Fostering a Safe Online Culture with Cyberbullying Awareness and Prevention

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ABSTRACT

The worldwide expansion of blogs, Twitter®, wikis, and virtual worlds is rapidly forming a new online culture where instant communication and virtual interaction are easily accessible at our fingertips. These powerful communication technologies are bringing global communities closer than we have ever imagined possible. While the technical affordances of these tools are holding promise to better support our diverse cultures and individual differences, the very same features can also bring in a major negative – cyberbullying. Internet aggression is more detrimental than traditional face-to-face bullying because it is often done anonymously behind computer screens. This makes human rights and equal participation more easily suppressed or violated in the cyberspace. This article focuses on raising awareness about the serious consequences of cyberbullying and suggesting innovative prevention actions, thus contributing to building a safe online culture.

Keywords: Communication Technology, Cyberbullying, Internet Safety, Online Culture, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Technology is supposed to help us improve on our lives. There are a lot of emotional problems that come with cyberbullying and as a teacher you see the side effects from it. (Joseph Ciani, a co-author / USA middle school teacher; discussing cyberbullying on the “Talk of the Town with P.G. Sittenfeld” radio show, March 23, 2013)

The rapid influx of communication technologies such as blogs, Twitter®, wikis, and virtual worlds is making a dramatic change in our lives. It is creating a new culture where instant communication and worldwide interaction become common practice; we virtually meet and interact with others from all over the world across time and distance. These powerful social media are bringing global communities closer than we
have ever imagined possible, thus allowing us to more easily understand the importance of cultural diversity and multiple perspectives and respect others’ values as well. These communication tools are also transforming users from passive consumers of content to more empowered creators of information. We can build a virtual community where we can project stronger online presences and more actively participate in social interaction. This makes it possible that human rights and equal access to resources can be more easily upheld and more strongly supported in the cyberspace.

Because of these potential benefits, the communication tools are flourishing well into education sector. For example, education students from different countries engaged in a virtual discussion forum and discussed the current status of instructional technology in their countries (see Seo et al., 2009); pre-service teachers taught elementary students reading and writing from distance using Skype and blogs (see Pellegrino & Mahaffey, 2012); college students connect with their peers through Twitter® to conduct class assignments (see Warren & Wakefield, 2012).

However, while social networking holds promise to better support diverse cultures and individual differences, it can also make a severely negative impact by allowing students the chance to pick on others, belittle them, mock them, impersonate them, or generally harass them on the Internet and makes their real world lives unbearable. Bullying has been around for a long time. Many students are victims of schoolhouse bullying where students are involved in playground scuffles or lunchtime brawls. Words are exchanged, aggression is let out, and the consequences and punishments are assigned. Face-to-face bullying is well known, well researched, and also has protocol when it comes to designated reprimands. This new type of bullying occurring in the cyber space, however, is more detrimental and harder to resolve because of the anonymity of offenders. According to Donegan (2013), “this anonymity makes it easier for the offender to strike blows against a victim without having to see the victim’s physical response” (p. 34). What makes cyberbullying more serious is that it often happens without teachers or parents’ knowledge because it is visible only in the virtual space yet its impact on the real world is significant. Cyberbullying is done behind computer screens, is in a state of flux and evolution so that it is difficult to research, and has wavering punishments from parents, schools, and law enforcement. Ironically, the technical affordances of social networking that allow us to support human rights and equality can also become means to suppress and violate the values.

As social media are deeply saturated in our students’ lives, it is important to alert them on the severity of cyberbullying, engage their deeper thinking about the topic, and also provide their teachers and parents with helpful tips on how to educate children about fostering a safe online culture. The purpose of this article is twofold: (1) to raise awareness about the harmful impacts of cyberbullying by informing students, parents, and teachers of the real life ramifications of cyber relations and helping them gain an understanding that negative cyber relations have long term effects on adolescent internet users; and (2) to suggest innovative prevention actions. Rather than being retroactive and finding a solution once a cyberbullying situation has occurred, we suggest being proactive and stopping cyberbullying from happening, thus contributing to building a safe online culture where individual differences and voices are celebrated and respected.

**TODAY’S LEARNERS**

Today’s learners are dramatically different in terms of their needs and learning styles. Modern children live in a digital age where they are frequently confronted with technological references. Most commercials that are geared towards young children’s television channels flash a “.com” message. With the surge in digital opportunities, students are being introduced to computer technologies even younger than previously. The average American teenager
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