Storytelling as a Liminal Space: A Narrative-Based Participatory Intervention for Addressing Cyberbullying Among Adolescents

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Abstract Cyberbullying in the adolescent years can have a devastating impact on mental health and the social and emotional development of teens. Responses to the issue have been widespread. While many whole school programmes include elements such as role modelling, few interventions appear to use a participatory approach with adolescents. This chapter considers the use of narrative based participatory approaches that capture and utilise the student voice. It is suggested that these approaches be added as creative, complementary components of whole school anti-bullying programmes. Drawing on Turner's concept of liminality and Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed model, we propose a creative process that places the adolescent voice at the centre of anti-bullying initiatives and advocate for a return to the development of more bottom-up approaches to school-based interventions. In line with United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Articles 12 and 13, we suggest that adopting a participatory approach that invites and supports adolescents to tell their own stories is an opportunity for schools to give voice to students and to consult them in making decisions about themselves. The practice of drawing on students' own stories and personal accounts can have a cathartic and empowering effect on participants. We contend that such an approach may provide more powerful points of entry to discussions on cyberbullying, and ultimately a more transformative experience for participants, than that offered by approaches that preclude the student voice or by participatory approaches that require less creative input and less social and emotional investment.

Keywords: *Cyberbullying, Intervention, Narrative, Liminal, Adolescents, Voice.*

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1. Introduction

Emerging data show that cyberbullying is an increasing concern among parents and teachers and that there is a need for new interventions to be developed to support them in educating children and young people about this issue (O'Moore, 2009; O'Higgins Norman and Connolly, 2011). Thus, many schools in Ireland and elsewhere are struggling to develop appropriate pedagogical responses to cyberbullying. In this striving, the importance of self-expression and creativity as a

means of coping for young people may have been overlooked. Initiatives that promote student voice can lead to improvements in school climate, including a reduction in bullying behaviour (Voight, 2015). Adopting a narrative based participatory approach to tackling cyberbullying enables schools to offer a creative and inclusive intervention that values student perspectives and promotes student voice. It provides a platform for young people to voice their concerns and allows them to discover and recommend ways to overcome cyberbullying and deal with its negative effects.

Drama based initiatives have been linked to positive coping and emotional regulation for children and adolescents, in addition to increased empathy, social skills, empowerment and self-knowledge (Joronen, Konu, Rankin, & Astedt-Kurki, 2012; Lee, Patall, Cawthon, & Steingut, 2015; Moneta & Rousseau, 2008; Wright et al., 2006). Using drama to express feelings/emotions and to practice coping skills could provide a safe and applied space to act and reflect on realistic and/or difficult life events (Burton, 2010). As such, drama-based initiatives have the potential to create real change in terms of the prevention of and interventions countering cyberbullying. In this sense, drama allows for participants to get a feel for 'reality' from a range of perspectives and thus to learn empathy, problem solving and social skills (Burton, 2010; Flemming 1998), all of which are elements that have been shown to be useful in other school-based cyberbullying programmes (Ttofi & Farrington, 2010; Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013). Drama approaches have been used in the public health literature targeting attitude changes to a range of health behaviours (Joronen, Rankin, & Åstedt-Kurki, 2008). Indeed, some existing anti-bullying interventions have included elements of drama (e.g., Salmivalli et al., 2005), although their unique utility in the context of cyberbullying is relatively under-researched.

2. Adolescents, Cyberspace and Narrative as Liminal

There is growing evidence to suggest the effectiveness of arts-based interventions in supporting the personal, social and emotional development of children and young people in areas such as self-awareness, self-esteem and resilience (Coholic, 2011, Elliott, 2011), health and well-being (Staricoff, 2004; Atkinson and Robson, 2012), and self-confidence, empowerment and identity (Chandler 1999; Howell 2008). In addition, some recent studies highlight the potential of the creative arts to engage and enhance educational outcomes for all students but especially vulnerable youth (Lorenzi and White, 2014; Scholes & Nagel, 2012; Leckey, 2011). Cognisant of the appeal *and* effectiveness of arts-based initiatives in youth education, we consider the potential of arts-based programmes in tackling cyberbullying. We propose a narrative based intervention that focuses on tackling cyberbullying through prevention, detection, intervention and aftercare. Advocating a participatory, democratic and inclusive approach, it draws on the student voice as a means of self-expression, as a means of therapeutic dialogue, as a means of intervention and as a means of awareness raising among the school community.

