

ASIST&T SIG CR Doctoral Research Forum

Title: A Review of *Boundary Objects* in Classification Research

Full Name: Eva Hourihan Jansen

Affiliation: Faculty of Information, University of Toronto
140 St. George Street

Email: eva.jansen@utoronto.ca

Autobiographical note:

Eva Hourihan Jansen is a PhD student at the iSchool, University of Toronto, with an interest in exploring practices that shape standard classification systems and the role that classification systems have among people and technology in large information infrastructures. She is interested in approaches to inquiry, and the enactment of international standard occupational classification systems across different contexts and cultures.

Abstract

Purpose – To extend our understanding of conceptual frameworks and epistemological assumptions in classification research. I survey recent reviews and empirical inquiry that features the concept of boundary objects, and discuss their implications for classification research. Further, I discuss the problems posed when predominant discourses concerning classification research inhibit gaining an understanding of classification practices as socially, historically and culturally constructed. I propose a line of inquiry into classification practices in large scale infrastructure that considers locating and describing the particular, situated, socio-material relationships where a standard classification is used in practice.

Design/Methodology/Approach – Based on an assessment of contributions drawn from review literature, and a detailed analysis of two frequently-cited case studies, I examine the concept known as “boundary object” drawn from Star & Griesemer (1989) and its enactment in key examples of classification research. I assess these studies in relation to Hjørland’s (2005) concern with characterizing the influence of empiricist, rationalist and positivist epistemologies and Day’s (2011) call for conceptual critique of theoretical models that extends to practice, method and the notion of theory and disciplinary foundation.

Findings – Adaptation of a social constructivist theoretical framework in classification research continues to demonstrate a strong tendency toward a positivist epistemological paradigm. Overcoming these assumptions is essential for moving towards critical inquiry of the political and ethical dimensions of classification practices; studying standard international classification and contributing to theories of classification.

Originality/Value – This research offers a conceptual analysis and discussion of the empirical aptness of a constructivist approach to understanding classification practices with a view to informing future directions in methodology for classification research.

Keywords – Classification research, boundary object, epistemology

Paper Type – conceptual analysis

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