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Cultivating Cyber-Phronesis:

A new educational approach to tackle cyber-bullying

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Cyber-bullying is a pervasive and troubling moral concern for teachers, schools, parents and pupils. As children and young people in England are now more likely to be bullied online than face to face, this article explores if there is a need to rethink traditional educational approaches to dealing with the issue. The article starts with a critique of the current dominant approaches to tackling cyber-bullying in schools, which draw predominantly on deontological and utilitarian moral philosophies. It then details what an Aristotelian character education approach to cyber-bullying would consist of. At its heart is a requirement to enable children and young people to become digitally virtuous citizens, through the development of cyber-phronesis. The article concludes with a description of moral educational interventions that would increase the likelihood of children and young people making both 'good' and 'wise' choices when online.

Keywords: Cyber-bullying, Education, Character, Virtue, Phronesis

Cyber-bullying: a moral educational concern

The invention of the Internet has brought with it new educational opportunities and challenges, some of which relate to children and young people's moral functioning (Harrison, 2016). These moral educational challenges will become more persistent as access

to the technology increases (Freestone and Mitchell, 2004). Emerging evidence shows that children and young people are more likely to commit some immoral acts online than offline. This includes being more likely to plagiarise online than from a book (Stephens *et al*, 2007; Sutherland-Smith, 2008; McCabe, 2004) and, download a music track illegally online than steal a CD from a shop (Lysonski and Durvasula, 2008). One of the most pervasive and troubling online moral concerns is cyber-bullying.

Cyber-bullying is defined differently in the literature (Tokunaga, 2010) and for the purposes of this article is understood as the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour, by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others (Belsey, 2005). The reported rates of cyber-bullying vary across studies depending on how it is defined (Whittaker and Kowalski, 2015) as well **the age of the respondents and the time frame over which they are asked (Smith, 2014)** although most studies show that between 10% to 40% of children and young people report being victims of cyber-bullying, both in the UK and elsewhere (see, for example, Livingstone, 2008; Kowalski *et al.*, 2014; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). Significantly, in 2014, a report found that for the first time, young people in Britain are more likely to be bullied online than face-to-face in the playground (Livingstone *et al.*, 2014) **in contrast to an earlier study by Olweus (2012) that found that incidences of cyberbullying were lower than traditional bullying.**

The prevalence of cyber-bullying has brought new challenges for schools and should not be ignored by parents or teachers (Finkelhor *et al.* 2005; Nansel *et al.*, 2001). Senior teaching professionals have reported spending an average six hours a week dealing with issues connected to cyber-bullying, and that the issue impacted on the school climate with staff feeling demoralised and contemplating leaving the profession (Cross *et al.*, 2012). **In 2015,**

an estimated 26,000 children and young people contacted ChildLine and received a counselling sessions because they had been bullied either online or face to face (NSPCC, 2015). Teachers have questioned the effectiveness of anti cyber-bullying programs (Limber, 2004) and forced educators to consider whether new strategies and approaches are required to deal with the issue (Shariff, 2008). Kyriacou and Zuin (2016: 34) argue that a feature of cyberbullying is the moral disengagement of those who practise it, and as such, 'a consensus has emerged regarding the importance of establishing anti-cyberbullying policies and practices, and the need to address cyberbullying within the school's pastoral care system and its personal and social education programme'. Studies have demonstrated the challenge schools face in implementing such programs that ultimately reduce bullying (Merrell *et al*, 2008; Ferguson *et al.*, 2007).

This article evaluates the current dominant educational approaches to dealing with cyber-bullying and argues that many are not as effective as they could be. One of the reasons is that they are mainly based on either deontological and / or utilitarian moral frameworks. The article makes the case for considering new approaches that either bolster or replace existing ones, and the resurgence of Aristotelian character education (Kristjansson, 2015) offers hope for those tasked with developing new interventions. The central thesis is that adopting a character-based strategy would help bolster rules or consequences-based educational strategies, and therefore preferential for the education of digitally virtuous citizens. At its heart is a requirement to enable children and young people to become digitally wise through the development of cyber-phronesis, understood here as the ability to do the right thing, at the right time, in the right amount whilst online. The article concludes

with a description of character education interventions that could increase the likelihood of children and young people making both 'good' and 'wise' choices when online.

