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The habitus and technological practices of rural students: a case study

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This paper describes the habitus and technological practices of a South African rural student in his first year at university. This student is one of five self-declared rural students, from a group of 23 first-years in four South African universities, whose access to, and use of, technologies in their learning and everyday lives was investigated in 2011 using a 'digital ethnography' approach. Their digital practices, in the form of their activities in context, were collected through multiple strategies in order to provide a nuanced description of the role of technologies in their lives. The student reported on here came from a school and a community with very little access to information and communication technologies (ICTs). While the adjustment to first year can be challenging for all students, the findings show that this can be especially acute for students from rural backgrounds. The study provides an analysis of one student's negotiation of a range of technologies six to nine months into his first year at university. Earlier theoretical concepts provide a lens for describing his practices through a consideration of his habitus, and access to and use of various forms of capitals in relation to the fields – especially that of higher education – in which he was situated.

Keywords: Bourdieu; ethnography; higher education; practices; rural; South Africa; students; technology; university

Introduction

In 2011 we undertook a 'digital ethnography' (Murthy, 2008:1) of students' access to and use of technologies in their learning and everyday lives. During the analysis phase it became clear that it would be important to describe the challenges and adjustments students from rural backgrounds face, both dealing with the transition to university generally, and specifically adopting new technologies into their learning lives. This is not a unique local problem: research from other countries has shown that students from rural backgrounds face challenges succeeding in higher education. A study of various factors affecting students' successful completion at the Open University of Sri Lanka, for example, showed that 77% of rural students did not complete their degrees compared with the 44% of urban students who did not do so (Gamaathige & Dissanayake, 1999). Another study, from Australia, identified students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds living in rural areas as a distinct group at greater risk of educational disadvantage (James, 2002).

In South Africa, it has not been possible to obtain exact figures on the percentage

of students from rural backgrounds in South African universities. This is made more difficult because students from rural backgrounds are often included either in the general category of 'disadvantaged students' or assumed to be in the group of students on financial aid.

However, it is clear from the literature that rural schools continue to suffer poor, indeed worse, learning conditions on the whole compared with their urban counterparts. Motala, Dieltiens, Carrim, Kgobe, Moyo and Rembe (2007:52) note that despite improvements in funding equity, many learners, especially in the rural areas, continue to lack access to proper infrastructure and have to manage with limited text books, badly stocked school libraries and poorly trained educators. They also note that the single most powerful recommendation to emerge from the findings of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (Department of Education, 2003 in Motala & Dieltiens, 2010) was the need to improve and equalise facilities and resources. In addition, learners in rural areas are less likely to attend school. Lewin (2009) analysed Demographic and Health Surveys from 25 Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) countries and found that urban children have about four times more chance of being enrolled in Grade nine than rural children in the data set. Studies of educational exclusion make the same finding – that more out-of-school children are to be found in rural areas than are to be found in urban areas (Motala & Dieltiens, 2010).

There is also evidence that students in rural schools achieve worse results than their urban counterparts. Motala et al. (2007) observe that learners who fared less well in the Department of Education's national assessments of learning achievement for Grades 3 and 6 came from (in descending order) township, farm, rural and remote rural schools. Many Quintile one schools[1] are in rural areas, with the Free State having 64.1% of Quintile one schools in South Africa, of relevance because four of this study's five rural students (including the student reported on in this paper) were from the Free State. The concerns about these schools and their general poor situation have been addressed in a number of ways, one of which is inclusion in the 500+ Dinaledi schools that receive National Treasury grants to improve mathematics and science results.

The statistics reveal that only 7.7% of the learners in Quintile one schools who wrote the National Senior Certificate exams in 2009 passed (Financial & Fiscal Commission, 2011). This means that the demographic and geographical spread of the country's students is not proportionately represented in universities. One of the few studies which consider rural students in universities (Tumbo, Couper & Hugo, 2009) reviewed lists of undergraduate students admitted from 1999 to 2002 in Health Science faculties, in terms of whether they had rural, town or city postal codes. They found that 59% of the students were from cities, 15% from towns and 26% from rural areas. They concluded that the proportion of rural-origin students in medical studies at that time in South Africa was considerably lower than the national rural population ratio of 46.3% (and of course disproportionate to the number of medical professionals in rural areas).

