Who Are You Online?

Essential Question

How do you present yourself to the world online and offline?

Lesson Overview

Students explore how they and others represent themselves online, and the relationship between online and offline selves. They begin by looking at a slideshow of people and their avatars and reflecting on how people can present themselves online. Students then watch a video of a teen talking about what it means to be "real" or "fake" online and discuss the video in groups, relating these issues to their own online selves. They learn that assuming different personas online carries both benefits and risks.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to ...

- reflect on the similarities and differences in how people represent themselves online and offline.
- understand that they might choose to show different parts of themselves online, depending on context and audience.
- consider the risks and benefits of assuming different personas online, and think critically about what it means to be genuine in an online context.

Materials and Preparation

- Journals or paper
- ▶ Preview *The New York Times Magazine* "Avatar Slideshow" (www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2007/06/15/magazine/20070617_AVATAR_SLIDESHOW_1.html) and prepare to show it to students.
- ▶ Preview the video, **"Ramon's Story — Being Real Online,"** and prepare to show it to students.

Family Resources

- Send parents the **Online Self-Expression Family Tip Sheet (High School)**.

Estimated time: 45 minutes

Standards Alignment –

Common Core:

grades 9-10: RI.4, RI.10, W.6, SL.1a, SL.1b, SL.1c, SL.1d, SL.3, SL.4, SL.5, L.4a, L.6

grades 11-12: RL.4, RL.10, RI.4, RI.10, SL.1a, SL.1b, SL.1c, SL.1d, SL.2, SL.3, SL.4, SL.5, L.4a, L.6

NETS·S: 1a-d, 2a, 2d, 3a, 3b, 4a, 4b, 4d, 5a-c

Key Vocabulary –

represent: to depict yourself to others as being a certain way or having particular characteristics

persona: an image and personality that you show to others

avatar: a graphic image that represents a person online

anonymous: without a name or other information that identifies who you are

inhibited: careful or restrained about your actions or impulses

Warm-up *(5 minutes)*

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary terms **represent** and **persona**.

ASK: *Does the way you represent yourself online differ from the way you represent yourself offline? What is similar and what is different about your online and offline selves?*

DISCUSS the idea that the Internet gives people the chance to express different parts of themselves and even try on different personas. In the lesson, they will explore how they represent themselves online, and all the possibilities, risks, and benefits involved in experimenting with their online selves.

teach 1

Exploring Avatars *(15 minutes)*

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary term **avatar**.

TELL students that they are about to see a slideshow that illustrates how people represent themselves online. The slideshow features photos of real people alongside images of the avatars they use in virtual worlds.

EXPLAIN to students that they are going to watch a slideshow, and that they should respond in writing in journals or on paper to each slide as you show it. Have them note the similarities and differences between the real people and their avatars. Encourage them to address characteristics beyond physical looks, and remind them that they should avoid passing judgment or making fun of anyone's avatar. Instead, they should speculate on why the people in the photos might have created these avatars. (Students should understand that they cannot be certain of these people's intentions without talking to them – they can draw conclusions based only on the information available in the photos.)

▶ **SHOW** students the first 10 slides in the "Avatar Slideshow" from *The New York Times Magazine* (www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2007/06/15/magazine/20070617_AVATAR_SLIDESHOW_1.html), or have them look at the slideshow on their computers.

INVITE students to take turns sharing their observations for each slide. The following sample responses may help you guide the discussion:

• Slide 1: Choi Seang Rak might represent himself as a girl because he'll do better in the game he's playing. Or maybe he wants to explore how others might treat a girl online.

• Slide 2: Tommy D. Graves might represent himself as a superhero who looks nothing like him because he wants to be anonymous and live out a total fantasy when he plays the game.

• Slide 3: Jean-François de la Fage might want to feel like a stronger, tougher version of himself.

• Slide 4: Ailin Graef might want an avatar that looks like her, wearing her favorite dress and with her best qualities exaggerated.

• Slide 5: Lucas Shaw seems to have created a barbarian character to match the virtual world of the game he is playing, rather than an avatar that resembles himself. He might want to escape to a fantasy world.

