

Digital Language as Symbolic Capital: Generational Exclusion in a Teacher Online Community of Practice

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ABSTRACT:

This study reconceptualizes digital language practices as an emergent form of symbolic capital within Bourdieu's field theory and investigates how these practices generate generational exclusion in a teacher online community of practice. Drawing on three months of WeChat group data and semi-structured interviews with six teachers from distinct generational cohorts, a Bourdieusian critical discourse analysis reveals that novice and veteran teachers deploy contrasting digital discourse strategies—techno-lexical display, hyperlink bombardment, achievement narratives, and long voice messages—to compete for professional authority. These strategies function as symbolic capital, positioning speakers along a hierarchy of "innovative" and "outdated" teaching. Exclusion emerges not through overt conflict but through subtle patterns of polite neglect, discursive silencing, and the naturalization of a techno-centric doxa. The analysis identifies a symbolic exclusion spectrum and demonstrates how micro-level discursive interactions reproduce macro-level generational power asymmetries. Deviant cases reveal that hybrid discourse strategies—blending narrative substance with digitized formal features—can mitigate exclusion, suggesting the hierarchy is not simply generational but shaped by field-specific legitimacy standards. Findings contribute to theorizing digital habitus and symbolic violence in professional learning contexts and urge teacher education programs to design digitally inclusive collaboration structures that pluralize legitimate modes of professional voice.

Keywords: Bourdieu; symbolic capital; digital discourse; generational exclusion; teacher online community; critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital platforms has repositioned online communities of practice (CoPs) as central venues for teacher professional learning. Messaging environments such as WeChat groups, Slack, and Microsoft Teams now host daily exchanges through which teachers negotiate what counts as legitimate practice. Yet

these spaces are not egalitarian. Existing institutional hierarchies and emerging digital inequalities persistently shape who participates and whose voice carries weight.

Research on teacher digital divides has thoroughly documented inequalities in access and technical skills [1] [2]. However, critical scholarship has only recently begun to examine

how language itself—particularly digital stylistic registers—operates as a mechanism of marginalization within professional communities. This study addresses that gap by arguing that digital discourse practices function as symbolic capital, producing generational exclusion in spaces ostensibly designed for inclusion. This argument draws on two largely disconnected strands of literature. Sociolinguistic studies of digital inequality demonstrate that online communication styles mark social identity and gatekeep participation [3]. The "digital natives" versus "digital immigrants" metaphor [4] acknowledged generational differences but deployed a deficit framing that subsequent critiques forcefully challenged [5] [6]. Yet the mechanism through which differential digital language use generates durable hierarchies remains theoretically underdeveloped. Simultaneously, research on teacher CoPs has documented benefits of distributed expertise and resource sharing [7] [8], while critical voices caution that power asymmetries are reinscribed through discursive norms privileging particular contribution styles [9] [10]. In the Chinese context, the *jiaoyanzu* (teacher research group) tradition has migrated onto mobile platforms, creating hybrid spaces where veteran and novice teachers interact with unprecedented textual visibility [11] [12]. These converging trends demand a lens sensitive to how linguistic micro-practices translate into macro-patterns of exclusion.

Bourdieu's sociological framework provides such a lens. Bourdieu et al. [13] theorized language as a field of struggle wherein speakers deploy linguistic capital to secure recognition. Extended to digitally mediated professional communities, his concepts of field, capital, habitus, and symbolic violence illuminate how particular discourse styles—educational technology acronyms, hyperlinks, multimodal artifacts, voice messages—acquire symbolic capital. A novice teacher's fluent techno-lexical deployment may position her as innovative, while a veteran's experiential narrative may be discursively ranked as outdated, irrespective of pedagogical

substance. This process constitutes symbolic violence when such devaluation is misrecognized as natural technological progress. The notion of digital-generational habitus moves beyond age-based stereotypes, capturing how formative technological experiences shape durable dispositions toward digital language use—dispositions unequally valorised in teacher groups.

This study empirically investigates generational digital discourse strategies in a subject-based WeChat CoP devoted to project-based learning. We pursue three research questions: (1) How do novice and veteran teachers employ differentiated digital discourse strategies to compete for professional authority? (2) How do these strategies distribute symbolic capital and construct generational exclusion and discursive hierarchies? (3) How does micro-level exclusion reproduce macro-level generational power relations, and how does it shape professional identities?

Our analysis offers two principal contributions. First, it concretizes digital language as symbolic capital by specifying the discursive features that carry capital value and the field conditions enabling their convertibility—moving existing macro-level analyses to a micro-interactional level. Second, it challenges the persistent skills-deficit framing of veteran teachers by revealing that exclusion operates through polite neglect and discursive ranking rather than overt ageism. The inequality is not one of competence but of the arbitrary, naturalized rules of the discursive game. This insight carries direct implications for designing teacher collaboration spaces, urging facilitators to pluralize legitimate modes of professional voice—fostering communities where pedagogical wisdom, irrespective of its digital accent, circulates as a shared good.

1.1 From Digital Divide to Digital Discourse Divide

Early digital divide research centered on physical access—who connected and who did not [1]. As connectivity expanded, scholarship shifted toward second-level divides in digital skills and usage patterns [14] [15]. In teacher

education, Prensky's [4] "digital natives versus digital immigrants" metaphor framed generational differences in ways that implicitly positioned veteran teachers as technologically deficient. Despite sustained critique, this binary proved durable. Bennett, Maton, and Kervin [5] dismantled its empirical basis, showing that age alone does not determine technological competence. Selwyn [6] further argued that the real issue is not a generational cognitive gap but the social, institutional, and cultural shaping of technology use.