While there are numerous studies about the transition to university of disadvantaged students (as defined economically), there appear to be few that focus specifically on those from rural areas, and those specifically from poor rural areas. Kapp and Bangeni (2011) describe some of the challenges students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds (many from rural areas) face in negotiating aspects of academic literacy at university. They show how students encounter an essentially foreign culture at university, and have to reconcile conflicting transitional spaces of their home and university identities. We have found no studies specifically addressing university students from rural backgrounds in terms of their technological literacies and associated issues. Information from a non-governmental organisation (NGO) supporting rural students in higher education says that in student feedback reports on their experiences at university "the unfamiliarity of technology comes up again and again as a real challenge for new students" (Glover, pers comm., 2012). This is not surprising given that Internet penetration is only 4.6% in South African rural areas compared to 21.8% in urban areas (Pejovic, Johnson, Zheleva, Belding, Parks & Van Stam, 2012). Although mobile telephony is decreasing the location-based divide, the disparity between rural and urban youth is still pronounced; while 70% of urban youth over 16 use mobile phones, only 49% of their rural counterparts do so (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) New York, Division of Communication, Social and Civic Media Section, Beger G & Sinha, 2012).

In a study on student dropouts, Brits, Hendrich, Van der Walt and Naidu (2011) review work reported on by the Rural Education and Access Program (REAP) in 2008 and 2010 which states that a rural background may have a negative impact on student success because students from disadvantaged backgrounds are usually underprepared for tertiary education, but at the same time the preparedness of the institutions to accommodate underprepared students is sometimes questionable (REAP, 2008:6, in Brits et al., 2011). In their colloquium report of 2010, REAP reports that rural students' success is constrained by financial factors including the fact that many cannot afford to go home for their holidays; academic factors which see them confront the fact that although they have passed Grade 12 they lack the necessary competencies required for tertiary study; and socio-cultural factors, including isolation and alienation in a new environment. In this paper we therefore focus on the story of one student, from what, by his account, is a seriously marginalised context. Through a narrative approach we explore how a student from a rural background navigated the use of technologies in his first year at university and we challenge assumptions that are made about the position of technology in the lives of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We also explore the learning pathways this student followed in acquiring ICT-based skills needed to successfully traverse higher education.

Theoretical framework

Students' technology practices cannot be described in isolation; these are not neutral

activities. We find Bourdieu's (1984, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) framework a valuable way to describe student practices in the context of the field in which they occur, and in terms of their habitus and the capitals they are able to bring to bear to their practices.

Bourdieu (1984:101) summarises his framework as "[(*habitus*) (*capital*)] + *field* = *practice*". A field is a distinct social space consisting of interrelated and vertically differentiated positions, a "network, or configuration of objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:97). In the case of this study, we understand higher education to be a distinct social field, and we also understand the rural community in which the students live to constitute a different social field.

Bourdieu (1986) describes four forms of capital: economic, social, cultural and symbolic. Economic capital refers to assets either in the form of, or convertible to cash. Social capital is "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:119). Cultural capital occurs in three states: embodied, objectified, and institutionalised. Jenkins (2002) explains that embodied cultural capital refers to long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, expressed commonly as skills, competencies, knowledge and representation of self image. Objectified cultural capital refers to physical objects as "cultural goods which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories" (Bourdieu, 1986:243, mentions pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines). Institutional cultural capital is the formal recognition of knowledge usually in the form of educational qualifications. Symbolic capital is appropriated when one of the other capitals is converted to prestige, honour, reputation, fame – it is about recognition, value and status.

Habitus has been widely used in education, specifically to consider the way that disadvantaged students mediate their educational experiences. Bourdieu (1977:vii) described habitus as "a system of durable, transposable dispositions which functions as the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices". This complex definition has been explained to mean that a habitus lens provides a way of showing students' "ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being…how [they] carry [their] history, how [they] bring this history into [their] present circumstances, and how [they] then make choices to act in certain ways and then not others" (Maton, 2008:53). This concept has been critiqued by many scholars as being determinist and leaving little room for agency. In a detailed review of these debates, Mills (2008) argues that the generative dimension of the concept can indicate transformation as well as reproduction. Therefore while an individual's habitus – inculcated by everyday experiences within the family, the peer group and the school – disposes actors to do certain things, orienting their actions and inclinations, it does not determine that they do so. As Mills (2008) points out, Bourdieu explained that habitus is a strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations. The point is that

there is no such thing as pure agency; but a kind of (limited) agency can be identified. She makes the point that those with a more transformative habitus recognise opportunities for improvisation and act in ways to transform situations. Thus, she observes that what one may experience as incapacitating, another may see as generative of opportunities for self-enhancement or self-renewal.

