

## Peer Education as a Means of Contrasting Cyberbullying and Online Violence. The Testimony of Young Protagonists.

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### Abstract

Educational work concerning the issue of online violence takes place at the frontier between generations and between virtual and real, a methodological frontier whose complexity we can only attempt to understand through the testimony of those involved. This paper proposes examples of a range of testimonies gathered through letter writing during peer education activities.

**Key words:** Online Violence, Cyberbullying, Peer Education, Testimony

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### **Nonviolent education projects**

Since 1982 the voluntary association Centro Studi Sereno Regis (CSSR) has been working to promote the culture of peace and nonviolence. The Centre's activities involve research, education and nonviolent action, each of which is an integral part of the pursuit of its mission. The research is intended as an intellectual space for deepening understanding of a holistic approach to peace, both in terms of the areas of human life that can involve nonviolence and of the attempt to deal with the phenomena of violence in their direct, cultural and structural forms. Education is the field of action for the endeavour to disseminate, create awareness and educate for a culture of peace and nonviolence, with approaches and methodologies that are in line with that aim. Schools are the principal environments in which this work is carried out. Nonviolent action is taking up a position, participating in processes of change, creating a space in which people can act to do something about the various forms of violence that surround us.

As with all our activities, the following educational projects involve an initial period of study and analysis, the educational activities proposed and a space in which the teenage girls and boys involved can act non-violently in order to bring about change.

### **Cyberbullying**

As of 2013 our Centre has been studying the question of online violence online and in particular the emergence of cyberbullying. This is a form of abuse which is voluntary and repeated so as to create a power relationship between perpetrator and victim in which the latter is unable to employ effective strategies in order to respond. It is different from more traditional forms of fully in that the medium used eliminates any possibility of activating an empathetic process and has no spatial or temporal boundaries. The contents can become viral and destroy the reputation of the person under attack both in distant places and times. In contrast to a to a direct gesture of bullying, cyberbullying appears even more de-responsabilizing for the perpetrator. It's only a shared video!

From our point of view, cyberbullying represents a group disfunction and cannot be resolved only by acting on bully and victim in the case of a particular episode of online violence. The phenomenon can only be understood in terms of its social dimension, building reciprocal roles that adolescents construct during their development phase. Thus our educational work is always

conducted at group level. New forms of cyberbullying evolve together with the emergence of new social media platforms that are ever more concerned with building self-image and thus increasingly prone to public ridicule.

### **Online hate**

In 2015 the phenomenon of hate speech began to emerge and attract our attention in terms of theory and educational praxis. The spread of intolerant discourse, the normalizing of denigrating and dehumanizing expressions - above all concerning minority groups, but also in general in terms of the other who has different opinions from mine - might seem a phenomenon that principally involves the adult world. In fact, however, this kind of language constitutes a social and cultural environment in which teenage girls and boys are immersed on a daily basis in a polarization of public discourse and opinions, a challenging of the concepts of truth and authority. This becomes a kind of background noise that impedes study in depth and assimilation of information that is not emotionally skewed so as to be in line with one's pre-existing ideas.

At the same, although this paper focuses on the violence that both characterizes and is specific to the virtual world, it cannot be denied that the new media involved offer enormous expressive opportunities, provide a much enhanced potential for building knowledge and communicating with vast areas of the world, facilitate many aspects of the lives of everyone and extend the range of activities possible within learning environments. Moreover, social media are an intrinsic part of the lives of young people and this is a process that cannot be turned back.

### **Peer education**

Analysis of the phenomenon of hate speech and of the best practices that have been promoted to combat it led us to develop an educational approach to intervening based principally on offline action and which aims to promote the building of groups characterized by positive relationships and the acquisition of "antibody" values such as respect and acknowledgement of the other, drawing on the methodology of peer education.

Peer education has long been introduced and widely applied in Italy, above all in the area of prevention of risk behaviour and drug abuse, emphasizing the importance of the communicative dimension and the role of those who benefit from the experience. Young people can best understand the risks of abuse if these are explained by

someone of their own age in a language that they feel is theirs, without the kind of self-censorship that would be spontaneous if talking to an adult. No one can be considered too young to be a peer educator and become responsible for one's own education and that of others. Those who choose voluntarily to become involved have initial training of between 12 and 18 hours and then work in small groups to plan projects. Our work involves classes at lower and upper secondary level, generally in vocational schools in areas that are geographically and culturally on the outskirts, where there is a prevalence of male students and a lack of attention to developing personal and social competence.

### **The role of peer educators**

The focus of our work has gradually moved from the young people who are direct beneficiaries of projects to those who work as peer educators. We believe that any kind of abuse, be it online or offline, is the result of malfunctioning in group dynamics, rather than a single defect in the bully or a mere inability to find adequate self-protection strategies on the part of the victim. Thus the priority has to be working at the level of group dynamics and peer educators are trained to intervene in this way in order to promote a healthy school environment. This involves intervening in a way that is continuative and sustainable in time and acting in such a way as to bring about change in that direction.

