



# Identity Play in Online Spaces

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## Facilitator's Guide

### **Lesson Overview** (Grades 8-12)

What is identity? How are online and offline identities related? What are some of the ethical dimensions of online identity play? In this lesson, students are introduced to the notion of “identity” and to the concept of “identity play”—the practice of trying out and deploying different identities in different contexts in order to experience and represent new ways of being in the world for both personal and intellectual development.

The lesson is designed to help students explore how identity-formation and experimentation occur through engagement with different roles, relationships, and ways of using technology. Also, 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 around 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 sense of self shifts 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.

### **Ethical thinking skills highlighted in this lesson:**

- Taking the perspectives of many community stakeholders.
- Recognizing the community-level consequences of individual decisions.

**New media literacies highlighted in this lesson:**

- **Negotiation**—the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms.
- **Performance**—the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery.

**Learning Objectives****After this lesson, students should be able to:**

- Understand that identity is not a fixed state, but a fluid and often context-driven way of being (or being positioned).
- Articulate the different aspects of themselves that they express as they move through different contexts.
- Explain some of the promises and perils related to online identity play.

**Materials Used**

- **HIGH-TECH NOTE:** Internet access and the ability to watch and project videos available online
- Worksheets for each student

**Lesson Introduction**

Begin with group discussion about identity in offline and online contexts.

**Questions:**

- What does the word “identity” mean to you?
- What are some of the different identities that occur in this school? [Who here plays a sport? Who plays music? Who is in student government? Who acts in plays or is part of a dance group? Who belongs to a club?]
- Can you have more than one identity?
- In the “real” world, can people choose to be whatever identity they want?
- How about in games—can people choose to be whatever identity they want?



- Who here has played a video game? Which ones? Who are some of your favorite characters in games? What does it feel like to play as those characters? In what ways do you behave differently as those characters? When playing a game, is the character you're playing in some sense *you*?
- Who here has a MySpace or Facebook page? What types of things are on your page? What do they say about you? Do you behave differently in offline and online spaces?
- What is the relation between online and offline identities? Is it possible for an online identity to feel “more real” than an offline identity?

### Activity #1: Exploring Identity Play

In this activity, students watch videos profiling two young people and the different ways they use technology to define their identities.

1. Have students watch the profile of Luis, which was produced for the Digital Generations project (<http://www.edutopia.org/digital-generation-profile-luis>). In this video, we see Luis move through many different spaces of his life (school, home, after-school programs, community) and we explore the ways he uses technology in relation to each.
2. Distribute “Sample Identity Map: Luis” and lead a group discussion using the following questions:
  - What roles does Luis play (brother, son, student, mentor, citizen) and what are some of the activities and tools he uses in performing those roles?
  - What responsibilities does Luis have to each of these contexts?
  - Are there moments when those responsibilities are in conflict? If so, what steps does he take to resolve those conflicts? (See, for example, the concerns raised by his family about the amount of time he spends in his after-school program).
  - How does he structure his time so that he is able to meet each of those responsibilities?
  - What steps does he take to integrate aspects of his cultural identity across these various roles and contexts (for example, the film shows him producing videos that speak to aspects of his Mexican-American background)?
  - Luis speaks Spanish in some contexts and English in others. How does this shape his identity in each space?
  - What aspects of his personality are most visible as we watch him interact in these different spaces (for example, being more serious or playful)?
  - Are there other things he changes about himself (for example, dressing differently for his public presentations than he dresses at home)?



- Luis mentions how multitasking allows him to do multiple things at the same time. Does it also allow him to adopt multiple identities at the same time?

3. View and then discuss the profile of Sam from the George Lucas Foundation's Digital Generations Project (<http://www.edutopia.org/digital-generation-profile-sam>).

**NOTE:** This site provides a range of profiles of young people, their relationships to technology, and the ways in which schools have responded to their passions and interests.