As this is not a study of agency, but one of practices, the specific issues of agency – both empirical and theoretical – do not receive attention. Rather the focus is on practices, especially the habitus and the ways that various capitals are drawn on and exerted in the fields, particularly that of higher education.

Methodology

This paper describes the habitus and technological practices of a South African rural student in his first year at university. It arises from a project which used a 'digital ethnography' (Murthy, 2008) approach to study 23 first-year students in four South African universities (Cape Town, Fort Hare, Free State, and Rhodes universities) during 2011. Digital or virtual ethnographies have been used to expand opportunities for data collection beyond the physical (Murthy, 2008) and to enable researchers to better understand people's technological culture (Hine, 2008). We drew on Ethnographic Action Research (EAR) as a methodological framework as it combined participatory techniques and ethnographic approaches into an action research framework (Tacchi, Foth & Hearn, 2009). Consequently we recruited and trained researchers located at each study site. The on-site researchers were embedded in the context of the student participants thus available and able to establish a relationship with them. This methodology allowed for the dynamic interchange between researcher and participant; it acknowledged that each influences the other – thus the inclusion of Action Research within its framework. The sources of data for the project (and this paper) comprise a range of interviews (transcribed and viewed), video records and transcripts, transcripts of a focus group as well as digital diaries and social media (Facebook) observations.

The student described in this paper is one of five self-declared rural students from a group. When it became evident that the rural students were of particular interest, we realised that we would lose the richness of their narratives if we tried to focus on all of them. We selected Jake (a pseudonym) purposefully. He had engaged consistently throughout the project and provided an extensive mix of interview and digital data. He had also responded by email when clarification on data and findings was sought.

This paper takes the form of a descriptive case study because it seeks to examine a particular phenomenon, *viz*. the assimilation of technology into the learning life of a rural student in a real-life context, namely, the first year of university (Yin, 2003). In examining this particular event in a real-life context we are looking at a bounded system in its own habitat (Stake, 1978). We acknowledge that this is one person's story and consider it important through the insight it offers into the challenges of a marginalised group of students in higher education.

Data analysis was framed by the theoretical lens and the concepts of Bourdieu's (1986) framework – habitus (with indicators of family background, schooling, and reported competence), economic capital, cultural capital (specifically embodied and objectified), social capital and field.

Transcribed interview evidence for all participants formed the basis of a content analysis that developed four coding matrices based on the research framework. The first three were for the past, current and future use of ICT by students. The fourth defined their use of varied aspects of social media. These were combined into a highly structured coding matrix using NVivo software which was used to code all the students' interviews. In addition, further analysis of all the data sources was undertaken for selected students' cases. In the case of Jake, we also sought clarity on further issues via email, and gave him the opportunity to read the draft of this paper. Whilst we sought informed consent from all students for the research and guaranteed their anonymity in publication, it was important that an individual student view our academic interpretation of his story.

Jake's story

Habitus is a way of describing how, "amongst other things [students], carry [their] history, how [they] bring this history into [their] present circumstances" (Maton, 2008:53). Therefore Jake's personal background is relevant to understanding his later digital practices.

Background

Jake, aged 19, is a first-year Humanities student, the first person in his family to go to university. He is trilingual, speaking seSotho as a home language but also fluent in isiZulu and English. His mother, who worked in town as a factory worker, had died when he was 12 years old and he described his father as a self-employed tiler. His father had two wives and four children, all of whom Jake considered his siblings (he spoke of his sibling on his mother's side, and his siblings on his father's side). Neither of his parents successfully completed their schooling; his mother left before the end of her school years and his father failed the final school exams. Jake is the first person in his family to successfully finish school and be accepted for university.

Jake attended primary and high school in small rural schools, the primary school having fewer than 100 pupils, the high school under 500 pupils. His high school was one of the afore-mentioned Dinaledi schools focusing on mathematics and science. Because of the additional grant these schools received, his school did have some technology, but as noted below, he did not have access to it.

Economic capital and access to technology

Jake's access to the types of capital which he could draw on in the field of higher education was limited. In terms of economic capital, there was a substantial shift when he got a university bursary that paid for his laptop and smartphone. Before he came to

university he had had few encounters with technology. His school had two computers in the library but he had never touched them. He got his first cell phone when he was in Grade 10, and until he came to university he thought a cell phone was the most important item of technology to have.

