
Bullying Gets Digital Shot-in-the-Arm

by Bernie Froese-Germain

‘Shift happens’ as the saying goes. Rapid social and cultural change is being driven in large part by even more frequent technological developments. One presenter at a conference I attended recently spoke of ‘e-generations’ as being measured in five-year spans!

When I started to use the Internet in my own work as an education researcher in the mid-1990s, I distinctly remember going to the web for research material only after having exhausted our library and other traditional resources. Now it’s hard to imagine working without access to web-based resources. Much has happened in cyberspace in the intervening nearly 15 years – not least of which is the interactive Web 2.0 environment.

The meteoric rise of social networking websites like *Facebook* is a case in point. Created by a 22-year-old Harvard student in early 2004 as a social networking tool for Ivy League university students, it had over 19 million registered users within three years. *MySpace*, *YouTube* and other Web 2.0 applications have followed similar trajectories of exponential growth, transforming the way young people socialize as they increasingly ‘live’ online.

California ethnographer Danah Boyd makes some interesting observations about the role played by social networking sites like *MySpace* and *Facebook* in contemporary youth culture – useful insights in understanding the teenage headspace. She describes them as a kind of rite of passage, a “cultural requirement for American high school students”; places where youth can explore their identity, “work out an image of how they see themselves”, provide “spaces where they can escape adult culture”.¹ Interestingly, there are also social class differences between *Facebook* users (who generally come from wealthier more highly educated families) and *MySpace* users (lower income families with lower education levels).



PHOTO: @Stockphoto.com/Ljupco

Bullying unbound

Online bullying or cyberbullying is one of the changes spawned by the Internet and social networking sites. Sometimes described as ‘old wine in a new bottle’ (to signify a new form of bullying), it is one of those phenomena that has left educators – and just about everyone else – scrambling.

The story of suicide victim Megan Meier, with its bizarre twists and turns, is one people are most familiar with. The 13-year-old Missouri girl was harassed through her *MySpace* page by an adult (Lori Drew, the mother of a friend) who posed as a 16-year-old boy, befriending Megan in order to find out what Megan was saying about her daughter. (A subsequent wave of ‘cyber-vigilantism’ was triggered when a blogger posted the identity of the perpetrator online.) Lori Drew has since been indicted on charges of conspiracy and accessing protected computers without authorization, a case being watched with interest given the lack of precedents and the difficulty of prosecuting cyber-related crime.

One of the more notorious Canadian victims of cyberbullying has become known as the ‘Star Wars kid’. In 2003 a Quebec teen’s video tape of himself acting out a character from *Star Wars* was stolen from his school and uploaded to a website, resulting in millions of hits and relentless teasing at school. He eventually had to change schools, and the case was settled out of court in 2006.

While peer-to-peer is the most common form of cyberbullying, the emergence of online social networking has been accompanied by an increase in cyberbullying by students against teachers and other educators, often

involving derogatory postings about teachers on *Facebook* and *YouTube* – what Shaheen Shariff, McGill University professor and an international authority on the subject, describes as “anti-authority cyber-expression”.

In her new book, she claims that “cyber-bullying is not much different from the adolescent cruelty that has always taken place – including the graffiti on bathroom walls about disliked peers and teachers. What has changed is not the *kids*, but the *medium*. Therefore, we must be careful where we place the blame.”² Teens (among others) engage in this behaviour because of the ease with which digital content can be captured and transmitted, as well as a lack of empathy stemming from the fact that perpetrators can’t see or hear the impact of their actions on the victim.

According to Shariff, the following characteristics generally distinguish cyberbullying from conventional face-to-face bullying:

- It allows participation by a potentially infinite audience.
- The covert insidious nature of cyberspace makes it difficult to identify perpetrators.
- The expression is virtually permanent. The ubiquity of and dependence on cell phones, computers and other electronic devices can make it difficult to avoid perpetrators, and once the material is posted online and downloaded by other users, it can be very difficult to remove.
- Sexual and homophobic harassment seems to be a prevalent aspect of cyberbullying.
- Bullying in a ‘virtual environment’ impacts learning in the physical school setting, which can lead to a hostile school environment.
- Cyberbullying is psychologically devastating for victims (in terms of health, dropping out of school, suicide), and socially detrimental for all students.³

Emerging research on a growing phenomenon

Shariff draws on emerging international research to provide a transnational snapshot of cyberbullying. Generally speaking, the more opportunities people have to use new technologies, the greater the incidence of cyberbullying and exposure to other online risks. For example a study by the Pew Internet and American Life project found that American youth who use the Internet more intensively, particularly content creators who create blogs and upload photos, etc., and those belonging to social network sites, are more likely than their peers to report being bullied online.⁴ The study also found that girls are more likely than boys to report being cyberbullied, a finding corroborated by other studies.

