Case Study on the Impact of Technology on Incivility in Higher Education

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Abstract

A qualitative case study research design provided an in-depth perspective of the participants in relation to understanding the holistic impact technology has on the incivility of student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions in higher education. The conceptual framework by Twale and Deluca (2008), based upon Salin's (2003) proposed model for bullying, is detailed. Participants were doctoral students (n=17) who are full-time professionals in higher education. The participants were given open-ended questions regarding technology and incivility. Access and ethical considerations are detailed. Participants' detailed written responses were analyzed as outlined by Yin (2003). Four themes emerged from the data analysis; reported causes, reported outcomes, relationship types of participants, and ways to reduce technology's impact on incivility. Technology use and incivility in higher education are both increasing. This study is important in understanding the views of students and perceptions of the causes, impact, and ways to decrease incivility.

Keywords: Higher education, online education, qualitative research, case study research, holistic impact of online learning and teaching

INTRODUCTION

The study examined how technology is perceived to impact incivility in the higher education context for student-to-student and faculty-to-student interactions. Workplace incivility

has been described as "…low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect" (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457). This specific definition has been used widely (Blau & Andersson, 2005; Cortina et. al, 2001; Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001). As incivility in the workplace becomes an increasing problem (Buhler, 2003; Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001; Pearson & Porath, 2005) more research is being conducted on workplace incivility (Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006; Vickers, 2006). While incivility is on the rise and more national attention has been given to the topic, typically the focus is on adolescents rather than "…as an adult problem affecting adults" (Misawa & Rowland, 2015, p. 3).

Problem and Purpose of the Study

Workplace incivility negatively impacts workers, in this study higher education faculty and students, in many ways (Alexander-Snow, 2004; Ambrose, Huston, & Norman, 2005; Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Blau & Andersson, 2005; Cortina et al., 2001; Martin & Hine, 2005; Pearson & Porath, 2005; Salin, 2003, Settles, Cortina, Malley, & Stewart, 2006). Further, Holm, Torkelson, and Bäckström (2015) found that workplace incivility impacts job satisfaction. Higher education faculty members with lowered job satisfaction towards students have been found to have lower teaching effectiveness (Cranton & Knoop, 1991) which lowers the quality of education students receive. Students who perceive lowered quality of services provided by a university are less likely to persist and complete their education goals (House, 1999). Lim, Cortina, and Magley (2008) stated "Affective experiences at work have a strong influence on overall job satisfaction. Job satisfaction, in turn, drives judgment-driven behaviors, such as turnover" (p. 97). Faculty turnover (Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008) and student attrition (House, 1999) are costly to higher education institutions. Technology enhanced asynchronous

communication such as e-mail, text messaging, instant messaging, and use of social networking sites such as Facebook is an increasing method of communication between faculty and students. Faculty and students rely increasingly on technology to communicate. Kelly, Keaten, and Finch (2004) reported that students preferred asynchronous communication such as e-mail to face-to-face contact with faculty. Furthermore, workplace incivility is a growing problem (Buhler, 2003; Pearson et al., 2001; Pearson & Porath, 2005). With this in mind, the current study examined the impact technology has on the incivility of student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions in higher education. Technology based incivility that goes unmanaged may negatively impact the students, faculty, and higher education institutions. Understanding and effectively managing workplace incivility will aid in lessening those negative impacts. The purpose of the study is to provide an in-depth perspective of the participants to understand the holistic impact of technology on incivility in their interactions.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the paper is based upon Salin's (2003) proposed model for bullying. Twale and Deluca (2008) built upon the model to examine faculty in higher education. The framework for the study includes motivational structures, precipitating circumstances, and enabling structures that lead to workplace incivility. Based on a review of the literature, a specific model for the study looks at students and faculty in higher education as the context for incivility. Within that context, motivating structures are areas that support incivility, triggers are those factors that encourage the incivility, and enablers are those factors that allow the incivility to occur. Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the framework.

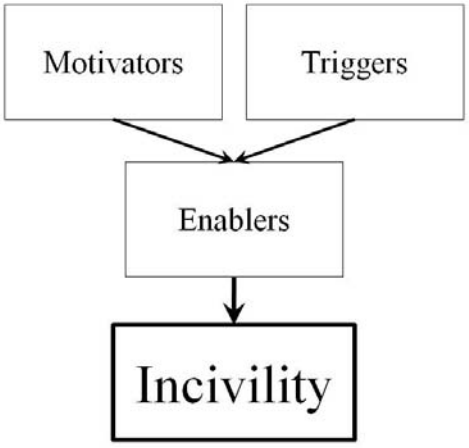

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of incivility based on "Incivility and information technology" (Salin, 2003)

