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Cyberbullying: Taking Control through Research-Based Letter Writingdents

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Cyberbullying: Taking Control through Research-Based Letter Writing

Through a letter exchange, students inform preservice teachers about the dangers of cyberbullying.

According to a 2009 AP-MTV survey of 1,247 people ages 14–24, 50% of those surveyed have experienced cyberbullying (Gatti 1). Victims were twice as likely to need help from a mental health professional and were three times more likely to drop out of school than those surveyed who did not report being cyberbullied (5).

Given this alarming social context and in light of the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for ELA/Literacy, we—Maureen (a high school English teacher) and Vicky (a teacher educator)—decided to collaborate on a standards-based writing assignment that gives adolescent students strategies to use when they experience bullying in cyberspace and that helps prepare content-area teachers to address this issue. All teachers can use writing to help students examine their role in preventing bullying. This article describes our cyberbullying lesson, which is discussed in more detail in our book, *Getting to the Core of English Language Arts, Grades 6–12: How to Meet the Common Core State Standards with Lessons from the Classroom.*

The Cyberbullying Letter Project at the High School Level

Students in Maureen's tenth-grade class addressed the topic of cyberbullying by writing research-based letters to preservice teachers in Vicky's class. This assignment was inspired by their reading of *The Chocolate War.* In the novel, there is a group of bullies called The Vigils who intimidate other stu-dents physically and emotionally. One of the most disturbing aspects of the story is that the group operates with the silent permission of the headmaster and the willingness of teachers to look the other way. Maureen's students agreed that the adults in the novel should have tried to do more to help the victims of The Vigils. With that thought in mind, they turned to the timely and relevant issue of cyberbullying. What should schools be doing to address it?

When the conversation about cyberbullying began in the tenth-grade classroom, some students were passionate about addressing the problem, while others voiced frustration regarding this issue, saying things like "it's just a fact of life now" or "people who are bullied need to get a thicker skin." This attitude of blaming the victim shifted for many when they focused on the high-stakes consequences of cyberbullying by watching the ABC News coverage of the story of Megan Meier on You-Tube. Megan Meier was courted on Myspace by a seemingly charming boy. This cyber love story fell apart after the boy posted disparaging comments on her wall. Megan was so distraught over this that she killed herself. It was later revealed that the boy was a personality that was invented by the mother of a classmate of Megan's.

Maureen's students were outraged at this adult's behavior. When she asked how Megan's case was different from other cyberbullying cases, they explained that the bully was an adult and that they expect adults to be responsible. The next question Maureen had to ask was, "How do people learn re-

sponsibility?" Clearly, there is a need for teachers and parents to teach young people about acceptable and responsible cyber practices and about how to cope with cyberbullying.

High School Students Write Letters

After establishing a genuine need for this lesson, students conducted research on the topic. Sadly, several cases of cyberbullying have been prominent in recent news such as those of Tyler Clemente, Phoebe Prince, and Alexis Pilkington. In addition to investigating the tragic outcomes of cyberbullying, students researched why a person would act as a cyberbully, the best ways to respond to cyberbullies, and the best steps for adults to take regarding this issue. It is interesting to note that conducting this research opened some students' eyes to the fact that they themselves were either victims or engaged in some form of cyberbullying behavior.

The students used their research to write letters to preservice teachers in Vicky's class, informing them of the harmful effects of cyberbullying and offering advice as to how to address this issue. Each letter began with students stating their name, age, grade level, and purpose for writing the letter. They also discussed their personal connections to cyberbullying. In addition, they included at least three startling facts about the topic from their research. Most students included more.

In researching and writing to inform their audience, the students taught themselves. The level of knowledge regarding this topic increased even more when they shared their letters with one another for peer response. The students worked hard to create strong letters because they knew that their work would be read, not only by their teacher for a grade but also by the authentic audience in Vicky's class. This purposeful assignment yielded meaningful, research-based writing.

