

Facebook: The Good, the Bad or the Ugly?

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Summary

This paper presents a student project that used a unique service learning approach to the issue of cyberbullying among elementary school pupils. Students have prepared a combination of lectures (curriculum units) and workshops about cyberbullying that occurs on social networks. Main purpose of the project was to educate pupils about the harmful side of the social networks, violence, and pedophilia. However, students also showed children the variety of ways social networks can be used appropriately in school and how to protect themselves from bullies and predators on the web.

Key words: cyberbullying, elementary school, communication, social networks, Facebook, privacy, protection, anonymity

Introduction

The topic of this project was chosen following a series of bullying incidents on social networks. The authors of this paper believe that children should be gradually introduced to social networks and trained on how to use them safely and in the right way so they can profit from it (education, friendships, etc.). Children should be guided and warned of the dangerous of social networks such as private information, theft and cyberbullying, but they should also be taught how to protect themselves and follow rules enforced by their parents and teachers. It needs to be emphasized that, according to Facebook terms, children younger than 13 should not have a Facebook account. Unfortunately, research already showed that children use Facebook in much earlier age (a survey of kids in U.K. revealed that a quarter of them have a presence on a social network--way below the age limit of 13). The Facebook usage in Croatia is not different from United Kingdom. Therefore, we decided to have children younger than 13 (5th grade) included in our project: not as an encouragement for children to use Facebook, but as a security guide for those of them who already have a "secret" account. Although both parents and teachers can decide to ban social media from their children until they are 13, such approach might be counterproductive to a

child's development, since the ways that young pupils interact and make friends changed a lot during the last decade.

Bullying has been recognized by parents and school officials as a serious problem for decades. But, this harmful behavior has transformed its methods and ways as our communication habits changed. E-mails, text messages and social profile sites are part of our digital era. As reports show, 90% of children are online on a daily basis [10].

Cyberbullying is often described as a new form of traditional bullying. It is "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" [1]. Or, put differently, it is: "the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated and hostile behavior by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others" [3].

Although both bullying and cyberbullying can be defined as harmful behavior, there are some significant differences between these two. Essentially, cyberspace has no physical boundaries. It means that cyberbullying can happen at any place, any time. A victim does no longer have a "safe-place", since cyberbullying operates in the virtual space that can be accessed using the electronic devices.

The other aspect of cyberbullying is anonymity, causing victim to experience even more intense feelings of fear, frustration and powerlessness and encouraging bullies to be more aggressive. Another characteristic of cyberbullying is the potential global audience, unlike the traditional school environment. The distribution of text, photos or videos has never been easier and never harder to erase entirely once it's published online.

To summarize, bullying can manifest itself in at least three different ways [10]: physical bullying, harassment and relational bullying (destroying victim's relationships). Cyberbullying has two main forms [10]: direct, where messages are transmitted from the bully to the victim, and indirect, in which case bully enlists others to bully the victim.

Qing Li [7] quotes Williard's methods of cyberbullying:

- a) flaming – sending angry, rude, vulgar messages directed at a person or persons privately or to an online group
- b) harassment – repeatedly sending a person offensive messages;
- c) cyberstalking – harassment that include threats of harm or is highly intimidating;
- d) denigration (put-downs) – sending or posting harmful, untrue, or cruel statements about a person to other people;
- e) masquerade – pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material that makes that person look bad or places that person in a potential danger;

- f) outing and trickery – sending or posting material about a person that contains sensitive, private, or embarrassing information, including forwarding private messages or images.
- g) exclusion – actions that specifically and intentionally exclude a person from an online group.

Cyberbullying can affect academic and social life of victims causing school absence, eating disorders, substance abuse, depression and even suicide.

Methodology

The project presented in this paper *Facebook: The Good, the Bad or the Ugly?* was designed and implemented by three graduate students of Information and Communication Sciences study at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (who are also authors of this paper) as part of the course *Service Learning in Information Sciences*.

Service learning is a new teaching method rapidly spreading in higher education in United States and Europe [2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9]. Following this method, students learn and develop their professional and interpersonal skills as well as critical thinking through active participation in structured cooperative activities that address community needs. It also helps universities to contribute to their communities and instills democratic values, increasing the mutually beneficial interaction between universities and the social community.

The project *Facebook: The Good, the Bad or the Ugly?* used a unique service learning approach to the problem of cyberbullying. This service learning project stretched over a semester and took place in the elementary school Julije Klović in Zagreb.

Each graduate student had the opportunity to apply what she learned to "the real world", but also to be a part of the project run by different participants (school teacher, students, faculty mentor and school pupils).

The process of implementing a service learning component involved four separate and distinct stages: (1) Preparation, (2) Action, (3) Reflection, and (4) Presentation, described in the following chapters.