These critical interventions, however, largely retained an individual-level focus on knowledge and skills. They did not fully examine how digital language—the stylistic, rhetorical, and interactive dimensions of computer-mediated communication—operates as a social force within professional groups. More recent research has begun to address this. In organizational contexts, Leonardi and Treem [16] demonstrated that mastery of specific digital communication styles signals expertise and regulates access to informal networks. In online communities, linguistic accommodation and specialized jargon usage correlate with social status [17]. Within teacher communities, Stoll and Louis [18] observed that collaboration is frequently undermined by unspoken status differentials, yet they stopped short of analyzing the discursive micro-processes through which these differentials are enacted. The present study shifts the analytic lens from a skills-based digital divide to a digital discourse divide, treating language not as a neutral vehicle for professional exchange but as a site of symbolic struggle.

1.2 Bourdieu in Education and the Digital Arena

Bourdieu's conceptual framework—cultural capital, habitus, field, and symbolic violence—has been extensively applied in education to explain how schooling reproduces social stratification [19] [20]. In teacher education, scholars have used Bourdieu to analyze the differential valuation of academic and practical knowledge [21] and the ways institutional hierarchies shape professional

identities [22]. Yet the digital dimension remains theoretically underdeveloped.

Selwyn (2012) introduced the notion of technological habitus to capture how individuals' technological dispositions are structured by social background, but this concept has not been systematically extended to the discursive texture of online teacher interaction. Ignatow and Robinson [3] argued that digital media practices can function as cultural capital, yet their analysis operated at a macro-level, focusing on general patterns of digital consumption rather than granular, moment-by-moment language use.

This gap matters because digital discourse has distinct material properties: messages are persistent, searchable, and multimodal. Within a competitive professional field, particular discursive features—technical abbreviations, hyperlinks, modality choices between text and voice—can be recognized as competence signals and converted into professional esteem. Bourdieu [23] defined symbolic capital as any form of capital perceived as legitimate and misrecognized as natural talent rather than socially produced advantage. When a novice teacher's hyperlink-laden message receives immediate praise while a veteran's carefully crafted narrative meets silence, we observe the transmutation of linguistic practice into symbolic capital.

A contrast with more optimistic traditions sharpens this focus. Lave and Wenger's [24] community-of-practice theory emphasizes legitimate peripheral participation and movement from margin to center. Jenkins [25] celebrated participatory culture as open and democratic. These frameworks underestimate the arbitrariness of rules by which some participants gain centrality. Bourdieu insists that the standards of legitimacy—the field's doxa—are themselves stakes in the struggle. In a teacher online community, the implicit elevation of techno-fluent discourse over experiential narrative is not a natural outcome of efficient communication; it is a doxic rule that generates exclusion while appearing neutral. This critical edge makes Bourdieu particularly suited to our analysis.

1.3 Teacher Online Communities and Power Asymmetries

Online communities of practice for teachers have been celebrated for reducing isolation, facilitating resource sharing, and enabling distributed expertise [7] [8]. However, this celebratory narrative often overlooks persistent power asymmetries. Critical scholars have long argued that communities of practice are not inherently egalitarian; they can reproduce insider–outsider dynamics and reinforce existing hierarchies [26] [27]. Selwyn and Facer [10] warned that teacher digital communities may quietly privilege certain technological practices, marginalizing those whose professional identities are differently constituted.

In the Chinese context, the tradition of collective teacher research groups (*jiaoyanzu*) has migrated onto mobile platforms such as WeChat, creating hybrid spaces where face-to-face collegiality intersects with digital messaging affordances [11]. WeChat's multimodal architecture—text, voice messages, emoji, hyperlinks, and mini-programs—amplifies stylistic differences across generations (cf. [28]). This makes such groups a potent site for investigating how everyday digital language use constructs professional hierarchies. Our study treats one WeChat teacher group as a bounded field, where the struggle for professional recognition is enacted through discursive strategies the literature has yet to examine in depth.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Case Selection

This study employs a single-case design integrated with Bourdieusian critical discourse analysis (CDA), an orientation that treats discourse as a site of symbolic struggle and positions linguistic features as evidence of capital distribution [29] [30]. The single-case approach permits intensive, context-sensitive examination of discursive micro-processes that larger comparative studies often overlook, aligning with the theoretical imperative to trace how symbolic capital operates in situ.

The case is a WeChat group established by a district-level teaching research office in Henan Province, China, to support Project-Based Learning (PBL) implementation in English language teaching across local secondary schools. Three criteria guided case selection. First, the group brought together teachers from different generational cohorts with a shared professional mandate, creating a natural setting for intergenerational discursive interaction. Second, its thematic focus on an innovative pedagogy heightened debates around new technologies and traditional practice, surfacing the discursive strategies central to our research questions. Third, WeChat's multimodal infrastructure—text, voice messages, emoji, hyperlinks, mini-programs—amplified stylistic differences that a text-only platform would not capture [28].

