International Perspectives on Cyberbullying

Part 1

The following is a report from the COST [Cooperation in Science and Technology] Action ISO801 First Cyberbullying Workshop: Definition and Measurement: Vilnius in Lithuania, 22 – 23 August 2009.

By Barbara Spears

Bullying has come to the global village. Cyberbullying, whilst it may operate locally, is not constrained by boundaries constructed by individuals, schools, governments, cultures or countries. It operates with limited reference to time or place, and seemingly with limited consequences. This nexus between aggressive, bullying behaviours and technology is the new challenge for educators and policy makers.

In order to further emerging understanding of cyberbullying and its relationship with technology, it is important to consider: how and from whom information about its occurrence is accessed; how what is normative behaviour by young people in relation to their social networking and technological use is discovered; and finally, how young people are engaged as co-researchers to co-construct strategies and solutions.

At a recent meeting of international experts on bullying and cyberbullying held in Vilnius, Lithuania (August, 2009): Smith (UK), Ybarra (USA), Slee & Spears (Australia) and Donna Cross (Australia) presented key messages about cyberbullying from their cultural contexts. Workshops facilitated by leading European academics then explored cyberbullying issues from differing perspectives, suggesting possible future directions in terms of determining prevalence, prevention and intervention. This article reports on four keynote addresses, so that an international perspective is brought to bear on the phenomenon known as cyberbullying: where bullying and new technologies meet.

Professor Peter Smith from Goldsmiths College, University of London, is the chair of the European COST Action ISO801 Cyberbullying: coping with negative and enhancing positive uses of new technologies, in relationships in educational settings (www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/is0801/). In the opening address he suggested that, in order to look to the future, it is necessary to learn from the past. This brief excursion to the past enables cyberbullying to be placed in an historical context.

Learning from the Past

In reviewing the past 39 years of research and interventions into bullying in schools, Smith identified four 'waves' of studies where direction and emphasis have shifted according to the times and contexts. Referring to Heinemann's early work on mobbing (1972), and Olweus' Forskning om skolmobbing (1973) which translated (1978) as 'Aggression in Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys,' Smith outlined the origins of the important early work undertaken in Sweden and Norway in the early 1970s. Also in this first wave of studies (through to 1988), Japanese work on ijime was occurring, but was not widely known in Western literature. Bullying at this time was defined in terms of physical and verbal behaviours and Olweus developed a self-report questionnaire which became widely adopted, as well as a school-based intervention program. Both of these initiatives have formed the basis of much of the work that has been and continues to be done internationally in schools. In terms of cyberbullying, Olweus' definition of bullying was debated during this meeting, and deemed to be still relevant, as it captures the key aspects of any bullying behaviour: a deliberate intent to harm; a power imbalance; and repetitive, ongoing acts of aggression which render the target helpless. How these play out in cyberspace, however, was an ongoing question. How is repetition determined or impact measured, for example, when it is not known where it is being repeated or by how many it has been seen?

The second wave (1989 – mid-1990s) saw expansion of bullying research to countries beyond Scandinavia – England, Canada and Belgium – and the establishment of a research program. Peer nomination methodologies were developed and indirect aggression/bullying was included. In addition, the first focused meetings between Western and Japanese researchers took place. Indirect bullying is important to consider in terms of clarifying cyberbullying behaviours. The covert nature of some bullying acts, where others are manipulated, rumours are spread and reputations are denigrated, resonate with contemporary notions of bullying through the use of technology, where websites and online polling booths are created for the express purpose of denigrating another and manipulating the peer relationships of the group.

The third wave (mid-1990s – 2004) saw the establishment of an international research program, with surveys and interventions being undertaken in many countries (Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano & Slee (eds), 1999). This 21-country report saw the work undertaken by Rigby and Slee in Australia recognized. Further developments explored interventions (Smith, Pepler & Rigby (eds), 2004); the participant roles in the group dynamic (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman & Kaukianen, 1998) and a surge of interest from the United States (Juvonen & Graham (eds), 2001; Espelage & Swearer (eds), 2004). The Asia-Pacific region also became significant, with work from: Australia and New Zealand, (Sullivan, 2000; Rigby, 2002; McGrath & Noble, 2006); Japan (Taki

et al, 2005; Tsuchiya, Smith, Soeda & Oride, 2005) and Korea, mainland China and Hong Kong all contributing. Cultural similarities and differences became evident, for example, the notion of wang-ta in Korea. This international program brought comparisons across national and cultural boundaries and a recognition that bullying occurs regardless of culture and wherever institutions and organizations bring individuals together, for example, in schools, workplaces and prisons.

The fourth wave (2004 – ?) identified by Smith is that of cyberbullying, with the earliest press reports of text message bullying appearing from 2001/2002, followed by website articles and surveys. The earliest academic publications appeared around 2004, with special editions of leading journals following (Journal of Adolescent Health, December 2007; Journal of Psychology, November 2009). Several books have also recently appeared (Willard, 2006; Shariff, 2008; Kowalski, Limber & Agaston, 2008; Li, Cross & Smith, in press) as well as a rise in literature reported from the USA (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). Importantly, cyberbullying has been quickly identified as being the next iteration of school bullying, and therefore important to the wellbeing of young people, prompting governments such as Australia to set funding aside to examine the phenomenon with a view towards prevention and intervention. The last five years has seen a rise in the general public's awareness of cyberbullying and cyber safety as important issues for young people in Australia and overseas. The Australian Government has provided funding for research into covert and cyberbullying and cyber safety through DEEWR (the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations: www.deewr.gov.au/; ACMA (the Australian Communications and Media Authority: www.acma.gov.au/) and DBCDB (the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy).

Towards the Future: Collaboration across Boundaries and Contexts

The establishment of the COST Action ISO801, a four-year European science and technology collaboration which has brought together 23 European countries to explore coping with negative and enhancing positive uses of new technologies, is a significant step towards recognizing that bullying has indeed come to the global village: that bullying no longer operates solely within school boundaries, but has opened up to the potential for global humiliation. Whilst cultural contexts are highly relevant, cyberbullying has highlighted that the parallel universe within which young people operate socially is boundary-less. Australia's inclusion as a non-funded signatory to the COST Action indicates that Australia is a significant contributor to the international debate, and that the work being done here is cutting edge.

So what can be learned from the past to inform the ever-evolving future? One of the key learnings is that bullying in the past has been defined and understood in a 'known' world, albeit one which has changed over the decades since the early 1970s, and which has differing cultural contexts. What has not changed during the first three waves of investigation into bullying is that it has occurred when individuals interacted in the 'real' world. The fourth wave has arrived in a new digital world: where there is a digital divide between adults and young people and where normative adolescent behaviour in terms of communicating through social networking services is still not established or known.

Bullying is currently conceived as a relationship problem (Pepler, Craig, Jiang & Connelly, 2008) where aggression operates in a social context and requires relationship solutions. These relationship problems have, up until now, operated overtly or covertly; face-to-face, or behind one's back in the physical dimension of a school, or on the way to or from school. The challenge for now and in the future is to define, understand and intervene in bullying in a changing and evolving technological environment, where individuals interact in a virtual dimension, through the use of technology, in a boundary-less and time-irrelevant space: cycling between school, home and cyberspace.

In the next issue of *Education Technology Solutions*, part two of this two-part article will report on the keynote addresses from Dr. Michele Ybarra, Dr. Barbara Spears and Professor Phillip Slee, and Professor Donna Cross, discussing the issues faced in capturing a universal understanding of cyberbullying. ■

A full list of references is available upon request to editorial@australianmediagroup.com.