Cyberbullying in the Online Classroom: Faculty as the Targets

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Abstract: With the increase of online learning has come a subsequent rise of cyber-bullying. Bullying has typically been found in the workplace and between students in the classroom, outside of the classrooms, and in recent times, in many forms of social media. Most recently, faculty members have become targets and victims of cyber-bullying. For many, there are not established policies or training on how to react. The current research addresses the scope of the problem, a review of the findings of cyber-bullying related to a university where a majority of the coursework is administered online, and a plan for addressing the problem through policies, training, and professional development. The research includes a survey of current online faculty, the findings, and recommendations for addressing the problem.

Introduction

Bullying in schools is not a new phenomenon. Most people have been involved in bullying as either as a recipient, a bully, or as a witness to bullying, in the capacity of instructors, administrators, or students. Typically, bullying is first associated with the elementary and junior-high school yard. For many this progressed to high school, but progressed less frequently at the college and work-place level. As the number of households with internet access approaches saturation and cell phone ownership expands to the 100 million mark, avenues to bully have grown exponentially. Cyber-bullying has emerged from the schoolyard to an electronic bullying and harassment phenomenon in recent years. It is directly related to " a person's or a group's enabling harassment and threat and tying to harm others by sending rude texts and/or images continuously and on purpose to other people or groups via technology, e-mail, mobile phones, beepers, short message service, and web sites" (Ang and Goh, 2010; Aricak, 2009; Belsey, 2008; Berson, Berson and Ferron, 2002; Finkelhor, Mitchell and Wolak, 2008; Mason, 2008; Patchin and Hinduja, 2006; Willard, 2007).

The increase in the overall use of the Internet has directly affected the movement towards the prevalence of online learning. The number of students enrolled in online courses is increasing on an annual basis (citation). With this growth, cyber-assaults, written & verbal assaults, and other forms of cyber-bullying have become fixtures in the online classroom environment. There is an increasing amount of research on both student and faculty-related cyber-bullying (Lipsett, 2009; Smith, A, 2007; Daniloff, 2009; Minor, Smith, & Brashen, 2013). . In the fall of 2011, of the 17.7 million active college students, only 16 percent were attending traditional 4-year colleges and living on campus (Allen and Seaman, 2013). Experiences with online learning have noted increases in verbal assaults and cyber-bullying (and the shift from the face-to-face classroom to the online classroom may very well be attributed to an increased   potential for cyber-bullying). Additional research is necessary to address the upsurge of technology, and its impact on the age-old instances of bullying. However, online learning, tighter budgets, and competition for enrollments have led to changing "classroom" philosophies. Students are becoming the "customer" and higher education, following more of a business model, is increasingly expressing a different focus, treating the student as a "customer".

For many institutions, the increase in online courses and enrollments has resulted in an increased reliance on adjunct instructors. Further, the number of online adjuncts is growing annually as online enrollments experience double-digit annual enrollment growth. These online adjunct instructors, unlike full-time faculty and campus adjuncts, are often working in isolation, without as much structured supervision. They are teaching a different demographical student, typically older, working, and with different expectations (Education Today, 2012).

Based on today's college communications, social media, and personal e-mails, hundreds, even thousands, of recipients can be reached in a short period of time. As noted by a number of researchers (Hinduja & Patchin,2011), e-mails, text-messaging, chat rooms, cellular phones, camera phones, websites, blogs, etc., contribute to the spread of derogatory and ostracizing comments about students, teachers, and other individuals.

There is currently not a clear consensus or consistency on cyber-bullying laws. There is not a clear consensus between states on how to deal with cyber-bullying incidents, and this is not clearly differentiated between school districts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011). Cyber-bullying laws do tend to follow existing criminal legislation and laws for behavior involving such things as harassment, stalking, felonious assault, and certain hate and bias behavior (pg. 49); however, there is a gray area of interpretation of when cyberbullying behavior violates criminal or civil law or in the enforcement, thereof (Patchin, 2010).

Beyond specific state laws, many educational institutions have their own student codes of conduct that could include policies and restrictions applied to cyber-bullying, dependent on how they are written. Students are provided information in the institution' student handbook or code of conduct that covers the general guidelines of conduct that is prohibited by the college. Having the freedom to post content on the Internet and interact with new people without seeing them in person places college students and instructors at risk for cyber-bullying, even cyber-stalking.

Colleges and universities generally are using their existing codes of conduct to address these cases, but not specifically covering or discouraging that behavior directly related to cyber-bullying. Some policies seem to define harassment and disruption narrowly (physical harassment or disruption of the classroom) and this may not apply to all levels and types of cyber-bullying. It should be noted also that there is a difference in restrictions that can be restricted and enforced in public, private, or for-profit institutions, especially in the restriction of restricting "free speech" and "academic freedom."

