

Bullying in the Digital Age: Using Technology to Harass Students and Teachers

by Bernie Froese-Germain

Technology's dual nature

About a decade ago, under the direction of Marita Moll and Heather-jane Robertson, the Canadian Teachers' Federation probed into the educational implications of new information and communications technology (ICT). In the context of a debate in which much of the attention was focused on the promised benefits, we believed it was important to examine, to the extent possible, both the pros and cons of technology in schools.

We were also guided by the belief that we create and shape technologies, and those technologies in turn shape us. For example large-scale standardized testing, as a form of technology, and the ranking and reporting of the simplistic scores generated by these tests have become a powerful driver for educational change – including market-based reforms that foster competition and privatization in public education (see Manning, 2007).

It's a truism that technology can be a double-edged sword. Media educator and writer Arlene Moscovitch observes that being immersed in a technology-saturated environment may well contribute to a sort of collective "attention deficit":

...we live these days in a state of continuous partial attention. Multi-tasking may indeed allow us all (and particularly youth who are both adept and comfortable with the toggling) to sample widely from a variety of experiences at the same time but it certainly increases the distraction factor. It's hard to be deeply engaged in an activity or conversation – with yourself or others – without some whole-hearted and uninterrupted focus on the experience at hand. Whether it is parents surreptitiously checking BlackBerrys during their children's concerts or students barely able to be separated from their cell phones during school hours, it is hard to avoid the feeling that people are often more interested in staring at screens than into someone else's eyes. (p. 17)

Leading edge education is often portrayed this way, with students and teachers intently focused on glowing computer screens rather than each other.



The ubiquity of mobile phones and e-mail, and the rapid emergence of social networking and file-sharing sites and platforms on the Internet like blogs, Facebook, MySpace and YouTube illustrate the dual nature of technology. There's little doubt that electronic media facilitate communication, information sharing and socialization, enabling young people to be connected to each other. The downside includes the targeting of children online by marketers, the accuracy of information available on the Internet and the importance of educating students to carefully evaluate what they find online, safety and privacy concerns, and a new pernicious form of bullying against students, teachers and others – cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying rears its ugly head

A term coined by Canadian educator Bill Belsey, cyberbullying is so new it isn't in my dictionary or Merriam-Webster's online dictionary (although it does appear in Wikipedia).

The media stories are already tragically familiar – defamatory comments about teachers, or teachers being misrepresented, on Facebook; students harassed online and driven to depression or even suicide; teachers deliberately provoked in class by students only to have their reactions caught on camera phone and posted to a worldwide audience over the Internet.

Describing cyberbullying as an extension of conventional bullying, Shaheen Shariff (2005) in the Faculty of Education at McGill University notes that bullying

typically adopts two forms: overt and covert. Overt bullying involves physical aggression, such as beating, kicking, shoving, and sexual touching. It can be accompanied by covert bullying, in which victims are excluded from peer groups, stalked, stared at, gossiped about, verbally threatened, and harassed (pp. 458-459).

We also know that homophobic, racist, classist and sexist attitudes often intersect with bullying. As Gallagher (2004) states, “bullying is rarely random behaviour. It most often works closely and systematically with pervasive systems of oppression based on race, gender, and sexuality.” (p. 29)

Empirical research on ‘conventional’ bullying behaviour has found that it involves an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim, whether physical, psychological or social (Shariff emphasizes that bullying is “always unwanted, deliberate, persistent, and relentless”, p. 459); gender differences exist in the nature and extent of bullying; a small but significant correlation exists between parental aggression and bullying; and youth incarcerated for violent crimes are more likely to have been identified as bullies in elementary school (excerpted from DiPasquale, 2004, p. 7). Victims of face-to-face bullies can become cyberbullies themselves (or vice versa) as a form of revenge.

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Belsey (2007) defines cyberbullying as involving “the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated and hostile behaviour by an individual or group that is intended to harm others.” (p. 15)

Schools have not escaped this trend. Situating it in an education context, Brown et al. (2006) at Simon Fraser University describe cyberbullying in this way:

Children and adolescents have taken schoolyard bullying to an entirely new level by utilizing the electronic medium to bully. Cyber-bullies use emails, text messaging, chat rooms, cellular phones, camera phones, web sites, blogs, and so on, to spread derogatory and ostracizing comments about other students, teachers and other individuals.

A new level indeed. While it is a form of bullying, cyberbullying differs from face-to-face bullying in significant ways:

- The perceived anonymity afforded by the computer – through for example the ability to assume alternative identities on the Internet – reduces inhibitions and makes it difficult if not impossible to identify the cyberbully.
- Cyberbullying frequently takes place beyond school supervision boundaries (on home and other off-site computers) and outside school hours, however this does not lessen its poisonous impact on schools – as Shariff states, “although cyber-bullying begins anonymously in the *virtual* environment, it impacts learning in the *physical* school environment It creates a hostile physical school environment where students feel unwelcome and unsafe. In such an atmosphere, equal opportunities to learn are greatly reduced” (p. 460).
- Hurtful damaging messages can be sent instantaneously at any time to a very large audience; because they ‘live’ indefinitely in cyberspace, these messages have a recurring capacity to inflict harm on the victim.

To the extent that bullying is learned behaviour, Schriever (2007) reminds us that adults don’t always model appropriate behaviour for children and youth, to say the least:

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. (p. 42)

Some early research on the impact of cyberbullying indicates that it can result in a range of negative outcomes including low self-esteem, anxiety, anger, depression, school absenteeism, poor grades, an increased tendency to violate against others, and youth suicide (Brown et al., 2006).

