Cyberbullying: Proactively dealing with a 21st century problem

Abstract
In our changing educational system with increased emphasis on online classes, students need to feel as comfortable and safe in those environments as they do in on campus classes. Our institutions may have policies to protect on campus students from harassing and threatening behavior, but what about in the online environment? How can we take existing policies and modify them to include provisions for the online environment? Two colleagues recount a "cyberbullying" experience from the Fall of ‘04 with suggestions for preventing and prohibiting such behavior before it affects the members of the online community.

Precipitating Events
"I certainly hope our private email exchanges did not find their way to staff members in your department. If I find out that you have in any way compromised my ability to get my certificate I will come after you."

"Exactly how did I break the [on-line] code [of conduct] in a private email? I stated facts is all. If this is abusive then I would hate to see your reaction to something real."

The above are quotes from a student enrolled in online classes during the Fall of 2004. These hostile exchanges came as a part of a repeated barrage of email to both the course instructor and the chair of the department in response merely to offers of help. Fortunately, the online course instructor had an Online Code of Conduct in place which allowed prompt denial of access to the online course ("Developing an online 'code of conduct', AACE Journal, 13(2), 127-136). Unfortunately, it took several weeks for the student to be removed from all classes due to an unwillingness to meet on campus with administrators. During this time between denial and removal, the student sent daily, harassing email messages to both the instructor and administrator.

Background
Online classes have become a reality of our worldwide culture. CLO NewsCenter reports that Capella University, an online learning provider, predicts online enrollment in the United States is to increase by 900 percent over the past two years. Additionally, it is expected to involve three quarters of a million students in fully online instruction by the end of this year (Demand for E-Learning, 2003). With such tremendous growth in the number of students enrolled in online classes, it is important not only to examine the technological infrastructure and issues of student support but policies that affect students as well. Are student codes of conduct and AUPs (Acceptable Use Policies) contained in most undergraduate and graduate catalogues enough to protect online classrooms? Do such umbrella policies currently exist in academic environments offering online classes? Would instructors and administrators at your institution have policies in place today to protect you and your students should an incident such
as that described above occur at your institution? What if the student lived in another state…or another country?

It is the authors’ contention that without specific policies in place to protect the virtual safety of an online classroom environment, a cyberbully’s words could be used to disrupt or even terrorize an online class (Chronicle of Higher Education, June 2005). If the promise of "safety" does not extend to the online environment, students may become just as fearful of the virtual environment as they might be in an on campus setting following an episode of violence. After this incident, both the instructor and administrator were determined to discover if campus-wide policies for online class conduct were in place at other institutions. If not, what types of information would need to be included in such a policy to afford protection for instructors and students against harassing students while still affording that student due process.

**Research and Results**

Immediate and unequivocal policies are needed that allow the removal of any student who has harassed or threatened students and administrators—whether online or on campus. Our current vague timelines and slow processes may allow a perpetrator’s behavior to continue and thus send the wrong message that cyberbullying, harassment and threats of violence are tolerated.

The presenters will discuss current issues in dealing with cyberbullying in online classrooms, findings of research conducted to determine if there are policies in place at various institutions specifically designed for online learners, and now to develop policies such as an Online Code of Conduct for both individual classrooms and campus-wide settings.