You got pwned[1]! The behaviour of young people online and the issues raised for teachers

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Young people are more socially connected than ever before through online social networks such as Facebook and Myspace, yet in some ways their solitary participation in the world online leaves young people more isolated. By missing out on more traditional face-to-face social encounters and away from the watchful eyes of their parents, young people face moral dilemmas that impact on their personal development as they mature into adulthood. This article explores the moral development issues raised when young people interact in cyberspace. As the school curriculum is increasingly supported by new technologies, particularly in recent years to support the personalisation agenda, these ethical issues have become the concern of both parents and educators. To prepare young people for success they must be taught ethical online behaviour in addition to traditional academic skills.

Keywords: Adolescent; Cyberspace; Ethics; Social Networking; Moral Development

Introduction

Young people are more socially connected than ever before through online social networks such as Facebook and Myspace, yet in some ways their solitary participation in the world online leaves young people more isolated. By missing out on more traditional face-to-face social encounters and away from the watchful eyes of their parents, young people face moral dilemmas that impact on their personal development as they mature into adulthood. The Home Office review by Dr Linda Papadopoulos (2010) refers to some interesting statistics on young people's use of technology:

- 99% of children aged 8–17 have access to the internet (Ofcom 2005–09 [2008])
- 60% aged 12–15 say they mostly use the internet on their own (Ofcom 2009)
- 33% of parents say they set no rules for their children's use of social networking sites (Ofcom 2005–09 [2008])
- 43% of children say their parents set no rules for use of social networking sites.

The *Harnessing technology* survey of schools (Galloway 2008) reported that 95% of young people aged 8, 12, 14 and 17–19 use a computer, 88% use the internet, 82% play computer or console games, 76% use a mobile phone, 70% use an MP3 player and 53% use a digital camera.

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[1] 'pwned'. A corruption of the word *owned* which originated from a misspelling in an online game, World of Warcraft. It means 'to own' or to dominate a situation.

The context

The internet was created in the late 1960s by private and United States military research as a technology designed to function without centralised control. This globally interconnected computer network which operates without central governance has been likened to a state of anarchy. This can be viewed negatively as being a state of lawlessness and chaos, or as an ideal state built by cooperative individuals in the absence of central control. 'The Internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand, the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had' (Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google, 2010).

Life online

Fifty years on, teenagers are using computers and the internet in every aspect of their personal lives for communicating, information seeking, entertainment, creativity and participating. Communicating and creating content tend to be the most popular activities. For many young people, time spent online is simply a way to meet people, share things about themselves, communicate with friends and stay in touch with an ever-increasing circle of people. Through the use of social networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace, teenagers are sharing interests, photos, comments, sending messages and, importantly for increased social status, they are developing an ever-increasing network of contacts. It is not unusual for a teenager to have several hundred 'friends' in their personal network; a sample of six 15-year-old girls from the same school in London had between 340 and 937 friend connections listed on their online profile. All six were able to recall the number of friends from memory with uncanny accuracy.

New technologies are woven into the everyday activities of young people's lives. They do homework whilst switching between screens to queue their music playlist, search out relevant video clip tutorials on Youtube, find information for their essay; all the while discussing the work at hand with other members of the class through the chat function of their social network. Their bus journey home from school is spent with mobile phone in hand, texting and talking to friends, checking their online profile, checking for Twitter updates and playing with the latest 'app' that they downloaded for free to their phone that morning. To these young people, reading a book, doing a crossword or simply staring out of the window is not an option. Thanks to instant messaging, online chat rooms, multiplayer gaming and the like – all forms of 'social networking' that permit young people to have private, real-time conversations with people across the world – not only have adolescents succeeded in creating 24/7 social lives, but they have largely succeeded in shielding these online social interactions from adult scrutiny. Research identifies a gap between children's use of technology and the associated skills and parental awareness of this (Healy & Anderson 2007).

Morality in cyberspace

While there are certainly positive aspects to these virtual relationships, particularly for young people who may be socially isolated for a host of reasons such as disability, a growing body of research is showing that heavy internet use can actually isolate younger people. By unwittingly allowing time spent in online networks to replace face-to-face interactions with friends and family and spending much of their lives alone with a laptop or mobile phone, teenagers are missing out on vital real-world experiences that are simply not available in a virtual form. And, as with social interaction in the physical world, young people may also encounter 'cyber bullying', spite, isolation and other negative aspects (Kowalski et al. 2008). This growth in online interaction by young people raises moral concerns about their exposure to undesirable content and propositions. Unsupervised access to technology may mean that young people have access to materials and situations which would not otherwise be available to them.

> All the immoralities of physical life occur in virtual reality: censorship, lust for power, treason, stalking, lying, gossiping, peeping, stealing, cheating, seducing, breaking promises, insulting, and being unfaithful, unreliable, uncivilised or abusive. (Hamelink 2000)

It is helpful to consider the kinds of behavioural issues encountered by young people going online. Willard (1997) proposed a classification of these issues to include five main elements: respect for property, respect for territory and privacy, respect for others, respect for institution and respect for self. In analysing the legal, ethical and moral issues associated with these elements, there are opposing views as to whether these are just old issues in new dimensions or old and new issues (Hamelink 2000). Respect for property includes copyrights. By downloading music and other media and infringing copyright, individuals will commonly rationalise that this inappropriate use of technology is not the same as stealing because nothing was taken. A young person, exposed to the easy temptation of illegal downloads of music and films, having made the decision to go ahead and create what is in effect a huge library of stolen media, may very possibly be someone who would never dream of stealing anything in 'real life'.