Combining the narrative forms of drama and storytelling we put forward a programme aimed at exploring young people's perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying and their ideas on how to combat it. Rooted in the field of participatory arts practice, our programme adopts an artist led creative process that invites participants on an artistic journey that explores issues of immediate relevance to their shared community. Adhering to the principles and practices of the participatory arts, we use arts-based methods to facilitate young people in identifying and implementing a range of ideas and strategies to help them and others tackle cyberbullying. Fostering positive relationships and creating an environment of mutual trust and respect that enables a meaningful exchange of ideas, therapeutic dialogue and critical reflection is an integral part of this process. Integrating individual and collective storytelling with a selection of Forum Theatre techniques adapted from Boal's (2000, 2002) Theatre of the Oppressed model, the intervention comprises a twofold process that places the student voice at its core. In the first phase of the intervention, we examine narrative as a liminal space where young people can experience *communitas* – solidarity and togetherness based on shared human experiences – through the ritual of storytelling. The second phase presents narrative as a liminal space, a space of transition and possibility, where inhabitants have the opportunity to encounter 'other', let go of previous views (Land, Rattray and Vivian, 2014), and begin to conceive of themselves in a new light. In this regard, we posit that using role-play to prevent or tackle cyberbullying can achieve similar benefits to those derived from using role-play to prevent or tackle face-to-face bullying (Carney and Merrell, 2001; Milsom & Gallo, 2006; Chaux et al 2016).

We consider Turner's (1964) conceptualisation of liminality, as a state of in-between-ness, to be a suitable framework for examining the three core entities of our intervention: cyberspace; adolescents; and narrative, all of which, we argue, can be viewed in liminal terms. Adopting the view that liminality is applicable to time, space and subject (Thomassen, 2009), we see liminality as a unifying concept that helps us to understand the phenomenon of cyberbullying, the challenges facing adolescents in cyberspace, and the advantages of narrative as a creative and effective intervention in tackling cyberbullying and promoting positive online behaviour. Moreover, our use of a bottom up creative response reflects Turner's notion of 'anti-structure' as liminal, in contrast to social structure (status, power, top-down authority), and his view that 'the greater the powerlessness, the greater the need for positive anti-structural activities, which he styled *communitas* (positive community activities)' (Bigger, 2009, p. 210). Finally, the use of arts-based interventions in schools can, as Atkinson and Robson (2012) posit, be seen as liminal practice in that they are often artist-led outside of the curriculum initiatives that occur within the school and outside the everyday routine of the classroom where students enter a distinct time, space and set of activities designed to result in personal transformation. We begin with a brief discussion of liminality and an analysis of how it applies to cyberspace, adolescents and narrative, before turning our attention to how the participatory narrative forms of storytelling and drama can be used to co-create anti-bullying interventions with young people.

A somewhat abstract concept, the term liminal, derived from the Latin *limen* meaning 'threshold', was originally used by the anthropologist van Gennep (1909) to describe the middle stage in a rite of passage that marks a milestone transition from one social status to another. It was later developed by Turner (1964) to include all in-between phases or temporary states of upheaval that involve being on a threshold or in-between one state or space and another. Turner was interested in how liminal experiences affect people in modern society, 'the way in which personality was shaped by liminality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience' (Thomassen, 2009, p. 14). While liminality originated in the field of anthropology, a modern-postmodern paradigm shift has seen the concept being interpreted and applied in a wide range of fields and contexts far beyond van Gennep's original meaning and indeed Turner's later intention. Applying the concept of liminality to adolescents, cyberspace and narrative may contribute to a deeper understanding of how liminal spaces and experiences, as places of transition and possibility can protect, support and advance the development of liminal beings, those who may be perceived as in-between, as they transition from one state to another.