The group comprised 42 members: 12 veteran teachers aged 48–60, 18 mid-career teachers, and 12 novice teachers aged 23–30. For intergenerational analysis, we focused on the two extreme cohorts, treating mid-career members as contextual participants whose interactions illuminated the field's discursive norms. All participants held at least a bachelor's degree and were employed in public secondary schools. The group had been active for approximately eight months before data collection, ensuring relatively stabilized interaction patterns.

2.2 Data Collection

Data collection spanned three months (March–May 2024), yielding two principal sources:

Digital interaction data. We exported the complete chat history, generating 2,136 messages. From this corpus, we isolated 112 threaded discussions addressing technology applications, teaching design, or resource sharing. A discussion was defined as a sequence of three or more topically linked messages involving at least two participants. This selection focused analytic attention on episodes where professional authority and symbolic capital were actively negotiated.

Interview data. We conducted semi-structured interviews with six purposively selected focal

teachers: three veterans (V1, V2, V3) and three novices (N1, N2, N3). Sampling was criterion-based: participants had engaged in at least five critical discussions and displayed distinct discursive styles. Interviews lasted 45–75 minutes, exploring: (a) intentions behind specific messages, (b) perceived uptake or neglect of contributions, and (c) emotional and professional identity effects of being heard or ignored. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' university institutional review board. Participants provided written informed consent for anonymized chat data and interview recordings. A protocol blurred personally identifying details in quoted chat messages.

2.3 Analytical Procedure: Bourdieusian CDA

We designed a four-stage analytical protocol operationalizing Bourdieu's constructs within a systematic discourse analytic framework, integrating inductive coding with deductive mapping to capital forms.

Stage 1: Discursive event identification. Two researchers independently reviewed the 112 threaded discussions and identified intergenerational exchanges—sequences where a veteran or novice message received a direct response from the other cohort, or triggered a topic shift affecting the other cohort's participation. This yielded 47 critical episodes forming the primary analytic corpus. Disagreements (initial agreement 89%) were resolved through discussion.

Stage 2: Capital and strategy coding with linguistic dimension. We imported the 47 episodes into NVivo 14 and conducted three coding cycles. First, descriptive codes were applied to digital discourse features (e.g., "English educational acronyms," "voice message >45 seconds," "hyperlink drop," "phatic emoji response"). Second, these features were grouped into five overarching discourse strategies (see Table 1). Third, strategies were theoretically coded by linking each to a specific form of Bourdieusian capital.

Crucially, to ensure the analysis qualifies as CDA rather than thematic content analysis, a systematic linguistic dimension was integrated. Drawing on Fairclough [29] and Halliday's [31] systemic functional linguistics, we coded each episode for: (a) lexical choice and presupposition—examining how specific lexical items constructed reality and how presuppositions naturalized knowledge claims; (b) modality and epistemic stance—analyzing speakers' commitment to propositional truth using systemic functional classifications; and (c) theme-rheme structure—examining how information was organized at clause level to reveal what was foregrounded (technological versus relational orientations). This linguistic coding was independently conducted on 20% of the corpus, yielding Cohen's kappa values of .82 (lexical choice), .79 (modality), and .85 (theme-rheme).

Stage 3: Field position mapping. For each critical episode, we charted how participants' discursive actions repositioned speakers along a continuum from "peripheral/outdated" to "central/innovative." This produced a dynamic visualization of the symbolic exclusion spectrum. A note on quantitative indicators: descriptive statistics (Table 2) are employed as illustrative complements to qualitative analysis, not as inferential evidence. Given the single-case design and small episode count ($n=47$), no statistical significance tests were performed. The patterns reflect distributional tendencies and should be interpreted with caution.

We systematically explored alternative explanations for observed response asymmetries: (a) topic-specific dynamics—technology-focused conversations were inherently aligned with the group's stated purpose and may have attracted engagement regardless of contributor cohort; (b) facilitator influence—mid-career teachers occupying leadership positions may have disproportionately influenced thread attention. We compared episodes with similar topics but different contributor cohorts to isolate the effect of discourse style from topic. Where alternative explanations could not be ruled out, this limitation is acknowledged.

Stage 4: Intertextual validation. We cross-referenced interview narratives with actual discursive sequences. For instance, when V2 described feeling "ignored" after a particular post, we located that post and examined the response chain. This triangulation deepened interpretation and exposed discrepancies between self-reported experience and observable interactional patterns.

Stage 5: Deviant case analysis. To guard against selection bias, we systematically searched for episodes deviating from the dominant response pattern: (a) veteran contributions receiving

substantive engagement, and (b) novice contributions receiving minimal uptake. These cases were analyzed comparably to identify conditions enabling or inhibiting the usual valuation dynamic. Findings from deviant cases are integrated into Section 5.