In the project's preparation phase, students identified and analyzed the problem - social network violence and identified a community need - to teach school children about current social network violence issues. Students designed a detailed plan of the project with the university and community members (school teachers and faculty mentor) to ensure collaboration between their University and elementary school Julije Klović in Zagreb.

In the project's action phase students performed all the activities specified in the written project application, while in the reflection phase they produced the results of their reflection: a reflective journal and e-portfolio. The project ended with the group multimedia presentation.

In their 5 years study these students learned many theoretical concepts and applied them to the imaginary or simulated circumstances, but rarely managed to

apply the acquired knowledge to the real world. In this project they had time and will to rethink and implement their own research ideas and they seized the opportunity to transform them into "hands-on" experience, while observing the results and the project's impact to the end beneficiaries.

Finally, during their research on cyberbullying, students came across a great source of information for their project. The Brave phone and Child Protection Center Zagreb expressed their enthusiasm about the project and offered their partnership and support.

The Brave phone ("Hrabri telefon") is an NGO registered in 1997 with the main aim to protect the children from abuse and neglect. Child protection center Zagreb was founded in 2002 aiming to provide effective and systematic support for traumatized children and their families (i.e. abused and neglected children, families affected by the war, etc). From the first contact with the Brave phone team, students experienced their support and engagement in the topic of cyberbullying. They shared students' concern and will to educate children, parents and teachers. With the help of the Brave phone, students also established collaboration with the Child Protection Center Zagreb, which provided them with copies of their handbook on cyberbullying. This handbook was designed for children, parents, teachers and everybody who works with children and wants to protect and educate children and youth about the huge risks of the Internet misuse.

Project's preparation phase

In the first stage of the project students worked on identifying a community need, collaborating with the community partner and acquiring new information and skills.

Students have decided to prepare a combination of lectures (curriculum units) and workshops for elementary school pupils about cyberbullying [1] that occurs on social networks. The main purpose of the project was to educate pupils about the harmful side of social networks, violence, and pedophilia. However, they also wanted to show children how social networks can be used properly and how to protect themselves from bullies and predators on the web.

After identifying the need (cyberbullying) and potential community partner (elementary school), the students' focus shifted onto analyzing how to integrate the service learning project into existing curriculum while meeting the educational requirements of the regular school curriculum as well as the pupils' needs.

Students drafted a 10-minutes long presentation at the beginning of the class. But, since the whole class lasts 45 minutes, they decided to devote most of the time to the workshops ideas. Regarding the workshop, students have selected a short animated movie as a motivational instrument for the entire school class.

In the next step, they planned the session of poster design with pupils as a type of artistic workshop, so that these posters can later be used as part of the school exhibition on the cyberbullying topic.

Although students' main objective was to develop curriculum units and workshops that would raise pupils' and teachers' awareness of the issue and effects of cyberbullying in the elementary school, they also wanted to explore opportunities to acquire new skills, to think critically, to adopt new competencies and to test their roles in an environment which encourages risk-taking and rewards competence. The student communicated about the project via Moodle, e-mail and face-to-face meetings.

Project's action phase

In the first phase of the project realization, a student team has chosen the team leader who was responsible for communication with the faculty mentor.

The key goal emphasized in the action phase was to design an interesting presentation and a workshop on social networks and problem of cyberbullying for pupils, but students also planned to make a small exhibition on the topic and include pupils' parents. Considering the different learning preferences of the teammates, the different knowledge level and different understanding of the issue, students had to cope with the existing limitations.

Project *Facebook: The Good, the Bad or the Ugly?* was carried out in two 5th grades and one 7th grade during informatics class at the elementary school Julije Klović in Zagreb.

Introductory and motivational part

As a part of a single lesson (45 minutes), students firstly held a small presentation about violence and potential danger of the online world followed by a workshop about cyberbullying.

The class conducted by students included: (1) an Introduction, (2) the Lecture, and (3) the Workshop. The Introduction consisted of the following elements: (1) an introduction stating learning objectives and what the project was about, (2) background information establishing the importance of the chosen topic and explaining to pupils general terms like communication and Internet, (3) motivational video from Youtube titled: *Znaš li s kim razgovaraš? Online zamka.* ("Do you know who you're speaking with? An online trap").¹ This motivational video is a short animated movie made in collaboration between Center for missing and abused children in Osijek, video club Mursa and elementary school Mladost in Osijek. Drawings and animations were made by eighth grade pupils to warn their peers about the potential dangers of the online world, especially social networks. This powerful multimedia resource helped pupils to get acquainted with the main topic of the project.

