I must confess that I am one of those people for whom role-playing is a scary thing. When I was a child, I always dreaded the “audience participation” part of the program when my parents took me to a magic show or one of the animal acts at Sea World. And yet, as a teacher, I have seen the amazing power of drama in the classroom to bring concepts and texts alive for students who, perhaps, have difficulty conjuring up images from a printed page. Because I saw their great power, I continued to use very simple process drama activities in my classroom, all the while making sure there was a space for the “shy kid” or two who was always present and who always reminded me of myself.

Recently, while researching teachers who make use of what’s known as “Web 2.0” in their classrooms (Kist, 2010), I have found that some teachers are using social networking platforms to set up virtual role-playing activities. These new media venues seem to capture the best of both worlds, keeping the creative play aspects of in-classroom drama activities, while allowing the more reserved students to do their “acting” in the (relative) privacy of the library, computer lab or their own homes. Also, these activities may spark some conversations about the nature of identity, which is probably a good thing for safety reasons in an age of online “profiles” that we all craft every day.

In my research, I have seen these interactive role-playing activities set up using three different platform: blogs, wikis and Nings. A blog is simply an online log (“Weblog”) or journal designed for one person to share his or her thoughts with the world. A “wiki” (named originally for the Hawaiian word meaning “quick”) is a virtual space for building collaborative texts online. The most famous example of a wiki is Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org) in which people across the world collaborate on what are essentially encyclopedia articles about various topics. Finally, a few years ago, a website called Ning.com was created that allowed anyone to set up a social network that approximates Facebook or MySpace. One could set up a Ning for one’s family, or club members, or around any activity through which people wanted to socially network. It allowed for discussions to form around any topic and for people to post pictures and various announcements. Nings were often used for online role-playing games. Unfortunately, Ning.com recently announced that it is going to begin charging people to use the web site (anywhere from $2.95 per month to $50 per month, based on the desired features). Due to this cost, I have decided to describe a virtual role-playing activity that is...
set up as a blog, because there are many sites that continue to host blogs for free. In addition, some school districts have their own in-house systems (known as “Intranets”) that are ideal for hosting student blogs in a protected environment.

The first step in creating any kind of online role-playing activity is to find out what your district’s policy is on having students keep blogs. Districts vary in their policies, and you may find any range of restrictions in place, so make sure to ask your principal or whoever is in charge of instructional technology in your district. Once you have determined that your district allows for student blogs, you can begin with the following steps:

1. Figure out the best venue for hosting your blog activity. The following sites are commonly used and are all free:
   
   Blogger (https://www.blogger.com/start)
   Blog.com (http://blog.com/)
   LiveJournal (www.livejournal.com)
   MSN Spaces (www.spaces.msn.com)
   Typepad (www.typepad.com)
   WordPress (www.wordpress.org)
   Yahoo 360 (www.360.yahoo.com)

2. Set up your own blog and practice blogging yourself for a few weeks, just to get used to the format of keeping a blog.

3. Go to Technorati (http://technorati.com/) which is an online repository of all blogs. Search for blogs that may exist dealing with the subject you are teaching. Assemble a list of these blogs and introduce them to students so that they can become familiar with the conventions of blogging. (See Kist, 2010, for general principles that can be set forth for students on how to be an ethical, responsible blogger.)

4. Decide what source text will be the springboard for your blogging activity. Obviously, the kinds of texts that lend themselves to this kind of activity are those in which there are characters that students can impersonate. These may be fiction or nonfiction texts.

5. If you teach multiple periods of the same course, consider whether you will set up one blogging project for all your classes together, or whether each class will have its own blogosphere. For example, if you are teaching Lord of the Flies, will there be one student impersonating Jack across all of your class periods, or will there be one student impersonating Jack in each of your class periods?

6. Start off with some simple prompts that may help your students be able to begin the role-play. Some simple prompt ideas are suggested in the box below.