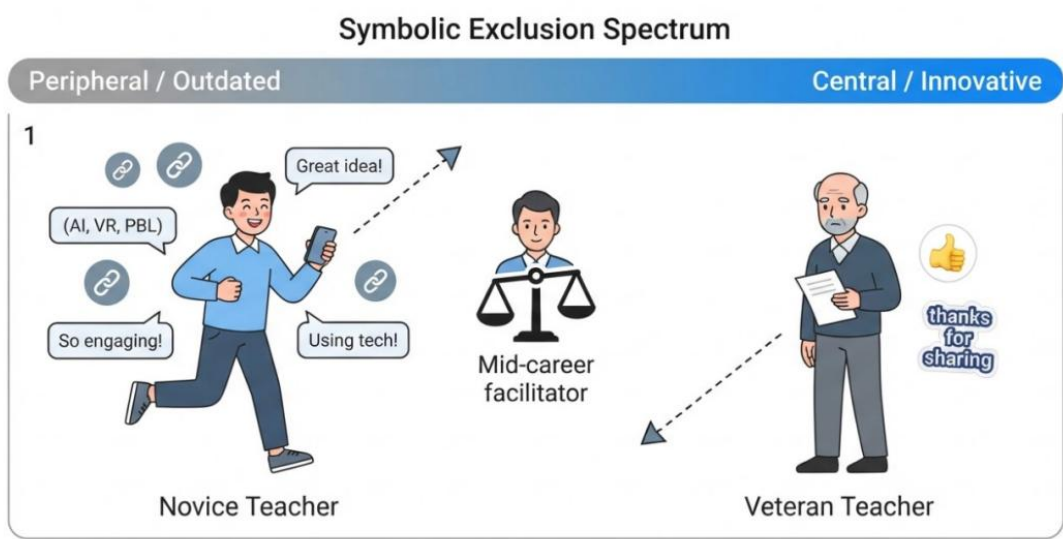
Table 1 and Figure 1 present the coding scheme, mapping each discourse strategy to typical features, predominant cohort, form of symbolic capital conveyed, and exclusionary effect. This table functioned as both analytic tool and transparency device.

Table 1: Coding Scheme for Digital Discourse Strategies and Corresponding Symbolic Capital

Discourse Strategy	Typical Features	Predominant Cohort	Form of Symbolic Capital Conveyed	Exclusionary Effect
Techno-lexical display	English acronyms, technical verbs (e.g., "scaffold," "iterate"), edu-platform names	Novices	Techno-pedagogical cultural capital (signals alignment with global innovation discourse)	Positions non-users as outdated; veteran withdrawal consolidates their peripheral status
Hyperlink bombardment	Multiple URLs, cloud document links, multimedia portfolios in a single message	Novices	Network capital (access to and command of distributed digital resources)	Overwhelms linear reading practices; veterans report feeling "drowned out"
Achievement narrative	Detailed classroom anecdotes, student exam improvement data, context-rich pedagogical reasoning	Veterans	Practical wisdom capital (experiential authority grounded in relational knowledge)	Frames tech talk as ungrounded theory; novices' tools implicitly cast as unproven
Long voice message	45–120s audio segments, often with prosodic emphasis and storytelling cadence	Veterans	Relational-affective capital (conveys personal presence and emotional investment)	Low uptake in text-dominant norms; perceived as time-inefficient by text-oriented members

Phatic repair	Emoji-only responses, “thanks for sharing” stickers without substantive follow-up	Both reaction)	(as	Politeness capital (maintains surface harmony without engagement)	Masks disengagement; veteran contributions disproportionately receive empty politeness
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Figure 1: Dynamic Symbolic Exclusion Spectrum in a Critical Episode



2.4 Trustworthiness

We addressed trustworthiness through four strategies aligned with naturalistic inquiry [32]. First, triangulation of sources: chat log evidence was systematically juxtaposed with interview accounts. Second, member checking: preliminary interpretations were returned to two participants (one veteran, one novice), whose reflections were incorporated. Third, reflexive journaling: the first author maintained a reflexive log recording personal assumptions about generational differences and monitoring how these might shape coding decisions. Fourth, audit trail: all coded transcripts, coding memos, and field position maps were retained, creating a transparent chain of evidence supporting confirmability.

While the single-case design limits statistical generalizability, thick description enables readers to assess transferability to other digitally mediated

teacher communities. The integration of Bourdieusian theory with a rigorous CDA protocol provides a replicable methodological template for future studies investigating symbolic exclusion in online professional spaces.

3. Results

Analysis of 47 critical episodes, supported by interview narratives and pattern quantification, reveals three interrelated mechanisms through which digital discourse practices generate generational hierarchy. We present these findings by moving from specific discursive arenas to broader patterns of capital distribution and identity impact.

3.1 Digital Discourse Strategies and the Struggle for Professional Authority

Three discursive arenas crystallized as sites where generational strategies collided most visibly:

resource sharing, pedagogical debate, and reception of experiential narratives.

Arena 1: Resource sharing as capital display. Novice teachers routinely packaged resource recommendations to maximize symbolic yield. Episode 12 provides a representative sequence. N1 posted: "Has anyone tried ClassPoint? It integrates directly with PPT, real-time quizzes, word cloud. Super engaging #edtech #gamification" — followed by three hyperlinks and a promotional video. Within two hours, three novices responded enthusiastically. The exchange evolved into a multi-turn discussion of gamification principles. Veteran V2 contributed a 67-second voice message: "These tools are fine, but I remember a lesson where students actually discussed face-to-face, and their argumentation skills improved so much. Technology can't replace that." This received a single "thumbs-up" emoji from a mid-career teacher, after which the thread returned to tool discussion. No one engaged substantively with V2's point.

Linguistic analysis reveals the micro-mechanisms of this differential valuation. N1's interrogative opening ("Has anyone tried...") presupposed both the tool's legitimacy and desirability, functioning as an inclusive invitation that lowered response thresholds. The subsequent enthusiastic replies adopted a colloquial, affective register ("awesome," exclamation marks) signaling alignment. V2's voice message employed a declarative, narrative structure anchored in first-person experience with high-modal, personal stance ("technology can't replace that"). While both contributions addressed PBL implementation, N1's discourse constructed a shared, future-oriented object of discussion; V2's constructed a personal, bounded, past-oriented account. The field's doxa—valorizing the former—naturalized this preference as practical efficiency.

