

Cyberbullying: Ontario College of Teachers' Perspective

Cyberbullying

Students have always gossiped and complained about their teachers. But in cyberspace such behaviour can take on a life of its own.

by Beatrice Schriever*

Threat or teachable moment?

Kids have always joked around and been rude to their teachers and each other. For a generation, students have circulated surveys rating their teachers and professors in blunt terms.

But it's one thing to start a whisper campaign in the hallway. It's far more insidious to take an allegation online, where it can assume a life of its own.

Online technologies provide a new venue for harassment and some incidents have attracted wide attention.

Eighteen high school students in Caledon East were suspended after they let loose about their principal on Facebook.

A group of Grade 8 students in Thornhill was grounded from a field trip to Montréal after posting vulgar remarks about a teacher.

A student in Scarborough was suspended for creating a degrading web page about a vice-principal. When students demonstrated in protest, four were arrested.

Other incidents have flown below the radar.

At Francis Libermann Catholic High School in Toronto, a vice-principal was targeted in a particularly sinister way. A young man claimed online that the vice-principal was inappropriately touching students. The allegation was not true. But because the creator of the site was a former student, suspension was not an option.

At Holy Cross Catholic Secondary School in Kingston, a female teacher was the victim of serious slurs on Facebook, which would not divulge the name of the person who had created the offending material. It took months for school and board officials to ferret out the creator.

Eric Roher, an education lawyer in Toronto, has held in-service sessions for high school students on freedom of expression and cyberbullying. "The kids don't understand that their writing is not private," he says. "I compare it with a tattoo. It's not easily removed."

Instant and anonymous

Bill Belsey is a teacher in Cochrane, Alberta, who may have been the first person to use the term cyberbullying. According to his definition, cyberbullying involves the use of information and communication technologies – such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging, personal web sites and online personal-polling web sites – to support deliberate, repeated and hostile behaviour or defamatory messages by an individual or group that is intended to harm others.

Sarcasm, cheap shots, silliness, irony and teenage bravado are not cyberbullying. It's not enough to dislike something someone has written about you. Schools should give oxygen to self-expression, criticism and creative writing, not smother it. If people can't be critical and probing in school, where can they be?

It's tempting to think that cyberbullying is simply an extension of physical bullying, that bullying is the behaviour and cyber is the means. But the problem is more complex. In this instantaneous and often anonymous world, perpetrators don't seem to fear punishment, and behave as though they were beyond the reach of the law.

"The difference is that once it's in cyberspace, it's open to an infinite audience and it doesn't go away," says Shaheen Shariff, a professor at McGill University's Faculty of Education and one of Canada's leading experts on the subject. "That's where it's become an issue for teachers and school administrators to manage."

How significant a problem is the cyberbullying of teachers and administrators?

"The jury is still out on that," says Shariff. While research has been conducted on cyberbullying among students, there are no studies of its impact on teachers and administrators. Information is largely anecdotal. However, in this year's College of Teachers members' survey, a shocking 84 per cent of teachers report having been cyberbullied.

The always-on generation

You won't understand cyberbullying if you don't get its social context.

Although most adults are proficient at e-mail, Internet searches and cell phones, they don't use electronic communications the way children and teens do. Tools such as text messaging and blogs and sites such as Facebook and MySpace have become central to many students' lives. These are not means of communication; they are relationships.

Since cyberspace offers such a wide audience, the world has opened up for young people in a way their parents and teachers don't really understand. Adults still think of the world as basically the same, only faster and more technologized. Kids live in a world that's fluid, open, collaborative and interactive.

Bill Belsey set up www.bullying.org after the shooting at Columbine High School in Jefferson County, Colorado and the copycat killing in Taber, Alberta. He has written that these tragedies changed his perspective because it became apparent that the perpetrators had been relentlessly bullied and teased throughout their young lives.

Then, on his site, kids were reporting something new.

"I started to see kids exchange their experiences using mobile technology, ICQ, cell phones," he says. "Then it became easy to build a web site without knowing html. Now it's social networking."

"Adults have a functional relationship with technology. For young people, that's not the case. I call them the always-on generation."

"In the 80s, 'go to your room' was the worst thing you could say to a kid. Now kids' rooms often have TVs, phones, video games and Internet access. This is a substantial change."

Belsey followed up with www.cyberbullying.ca, the first site specifically dedicated to this new problem.

Kids Help Phone, which offers anonymous online counselling, confirms that kids don't understand that online means public. The organization conducted a survey last December and January and found that many

respondents seemed unaware that cyberspace is not a personal space and that the flow of information may be difficult to control.

Which is not to say that kids are the only perpetrators of cyberbullying against teachers.

Adults are also implicated in e-mailing, blogging and creating sites about the alleged incompetence of teachers and administrators. In perhaps the most notorious case in Canada, the BC Supreme Court last year awarded damages of \$681,000 to 11 people, nine of them teachers, who initiated a defamation suit against a community activist for prolonged online character assassination.

