Bullying and Mobbing in Academe: Challenges for Distance Education and Social Media Applications

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ABSTRACT

Bullying and mobbing are migrating to online realms, intensifying the damage involved and increasing the complexities of these issues. Social media (such as Facebook and Twitter) are intensely communal in many senses; they may serve to increase the negative aspects of bullying and mobbing as well as provide community-oriented tools for mitigation. Academic environments such as distance education also introduce intricate dimensions to these concerns, especially involving online freedom of speech and privacy issues. Younger individuals in academic realms may not be aware of the power of words and images to harm, especially in seemingly playful online contexts. Higher education institutions are legally and morally constrained in terms of student and employee privacy and free speech, which can make it difficult to protect victims and control the dissemination of often-damaging information. Many social media platforms allow for the surveillance and recording of incidents of bullying and mobbing, enabling some mitigation and disciplinary efforts. However, these capabilities also increase the responsibilities of administrators, faculty, and staff in dealing with bullying and mobbing, as well as their legal liabilities.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying and mobbing are disturbing social phenomena with long histories. They seem out-of-place in renowned academic institutions and modern online environments. However, as outlined in this article, they are flourishing along with other forms of incivility (Twale & De Luca, 2008). This article provides a critical analysis of bullying and mobbing in the context of distance education and social media applications in higher education. Although the very notion of "bullying" is very common its definitions and instantiations can vary, often leading to delays in organizational response (**Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007;** Salin, 2003; WI, 2009). Einarsen and Skogstad (1996) define bullying as "harassment, badgering, niggling, freezing out, offending someone repeatedly over a period of time, and the person confronted . . . [can have] difficulties defending him/herself" (p. 191), adding that the incidents involved in bullying are not isolated events but part of larger patterns of behavior. Einaren and Skogstad incorporate the factor of power differences to the mix, and contend that behaviors do not constitute bullying if the parties involved have comparable strength and power in the relevant organizational setting.

Adding the component of motivation to these definitions of bullying produces the following: bullying occurs when demeaning gestures and comments, personal attacks, inappropriate representations, social ostracism and neglect, and other means of demoralizing individuals are levied over a significant period of time with the major motivation to bolster the ego of the bully and/or enhance the functioning of the group. In "mobbing," group members in the social arena recognize a level of personal gain from bullying and join in the ostracisms or attacks or allow them to proceed when they have some power to stop them. The effects of mobbing can be intense on the parties involved: Leymann (1990) provided a pioneering analysis of mobbing that linked it to psychological "terror." In the short run, mobbers can gain in terms of personal and professional status; in the long run, they do not benefit

from mobbing, as capable organizational participants choose to leave the setting or as other forms of disruption ensue.

The term "cyberbully" emerged in the 1990s as incidents of online harassment and misrepresentation increased in number and variety, along with various misconceptions and myths about these phenomena (Shariff & Churchill, 2010). Cyberbullying (both of young people and adults), became a major factor in public discourse on the Internet in the past decade as social media emerged in prominence (Shariff, 2009). Social media are online platforms and venues that allow for significant input on the part of participants; they include Facebook, Myspace, Flickr, Linkedin, Wikimedia, Youtube, and Twitter, as well as weblogs. Distance education classrooms (run with Desire2Learn, Blackboard, or other platform as infrastructure) often incorporate aspects of social media, requiring participants to interact with each other and provide multimodal input (Oravec, 2003). Growing numbers of faculty members incorporate aspects of blogging or other social media use into traditional, face-to-face classroom settings. Since many social media can also be accessed through mobile devices, the apparatus for bullying is thus literally close at hand. Cell phone cameras have also played a role in bullying, with the digital images of victims taken in locker rooms or other settings distorted and placed online in social media for the purpose of public ridicule (Miranda, 2005).

Some social media platforms are explicitly linked to bullying in higher education contexts, openly encouraging gossip and the destruction of reputations. For example, the social media platform "Juicy Campus" was explicitly designated as a vehicle for spreading rumours relating to individuals in particular colleges and universities (O'Neil, 2008). It was investigated by the State of New Jersey for potential consumer fraud (Young, 2008) since it may have contained false statements about various classes. Although Juicy Campus ceased operations in 2009 it has been replaced with a large assortment of comparable online venues. Social media that openly rate and often mock particular faculty members are also expanding in influence (Chaney, 2011; Stuber *et al.*, 2009); for instance, students who have problems with particular professors can vent their grievances in public online forums with little or

no way for their targets to respond. Such websites are off-campus entities protected by free speech rights (King, 2010), although they may have considerable on-campus influences.