Countering the myths: the need for a new educational approach

From the outset, it is important to debunk two myths about education and cyber-bullying. The first is that espoused by determinists who contend that education is ineffective in the face of the relentless progress of new technologies. The second is that due to the unique features of the Internet, traditional educational approaches to bullying can be unproblematically applied to newer forms of cyber-bullying. Both these myths will be explored in more detail below.

A technological determinist account of the Internet holds that individuals are powerless in the wake of technological progress, since by its very design it dictates users' behaviours, and consequently diminishes human agency (Ellul, 1964). Such an account holds that the ways in which we think and act are governed by new technology, and that any attempts to educate digitally virtuous citizens would be ultimately futile (Innis, 1950; McLuhan and Fiore, 1967). This extreme **position is now considered out-dated** and has been largely discredited as a myth (Thrift, 1996; Bingham, 1996; Buckingham, 2000). For example, Buckingham (2000:54) argues that researchers should not avoid 'awkward empirical questions' when considering the impact of new technology on people. He believes that many researchers fall into a trap of adopting an 'essentialist position' that leads them to argue in absolute terms and that research shows that most that young people perceive their relationship with the Internet to be reciprocal, not unidirectional. So whilst it is necessary to acknowledge that there are seemingly unique features of the Internet, such as the

possibility of anonymity, which makes it easier for someone to behave immorally online, this does not mean they will necessarily do so. From a virtue ethical perspective, technological determinism is implausible as it is the character virtues of the users of the technology, rather than the technology itself, that determine online behaviour (Harrison, 2014). On this reading, there is a role for education to tackle online moral concerns, such as cyber-bullying. In fact, it could be argued it is imperative that teachers, parents, and others involved in the moral development of children and young people do not simply lie down helpless in the face of technological advances, but instead seek approaches that confront the issues head on.

A second myth is that cyber-bullying is simply an extension of face-to-face bullying and therefore it can be dealt with in the same way. Although there is some empirical evidence that shows a substantial overlap between traditional face-to-face bullies and victims on the one hand and cyber-bullies and cyber-victims on the other (Sourander *et al*; 2010) evidence is emerging about the differing nature of online and offline bullying and why a shift in educational strategies and approaches is required for dealing with it. Bullying as a form of aggression is not new, but as Mark and Ratliffe (2011:92) state, cyber-bullying has 'introduced new elements to a seemingly age old practice'. Whilst it has been argued that the motives of the bully have not changed, just the technology (Froese-Germain, 2008), and that most young people engage and act in both worlds in generally the same way (Davies, 2009; Thomas, 2007), research has shown that features or attributes of the Internet intensify deviant behaviours and increase the likelihood of morally inappropriate Internet-based behaviours, including cyber-bullying (Orgad, 2007; Suler, 2004). In addition, widely accepted core definitional components of face to face bullying, including intention,

repetition and imbalance of power don't fit with how cyber-bullying is now commonly understood (Tokunaga, 2010; Smith, 2014).

There is little doubt that the Internet has 'modernised' some of the traditional aspects of bullying. Whilst elements of cyber-bullying, such as name calling and social ostracising, replicate those of traditional face-to-face bullying, features of the internet including anonymity, ease of access and disembodiment, which increase the likelihood of cyber-bullying (Harrison, 2016). Whilst these elements are identified as negatives for the victim, they might be viewed as positives for the bully and constitute additional reasons why individuals may choose this approach over traditional forms of bullying. It is for this reason that conventional approaches to education about the appropriate use of the Internet require rethinking (Harrison, 2016) to ensure children and young people are equipped to deal with the unique attributes of the Internet (Slonje and Smith 2008; Suzuki *et al.* 2012). The following section describes what current and future educational interventions designed to tackle cyber-bullying might consist of. The discussions are structured around three prominent moral philosophies: deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics.