Focus of Research

The current research intended to address five questions and issues:

1. What is the extent of online faculty cyber-bullying by students?
2. Are online instructors aware of the policies and processes in place to handle issues of cyber-bullying at the institution?
3. How have online faculty addressed the issue of cyber-bullying? Was this effective?
4. Based on the results, what preventive measures, policies, and training are needed to reduce and discourage future cyber bullying in the online education settings be addressed (Steps to address cyber-bullying)?
5. How can the institution address the needs related to cyberbullying in ensuring that students are protected and prevented from partaking in behavior that will affect their future careers?

Methods

For the current research, cyber-bullying was defined for respondents as the use of electronic devices such as computers, iPads, cell phones, or other devices to send or post text or images intended to hurt, intimidate, or embarrass another person, to include such behavior as:

- Flaming: Online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language.
- Harassment and stalking: Repeatedly sending cruel, vicious, and/or threatening messages. Even one message could constitute cyber-bullying depending on the circumstances. Often times when this occurs instructors are unprepared to react and where to seek support.
- Mobbing: A group of students simultaneously cyber-bullying a particular instructor.

The research focused on the online faculty experience of being a victim of cyber-bullying. In the fall semester of 2013, each of the 550 instructors that had taught an online course for Park University in the last two academic years was contacted resulting with a total of 202 online faculty members (103 males and 99 females) responding (37% response rate) to a 49 question instrument between the period of September 1 to October 1, 2013. Respondents included full-time and adjunct online instructors at Park University that had actively taught an online course in the last two academic years.

The survey addressed the frequency and intensity of non-class related digital distractions in the extent of online faculty cyber-bullying by students, online faculty awareness of the

policies and processes in place to handle issues of cyber-bullying at the institution, how online faculty addressed the issue of cyber-bullying, the effectiveness of how the issues of cyber-bullying is addressed; and, what preventive measures, policies, and training were needed to reduce and discourage future cyber bullying in the online education settings be addressed (Steps to address cyber-bullying).

Results

The preliminary analysis of the respondents indicated that 50 percent had personally experienced student cyber-bullying at some perceived level.. Of these, 14 percent reported that they had experienced bullying once, 29 percent had experienced bullying "2 to 5 times", and eight percent experienced bullying six or more times. Additionally, 23 percent of the respondents were aware of other faculty members that had been bullied online. Past research (Minor, Smith & Brashen, 2013; Smith, 2007) supports the findings that 17 to 30 percent of faculty respondents have received email or instant messaging that "threatened, insulted, or harassed." Many "threats" were targeted at going to the chair or administration over grades or other assignments and course-related matters.

Measures

Based on the operational definition of cyber-bullying given in the student survey, these perceived threats and student threats via e-mails *are* forms of cyber-bullying. Many online adult learners have utilized such communications and consider it acceptable; many online adjunct instructors have accepted such communication as normal for online teaching. While not validated in this research, there is current research and literature on the topic of increasing of bullying on the Internet with the increase of online courses, as well as the increase in a number of social online venues, such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Linkedin, , etc., to name a few (Brady & Conn, 2006) .

Nearly half of the respondents (46%) reported that students threatened to complain to the administration over grading and assignments and 31 percent reported that students had used the university e-mail to personally attack them to other members of the class. The major reasons those having admitted to being bullied cited issues that were grade-related (48%), assignment-related (33%), age-related, outside work-related, gender-related, family-related, as well as other individual reasons.

Of those reporting being bullied, 55 percent stated they addressed the issue themselves while 23 percent contacted the academic director to intervene and 45 percent contacted either the chair or program coordinator to intervene. Adjunct faculty members are often working in isolation, which might affect their response to bullying as well as other course situations. Teaching online as an adjunct is competitive and reporting course problems may be perceived by adjuncts as detrimental to being assigned to teach future classes. When asked, 36 percent did not feel reporting bullying would be held against them, 20 percent said "yes"; and 44 reported that they were not sure which assumes that four-fifths of reporting faculty have a concern about reporting bullying and very well may not do so to avoid repercussions (Figure 1).
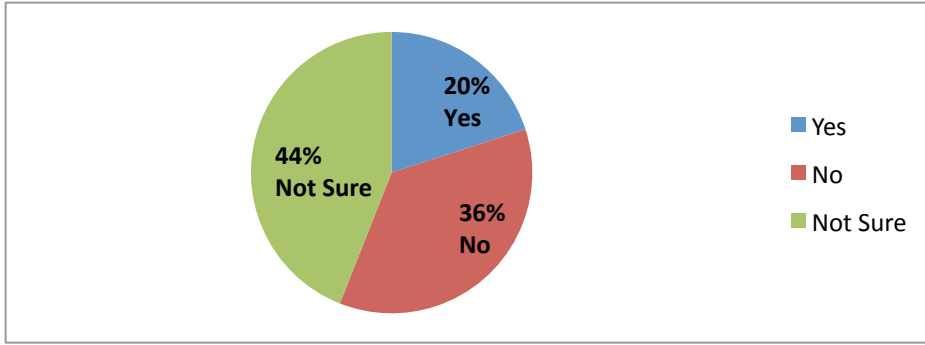
Figure 1 - Percentage of Respondents Who Feel That Reporting Bullying Will