In one British survey, among youth who had been cyberbullied, few victims reported the abuse to either parents or teachers, preferring instead to tell a friend. In another survey, the majority of respondents (74 percent) said they hadn’t sought help from anyone after being bullied online, and nearly half of parents surveyed (48 percent) indicated that they were not even aware of cyberbullying as a phenomenon.⁵

A study by the German Education Union (Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft) reports that approximately 50,000 teachers in Germany have experienced cyberbullying (also referred to as “cybermobbing”), mainly from students, and recommends more support and protection for both teachers and students victimized by cyberbullying.⁶

Cyberbullying is not solely a Western phenomenon. Cases have been documented in a number of Asian countries including China, Singapore, Thailand, South Korea, India, and Japan. The nature of cyberbullying is mediated by the social and cultural context of the specific country. In Japan, for example, cyberbullying, which occurs mainly through cell phones, is conducted by a peer group (rather than by an individual) against members of the peer group; parents and teachers will pressure victims to integrate back into the group to maintain valued group harmony.

There is also a growing Canadian research base on cyberbullying. A national public opinion poll conducted for the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (CTF) earlier this year reported that one-third of Canadians said they knew of elementary and secondary students who were victims of cyberbullying over the past year, and 19 percent said they were aware of teachers who were victims of cyberbullying.⁷

A survey of over 2,100 students in Grades 6-11 from 32 schools in the Greater Toronto Area found that 21 percent of students reported being bullied online (mainly through instant messaging) in various ways – being called names and made to feel bad, receiving threats, having rumours spread about them, having someone pretend to be the student, having private pictures including photos of a sexual nature sent to others, and being asked to do something sexual that the student didn’t want to do. Echoing the U.K. research, the majority of students who were bullied either did nothing about it or simply told a friend; very few students reported the abuse to parents or teachers.⁸

Shariff’s research at four high schools and two elementary schools, involving over 500 students in the English Montreal School Board, found that students express

some confusion “as to whether they are being hurtful or not” in cyberspace, a confusion that she suggests may be denial or may be a genuine inability to discern the difference between joking and abuse in online discourse – an inability which may itself be a reflection of the blurred line between the public and the private in cyberspace. She also found a difference of opinion between students and educators about the responsibility to intervene in cases of cyberbullying that occur in students’ homes. Whereas students don’t feel that schools have a right to intervene in the home environment, educators feel strongly that it is their responsibility to do so – indeed, Shariff says that “the schools see it as a 100 per cent mandate to keep students safe.”⁹ There are plans to do similar work in the French-speaking schools, enabling researchers to compare the responses of francophone and anglophone students.

It’s encouraging (and not surprising) that students indicated that a “welcoming school environment” was important to them, and said it was a factor when considering their willingness to take part in bullying or to report on incidents of bullying/cyberbullying. They also appeared to sense the lack of confidence with which many teachers and school administrators approach these issues, a finding confirmed in a recent study by the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ).

A national public opinion poll conducted for the Canadian Teachers’ Federation reported that one-third of Canadians said they knew of elementary and secondary students who were victims of cyberbullying over the past year, and 19 percent said they were aware of teachers who were victims of cyberbullying.

Last spring the CSQ released a major survey of its membership on the nature and extent of cyberbullying in the Quebec education community, including elementary and secondary teachers. Five percent of respondents reported experiencing cyberbullying in the school environment since starting their teaching careers, e-mail being the preferred method used by bullies. They reported that students are both the prime targets of cyberbullying and the primary instigators, and that school personnel feel helpless in the face of this phenomenon. Only 15 percent of respondents said that “their educational institution has adopted formal rules that are understood and properly enforced”, and over a third indicated there were no rules in

place to deal with cyberbullying where they worked. The majority of respondents reported feeling that the impacts of cyberbullying are serious and cannot be ignored.¹⁰ Framing cyberbullying within the general context of violence in schools, the CSQ called on the Quebec government to release its action plan to counter school violence.

Cyberbullying and school violence

Cyberbullying is clearly on the spectrum of behaviours that constitute violence in schools and so needs to be embedded within a broader discussion of safe, caring, healthy, equitable schools. The Falconer Report on school safety, prompted by the tragic shooting death last year of Toronto student Jordan Manners, cites several issues which, as the report’s authors note, “fundamentally reflect and impact on the health of school environments generally and on school safety in particular”.¹¹ Among these issues are the breakdown in the relationship between students and teachers; inadequate funding for schools; gender-based violence; lack of supports for students with complex needs; school safety concerns specific to Aboriginal students; and the relationship between safety and equity. While these issues are specific to the Toronto District School Board context, they do have relevance for the larger school community.

OISE-UT professor Kathy Bickmore likens school violence to “the visible tip of a massive conflict iceberg”, the symptom of what lies below the surface at the iceberg’s broad base – the “countless acts of omission and commission that can make schools alienating, unsafe, and/or ineffective learning environments for many students. These smaller acts of exclusion, disrespect, destructive competition, and ignorance that make up the bulk of the iceberg are harder to see than the violence at the tip, but if left un-checked they can nurture violence.”¹² At the heart of the problem then is: how can we make schools safer and more inclusive?

