

# **Cyberbullying**

## **An ethnographic case study of one Australian upper primary school class**

by Damian Maher

### **Abstract**

The issue of cyberbullying has been reported on widely in the press with the extreme cases generally presented as the norm. In this article, the interactions of Australian primary children aged 11 to 12 years old are presented to illustrate some bullying practices that young people engage in. Here it is demonstrated that while cyberbullying occurs, it is generally not extreme in nature. In focusing on bullying, some differences in girls and boys interactions are examined. This article concludes with several recommendations in helping to minimize and manage cyberbullying.

### **Introduction**

The Internet as a communication tool is an integral part of the lives of many young people in developed and developing countries. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABA, 2008) in the 12 months to April 2006, “65% of children aged 5-14 years accessed the Internet either during or outside of school hours”. This percentage of use was the same for boys and girls. Around 60% of nine to 14 year old young people who used the computer accessed the Internet for emailing or messaging. This is a significant percentage of the population for this age group.

This use of the Internet for communicating by young people has both positive and negative outcomes. One of the negative outcomes of its use is that cyberbullying is occurring. Here bullying is defined as aggressive behaviour where a dominant individual or group abuses their greater power by threatening a less dominant individual (Farrington 1993; Rigby 1996; Stephenson and Smith, 1989).

Cyberbullying involves the Internet or other digital communication devices’ (Willard, 2004) for bullying. The various forms of cyberbullying include flaming, flooding, harassment, cyberstalking, denigration (put-downs), masquerade, outing and exclusion.

Typically, when the issue of cyberbullying is reported on in the popular media, it is the extreme cases that are presented as if they are the norms. One example of this occurred in Australia where it was reported that a nine-year-old grade four female student received pornographic emails from a classmate (Thorp, 2004). In another example, it was reported that many of the students were affected at Calabasas High School in California where bullying on a website – schoolscandals.com occurred (Paulson, 2003). The problem with these types of articles is that they are not portraying an accurate picture of the type and scope of bullying that is occurring in many online communities.

To understand to what extent cyberbullying is occurring amongst young people, it is important that systematic research be undertaken. The purpose of the study from which this paper draws then, was to investigate how the Internet might contribute to the learning environment of students in upper primary school in grades five and six. The study was conducted over the space of one year and data were collected through audio and video recordings in the classroom, as well as by capturing the online interactions of the students both in school related activities and during home-based activities. It was found that there was cyberbullying occurring, but not to the extent that was reported on in the two examples above. The online interactions of students at school and at home were captured which illustrates cyberbullying in one classroom community consisting mostly of young Australian adolescents. This paper provides an ethnographic snapshot of practices, where as the literature review demonstrates, there are few such studies.

### **The literature on bullying**

There are a number of Internet sites dedicated to the issues of bullying in general, and cyber bullying in particular, with suggestions as to how to minimise and manage bullying (see [netaalert.gov.au](http://netaalert.gov.au) or [childsafenet.au](http://childsafenet.au) for example). Much of this information does not have foundation in research. In examining the research on cyberbullying, research has been conducted which focus on differences between boys and girls as well as the link between face-to-face bullying and online bullying.

There has been a number of studies conducted indicating that boys and girls use the Internet in equal numbers. In a study conducted by Kent and Facer (2004), approximately 60% of boys and girls reported using email at home on a weekly basis through completing a questionnaire. A number of other researchers have found that the amount of time spent on the Internet for young people is similar although the use may be different (Gardyn 2003; Papastergiou and Solomonidou, 2005).

While the use of the Internet for interacting may be similar for boys and girls there are clear differences in cyberbullying for boys and girls. For example, in a study by Li (2006), 264 junior high school students from three different schools were surveyed. The results of this study showed that boys were more likely to be involved in cyberbullying, and were less likely to tell an adult if cyberbullying was occurring. In another survey of 1500 American children in grades four to eight, it was reported that 42% of the students were bullied while interacting online (I-Safe America Inc, 2004). The results of this study also showed that boys were more likely to initiate and be the victims of cyberbullying and were less likely to tell an adult about cyberbullying instances.