Teachers/facilitators should review the whole collection to see if more of these videos are relevant to their student's lives. In this story, we see many examples of the ways that Sam manipulates her appearance or assumes alternative identities as she plays around with new production processes. These video-production and gaming activities provide Sam with opportunities to pull back, critique and edit her performance, and become more attentive to the way she presents herself in her everyday life.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

- Sam is short for Samantha. Why might she choose to adopt this nickname?
  - What does Sam mean when she describes new media as her "second life"? What relationship has she constructed between her "first" and "second" lives?
  - Sam says that "I can be a different person if I want" when she takes on an avatar in World of Warcraft. What do you see as the advantages and downsides of this ability to transform identities?
  - How many different ways do we see Sam change her self-presentation in the course of this short video?
  - Sam enjoys directing her friends in videos and advises others on how to construct their avatars. In what ways do these activities also reflect her interest in "Identity Play"?
  - Sam is helping a young male college student create an avatar for a class project. After helping him to learn to adjust the avatar's physical appearance, she tells him that he could create a male avatar for himself. Why might he choose to do so? Why might he choose to remain in a female form as he enters the simulation?
4. Transition to a discussion of identity play. Ask students to revisit Luis' Identity Map and think about how Sam's approach to identity is different. If we were to do a map for Sam, what kinds of markers or categories would we use to capture her identity performances?



5. Pass out “Sample Identity Map: Sam,” and work together to fill in the blanks, thinking about the ways in which identity performances can emphasize different types of characteristics. Explain that while Sam is consciously constructing alternative identities for herself, all of us are involved in identity play to some degree, though in the real world, we may have fewer options to radically transform who we are or to sit back and review our performances of self. We bring forward different aspects of ourselves as we interact with the various people in our lives or as we move through different contexts. Increasingly young people are deploying new technologies as resources to help them to manage these different roles and to facilitate different aspects of their identities. You might ask the class to consider the identities students take on when they enter the particular learning space they’re in. Class discussion might identify how people act in the classroom versus how they might act, say, at the mall or on the football field. Why is this the case?
6. Zero in on the concept of “identity play.” This conversation should introduce and highlight the new media literacy skill of **performance—the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery**. Introduce the idea of “identity play” as describing how taking on alternative identities is often a means for exploration and discovery.

**Discussion questions might include the following:**

- Why do people take on different identities at different times and in different places?
- How does this reshaping of our identities resemble or differ from deception and misrepresentation? For example, when we play a part on stage in a play, is that the same thing as lying?
- What if we play a fictional character in an online game?
- What if we represent ourselves as someone we are not in an online discussion list?
- Is withholding information about yourself the same thing as deception?
- What if other people form false assumptions about who you are? At what point should you respond to or correct those misperceptions?
- Do you know people who take on “fake” or alternative identities in online spaces? Why do people do this?
- Is it ok to play with identities online? What are the limits?
- What are the benefits of identity play for young people? What are the drawbacks?
- Why do parents and other adults become concerned when young people take on alternate identities? To what extent are their concerns valid?



## Activity #2: Personal Identity Maps

Distribute blank copies of the Identity Map and Prompts. This identity map is intended to highlight the everyday identity performances that we all enact; it asks learners to identify several different contexts in which they perform different identities. Ask students to identify, by context, various identities they take on. Our goal is to have the students reflect on the multiple aspects of themselves that they share in different contexts.

Ask students to fill out as many of the blanks as possible, representing the different identities they have in different contexts or in terms of different roles they play in their lives (student, family member, hobbyist, etc.) Encourage students to fill out one of the squares with an online identity they have (in MySpace, Facebook, an online video game, a fan-fiction site, etc.).

Using the Identity Map, students are asked to describe the different identities they take on using several markers: name (or nickname), demeanor, appearance (physical, textual, or virtual). The goal in having them map out their identities is to help them explore more fully the ways in which people can have different senses of self (what we're calling identities) as they affiliate with different social groups and/or pursue different projects, practical and expressive. Point out that even the act of choosing to emphasize one category or marker (such as appearance or mannerism) over another (such as activity or function) reflects the identity they are performing in that context.

When students have completed their maps, they can be shared with the class either as a whole or in small groups, or the maps can be kept private. Alternatively, students may be asked to gather input from people who interact with them in the different spaces they describe and find out whether they agree or disagree with the students' self-descriptions.

### Written reflection (or in-class discussion)

1. What does the word "identity" mean to you?
2. Were you surprised at how many different identities you have?
3. Imagine that people you know from the classroom (students or teachers) encountered you in the online space you identified. What do you think would be most surprising to them about how you perform identity and why? What if someone from the online space encountered you in the classroom?
4. How might you change your behavior if you knew your teacher or classmates were watching?
5. If you decided you wanted to change your identity in the classroom, would this be difficult?



6. If you decided you wanted to change your identity in an online space, what would be easy or difficult about doing this?
7. How do you think the Internet has changed how we think about identity?