Be Held Against Them

Eighty percent of the university's online instructors are adjunct faculty citation). An initial concern, as reported (Figure 2) is that only 30 percent of those that responded that they had been cyber-bullied were aware that the university even had a process in place to handle cyber-bullying.

A similar concern from the survey is that only 32 percent of respondents felt there were resources available to properly handle a cyber-bullying situation. That is, two-thirds of
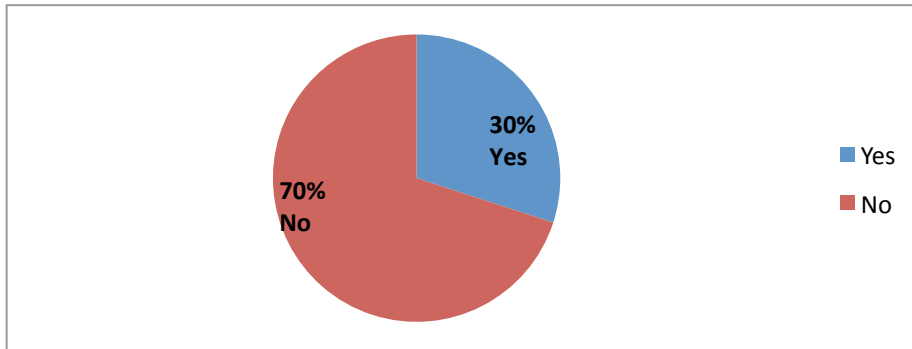

Figure 2 - Percentage of Respondents Aware That Institution Has a Process in

Place to Handle Cyber-Bullying

survey respondents either reported that they did not feel the institution had the resources to handle a cyber-bullying situation, or the "didn't know" if they had the resources to do so (Figure 3). Training and education for recognizing, addressing, and reporting cyber-bullying are key activities to ensure that cyberbullying is properly handled and that online instructors are fully protected.
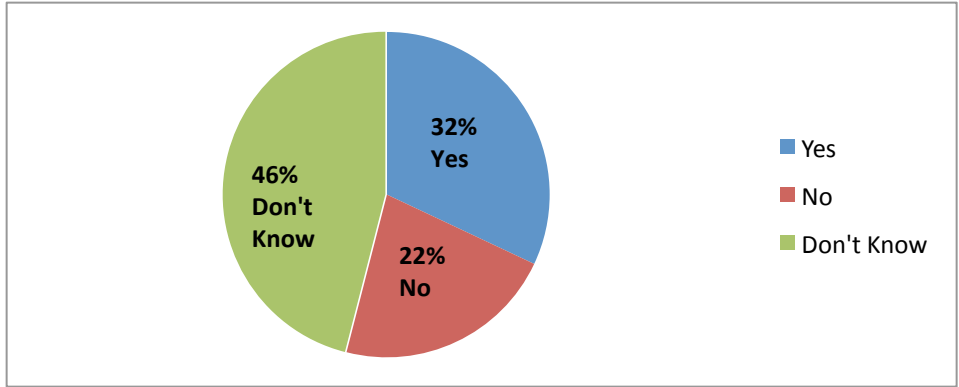
Figure 3 - Percentage of Respondents That Feel the Institution Has Resources