Deontology inspired educational approaches

Schools and teachers often adopt deontological-based educational strategies for dealing with online moral issues, including cyber-bullying. The term 'deontology' describes a 'duty' or 'rules' based ethical theory, as it considers that it is rules that bind individuals to their duties. The theory contends that moral duties are grounded in a certain kind of self-validating reason. Deontology is the moral theory most closely associated with the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1785).

Deontologically based strategies for dealing with cyber-bullying in schools include, a focus on e-safety and drawing up and enforcing rules and guidance on expected good and bad online conduct (Kowalski *et al.*, 2008). Posters about 'netiquette' are almost ubiquitous on school corridor walls and enhancing e-safety is seen as a way of meeting Ofsted requirements (Katz, 2012). Of course, it should be acknowledged that many of these posters are not simply a list of rules or guidance about 'how' to use the Internet, but also offer advice on what character virtues, such as compassion, respect and empathy, encourage 'good' use of the Internet. Another popular strategy employed by schools is banning mobile phones during the school day. Research has shown that some strategies are reactive, rather than preventative, and include teachers reporting incidents to the police or to the website providers and deploying in-school sanctions against bullies and detentions (Cross *et al.*, 2012).

The effectiveness of these deontological based approaches has been challenged. A major issue is that the rapid advances in internet technology have created ethical dilemmas that the law has not yet fully addressed, and for which there appears to be a lack of social consensus (Mahmon *et al.*, 2009). Research has shown that traditional strategies, such as the use of sanctions to counteract bullying, are not sufficient when confronting incidences of cyber-bullying (Hinduja and Patchin 2008; Agatston *et al.*, 2007). For example, the effectiveness of banning mobile phones has been debated and it has been suggested that a more useful intervention would be to discuss with pupils how messages can be perceived as being harassing due to the language used (Ybarra *et al.*, 2007). It has also resulted in some difficulties in terms of reporting (Slonje and Smith, 2008) as students are reluctant to report incidents for fear of having their mobile phones confiscated and getting into trouble

(Kowalski *et al.*, 2008). Several studies have found that teachers and parents are often unaware of cyber-bullying (for example, Keith and Martin, 2005). One study shows that 90% of young people do not tell their parents or other adults that they are being cyber-bullied (Juvonon and Gross, 2008). Shariff and Hoff (2007) have also found that schools have a difficult time supervising online activities, knowing when to involve law enforcement, and distinguishing rights of freedom of expression from harassment.

Plaisance (2013: 91) argues there are 'few successful efforts to articulate a coherent framework that marries works on technology ethics with a project that identifies a set of universal norms to guide behaviour'. Most significantly, systems of formal rules on the Internet are difficult to apply in practice. Presently, websites used by potential bullies seem to be incapable of regulation and, in any case, bullies find ways round any given rules and detection. Therefore, looking for solutions to stop cyber-bullying, based exclusively on deontological thinking, is seemingly not sufficient.

Utilitarian inspired educational approaches

Utilitarian based approaches to dealing with cyber-bullying are very popular in schools (Stauffer *et al*, 2012). Utilitarianism is widely conceived as a form of consequentialism and the theory is most closely associated with the philosophy of Jeremy Bentham (1907). The term 'utilitarian' refers to moral approaches that foreground 'the greatest happiness principle', in which the moral worth of an action is determined only by its resulting outcome. Popular approaches to dealing with cyber-bullying in schools include warning students about the consequences of cyber-bullying, restorative justice, referring pupils to the school counsellor and arranging meetings between the victim and the bully, so they can

face up to their actions (Cross *et al* 2012). A commonly adopted approach is to appeal to young people's sensibilities by highlighting palpably the consequences of negative behaviour online (Harrison, 2014). For example, students might be shown a film that features a cyber-bullying victims, including Hannah Todd, who committed suicide. Although there is no doubt an immediate shock value to such an approach; the question is if these films have longer-term effects and indeed have any effect on children and young people's behaviour. Research by Harrison (2014) found that many young people did not think films work, as they are not personal or related to their own contexts.

