

## Cultural Capital and the Digital Divide: A Literature Review

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### *Abstract*

*The internet holds promise of rapid diffusion of information to the global community and the potential to change our way of life. Those without access or with limited access to the internet are at a disadvantage. This paper examined the implications and issues surrounding the Digital Divide as it relates to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. It is an examination of the literature on the Digital Divide in education.*

### *Introduction*

The importance of the internet to the global community is its promise of rapid diffusion of information (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004). With this importance come implications for access to the internet. The internet not only holds vast amounts of information for people around the globe, it also has the potential to change our way of life. Consequently, how does this affect people without access; or those with limited access to computers and mobile technology? What is the significance of the Digital Divide?

The Digital Divide refers to a gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not. It is an issue of equity. Defining the "Digital Divide" is difficult. It has been described as the gap between people who have the skills and abilities to use technology and those who do not, people who live in areas where technology is available and those who do not, people who are educated and those who are not (Attewell, 2004; Attewell, 2001; Willis & Trantner, 2006).

We examined the literature on the Digital Divide in education to determine how it relates to Bourdieu's sociological theory, and the role of habitus, field, and cultural capital. We used online search engines including Google Scholar and a university library search engine with multiple databases based on the search terms "Digital Divide," "technology access," "technology gap,"

“Digital Divide and cultural capital,” and “technology and the poor.” The searches revealed peer-reviewed sources relevant to the Digital Divide in relation to cultural capital.

### *Cultural Capital*

Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist who attempted to show how inequality is created and sustained in a society (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). He used the term “cultural capital” to understand the resources that individuals, groups, and institutions offer a society, and used the terms “field” and “habitus” to describe this development. Field is the context in which cultural capital is produced and in which it holds meaning. Habitus involves character and a way of thinking; one’s perceptions of how to live out who they are and what they have—actions one sees as available (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu was asking how and why social structures are reproduced.

Educational, social, and intellectual knowledge are at the core of cultural capital. The implications of cultural capital for education lie in the dominant and dominated groups surrounding that educational system. For example, there may be a difference in those raised in a working class neighborhood from those from a middle-class neighborhood. Winkle-Wagner (2010) stated, “Those students who early acquired the forms of cultural capital valued by the dominant groups will be more highly rewarded” (p. 18). Cultural capital is an “asset” that is developed in a field—primarily in a family and in early education. It holds its value based on what is valued by those in relationship to it, and it is part of the institutions which surround it. Cultural capital includes the skills, knowledge, competence and abilities that are culturally related (Bourdieu, 2007). Because cultural capital is coupled with the structures by which it is surrounded, its value comes not because of an inherent worth, but because of the value placed on it by the people and structures it serves.

### *Literature Review*

#### **Have and Have-Nots**

The literature revealed a variety of thought and theory surrounding the Digital Divide. We consider the issues of access and use in this literature review.

Attewell (2001) reported that poor and minority families do not have access to computers as do other families. He called the condition “the information haves” and the “information have-nots” (p. 252). He pointed out that United States policy makers have proactively tried to avert access problems and view this as a social problem. In 2000, the Digital Empowerment Act sought to provide increased funding for school technology. Other state-wide policies were cited as further indication of the importance of this problem (Attewell, 2001).

Attewell (2001) contended that there have been two Digital Divides—the first, an issue of access, the second, an issue of computer use (Attewell, Suazo-

Garcia, & Battle, 2003; Korupp & Szydlik, 2005). The first was driven by “income inequality and/or educational differences” (Attewell, 2001, p. 253) and were found to be most prevalent in schools serving the poor. The second was viewed as the way the computers were being used both in school and at home, rather than the numbers of computers available in classrooms.

Rogers (2001) identified the social problems that come with the use of the internet. He said,

The main social problem with the widespread diffusion of the internet, however, is that it has not spread evenly to everyone, creating a digital divide in which the considerable benefits of the internet only accrue to certain, already advantaged individuals, leaving other individuals relatively more disadvantaged (p. 98).

He argued that the Digital Divide is a matter of access and in the future, it could be a learning divide or a content divide.

Attewell, Suazo-Garcia, and Battle (2003), in their longitudinal study beginning in 1968, discussed education as a key part in studies on the Digital Divide. They contended that if computers are beneficial to learning, then children who lack access to them at home or at school are likely to experience disadvantages during their childhood. The researchers spoke of the Digital Divide as bigger than just unequal access, and agreed with Attewell (2001) that it also required examining the quality of computer use. Quality included equipment students had available to them, the training teachers received, and the progressiveness of what the school offered.

