Student Cyberbullying in Higher Education

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Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Online learning in higher education is increasing (Samarawickrema & Stacey, 2007). Instances have arisen where prejudicial and harassing interactions have occurred between students, which is now typically defined as “cyberbullying” (Englander, Mills, & McCoy, 2009). The lack of institutional policy and tools to address this situation is problematic (Brown et al., 2006; Parchoma, 2006). The following sections of purpose, research questions, literature review, and methodology outline and discuss this research proposal addressing cyberbullying in higher education.

Purpose of the Study

This study will try to understand offensive communications occurring in online learning systems by identifying the number of incidences and levels and types of harassment on the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD) campus. This study will also investigate existing or proposed policy to minimize the potentiality of student harm and institutional liability due to cyberbullying. In addition this study will explore other possible solutions higher educational institutions have or could have in place to address these harmful e-learning interactions.

Research Questions

The research questions proposed are as follows:

1. What is the prevalence of these offensive student-to-student online communication events at UMD?

2. What was the targeted topic of the online student-to-student offensive communication (e.g., race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, age, marital status, disability, public assistance status, veteran status, or sexual orientation, other) at UMD?

3. What is the severity of these online student-to-student communication offenses?

4. What policies have been implemented or could be implemented to deal with inappropriate e-learning communications between students?
5. What other means are in place to deal with inappropriate e-learning communications between students?

These questions were inspired from the literature review which follows.

**Brief Literature Review**

According to Samarawickrema and Stacey (2007), a majority of higher educational institutions are becoming deliverers of online, educational content to their students for success in their programs through learning management systems. “By 2025, Dunn (2000) stated that some experts believe that traditional universities will be replaced by a network or consortia of course providers with online delivery systems that completely bypass the traditional classroom” (as cited by Woods, 2001). Increasing use of e-learning tools in higher education and a transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 is changing the learning environment and roles of teachers and students:

One way of summarising [sic] the change to Web 2.0 is by contrasting the former web (“Web 1.0”) with Web 2.0. In Web 1.0 a few content authors provided content for a wide audience of relatively passive readers. However, in Web 2.0 everyday users of the web use the web as a platform to generate, e-purpose, and consume shared content. With Web 2.0 data sharing the web also becomes a platform for social software that enables groups of users to socialize [sic], collaborate, and work with each other. This change of use is largely based on existing web data-sharing mechanisms being used to share content, in conjunction with the use of web protocol based interfaces to web applications that allow flexibility in reusing data and the adoption of communications protocols that allow specialised [sic] data exchange. (Franklin & van Harmelen, 2007, p. 4)

Because Web 2.0 students are now also part of creating and sharing online data and information, offensive communications have transformed from face-to-face to virtual situations. “The location, actors, language and gestures in face-to-face bullying have evolved and moved into the electronic venue” (Brown, Jackson, & Cassidy, 2006, para. 1). Children, adolescents, and young adults are now savvy in the Web 2.0 world, however their maturation level to deal with online social interacting may be problematic as being witnessed by cyberbullying activities (Kruger, Epley, Parker, & Ng, 2005). “Cyberbullies” utilize a variety of electronic tools, such as...
email, chat rooms, cell phones, cameras, web sites, and blogs, to communicate offensive information to other students (Belsey, 2006; Campbell, 2005; Shariff, 2005). Cyberbullying encompasses harassing and discriminatory language that discloses “personal information, or contains offensive, vulgar or derogatory comments” (Willard, 2003, p.66).

The communications between students in electronic education (i.e., e-communications) can be productive as well as damaging. Englander et al. (2009) evidenced college student e-communications being bullying and harassing in nature, however their study did show the offensive incidences occurred at a lower rate in higher education than in K-12 educational institutions. The concern remains that some individuals are not socially as responsible in a virtual, expedient, and even anonymous world. “It evolves rapidly, adults differ fundamentally from children in their use of the Internet, and children are comfortable with technology but ignorant about the psychological impact of their online behaviors and the dangers to which they expose themselves and their families” (Englander, & Muldowney, 2007, abstract). Englander et al. (2009) discussed that college cyberbullying does exist and little research has been conducted on this topic in higher education. Roberts and McInnerney (2007) identified the top seven problems in online learning without mentioning offensive communications between students. However they noted that their list is not exhaustive and that relationship building and group work with a high level of student-to-student communications is essential for online learning success (Roberts & McInnerney, 2007).