BULLYING AND MOBBING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Incidents of bullying and mobbing are becoming well documented in a number of higher education settings, including academic libraries. In "Workplace Mobbing: A Discussion for Librarians," Hecker (2007) describes mobbing as something that "occurs in libraries but is usually unrecognized and unchecked because the phenomenon has not been described and given a name" (p. 439). Other higher education workplaces have been described as sites of mobbing, including nursing education departments (Kennedy, 2011; Kolanko *et al.*, 2006; Luparell, 2011), community colleges (Lester, 2009), information technology centers (Morales, 2004), and various academic services (Thomson, 2010). Bullying and mobbing are especially damaging in academic contexts because of the very nature of intellectual activity. These behaviors are often directed toward those who express innovative ideas and perspectives, which makes their effects upon academic interaction particularly detrimental (Westhues, 2005). Many individuals find it hard to believe that bullying and mobbing can occur in such distinguished settings as those found in higher education, so these negative behaviors can continue unchecked.

The problem of bullying and mobbing in social media realms is expanding in importance for higher education administrators, although much more of the attention of researchers is devoted to schools and the K-12 level (Coleyshaw, 2010; Keashly & Neuman, 2010). Online bullying incidents have been linked to the suicides of undergraduates (Cloud, 2011). These include the 2010 suicide of Rutgers student Tyler Clementi (Perez-Pena & Schweber, 2011). Clementi's roommate, who allegedly arranged a web-cam feed of dorm room sexual activity, was arraigned in 2011 for his involvement. Hutton (2006) documents the social and economic costs of workplace incivility and bullying, which sometimes results in deaths from physical attacks and stress. McMullen (2011) describes bullying incidents as deeply af-

fecting the reputations of higher education organizations. Lovell & Lee (2011) outline the negative implications of bullying and mobbing for mental and physical well-being, factors that can also lead to economic pain for organizations. Mobbing incidents in a particular institutional entity have also been linked to a lessening of organizational commitment in the entity's employees (Tengilimoğlu, Mansur, & Dziegielewski, 2010); rather than unifying employees (as they may appear to do at first), the mobbing incidents serve to make employees more distant from the organization and each other. Holt and Lukianoff (2010) outline how colleges may even be required to prevent bullying by their various stakeholders as well as by law enforcement. The strong moral arguments for the support of those who are being bullied and mobbed also provide justification for administrators' efforts in this regard (Dawson, 2005). Bullying and mobbing can affect the very meaning of work for those who are victimized (MacIntosh, *et al.*, 2010), lessening the quality of life.

Changes in the climate of higher education itself may be linked to some bullying incidents. Twale and De Luca (2008) write of the "rise of the academic bully culture" in which opportunism and social ineptitude does not support civility in intellectual interactions. Such behaviors, considered individually, often appear to be insignificant. However, considered in context and combined with other inappropriate behaviors they can have direct impacts on the quality of instructional experience for students, as demonstrated in this narrative from a junior faculty member:

> I kept asking my mentor for help in dealing with an evening class of graduate students who were clearly indignant to me *during* class. But she clearly was not going to back me up on anything. I found out later that my mentor actually orchestrated the behavior of the class.

Twale and De Luca (2008), pp. 53-54

Bully cultures can flourish when support for victims is lacking and no one intervenes in the early stages of bullying. Faculty members who do not work together and have the opportunity to establish emotional ties may not be as involved in the support of bullied colleagues. For faculty members without tenure, their own job security may be a factor in their responses to bullying (Gravois, 2006). They may not have the institutional resources to support colleagues who are being bullied or mobbed, so the increase in non-tenure track adjunct positions in many higher educational institutions may be a factor in the rise in incidents of these phenomena.