He says that when people in his village need to access the Internet from a computer they have to travel to an Internet cafe and that "it is costly". He makes a similar observation about accessing the Internet from cell phones when he notes that, "Most of my peers had cell phones that had internet but they couldn't use them to surf the net due to coverage issues and costs". He says he now uses the Internet more than his friends at home because,

> "when I get to the internet, already having like paid for the data services and stuff, I get for free. So to them it is still like they have to budget for the whole thing, so I think it is more accessible to me than it is to them."

It is through the economic capital Jake acquired when winning the bursary that he gained access to what he describes as the "individualism" of his own laptop. He says that the university does have computer labs but that he prefers having his own machine, which he points out he uses differently. Having the luxury of an individual machine means that "there are no monitors" and that while in labs, "there are other students and you have to be silent". He notes that, "with your own computer you can angle it the way you want and watch whatever you like".

Having the money to buy a laptop and phone also meant that he gave away other devices such as flash drives and memory sticks to others "at home, for music and stuff".

If considered in terms of his university context, his economic capital or resources are mixed. On the one hand Jake's computer at six months old is considered relatively old, and he describes it as, "problematic. Full of *matata,* problems. This Acer of mine is now becoming too old". But Jake is mindful of the fact that he is on a bursary and says that he would never ask his family for money to buy technology as he cannot justify it to them; he points out that they would not understand what he was asking for. He also adds that he still has credit on his bursary, so this is another reason not to ask his parents.

While the bursary has literally provided Jake with economic resources he did not previously have, he continues to operate in an environment where technology practices are shaped by resource constraints. Thus he does all his printing in the university labs, as he does not have a printer. And he notes in one of his Facebook status updates that:

> It ws a shock @ first 2 notice dat many of my frnds r no longer updating anythng on fb, bt then again I got reminded of da fact dat skuls r closed. Whch minz no more easy access 2 free computers on campus. Only dose wit smartphnes r beatin da recession. # shame #.

Jake is aware of the privilege his financial position offers him and that without access to centralised university resources such as computer labs, his fellow students are cut off from their online social networks.

Social capital

Acquiring a computer has given Jake access to social capital and changed the dynamics of his relationships.

He is able to help his room-mate as he is the one who has the computer. Jake shares his laptop with his room-mate when he needs the Internet, otherwise he would have to travel a distance to gain access. Jake says:

> I'm logging in…to send an SMS. My room-mate's mother. Ja, [he] is looking for money, money. …My room-mate wants to send an SMS, let me just login. My roommate is going to send an SMS to his Mama. Apparently, he's looking for something like money, whatsoever, so I am going to make space for him.

He has gained new networks, and he calls on them for help if he has problems with his computer, particularly his network of neighbours in the hostels. He says that he has never asked for help in the computer labs; even though there are plenty of people there. He says it takes too long for anyone to respond if he raises his hand, observing that "they don't even see you".

His online networks have changed substantially in the six months that he has had the laptop and the Blackberry, as he did not have a computer before (and nor did anyone in his family) and his previous cell phone did not have easy Internet connectivity.

He uses Facebook on the computer regularly (at least every hour) and both Facebook and Mxit on the Blackberry. He has between 350 and 400 Facebook "friends", of whom he says only 15 are friends known to him personally. The networks are through his church, his home community and through his connections in another province. He is very active on lists and groups, many of them related to his church and other religious groupings. He says that Mxit is largely for a small group of his church friends.

Cultural capital

Jake is aware that before he came to university he had limited cultural capital in terms of computer literacy, and he observes that although there were in fact two computers at the school he did not use them because he did not know how "to compute or surf the net. In our school we didn't have computer literacy skills."

He notes that "the technological infrastructure in my home comprised only a radio". He says, "In our community no one has a computer" and he adds that the only technology that matters in his home village is "music systems". He does not link the lack of technology to lack of finance or economic capital, but interestingly, rather to cultural capital. Thus, he says, "In my community technology is not that important as people lack the skills to use it."

"Before I came to varsity technology was important as I understood its vitality (*sic*) in the Information Economy we are living in. I always dreamt of owning a laptop." As soon as he got to university, he did a first-year basic computer literacy course for six months. He said these months were tough and that he failed the first test

and needed help with the practicals. He continues to use the computers in the lab, as they have software programs that he does not have on his laptop – he is struggling to finish a PowerPoint and Excel installation, for example.