In his letter, Juan M. wrote:

> The bullies vary because anyone can be a bully in the cyber world . . . it is shown that 48% of victims do not know who their bullies even are, due to anonymous messages. Almost 50% of cyber bullies are currently friends with the victim, so even your best friend can be the bully. This is why you must be careful on the internet. Also 55% of cyberbullies have told adults that they physi-

cally bully as well (Hayes 1). Not only are they tormenting people through the computer, but they are also hurting others physically or verbally. Therefore this is why schools are starting to set more serious consequences and take action.

To conclude her letter, Karen M. wrote, "Nobody deserves to go through being harassed, teased, being looked down upon, or humiliated. And if you have been a victim or if you're going through this, **know** that there is a solution to all of this if it's handled right. . . . I promise you it will come to an **end**."

Juan's and Karen's words reflect concern and determination to raise awareness about an issue that matters to them. Both letters contain startling statistics, but moreover, they relay a sense of urgency and a need to take steps to empower victims and inform adults who may be able to take action. According to the high school students' letters, teachers can encourage their students to stop negative behaviors in class

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and do something positive instead. They can also educate parents about cyberbullying and suggest ways to deter cyberbullying, which include monitoring their children's use of social networking, talking with their children about cyberbullying, and encouraging their children to ask for help if they are being bullied.

Maureen used a simple grading checklist to assess the students' writing. However, the true measure of their work was the anticipated impact of their letters on the preservice teachers. After submitting the letters, students frequently asked about receiving a response from the preservice teachers. They were eager to hear what these adults thought of their work.

The Cyberbullying Letter Project at the Graduate Level

The purpose of the cyberbullying assignment at the graduate level was to make preservice teachers aware of how cyberbullying affects students and to help both teachers and students find ways

to prevent harmful behaviors. Preservice teachers were asked to read the high school students' letters, select one, and write a reply letter to the student author. They were also required to write a reflection on the letter-writing in which they discussed their reactions to the letters and how their perceptions about cyberbullying and about teaching cyberbullying prevention changed or were reinforced. The preservice teachers also considered the challenges of teaching digital natives when they are digital immigrants themselves. They developed strategies of using reading to teach cyberbullying prevention in their classrooms since the mandatory course for state teaching certification, in which they were enrolled, focuses on literacy in the content areas.

Preservice Teachers' Reply Letters

In their reply letters addressed to the high schools students, preservice content-area teachers expressed their interest in the information provided about cyberbullying as well as their appreciation for the sincere tone in which the letters were written. One preservice teacher wrote that the letter had a "huge impact" on the way he views cyberbullying. Others wrote that the facts about cyberbullying opened their eyes to what students are experiencing in this age in which technology is being used as the detached medium for people to express cruelty. One of the facts that surprised preservice teachers was that cyberbullying is carried out by friends or former friends of the victims.

> **Preservice teachers were asked to read the high school students' letters, select one, and write a reply letter to the student author.**

Preservice teachers found the students' tips for cyberbullying prevention helpful. Rachel wrote that it is her duty as an educator to create a safe environment for her learners and inform her students about cyberbullying and its harmful effects. Madison applauded some of the suggestions:

> "Stop, block, and tell" is a phrase that I will use in teaching my students ways to protect themselves against cyberbullying. Understanding that a teenager's daily goal is to not be embarrassed, your approach to stopping bullying seems both logical and effective. Telling your friends and peers will have a profound impact on the bully and hopefully put them in their place.

Preservice Teachers' Reflections

Preservice teachers reported that their perceptions of cyberbullying and of teaching cyberbullying prevention changed after reading the letters by the students. They admitted that they might have overlooked this critical issue. For example, Madison wrote:

> I had not planned on teaching cyberbullying prevention in my social studies classes; however after reading these compelling letters, I feel as though I definitely should. Students may not get the training to prevent and deal with bullying anywhere else. I would teach cyberbullying from a historical approach, concentrating on the impact it has had on society, how bullying in general has evolved, and what it says about our society.

