

SEXTING AND CYBERBULLYING:  
ADDRESSING THE EMERGENT RISK AND OPPORTUNITIES OF A CONNECTED  
WORLD

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Abstract

Connected social technologies such as texting and Facebook have greatly changed the pedagogical and management environment for middle level educators. This paper addresses the social motivations and opportunities that these technologies provide as well as how to mitigate associated risks. Current Brain research and best practice are addressed.

Sexting and CyberBullying: Addressing the Emergent Risk and Opportunities of a Connected World

The opportunities for today's child are vastly different than just a single generation ago. A typical student has near immediate access to any fact ever written down, any speech ever recorded, and any work of art ever produced. They can speak to, and collaborate with, nearly anyone in any country. They can publish their own writing, music, and video to a worldwide audience. The increase in connectivity between this generation and last is so vast and happened so quickly that it is difficult to appreciate the magnitude of this paradigm shift. But this great opportunity comes at an equally great cost.

In addition to readily accessible facts, the Internet also brings falsities, urban legends, and outright lies to the hands of our students. And while they can listen to any audio and look at any work of art, there is unprecedented access to hard-core pornography for our children (Greenfield, 2004). The opportunity to publish and have a truly global voice comes at the cost of exposing personal information and risks of identity theft and child abduction. Increased communication has produced new risks such as sexting and cyber-bullying. The middle level child is particularly at risk regarding these technology-based risks (ISTTF, 2008)

The prevalence of discipline incidents involving technology in schools is dramatically on the rise (NCES, 2008). Our current practice in schools is to ban access to cell phones, social networks, and other interpersonal technologies. We filter their Internet experience from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm and then send them home to unfettered access to the web in their homes and on their phones. We provide

students no guidelines or modeling of what an effective and appropriate online presence is. Many schools have abdicated their responsibility to prepare students for the future by clinging to a model for learning that is rooted in practices developed decades before the digital opportunities of the connected world. Best practice demands that we not only prepare our students for the world that they will live in, it requires that we adapt these technologies to improve our own classrooms.

We have not done well by our digitally native children in this highly connected world. I would argue that the data enabled cell phone is the most influential and powerful device ever constructed. The potential access to information and people is nearly unlimited. The ability of this generation to publish, interact, and experience while being mobile is exponentially massive compared to previous generations. We have put the most powerful device ever created by mankind into very small hands with little more supervision than a general plea to “be careful.” The educational community has a moral obligation to provide the youth in their charge the skill set and self-advocacy necessary to be safely productive in this environment.

The Internet is not simply a trendy convenience. It has fundamentally altered the human experience. The problems for educators associated with mobile connectivity will not dissipate anytime soon. In fact, by the close of 2008, mobile subscriptions outnumber land-based phone lines three to one (ITU, 2009). The relatively low cost and high efficiency of portable technologies has increased their density into developing countries and less affluent areas in developed nations (ITU,

2009). The digital divide is starting to close and those that have mastered the safe use of these emergent technologies will stand ready for the world developing in front of us. Best practice demands that we not only prepare our students for the world that they will live in, it requires that we adapt these technologies to improve our own classrooms. Beyond this, we must understand the adolescent motivation and mindset in the online world.

*Why are you texting her – she's standing right next to you!*

The reason that adolescents are drawn to digital communications such as texting and social networking sites is rooted in adolescent brain development. The prefrontal cortex of the brain is responsible for executive thought. It's where we make predictions, execute judgment, and rationalize decisions. Until recently, little was known about the adolescent brain. We now know that the teenage brain is not simply that of a little adult. In fact, the prefrontal cortex does not fully mature until humans are into their twenties (Giedd, 2004). This means that it is not only the lack of life experience that mitigates the adolescent's judgment; it is the physiology of their brain. Adolescents do not have the fully realized capability of predictive, rationale thought. Parents and educators have always known that teenagers think they are invincible and now we know why.

Walk into any school or mall and you will often see students engaged in using their phones to send messages to people that are sitting nearby. Texting is powerful because it removes all of the social cues associated with conversation. When people talk to one another, there are various social indicators that occur such as non-verbal

cues including where the other person is looking and facial expressions. People also have self-reflective considerations such as, is the other person listening, do I look OK, and is there something on my teeth? For teenagers, where self-esteem and self-confidence may be tenuous, texting allows for communicating without all of these social cues.