Many universities have non-harassment and non-discrimination policies, such as the University of Minnesota’s equal opportunity statement, “the University of Minnesota shall provide equal access to and opportunity in its programs, facilities, and employment without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, gender, age, marital status, disability, public
assistance status, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression” (University of Minnesota Duluth, 2009, para. 1). This statement reflects the espoused environment of learning and working at the University, however, the focus is on faculty and staff behavior. Anti-bullying educational policies have arisen that deal with student-to-student harassment and discrimination (Brown et al., 2006). Once such incident affected UMD — a Facebook (i.e., electronic social networking Web site) incident occurred involving blatantly racist statements between two white female students about an African American female student who was also in the same room on UMD property. The African American student’s friends notified her as to the offensive e-communication content targeting her by the other two students during the incident. UMD did not have a policy available during the time of the incident to know how to deal with the situation, and it greatly affected the campus, with a silent march and a new group formed to address this racism on campus (UMD Statesman, 2010).

Even though cyberbullying does regretfully exist, cyberbullying may also be misconstrued and this also needs to be addressed. As electronic communications can be “without the benefit of paralinguistic cues such as gesture, emphasis, and intonation, it can be difficult to convey emotion and tone,” where something may be received as offensive, but may not have been sent offensively (Kruger et al., 2005). In any case, to deal with these student-to-student electronic bullying communications or miscommunications, many researchers are recommending institutional policies. Just as we have policies for student-to-student conflict that is face-to-face, the e-learning environment is creating new issues for educational policy makers.

With the increased dependence on electronic means of learning, “there is now an urgent need for a policy analysis of this new form of bullying” (para. 1), according to Brown et al.’s
Numerous physical and mental ailments can ensue from online harassment in youth and adults all over the world. Whereas traditional bullying is confined usually within school boundaries, cyberbullying can take place at any time or place, even in the privacy of one’s home. Therefore, students who are electronically engaged can be cyberbullied at any time. Options for escape are extremely limited, with the principal options being either to cease using the Internet or ignore the harasser. Preliminary research by Willard suggests cyberbullying may produce even more damage to youth, with such consequences ranging from low self-esteem, anxiety, anger, depression, school absenteeism, poor grades, an increased tendency to violate against others, to youth suicide (Willard, 2006). For example, in June, 2004, the New Zealand Catholic News reported one student committed suicide following incidences of text bullying (Brown et al., 2006, para. 26).

Brown et al. (2006) explained that cyberbullying is radically different than face-to-face offenses, such as the ability to be anonymous. Their policy recommendations were based on the current literature in 2006:

a) At the school level, the need for acceptable-use policies that expand on online use and behaviour [sic] to include both school and home use. This level remains the most sensitive to the needs of the local context;
b) At the divisional level, the concurrent development of board or higher administrative policy that interconnects local school policies for government and public accountability, which establish standards for responsibility in responding for staff;
c) The need, in an ongoing basis, to allow students to have voice into the development of relevant policies in the area, so that new or reformed policies are more consensual than autocratic or imposed;
d) The critical need to evaluate the effectiveness of policies in order to determine if they are actually achieving their policy intent and not undermining other relevant policies and systems already in place. Zero-tolerance policies in particular have this need, given the oft demonstrated exacerbation of harm to students sanctioned by them, such as exclusion from the school learning environment and psychological effects of negative labeling

... [and] expansion of existing policies on harassment and bullying or creation of new policy specific to cyberbullying should set out the social values underpinning the policy such as:

1) Caring and respectful behaviours [sic] in student to student exchanges;
2) Safe and nurturing environments for healthy development of identity and netizenship;
3) The principles of tolerance and impartiality.

(Brown et al., 2006, para. 51)
Parchoma (2006) echoed the need for e-learning policies in higher educational institutions whereas an “e-learning policy field is posited” (p. 321). To help eradicate racist, sexist, and other derogatory communications between students "top-down authority directives" were seen as powerful forces to both establish web-based teaching as well as helping provide a safe online environment through institutional policies and procedures and developing "climate and ethos" (Samarawickrema & Stacey, 2007, p. 330).

The next section is methodology. This section describes how the problem statement, purpose, research questions, and literature are synthesized to deduce a practical approach to researching this problem in higher education.

**Methodology**

This methodology originates from the purpose and research questions. Creswell (2009) stated that the purpose should explain the research importance (p. 112) and that it leads the direction of the research (p. 111), and Blaikie (2010) stated that it should provide what knowledge is proposed to be produced (p. 57). From this, a mixed methodology is derived. As previously stated, this research study proposes questions that start with “what” and based on their inquisition, it is advised to utilize an inductive and mixed methodology (Blaikie, 2010). Survey tools with both quantitative and qualitative questioning will be used appropriate to the two populations studied, which are UMD students utilizing online learning management systems for their major and other higher educational institutions.

Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies are embedded in Likert-based and open-ended questions in two delivered surveys/questionnaires. The survey addressed to other institutions will test theory as to what already exists, such as educational policies or other means
regarding cyberbullying, to help minimize student harm and institutional liability — this is quantitative in nature (Blaikie, 2010, Creswell, 2009). For the qualitative aspect of this study, the UMD existing online environment will be investigated as to the current level and extent of offensive student-to-student communications.

This proposal supports that a mixed methodology is more robust in findings. In quantitative research, theories are tested according to both Creswell (2009) and Blaikie (2010), as deductive approaches used (Blaikie, 2010, p. 19; Creswell, 2009, p. 57). However “qualitative generalization is a term that is used in a limited way . . . since the intent of this form of inquiry is not to generalize findings . . . ‘particularity’ rather than ‘generalizability’ is the hallmark of qualitative research” (Creswell, 2009, p. 192-193). According to Creswell (2009), “employing the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, has gained popularity. This popularity is because research methodology continues to evolve and develop, and mixed methods is another step forward, utilizing the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research” (p.203). Hopefully, findings from this research specific to UMD will assist the institution in understanding its status regarding online student-to-student communications as well as to identify what it is and other like-organizations are employing, policy-wise or otherwise, to minimize student harm and institutional liability.

Two populations and two survey tools will be utilized to gather data and information as follows. Population one will be UMD students enrolled in online courses (all online and hybrid courses which are a portion of online course work and a portion face-to-face classroom course activities). An online survey will be generated using Survey Monkey™ of an already existing survey instrument, but tailored to online student-to-student communications. A census will be conducted and responses would generate a convenience sample.
Population two will be regionally accredited higher educational institutions in the U.S. Randomized samples from each of the regional accrediting board regions will be utilized to gather data and information as to the effect of what they are doing to help minimize student harm and institutional liability regarding any offensive online course room student-to-student communications. The data will be coded and quantified for analysis. Creswell (2009) stated that a random sample assists representation of the population (p. 155). Furthermore he recommended using “a systematic or probabilistic [random] sample” (p. 148), as generalizability is ensured and stratification is employed, such as identifying gender characteristics (p. 148).

These samples are from a “semi-natural” environment as discussed by Blaikie (2010) in that the participants “report on their own and/or other people’s activities, attitudes . . .” (p. 166). The data gathering tools will be Web-based surveys provided to the student census and the universities/colleges sample. A letter with the Web survey link, consent form (for students), and a gift certificate will be provided as an incentive. Follow-up phone and email contacts will be completed with an additional incentive of a $50.00 gift card drawing. These type of procedures help ensure a higher response rate as it has become increasingly difficult to obtain a significant response rate in survey research (Blaikie, 2010, p. 180).

After the survey data and information is gathered from the two populations, they will be assessed and evaluated. Quantitative data will be analyzed in SPSS. NVivo will be used to code qualitative information to generate patterns of responses to assist in quantification of results. Blaikie (2010) stated that data should be reduced for analysis, such as quantitative data “keying in responses to a questionnaire” for statistical analyses (p. 25) with data generated with Likert scale questions and Cronbach’s alpha utilized to determine internal consistency of the questions, as will occur in this research. Per Creswell (2009), qualitative validity will try to be ensured.
through triangulation from the different information/data questioning sources, and thick
descriptive text from the open-ended questions to determine major themes and positives and
negatives generated (p. 191), which will be from the UMD student responses.

Overall, this proposed research will investigate both primary and secondary data through
surveys/questionnaires and gathering data/information online. Primary data is “generated by the
researcher” and can take word or number form and secondary data is “generated by another” and
analyzed by the researcher (Blaikie, 2010, p. 161). This study will gather data and information
from the two surveys, but it will also investigate what other post-secondary institutions may be
doing to alleviate cyberbullying through existing online data/information.

The problems and limitations of this study are initially identified as the results of the
UMD student questionnaire not being generalizeable to other higher educational institutions,
variations and proportions of use of online e-learning tools/course rooms occurring between
UMD courses, and that qualitative analyses may be limited. Blaikie (2010) stated that the
problems and limitations should be reported as what may be encountered in the design phase and
after the research is conducted that hindered the research and to express both strengths and
weaknesses (p. 26). Because of this, additional limitations may be identified later in the study.
Additionally, because conducting qualitative research employs an “unfolding model of inquiry”
(Creswell, 2009, p. 173), determining design issues initially can be problematic.
References