• Slide 6: Andreas Fisher is posing like his avatar, so he seems to be exploring the side of himself that wants to act like a superhero.

POINT OUT that in creating their avatars, people may make choices based on what kind of online world the avatars will inhabit. Encourage students to suggest how an avatar designed for a social networking site their

friends use might differ from one created for a virtual world like Second Life or for a competitive gaming site.

teach 2

Being "Real" or "Fake" Online *(20 minutes)*

DIVIDE students into groups of four or five.

ASK: *What do you think it means to be "real" or "fake"?*

ASK: *Do you think it's easier for people to be "fake" online than in real life? Why or why not?*

EXPLAIN to students that they will be watching a video in which a group of teens explores these questions.

▶ **SHOW** students the video, **"Ramon's Story – Being Real Online."**

ASK:

Ramon talks about how some people exaggerate or seem very different online than in person. How do you explain these differences between their online and in-person personas?	Guide students to draw on points that Ramon has made. He thinks some people want to seem tougher or cooler than they are offline so they will be more accepted.
Are there risks for creating an online presence that is very different than the offline one? Are there benefits?	Guide students to identify risks, such as setting up false expectations for others, spurring violence, and depending on online communication to the detriment of in-person communication. Benefits are that you can enter interest-driven communities that you couldn't before, you can take time to compose your thoughts before responding to others, and you can experiment with the opinions you put forth and how you present yourself.
What are other reasons why people might feel they can act in ways online that they wouldn't act offline?	Sample responses: • You have time to plan what you want to say, and you can shape how you want to come across to others. • You can't see other people's faces, so you don't see their reactions. • Because you can't see other people, you might behave differently based on your assumptions about who you think they are and what they're like online.

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary terms **anonymous** and **inhibited**.

DISCUSS the idea that people may feel less inhibited when they are online. This is especially true if they are anonymous or are interacting with people who don't know them offline. (Even when they know the people, it's easy for people to feel anonymous when they are online, because they are alone with their computer or phone.) People might feel free to invent new personas online, or they might change particular parts of themselves.

ENCOURAGE students to think of the risks and benefits involved in being anonymous or feeling less inhibited

online. Have them identify types of behaviors this might encourage, and urge them to provide concrete examples.

ASK:

Are there any benefits to being anonymous or being less inhibited online?	Some reasons include: • You might feel freer to say things you're really thinking. • You might be able to try things out that you can't in the offline world. • You can highlight or emphasize the parts of yourself that you feel good about.
Are there risks involved with being anonymous or less inhibited online?	Some reasons include: • You are not accountable for your actions, so you might do or say things you wouldn't offline. • You might behave in ways that are unsafe or harmful to yourself. • You might behave in ways that are disrespectful or harmful to others.

INTRODUCE students to the idea that it may be possible to "stay real," even when they are representing themselves in different ways online, by staying true to who they are and to how they would treat themselves and others in the offline world.

INSTRUCT students to work in groups to come up with a set of advice for "Staying Real Online." Examples include:

• Present yourself in a way that's positive and not harmful to you.

• Treat people the way you would treat them in person.

• Don't say or do things that harm other people, or betray their trust.

• Never get into a relationship that is not safe.

• Avoid getting involved in a community that is not appropriate.

INVITE groups to share their lists with the class.

closing

Wrap-up *(5 minutes)*

You can use these questions to assess your students' understanding of the lesson objectives. You may want to ask students to reflect in writing on one of the questions, using a journal or an online blog/wiki.

ASK:

How does your persona change depending on the context, online and offline?	Students should be able to describe some of the similarities and differences between their various online and offline "selves."
What are the benefits and problems with being anonymous or less inhibited online?	Students should be able to describe several of the risks and benefits identified in Teach 2.

> *What responsibilities do you have to yourself and others to "stay real" online, even when you exaggerate or act differently?*

Students should be able to name several pieces of "Advice for Staying Real" they developed in Teach 2.

Extension Activity

Have students prepare a presentation on "Staying Real Online." Break the class into small groups, assign each group one of the pieces of advice, and have them design a role-playing exercise of an online situation in which a student faces a dilemma, and what would happen if that student does or does not follow the advice. To share their work with peers, students could create PowerPoint presentations on "Staying Real Online," with talking points and examples for each piece of advice.