The issue of face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying has also been a focus of research demonstrating a link between these two sites. Research conducted by Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor (2007) found such a link. The researchers interviewed 1500 participants aged between 10 to 17 by phone. Here they found that “45% of known peer harassers had offline contact with targets, suggesting online incidents that may have been an aspect of offline bullying” (p. 57). Similar findings were also made in an Australian study where 652 students aged between 11 to 17 were provided with a questionnaire on their online experiences (Lodge & Frydenburg, 2007). Here it was found that there was a strong link between students being cyber-bullying and in-school (real-world) bullying. A link between cyberbullying and school bullying students has been identified in research conducted by Beran and Li (2007). Here the researchers surveyed 432 year seven to nine Canadian students. They found that students who were bullied in cyberspace were also likely to be bullied at school. Similar findings have also been made in studies conducted by a number of other researchers, for example, Ybarra, Diener-West, Philip and Leaf (2007).

As demonstrated here, there is little research conducted that examines primary school aged children's online interactions from an ethnographic viewpoint. Of the research that has been conducted on cyberbullying, much of it is quantitative in nature and cross-sectional which makes it of limited value in understanding cyberbullying from an ethnographic viewpoint. The research referred to here also draws on very large samples using surveys or focuses on older students. The focus of these studies is on interactions between peers as well as strangers and looks at a range of networked devices, including the Internet and mobile phones. Many studies were confined to school or home based interactions, or did not make the distinction. There is a need for qualitative ethnographic studies which look at young people's online interactions focusing on instances of cyberbullying. In the study from which this paper draws, this issue is examined.

### **The study**

For the study, a qualitative methodology was used, drawing on aspects of ethnography, case study methods and grounded theory. Data were collected through a variety of methods included observations, field notes, interviews, discussions with teachers and by recording online interactions.

The study was conducted over 12 months with a grade 5/6 class consisting of 22 students and their teacher. Here the age range of the students was 11 to 12 years old. The class was located in a suburb of Sydney, Australia. Many of the students had access to the Internet at home and used it for interacting. This class was selected for the study as it contained networked computers and the teacher was incorporating the use of the computer into classroom practices. The teacher wanted to explore the Internet as a communication tool in the classroom.

There were special ethical considerations required given that much of the data consisted of online interactions. The study was explained to the students and their parents and the students were invited to participate. As some of the interactions were recorded from students' homes there was constant information conveyed to parents via the school newsletter as to what was happening and parents were invited to log

into chatroom sessions. Interestingly none of them did throughout the year the study was undertaken.

Nine curriculum projects were implemented in the classrooms incorporating the use of the Internet. One of the projects involved establishing a class web site which contained interactive elements, including a chat room, a guest book and an email account. These interactive elements could be accessed both in and out of school without any special passwords.

In gathering the data at school, visits occurred once a week for the whole day where students were recorded working on various curriculum tasks that involved the use of the Internet. In attending the school days I took on the role of teacher/researcher where I worked with the teacher in the classroom with students both in a whole class setting and in groups. The students and teachers were also interviewed about their experiences and views in using online interactive tools. The students were interviewed at the start of the study individually to get a sense of how much they used the Internet for interacting and who they interacted with. They were interviewed throughout the year in groups to discuss issues that arose through the various projects that were undertaken.

The students also initiated the use of Hotmail and Messenger from their own homes in the evenings and invited me to participate. Many of the interactions reported on here draw from students' interactions while at home using Hotmail, Messenger, as well as the guest book, chat room and email account based on the school web site. While these home-based interactions were encouraged by myself and the school teacher, they were entirely voluntary. These interactions did not form part of formal school work. The students were aware there were no negative consequences for their grades if they chose not to interact online while at home. The length of these interactions varied from five minutes to an hour depending who was online. This took a great level of trust by the students who were aware that their interactions were being recorded. In this online community I was viewed more as an equal participant, rather than the role I had at school as teacher/researcher.

### ***Theoretical framework***

The theoretical framework which guided the analysis of the data is located within a sociocultural discourse. Proponents of this approach argue that learning is primarily a social process mediated through interactions using tools (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertch, 1999). The types of tools that Vygotsky refers to fall into two categories, which include physical tools, such as pens, and semiotic tools, such as language). Humans do not directly act on the physical world, but rather use tools as a way of indirectly mediating actions in the world.