### Activity #3: The Limits of Identity Play

1. The teacher/facilitator and students will work through the ethical dilemmas on the “Limits of Identity Play Scenarios” Handout; each scenario is designed to represent a common situation teens might encounter online.
2. Pass out the “Limits of Identity Play Scenarios” Handout to students. Walk through each situation and encourage them to reflect on it both from the point of view of the young person involved and from the point of view of others who might be impacted by that young person’s choices. For each scenario, ask them to consider:
  - Is it appropriate to adopt a fictional or alternative identity under these circumstances? Why or why not?
  - What motivates each person to adopt an alternative identity? Are these legitimate reasons? If so, what might be other ways to achieve the same goals? If not, why not?
  - Are some of these kinds of identity play easier to perform online than off? If so, what properties of digital media make it possible for us to take on identities other than our own?

Having discussed the examples, you might then push the students to consider how they would draw the line between “identity play” and “deception.” Our culture creates spaces—online games, fantasy conventions—where it is appropriate and even socially desirable to adopt fictional identities or engage in role-playing activities. Yet even in these spaces, harm can be done if these identities are performed with the intention to deceive. Understanding when and where identity play is appropriate requires solid skills in negotiation, including the ability to identify implicit social norms that determine what are and are not appropriate ways of interacting within specific communities. Particularly challenging here are those cases in which assuming identities allows young people to work around various mechanisms of social exclusion that can, in their own right, produce hurt and injustices.

3. Written reflection (or in-class discussion)



Having discussed as a group several of the scenarios with the students, you might consider having a student take on one of the situations as the basis for a short written assignment that will allow them to reflect more deeply on the motives and consequences of identity play and deception in the online world.

## Concluding Takeaways

By having students watch videos, fill out Identity Maps, and evaluate scenarios describing teens' identity performances, this lesson encourages students to think about identity as both a concept that applies to them and a "thinking tool" for analyzing the ways in which people do different kinds of identity performances in different spaces and as they pursue different goals (ranging from enacting identity play for the purposes of self-expression and social affiliation to enacting identity play for the purposes of taking on practical roles and responsibilities). As the digital realm offers a new arena for the exploration of identity, a central goal of the lesson is to introduce students to the ethical dimensions of identity play, specifically the consequences of individual identity performances at both the personal and the community level.

## Assessment

**Through participation in class activities and discussions and/or answers to optional assessment questions, students should demonstrate they can:**