A particular challenge for utilitarian approaches is that research has shown young people often 'innocently' cyber-bully, as due to the features or attributes of the Internet they struggle to predict the consequences of their online actions (Mark and Ratcliffe, 2011). This is because the consequences of actions are not always immediately obvious (Campbell, 2005; Willard, 2002); a decrease in 'social presence' can lower a bully's empathy, which makes him or her more likely to be aggressive (Johnson and Keil, 2002) and with less feelings of guilt (Arsenio *et al.* 2006; Malti, *et al*, 2010). In addition, the absence of visual clues has been found to make cyber-bullying more likely to occur, either on purpose or by accident (Cross *et al.*, 2009). Many of these themes can be summarised by what Suler (2004) called the 'asynchronicity' effect. Asynchronicity is when online communicators are not faced with the immediate emotional response that might make them check or change their behaviour. This leads to a reduction in accountability cues in private self-awareness, and might perhaps lead to a decrease in self-regulation. The distance and disassociate nature of online communication makes it more likely that Internet users are either unaware or unlikely to be concerned by the consequences of their online actions. In addition Menesini

et al. (2013) found that the Internet encourages individuals to participate in 'egocentric reasoning', as they are more concerned with gaining credibility from their peers than with the outcomes of their actions. This evidence leaves utilitarianism as an insufficient moral theory for those seeking philosophical guidelines for developing educational strategies to reduce cyber-bullying.

A suitable alternative: Virtue Ethics

It has been argued thus far that although deontological and utilitarian based educational strategies are popular in schools for dealing with cyber-bullying, there are particular features and attributes of the Internet that make them insufficient on their own. The remainder of this article aims to demonstrate the advantages that virtue ethics has over these rival moral theories when developing educational approaches for dealing with cyber-bullying (Harrison, 2016; Vallor, 2012). Virtue ethics is an ethical theory with roots in antiquity (Aristotelianism in Greece and Confucianism in China) that has undergone a revival of late in philosophical and educational circles (Kristjánsson, 2015). 'Virtue ethics' refers to any moral theory that foregrounds the concepts of character and virtue. A virtue ethics based educational approach would prioritise the creation of wise and virtuous online citizens. It would seek to provide children and young people with a set of tools to negotiate the inevitable conflicts and moral challenges of using the Internet. In comparison to utilitarianism and deontology, virtue ethics, with its focus on character, takes an 'agent orientated' or 'person centered' approach to understanding human conduct. Theorists (Vallor, 2010; Plaisance, 2013; Couldry, 2010) have argued that virtue ethics should at the very least complement, if not replace existing deontological or consequentialist approaches to investigating new technologies. Vallor (2010) believes that several distinctive features of

virtue ethics make it uniquely suited to the domain of Internet ethics, and furthermore, a virtue-based perspective is needed to balance a strong utilitarian bias in the literature. Couldry (2010) agrees and argues that virtue ethics offers a more compelling and more useful basis from which to study the Internet, than deontological claims. Since rules are hard to establish and uphold online, and consequences are hard to predict, an approach to morality that is based on an individual's own character virtues is particularly appealing. As Plaisance (2013: 92) argues 'rather than getting mired in the philosophical thicket regarding the motives and duties of actors in an online world we should focus on what behaviour and guidelines contribute to the flourishing of digital lives'. A virtue ethics approach is beneficial for those interested in developing practical solutions for dealing with these moral issues, as it provides guidance for what is appropriate behaviour, based on the concepts of character and virtue.

Julia Annas (2011) uses a skill analogy to explain how people might develop virtues through the practice of them. Her argument is that exercising a virtue involves practical reasoning that be compared to the kind of reasoning that someone exercising a practical skill develops. For Annas the acquisition and exercise of virtue can be seen to be like the acquisition and exercise of other activities such as building or playing the piano. Such an understanding of how people develop virtue through practical wisdom allows us to conceive a way that children and young people can increase their virtuous online practices through education and experience. It may take hard work, but over time, children and young people can learn to 'self-police' their actions, through showing virtues, even when no-one is watching. In this understanding, 'doing the right thing online' should not simply be a matter

of adhering to rules, or an assessment of consequences, but because virtue guided actions have become habits.