Jake is expressive when he explains that:

> My rural background was very challenging upon my arrival at the UFS. The computer literacy module, BRS 111, was like rocket science to me. To top it up, lecturers had started making use of Blackboard for notifications. It was a real challenge. Typing assignments in accordance with the required formats was even more threatening. Universities are congested with computers and it is unwittingly assumed that all students can use those computers beneficially; which is not the case. Rural students feel estranged and depressed by these technologies. Setting appointments via email, checking emails from the varsity, and doing research for assignments are scary activities to rural students.

He is proud of what he has achieved, and says, "it is becoming easier and easier as I get familiar more with the technology… . Now I'm like accustomed to everything and I know the functions, ja. Now, I love it."

Objectified cultural capital

The importance of both the computer and the Blackberry in Jake's life is captured by two of his Facebook statuses. The first reads:

> "Imagine life without this tiny device called a Blackberry. Imagine life without this cute portable thing called a laptop...jerrrr.....tasteless."

The second reads:

> "nna to be honest these two r rulin my world..of course dey come after my beautiful galfriend."

For Jake, his computer is a valuable artefact: "I don't want to play games on my laptop, as the heavy use of keys may damage my keyboard."

It is an important part of his life now, as a student. He says,

> "The thing is that at Varsity level you can't survive if you do not have your own laptop. Cos' like, truly speaking, we have computer labs, so before I bought my computer, I still had access to computers, but I just felt that I needed my own."

He estimates that he spends 80 hours on his laptop a week, guessing that over half of that is on "academics" with the rest being entertainment, particularly music. Of his six-month journey, Jake says, "I know my way around the computer everything is satisfactory, it is how we live now." For Jake, the laptop is about his studies and his music: "So, my laptop, it has to do its job; assist me academically and entertain me. I can't just put it away and not play on it, then it's not doing its job."

Yet, while Jake prizes his computer, he believes his cell phone is indispensable. He says, "I can't imagine life without my cell phone" – it is always with him and he never switches it off. He would find being in an area without cell phone reception problematic. He says that he will answer texts at the dinner table and that his concession to university lectures is to log out of Facebook and Mxit on the phone, although

he says he still receives notifications even when he is logged out, and that he logs on again as soon as the lecture is finished.

He says the phone is really useful when he is waiting in a queue, and that having the phone on the four-hour taxi journey home makes the journey seem faster.

He is honest that having a cell phone is about style and reputation. He says that his previous phone was "an old Nokia, from my father. The phone had no camera, couldn't play MP3s, and was worn out." He said at school, "you want to have a cell phone, you don't care about emails and stuff. You want to fit in. It is the trends." When he came to university and won the bursary he decided to buy a new phone. He observes that his new phone is really easy to use, but notes that ease-of-use is not the reason he bought it. Rather he says: "I actually switched to it, because it was popular. So, I got to learn about its functionalities after I had bought it."

After a few months of having the phone Jake became worried about the effect it was having in his studies. He says:

> If you want to access Mxit, Facebook and all social networking sites, you actually don't like concentrate on your work. One minute you study, there comes a notification; 'Someone posted on your wall', 'Someone has sent you an email' or something like that and you have to go and check it out. So, I decided to cut off my Blackberry Internet Service (BIS) and I did not renew it for this month. I will only like renew it when we go to recess, because of these like tests and stuff, ja. At the moment I only access Facebook when I am in my room at night.

Digital practices

It is evident from his self-recording that Jake uses his two devices in a variety of ways, and that he multitasks. He moves between devices, for example when he writes on a friend's Facebook page, "Hey monna inbox me ur mxit..." in order to have a private conversation. It is also clear that he uses social media for both academic and personal purposes, an indication of the kind of blurring that happens with both software and hardware. While most of his Facebook statuses (and comments on his friends' statuses) are personal (including many quotes from popular songs and religious references) they also include affective comments and reflections including:

> Study hard n al shall follow.
>
> Stop whining n study.
>
> Good luck 4 da second semester.
>
> I so wish textbooks were designed lyk magazines. Ten years frm nw u probably wud stl rememba da story of Kelly Khumalo in Drum Magazine, whch minz evn chapters wud last 4eva in one's mynd.
>
> [names a friend] I'm studyin nw. Procrastination is a rapist of tym.

