

USING INTERNET MEMES FOR SUBJECT-SPECIFIC DISCUSSION

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KEYWORDS

Online learning, creative teaching, using memes, connecting with students, increasing student engagement.

SUMMARY

This How-To-Guide introduces the idea of using internet memes in classroom discussion as an introduction to difficult academic concepts.

This short study explores reasons for using memes, how to do so, and the benefits for both students and lecturers. Further, it provides a personal reflection on the use of memes and outlines how their usage can be adapted for any subject.

CONTEXT

Particularly first year students who have just left secondary school or are returning to education after many years often struggle with theories and academic language in research papers as well as classroom discussions. The lecturer is responsible for communicating the topics of the class in an understandable way while at the same time working on the appropriate academic level.

HOW TO CONNECT TO AN INTERNET GENERATION

Students who are just starting in Further or Higher Education are most likely part of the generation that has grown up with online resources. They will spend much of their time on social media, expressing them-selves through emojis and memes.

Being able to tap into this concise and fun way of communicating allows the lecturer to gain the students' attention quickly, introduce a potentially difficult to grasp concepts and lead a discussion that encourages student engagement.

PEDAGOGICAL BACKGROUND

Purnama (2017) points out that students connect easily to topics and formats that they are already familiar with. Using social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram and others has been proven to improve student learning and engagement (cf. e.g., Gerard 2012, Blessing et al 2012, Wells 2018, Riser et al 2020). Mayer (2008) contends that images alongside written content as well as using a more conversational style in academic teaching is highly beneficial for student engagement. Student learning outcomes are improved by actively engaging with memes, whether it may be through describing memes and explaining how they fit into the lecture's context or creating memes themselves.

WHAT IS A MEME?

A meme is 'an idea (e.g., a word or phrase, hashtag, hyperlink, picture, or video), usually rooted in popular culture, that is widely popularized and distributed on the World Wide Web, for example, via social networks, blogs, e-mail and news sources' (American Psychological Association).

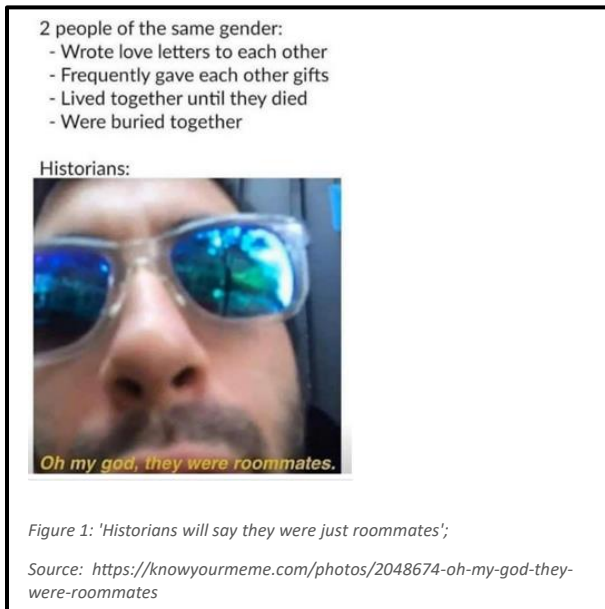
HOW TO MEME

Using memes for classroom discussions means more than the lecturer simply adding a funny picture to their lecture slides. While this passive way can have benefits, this guide considers the active use of memes. Here, using memes as an introduction to an academic topic are considered. Choosing the right meme is highly important to the outcome of the exercise. The meme must relate to the subject and topic the lecturer is planning to discuss afterwards. The main issue with memes is copyright and providing the sources. Creators of memes usually do not claim any copyright, partly due to the pictures used would be someone's intellectual property as well. Currently, the agreement in using memes in education seems to be that one has to provide the link to the exact website the meme was taken off (e.g. knowyourmeme.com; twitter.com; also see Kath et al 2022 for this). If the creator has provided copy right information, this should be adhered to and only used if it states a creative commons licence. Colleagues can seek additional guidance from their own institution if they are unsure about using a meme.

Memes often have a 'certain inside-joke quality' (Hellyer 2015) that the lecturer needs to be aware of. Before using a meme, it should be clear where the picture originated from (e.g. a TV series, a movie, artwork) and how the text on the meme relates to the picture. Then, the lecturer needs to consider possible reactions by students and how to make use of them for the topic. If there is not enough student engagement, it can be useful to have a couple of question for the students to consider such as 'How do you think this relates to today's class?', 'Why is this funny?' or 'Why am I showing you this?'. Once the students have discussed the meme and connected it to the academic topic, it is a good idea to refer back to the meme throughout the class.

CASE STUDY: 'HISTORIANS WILL SAY THEY WERE JUST ROOMMATES'

For this guide, the following meme has been chosen:



Using this meme was aimed to support the students in critically examining how the perception of gender and sexuality has changed over centuries, and how this is interpreted by historians in different eras and to encourage the students to engage with academic texts. Using the meme rather than just asking the question allows the students to connect their everyday life on social media to their subject of studies. It links history to relevant topics today and is adequate for the level of study due to it being both easily understandable and the gateway to a much more in-depth academic discussion. Further, it allows the lecturer to assess the students' understanding of the topic.

Upon first seeing the chosen meme, the students reacted with giggles and comments in the chat discussing the quality of the meme, but soon there were comments such as 'this is really what it's like', showing their understanding. There was increased engagement from those students less confident. The chosen meme relates to the class 'History and Historians' as it explores how historians approached gender relationships and sexuality in the past (in this case not at all) and how modern day historians approach the topic. Using the meme, the students explored how historians think about gender and sexuality in relation to how they explore history as well as to encourage them to be more critical when they considering interpretations of the past. Soon we were discussing how the perception of gender and sexuality has changed. This led smoothly into a discussion of the academic texts they were asked to prepare, combining classic pedagogics with a more accessible approach.

ADAPTING TO DIFFERENT SUBJECTS

Memes are being used for teaching in a variety of subjects. I personally have used them in History classes (as seen in the case study above) and Beginners German classes. For History, memes are highly useful to explain complicated concepts, connect the past with the present and allow the students to connect in their own way. When learning German, students tend to get frustrated with the grammar and difficult vocabulary. A meme in the middle of the class can help to relax and laugh off the difficulties. It also encourages the students to connect to the language by possibly sharing the meme with friends after class.

I am convinced that there are memes for any subject and students will appreciate a new approach to teaching that allows them to connect their private life on social media with their academic learning.

WHAT LEARNING AND TEACHING ENHANCEMENT STRATEGY VALUE(S) DOES THIS ALIGN WITH?

It aligns with 'Supporting the learner as an individual', 'Integrated and sustainable learning and teaching' and 'Supporting flexible and student-centred learning' as it helps those students with PSLP or those who find it intimidating to speak out in a class situation when discussing academic texts and topics, allowing them to participate in their own way and hopefully helping them access class material more easily.

The use of memes in class functions as a stepladder from general thinking to an academic one, demonstrating 'Learning for personal growth and employment' as well as 'Enriching learning through digital practices'.

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If you wish to submit your own case study, or have any questions about this resource please contact:

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