Bickmore argues for an emphasis on longer-term preventative and restorative approaches to school violence rather than reactive after-the-fact punishment and surveillance models where much of the emphasis now lies (sniffer dogs, video monitors, and zero tolerance policies that provide for student suspensions and expulsions). She reminds us that “schools’ main mission is education, not social control, and this is what they do best. The most powerful unrecognized key to preventing escalation of violence is to teach”.¹³

This would include teaching about responsible and creative use of new information and communication technologies, in and out of schools. Shariff believes education – of

students, teachers, parents, administrators – about these issues is key and needs to be part of an alternative approach to dealing with cyberbullying, an alternative to banning websites and technologies, withdrawing computer and other technology privileges, and installing expensive filtering software programs, approaches that are proving ineffective. (Australia's \$84 million national Internet filter scheme was hacked by a Melbourne student in 30 minutes.) Among other strategies, she calls for teacher education and professional development programs to foster both legal and digital literacies among prospective and current teachers and school administrators.

Concluding thoughts

Cyberbullying has unleashed a number of tensions that need to be somehow reconciled – a rapidly evolving electronic communications environment; student and teacher freedom of expression; the best interests of the child; the well-being and working conditions of teachers; and parental and school protective authority over the child.¹⁴ While the policy and legal void which currently exists is problematic for schools, educators and boards, emerging research should be useful in helping to bridge this void and hopefully address some of these tensions. (The CTF adopted a national policy on cyberbullying and cyber-conduct at its annual general meeting in July 2008.)

For their part, teachers firmly believe that cyberbullying is a serious problem and that schools have a responsibility to address it, even when it occurs off campus. And while teachers are a critical part of the solution – and recognize that they must learn how to respond effectively to cyberbullying in order to gain their students' confidence in reporting it – they cannot do it alone. Cyberbullying is one of those complex educational conundrums that will require a coordinated approach by the whole school community, involving different prevention and intervention strategies (including legal, educational, policy, program) and a host of educational and non-educational partners (including the legal community, social workers, mental health professionals, technology service providers). It will also require a broad perspective that situates cyberbullying within the context of overall school violence and the need to make schools safe, welcoming and more inclusive places for all.

Endnotes

1 As cited in S. Shariff, *Cyber-bullying: Issues and Solutions for the School, the Classroom and the Home* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 36.

- 2 Shariff, 2008, 76.
- 3 Ibid., 32-34.
- 4 Ibid., 75.
- 5 Ibid., 66.
- 6 See *Education International* news release, "Teachers Against Cyberbullying," May 29, 2008. <http://www.ei-ie.org/en/news/show.php?id=786&theme=healthandsafety&country=global>
- 7 "2008 CTF National Issues in Education Poll – Summary of Major Findings," *Economic & Member Services Bulletin* (Canadian Teachers' Federation: Ottawa, July 2008).
- 8 Presentation by Dr. Faye Mishna (U. of Toronto) and Dr. Tanya Beran (U. of Calgary), "Cyber Bullying in a Cyber World" at PREVNet's (Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network) 3rd Annual Conference, Toronto, May 27-29, 2008.
- 9 Shariff, 82.
- 10 L. Allaire, "CROP-CSQ Survey on Cyberbullying: Young People Need to be Made Aware," *CSQ News* 23, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 11-12.
- 11 School Community Safety Advisory Panel, *The Road To Health: A Final Report on School Safety*, Executive Summary (Toronto, Jan. 2008), 2. www.schoolsafetypanel.com
- 12 K. Bickmore, "School Violence: Preventative, Restorative, and Educative Approaches," *Education Canada* 48, no. 1 (Winter 2007/08): 34-38.
- 13 Ibid., 36.
- 14 See K. Brown, M. Jackson & W. Cassidy, "Cyber-bullying: Developing Policy to Direct Responses that are Equitable and Effective in Addressing this Special Form of Bullying," *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* 57 (2006); see also B. Schriever, "Cyberbullying: Threat or Teachable Moment?" *Professionally Speaking* (2007): 38-46; both references as cited in B. Froese-Germain, "Bullying in the Digital Age: Using Technology to Harass Students and Teachers," *Our Schools/Our Selves* 17, no. 4 (Summer 2008): 45-54.

Bernie Froese-Germain is a Researcher with the Canadian Teachers' Federation in Ottawa and a member of the CTF workgroup on cyberbullying. He is also on the Editorial Board of *Our Schools/Our Selves*, published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Note: This article originally appeared in *Education Canada* (Fall 2008), published by the Canadian Education Association (<http://www.cea-ace.ca/>). Copyright© Canadian Education Association (2008). ISSN 0013-1253 *Education Canada*, Vol. 48(4). Reprinted with permission. If you wish to make additional copies of this article, please contact the publishers or ACCESS Copyright (1-800-893-5777).