Arena 2: Pedagogical debate and the ranking of evidence. Episode 23 centered on using AI to correct student writing. N2 initiated: "The feedback accuracy of ChatGPT-4 on argumentative essays has reached 92% correlation with human raters [link to pre-print].

We must teach students to use it ethically." V3 responded with a carefully typed multi-paragraph text drawing on 30 years of writing instruction: "The point isn't accuracy; it's the process of thinking. A machine can't understand the child behind the essay." N2 replied with a meta-analysis screenshot: "Of course, experience matters, but the data is clear." Four novices "liked" N2's response. No one further addressed V3's argument.

Linguistic contrast is instructive. N2 deployed depersonalized, high-epistemic-modality language: passive construction ("has reached"), quantitative proxy, followed by deontic "must." The passive and citation created external, objective warrant. V3 relied on personalized, first-person experiential structure. The Theme-Rheme organization places "the point" and "the child" thematically—relational categories—against N2's "the data" as Theme. The subsequent likes perform social ratification of the evidence-based register, delegitimizing experiential knowledge through refusal of textual elaboration. This constitutes a genre conflict: scientific evidence summary versus professional narrative. The field's doxa implicitly ranks these genres, and linguistic analysis demonstrates how this ranking is enacted through response patterns privileging one genre's features over the other's.

Arena 3: Experiential narratives and the phatic boundary. Veteran teachers contributed the overwhelming majority of narrative-style posts (17 of 19 across episodes), typically recounting classroom successes without embedding digital tools. Responses formed a consistent pattern—the phatic boundary. A typical example: V2 posted a vivid account of using a debate format to deepen student argumentation. Response chain: "thumbs-up" emoji, "thanks for sharing" sticker, "smiley face." No follow-up questions, no connection to ongoing PBL discussions. After 90 minutes, a novice posted a digital debate platform link, pivoting the thread.

The phatic boundary is linguistically constructed. The emoji-only response performs civil inattention—acknowledging presence without engaging content. "Thanks for sharing" functions

as a fixed pragmatic formula closing the exchange while maintaining politeness. Temporal structure matters: average 4.2-hour lag before acknowledgment, compared to immediate novice responses, constitutes temporal devaluation. The formula constructs veteran contributions as completed acts of giving rather than openings for dialogue. V1's metaphor—"It's like a full stop"—captures this closing function. Accumulation of

these "full stops" gradually built a discursive boundary veterans experienced as exclusionary.

3.2 Distribution of Symbolic Capital and the Construction of Discursive Hierarchy

To move beyond episodic illustration, we quantified response patterns across all 112 threaded discussions. Table 2 displays contribution type distribution by cohort and dominant responses.

Table 2: Response Patterns by Contribution Type and Cohort

Contribution Type	Novice Posts (n)	Veteran Posts (n)	Dominant Response to Novices	Dominant Response to Veterans
Resource/tool share	34	9	Multi-turn engagement (2.8 follow-up messages on average)	Single emoji or delayed acknowledgment (average lag: 4.2 hours)
Pedagogical question	15	20	Collective brainstorming, suggestions including links	"Let's search online," silence, or redirection to policy documents
Narrative experience	2	17	Insufficient data	Phatic reply only (92% of cases); zero substantive follow-up
Policy/Admin notice	5	11	Neutral acknowledgment	Neutral acknowledgment

Systematic asymmetry is evident. When novices shared tools or asked questions, the field responded with elaboration. When veterans contributed narratives—richest in contextualized knowledge—response was perfunctory. This differential treatment represented collective operation of the field's doxa: naturalized preference for decontextualized, link-supported, text-based contributions over narrative, voice-mediated ones. The doxa disguised itself as preference for "efficiency" or "being current."

Further quantification across 47 critical episodes: novices employed techno-lexical display in 41 episodes (87.2%), hyperlink bombardment in 38

(80.9%). Veterans relied on achievement narratives in 36 episodes (76.6%) and long voice messages in 28 (59.6%). Stark asymmetry in strategy deployment meant novice-favored forms dominated, normalizing them as competent participation standards.

3.3 Micro-Exclusion and Macro-Reproduction: Spiral of Silence and Symbolic Violence

Cumulative response asymmetries produced a spiral of silence [33] among veterans. V1 described: "After several times being ignored, I just stopped talking. I let the young ones run the group." V1's withdrawal is critical—she actively

used an LMS in her classroom. Her silence was strategic response to symbolic exclusion, not digital incompetence. Yet novices interpreted silence as deficit: "The senior teachers rarely speak. I think they're just not interested in growth" (N3). The misrecognition was circular: the field excluded veterans, interpreted resulting silence as incapacity, and used this to justify original exclusion.

This dynamic constitutes a compelling illustration of symbolic violence. Exclusion operated without overt ageism—through message format preference, response speed, valuation of hyperlinks over narrative. No one explicitly devalued experience; the field rewarded discursive forms novices were dispositionally inclined to produce. Violence resided in naturalization of this preference, making it appear veterans chose irrelevance.