To Handle Cyber-Bullying Situation

Eighty-five percent of all survey respondents reported that they had no training in how to respond to or report cyber-bullying. Additionally, nine percent of responses reported very limited training in this area (Figure 4). Instructors are provided in-depth training in facilitation, pedagogy, and the learning management system, but cyber-bullying and the process of reporting is neither addressed in initial training nor provided in separate professional development training (Figure 5).
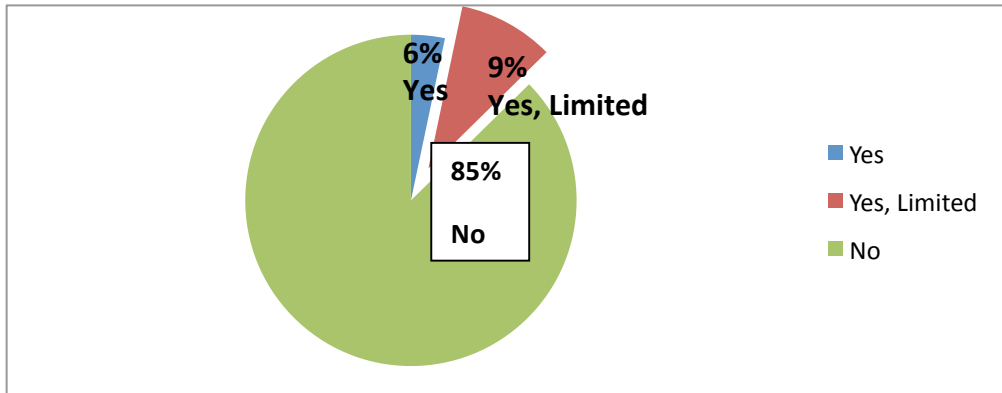

Figure 4. Percentage of Respondents That Have Received Specific Training in Responding-To or Reporting Cyber-Bullying
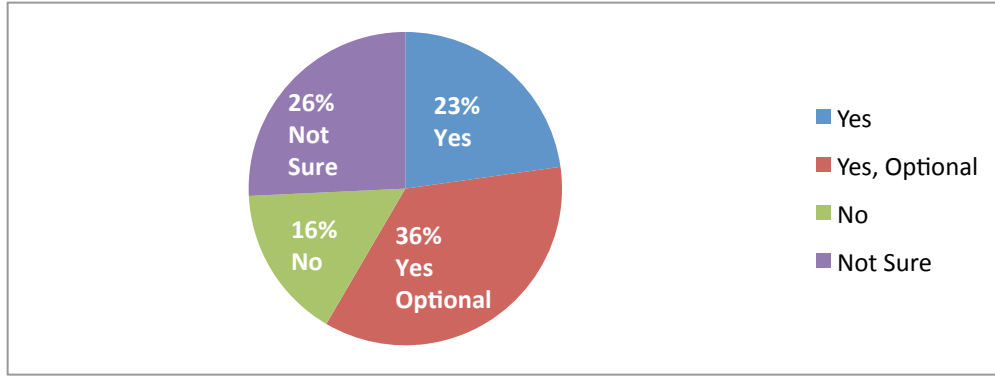
Figure 5 - Percentage of Respondents Perceived Need for Professional Development Training Related to Bullying

Respondents were asked how they handled their cyber-bullying incidents. It appeared that there is a communication gap exists that may contribute to the "non-reporting cyber-bullying", or other course issues. For those who reported that they had been cyber-bullied, institution procedures dictates to contact the academic director and program coordinator. As revealed in Table 1, those bullied were most likely to maintain most frequent contact via e-mail with online staff members (within Park Distance Learning), the program coordinator, and other online adjunct instructors. The data indicates that there is limited e-mail communication between online instructors and key individuals in the institutional academic process.

Table 1

Communication with University Personnel via E-mail by Percentage of Frequency of Contact

Position / Frequency of Contacts (%)	Never	Annually	Once or Twice Per Term	Monthly	Weekly
Program Coordinator	37	22	30	5	6
Academic Director	60	19	15	4	1
Department Chair	57	18	15	5	5
Assigned Mentor	68	16	11	0	4
Department Faculty Member	67	9	13	6	5
Online Staff Member	28	14	24	21	8
Other Online Adjunct	55	13	17	7	8

Similarly, Table 2 depicts the frequency of telephone contacts between online instructors that have reported cyber-bullying and key institutional members. Other than reported

telephone contact with other online adjuncts, there is very little telephone contact reported between online instructors and the program coordinator, academic director, department chair, assigned mentor, or other department faculty members.

Table 2

Communication with University Personnel via Telephone by Percentage of Frequency of Contact

Position / Frequency of Contacts (%)	Never	Annually	Once or Twice Per Term	Monthly	Weekly
Program Coordinator	79	4	10	3	3
Academic Director	83	8	7	1	1
Department Chair	82	6	8	1	3
Assigned Mentor	96	2	1	0	1
Department Faculty Member	86	4	3	3	4
Online Staff Member	84	6	6	3	1
Other Online Adjunct	63	15	11	6	1

Discussion

The first important finding concerns the extent of cyber-bullying of instructors by students. The second issue addressed whether online instructors were aware of the policies and processes in place to handle issues of the cyber-bullying at the institution. While there is a process in place, only 29 percent of respondents affirmed that they were aware of the university having a process in place to handle cyber-bulling. Strikingly, two-thirds of all respondents stated that they either did not know or did not feel that the university had resources available to help instructors to properly navigate a cyber-bullying situation. 71 percent of all respondents stated that they were not aware that there institution had a process in place to address cyberbullying. It is important for the institution to provide online instructors with the training to prevent and properly address cyber-bullying in their classroom.