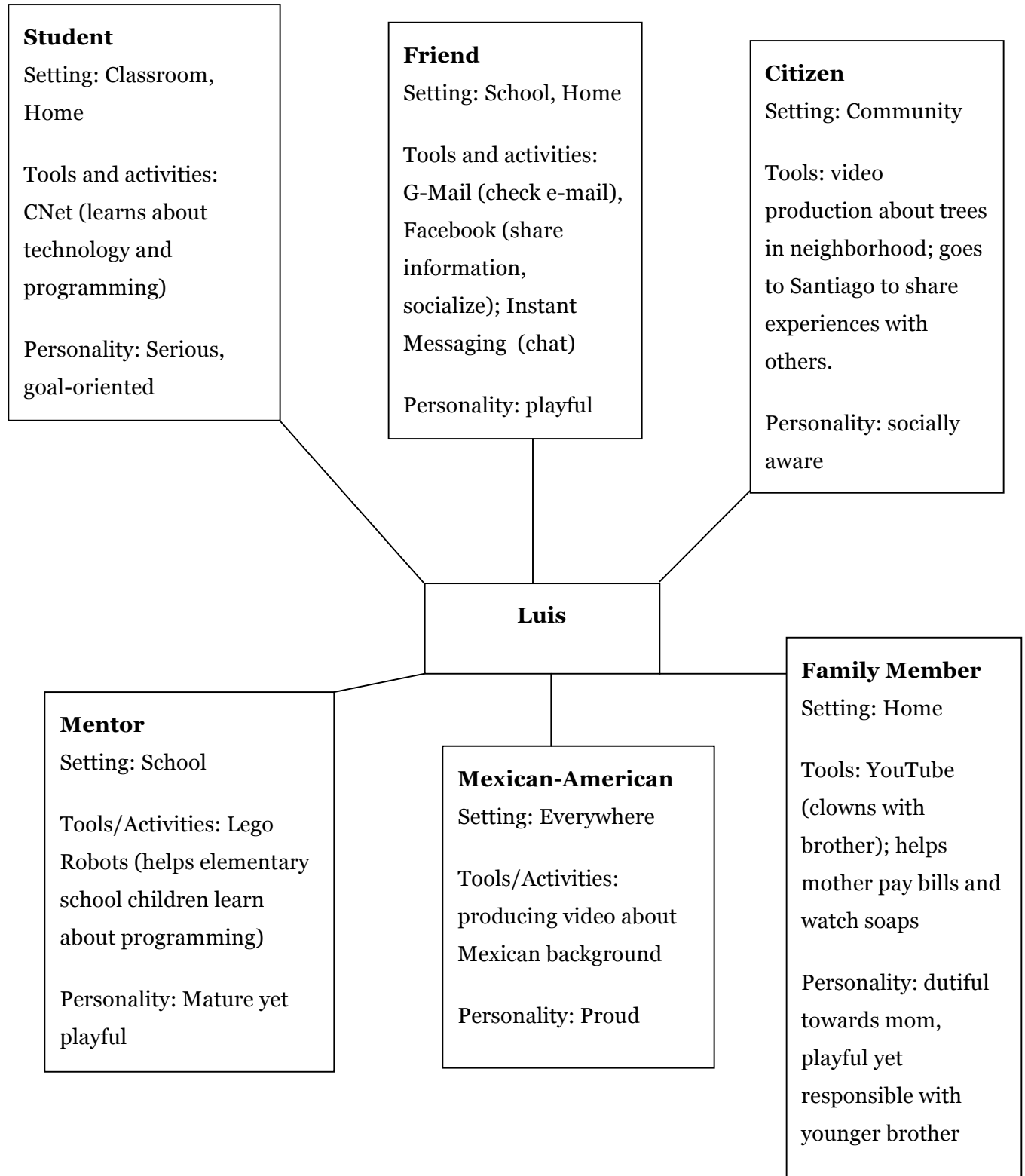
- Understand that identity is not a fixed state, but a fluid and often context-driven way of being (or being positioned).
- Articulate the different aspects of themselves that they express as they move through different contexts.
- Explain some of the promises and perils related to online identity play.

### Assessment Questions (Optional)

- Name 3 contexts (at least one should be an online context) and describe what aspects of yourself are the same and what aspects of yourself are different across each context. (Possible contexts include: school, sports team, home, Facebook, World of Warcraft)
- What are some benefits to being different online?
- When might being different online be a problem? Who might it be a problem *for*?