In mediating interactions, the Internet allows for young people to interact with each other in new ways not possible in a face-to-face setting. Students are able to be anonymous when they interact online, particularly if using guest books that don't require a logging in process. The Internet also allows for interactions to reach a large number of participants and the message can be in a public space until the sender decides to remove it. Here in this paper the way Internet mediated the interaction process is examined. One example of this is how students flooded each other online.

In considering learning as a social process and the impact of using the Internet in such learning, the concept of appropriation is significant. The term appropriation was first suggested by Leont'ev (1981) to describe how a child's language use, and his or her ideas, have their origins in the child's social and cultural history. Children appropriate the ideas and mannerisms of those with whom they interact most, through what they see, hear and read. As children work, play and solve problems together, "...so their spontaneous ways of thinking, talking and acting—the ideas that come to mind, the words they choose and the tools they make use of—embody an accumulated set of cultural values and beliefs that have been constructed and refined over previous generations" (Wells, 2002). The Internet allows users to apply actions and thoughts to online activities that they apply in a face-to-face setting. Here the concept of appropriation is applied to examine influences evident in interactions, for example, the way in which students appropriated ways of interacting in informal situations and applied them to formal interactions and how students transferred offline friendships and communities into an online environment.

It can be seen that the constructs of mediation and appropriation are developed in this paper through the framework they provide for discussion of the data. Next is discussion of the data examining the cyberbullying that occurred during the study.

### **The online bullying**

In looking at instances at cyberbullying, analysis of the data indicated that it was occurring both during home-based informal interactions and during school-based formal interactions. In examining the data from home-based interactions, it is shown here that only boys were cyberbullied. In examining school-based interactions the way boys and girls were cyber-bullied is examined.

#### ***Bulling at home***

While the girls did interact online while at home there were no instances recorded where bullying occurred. The boys on the other hand did engage in bullying online while interacting both through a chatroom and through using the schools email account. Interactions in these two forums are examined in this section.

#### **In the chatroom**

The cyberbullying began when the boys started using the class chat room. The focus of the bullying was often the boys' interest in girls, which seemed to cause immediate and angry responses from the person at whom the bullying was directed, as indicated in the extract from the chat room:

*<J.G> [Jack] mat likes mary*

*<matty> shutup*

*<J.G> u cant shut me up*

*<matty> bring it on*

*<J.G> ok lets go*

*<J.G> matt is dead*

The student, who called himself JG, was a dominant individual in the classroom. The other student, matty, was his friend although JG often bullied Matty in the classroom. JG was a much larger person physically than matty and used this to intimidate matty. They appeared to be the type of relationship where JG was the dominant figure and

Matty was the subordinate figure. This type of physical intimidation that boys more often engage in at school than girls was transferred to an online environment.

In the study from which this paper draws, it was found that participants who interacted informally online tended to belong to the same face-to-face community and that where there was face-to-face bullying, this behaviour was then appropriated in an online environment. So too, as the example above indicates, did the boys appropriate the types of aggressive behaviour that typifies much of offline behaviour.

Interestingly, although boys engaged in online bullying in this study, they appeared able to cope with this type of bullying, which has been observed by other researchers. Lodge and Frydenburg (2007) for example, found that boys who experienced cyberbullying coped by adopting and using positive focus, working hard, and problem solving skills.

### **Instances of flooding**

The boys also demonstrated a desire for control and power while interacting online. They would often press the submit key down and hold it down, as is evident in the chat room extract below.