An increase in technology use is creating an all day, every day platform for connectivity (Standlee, 2016). This hyperconnectivity is defined by Quan-Hass and Wellman (2006) as "…The availability of people for communication anywhere and anytime" (p. 285). Technology has provided a rich ground for behaviors that are not civil in many settings (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014). According to Vickers (2006) technology is a possible reason for the increase in incivility in the workplace by connecting people to work at all times (Vickers, 2006), therefore increasing stress. According to Dickerson (2006) cyberbullies use a variety of technology and "They blast professors and administrators… they mix in hateful attacks on our character, motivations, physical attributes, and intellectual abilities" (p.51). The definition of cyberbullying for this study will be recognized as any bullying behaviors that are conducted through the use of technology-based methods. Reeckman and Cannard (2009) stated: "Cyberbullying is more pervasive because the victims cannot easily escape and it can happen anywhere and at anytime, day or night" (p. 42).

Data Sources

Doctoral students (n=17) who are full-time professionals in higher education were given open-ended questions regarding technology and incivility. Participants responded in the form of telling stories of the experiences. In order to provide the most freedom for responding the participants were given the option of commenting on their own personal experience as students or as instructors. Some participants gave detailed examples from both perspectives. Detailed written responses became the text content that was analyzed. Purposive sampling was used in this study. Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen, & Kyngäs (2014) supported this sampling method and stated: "…purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative studies where the researcher is interested in informants who have the best knowledge concerning the research topic" (p. 4).

The sample of a study should contain participants who can best represent the research topic (Elo, et al., 2014) and "have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and puzzles which the researcher wishes to study" (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013, p. 78). When determining the sample size of a qualitative study, Elo et al. (2014) stated, "There is no commonly accepted sample size for qualitative studies because the optimal sample depends on the purpose of the study, research questions, and richness of the data." (p. 4). Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) call for the need to create guidelines for qualitative sample size selection to achieve saturation. Marshall (1996) stated that qualitative sample size must be appropriate for answering the research question(s) that guide the study.

Access

Participants were chosen because of their unique role as both doctoral students and faculty and/or administrators in higher education. Their active role in higher education and their

desire to participate helped with access to the study. The researchers previously knew the participants and we selected with purposive sampling. Purposive sampling method combined with the participants' interest in the topic created easy access to collect data from the participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics was considered because the role of one researcher is that of "instructor" to the participants. So that participants would feel they could share information confidentially, they were encouraged to change names, job titles, and workplace names. Participants' participation in the study was voluntary. No benefit or payment was provided for those who participated; likewise, no negative impact was incurred on those who chose not to. Willingness to participate in the topic area was overwhelming positive.

Data Collection

Participants were asked to give detailed written responses to the following question: "How do you feel technology has impacted the civility of student/student and student/faculty interactions?" Participants typed and emailed their responses in a "tell me a story" type response. No page requirement or limitation was provided, however, participants were encouraged to give in-depth details of the scenario(s). Responses were unpredictably rich, thorough narratives on personal experiences with workplace incivility. Storytelling has been used for rich data collection in the extant literature. Meyer (1995) collected stories from participants to examine organizational values. Davis (2007) who examined "...how storytelling can be used as a method of collecting authentic and revealing research data from children" (p. 169), used stories to prompt discussion from participants. However, our study asks participants to tell their story, which encourages each member to give rich, detailed data. The descriptive data received from

asking the participants to tell their story helped the researchers frame the findings within the context of the participants' perceptions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted as outlined by Yin (2003). The participants' responses were read in their entirety to get a holistic view of what they were trying to report. A researcher entered the responses into a qualitative software program, NVIVO 7. Organization and analysis of free nodes, tree nodes, and case nodes were conducted in NVIVO 7. Finally, themes emerged from the organized nodes. A second researcher printed the written responses and each sentence was viewed independently to be stand alone responses. Significant statements were pulled and then placed in groupings that emerged. Groups were examined and formed into themes. Emergent themes from both researchers were reviewed, compared, and contrasted. Researchers felt utilizing both forms of data analysis would aid in a well-rounded view of the data.

Results/Conclusions

Four themes emerged from the data analysis; reported causes, reported outcomes, relationship types of participants, and ways to reduce technology's impact on incivility. Within the themes, groups existed that were branches within the theme.

Theme 1: Reported causes of technology's impact on incivility.

The first theme that emerged was the participants' suggestion that technology impacts incivility. Participants cited three distinct areas; dependency, behaviors, and accessibility. These three areas are detailed below supported by examples of participant statements.

***Dependency*.** Dependency on technology has increased noticeably with students increased use of social network sites. Technology gives the opportunity to have a constant connection to email, instant messaging, and text messages. The increasing use and dependency

of technology in everyday communications has impacted behaviors and accessibility.