Respondent comments were mixed in regards to the success of addressing student bullying in their online courses. The majority of respondents did identify a need for a university commitment to training and professional development for instructors and university-wide education to students that specifically addresses cyber-bulling prevention and consequences. Eighty-five percent of respondents reported having no training to address or report cyberbulling; the same number expressed that there is a need for professional development training related to cyber-bullying in the university's online

training. While current instructors have not received such training in their initial online training, this can be added to future initial training for newly hired online instructors. Additionally, professional development classes can be developed and provided for current online instructors for recognizing, addressing, and reporting cyber-bullying.

There are ways for colleges and universities to help prevent incidents of cyber-bullying. It is very important in formal and informal discussions and lectures to try to make sure the students understand that number one, it is against the law; number two, it's against school policy (Breitenhaus, 2010). Repetitive education and enforcement will ensure that students understand that the administration is clearly behind anti-cyber-bullying programs. There are penalties for cyber-bullying. The consequences must be clarified for students. The fear and threat of suspension, expulsion, criminal prosecution, and/or civil lawsuits will normally deter the majority of students from such behavior.

Conclusions

The majority of respondents did not know how to identify cyber-bullying or the process to follow when it occurs. It is important for instructors to provide a first line of security and safety for other students in the class and to feel confident and assured that they have the means to protect themselves. It is important for the institution to provide online instructors with the training and access to prevent and properly address cyber-bullying in their classrooms.

First, there may be a need to change the current policies, either by adding-to or changing coverage to include cyber-generated abuse, threats, stalking, and the like. Specific definitions for harassment, intimidation, and bullying and cyber-bullying (including the electronic variants) are strongly recommended.

Second, add cyber-bullying training to the initial training of online instructors and to new faculty orientation. This will not excessively lengthen the training. Awareness is the key. Make new instructors aware of what to look for, how to address it, and how to report it. Assure the instructors that this will have no negative repercussions on them; in fact, they are encouraged to report all cyber-bullying. Procedures for preventing cyber-bullying (workshops, staff training, and curriculum enhancement) should be developed.

Third, if an institution has a resource website for its instructors, (as there is at Park University – PDL751) it should place detailed information on addressing and reporting bullying.

Fourth, create a professional development course with materials for all instructors. For example, at Park University, all instructors are required to take PDL750 prior to teaching; however, that means it now has 550 active instructors that have already completed this training and would not benefit by adding a bullying portion to this course. The institution needs a separate portion on cyber-bullying in the new instructor course and a separate professional development course.

Fifth, enact a policy on instructing and warning students of online behavior during the duration of the course. Make it mandatory that students read it, understand it, and agree

to comply. This should include graduated consequences and remedial actions; procedures for reporting, procedures for investigating' and specific language to encompass off-school speech or behavior that results in "substantial disruption of the learning environment."

Sixth, emphasize cyber-bullying and the consequences in specific classes and, generally, in every class. This is a very serious problem. This is a growing problem. Graduating students do not want to graduate with a permanent annotation on their transcripts involving cyber-bullying (or related offenses, or face expulsion, or criminal charges) that would be detrimental to their entire career plan.

This research explored cyber-bullying through the examination of online instructors' perceptions about cyber-bullying and perceived support. The analysis of a survey data collected from 202 online instructors addressed a number of perceptions and issues. Results illuminated the extent to which cyber-bullying occurs, awareness of policies related to cyber-bullying, awareness of how to respond and report cyber-bullying, the prevalence of training to combat cyber-bullying, and higher policy issues that will dictate the future of cyber-bullying and institutional responses to the problem. These themes are important and display the problems associated with cyber-bullying. The results indicate the need for initiatives to combat the practice. The survey results indicate that there are too many highly educated professionals that are, at best, oftentimes unsure of how to respond to cyber-bullying and at worst, unable to identify or too intimidated, either by students or institution administration, to report cyber-bullying when it occurs. By recognizing the detrimental effect on the teaching and student experience that cyber-bullying can create, as well as the repercussions that may result for students, institutions must take steps towards eliminating cyber-bullying and creating a safe and enjoyable experience for students and instructors alike. Developing and incorporating more effective training programs for students and instructors is the first step towards maintaining an effective online learning environment.

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