There are several references in the literature to support our various applications of the concept. For instance, Cousin (2006), Elmore (2009), and Land, Rattray and Vivian (2014), all refer to adolescents as liminal beings. Neither child nor adult, they hover in the 'in-between' as they shift from one status to another, '"no longer" and simultaneously also "not yet"' (Wels et al, 2011, p. 1). In Turnerian terms, they are 'neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (Turner, 1969, p. 95).

Cyberspace can also be considered a liminal space as it too is 'neither here nor there', 'betwixt and between': it is a hybrid of reality and virtual reality that enables users to inhabit two worlds at once and therefore experience a dual identity. This dissolution of fixed identities and the formation of hybrid identities and interchangeable roles is characteristic of Turner's concept of liminality where social structures become fluid and *becoming* takes over *being*. Others have viewed cyberspace as a liminal space which supports and enables users to form a new identity as they transition from one life stage to another, such as students *becoming* newly qualified teachers (Cook-Sather, 2006), or women *becoming* new mothers (Madge and O'Connor, 2005). The reconceptualization of cyberspace as a liminal space allows us to view it as a distinct time and place where people leave their everyday reality and enter a space to engage in activities that allow them to take on a new identity. The anonymity of online identities can cause a transformation in users' attitudes and behaviour that results in a shift in behaviour and status underscored by what Terry and Jeff (2016) call online disinhibition effect. This is particularly true in the case of young people who cyberbully, who in some instances may assume a different persona and adopt a set of behaviours that differ from those they may consider acceptable elsewhere in face-to-face situations. Land, Rattray and Vivian's (2014) observation that the liminal space can be seen as a creative space 'where things become fluid' captures the notion that for many young people, reality and cyberspace have become fluid and the encounters and existences they experience in one sphere frequently spill into the other. It is in this context of liminality as a creative, fluid space and liminality as a threshold between two worlds that we also perceive narrative as a liminal space.

Like cyberspace, storytelling, as Curteis (2010, p.156) notes, stimulates a dual consciousness that enables participants to experience two worlds simultaneously: 'Storytelling or hearing stories told places us on a threshold between two worlds: the world of our physical sense experience and the world of the story—this phenomenon of straddling two

sets of consciousness is a liminal space'. This dimension of storytelling offers a powerful means of accessing and exploring inner thoughts and feelings. It offers a space where young people can examine their experience through a fictional lens. For example, the young person who has been cyberbullied has the opportunity to express his or her experiences and feelings at a 'safe' distance from reality; the young person who cyberbullies can also explore his/her inner thoughts and feelings and perhaps discover motivations behind their behaviour; bystanders can consider their role and perhaps see new ways of reacting and responding to bullying behaviour. In line with guidelines for good practice in participatory arts in healthcare (White, 2010), it is imperative that students' well-being is protected and that the common principles and values that govern engagement with participants in participatory arts practices inform the planning, delivery and evaluation of this intervention. The use of role-play as a pedagogical approach for enhancing learning through emotional engagement while still providing a safe learning environment is well documented in the drama in education literature (Bolton, 1992; Bolton and Heathcote, 1999; Heyward, 2010). Role-play enables students to engage emotionally in the fictional world of the narrative and creates opportunities for genuine educational encounters (Courtney, 1988). Navigating the borders of fiction and reality requires considerable skill. Appropriate strategies, such as the use of clear signifiers indicating the beginning and ending of the narrative, and a clear understanding that a character's words and actions do not have any repercussions in the real-world, help create a safe space (Heyward, 2010).

Drama invites participants to engage in an imaginary world, enabling them to explore and experience an issue or event in a way that distances participants from their everyday reality. It generates 'a homogeneous social state in which participants are stripped of their usual status and authority' (McLaren, 1988, p. 165), allowing them the freedom to think and act differently. This imaginary world is a liminal space where social norms are temporarily suspended, risks can be taken and alternative behaviours can be played out. Turner identifies ritual and performance as agents of liminality that open up an in-between space, a space that is in-between the present and the future, where the norms of culture can be changed and broken by the actors (Hawkins and Georgakopolous, 2010) and *communitas*, collaborative positive action inspired by the needs of the community, is achieved (Schechner, 2003). Occupying the dual role of performer and observer, students inhabit two worlds at once; simultaneously experiencing and reflecting on their own actions and the actions of others, discovering new ways of approaching a situation and finding new ways of dealing with issues that arise. The self-confidence participants gain from this experience can have a liberating effect that transforms their outlook, so when they return from the liminal to their everyday reality, they return with a fresh perspective and a new-found confidence that inspires and empowers them to change their behaviour and actions.