"We are becoming increasingly dependent on technology to communicate." - Participant

Behaviors. The extensive use of technology in communication had led to an increase in demand for immediate responses, the informality of communications, a decrease in personal interactions, and a gap between acceptable behaviors between face-to-face and technology correspondence.

The demand for immediate response was exemplified in a response from another student stating "students use email like synchronous communication." Further complaints on the pressures of being 'always available', an instructor wrote about switching from classroom to online classroom, "…I have noticed a difference in the students' expectations regarding grades and feedback. They want it NOW!" Another instructor vented, "…students expect instant e-mail responses, even on weekends, holiday breaks and late evenings", "when students do not get immediate responses, they continue sending emails until they get a response."

"Patience and politeness have given way to immediacy" - Participant

The informality of communications was described as an "informal atmosphere" that can "…encourage communications that can often stray into areas that are inappropriate". It was often explained that students can act "…in ways they would not, should the situation be face-to-face."

"It is so much easier to be rude to someone when you are not face-to-face" - Participant

Accessibility. Technology makes people more accessible and otherwise unreachable people reachable. Additionally, students are posting personal/inaccurate information about others on web pages, blogs, or other social networking sites. Technology accessibility also makes incivility easier by permitting contact without mutual consent, unlike face-to-face. Increased opportunity was described as "technology generally makes it easier to get in touch with people",

"with the increased use of technology, students also have increased opportunities to behave unethically…", and technology gives "…the student the opportunity to immediately vent". Participants also described a false sense of anonymity that technology offers, making people more likely to engage in uncivil behaviors.

> *"Technology has not made anyone more uncivil…but it has made incivility easier to do" - Participant*

Theme 2: Reported outcomes of technology induced incivility.

Reported outcomes of technology-induced incivility include disrespectful behaviors and socialization issues.

***Disrespectful behaviors*.** Disrespectful behaviors reported include; lack of privacy, challenging authority, rudeness, and lack of self-control. A student stated, in reference to a lack of privacy, "anyone can look up anyone's email address, phone number, office location, and background information" and "I have also heard of students… finding classmates' email addresses and constantly bothering them and their professor through email for missed notes or assignments." Participants described challenging authority as "checking emails in class", "posting embarrassing information about faculty on blogs, and disrespectful emails about "…not liking grades." Rudeness overshadows being "correct". For example, one instructor stated about a rude student, "his appeal was appropriate: however, the manner of his email communication was far from suitable." Lack of self-control was described as "…email can be a vehicle for student incivility when one is emotionally upset, frustrated and acts on impulse", "He felt he had the right to express himself and chose email as the medium to vent his frustrations."

> *"It is like road rage, in that one's feelings overcome any rational assessment of situations." - Participant*

Socialization. Socialization issues reported include noticeable decreases in social skills and social expectations. A decline in social skills was present in complaints of people using too casual or informal communication through technology such as lack of capitalization, proper sentence structures, use of slang shorthand, and lack of salutations. Participants reported that some peers could not talk face-to-face and used technology to communicate while in the same room. A complaint against the decline in social expectations stated technology is "redefining civility."

Theme 3: Relationship types and incivility.

Student-to-student incivility was reported in activities such as rude emails, text messages, and instant messages. More serious acts of incivility that led to stalking and invasion of privacy were also mentioned. For example, a male student used email to trick an administrator to give confidential information about the location of an internship of a female student.

> "The staff member interpreted his request as an instance of 'internal use' where schedule and class location information could be provided, since she knew he was another medical student. The staff person was fooled by his making this bogus request as an actual medical student and also without a face-to-face meeting where body language, voice tone, or other mannerisms, might have tipped off the lie".

Student-to-faculty incivility was also discussed. Varying situations such as "students posted untrue information about a faculty member on a popular blog site" and students emailing faculty and administrator very angry over grades were reported. One instructor further commented on this situation by stating "inappropriate web postings have the potential to

seriously damage careers and reputations."

Rude comments, inappropriate curse words, and the use of all capital letters were reported among all relationship types. Specific accounts included that the uncivil instigator used an "offensive tone". Another participant recalled an instigator would "…post scathing comments in all capital letters."

Theme 4: Ways to reduce technology's impact on incivility.

Lack of body language and tone of voice can also increase the chances of misunderstanding. One participant stated, "…emails or instant messages might be taken as offensive, even though the sender did not intend it." While technology can cause incivility through misunderstanding, there are ways to reduce the impact of technology on incivility.