Episode 34 provides granular illustration. V2 typed a detailed debate activity account with outstanding student outcomes—carefully composed, richly contextualized, no hyperlinks. The group leader (mid-career teacher) responded: "Thank you for sharing your experience. Perhaps we can also explore integrating some tech tools next time to make it more interactive." This reply acknowledged, praised politely, and reframed V2's success as incomplete. Implicit yardstick was technological integration; by that measure, V2's achievement counted as first step. V2 later said: "It's like my teaching is never enough unless there's an app attached." Her words encapsulate internalization of symbolic violence.

3.4 Deviant Cases: Exceptions and Theoretical Significance

Systematic search identified two deviance types refining theoretical account.

Type 1: Veteran contributions generating substantive engagement. Three episodes (8, 29, 41) involved veteran contributions receiving extended multi-turn responses. In all cases, veterans adopted hybrid formal features—embedding hyperlinks or techno-lexical items within narrative structure. Episode 29: V1 described a PBL unit on environmental issues, including a student-created digital portfolio link

and phrase "scaffolding with feedback loops." The combination of narrative substance with digitized formal features triggered substantive engagement. This suggests veteran contributions were not categorically devalued; integration of digitized features enabled recognition as aligning with doxa while conveying experiential knowledge.

Type 2: Novice contributions receiving minimal uptake. Four novice posts (15, 22, 36, 44) received phatic responses despite techno-lexical display. Common feature: contributions were perceived as self-promotional or superficially link-heavy without substantive commentary. Episode 22: N3 posted five hyperlinks with no explanatory text beyond "Check these out." Response was single "thanks" and no further engagement. N3 acknowledged hasty posting without contextual framing. This demonstrates genre proficiency alone insufficient for capital accumulation; the field also valued pedagogical grounding.

Deviant cases carry two implications. First, doxa is not simple "pro-novice" bias but specific valuation of integration of technological form with pedagogical substance. Veterans hybridizing style gained recognition; novices performing form without substance lost it. Hierarchy is not fundamentally generational but about discursive genre repertoire and field-specific legitimacy standards. Second, hybridity—blending narrative and technical registers—functions as accumulative strategy available to both cohorts. The symbolic exclusion spectrum is more finely graded than binary mapping implies.

3.5 Professional Identity Effects

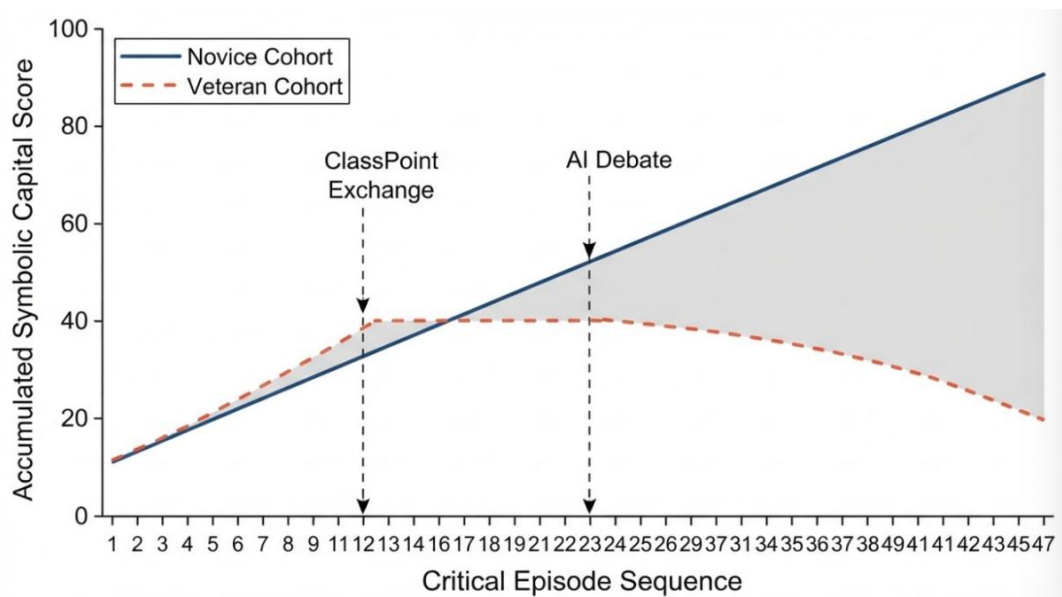
Sustained symbolic capital asymmetry produced divergent identity trajectories. Veteran teachers consistently described dual threat: to professional competence and belonging. V3 confessed: "I used to be the go-to person in the physical office. In this group, I feel like a student who hasn't done the reading." V1 expressed existential concern: "If teaching now is all about these apps, then who am I as a teacher?" These statements reveal stakes extending beyond momentary recognition to core professional self-understanding.

Interview discourse was analyzed as discursive performance of identity. V3's contrast between "go-to person" and "student" constructs a narrative of decline—temporal (past authority to present novice) and spatial (physical office of recognized competence to WeChat group of devalued competence). The metaphor "hasn't done the reading" adopts the field's evaluative framework, positioning the veteran as deficient learner. V1's "I let the young ones run the group" employs passive construction ("being ignored") and causal attribution ("I let") presenting withdrawal as deliberate, agentive choice—subtly repositioning V1 as still possessing authority even as she cedes control.