3. The Intervention

Research continuously shows that interventions aimed at tackling bullying must be located within a whole-school approach (O'Higgins Norman & Sullivan, 2018) and that cyberbullying among young people usually relates to off-line relationships (Gleeson, 2014). As such then, in proposing our intervention, we are faced with a two-fold challenge. Firstly, it is unlikely that there will be a suitably qualified teacher in every school who can introduce and use forum theatre as a method of tackling cyberbullying which means that schools will have to engage external experts who can roll out a programme over a number of weeks. However, our second problem is that the use of external experts can be undermining of a whole-school approach if they are not directly connected to the rest of a school's efforts to tackle cyberbullying (Department of Education and Skills, 2013). So, in order to overcome these challenges, we recommend that if it is necessary to use an external individual to deliver the intervention, it is equally necessary to ensure that s/he works with school leaders, teachers and parents in the school to ensure that the intervention is closely related to and augments their ongoing work on cyberbullying.

3.1. Phase One: Storytelling as Voice-giving

The narrative approach put forward here begins with a series of creative writing storytelling workshops that enables adolescents to creatively engage with the subject of cyberbullying. Through the medium of creative writing, the programme invites participants to create fictional stories of cyberbullying from various perspectives including someone who is bullied, someone who bullies, or a bystander. Each workshop begins with an artist led group activity that provides a stimulus for writing and encourages students to work individually and collaboratively in response to a group exercise. Creating a fictionalised account of a cyberbullying scenario distances participants from any real-life experiences they may have had and affords them an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings on bullying or being bullied in an indirect way through the creation of characters and storylines. Research in the field of psychotherapy highlights the therapeutic value of creative and expressive writing as an agent for self-expression (Wright, 2002; Baikie and Wlihelm, 2005). There is also evidence to suggest that engaging with narrative has a positive influence on young people's personal development. For example, Chandler (1999) suggests that writing is an act of empowerment that enables individuals to access self, imagination and voice and can contribute to the mental, emotional, and social development of the writer. Chandler (2002) also suggests that writing in a group using a specific approach facilitates emotional catharsis, increases self-knowledge, coping strategies, and understanding and appreciation of others. Similarly, Howell (2008) argues that creative writing promotes personal and social development and offers students opportunities to develop civic awareness and responsibility through the exploration of social and moral issues. Weinstein (2010), on the other hand, identifies self-confidence, positive self-identity, community building, therapeutic benefits, and respect for peers and adults as benefits of youth spoken word poetry.

These findings are encouraging and offer hope that the use of narrative can empower and encourage adolescents to use their imagination to consider issues such as cyberbullying in a new light and from alternative viewpoints. Furthermore, given that cyberbullying is predominantly an issue that affects young people, adolescents' perspectives on the topic may generate further potential solutions and areas for discussion, including those not previously considered by teachers or parents.