"…online communications have great potential for misunderstanding." - Participant

Students stated that "ground rules" need to be set. A suggestion included, faculty placing a section in the course syllabus with ground rules for technology communication. Some basic rules may include typing with the same level of kindness as you would use face-to-face, being respectful of others varying viewpoints, or using literature to support opposing viewpoints rather than opinions. The student participant's suggestion of adding ground rules to the syllabus is supported by Galbraith and Jones (2010), "The most effective way of preventing acts of incivility in online courses is to detail in the course syllabus those behaviors that will not be acceptable (p. 5).

The need for training was echoed by participants who felt that people are taught socially acceptable ways to interact face-to-face, "perhaps college students have not been taught how to use technology in academic, formal, and professional ways…." On a more personal level, participants felt that positive encouragement and connecting as human beings would help. Online

classroom software such as Collaborate was suggested to help make this human connection, "Tools like Collaborate are very important…I believe that it is much easier to show uncivil behavior to a name on a screen. A face and a voice that go with the name help curb the impulse to say something inappropriate or rude." Most participants echoed the need to foster a community atmosphere that transcends from the classroom to include interaction utilizing technology.

"When we connect as human beings it becomes more difficult to be disrespectful or uncivil!" - Participant

CONCLUSIONS

Participants' responses focused on four major areas; reported causes, reported outcomes, relationship types, and suggestions for reducing technology based incivility among students and faculty members in higher education. Figure 2 depicts the four emergent themes along with the corresponding variables and is the supportive model of the study.

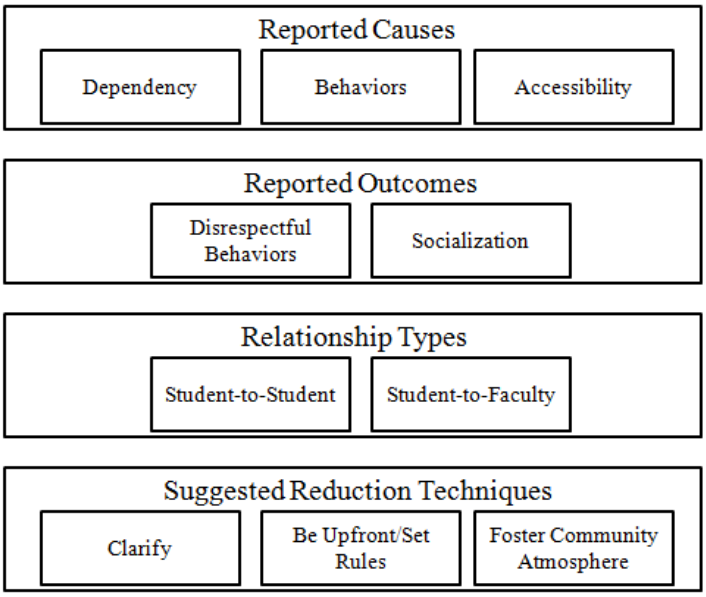

Figure 2. Model of four emergent themes and corresponding variables of the impact of technology on incivility in higher education.

Overall, many participants reported, "…the use of technology has increased incivility." One instructor stated, "I do believe that…technology has facilitated an increase in the frequency and type of incivility we observe in higher education due to the perceived lack of accountability for what is transmitted electronically." In contrast, one student stated, "In emails and instant messages, students can retract inappropriate words and comments that may have otherwise been spoken in face-to-face conversations."

Importance of the Study

Technology use and incivility in higher education are both increasing. Ribble and Miller (2013) stated: "Digital citizenship is a growing topic and concern for school leaders" (p. 141). Many students and instructors are under-prepared in technology communication etiquette. We believe that etiquette seminars will reduce the impact technology has on incivility in higher education. Reducing incivility could improve work culture leading to increased job satisfaction, job productivity, student retention, etc. Furthermore, legal implications can be devastating for both the participant and the institution. For example, many students and instructors feel a false sense of privacy in their technology communications which may facilitate incivility. One participant gives the following warning, "…students feel that the use of their email communication…is private…yet it truly is a time stamped, dated record of improper or "incivil" interactions." For example, if a student sends an uncivil email, that email is not just between the sender and recipient. The email can be forwarded, printed, and/or shared at any time. Further, emails have a date and time, therefore, if uncivil emails are repeatedly sent, these emails can be used to show bullying has taken place. Lastly, as Mason (2005) stated, "Data "deleted" from a computer hard drive is not destroyed" (p.777).

The study is important in understanding the views of students and instructors' perceptions of the causes, impacts, and ways to decrease incivility. Understanding these factors will help in the development of incivility training programs. While it is important to help the instigator find better ways to interact than uncivil behaviors, it is equally important to help potential targets understand how to cope, respond, and minimize uncivil behaviors. This study, specifically the inquiry of perceptions of causes and impacts of incivility, offers the potential to help in shaping future research and conversations about ways to empower people to successfully navigate uncivil incidents in the workplace.

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