



IDENTITY

Unit Overview

The Identity unit is designed to encourage critical thinking about self-expression and self-exploration with new media. The ultimate goal of these lessons is to create an understanding of the ethical dimensions—meaning, the positive or negative effects *on others*—associated with expressing one’s identity, or exploring new identities, online.

Key Questions

- How do different forms of self-expression online affect others?
- What are the potential benefits and harms to others?
- When does “identity play” cross the line and become identity deception?

A vital part of growing up is developing one’s identity. Offline, we are tied to bodies and other inherited circumstances that set strong parameters on what and who we can be. Online, we have far more (though not limitless) freedom from these circumstances. Youth can use photos, interests, and “favorites” lists, along with other content, to play up—or hide—different aspects of their identities. They can engage in “identity play”—in which they explore and receive feedback on new identities (for example, a more confident self), or develop facets of the self (sexual or gender identities, for example) that they may not feel comfortable exploring offline.

Online self-expressions and forms of “identity play” can affect other people in various ways. On the positive side, youth who celebrate gay, lesbian, or other kinds of identities through blogs or social network profiles may uplift others who feel marginalized and unable to express themselves. On the other hand, some forms of online identity exploration can be deceptive, undermining relationships and causing distrust in communities.

The reality is that youth, and indeed all of us, still live much of our lives in a world in which a sense of who you are—and who you are not—matters. Understanding when and where identity play is appropriate, and when and where accuracy is necessary, are critical skills for youth today. When



presenting themselves and exploring new identities online, youth need to be reflective about the potential effects on other people and on the communities in which they engage.

Ethical Thinking Skills

Ethical thinking skills highlighted in this unit:

- **Perspective-taking**, or striving to understand the motives and goals of individuals who engage in various forms of identity play.
- Considering one's **roles and responsibilities** when presenting one's identity in various online contexts.
- Reflecting on the **potential benefits and harms to communities** of different self-presentations.

New Media Literacies

New media literacies highlighted in this unit:

- Online, a teen can present herself by practicing the new media literacy of **performance**—the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery. Although youth may rarely decide to completely reinvent their identities online, they can and do engage in “identity play” —deliberate self-presentations, using text, images, and video to reshape, highlight, downplay, and cultivate different aspects of the self—with social media, such as blogs, social networks (Facebook and MySpace), online forums, and virtual worlds.
- Involvement in online communities can also nurture the skill of **negotiation**—the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms. As teens participate in various online forums, social networks, or games, they can grasp the distinct norms and values of these different communities. This understanding can help teens present themselves in a given online space in ways that are both comfortable to them and consistent with the ethos of the communities.

Unit Lessons

The Identity unit contains the following lessons:

- **Identity Play in Online Spaces**—This lesson is designed to help students explore how identity formation and experimentation occur through engagement with different roles, relationships, and ways of using technology. Students will consider the ways in which digital technologies offer new resources for identity exploration and self-expression. During the



activities in this lesson, students will watch two videos to stimulate discussion about how people bring forward different aspects of themselves as they interact with different people and move through different contexts. They will also consider how identity play is relevant to their own lives—how their own senses of self shift as they take on different roles and responsibilities in different situations. The lesson concludes with an activity that requires students to think through scenarios depicting youth using alternative identities for different purposes. Students are asked to judge whether the choices made in these identity performances are ethical. Designed by Katie Clinton, Henry Jenkins, Jenna McWilliams, and Jessica Tatlock (Project NML).

- **Linking Avatar and Self**—How do the identities we take on online relate to our offline identities and to an “authentic” sense of self? How can our online identities be harmful or beneficial to ourselves, to others we know, or to the larger communities of which we are a part? These are the questions addressed in the Linking Avatar and Self lesson. In this lesson, students try to match photos of gamers with photos of the characters they play; they then use these photos and quotes from young people to discuss the many motivations for online identity exploration, including the possible benefits and harms. Designed by Sam Gilbert (GoodPlay).