He is on video record using his Blackberry as a modem and emailing his work to other students with whom he will be working in the lab. In one clip he is using Mxit on his Blackberry, Facebook on his computer, and is also playing music. He thinks about technology and notes in one of his Facebook statuses that he does not like Twitter:

> I jst cnt connect with Twitter. Its so shortcut n complex. @ Jake. @ Kido...@ Nomvie…such titles n da scribblings confuse me.

He also says, "So, Twitter is more competitive than Facebook, Facebook is how you feel."

It is interesting that Jake perceives his laptop to be part of the academic world he has entered, an aspirational part of the information economy, and also how closely he links expertise, skills and training with the computer as specific type of technology.

Field

Jake sees the challenges he has experienced with technology as part of the wider sweep of challenges that he has had to deal with in the transition to university. He is aware of the dramatic effect that this can have and he observes that not only for him, but also for others, these transitions can be a shock:

> Since campuses appear to be sophisticated, rural students prefer to abstain from exploring them with the fear of their rural mentality being exposed. Apart from technology, lecturers make it tough for rural students because these lecturers are used to Model C schools and the way those schools teach. As a result, their tone suits private school graduates. Their language and examples are in line with these urban students. No one seems to understand township or homeland students.

His habitus can be described as transformative both in terms of his experiences at university and at home. In both cases there have been changes. His relationship with his class mates has changed as it has with his home community. He says that while at university he knows less than his friends, at home he is "the mastermind". Being ICT literate gives him a kind of freedom, "And I think that I am the only computer literate one in my family. So, I am free to do anything I want, because they don't understand what it is." Fellow students ask if his family know what Facebook is and laugh; Jake replies, "They do not understand."

His friends, family, relatives and teachers back home think he is "clever with technology" and they ask his advice about things, for example, about "how a webcam functions". He is the first person in his family to own a laptop.

He comments that while he is connected to his university lecturers and emails them, he is not in contact with teachers from his school as they are "not that much computer literate". For example he says that they hand work to the school clerks to type for them, "to do reports and stuff". With regards to his friends at home, he says he largely uses Short Message Service (SMS), that he cannot Blackberry Messenger (BBM) them as many of them do not own Blackberry cell phones. When he returns from a short break at home he notes, "At home I did not use any technology, at all – Kwala."

There is one area of continuity, that of music. He had noted that the only technology that matters in his home village is "music systems". Music continues to be very important to him. "The first thing I do always is play music [on my computer]; …But everything I do, I do to music." This is the one aspect of his new computer that he

values highly, demonstrating in the recorded videos, how his Virtual disc jockey (DJ) system works. He is clearly proud of the expertise that he has gained in this arena.

Conclusion

While this paper focuses on students' technological habitus, it also demonstrates that technological literacies are interwoven with other literacies as only one component in a dense skein of experiences and adjustments for first year students.

Bourdieu (1986) provides a useful conceptual lens for describing how one student uses and engages with technology, as well as framing the way his background shapes his response to his new environment. The findings highlight an example of a transformative habitus – as Jake himself says in relation to his background: "I'm not sorry of myself, despite my regrettable background. Actually, it's that background which keeps reminding me that I have to work even harder to stay competitive." Jake's ability to develop symbolic capital through the motivation his background has elicited in him thus provides an additional thread that runs through his story.

Jake's story serves as a stark reminder that for students from disadvantaged backgrounds – in this case from a rural background – access to success in higher education is more than just entrance to university. It is about on-going and continuing access to various forms of capital such as financial assistance and the establishment of new support networks. It is about the disjuncture between background and institutional culture, and the consequent reforming of individual habitus in the light of the imperatives of the higher education terrain. In negotiating this path, technology has played both an inhibiting and enabling role for Jake. While it was initially yet another challenge to navigate, it proved to be an enabler to building his confidence, establishing new connections and providing new opportunities for him to pursue his passions. The multiple forms of data provided by the 'digital ethnography' methodology of this study afforded a lens to Jake's technology practices and provided a view of his strategies for success.

Note

1 The poorest schools are included in Quintile one and the least poor in Quintile five. Schools are classified first by a national poverty table, prepared by the Treasury, that determines the poverty ranking of areas. It is based on data from the national census including income levels, dependency ratios and literacy rates in the area. Secondly the provinces then rank schools from Quintile one to five, according to the catchment area of the school. Each national quintile contains 20% of all learners, with Quintile one representing the poorest 20% and Quintile five the wealthiest 20%. However, provincial inequalities mean that these quintiles are unevenly distributed across provinces.

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