*<luke>*

*<luke>*

*<luke>*

*<luke>*

*<luke>*

*<luke>*

*<luke>*

*<luke>*

*<Jack> Dont*

This process, called 'flooding', effectively prevented any one else from interacting. This was a way that students had of intimidating other students by preventing them from interacting. The students didn't like being the victim of flooding. This issue was raised in an interview, the initials DM indicate me:

*Jack: You know people put submit all the time and it goes on and on.*

*Matthew: Yea, I hate that.*

*Luke: Yea Matthew.*

*James: Yea, you do that Matthew.*

*DM: Yea, you're not the only one that does that Matthew. Why do people put their finger on the button and hold it?*

*Matthew: Because sometimes I'm bored and it's like, to get people's attention.*

*Because I put Jack and he's not there for 5 minutes and then he comes back.*

*James: But we put Matthew, we're here and you're still pressing it.*

*DM: You're not the only one who has done it though.*

*Matthew: Every body who has been on the chat room has done it. Jack has done it.*

All the boys who interacted online engaged in 'flooding' while using the chat room. Perhaps what the students disliked was not having control. Students were able to exert more power than they might have in the classroom, both on the content and control of the speaking space. This control was evident where Luke for example, held down the Send button in the chat room, preventing others, including me, from participating.

Here is an example of how the Internet mediated a new way for students to bully other students. This type of behaviour is not possible in a face-to-face settings but students quickly discovered that this tool was available and they used it for purposes of bullying. Many of the students in the study had older brothers and sisters so it may have been possible that they appropriated this behaviour from there siblings.

### **In the guest book**

Bullying also occurred between the boys in the guest book which is a asynchronous environment, with the focus being on the boys' interest in girls as indicated in the following message:

*Wednesday, 3/7/02*

*EVERYONE MAT LOVES MARY!!!! HIS SECOND BEST CHOICE IS SUSAN. HE S*

*TRYING TO BE KIERENS FRIEND BUT MARY LIKES HIM TOO MUCH. MAT IS SCARED HELL LOOSE MARY IVE GOT PROOF!!!!!!!!!! MAT \$ MARY*

The topic of bullying was not just related to the opposite sex. Musical taste also became a topic of bullying as the following guest book entry indicates:

*KORN SUX*

*Tuesday, 9/7/02*

*JACK SUX AND KORN SUX*

*From: kORN SUX*

*Web Site: KORN SUX*

In the two examples above, the sender of this message did not leave his name although other messages left made it possible to identify who it was. In using forums like guest books, senders are able to anonymous. This, according to David-Ferdon and Feldman Hertz (2007), gives students power and control that they do not normally have in a face-to-face setting. Here is an example of how the Internet is able to mediate a new way of bullying where the victim does not know who is taunting him or her. It appears that many young people believe that anonymity can aid cyberbullying. In research conducted by Li (2007), it was found that nearly half of the cyber victims did not know who cyberbullied them. This aspect of anonymity was also observed during school-based online interactions which is reported on later in this paper.

Another factor in the use of forums like guest books is that there is the power of the written word, where the taunts are able to be read over and over again by an audience (Campbell 2005). It is important, therefore, where these forums are used in schools that they are regularly checked and any inappropriate comments removed.

### ***Bullying at school***

Bullying was not just confined to the students' social interactions while they were at home. There were instances during classroom interactions where bullying occurred. The following extracts are taken from a session during one of the curriculum projects initiated where the students used a chat room to interact with a group of high school

students. The focus of the project was to support the primary school to high school transition program the school had in place. As is shown in this section, bullying occurred between the boys and between the girls.

### **Boys' bullying**

In the extract, the first entry and third entry is posted by Jack and Matthew. The second entry is James and Luke:

YO RAMS

YP IM BETTER THAN U U SUCK MCBAN WANT SUM RYE COURSE YA DO  
GARSIDE DO U HAVE MSN

**james n luke**

mat is gonna get bashed at lunch

JACK = MATT

U GUYS IN RAMGATE R U HERE DAMMIT

A factor that could have contributed to this type of language and the intentions behind it was the interactions that occurred through the class-based chat room, where a more flexible use of language was permitted. Given that both Matt and Jack interacted online with other grade six students and with me, they may have believed that previous rules of out-of-school interactions applied to in-school use of the Internet for interactions. In interacting socially with me, there was an implicit sanction of language that was not appropriate for class interactions. Here is an example of students appropriating language practice from one situation (informal) and applying it to another situation (formal). This illustrates the challenges of encouraging students to interact online in an informal manner at home and then allowing them to interact online in school-based projects.