**The role of habitus.** Habitus is a way of thinking; the perceptions people have and the actions they perceive are available to them. It is developed based on the context in which they live and grow. A look at cultural capital requires one to consider habitus—how perceptions are developed. An ethnographic study by Kvasny (2005) looked at the role of habitus in the Digital Divide by examining discussions between government authorities and residents in an urban technology center of working class people. Kvasny (2005) argued that these discussions could reproduce social inequities. The study, focusing on 15 adults enrolled in computer courses at a community technology center, allowed the voices of those who were experiencing the negative side of the Digital Divide to be heard. Kvasny (2005) recognized the unequal power over decisions being made regarding designing and developing technology and found that those solutions were not bridging the gap, perhaps because of the power of habitus on the group being studied and the implications the policies require of the group.

Korupp and Szydlik (2005) studied cases of computer and internet access to understand the inequities of the Digital Divide. The model they drew from was, “a three-fold model including human capital, family context, and social context” (p. 409). They defined the Digital Divide as “a division between individuals and households at different socio-economic levels, regarding their chances to access or use information and communication technology” (p. 410).

They agreed with Attewell's (2001) distinction between first and second level Digital Divide—first level represents access and second level represents uses.

**Relationship to cultural capital.** In comparing studies on the Digital Divide, several issues are prominent. Most notable is the lack of consistency in defining the Digital Divide along with the breadth of interpretation of its impact on education and society. Attewell (2001), Attewell, Suazo-Garcia, and Battle (2003), and Korupp and Szydluk (2005) agreed that two Digital Divides exist—that of access and that of use. Perhaps the question of use is linked to implications of studies where no substantial impact on children's learning was noted when computers were used in the classroom. The question of access versus how computers were used could be important when viewing implications of these studies. Are they ineffective because of the stated lack of supervision children had and their tendency to use them for games and simple word processing tools rather than for more complex tools of learning? How are these issues connected to cultural capital, field, and habitus?

Socio-economic status (SES) could have implications for children's learning with computers. Attewell (2004) reported computers have a lack of impact on student learning and concluded the way they are used impacts the lack of effectiveness. Kvasny (2005) argued that the power of habitus had an effect on the group being studied. Korupp and Szydluk (2005) found that income, gender, and living in a single household were factors of the Digital Divide.

#### Summary

A Pew Research Center report indicated "Household income is the greatest predictor of internet use for Americans" (Jansen, 2010, p. 2). Jansen (2010) reported 95% of Americans making \$75,000 or more use the internet at home compared to 70% in lower income brackets. Higher income households use the internet more frequently and make use of more online activities. Important activities for higher income groups are 1) health information and 2) online product searches. Availability of these services is important to all groups and is foundational to issues of the Digital Divide.

Cultural capital and education hold many implications for the problem of the Digital Divide. How people see what actions they have available to them—that is "habitus." Do they perceive they have access to technology? Studies have shown that even barring problems with community-offered technology centers, low-income, urban families and individuals do not have the cultural capital to take advantage of these initiatives—that is "field." Lack of education, lack of willingness to take initiative, lack of training, and inability to see they have an option affect these groups of people.

#### Conclusions

Field and habitus in the theory of cultural capital are important to a study of the Digital Divide. Field is based on class and is what gives meaning to the assets of the people in that field. Why are those particular assets important to that group of people? How does that impact the Digital Divide? Habitus "Is the sum total of one's cultural capital, the series of dispositions that one has internalized and that one will employ" (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 8). Habitus is who we are because of where we are. It is "gained" by living in a certain family, being educated in a certain school—the structure behind which we form beliefs, knowledge, and actions.

How do field and habitus relate to the Digital Divide? The literature indicates socio-economic status has had the strongest impact on the Digital Divide. Future studies should examine the technology needs of those of low SES in order to make certain these groups are provided not only the hardware and software, but also the training, skills, and support they need to connect to technology that works. The have-nots are on the wrong side of the divide and the barriers presented by low SES make crossing the divide very difficult. What one sees as actions available and how those actions are viewed by the people in a cultural area contribute to the ability or lack of ability of individuals to cross the divide.

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