At-home Activity

Have students create three avatars of themselves for three different social networks:

1. A school social network where teachers, students, and parents communicate

2. A social network where you connect mainly with friends and people you know

3. Second Life (www.secondlife.com), where you communicate mainly with people you don't know in real life

Instead of drawing their avatars on paper, have students use online tools such as Meez (www.meez.com), Build Your Wild Self (www.buildyourwildself.com), Portrait Illustration Maker (www.illustmaker.abi-station. com/index_en.shtml), or Marvel Create Your Own Superhero (www.marvel.com/games/play/31/create_ your_ own_superhero).

Who Are You Online?

_____

_____

1. _____ means to show yourself to others as being a certain way or having particular characteristics.

    a) Represent

    b) Inhibited

    c) Anonymous

    d) Label

2. **Offline, Tyrone is shy and gets made fun of at school. Online, Tyrone is outgoing and feels popular. Why might Tyrone feel he can be outgoing and popular online when he is shy and unpopular at school?**

    a) Tyrone has a funny screen name

    b) Tyrone can't see other people online, so he feels he can behave differently than he would offline

    c) Tyrone has more time to plan what he says to people online

    d) Both b and c

3. **What are some risks and some benefits to presenting yourself differently online than you present yourself offline? Write the letter of each answer choice in the correct part of the chart.**

    a) You might behave in ways that are unsafe or harmful to yourself

    b) You might be able to try things out that you normally wouldn't or couldn't try

    c) You can highlight or emphasize the parts of yourself that you feel good about

    d) You might behave in ways that are disrespectful to others

Risks	Benefits

Who Are You Online?

1. _____ means to show yourself to others as being a certain way or having particular characteristics.

   a) Represent

   b) Inhibited

   c) Anonymous

   d) Label

   Answer feedback

   The correct answer is **a**. Represent means to show yourself as being a certain way. The way you represent yourself online can be different than the way you represent yourself offline.

2. **Offline, Tyrone is shy and gets made fun of at school. Online, Tyrone is outgoing and feels popular. Why might Tyrone feel he can be outgoing and popular online when he is shy and unpopular at school?**

   a) Tyrone has a funny screen name

   b) Tyrone can't see other people online, so he feels he can behave differently than he would offline

   c) Tyrone has more time to plan what he says to people online

   d) Both b and c

   Answer feedback
   The correct answer is **d**. Oftentimes people feel less shy online because they are not interacting with others face to face.

3. **What are some risks and some benefits to presenting yourself differently online than you present yourself offline? Write the letter of each answer choice in the correct part of the chart.**

   Answer feedback

Risks	Benefits
a) You might behave in ways that are unsafe or harmful to yourself	b) You might be able to try things out that you normally wouldn't or couldn't try
d) You might behave in ways that are disrespectful to others	c) You can highlight or emphasize the parts of yourself that you feel good about

Who Are You Online?

1. _____ means to show yourself to others as being a certain way or having particular characteristics.

a) Represent

b) Inhibited

c) Anonymous

d) Label

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **a**. Represent means to show yourself as being a certain way. The way you represent yourself online can be different than the way you represent yourself offline.

2. Offline, Tyrone is shy and gets made fun of at school. Online, Tyrone is outgoing and feels popular. Why might Tyrone feel he can be outgoing and popular online when he is shy and unpopular at school?

a) Tyrone has a funny screen name

b) Tyrone can't see other people online, so he feels he can behave differently than he would offline

c) Tyrone has more time to plan what he says to people online

d) Both b and c

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **d**. Oftentimes people feel less shy online because they are not interacting with others face to face.

3. What are some risks and some benefits to presenting yourself differently online than you present yourself offline? Write the letter of each answer choice in the correct part of the chart.

Answer feedback

Risks	Benefits
a) You might behave in ways that are unsafe or harmful to yourself	b) You might be able to try things out that you normally wouldn't or couldn't try
d) You might behave in ways that are disrespectful to others	c) You can highlight or emphasize the parts of yourself that you feel good about