3.2. Phase Two: Forum Theatre as Voice-giving and Awareness Raising

Augusto Boal's (2000, 2002) Theatre of the Oppressed model comprises of three forms: Image Theatre, Invisible Theatre and Forum Theatre; the latter of these is the focus of this intervention. Others (see for example, Donovan, 2005; Gourd and Gourd, 2011; Bhukhanwala, 2014; Ross and Nelson 2014) have used Boal's model to tackle face-to-face bullying. Here, we look at how this approach can be extrapolated and used as a potential tool in the context of tackling cyberbullying among young people. Theatre of the Oppressed, as the name suggests, is greatly influenced by Boal's Brazilian counterpart Pablo Freire and his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Boal's work is also greatly inspired by the German theatre practitioner and playwright Bertolt Brecht and his use of Epic Theatre to stimulate a thinking, enquiring response that would incite audiences to action (Brecht, 1964). Like Brecht and Freire, Boal believed that the oppressed must free themselves and that transformation can only come about when the oppressed realise their capacity to transform reality. While Freire sought to awaken critical consciousness through education, Boal chose to do so through theatre which he, like Brecht and Turner, viewed as a powerful catalyst for change that has the capacity to draw attention to the fact that alternative courses of action exist and, therefore, 'to alert audiences to the contradictory, alterable course of history' (Brooker, 2006, 221). Keen to place this power in the hands of the oppressed, Boal brought theatre to the prisons, hospitals, schools, factories and slums of Latin America where his work saw audiences became active participants in the creation of theatre. As Jackson points out in the introduction to Boal's (2002) *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, 'It is fundamental to Boal's work that anyone can act… The dual meaning of the word 'act', to perform and to take action, is also at the heart of his work' (p. xxii). Boal insisted that everyone is 'at one and the same time, actor and spectator' or what he termed *spect-actor* (2002, p. 15). It is in this liminal space between spectator and actor that new discoveries are made and transformation becomes possible.

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There are various ways in which Boal's Forum Theatre model can be approached but typically it revolves around the use of re-enacted scenario-based narratives devised by a group of people examining an issue of immediate relevance to their lives. Initially when Boal devised the model, he visited oppressed communities with a troupe of professional actors who devised and performed a short play based on the shared stories and experiences of the said community. In later years, the model was adapted to accommodate participants in creating and performing their own plays and it has since been revised and adopted by others for a variety of purposes and in a range of contexts worldwide (Hawkins and Georgakopolous, 2010).

Typically, a forum theatre session begins with participants discussing and exchanging stories of their experiences and/or others' experiences of an issue concerning their community. Working in groups, participants agree a scenario based on one or more of the situations outlined in the stories they shared and work together to create a dramatic narrative that brings the story to life. In the case of this intervention, the scenarios can be derived from the short stories which have been written collaboratively by the group during Phase One. Using the outline of the scenario as a starting point, the participants agree on the components of the drama, decide how many characters are involved in the story, how many scenes are needed to tell the story, where and when each scene is set and who will play each part. The dialogue is improvised but as the message of the story and the purpose of each scene is clear in advance, participants usually find it relatively easy to role-play the situation. Boal stipulates that it is important that the story illustrates the oppression in action and the oppressed failing to overcome whatever obstacles are placed in his/her path. This then gives the audience an opportunity to examine the oppression and suggest possible strategies for dealing with the various instances of the oppression. After a short rehearsal, the scene(s) is performed and the audience watches the situation unfold. A brief dialogue follows. *The Joker* (Boalian term for facilitator/workshop leader) asks the audience to confirm if the story illustrates an example of oppression and if they can identify pivotal moments where they feel that a different response might change the course of action from what went before. Rather than discussing their suggestions, the audience members are asked to test out their ideas by participating in the drama. The audience then watch the performance for a second time. During the second performance audience members can intervene at any point by shouting 'STOP!'. The performers then 'freeze' and the audience member takes the place of the oppressed character. The action then resumes and the spect-actor implements his/her proposed strategy and the other performers respond in real time. Clearly the spect-actor thinks the intervention might work but until it is tested out and others respond, the outcome remains unknown. It usually becomes apparent fairly quickly whether the strategy is effective or not and it often takes numerous attempts before a successful intervention occurs. Other audience members can intervene at any stage and replace the current spect-actor in order to try out an alternative strategy. The scene is replayed several times and the action continues until a successful intervention has been identified. The Joker, familiar with effective and non-effective strategies for dealing with the issue in question, operates according to an agreed set of goals that should be achieved; and evaluates interventions based on that criteria. The Joker leads discussions on the effectiveness of each strategy and is responsible for indicating if a strategy might be considered '*magic*', a term Boal used to describe an unlikely or unrealistic response by the character in the context. It is important that the audience discusses the various strategies that were attempted; identify what each spect-actor attempted to do; debate whether or not it worked and suggest how it might be tweaked or handled differently altogether. Through questioning and dialogue, the Joker encourages the audience to identify and extrapolate the behaviour and attitude informing each intervention.