Novice teachers reported identity enhancement.
N1: "The group makes me feel like I'm at the

forefront. I can contribute things that matter."
N2: "It's empowering. Even as a new teacher, my voice counts if I bring the right resources." The online field, rewarding digital discourse capital, became a site where professional identity was remade along generational lines. It flattened traditional seniority-based authority of Chinese *jiaoyanzu* culture, replacing it with hierarchy based on discursive style. The irony: this new hierarchy felt egalitarian to beneficiaries precisely because it appeared to reward merit—fast, informed, tech-savvy contributions—rather than age. Misrecognition of symbolic capital as natural talent sustained the illusion of a level playing field while quietly pushing veteran teachers to the discursive periphery (figure 2).

Figure 2: Symbolic Capital Accumulation Trajectory by Cohort Across Episodes



Taken together, these findings demonstrate generational exclusion in the teacher WeChat group resulted not from isolated incidents but from a self-reinforcing system. Digital discourse strategies functioned as symbolic capital, which the field's doxa rewarded differentially, producing widening gaps in participation and professional esteem. The next section discusses theoretical and practical implications.

4. Discussion

This study has demonstrated that digital language in a teacher online community of practice does not merely transmit information; it acts as

symbolic capital that structures professional hierarchy. The findings extend Bourdieu's sociological framework in three interconnected ways, each carrying implications for theorizing technology, language, and generational relations in professional learning.

4.1 Concretizing Digital Language as Symbolic Capital

Prior scholarship has suggested that digital practices can function as cultural capital [3] and that technology use is shaped by durable technological habitus (Selwyn, 2012). However, these accounts operated at a macro-level,

describing broad consumption patterns rather than specifying the discursive mechanisms through which capital is accumulated, recognized, and converted in real-time interaction. Our study fills this gap by identifying precise discursive features—techno-lexical display, hyperlink bombardment, achievement narratives, long voice messages, and phatic repair—that carry capital value within a bounded professional field.

Crucially, these features are not intrinsically valuable. Their convertibility depends on a largely unchallenged doxa that equates technological fluency with pedagogical innovation. This doxa is not a natural reflection of effective teaching but a historically specific product of global policy discourse positioning digital competence as a proxy for teacher quality (Ball, 2012). By demonstrating the linguistic instantiation of technological habitus and its competitive deployment, our work provides the missing micro-sociological link between Bourdieu's theory of capital and everyday digital interactions of teachers.

This conceptual move also differentiates our position from more optimistic traditions. Community-of-practice theory [34] emphasizes legitimate peripheral participation, assuming newcomers move toward the center through learning. Our evidence suggests the opposite can occur: the "shared repertoire" of a digital CoP can be systematically skewed to privilege discursive forms one cohort already possesses, while experienced practitioners are pushed to the periphery—not through knowledge deficits, but through devaluation of their discursive style. Jenkins's [25] celebration of participatory culture similarly underplays the arbitrary rules determining whose participation counts. Bourdieu's framework insists these rules are stakes in the struggle, and our findings provide empirical force to that insistence.

4.2 Revealing the Subtle Machinery of Generational Exclusion

A second contribution lies in exposing polite neglect and discursive ranking as a distinct form

of symbolic violence. The exclusion we documented was not marked by overt ageism or explicit devaluation. It was enacted through what did not happen: the substantive reply that never came, the question not asked, the narrative met with a sticker. This resonates with Bourdieu et al.'s [13] argument that symbolic violence operates most effectively when misrecognized as communicative efficiency or personal preference. Participants genuinely believed they were engaging in neutral exchange; they did not see their behavior as exclusionary because the field's doxa had naturalized particular discursive norms as simply "useful" or "current."

Our identification of a spiral of silence [33] specific to veteran teachers adds a generation-sensitive layer to scholarship on online participation inequality. Whereas Hampton et al.

[35] documented general patterns of opinion suppression, we show how the spiral is fed by systematic devaluation of one form of professional expression—narrative, voice message, experience-based argument—in favor of another. This extends the literature on teacher collaboration [7] [18] by demonstrating that implicit norms of online communities can institutionalize techno-centric normativity that inadvertently silences precisely the wisdom professional communities are meant to share.

An important nuance emerges from the role of mid-career teachers in this dynamic. These participants frequently occupied the position of evaluative arbiters—responding with polite but prescriptive redirections that reframed veteran contributions as incomplete. This observation complicates a straightforward "young vs. old" narrative. The exclusionary mechanism is not fundamentally about age but about position-taking in relation to the field's doxa. Mid-career teachers, possessing institutional authority and discursive versatility, are the principal agents of doxa enforcement. The power structure is triadic: novices supply the discourse forms; mid-career teachers validate and amplify them; veterans are marginalized through micro-rejections from both groups. This aligns with Bourdieu's view of fields as structured spaces of positions rather than

demographic categories. What matters is not the participant's age but their position in the field and capacity to impose the legitimate definition of professional competence.

4.3 Reframing the Generational Digital Divide

Our third theoretical intervention challenges the persistent "digital native-immigrant" binary [4] not by dismissing generational differences, but by relocating them from a cognitive-deficit frame to a relational, capital-driven struggle. Veteran teachers in our study were not digitally incompetent; several actively used learning management systems. Their marginalization stemmed from the fact that the rules of the discursive game, collectively enforced through everyday messaging practices, privileged a networked habitus over alternative forms.

This insight carries significant weight for teacher education: interventions aimed at "upskilling" older teachers miss the point if they do not simultaneously interrogate the norms of the collaborative spaces into which those teachers are expected to contribute. By reframing the problem as one of symbolic capital rather than technical skill, our study responds to calls to politicize educational technology research [10]. The digital divide, in professional communities, is not merely a gap in access or ability; it is a field of symbolic struggle over who gets to define good teaching.

