

Chapter 10

Taking a Stand against Cyberbullying in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

As a result of the rapid online expansion of digital learnscapes, resulting in university students regularly engaging in online learning communities, cyberbullying has increasing potential to become a serious issue for higher education institutions. The effectiveness of educating students and staff in higher education on the elements and impacts of cyberbullying has driven this innovative study, which involves the development of an action research-led and student-directed interactive educational website to inform higher education students and staff about the consequences of cyberbullying. In describing the ongoing development and generalisation of the site, this chapter highlights the third cycle of an action research inquiry, and more generally the need for such resources to support higher education so that users understand what constitutes cybersafety and cyberbullying. As such, the research is directed toward understanding, sharing, participation, reflection, and change. Findings are discussed in relation to the information on the site for users in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first century digital communication technologies allow for wider and faster Internet access. These technologies have enabled more people to share and be connected to an extensive range of online material for a variety of purposes. Currently, there are over three billion Internet users internationally, with approximately forty percent of the world's population with an Internet connection (Internet Live Stats, 2015). In a distribution of Internet users worldwide over the age of fifteen, the Asia-Pacific region accounted for forty-four percent with Internet access (Internet Live Stats, 2015). This figure is greater

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than both North America and Europe combined (Internet Live Stats, 2015). Within this region, social media has seen unprecedented growth, with Australia leading the world in online engagement in applications such as Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn and Google+, recording the highest global average for time spent each month using these social media tools of seven hours per month (Nielsen, 2010; Sensis, 2015). While social media and digital tools have huge potential for teaching and learning, particularly in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region, the particular qualities of online interactions can also lead to negative interactions online. This rapid growth, and the possibility of bullying online, prompted the authors to apply action research to studying inventive student-centred approaches in higher education to raise awareness of the pervasive and serious issue of cyberbullying, using the case study of a university in North Queensland, Australia.

Traditional values such as respect and appreciation may be eroded in an increasingly networked world. For many, technology has shifted users' understanding of values to such a degree that they are sometimes discounted when interacting with diversity on the Internet. For example, Sally Evans (2014) describes how online communications encourages a 'disinhibition effect', which causes some people to both reveal more about themselves online and to 'separate behaviour from actions', making them "feel less accountable for those actions" (p. 161). These people may struggle connecting decently with others and their ideas within and across diverse online environments.

This research project acknowledges that, as humans are social beings, behaving according to values makes sense when it is a relational process, rather than an individual pursuit, and although variable from one context to another (mostly for religious, socio-cultural and/or geopolitical reasons), strong ethical standards are fundamental to this interpersonal process within a globalised world. This is particularly the case in a higher education context, where diverse students are required to interact ethically (and making decisions based on moral values) with each other online. Indeed, scholars in the area of human-computer interaction call for research that charts how "human values in all their diversity" are supported by technology (Sellen, Rogers, Harper, & Rodden, 2009, p. 63). These values include "personal privacy, health, ownership, fair play and security" (Sellen, Rogers, Harper, & Rodden, 2009, p. 64). As a result, this research project understands cyberbullying within a wider context of online privacy, digital wellness and reputation.

Digital Footprint, Digital Wellness, and Reputation

The rise in use of digital communications has increased the potential damage that can be done to an individual's reputation, career prospects and sense of self-worth (Pelletier, 2009). The particular 'everywhere, anytime' (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak 2003; Patchin & Hinduja 2006; Tokunaga 2010) qualities of Internet communication make acts of bullying pervasive and often highly visible long after the incident has taken place. Therefore, ethical practice needs to be enacted by all users to ensure a positive digital footprint. A digital footprint is a trail of a person's activities online (Waever & Gahegan, 2016, p. 324). This includes photographs, emails, text messages, webpage content, chats, 'likes', 'shares', and other social networking site pages (Katz, 2012). Encouraging individuals to reflect on what they are about to post online before they do can assist people in considering the impact of what they share online on themselves and others (Woods, 2014). This is of major significance due to the permanent nature of content that exists online (Mansouri & Mrabet, 2013) and the ease by which information and materials can be saved and shared. Julia Davidson and Elena Martellozzo (2013) observe that everything young people—and by extension older university students—do online is a permanent record of their actions,

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