### **Towards participatory evaluation**

What follows is a description of a process based on "letters written to ourselves" by peer educators who have participated in projects for peace education, texts which they might re-read at a distance of months or years in time in order to see what has changed in themselves during these educational experiences. The objective is also that analysing our work as a centre through the eyes of those who are active in our projects.

The extracts that follow come from a group of peer educators working in a third class in an upper secondary school, each of which attended a 4-day residential course in 2016. The residential nature of the experience proved to be highly significant for the participants.

Two elements concerning the writing of letters to ourselves are particularly important in terms of our objectives and involve the Theory of Change and the reflexive approach. The Theory of Change (Brest, 2010) is an approach within the field of social work in terms of planning and evaluating projects which promote social change through the participation and direct involvement of those who

are the beneficiaries and focuses the attention on their perception of the situation in which they are. This methodology means that the data to be analysed is not pre-defined, but rather emerges from the participants' reflections on their experience. This is coherent with a positive vision of the young people themselves, based on promoting participation and empowerment. Educational initiatives, particularly with respect to the prevention of violence between young people, often risk identifying certain teenagers as victims to be protected and cared for and others as violent and deviant with a consequent need for security and repression. In other cases, there are social platforms who look at young people as a new pool of consumers. We prefer to consider them as subjects in processes of change that can take place here and now in the reality that surrounds them, thereby placing them at the centre of evaluation procedures and subject planning of how to proceed.

The task proposed was to *write to your future self about what has changed in you and for you after this experience*. The Theory of Change permits us to gather elements about online life that only teenagers can identify and narrate and is therefore an essential part of the process of analysis and project building.

### **The reflexive component**

A number of elements that emerged from the peer educators were unexpected, causing me some surprise and offering me opportunities for further analysis.

Social networks impose a kind of fictitious instantaneity, that is fictitious because nothing obliges the user to react instinctively and immediately to whatever stimulus appears on the screen, while at the same time almost everyone reacts as if instantaneity were necessary. Reflexiveness counters this attitude because it requires time to remain within the lived experience, interpret the changes brought about in oneself and the surrounding environment. Becoming reflexive means looking both back toward the past and forwards in the direction of the future, since it requires reflecting before replying, publishing, posting, or twitting on the potential consequences of our actions. In 2015 a 15-year-old girl, Trisha Prabhu, developed a simple app called "ReThink", through which a pop up emerged whenever someone was about to post an offensive content, saying "What you are writing could be offensive for someone. Are you sure you want to publish it?". The concept of the reversibility of one's actions is a recurrent theme within this approach to peace education. Our

experience leads us to conclude that digital devices create a form of detachment from the consequences one's own actions or inactions can have for oneself or for others, de-responsabilizing, de-materializing, distancing outcomes in space and time, setting off chains for which we cannot know the final link. In this respect, it can be very productive to ask young people questions like "In twenty years from now, will you be happy about or embarrassed by the image you are now posting on Instagram?"

### **Letter to myself**

#### **What is sharing?**

*Life in common was wonderful. I had never experienced it.*

This affirmation was surprising, yet recurrent, in the letters, containing elements of appreciation, of difficulty, and in any case of growth. It would seem contradictory to hear how girls and boys who continuously share parts of their private lives, at times their most intimate aspects, in a changing context in which borders are ever shifting and constantly mediated, move in social communities that are in fact non true communities at all. In sharing online, everyone chooses what to share, a part of oneself that is selected, partial, modified, filtered so as to please, provoke, scandalize, be sure of existing. Yet life in common is not part-time, where you enter holding your breath, like going to school, it is sharing everything, natural, where helping each other is expected, collaborating, where hiding cannot go on indefinitely, and where everyone is imperfect in some way. The worst insult between teenagers seems to be "You've had it!", a fiction that all share through social networks but which no one admits and, on the contrary, everyone continues to repeat unfiltered. One of the most painful dimensions of cyberbullying is that the attack is not so much directed at people as such but rather the way in which they have chosen to show or present themselves to others, in what they consider to be the best possible light, exposing themselves to the gaze of others.

Our aim is to offer schools immersive community experiences where people share their bodily selves, in which they mediate their own needs with those of others, a situation which young people of 16 or 17 often experience for the first time and which they much appreciate.

#### **Accepting yourself**

Acceptance is not only something to seek in others, but rather in young people should be a process regarding oneself:

*Through this experience you've succeeded in accepting a part of yourself that you knew about but that you always kept hidden. You're afraid of*

*believing that others can become fond of you. Perhaps this has always been your big problem in class. Your classmates perceive this and so it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. You're afraid of etting yourself and trusting others.... If you feel you're more accepted, then slowly you can begin to put down roots.*

#### **Seeking equivalence**

In the end, what is most interesting but also most difficult to achieve is equivalence within a conflict. Perhaps also the fact of dealing with questions so profound, like conflict, your own personality, active listening. I found myself in difficulty, really involved in the first person, and I wasn't ready for it.