4.4 Macro-Reproduction and Policy Ecology

The micro-exclusions observed are local enactments of a broader policy ecology. China's 2022 Compulsory Education Curriculum Plan explicitly mandates "deep integration of information technology and curriculum," positioning digital literacy as a core competency. At school and district levels, teacher evaluation frameworks increasingly include technology use indicators, and professional development funding preferentially allocates to digital pedagogy initiatives. These policies create a macro-level doxa valorizing technological integration as the primary axis of pedagogical innovation.

The WeChat group reenacts and concretizes this policy discourse through everyday interactional practices. When the mid-career group leader responds to V2's narrative with "Perhaps we can also explore integrating some tech tools next time," she is performing the policy imperative at the micro-level, translating macro-level policy into local interactional norms. The veteran teacher whose experiential knowledge is devalued is experiencing the discursive translation of policy—the policy's emphasis on "innovation" and "technology" becomes the yardstick by which contributions are implicitly measured. Symbolic exclusion is thus not an incidental byproduct of communication preferences but a local enactment of a global policy discourse systematically privileging certain forms of professional knowledge. This macro-micro linkage is precisely what a Bourdieusian analysis brings into focus, revealing how the "naturalized" hierarchy of the chat group reflects broader institutional and policy pressures.

4.5 Practical Implications

Teacher educators and community facilitators must move beyond a neutral stance toward digital discourse. They can actively counteract automatic valorization of tech-centric contributions by establishing explicit norms that pluralize valued professional voice. Facilitators might designate space for "wisdom narratives" alongside resource sharing, explicitly legitimating experience-based posts. Training facilitators to recognize when phatic replies mask disengagement—and to intervene by bridging discussions—can interrupt the spiral of silence before it solidifies. Adopting hybrid facilitation formats that blend synchronous voice discussion with text-based exchange can reduce modal bias against voice messages, making veteran participation more visible and valued. Such structural adjustments are modest but can shift the balance of symbolic capital within the field.

4.6 Limitations and Future Research

This study is a single-case analysis of one subject-based WeChat group in China. Dynamics may vary on platforms with different affordances, and cultural factors—particularly the Chinese

tradition of respecting seniority—may have shaped expectations and politeness strategies in ways that differ elsewhere. The first author's role as participating observer introduces positionality effects that, while reflexively monitored, cannot be eliminated. Future research could employ comparative case designs across platforms and cultural settings, or adopt longitudinal tracking to examine how symbolic exclusion cumulates, stabilizes, or is disrupted over time. Intervention studies testing the effects of explicitly pluralizing discourse norms would also be valuable.

In closing, this study has provided a theoretically grounded and empirically detailed account of how digital language practices function as symbolic capital in teacher communities, generating generational hierarchies that are both subtle and powerful. By revealing the discursive machinery of polite exclusion, we equip educators and researchers with a critical lens for designing professional spaces where all voices, across generations, can contribute to the collective wisdom teaching so urgently needs.

5. Conclusion

This study has provided an empirically grounded account of how digital language practices operate as symbolic capital in a teacher online community, producing generational hierarchies that are subtle, cumulative, and powerful. By integrating Bourdieusian sociology with critical discourse analysis, we have reframed the digital divide: it is not fundamentally a gap in technical skills but a discursive field of struggle over whose professional voice counts as legitimate.

Three theoretical contributions anchor this reframing. First, we have concretized digital language as symbolic capital by specifying the discursive features—techno-lexical display, hyperlink bombardment, achievement narratives, voice messages, and phatic repair—that carry capital value under a field-specific doxa equating technological fluency with pedagogical innovation. Second, we have revealed polite neglect and discursive ranking as a distinct form of symbolic violence, showing how exclusion operates through systematic withholding of substantive engagement rather than overt ageism.

Third, we have relocated generational differences from a cognitive-deficit frame to a relational, capital-driven struggle, dismantling persistent native-immigrant binaries and their associated deficit narratives.

The findings carry practical implications. Teacher educators and community facilitators must interrogate the implicit norms of digital collaboration spaces. Without deliberate intervention, these spaces risk institutionalizing techno-centric normativity that marginalizes experiential wisdom. Practical remedies include establishing explicit community norms that pluralize valued contribution modes—honoring "wisdom narratives" alongside resource shares—and facilitating bridging moves when phatic responses signal disengagement. Hybrid formats combining synchronous voice discussion with text-based exchange can reduce modal bias against voice messages.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. The study examined a single WeChat group embedded in Chinese secondary education; platform affordances and cultural norms may shape dynamics differently elsewhere. The first author's participant-observer role introduces positionality effects that, while reflexively managed, cannot be fully eliminated. Future research should employ comparative case designs across platforms and cultural settings, longitudinal analyses of symbolic exclusion trajectories, and intervention studies testing the effects of pluralizing discourse norms.

This research affirms that the medium of professional learning is never neutral. The linguistic practices we reward in digital communities shape who speaks, who is heard, and ultimately whose knowledge defines the profession. Meaningful generational inclusion demands not merely technological access or skills training but critical, ongoing interrogation of the communicative norms we have come to take for granted. Only then can teacher communities become fields where pedagogical wisdom, irrespective of its discursive accent, circulates as a genuinely common good.

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