To give you some idea of the power of this type of communication, imagine if you could talk this way. When you said something, the words appeared in a little word bubble, like in a comic strip, where you could preview your statement before you put your foot in your mouth. It is an empowering ability. Teens are naturally drawn to this type of communication because of the opportunity to self-edit. They can make themselves sound funnier, smarter, or more interesting. Additionally, texting has a social component to it in that texters have a common vernacular of abbreviated speech. Participating in texting is being accepted in a social group with its own norms and accepted behaviors.

While the writing teachers of the world bemoan the loss of writing skills in our youth, the fact is that this generation is writing more than previous generation. The number of text messages and blog postings by teens represents an enormous tendency to the written word. The fact that it is not in the form or intention that we desire does not mitigate the fact that this is a writing generation. There is a convenience to texting that is often ignored by the adult world. Our youth have capitalized on the convenience and exploited the lack of negative social feedback to become the most socially connected generation in history. One hundred years ago,

people were influenced by what they could come in physical contact such as the books they could read and the people they could meet. The phone increased our ability to talk to people in other geographic areas and the television allowed us to witness happenings in the rest of the world. But the Internet allows for this generation to interact with the rest of humanity. Our students' lives have no boundaries but our classrooms continue to hold onto the brick and mortar constructs of period driven subjects.

The density of Internet connectivity brings massive opportunity for schools. Having observed hundreds of classroom discussions over the past two decades, most are dominated by the academically or socially strong. Students with poor self esteem or low academic ability will not participate in class discussions even with a master-level teacher facilitating the process. But there are technologies available now that allow all students to contribute via an anonymous text. The shy student and social pariah can actively contribute to a classroom discussion even on controversial topics using technology to remove social barriers to participation.

Some educators argue that this process is a crutch because enabling the student to share anonymously does not teach them how to advocate for themselves and speak as they will need to when they are out of school. I argue that the child will never know she has something valuable to share unless we are able to help her speak. When in the current system do the socially marginalized children get their chance? The traditional system favors those who are intelligent and socially adept. Even if a student has exceptional intelligence, negative social interactions can

destroy a child's ability to interact. Schools often fall into caste-like systems separating children because of race, disability, gender issues, acne, weight, size, income, hair color or any number of focal points that speak to identity. Technology in the hands of a master teacher gives us the ability to level the playing field so that the social cast off has a voice. As children grow to understand the value of their own contributions, the need for the shield of anonymity these technologies can provide will reduce.

But there is a massive return swing of this pendulum of opportunity. Just as technology can foster positive communication, the removal of social cues also enables people to push violent, hateful, and sexual communications more frequently. I first became aware of this phenomenon in the early days of instant messaging. A computer teacher had discovered two sixth grade girls, both honors students, using an instant messaging program to send messages to each other during a computer class. These girls had no history of problematic behavior and were model students in all respects. These girls were young sixth graders and seemed more interested in cartoons than boys. The transcript of the conversation that the girls were engaged in during their instant messaging discussion was peppered with all kinds of language that violated the student handbook. In particular, the word "fuck" or its abbreviation was used dozens of times. The girls were very embarrassed when shown the transcript of the conversation. Both girls claimed to have never actually said the word out loud but they thought it was OK to say it on the computer.

*Cyberbullying*

Sometimes negative social cues serve a valuable purpose and their removal has emboldened a whole generation of cyber bullies and hate mongers. There is the teenage girl who was harassed to the point of suicide by an adult (Steinhauer, 2008). The number of news stories and police reports published about technology-enhanced harassment is growing rapidly (ISSTTF, 2008). This phenomenon is not limited to the adults. Anyone who has been in public education for more than a decade has experienced the curious situation where a scathing email is followed up by a rather meek personal conference. People feel empowered when the immediate social feedback is removed. In the case of adolescences where there is a biological lack of judgment from the start, the consequences can be dire.

Instead of the stereotypical physically dominate bully, we have created an entire new iteration of tormentor. Anyone with access to a computer or cell phone can wage a campaign of terror from behind the electronic screen. Cyberbullying, or electronic harassment, is more damaging than traditional bullying in two ways. One, it is more permanent. If someone says something mean or starts a rumor, it's temporal. It's only around as long as people are talking about it. It can be very hurtful and it can be serious but eventually, the words can be forgotten or at least the intensity can decrease. But if the cyber-bully makes a Facebook page harassing someone, that's permanent. More and more people can join and it just gets bigger and bigger. Two, electronic harassment can occur everywhere, anytime. Some children just cannot escape the bombardment of emails, texts, and status updates. It comes through their phone, through

their friend's phone, through social networks, emails, and posted videos... We've enabled the bully twenty-four hour access.