Cyber-phronesis: a new approach to educating digitally good and wise citizens

Character education (*qua* the educational incarnation of virtue ethics) is increasingly gaining traction in Britain (Arthur, 2003; 2015) as well as elsewhere in the world (Sanderse, 2012). It is also increasingly viewed as a good vehicle for educating young people about the virtuous use of new technology, including the Internet (Stephens et al, 2007). Milson and Chu (2001) argues that character educators should expand their notions of citizenship to include *netizenship*, which is in essence the fostering of online civic virtues, including respect, responsibility, honesty, courtesy, and self-control. Notable research in this area includes the work of Chang and Chou (2015) who sought to discover, through a study with Taiwanese students, the specific character education (what they called e-CE) needs of cyber-society. Their findings show that the e-CE virtues considered important by teachers include law abidance, respect, self-discipline, and sharing, and believe their results serve as a foundation and guide for the promotion of e-CE curriculum development and implementation. Another intervention is the *Media Hero's* project (Wolfer et al., 2013), which has been proven, by trial, to be effective. It combines elements of consequences, as well as character based approaches, such as moral dilemmas. Its aspiration is to raise students' awareness concerning the consequences and legal risks of cyber-bullying, as well as the improvement of social responsibility. Although these studies all support the idea of teaching about online morality through character education, the approaches are not

distinctly Aristotelian. The remainder of the article discusses what an Aristotelian character education approach to the Internet might consist of.

For the purposes of this article, character education can be defined as an umbrella term for all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people develop positive personal traits called virtues (Jubilee Centre, 2013). Although character education has been approached from a number of theoretical stances and conceptual assumptions, a striking feature of recent developments in the field has been the resurgence of Aristotelian or quasi-Aristotelian virtue ethical approaches (Kristjánsson, 2015). It is also increasingly being viewed as the best approach for cultivating the virtues of character associated with common morality, enabling young people to become good citizens and lead good lives (see Arthur and Harrison, 2012). Character education, drawing on the philosophy of Aristotle, offers a promising foundation from which to develop an approach to enhancing the virtues required for 'good', as well as 'wise' Internet use and a number of themes, topics and issues can be explored; including new technology, the Internet and more specifically, cyber-bullying. Therefore, just as important as developing key virtues such as compassion and honesty is a requirement to cultivate the meta-virtue of *phronesis* or practical wisdom in children and young people.

Phronesis is an important component of Aristotle's understanding of ethics. Translations of *phronesis* include practical reasoning, practical wisdom, good sense, moral discernment, moral insight, and prudence (Noel, 1999). Aristotle (1976) defines *phronesis* as a state of grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action that are good or bad for a

human being. For Aristotle, *phronesis* helps individuals get things right, using practical or moral wisdom; it is what helps individuals to make the right judgment in any given situation. Aristotle understood that the requirements of different virtues can bring about conflict because they sometimes point to different courses of action. For example, should one be loyal or honest when one learns of a friend's wrongdoing? The development of practical wisdom comes with time and through practice, Aristotle believed that knowing the best course of action would eventually become second nature. *Phronesis*, for Aristotle, is different from other forms of reason, such as *epistme* and *techne*. *Epistme* is scientific knowledge and concerns things that are necessarily true, and *techne* is craft knowledge, useful for finding an effective way to make a product. Neither of these are necessarily virtues, as they might be used for good or bad ends. *Phronesis* is different, as it concerns using practical wisdom to make a virtuous decision in any given situation. Therefore, the rational capacity operative in the virtue of character is practical wisdom.

For the purpose of this paper, a new term cyber-phronesis can be coined to describe the ability to do the right thing, at the right time, and in the right amount whilst online. Educational interventions that seek the development of cyber-phronesis are in the process of being created and tested. One example is the Character Education Programme of Study (Wright *et al.*, 2014) that contains specific lessons on 'using technology more wisely'. Another example is a re-imagining of the computer science curriculum that contends students should not be deemed computer literate unless they are good and wise Internet users (Arthur *et al.*, 2014). A third example is teaching about cyber-phronesis through and within all curriculum subjects (Harrison *et al.*, 2016) so that developing 'good digital citizens' is at the heart of all subjects that cover topics on new technology.