As the name suggests, Forum Theatre offers a platform for discussion but crucially it also offers a safe space – a liminal space – within the parameters of a fictionalised world where students have a voice and the opportunity to trial and test approaches and strategies that can subsequently be used to prompt action in the real world. In Boal's words, it is a 'rehearsal for reality' (2002, p. xxiv). Through participating in the drama, students imaginatively experience a social situation or issue and discover, as Heathcote (1968, p.49) puts it, 'how it feels to be in someone else's shoes'. Discoveries made through the drama allow them to develop empathy, tolerance, and understanding as they view the situation from multiple perspectives and gain insights into others' actions. This liminal experience allows their understanding of reality to change causing them to reflect on previously held views. By connecting experiences in the drama with experiences in their lives, participants develop more understanding about the challenges they face and the options available to them. Engaging in drama gives students a voice and an opportunity to choose new behaviours, experiment with possible strategies and conceive of a different reality. Reflecting on this experience allows them to consider how these actions might apply in real life. The realisation that the actions they chose and the strategies they discovered in the drama can inform their

choices and behaviour in real life is the first step towards awakening the critical consciousness that Brecht (1964) and Freire (1996) deemed essential for social change.

The intervention presented here brings the narrative forms of storytelling and drama together to create a liminal space that enables young people to work collaboratively and imaginatively to identify issues and find solutions that can bring about meaningful and positive change in their lives. There are a number of caveats which concern the successful implementation of the programme and increase the likelihood of a positive outcome. Chief among these is the need for a suitably qualified and experienced facilitator. An understanding and appreciation of the participatory arts and a willingness to trust in the integrity of the artistic process is a core principle of this intervention. The intervention requires a facilitator who has the skills to establish a safe, creative and playful space that supports and encourages openness, spontaneity and risk-taking. Gaining participants' confidence, trust and respect is key and it is vital that the facilitator has the capacity to build a dialogic relationship with students. It is also critical that the facilitator is familiar with productive and non-productive coping strategies to deal with cyberbullying, in order to ensure that students do not provide each other with non-productive advice.

It is further recommended that the intervention is carried out in small group settings that include a range of stakeholders from the school community. As this mix will consist of a random selection of adolescents and adults, it is most likely that participants will not have worked with each other in any capacity, least of all an artistic one. It is, therefore, essential that sessions begin with a range of warm up drama activities and creative exercises aimed at making participants comfortable with each other, and with this style of work. Boal (2002) advocates the use of games and exercises as a means of disinhibiting the spect-actors at the beginning of a Forum Theatre session. His inspiring work *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (2002) is an excellent resource for precisely this purpose.

4. Conclusion

The narrative approach adopted here is intended as a component of a whole school anti-bullying programme. It aims to build resilience and confidence among young people, to empower them in using social media with confidence, and to help them make decisions about how to interact based on empathetic values. In this chapter it is our aim to remind stakeholders of the possible use of existing approaches that have been developed in other contexts using role-play within a whole school approach. We know from previous research that the most successful programmes to tackle bullying generally are rooted in a whole-school approach (O'Higgins Norman et al 2010; O'Higgins Norman and Sullivan, 2017), and that role-play has been shown to be of use in a number of contexts characterised by conflict, so it is not unreasonable for us to postulate that combining these approaches to tackle cyberbullying may go some way to addressing the issue.

Cyberspace as a liminal space, narrative as a liminal experience, adolescence as a liminal period, and performance as a liminal activity, have been brought together in this chapter to examine how the interconnection of these four liminal phenomena might result in a creative, innovative intervention that is supportive, intuitive and empathetic to the transitions and transformations at play in the evolution of a young person's development as a kind, considerate user of social media. The generation of liminal spaces through arts-based initiatives enables schools to respond to negative behaviours in a positive and creative manner. In terms of a bottom up approach, the narrative based participatory approach put forward here promotes the implementation of democratic, inclusive practices that value voice, participation and engagement from all members of the school community including, crucially, those directly involved in and affected by cyberbullying.

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