examples might include doctor, patient, and so on. Membership categories are linked to each other through a membership categorization device (MCD), a "collection of categories for referring to persons" (Sacks, 1995, Vol. 1, p. 238). Importantly, category work is members' business; therefore, "we only talk about a collection when the categories that compose it are categories that members do in fact use together" (Sacks, 1995, Vol. 1, p. 238). Thus, membership categorization devices are "*in situ* achievements of members' practical actions and practical reasoning" (Hester, 1994, p. 242 cited in Housley & Fitzgerald, 2002, p. 68).

Categories are "inference rich" (Sacks, 1995, Vol. 1, p. 40), with members' knowledge stored in categories. Schegloff (2007) referred to "inference richness" as a "filing system for the common-sense knowledge that ordinary people have... about what people are like, how they behave" (p. 469). Embedded in inference rich categories is the common-sense knowledge of the activities that a member of the category might be expected to do or not do (Butler, 2008) and associated "obligations and rights" (Jayussi, 1984, p. 35). Rights and obligations are referred to as "category bound activities" (Sacks, 1995, Vol. 1, p. 241) and it is the way in which categories and associated actions are bound together that helps members make sense and organise social action *in situ* (Author B, 2011).

### **Methods**

The study examines online comments made on the news website Stuff.com.nz in response to an article published in 2014. The article is available at:

<http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/education/10233243/Classrooms-flooded-with-devices>

The article provides information and perspectives on the uptake of digital devices in classrooms. As with other articles on this website, a comments section allows for individuals to post comments in response to the article, respond to comments of others and indicate whether comments are liked or disliked.

Analysis examines a corpus of 198 comments posted by 97 people made over two days beginning with the first response to the article. Membership categorization analysis involved the delineation of categories and category bound activities and consideration of how, when and why categories were made relevant and how their relevance was oriented to over the course of written comments. Thus, our analytic claims about membership categories are

located in the claims to which members oriented and are “grounded in the conduct of the parties” (Schegloff, 2007, p. 476).

**Data Sources**

The full paper presents analysis of numerous categories used or made relevant. Here we provide extracts from our analysis of category work by Grandpa\_Jo3, and those who responded to his comments, to illustrate some points from the paper.

Grandpa\_Jo3 participated in six threads of conversation and contributed eight posts. His early contributions were:

*Table 1*

Contributor	Comments
<i>Grandpa_Jo3</i>	There is definitely potential there with technology in education. Potential for both positive and negative outcomes. As always, the investment in teachers’ professional development should match the investment with the resources themselves ... I believe our challenge in education/technology debates is not to think of technology as either good or bad, but rather accept that it’s here to stay. We need to be smarter about when and how we use it, and most importantly, when to turn it off (Parents, we’re looking at you here too!)
<i>Wellyboy</i>	Potential was realised 35 years ago. It’s people like you who are struggling with the concept.
<i>Avon</i>	I am 56 and I just took it for granted the students were do a lot of their work on devices.
<i>Grandpa_Jo3</i>	Struggling with it? I’m an IT teacher at a large primary school who would have a better idea than most... Seems to me you’ve missed the point of what I was getting at.
<i>Dma</i>	Wellyboy, if you don’t get what Grandpa is saying then I think you might want to go back to school ... What point is there in having these devices for teaching on if the teachers aren’t trained in how to get the most out of them?

The interchange between Grandpa\_Jo3 and Wellyboy shows how categories are made to matter. Usernames that encompass a category, such as Grandpa\_Jo3, may lead to inferences by others and interactional trouble. In his post, Grandpa\_Jo3, while not directly claiming to be a teacher, speaks authoritatively introducing the importance of professional development, an activity bound to the category teacher. Additionally, he uses collective pronouns ‘our’ and ‘we’, which claim membership of the category of someone who knows about the challenges for a teacher. Use of “we” invokes a shared category with others who have an obligation to address the educational potential of digital technology because of category membership.

The next post, Wellyboy’s, topicalizes “potential” but he does not align with Grandpa\_Jo3’s perspective on it. Instead, by pointing out the potential of digital technology was realised

years ago, Wellyboy rejects Grandpa\_Jo3's position. Further, his reference to "people like you" infers Grandpa\_Jo3's membership of a category with the category bound activity "struggling with the concept". Avon's response to Wellyboy's comment suggests her understanding that "people like you" are old. She foregrounds her age but makes age not relevant to the issue. In this way, she resists the category bound activity invoked by Wellyboy.

Grandpa\_Jo3's response follows on from Avon's but ties it to Wellyboy's comment through partial repetition of his words ("struggling with it?"). The addition of a question brings Wellyboy's statement *into* question. Further, Grandpa\_Jo3 not only indicates that Wellyboy has missed the point, but infers that Wellyboy has in fact "missed the category", leading Grandpa\_Jo3 to explicitly name, and assume, the category IT teacher. Category shifting in this way illustrates that people belong to numerous categories (Sacks, 1995) and make a best fit at the time according to particular interactional purposes and circumstances; misunderstandings may require naming a category.

DMA makes the final comment. Although following Grandpa\_Jo3's response, his comment is directed at Wellyboy through the use of his username in the turn initial position (Schegloff, 2007). The comment draws on Grandpa\_Jo3's formulation that Wellyboy has missed the point. DMA aligns with the position stated by Grandpa\_Jo3 originally, through remarks about devices and teacher training, thus displaying his own understanding of the point that Wellyboy has missed.

### **Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view**

In the full paper we discuss: how perspectives on the educational issue are related to knowledge and experience encapsulated in categories; how interactions are managed sequentially and categorically to display sense-making to others; how membership of numerous categories, as an integral aspect of social life, is managed during interaction. A brief overview of these points is provided here.

Perspectives on the educational issue display knowledge and experience encapsulated in categories and their use (Sacks, 1995). Highlighted in the analysis, in particular, is how this promotes discussion, particularly through disagreement related to category use or inference about categories. In the excerpt above, individual comments by Grandpa\_Jo3 and Wellyboy provide interactions that are integrally related to who they are and what they are entitled to say.

Analysis shows that commenters employ a range of methods to manage their interactions on the site in order to make clear to whom their turn was directed. Grandpa\_Jo3 sometimes used quotation marks and direct quotes from a previous post to indicate that he was responding to it specifically. Another way to indicate the recipient of a comment was to specifically state the username of the person. Comments were also repeated, with "NOT" inserted to provide a counter perspective.

As Sacks (1995) proposed, people belong to numerous categories. Our analysis shows how categories are made relevant on particular occasions for specific purposes. That is, people

manage their category membership during interactions with others on the news website. Unlike the conduct of research interviews where participants are often selected because of their existing membership of a particular category, what happens on this website is that contributors choose to speak from a particular category and may shift categories. Additionally, participants and analysts alike could only draw conclusions about people and their perspectives on the issues that are made available in comments, or by clicking on the username profile. Grandpa\_Jo3 eventually makes clear that he is an IT teacher but refers to himself as a technology nerd on his profile. While others make inferences, these can be inaccurate and lead to misunderstandings (Hester & Hester, 2012).

### **Scholarly significance of the study or work**

Online discussion sites provide perspicuous settings (Sacks, 1995) for examining how categories are used by people in the conduct of their everyday social activity. Such sites draw together large numbers of people who do not necessarily know each other offline, yet share an interest in a topic or social issue. Because interaction is conducted through written comments, rather than face-to-face, online commentary provides rich illustrations of the ways that people use categories to contextualise their posts and negotiate their interactions. These exemplify the position proposed by Sacks; that in examining the use of categories we can find *in situ* “sense making” that underpins and enables social life.

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