Young people are well aware of the less-than-stellar example set by adults. At the second anti-bullying conference organized by Child and Youth Friendly Ottawa, students said, essentially, practise what you preach. They pointed out that adults, not kids, are responsible for intolerance, violent video games, hate sites, porn sites, the sex trade and other violations of the vulnerable. Popular culture is jammed with abusive conduct, from TV shows to movies to professional sport.

Seven camera crews

One cold day last February, Edward McMahon looked out the window of his Caledon East school and saw seven camera crews camped on the lawn. "It was a frenzy," he remembers. The principal at Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School had just suspended 18 students for making crude comments about him on Facebook. The students' actions and his response made big news.

They were all "great kids," acknowledged McMahon – student-council members, athletes and activists around the school. Most were in Grade 12. None had been in trouble before.

He doled out suspensions ranging from three to eight days, and made sure the kids didn't fall behind in their assignments while they were off.

People from Halifax to Winnipeg got in touch to commend him. The parents of most of the perpetrators backed him up too, but not all. "What struck me was some parents' reluctance to stand up and take responsibility for their kids' actions."

Seven camera crews (cont'd)

On the students' first day back, he brought them into his office "to make eye contact" and talk about personal accountability. He remembers one girl saying, "With university coming up next year, think of what you've done to my reputation."

"It's interesting you've said that," he told her. "We took the suspension letters out of your OSR. But what do you think you did to my reputation? I've been in education for 30 years."

She said nothing.

The students returned to classes and school life continued.

"We just held our graduation," McMahon said.

"I handed most of them their diplomas and shook hands. We're over it."

Playing catch-up

The impulse in some schools and boards has been to attack the problem in almost physical terms. Administrators set up firewalls, prohibit access and install blocking software. But such tactics are doomed to fail in the fast-moving reality of electronic communications.

Most Ontario boards and schools have not updated their policies, though this fall, many will be adding references to cell phones and Internet usage to their codes of conduct.

The legal context for cyberbullying is shifting as well. Last spring, the Ontario government moved away from a zero tolerance approach. It introduced amendments to the *Education Act* to include student bullying (although not cyberbullying specifically) and to replace mandatory suspensions and expulsions with more leeway for principals. All parties endorsed the changes in June, and they come into effect on February 1, 2008.

Shariff fully endorses Ontario's move away from a zero-tolerance approach, but says legislation won't solve the problem. "Well-intentioned, seemingly sensible programs to address bullying have been superficial. School boards should make sure that the schools have looked at the roots of some of these problems."

She points out that the Canadian school population is changing, and says that schools should do more to understand how young people really live, their cultural and religious values and their perceptions of how their teachers see them. Every case is different. She thinks this is particularly important where the cyberbullying of adults is concerned.

"Find out why kids are defaming their teachers," she says.

Thornhill dilemma

Kelly Fassel, the principal at Willowbrook Public School in Thornhill, met the Facebook challenge last spring. Some of her students had posted crude remarks about one of the female teachers. She contacted parents, held meetings at the school and barred six kids from a trip to Montréal.

One student told CBC Radio that he felt the punishment was an invasion of privacy. "It's like they're eavesdropping on our conversations." After the incident, he started stonewalling his teacher. "During her classes, I just sit in my seat and try to keep my head down."

Obviously, this was a problem. With support from her board, Fassel applied a restorative approach to bring respect back to the relationship between the teacher and her students.

Fassel says that a process like restorative justice is one of the ways her board deals with issues like this – "because suspensions don't really work."

She acknowledges that social networking sites pose a dilemma. "This is something that kids and adults are involved in. Many of my teachers have Facebook sites."

No how-to list

This evolving environment leaves the school administrator in a tight spot, trying to balance staff well-being, exploding electronic communications and students' right to free expression.

Bill Belsey says that kids will turn us off in a heartbeat if we make technology the bogey man. "We can't bury our heads in the sand. We have to talk with them about all this. Their fear is that we will overreact."

No how-to list (cont'd)

High school students made this point at a forum about online respect and responsibility held by the Ministry of Education in May.

Melissa: This technology wasn't created to do harm to the world; it was created to open the doors for people; it was created to help us.

Pavan: You can place a ban on Facebook or MSN, things like that. But in the end, there's always something new that's gonna come out, and then the process will start all over again.

Corbin: We can't stop it. It's a global and evolving tool.

Andrew: It is so important that we as students lead this cause, in order for it to be effective and in order for us to find a solution.

Certainly, updated acceptable-use policies and modernized codes of conduct have their place. They could explicitly address wireless technologies, online harassment and the use of home computers. But according to Shariff, a punitive stance is unlikely to succeed. Discipline policies that react to unwanted behaviour are least successful. She believes it's time for proactive approaches.

"There is no how-to list," she says. "I can't say, 'This is what you do to reduce cyberbullying against teachers.' It doesn't exist."