During our activities, Patfoort's equivalence (1987), Galtung's triangles of conflict and violence (1996) and Rosenberg's nonviolent communication (2015) are all models on which to base understanding and acting in situations characterized by interpersonal conflict and violent dynamics with which peer educators become progressively familiar. The conflicts both concern relationships where the peers have to decide how to act and involve that dimension in which we are all involved. In this way, the training they undergo so as to be able to work with others also prepares them to work on themselves. What is most important is to deconstruct a model of conflict as a zero-sum game, challenge the idea of violence as the only way of relating in a situation of conflict, show how nonviolence is not passiveness or inaction but rather assertiveness and constructive reaction, create awareness of the presuppositions that have given rise to conflict and the effects that their development will have on all parties. Young people are used to living learning processes as something immediate and almost external to them. A learning process that directly involves them can often find them unprepared and put them on the defensive. In this respect the peer educator works as a facilitator who accepts different points of view and encourages a calm discussion of different points of view within a condition of equivalence.

#### **Courage**

*At first, I wouldn't have bet anything on this project. Before starting out I asked myself if it was too late to call everything off. I asked myself why I'd even accepted to do it. I could have stayed at home or gone out with my friends. I wasn't interested in being with people who for me were only classmates. People who you see for five hours a day and after school that's it. I really didn't want*

*to do it, but I couldn't have been more wrong. We took part in games, experiments, reflection sessions and during all these things something took place that in three years I had never experienced. In the group we were listening to each other, we were talking, we were opening ourselves up to each other.*

It takes courage to participate in a peer education project, abandon your comfort zone and open yourself up to others. Initially collaboration with the teachers and the school as a whole is fundamental. The effort the young people make in jumping into the unknown has to be supported, encouraged and acknowledged. The theme of courage is recurrent in our activities, Civil Courage, courage to speak out, to denounce, to intervene in a situation of oppression and violence. Courage requires training and many experiments show how strong is the bystander effect which stops people intervening because there are others who could do it. Online space multiplies this effect and breaking the wall of silence, even if extremely difficult, often leads to reactions that are positive and supportive for people who have not had the courage to intervene before. Online action needs to be trained, planned and enacted in a coordinated fashion.

#### **Love and value difference**

*There are thirty-two of us and we have all suffered or are all suffering, each one of us reacting in their own way to the pain. Now I know that we are all equal, with the same fears and worries. It's just that some of us hide them better than others. I've learnt to appreciate all the differences between us that annoyed me before. I've learnt to recognize the real value of the people around me.*

Online space often gives young people the illusory impression of being able to accede to any kind of information via the freedom that internet affords everyone, and that what they find is necessarily the truth and the same for everyone. If put in a situation where each one of them looks for information about the same thing simultaneously, they are stupefied to find that what is displayed on the smartphone of their friend is different from that on their own. How is it possible that a device that permits a (presumed) unlimited freedom to search – and therefore discover the truth – can show different results for each one of us?

Each one of us looks at the world from a particular point of view and we are continually challenged, called into question, oppressed, disappointed or convinced by others' points of view or ideas of the world, each of which is in turn influenced by innumerable personal, interior, cognitive and social aspects, at both micro- (such as the family

we grow up in) and macro- (such as the country we were born in) levels. Through complex and secret algorithms social networks filter the contents to which we accede and feeding our sense of wellbeing online. Nothing does this more than finding a group of like-minded people. This filter bubble effect<sup>3</sup> (Pariser, 2011), together with that of a natural homophilia (Bessi et al., 2015) is facilitated by the ease of finding even the most minority groups and positions. Moreover, there is the dimension of the silence spiral, through which if people feel that theirs is a minority position in a given situation they tend not to intervene. All these elements mean that the internet environment that each one of us encounters ends up being entirely in line with our beliefs. We continually reflect on it in an online world that continues to reflect us, within echo chambers (Del Vicario et al. 2016) in which information, ideas or beliefs are amplified and reinforced by the communication and the repetition inside the closed system we inhabit.

What effects do these processes have on young people? In the first place there is an increasing difficulty in relating constructively to diversity, whatever form it takes, to come into contact, even casually, with something truly different from personal experience and convictions. The same difficulty involves expressing one's own position, since this is not necessary if everyone thinks like me, and entering someone else's bubble is only a question of provoking or enjoying myself. The adolescent is constantly searching for positions which are clear and well-defined, compromises and nuances are difficult to accept, the quest for belonging and identity is fundamental, and all this risks leading young people to extremes.

An approach based on peer education can gradually lead to exploring individual differences as a resource for oneself and for the feedback to give to others who are younger. Diversity is re-discovered in the unity and the uniqueness of emotional experiences, in acknowledging others' emotions that reflect one's own.

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<sup>3</sup> Pariser argues that users are subjected to fewer conflicting points of view and are intellectually isolated in their own information bubble

### Being with others

*Now I've learnt that being with others is more enjoyable and that discovering and being discovered is really a wonderful experience.*

Social networks have not necessarily increased the feeling of solitude but have rather led to new forms of solitude or difficulty in opening up to others and showing one's own complex features to others. Peer education activities can provide a space for meeting and building protected relationships in which the fundamental rules and attitudes involve suspending judgement, reciprocal listening and empathy.

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