However, this also means there is a potential for better records of harassment. There are electronic paper trails and time-stamps that can catch bullies and provide legal recourse to parents and schools in their efforts to curtail this behavior. In order to stem the growing cyber-based bully, we must foster relationships with children that provide safe places for reporting abuse and admitting wrongdoing. Students make mistakes and we must enable the middle level child an opportunity for growth. Counselors, teachers, and principals must be aware of technology trends and new capacities so that we are better able to help children protect themselves.

### *Sexting*

Sexting is the transmission of sexual-based information from one portable device to another (Brown, et. al. 2009). While sexting is a new phenomenon, it should come as no surprise. We have given our teen population these incredibly powerful and portable social devices at a time when their biological lack of self-regulation is coupled with their emergent sexuality. While there are individual sexual deviants among our adolescents, a majority of the cases I investigated as a principal and technology coordinator involved young people making poor choices, not criminal intention.

We forget that young love is powerful. We tend to call it puppy love or a crush but doing so trivializes the real passion involved. A one-year relationship for a 40 year old represents just over two percent of a person's life but a six month relationship for a 14 year old is almost four percent. They also don't have the

breadth of experience to squelch their expectations for happiness and success.

When two adolescents are in love, it can be an extremely powerful and consuming relationship. When we consider this intense romantic connection in the context of their biological limits on executive thought and self-regulation and we can start to see the foundation of the problem. Additionally, sexting allows for young people to engage in sexual activity while maintaining personal vows of chastity and public service announcements calling for safe sex.

We have not done too well to keep up with these latest technologies and their integration into the fabric of our children's lives. When parents feel a child needs punished for something, the cell phone or the computer is the first thing to go. In my experience as a principal, parents do not ground their children anymore in the traditional method of sending the youth offender to his or her room. Because our youth are so connected with cell phones, gaming systems and laptops, isolating them physically just isn't enough of a punishment anymore. It is not that children should not have consequences for their mistakes, but we need to put things in context.

Imagine you go out to your car and there is a parking ticket on the windshield because you parked in front of a fire hydrant. Maybe you did it by accident or maybe you did it on purpose because you were in a hurry. Instead of a \$25 fine, the ticket indicates that you must give up the ability to talk for six months. You must relinquish your preferred form of communication for a period of a half-year for the trivial offense of parking illegally. Ridiculous? This is the equivalent of

what parents do when we take away a child's cell phone for six months because he got a "D" on a math quiz. It is not that cell phones and the like cannot be part of the consequences for poor behavior. In fact, when the behavior in question is involving these technologies, it makes perfect sense. We need to be reasonable and give the child an opportunity to not make a future mistake. If the child loses their cell phone forever because they went over their allotment of minutes, he never gets the chance to show he can use the phone properly.

But there is a more significant problem associated with our tendency to over-react. Most students treat their cell phone as an extension of who they are. For many children, it is their primary form of communication. Therefore, if they ever receive a sexual proposition, naked picture, or graphic sexual story on their phone, they tell no one. After my time in the public school system, I believe that we currently have a generation of young people who have been exposed to things that they did not want to see and they have not reported their abuse for fear of losing their phone or computer.

A principal colleague of mine shared a story about a twelve-year-old boy who had quite suddenly started earning very low grades and exhibiting poor behavior. The principal and counselor worked for weeks to try and uncover the source of the changed behavior. They feared that the child might be the victim of sexual abuse but they had no evidence. In the end, the child revealed that he had not been sleeping well. He had received a text message that claimed to be from a ghost. The text message was from a number he did not recognize. It claimed to be from a boy who

had been killed by his father at the foot of his bed at 2:00 am one year ago. The message said that if the recipient did not forward the message on to six other people, that the ghost boy would show up at 2:00 am and kill him.

