Online Personae: Identity in the Virtual Classroom

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Abstract: I have taught using various online environments, from Second Life and threaded discussions to Facebook and vlogging. I also interact a lot with students face to face – in class, as advisees, via student groups and through other opportunities. After I get to know a student online, I’m frequently surprised when I meet the student in person. A student I thought was shy may turn out to be gregarious; a student I thought was smart-alecky or snarky may turn out to be respectful and deferential; a student I thought was a left-brain thinker may turn out to be more of a right-brainer; and so forth. In this paper, I explore how and why students develop online personae – sometimes multiple identities – in online courses. Drawing on the work of scholars such as MIT Professor Sherry Turkle, I posit that the development of an online personality (a “second self,” as Turkle titled one of her books) is often therapeutic and liberating: In our virtual classrooms, young people have an opportunity to try on a variety of psychological masks, to reinvent themselves, to test the waters as their alter ego. This, I believe, can be an important step in finding one’s true self. [Note: The paper below was updated in July 2012 to reflect the discussion from the VCU Online Learning Summit.]

Introduction

My paper is more of a personal essay than scholarly research. I interact every day with students online and in person. All of my courses are hybrids – a combination of in-classroom and on-the-Web engagement. And my office door is always open: Students drop by regularly to discuss academics, careers, politics, culture and life in general. From that intersection of in-person and online engagement, I often find that students present themselves in different ways
in different environments. The student I see in my office does not necessarily have the same persona as the student I chat with online.

Sometimes the disconnect is a bit disturbing: A student who is polite in one setting might turn out to be a pill in another. But those are exceptions. Usually, the different persona is simply surprising. I believe the online environment is an opportunity for people to take a different personality for a test drive – to branch in new directions. In this paper, I will outline some of the research and literature on this subject; reflect on what I have observed in my interactions with students; and recommend ways that instructors might assist students in the health development of online identities.

**Research and Literature**

Sherry Turkle, director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self, has written extensively on this subject. Her books include *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (published in 1984 and revised in 2005); *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995); *Simulation and Its Discontents* (2009); and most recently *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011). Turkle, who has been called the Margaret Mead of cyberspace, argues that online experiences challenge the way we see ourselves and our traditional notion of identity. In *Life on the Screen*, Turkle notes that online interaction – in contrast to face-to-face encounters – offers opportunities to be anonymous, invisible and multiple. In that virtual environment, she says, people can express unexplored aspects of “self.” Turkle focused especially on MUDs (Multi-User Domains) and online role-playing games: “MUDs blur the boundaries between self and game, self and role, self and simulation. One player says, ‘You are what you pretend to be ... you are what you play.’”
Overdependence on online interactions has downsides, of course: Users may repress their authentic self and shun real-life self-reflection, Turkle notes. But virtual environments present distinct advantages as well. People can use their lives on the screen to explore or replay unresolved issues involving identity and relationships, Turkle says.

Amy Bruckman studied under Turkle at MIT and is now a professor and scholar at Georgia Tech. She says online life has become an “identity workshop,” affording users virtual space to experiment with alternative self-portrayals. For example, Bruckman noted in a 1993 presentation to an Internet Society conference, “It is possible to pretend to be the opposite gender. … Gender swapping is an extreme example of a fundamental fact: the network is in the process of changing not just how we work, but how we think of ourselves – and ultimately, who we are.”

Bruckman describes less extreme examples as well, such as people wrestling with national identity (which country to affiliate with online) or different personality traits. In ways big and small, the digital environment frees users from their analog selves – allowing them to don a mask and see how it feels. We see this in email: People say in messages things they would never say in person. A 2001 article in *The New York Times* put it this way: “It has been widely noted that there is something about online communication – which always seems as ephemeral as a water-cooler chat but often proves more indelible than ink – that we just don’t have the hang of yet. ‘Disintermediation,’ sometimes coupled with anonymity, seems to make us bold and stupid, capable of, for example, a level of invective that would be unthinkable in real conversation.”

**Personal Observations**

In my classes, I have witnessed students’ experiments with identity online. It occurs in various ways: from the avatars they choose and things they say or do in Second Life; to postings
in Blackboard discussions and on Facebook; to the way they portray themselves on LinkedIn, Twitter, blogs and other personal expression/branding tools; to emails that students send me and their classmates. Yes, sometimes I see invective and nastiness – one student leveling a personal attack on another. But more often, I see students in the throes of searching for who they are, or want to be. As I get to know students on a personal level, I can see whether or how their online identity differs from their real-life persona.