Preservice teachers came up with some innovative ways to integrate cyberbullying prevention into their content-area classes. For example, Jake suggested that in his social studies class, he would have students examine the bullying behaviors of many important figures throughout time and how they have affected history and society. Madison suggested that she would use primary sources to teach how bullying-related events affect society; these primary sources can include "diary entries of students who have used violence in school shootings, blogs and posts of individuals who have been victims of bullying . . . pictures that have been altered by bullies . . . video accounts and news clips of school shootings and other acts of violence." In an English class, Rachel would assign *Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult (Atria, 2007) and involve parents in a campaign against bullying. Jane suggested that in her science class, students would examine the psychological and chemical effects of cyberbullying on the bullies and on the victims.

In their reflections, preservice teachers also addressed the challenges of teaching what Marc Prensky calls digital natives—those who have used technology all their lives and thus have thinking patterns that naturally align with a technology-rich world—when teachers, themselves, are digital *immigrants*—those who adopted the use of technology later in life and therefore must develop thinking patterns to align with those of their students (1). One preservice teacher, Madison, suggested that "through proper research and training, even novices can learn

how to help students who may become victims of cyberbullying and bullying in general . . . teachers are going to have to try and stay a step ahead of the bullies." Rose commented that two of the biggest challenges that she, as a digital immigrant, faces are the unfamiliar technical language and the inability to catch up to the changing trends of technology. These challenges deter teachers from connecting with their students who are both adept at using technology and up-to-date with new technological tools.

Benefits of the Cyberbullying Letter Project

We note several benefits of the cyberbullying letter-writing project:

- Connecting the themes of high school reading with current social issues allows adolescent learners to explore cyberbullying as it is discussed in texts (literary and informational). Students make text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections that deepen their understanding of the topic and empower them to take action.

- Developing high school students' literacy skills through rich, high-level CCSS-based activities. Students read a novel and analyze how characters and events develop in the story and how the author's point of view shapes the content (Reading Literature [RL] 2; RL 3). They engage in online research, read closely, and analyze complex articles about the topic of cyberbullying (Writing [W] 7; W 9). Through process writing, students draw from sources to produce clear and coherent research-based letters appropriate for the audience of preservice teachers (W 4; W 5). These letters explain the issue of cyberbullying and how it applies to them (W 2).

- Familiarizing preservice teachers with the new standards and how they can design lessons aligned with the CCSS for literacy that address a real issue and incorporate content reading and writing activities.

- Raising content teachers' awareness of cyberbullying and offering them strategies for dealing with this serious issue in their own classrooms. It might even change their perceptions of how cyberbullying behaviors can negatively impact society and what their role should be in prevention.

- Allowing for high school and college collaboration that seeks to address the issue of cyberbullying at both levels. Preservice teachers view the issue from the perspective of the students, which will affect the way they teach the topic. Preservice teachers also examine the writing of the students, which gives them a glimpse into the quality of student writing they may be encountering when they begin teaching. When high school students read the reply letters, they see the perspective of the preservice teachers.

As their lives become more infused with technology, one of our tasks is to keep students safe by helping them to make positive choices about how they interact with one another digitally and in person. We must provide guidance for how to cope with those who use technology in harmful ways. The cyberbullying letters project is a step toward that end because it informs the students who write the letters and the preservice teachers who receive the letters. We hope to call attention to the triggers of pain, anxiety, and fear that hide behind a computer screen. Students and teachers need to regain control of their technology-based social interactions, so students can make positive use of technology spaces without fear. 🎔

Note

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION   Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In "Communicating on Local Issues: Exploring Audience in Persuasive Letter Writing," students brainstorm a list of local issues and research an issue that concerns them, using Internet and print sources. Next, students review the concepts of purpose and audience. They then argue a position on their selected issue in letters to two different audiences, addressing their own purpose and considering the needs of the audience in each letter. Students work with peer groups as they use an online tool to draft and revise their letters. Finally, students publish their letters using an online, interactive Letter Generator and send them to their intended recipients. http://www.readwrite think.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/communicating-local-issues-exploring-945.html