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrDXuT2oGFY>

The Lecture was delivered as a Power Point slide presentation for pupils and it was divided in three parts. Firstly, students presented the notion of social networks, Facebook and violence in general, addressing issues such as: what to do if you are cyberbullied and why pupils cyberbully. In the second part of the lecture they presented possibilities and ways of online protection and prevention of cyberbullying. Finally, they concluded the presentation indicating positive uses of social networks.

Workshops

The last part of the lesson consisted of workshop activities that actively involved classroom pupils and targeted their multiple learning styles, requiring pupils to implement what they have learned from student lecture and to think about how the lesson applied to life outside of the classroom.

Two sets of workshop activities were developed by students. One set was designed to be used with fifth graders and the other set was designed for use with seventh graders. Specific goals for each group workshop were described in details in the student project plan, as well as all the activities that would take place in the group during the 45-minutes lesson.

Fifth grade students were instructed to write positive and negative aspects of the social networks.

In the first class of the fifth graders, pupils were given red and green cards. They had to write negative experiences and the misuses of social networks on the red cards, while on the green cards pupils had to list the good characteristics of the online communication. On the yellow cards students have written neutral terms like „anonymity” or „availability”, relating them to the semantics of online communication, but they also taught pupils about meaning of such terms in both positive and negative context. Red, yellow and green cards were then shaped as a traffic light, showing negative, neutral and positive aspects of social networking.

The other class of the fifth graders had a similar task, writing down positives and negatives, but this time they were given cards of several different colors. They were instructed to write down one good thing about the Facebook on the one card, while on the other they had to write down one bad thing about it. Students made two posters out of these cards: one presenting "good" cards with the

„like” button , and the other containing "bad" cards with the „dislike” button .

Seventh graders had a bit more challenging task. They were divided in smaller groups of 3-5 pupils and given a task to invent a new Facebook group with a socially useful aim: useful for their class / school or their neighborhood or for some other shared interest. While some groups of seventh graders did an excel-

lent job writing down all the steps of creating such virtual group and describing the possible issues that might occur, other groups were not so engaged.

Results of these workshops were posters which the pupils designed themselves, expressing their reflections and comments about the given topic. Posters were put in the visible place (two in the corridor of school and one in the informatics classroom).

Students have fulfilled the objectives of their project, connecting them with the basic objectives of their study (museology / information science). They have also enabled further communication about the topic of cyberbullying in the whole school, bringing it closer to other pupils who did not have a chance to participate in this project.

Project's reflection phase

During the whole project (preparation and action phase), students were required to write a reflection journal in order to integrate their learning and service experience with the personal awareness and growth.

Reflecting on the service learning process and the skills they mastered, they wrote that these projects represent innovation in education because they provide practical part of it that is usually neglected. The project had a positive effect on their personal development, fostering the sense of personal efficacy and leadership, as well as the ability to work with teammates improving the communication skills and confidence.

Evaluation

In order to receive the feedback from their beneficiaries, students designed a survey that consisted of ten questions. Their goal was to find out the number of pupils with Facebook accounts and if their parents knew about these accounts, since children under the age of 13 are not allowed to open Facebook accounts and can only do so if they or an adult have been untruthful about their date of birth. Students explored whether pupils were familiar with the topic of violence on social networks, whether they experienced violence themselves and if they need and like lectures and workshops such as ones they attended. A total of 49 pupils from two 5th grades and one 7th grade were surveyed. Pupils were asked to answer with "yes" or "no" to questions or rank their claims on a 1–5 scale with 1 being the lowest value and 5 being the highest value. Most of the pupils were male.

Furthermore, pupils were asked if they have a Facebook profile in the first place and if their parents know about it. Students discovered that as many as 68% of pupils have a Facebook account that their parents knew about (Figure1).

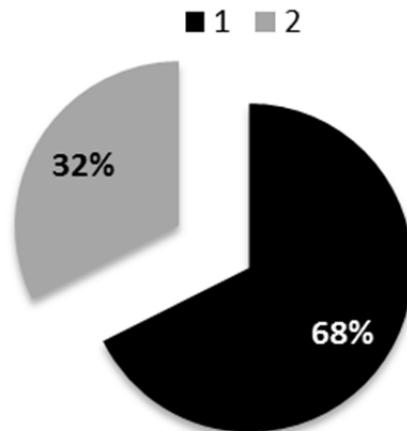


Figure 1. Percent of pupils that have a Facebook profile

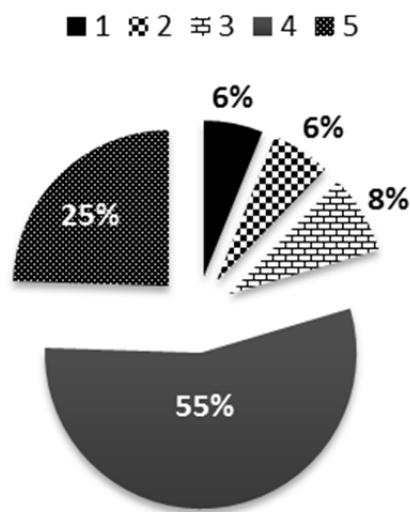


Figure 2. Percent of pupils with previous knowledge about cyberbullying

Also, more than half of the children (55%) were familiar with the topic of violence on the social networks (Figure 2).