Shariff advocates a strategy that combines knowledge of the law with an understanding of education concepts. She says teachers should be literate about constitutional law, human rights and torts, but recognizes that she is training educators, not lawyers. Her case studies are grounded in pedagogy.

"We need to look critically at our own assumptions," she says. "Where there's smoke, there's fire. I'm not saying that the teachers are always to blame and I'm not trying to absolve the kids of responsibility. But I think we have to look at how we approach education these days."

Kids are the experts

In her speeches to education audiences, Shariff stresses how important it is that schools and boards work on

cyberbullying issues with their stakeholders, including parents, web providers, cell phone providers, community groups and law enforcement authorities.

Above all, they should work *with* their students, not talk at them. "Kids are tired of hearing the word bullying. That horse has been flogged dead. We have to talk about it in different terms."

Eric Roher, the education lawyer, makes a similar point. Cases of cyberbullying are opportunities to teach about responsibilities, consequences and healthy relationships. He also spotlights a new trend, which may exert a chilling effect on students' online behaviour. Employers are starting to check prospective employees' online habits: your resumé is one thing, but what kind of person are you *online*? We all leave digital footprints.

Whose job is it to improve kids' understanding of the public nature of cyberspace and the importance of respect and responsibility? Parents think that schools are giving kids guidance; teachers think that parents are.

"The truth is that probably neither is, because they don't know enough about it themselves," says Belsey.

"The Internet is the most powerful tool in the history of mankind. We say to kids, 'Oh, here are the keys to the Lamborghini and there's the autobahn. Go play.'"

He deplores this hands-off attitude. "We have to be models for appropriate communications."

"As teachers and administrators, we have to give kids positive online experiences. Do tech projects. Collaborate with kids around the world. Give kids safe educational experiences online."

This is a unique time in education.

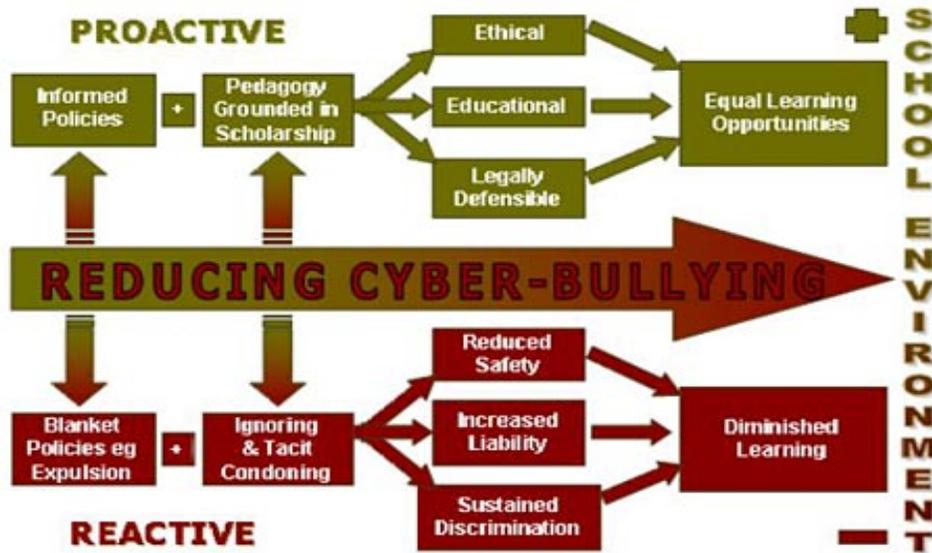
Children and teens know more about information technology than most of the adults in their lives. The Kids Help Phone research study points out that "adults can offer suggestions for how to deal with cyberbullying, but in the online world, kids are the experts and they often have workable suggestions for dealing with online behaviours."

"We really need to work *with* the kids," says Shaheen Shariff, "and help them to help us understand this phenomenon."

BE PROACTIVE

The most effective approach to cyberbullying is to create a positive school environment.

- Learn your legal rights and those of your students and their parents, as they relate to education.
- Lose the outdated world view that technology is only a means to an end or a way to transmit information.
- Write clear school policies that help students live in a pluralistic society, where people have the right to freedom of expression, but also a responsibility to respect others.
- Work with your students to help them understand the serious consequences of cyberbullying for themselves, their victims, their families, their friends and their schools.
- Involve your students in rule-making for school codes of conduct.
- Close your own information gap by pursuing professional development courses about the Internet, in which innovative thinkers offer forward-looking guidance.
- Bring in technology experts, including Internet and cell phone providers, to explain how to help students who have been cyberbullied document their experiences.
- Inform parents about whom to contact at the school and respond quickly and consistently to incidents.
- Remember that every case is different.
- Deploy creative techniques like peer mediation, restorative approaches, peacemaking and conflict resolution.
- Network with community groups, such as the police and parents' groups; don't try to do it alone.
- Model positive behaviour yourself.
- Maintain appropriate boundaries on social networking sites.
- Learn to live with complexity! There are no simple solutions.



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