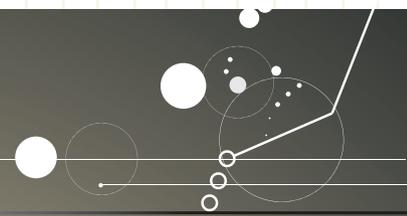




cyber chat



Using Technology to Enhance Wellbeing

By Dr. Barbara Spears

For more years than I care to remember, I have taught a course at university level called *Peers, Relationships and Health* which exposes pre-service teachers to the notion that relationships play an important role in encouraging marginalised youth to achieve success. In particular, this course focuses on the importance of understanding the impact of the peer social dynamic on individuals and groups, which can lead to healthy/unhealthy outcomes for our students.

Moving focus away from the curriculum (the what) or the pedagogical (the how) approaches to teaching and learning, and honing in on the children/young people and their developmental and social needs (the who), can cause a shift in perspective that is particularly pertinent in this current climate of NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) testing and accountability in terms of managing behaviour.

How can young people learn effectively to maximise their potential when they are conflicted, under stress, lonely, isolated, shy, aggressive, bullied, rejected, friendless? What impact do peers have on one's mental health and wellbeing and ability to learn and perform optimally? What can we learn from this field to inform our approaches to NAPLAN? These questions have been considered for a long time, and websites such as those from the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (<http://www.casel.org/>) and Response Ability (<http://www.responseability.org/site/index.cfm?display=21924>) provide a wealth of research, information and resources which support the importance of social and emotional learning programs for schools in terms of academic outcomes.

However, the BIG questions for contemporary educational and social settings, including the pre-service teachers in my course, are: how has technology

impacted on peers, relationships and therefore health and academic-related outcomes, and how is technology being used to enhance wellbeing in young people: the state of being healthy and happy? Whilst much is made of the negative impacts of technology on young people, technology is here to stay, so what contribution does it make to enhance young people's sense of themselves, their identities and their relationships?

The Inspire Foundation is one such organisation which seeks to make a positive contribution by using technology to enhance wellbeing. Through ReachOut.com (<http://au.reachout.com/>), its web-based presence offers information, support and resources to assist young people improve their understanding of mental health issues, develop resilience and increase their coping skills and help-seeking behaviour. It is anonymous, available 24/7 and therefore can reach those who may be geographically or socially isolated.

The Line (<http://www.theline.gov.au/>), a government-funded site, challenges young people to determine where 'the line' is for them and others to cross in relation to their relationships, so that they can determine what is okay and what is not. Respect for self and others is a fundamental premise behind this site, and encouraging young people to have respectful relationships is an important goal.

Kids Helpline (<http://www.kidshelp.com.au/teens/>) offers free online web and email counselling services for teens and children and the growth in the use of online counselling has been noted.

Young people and children are conducting their relationships seamlessly offline and online: they live, love, work, play and fight in cyberspace, flowing from one domain to the other and back again, in ways that the previous generations could never have imagined

and indeed find difficult to comprehend, thereby making any advice from this age group out of date and irrelevant to the ways contemporary relationships evolve. Technological environments then are akin to the 'Wild West', in terms of relationship skill development as well as general codes of conduct and behaviour, as the issues with rules and laws are only just emerging. Understanding how technology can enhance wellbeing in this fluid and dynamic environment is a challenge that must be addressed. Where is the line that must not be crossed when the relationship is conducted online? Does the current raft of self-help websites cater for the fact that the advice given is from the offline relationship perspective?

It is important that we understand the Internet and the convergence of technology, as both a system and setting in which we now all operate. A system in that it overlays the other dynamic systems we inhabit, providing a 'third dimension' encircling families, schools and workplaces. A setting in that it can operate entirely in isolation from these systems, when it is viewed merely as a communication medium.

Engaging technology to enhance wellbeing must take into account these theoretical accounts if young people are to be supported so that they develop satisfying relationships, and the skills to navigate their relationship journeys as they move between online and offline interactions. 

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