Currently there is little Canadian research on cyberbullying of students, and less still on cyberbullying directed against teachers and other educators. There’s also little in the way of policy to provide direction to schools and school administrators.

Responding to, and preventing, cyberbullying

There are a number of practical things that can be done to reduce cyberbullying. Hurley (2004) suggests these common sense strategies:

- protecting personal information (passwords, etc.) in e-mail communication and other online activity
- avoiding the unknown with regard to electronic messages – e.g., “learn to discriminate between the important and the potentially harmful”
- blocking messages using software for cell phones and e-mail
- avoiding replying to bullying behaviour
- gathering evidence and reporting incidents to school and other authorities

(for other ideas see Belsey, 2007; Childnet International, 2007)

Brown et al. suggest these general elements of a proactive approach to dealing with cyberbullying:

...it is important to concentrate on proactive strategies that will modify students' behaviour in online environments, empower victims of cyberbullying to report misdeeds, and dissuade bullies from further acting out in cyberspace.

The urgency regarding the policy void that has opened up around the cyberbullying phenomenon is underscored by Shariff who notes that, “in the absence of established legal precedents specifically relating to cyber-bullying, it is important to identify the policy vacuum that leaves schools confused about their rights, obligations, and limitations, in regard to harassment by students in cyber-space.” (p. 458)

Similarly, Brown et al. state that, “since the current stream of pedagogical and legal thought concentrates primarily on bullying that occurs on school grounds, there is now an urgent need for a policy analysis on this new form of bullying.” Based on their review of the cyberbullying literature, they offer these useful recommendations to guide the policy process: the need at the school level for acceptable-use policies (AUPs) that “expand on online use and behaviour to include *both* school and home use”; the need to develop comprehensive policy at the school board level that provides the “broader framework”, addressing staff, student and school/home responsibilities; involving the intended recipients of policy (students, teachers, etc.) in the development and implementation process; and the need for ongoing evaluation of policy effectiveness.

Whether creating new policy, or modifying existing policies on acceptable use of ICT, conventional bullying, safe schools or harassment to include cyberbullying, Brown

et al. recommend making explicit the “social values underpinning the policy such as: caring and respectful behaviours in student to student [and student to teacher] exchanges; safe and nurturing environments for healthy development of identity and netizenship; the principles of tolerance and impartiality.”

Some understanding of the psychology of Internet use among today's youth is important for anyone involved in policy development. Brown et al. talk about the need to come to terms with the “user mentality” of young people who inhabit the digital universe (including the “netspeak” of the Internet), and the realization that the “Internet is the formal line of communication and social well-being to many youth”. As such, applications that are misused for bullying purposes like blogs, Facebook and YouTube may be effective vehicles to promote anti-bullying messages, especially if they speak to youth in their language (posting creative anti-bullying video clips to popular sites as one example).

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In addition to the generational linguistic gap, recognition of other gaps that exist between adults and youth/children as regards their intent in using the Internet, their technological savvy using electronic media, and what parents think their kids are doing online compared to what the kids are actually doing is another policy consideration. Brown et al. urge policymakers to consider these “technological discrepancies of knowledge between parents and children” in drafting policy on cyberbullying.

At the same time, despite their comfort level with electronic media, youth need to be made aware that the line between public and private has become blurred in online activity, such that what they're doing in cyberspace is not as private as they may think – and could come back to haunt them.

Of course policy development and/or reform must be informed by homegrown research and analysis. We need a clearer national picture of the extent and severity of the cyberbullying phenomenon as it impacts on Canadian students, teachers and schools (see Brown et al.). Toward this end, researchers at McGill University and Simon Fraser University are collaborating on a SSHRC-funded

research project to develop legal standards and guidelines to help educators reduce cyberbullying and to inform teacher preparation and professional development (Shariff, 2005).

Given the cultural diversity of Canadian schools and the link between bullying and racism, homophobia and sexism, another part of the solution must be anti-discriminatory education and the strengthening of other equity initiatives in public schools. According to Gallagher,

...the best way forward [in addressing the complex issue of bullying in schools] is through supporting the ways in which the demanding work of anti-discriminatory education and curriculum development can be placed firmly and confidently in the hands of creative teachers. And these teachers must be fully supported by progressive equity and diversity school board policy documents that support the difficult work of equity-centred teachers. (p. 28)

Constructively modifying student behaviour in virtual environments also ties in to other aspects of the curriculum, in terms of teaching students to be civic-minded and socially responsible, online or not. The powerful role the arts can play, particularly drama, in raising awareness about bullying issues also cannot be overlooked (see for example Gallagher, 2004). Brown et al. highlight the general need to “develop pedagogy that engages the students’ interest in the positive aspects of Internet communication through respectful use.”

Developing policy in the current vacuum clearly poses a major challenge. Policymakers will need to reconcile the multiple tensions unleashed by cyberbullying: freedom of expression; a rapidly evolving electronic communications environment; the best interests of the child; the well-being and working conditions of teachers; and parental and school protective authority over the child (see Brown et al., 2006; Schriever, 2007).

Bullying has butted its way into the digital age, negatively affecting the lives of students and educators. As with other complex educational problems, cyberbullying has no easy solutions. It will require multiple strategies (policy, program, education) and the concerted efforts of the whole school community to develop, implement and evaluate those strategies.

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