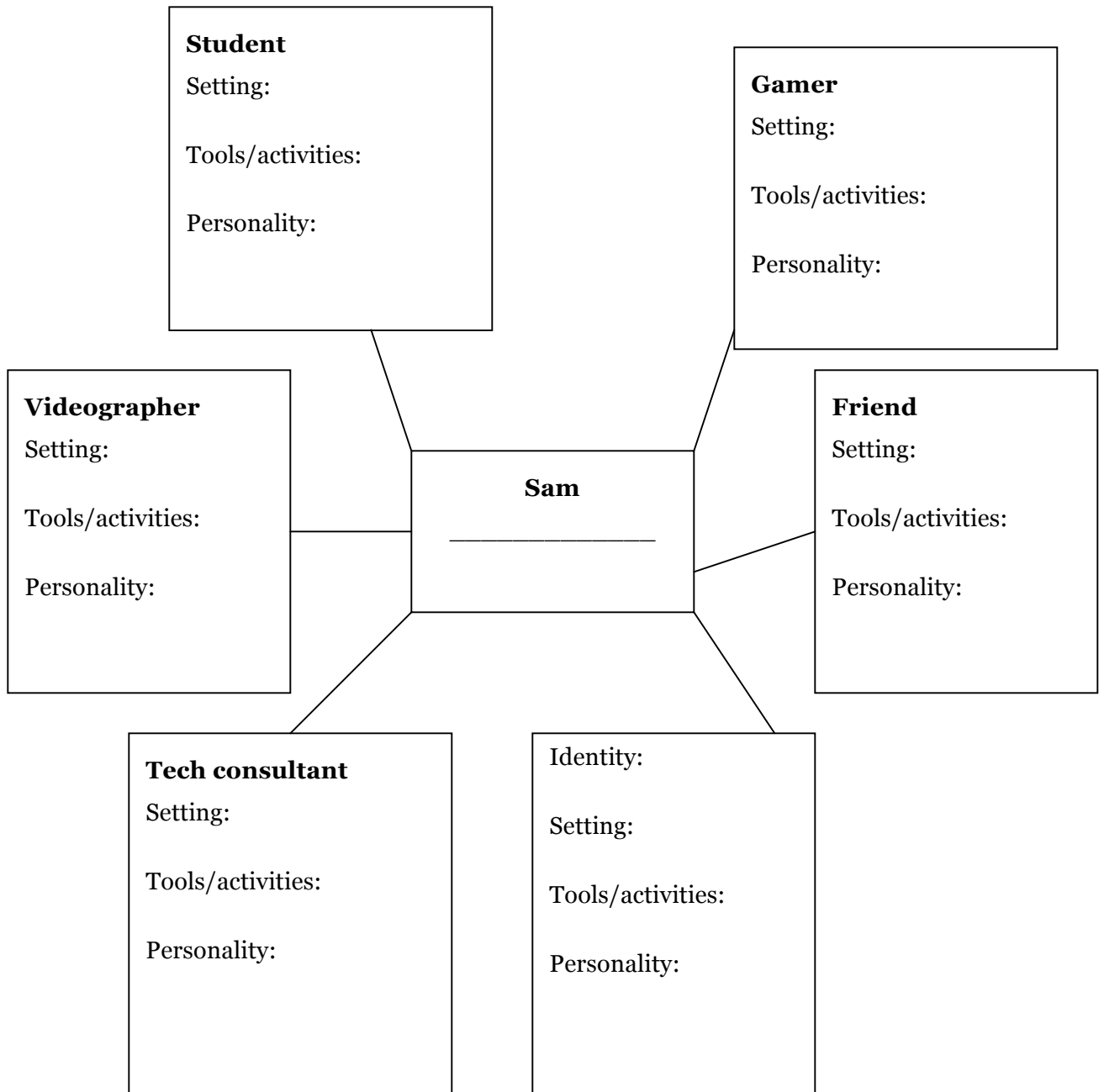


# Sample Identity Map





# Sample Identity Map: Sam





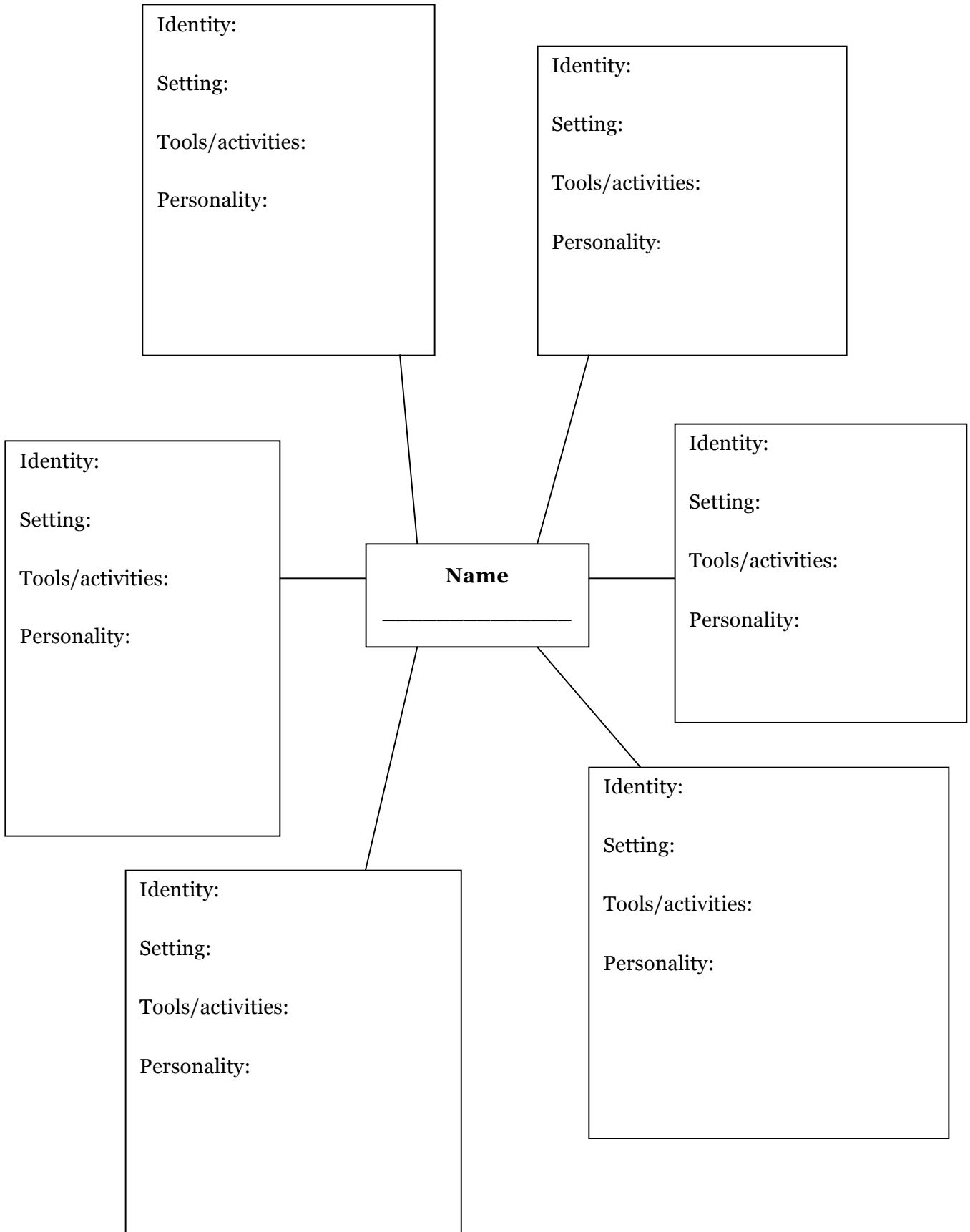
# Identity Map

## Instructions

The worksheet below is intended to offer you a space to consider how you perform different identities in different situations, or contexts. Fill in the boxes with some of the different contexts in which you think you perform distinct and different identities. Ideally, at least one of these contexts would be an online space. Sample contexts might include: English class, the football field, at home, MySpace or Facebook, or a fan-fiction site or similar online social network. Here are some prompts to help you think about different identities:

## Prompts:

- What name(s) do people call you by in each setting?
- What do you get to do (or state / pretend you do) in each place?
- What can't you do (or state / pretend to do) in each place?
- How do you dress (or state / pretend to dress) differently?
- What do you get to say (or what can't you say) in each place?
- How do you behave in this place?
- How do you think other people would describe you in this context?
- What responsibilities do you have?
- What technologies do you use?
- What activities support your being a particular way?
- What elements of yourself do you carry with you into each of these contexts?
- Are any of these identities "false" or do they simply represent different aspects of who you are?





# The Limits of Identity Play

## Instructions

The teacher/facilitator and students will work through the following ethical dilemmas, each designed to represent common situations teens encounter online.

### Prompts:

- Is it appropriate to adopt a fictional or alternative identity under these circumstances? Why or why not?
- What motivates each person to adopt an alternative identity? Are these legitimate reasons? If so, what might be other ways to achieve the same goals? If not, why not?