Some educational administrators themselves may be considered (sometimes unfairly) as bullies or as participants in mobbing (Westhues, 2005). The notion that bullying somehow improves the classroom or work environment by making administrations seem tougher still circulates in some higher education institutions (Westhues, 2005). Bullying still has strong associations with leadership, with many administrators portrayed in movies, television shows, and other dramatic venues as using fear and coercion as motivating factors. However, research in organizational systems demonstrates that such negative emotions as fear do not result in better work or learning outcomes, as outlined in the quality principles of W. Edwards Deming (2000). School principals have often been warned by their professional organizations and in their training about the effects that power imbalances can have in the insulated working environments that schools provide (Blasé & Blasé, 2004), giving them the means to inflict psychological pain upon subordinates. However, bullying and mobbing can emerge even without vast power imbalances, as in reported cases of teacher-on-teacher bullying (Matheny, 2010).

Online bullying incidents have already become a factor for academic administration (Babbitt & Rinehart, 2010). In the near future, higher educational administrators will have few excuses for why they did not work to mitigate the problem of online bullying and mobbing in their institutions. A number of administrative theorists are projecting that within the decade organizational leaders will be required to blog and participate in other social media venues on a regular basis as part of their regular responsibilities (Salopek, 2010); even US President Barack Obama conducted a "Twitter Town Hall" (Shear, 2011). Leaders engaged in online interaction may thus observe bullying behavior firsthand in their own

online media efforts, for instance, noticing that venomous remarks that are made over time are escalating in chat room or blog exchanges. They may also receive early warning signals online from other members of their institutions, thus providing them with little justification for not dealing with the bullying or mobbing.

DEALING WITH THE ONLINE BULLY

Research on case reports shows that bullying typically is a "long-lasting phenomenon that 'wears down' its victims" and often takes more than a year (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007). Bullies themselves are often "serial bullies," having more than one victim either in sequence or simultaneously (Chan, 2006). Bullies, as well as victims, can have suicidal ideation and behavior (Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2011). The kinds of behavior associated with bullying are seldom if ever warranted, but especially not when primarily linked to the bully's or group's own needs. The need for bullies to express power or be associated with the expression of power has been explored (Carter, 2011). Perlmutter (2010) outlines some of the complex rules of bullying in relation to the power structure of higher education departments:

> Bullies never reform; only in inspirational movies do they have a change of heart. If you can't avoid them, the most direct form of protection is to put yourself under the aegis of someone the bully does fear. It is one of the most important yet unwritten duties, for example, of a department chair to protect students and junior professors from **bullying** of any kind. A similar role should exist for the head of the promotion-and-tenure committee. Ideally, senior scholars should converge to defend the juniors when they are put upon by a supervillain. Alas, the ideal is not always the reality. Timid chairs may not feel like "interfering."
>
> Perlmutter, 2010, p. 38

In academic settings, those who are deemed as being bullied are often banned from campus (Bradley, 2007). Banning a bully whose harassment has been conducted in online venues (venues often not controlled by the institution) is a more difficult undertaking. Getting to the stage where a bully's behavior has been documented, the bully has been given due notice of campus policies, and in which administrators have acted to remove the individual either physically or virtually can be a lengthy struggle. Witnesses are needed to provide context for the situation and are often difficult to obtain, despite the fact that many individuals may have observed the matter at hand. In a declining economy, this syndrome is especially apparent; few people will risk their own careers to help a target, particularly in a complex and uncertain situation. Witnesses can fear retaliation for their intervention. However, some bullying cases may be so severe as to bring in law enforcement (Trump, 2011), so the notion of understanding how and why bystanders should be capable witnesses and reporters of bullying incidents must be communicated to everyone involved on campus.

Administrators would certainly find information as to what attracts bullies to particular victims of value in both prevention and mitigation efforts. Research is providing some clues, but often the circumstances are so multifaceted as not to provide straightforward explanations. Overweight children and adults are often singled out by bullies ("Obesity increases odds," 2010). Gender is sometimes a factor, although it is complex; girls are often bullied by other girls, and the syndrome of women bullying other women is also common (Billitteri, 2010). Although Hindujn and Patchin (2008) did not find race and gender to be significant factors in either the probability that an adolescent would be a cyberbully or the victim of one, they did find that proficiency and time spent online were indeed significant; adolescents who spent a great deal of time online often became drawn into bullying syndromes. Hate speech and harassment of various sorts has been a part of Internet interactions for a number of years, from the early days of chatrooms and list-servs (Oravec, 2000); research on the evolution of online hate-related phenomena can be of use in understanding bullying and mobbing.

