

Context is key

This is an issue of the *Journal of Enabling Technologies* that strongly illustrates the importance and complexity of context in research and practice in our field. There are two research papers that focus on enabling technologies in care contexts for the elderly, and two research papers that focus on augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) for professionals, albeit from different – though complementary – perspectives. The fifth paper is the final short report from the Digital Bubbles seminar series on innovative technologies for autism, in which the authors consider the overall context for future research in this area.

First, Hamblin, Yeandle and Fry place a very helpful methodological lens on context by critically evaluating their “everyday life analysis” (ELA) grounded within ethnographic principles. Their paper focusses on exploring the very individual and personal circumstances and factors that enable or constrain the use of telecare by older people in their homes. This is a paper that seeks to dig beneath the standardised “outcome measures” to find out what matters most to the users of technology in their everyday lives – a core area of interest for this journal of course. By using multiple methods with multiple informants, the authors were able to build up rich insights into experiences over time. The methods included an individualised and inclusive “ELA Box”, which enabled elderly participants to write diaries and/or take photographs of daily experiences depending on their preferences. It is clear from the findings that technology implementation – however well intentioned – can have substantial impacts on the aspects of identity fundamental to well-being, especially relating to independence, autonomy and control.

Ensuring that people can maintain independence and autonomy in their daily lives is, of course, vitally important and one of the main overall objectives of enabling technologies. The paper by Lancioni and colleagues is a good example of a small-scale, but promising, evaluation of using technology applications for supporting people with Alzheimer’s disease in their own homes. The authors developed a simple approach based on a tablet PC coupled with a Bluetooth earpiece and a talking alarm clock app that provided timed prompts and basic instructions to help people initiate and complete practical daily activities, such as preparing coffee and setting the table. Over a short period of time, all of the eight participants were significantly supported to initiate and complete many more activities during the day without staff intervention. As the authors note, this was a small sample and more research is needed to understand more about the acceptability and satisfaction felt by the participants and their families. However, as an initial demonstration of what can be achieved with a simple set-up, this is an interesting and accessible idea.

While these two papers target the views and experiences of the “end users”, the next two research papers come from the other direction of supporting the understanding and training of professionals in the field of AAC. Pampoulou presents an insightful conceptual analysis of the diversity of the types of graphic symbols. The author shows that it is valuable to dig beneath commonly held views or assumptions to take a deeper look at how different symbol sets are constructed and, therefore, how they might be specifically beneficial in practice. In other words, symbol sets have different ways of conveying meaning and these different ways are likely to be important for supporting the communication needs and preferences of individuals. Being able to share a common understanding and language around graphic symbols across multiple contexts and multi-disciplinary teams is likely to be important for strengthening research and practice in this area.

Developing the knowledge and understanding of the professionals using AAC is the primary concern of the paper by Wallis, Bloch and Clarke. The authors surveyed 98 clinical service

training providers in England to identify the current context for post-qualification AAC training. The findings showed strongly that there tends to be a medical model approach to current training that focuses on the individual's impairment and activities. There were also limited current training opportunities for understanding the wider context of technology use and the factors that may impede the uptake of AAC; crucial features of use highlighted by Hamblin and colleagues' paper noted above. However, many service providers aspired to providing a more social model approach that focused on creating an enabling and inclusive environment, rather than targeting individual impairments. The fact that there was an awareness of the need to prioritise an understanding of this wider context in future training provides at least some encouragement that inclusive strategies are on the radar even if not yet widely implemented in training.

Finally, Parsons, Yuill, Brosnan and Good present the final short report in a series of papers published in this journal on the ESRC-funded "Digital Bubbles" seminar series that took place from 2014 to 2016. This paper summarises the main themes that emerged from the previous six seminars and were used as a framework for discussion at the final, seventh seminar. The paper also presents some ideas for directions for future research in the field, focussing on: ethics and responsible innovation, learning and pedagogy, technology-enabled social interaction and engagement. It is clear that there is a very strong impetus coming from the autism community for research to move well beyond technologically deterministic approaches and narrowly defined outcome measures. In the wider field of enabling technologies more generally, such conclusions are well known. However, making the shift in research and practice is challenging and so it is always helpful to have repeated reminders about the value and importance of taking into account the wider context, and critically reflecting on research aims and practices.