### Scenario #1

Jose is interested in a girl from his class and he knows she hangs out in an online community for teen girls. He adopts a female persona to enter this space and see what he can find out about her likes and dislikes.

### Scenario #2

Asuka has been made fun of by others participating in an online discussion forum because of her Asian name. She adopts an Anglo name for her future posts.

### Scenario #3

Patrice is a shy girl at school but when she plays *World of Warcraft* she is aggressive.

### Scenario #4

Devin's parents do not want him to reveal personal information online, so he has constructed an alternative identity which allows him to "share" aspects of his life with others.

### Scenario #5

Paul has a problem he can't talk about with his friends or family. He masks his identity so he can speak more openly in an online support network.

**Scenario #6**

Casey is a Harry Potter fan who likes to dress up and attend conventions. Casey and her friends pretend to be “Slitherian” and have formed strong social bonds about their shared identification with this house from J.K. Rowling’s book series.

**Scenario #7**

Sonia wants to be taken seriously in a fan community. She knows many participants have a bias against younger members. So, she doesn’t tell people her age and hopes her maturity will speak for itself.

**Scenario #9**

Sarah’s parents have told her that they don’t want her to have a Facebook page. She creates one using a fake photograph and a fictional identity.

**Scenario #10**

When Amulya’s contributions to a discussion list come under attack from other members, she creates a second account and writes a letter of support for her position under a fake name.

**Scenario #11**

Steve pretends to be another student in his class, creating a fake home page as a practical joke.

**Scenario #12**

Hector wants to criticize a school policy but is worried about getting into trouble with administrators and teachers. He posts his comments anonymously.