Most of the children, 74%, did not experience any problems while using social networks. But, 20% has faced some form of violence, while 6% encountered serious violence on the social networks (Figure 3).

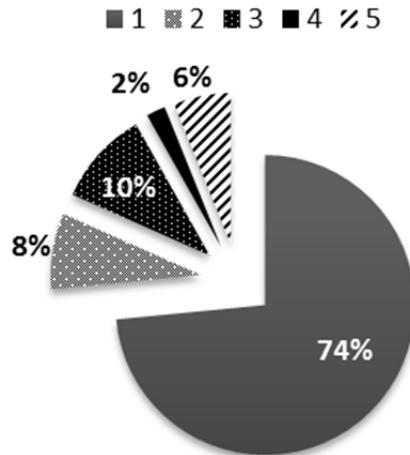


Figure 3. Percent of pupils encountering violence on social networks

Most of the children (53%) admitted that these types of lectures are needed in elementary schools (Figure 4).

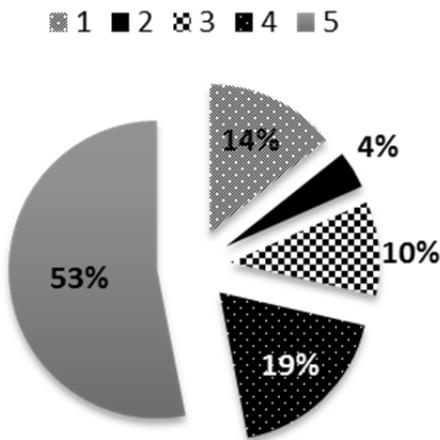


Figure 4. Pupils' attitudes towards lectures on topics such as violence on the social networks

Finally, more than 50% of the pupils declared that they learned something new during the lecture and workshop on cyberbullying (Figure 5). The last survey question allowed them to add their own comments. They acknowledged that there is a lot of violence on social networks, but they rarely dare to talk about it. The survey results have shown that although children encounter violence on the social networks, they tend to be reluctant to talk about it.

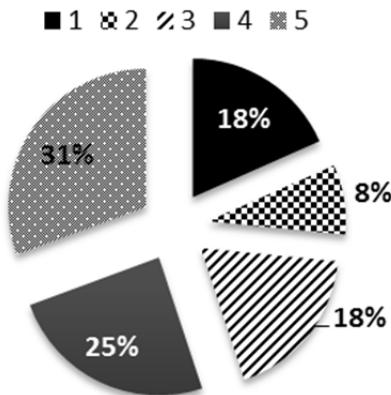


Figure 5. Percent of pupils that stated they learned something new in this lecture and workshop

Conclusion

After the evaluation of their project, students have come to the following conclusions: all pupils (5th and 7th graders) that were part of the project use the Internet and are mostly acquainted with terms that adults use in online communication. Most of the pupils use various social networks, especially Facebook. The majority of pupils are acquainted with the potential dangers of the Internet. Furthermore, students in this project have revealed an emergent issue in the elementary school curriculum: pupils do not learn about the Internet until they become 7th graders, but they begin to use the Internet much earlier, without necessary skills, knowledge and the quality supervision.

Therefore, students have fulfilled the specified project goals: they have warned 5th and 7th graders about possible danger of using social networks, introducing them to various ways of protection. They have also taught them about the positive use of social networks and encouraged them to participate in the design of posters and small projects.

The service learning project *Facebook: The Good, the Bad or the Ugly?* has addressed a specific community need (violence on social networks) while giving students an opportunity for critical thinking through active participation in a structured activity. For some of the students, this project experience represented a first face-to-face encounter with pupils and the opportunity to teach in front of real pupils instead of their peers. Moreover, students have established a successful collaboration with the community partners: the elementary school Julije Klović, Child Protection Center Zagreb and the Brave phone, as well as with their final beneficiaries - school pupils.

This project brought many long-term contributions to society: it increased public awareness about issues of cyberbullying and about adequate usage of social

networks; it promoted the Internet culture and its benefits to pupils, while the school community witnessed a unique approach to one of the important and contemporary issues in the elementary school.

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