Many participants in online bullying and mobbing cases are young adults who may not under-

stand the full gravity of harassment, misrepresentation, or other forms of participation. They are being faced with a confusing and time consuming assortment of issues as they establish their social and intellectual lives online. For example, social media such as Facebook are exposing students to complex privacy concerns as they balance the needs for social contact with requirements for the release of information (Brandtzæg, Luders, & Skjetne, 2010). Student breakups and other romantic troubles can be broadcast quickly online, and potential stalking and harassment may ensue because of the surveillance-related capacities of social media (Tokunaga, 2011). Higher educational institutions have often been assigned some roles of responsibility for the well-being of young people, especially when they are living in on-campus housing (O'Neil, 2008), so higher educational administrators will not be able to avoid dealing with these concerns even if the social media involved are not directly provided by their campuses.

Systems approaches to bullying and mobbing can help by mapping the various parties and influences involved (Lee, 2011). It takes moral courage to expose the bullying "system": many profit from this abuse, because it identifies and punishes those who are "different" (which is very dangerous in institutional contexts). Many institutions have developed bullying policies that are designed for face-to-face interactions. There are serious questions, however, about how to handle online bullying and mobbing incidents (along with other online transgressions). Simpson (2011) and others have proposed that some online social problems be handled in virtual realms, and not brought into real-world, face-to-face venues. In the decades to come, societal consensus may emerge as to whether the online realm should be segregated from the face-to-face one in this or other ways (Oravec, 1996).

VICTIMHOOD, LEARNED HELPLESSNESS, AND CYNICISM

Administrators, faculty, staff, and students need to proactive in dealing with bullying and mobbing. However, higher education also emphasizes the building of resiliency and strength of character despite the odds (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004).

The notion of labeling someone as a victim (or self-labeling) can seem counter to this mission. It may make individuals look "weak" to ask for help themselves or be concerned for others in this regard. However, establishing sound support structures for victims of bullying can serve to mitigate the effects of bullying and reduce the time it takes for the entire system to heal. Vickers (2010) shows how victims begin to produce various social performances in their often-futile attempts to normalize their working relationships during and after bullying incidents. Such performances, and the energy taken to engage in them, take away from productive organizational activity.

Bullying and mobbing are often linked to increased levels of stress as well as "learned helplessness:" the victim soon learns that little is going to be done about the bullying and mobbing, and that he/she will find it increasingly difficult to be effective in the workplace, school, or other social venue. Personal health issues can emerge in these scenarios with the increased stress, especially with middle-aged employees (Hansen, Hogh, & Persson, 2011; Helkavaara, Saastamoinen, & Lahelma, 2011). Cynicism is also a major by-product (of everyone involved) as administrators appear to be out-of-touch with what is going on. The following narrative from Twale and De Luca (2008) exhibits how even well-meaning academic participants can be worn down by bullying and made less capable of countering effectively a bully culture:

> In the meantime, I do my job. I work well with the other profs in my department. I am trying to make inroads into another department and at other institutions. In general it is a pleasant place to work. But I make statements as the conscience of the group. I don't try to anger anyone. There isn't too much you can do. You get passive. You can't make yourself sick over it.

Twale and De Luca, 2008, p. 163

Bullying is seldom an isolated struggle between two people; other individuals (students, faculty, and staff) generally know about the bullying,

whether because resources are being denied to the victim or the bully is sending signals directly to them that the target is "not right" (Westhues, 2005). These bullying and mobbing incidents often provide "teachable moments" for administrators that can illuminate a variety of critical concerns if addressed quickly and with adequate resources. Lack of response can foster the kinds of cynicism and lack of energy portrayed in the narrative above. Social media add complexities to the situation, allowing participants and observers to be part of the situation while not physically proximate. Social media also provide more tools for invasion of the victim's terrain as well as empower bullies to enlist others in venues distant from the victim.