Now to a discerning adult, the idea of a ghost with a cell phone with a texting plan is comical at best. But to an impressionable twelve-year-old who was rightly told never to forward text messages, this situation brought the young man intense personal stress. He had told no one about the text message because he did not want to have his cell phone taken away as it had been in the past. Even though he said he did not believe in ghosts, he could not fall asleep until after 2:00 am. In my experience, this situation is not the exception. I have dealt with young girls who had been harassed by older boys, boys who had their picture taken in the locker room and forwarded to girls, and even a young boy who was being terrorized by his older brother's friends for a period of months. None of these children told a responsible adult because of our tendency to overreact. Our lack of understanding of the online phenomenon is only outdone by our lack of presence in the online world itself.

### *The New Frontier*

There is a reason that online social networks have devolved into unsafe playgrounds of illicit sexual and illegal activities. We have unintentionally created a new frontier land without adults. When adolescents make the rules, the game can be unsafe. Children today are not more malintentioned than previous generations; we have simply given them more powerful tools without providing any guidance. The reason some of the online social networks have decayed into a cesspool of humanity

is that we are not there with them. Where are the teachers modeling effective communication? Where are the parents connected to their kids digitally? We have been so concerned about shielding our children from these potential dangerous social technologies that we have ignored an incredible opportunity.

### *Changing the Classroom*

While the increased access to communication all over the world has great risk, the potential benefits far outweigh the negatives. What is needed are innovative teachers to capitalize on these technologies and supportive administrators to help implement their ideas safely. This innovation is starting in classrooms and initiatives all over the world.

### *Removing Social Barriers to Learning*

Much of the danger of these connected technologies is rooted in their anonymity. However, the competent teacher can capitalize on this factor for the benefit of the students. Teachers can create online learning environments where a socially neutral screen-name or email account is assigned by the teacher to allow for anonymous communication to occur between students under the teacher's full purview. There are even free technologies that allow students to send text messages to answer a teacher's question. When teachers are discussing difficult or controversial subjects, all students can engage safely without fear of social disruption. We must caution against a swing of the pendulum to such a degree that all direct interpersonal communication is removed but the selective application of such readily available technology-enhanced interactions should be explored.

*Connected Classrooms*

With federal and state initiatives, the density of internet access in our public schools is nearly complete (NCES, 2006). This high speed data access and the growing prevalence of video enabled chat make the environment for connecting classrooms across physical boundaries a much simpler process than in recent history. These connections can be used to bridge cultural divides, enhance the context of curriculum elements, and foster additional information resources. These interactions can be as grand as students connecting across the globe or as simple as having high school students mentor middle school students in their own district. Teachers should be mobilizing social technologies to update students and parents with relevant information. We need to extend the definition of classroom to encompass all the environments that can promote learning.

*Alternative, Authentic Assessment*

The latest generation of mobile technologies have put cameras and microphones in the hands of our children continuously. Teachers should be encouraging their students to document the connections of their personal experiences to their curriculum. Instead of a simple recall question quiz after a new concept is taught, have the child document their new understanding with a picture or video from their own experience. Students should be capturing the world around them and using that media to create generative products that demonstrate capacity.

*Publish Beyond the Classroom*

Traditionally, the students generate work for the eyes of the teacher only. The Internet connected classroom allows for students to publish their assessment materials for the whole world. Instead of completing a traditional paper or speech, why not have the child publish a podcast, blog, or media rich presentation that can be delivered to classmates, family members, or anyone anywhere. Students must learn that their contributions have merit and that they are capable of adding to the social fabric.

### *Digital Portfolio*

The concept of student portfolios has been around for decades but there were always problems of culling and storage. The digital age solves the logistics of physical portfolio management by allowing for the archival storage, and tagging of nearly unlimited artifacts for each student. The growth of a child across any discipline or skill set can be documented. Reading, writing, the arts, mathematics... anything can be recorded, scanned, or uploaded and maintained. Even beyond the evaluative purpose is the very real connection that the child can make to his or her own growth over time.

### *Moving Forward*

The connected nature of today's student drastically changes our opportunity for teaching. The demands of teaching in a connected environment need to be addressed by the professional organizations that support teachers and administrators. The traditional teacher contracts of the past do not recognize the time and expertise necessary to foster these developments into the learning

experience. Instead of limiting our student's education to punctuated periods of standardized nuggets of curriculum, we must enable our teachers apply their content and pedagogical expertise within these new media.

The incorporation of these connected technologies involve adding additional risk to our student's lives. We cannot be so foolish as to blindly move forward without preparing ourselves to realize these risks. Most importantly, teachers and parents must constantly foster an environment where students can advocate for themselves. We must enable our children to actively engage in this connected world and we can only do that if we connect ourselves.

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