In the study, the majority of the bullying observed was by the boys, which is consistent with research conducted as part of the by the I-Safe America Inc project (2004) and by Li (2006). The bullying was not confined solely to the boys. There

were some instances where the girls bullied each other online during formal interactions.

### **Girls' bullying**

Another instance of bullying occurred during the High School project. In this episode, one of the primary school girls posted a message using another student's name. Here is an example of a form of cyberbullying which is called masquerade:

Helen

*who wrote OKAY Helen in the name box*

Helen

*mary was it u*

***mary***

*me I didn't put my name sorry Helen*

*(Chat, week 5)*

This episode draws on a history. There were two groups of girls in the classroom who were having difficulties working together, due to personality clashes. The bullying in the classroom manifested itself on the Internet. It would appear that one of the students felt that writing a statement using the other person's identity would hurt that person's feelings, which is what happened. In response to this episode, the students were reminded to only use their real names and to respect each other's feelings.

The bullying by the girls' was generally more subtle and was different to the boys' bullying, which was more direct. This pattern of bullying in a face-to-face setting has been identified in the literature (Ahmad & Smith, 1994; Smith & Sharp, 1994), where it is suggested that boys tend to engage in direct bullying methods. Girls tend to use more subtle indirect strategies, such as pretending to be another person online as the example above illustrates. The bullying observed during the study indicates that the face-to-face practices of both boys and girls are being appropriated in an online environment.

The issue of anonymity was discussed earlier in the paper. The extract of the interaction from the high school chat session show how anonymity can be used in a

different way. In the extract above the sender was able to hide her identity and in doing so, was able to pretend to be someone else.

Of interest in the study was that while there were instances of boys bullying boys and girls bullying girls, there no instances of bullying between the boys and girls.

Research conducted with adults suggests that men tend to be the perpetrators and women tend to be the victims of harassment which is similar to face-to-face settings (Herring, 2002). Research in face-to-face settings with young people has shown that boys do bully girls (Casey-Cannon, Hayward & Gowan, 2001). Here in this research reported on here though, there were no instances of boys and girls bullying with each other online. The boys and girls did not tend to interact with each other online which is possibly a reason why little cyber bullying occurred between them. Perhaps if more young people interact online in the future this may become an issue for educators.

## **Conclusion**

The issue of cyberbullying in one Australian primary school class has been examined. It has been shown that bullying occurred during school-based and home-based interactions and that many of the students who bullied at school were likely to do it online. There was bullying by both boys and girls although the boys were far more aggressive in their interactions and bullied each other more than the girls bullied each other online. There were no instances of boys or girls bullying each other online. The way the Internet mediated interactions allowed both boys and girls to bullying each other in new ways including flooding and masquerade.

In schools, education can play an important role in helping to minimize and manage cyberbullying. It is important then, that policies and curriculums be developed that incorporate the use of interactive technologies such as email and chatrooms.

Appropriate training for teachers needs to be also developed so that there is an understanding of what the educational issues are in relation to cyberbullying and how these issues can be best addressed if they arise. Currently it appears that a significant proportion of teachers do not use or understand interactive online technologies so there is significant progress that needs to be made. Many schools seem to be hesitant to encourage online interactions, based in part on parental concerns and the fear of

litigation. It is important that schools base decisions on providing interactive online spaces based on research, rather than on the types of stories mentioned in the introduction of this paper.

As has been demonstrated in this article, the links between home and school are becoming blurred through the use of networked technologies such as chatrooms and email. The issue of who is responsible for students when they are encouraged to interact online while at home as yet remains unclear. This has important implications for policy directions in schools. If constructive change is to come about parents and teachers might assume a more cooperative approach in managing online bullying.

### **Autobiographical statement**

Dr Maher has been working as a primary school educator for the past 20 years, 10 of these years being part time in the tertiary sector teaching trainee primary school teachers. One of Dr Maher's main interests is the use of ICT in schools. In particular, he is interested in the ways the Internet can be used to mediate communication and the effects this has on pedagogy. Dr Maher is currently lecturing at Macquarie University in the School of Education.

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