How can administrators respond to these matters, and not act the role of the "victim" or the "savior"? There is indeed growing contempt for "victim-style" thinking in the US, which can forestall discussion of bullying and mobbing and how the system itself supports them. Administrators generally want to reduce the "drama" in our workplaces and schools. However, administrators need to prevent the growth of cultures that create a conducive environment for bullies, in which the bullies are perceived as "winners." A systems approach is required; administrators need to look at the entire system (including its online and offline dimensions), and understand how the system may support bullying. Bullying and mobbing create fear, and put everyone "on edge;" people are happy if the bully passes them by. People are suspicious of each other, and look for any positive sign from administrators. Very useful social media tools can be tainted and changed in character by bullying and mobbing, and administrators can work to ensure that these tools will be used for solid academic and purposes.

SOME CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Focus on bullying and mobbing has increased dramatically: in the *Journal of Psychohistory*, Dervin (2010) labeled 2010 as "The Year of the Bully" because of the many shocking incidents involving young people, many of which incorporated some online media component. Although many adults exhibit bullying and mobbing be-havior, a number of these behavioral patterns begin in childhood. Individuals learn how to bully or be a part of a mob from the schoolyard. The literature on childhood bullying can be of help for adults who are attempting to counter the effects of bullying and mobbing on their organizations (Danby & Osvaldsson, 2011). Shariff (2009) develops themes from *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1959) as ways of clarifying the moral dilemmas that are faced by educators dealing with bullies and mobs in cyberspace; with little guidance and structure, some individuals indeed adopt primitive ways of dealing with human relations.

Education, rather than criminal sanctions, has often been promoted as a strategy to deal with bullying and mobbing in the realm of online media (Currie, 2010; Meredith, 2010). Often, organizations have policies concerning bullying and related behaviors but the policies are not well explained or widely disseminated (Cowan, 2011; WI, 2009). Generic campus policies about personal safety and harassment are not adequate; policies must face openly the new factor of social media. For example, organizational participants need to be informed of the kinds of monitoring that will be conducted of their online activities (Maryott, 2010). They also need some clarity as to how their activities in social media venues that are not controlled by their institutions (such as Facebook or Twitter) will affect their on-campus lives. Educational efforts can help to bridge the gap between mere statements of policy and active understanding and compliance. Forming an "ombudsperson" or advocacy office specially skilled in this arena can also be a part of a solution (Miller, 2010; Morse, 2010). In the early stages of recognition of bullying and mobbing problems, self-help books have often been of use (such as Namie & Namie, 2010), along with a number of online support groups (Osvaldsson, 2011). These books and support groups can assist victims in understanding the various stages of bullying and mobbing from real-life examples of comparable cases. The after-bullying adjustment period is especially critical, as the victim tries to regain his or her former status and return to normal activity (Matsunaga, 2011); counseling can be of help for everyone involved. The strategy of establishing "bully-free zones" (along with various promotional efforts) has also been effective in some educational contexts. Cowie and Col-

liety (2010) recommend that educational institutions engage in "preventing and reducing cyberbullying through a process of awareness-raising, the education of the emotions and active participation" (p. 261). Organizational participants can be encouraged to be supportive yet critical of each other (while attempting to achieve lofty educational goals), and listen for clues that they are pushing each other too hard.

Ridding organizations of bullying and mobbing has indeed become more complex because of social media. Instructors of distance education classes, with many responsibilities and large numbers of students, will have even more to handle. Social media often provide some form of documentation that bullying is occurring; however, this material can also demonstrate when administrators became aware of the bullying and mobbing and what they did to mitigate the situation. Watching out for bullying and mobbing can involve a complex process of balancing concerns for free speech rights with the need to protect individuals from harassment and reputational attacks. As previously discussed, some theorists have pointed to a rise in bullying in academic settings linked to broad cultural changes in academe.   Social media themselves have also served to alter campus climate, adding new dimensions to the social component of higher educational institutions and making community-based solutions to these issues more feasible.

Bullying and mobbing are ancient in their origins but are migrating to very modern online realms in higher education. Academic administrators should not be afraid to ask whether bullying or mobbing are occurring either in workplace or classroom settings. They may increasingly be required to do so because of their professional liability (Koonin & Green, 2004).   Increasingly, effective support is available for those who are being bullied and for those who aim to stop bullying. Preventive efforts to stop bullying and mobbing before they start are often the most effective overall strategies. By talking and asking questions, academic administrators can blunt the attacks of bullies and can prevent mobs from forming in their institutions.

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