As young people are experimenting with new environments and exploring the boundaries of behaviour, so the digital context adds a multiplier effect through anonymity, pseudonymity, ease of manipulation, outreach and, of course, speed.

As regards social relationships in cyberspace, the distance from victims makes it much easier for people to act in different ways than they would in face-to-face situations where the consequences of their actions are visible. To give some examples: multi-player games such as World of Warcraft allow young people to assume an online character–avatar of their own creation and to wander their chosen realm in bands seeking out challenges or 'instances' and grouping together with up to 40 people to form a 'raid'. Normal, accepted Warcraft banter contains overt racism, homophobia and slurs from people who would never use such language in the 'real world'. Internet communities such as World of Warcraft set their own norms and standards through Acceptable Use Policies (AUPs) defining the rules and duties to which members must adhere. These are typically around areas such as privacy, personal identities, access and control of the network, pornographic or unwanted messages and copyright. But does participation in online games such as these, even with AUPs in place, have an impact on the behaviour of young people? In her work exploring the issues surrounding rights and responsibilities online, Charman-Anderson (2006) reported that there is always a lag between the introduction of new technology and the development of a set of social norms around the behaviour that the technology encourages.

Implications for educators

Teachers have always aimed to meet the learning needs of young people. This is formally recognised during the teacher training period within the Professional Standards for Qualified Teacher Status. Threaded throughout these standards is the expectation that in their planning, teaching and general conduct teachers will start from their knowledge of the child in creating effective personalised provision (Q10 Range of teaching and learning strategies, Q18 Influences on child development, Q19 Personalised provision).

The inclusion of personalisation in the current Professional Standards (2006) is as a major theme of public service reform and one of the principles informing the Labour Government's *Five year strategy for children and learners* published in 2004. At whole-school level, this means putting the learner at the centre and moulding around the child a system that has high expectations of each individual.

The *Five year strategy* placed personalisation as the unifying link between a range of educational policies, including: the National Strategies; Gifted and Talented; Special Educational Needs Strategy; Workforce Reform; 14–19 Strategy; Building Schools for the Future; and Every Child Matters. This was to address the Department for Education and Skills' five key components of personalised learning: assessment for learning; effective teaching and learning; curriculum entitlement and choice; school organisation; and beyond the classroom.

An approach taken by some schools anxious to deliver on the personalisation agenda (Tomlinson 2004) was to explore ways of allowing children to progress at their own rate through school, and, unsurprisingly, technology was seen as a potential way to support learners in guiding them through new material as and when they are ready to move on. The then Education Secretary Charles Clarke announced that schools were to be given more freedom to spend money on ICT specifically to support the drive for personalised learning. Enthusiasts held up a vision of schools as online communities, with virtual learning experiences and lessons delivered remotely by experts at a time to suit, and pupils able to design their own lessons to suit their individual needs. There seemed to be an assumption that by purchasing a 'Virtual Learning Environment', pupils in school – the super-communicating, multitasking, so-called 'digital natives' (Prensky 2001) – would take in their stride the shifting focus of their education to beyond the four walls of their traditional classroom.

Online learning is an approach wherein the aptitudes, attitudes, expectations and learning styles of children reflect the environment in which they were raised. It is also one that it is markedly different from the experience of teachers in

growing up (Oblinger & Oblinger 2005). Given that we know that much online activity outside school is unsupervised, that young people are dealing with and responding to issues without the support and guidance of parents and other adults, by making the connectivity of new technologies an integral part of the school curriculum, we may be doing our children and young people a disservice. While teenagers are more connected to the world at large than ever before, they are more cut off from the social encounters that have traditionally prepared young people for adulthood. Teachers need to pay close attention to group processes. Establishing a cohesive group that works productively together takes a large investment of time and effort from all parties and is likely to be strategically abandoned at pressured times. Even if the group seems to be working well, not all individuals may contribute equally or certain individuals may be frozen out. The assessment of a task could include an opportunity for reflection on the group process according to specified criteria. In this way the teacher can be alerted to issues and the pupil can still achieve even within a dysfunctional group.

Although the above seems little different to the demands of managing traditional group work, the teacher must create the virtual classroom with the same care as the traditional one. New technologies are both interactive and passive mediums. Both watching TV and surfing the web can be solitary activities, but the latter does allow for the possibility of communicating and interacting with other people, the teacher and the learning material. Interaction, activity and individualisation are all seen as beneficial to education and to keeping learners engaged. But how will this collaborative work and these online interactions impact on young people? How can teachers and parents, who are probably less technically competent and less familiar with the online environment, support these young people?

In her review of moral development research, Willard (1997) raised significant questions for parents and educators around raising the level of internalised empathy and internal moral orientation of young people. Moral development issues are identified around respect for law and standards; the ability to engage in moral reasoning; moral motivation and self-control.

Conclusion

Teachers need to form an understanding of the development of children's moral reasoning in the information age. It is through interaction with others that young people develop their framework for reasoning about moral issues, and, as established by Piaget and Kohlberg, these interactions are shaped by the child's level of cognitive development. In the case of teenagers and young people who are communicating online, this is an environment where there is little affective feedback from the other person. With fewer or no visual signs and a physical distance between the young person and the consequences of their actions, there is less chance that they will develop a clear understanding of a clear cause-and-effect relationship. It is therefore important that teachers become familiar with the online environment, where online social conventions may be different to the 'real world'. In this way the level of internalised empathy will be raised, and respect, moral reasoning and self-control will be developed so that young people's actions are guided internally. This will allow them to participate and thrive in an environment that seemingly allows or even encourages the disengagement of moral control.

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