Occasionally, the difference centers on an essential characteristic, such as the student’s gender identity. (A transgender student who outwardly was male in appearance used a female avatar and persona in our Second Life meetings. She told me that she felt she could be “the real me” online.) Other examples involved disabilities: A student who stuttered during in-person presentations in front of the class could express himself with eloquence and ease on our online discussion boards. More frequently, the online identity was a more subtle personality shift. Some students who played the “class clown” in person adopted a more studious and serious visage in the virtual world. Or students who are disorganized or sloppy in real life presented themselves as “having their stuff together” in their online portfolios and résumés.

Bottom line: The online environment offers young people another venue to explore identity issues and try on different personalities. That environment includes academics as well as purely social/personal platforms. (Indeed, the lines are blurring as many faculty members integrate Facebook and other social-media tools into their courses – and as Blackboard and other course management systems launch social-media platforms of their own.)

**Helping Students Explore Online Identities**

Young people create online personae in multiple ways, from the profile pictures they use on Facebook to the playlists they create on Pandora. In a 2004 article in *The Chronicle of Higher
Education, Turkle said colleges and universities should play a role in students’ online explorations. Such guidance can help students experiment with alternative personae in healthy, pro-social ways.

As an instructor, I am still struggling with what that guidance should be. Here are some thoughts on the subject:

First, we should offer a lot of opportunities for academic and social online engagement. I integrate into my courses a range of virtual environments: Blackboard discussions (I know – they’re pretty retro), Facebook, Wimba, YouTube, Flickr and others. This gives students multiple opportunities to interact. Apart from the development of online identities, these tools have many side benefits: They ramp up student involvement with the class, and they accommodate visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning styles.

At the same time, we need rules and some structure for online engagement; we cannot allow “anything goes.” I make it clear to students that they must respect one another online: personal attacks and profanity are prohibited. I encourage students to develop “online listening skills”: They should refrain from making personal judgments and jumping to conclusions; they should seek understanding before replying with tart criticism. (“If I understand your argument, you’re saying … Is that right? Have you considered …?”)

My rules on online interaction are constantly evolving. This semester, for instance, a student used our class Facebook group and our Blackboard email listserv to promote his business. That was a first for me. From my perspective, it was clearly inappropriate; I talked to the student and explained my position. So next semester, I will add language to my syllabus barring the use of class communication channels for commercial messages.
In almost all of the online activity I conduct (such as discussions), students use their real names. That’s necessary, of course, for grading; and students tend to be more thoughtful when they know everything is “on the record.” But I do see value in having a forum where students can post anonymously without fear of retribution. I used to have a “water cooler” discussion board on Blackboard for that purpose: The settings allowed anonymous comments, and they were useful (as long as I monitored the postings regularly). I have abandoned that method as I moved to Facebook for free-wheeling online discussions. For each of my classes, I create a private Facebook group. Since Facebook requires actual names, I have lost an easy online tool for getting anonymous feedback.

Beyond setting rules for online interaction, instructors must promote a culture of community and conversation. We must convey to students that we care – and we must get the entire class to care – about what members think and what they feel. This means reading and commenting on students’ postings; following up with emails and face-to-face conversations; and highlighting some online postings in class (with the authors’ permission) as a springboard for in-person discussion.

I know there are holes in my strategy. I haven’t addressed the elephant in the room: What if anything should an instructor do when a student’s online persona is completely different from his or her personal characteristics? Suppose a student who uses a wheelchair portrays herself in a Second Life class as a marathon runner: We wouldn’t crack down on that, right? But what if a student who is poor in math bragged about his statistical skills on his LinkedIn résumé? Are there limits to how far students can “stretch” in portraying themselves online?

From the discussions at the VCU Online Learning Summit, I sense that other faculty members also are struggling with these issues. We seemed to agree that there’s a big difference
between academic dishonesty (cheating, plagiarism and other Honor System violations) and online identity experimentation (portraying one’s self in a way different from real life). One summit participant suggested examining both the intent and consequences of the online “deception” – though even she said that word may be too strong in this context. By this measure, it would be OK for students to adopt an alternative online persona if the intent were benign (“I’m just acting out a different me”) and the consequences were circumscribed (affecting only the image of the portrayer).

Attendees at the summit appeared to agree on the benefits of giving students latitude on how they present themselves online. There was consensus that the online environment, including virtual-classroom activities, could help students develop healthy real-life personalities. On that point, I believe, Dr. Turkle would agree.