The next step is to apply these more general approaches to specific issues, such as cyber-bullying. This could involve deliberate educational efforts to develop cyber-phronesis through moral imaginative mindsets. Such an approach encourages children and young people to imagine the kind of online world they would like to inhabit. This requires them to be both self-reflective about their own Internet use and its impact on others, as well as the ability to imagine new ways of using the Internet. It drives young people to develop the effective capacities required for making moral judgments – such as how and when to be compassionate and honest. An ‘imaginative mindset’ would also enable users to see the effects of cyber-bullying from the outset, and in turn could increase online empathy, which may decrease online bullying (Mark *et al.*, 2011). The approach could also improve students’ ethical decision-making in cyber-society (McMahon and Cohen, 2009) as well as help them engage in moral reasoning, especially when there are conflicts in values and interests.

One approach to the cultivation of moral imagination is through the use of story or narrative (Carr and Harrison, 2015). Grodzinsky (2001:580) states that ‘virtue ethics offers a way of teaching self-reflection through narratives and a focus on moral exemplars’. In one example, Fleischmann, Robbins and Wallace (2011) developed interactive cases for information systems students, where the students needed to take on different roles in a group, and make interdependent ethical decisions. Moral exemplars highlight particular virtues as they showcase individuals who stayed strong and held fast to virtuous ideals. For example, rather than showing films about the victims of cyber-bullies, perhaps films should be shown about young people who have demonstrated restraint and chosen not to cyber-

bully. These stories can then be used as vehicles for reflection on young people's own moral character strengths and weaknesses. The use of personal journals could be encouraged, allowing young people to not only reflect on the stories of others, but also to record their own stories about times they have shown virtuous restraint online. Reflective journals have proven to enhance the ability of young people to apply learning about virtue from one context into their own (Arthur *et al.*, 2014) and guided self-reflection can therefore be an important tool in the development of character in young people. Furthermore, it has been found journals help create the cognitive connections required for students to think in terms of virtue concepts when required (Arthur *et al.*, 2014).

Journal keeping activities, such as those envisaged above, might actually be accommodated by the Internet itself and designed in a way that character educators can implement them in online environments. For example, they might be developed as online moral dilemma games, where users have to practice making difficult ethical decisions that are presented to them in the form of an online game. Alternatively, journals could be kept in the form of an online (personal) blog. At present, practical interventions that might help develop 'moral online mindsets' in young people are underdeveloped and therefore a considerable amount of further effort is required to create them. A further concern would be to develop suitable methodologies to evaluate their impact to ensure that they meet their stated character and virtues development aims, as Snakenborg *et al.* (2011: 94) warn that most current cyberbullying programs are based on practical beliefs about prevention and logical approaches, rather than on scientific evidence. Although the strategies outlined above will present challenges to researchers, they are challenges that seem worthy of the investment.

Conclusion

This article has called for educators to resist the temptation to deal with cyber-bullying solely through traditional approaches that are based primarily on deontological and utilitarian lines of thinking. Instead, approaches that draw on virtue ethics philosophy and can be delivered through Aristotelian character education should be developed and tested. At the heart of such approaches is a need to enhance cyber-phronesis; the ability to make good and wise online judgements. New educational interventions that seek to enhance online moral imagination through stories and narratives have been suggested as a favourable alternative to more traditional approaches. Whilst possible new approaches have been suggested, these have not been put to the empirical test in a manner that other interventions designed to tackle cyber-bullying have (see, for example, Perren *et al.*; 2012) and this is the logical next step.

This article concludes by calling for the inclusion and foregrounding of these virtue ethical methods to either replace other interventions that do not work, or complement those that have worked (at least partly). Whilst it is not suggested that virtue ethical approaches can entirely replace current approaches to dealing with cyber-bullying, given the nature and significant scale of the problem they should be viewed as a promising alternative.

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