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The Memeing Instructor: Increased attention = increased retention

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ABSTRACT
This brief explains the learning theories that make memes effective vehicles for instruction, discusses where to find popular memes and GIFs which resonate with students and methods of how they can be employed inside and outside the classroom to enhance instruction, and offers tips regarding best practices.

Keywords: pop culture, memes, GIFs, humor

Memes. Those pictures you see all over the Internet. Often involving cats or children. The best ones have a caption that is not only funny but fits the picture so perfectly that it goes viral. Memes start with a picture that is particularly evocative or amusing, such as Grumpy Cat’s frown. These pictures alone are pretty awesome. The Internet being the Internet, though, these become even more amazing when you add a caption (and perhaps add a swirly background to emphasize the picture’s focal point). GIFs, on the other hand, are short animations, usually evocative clips from celebrity interviews or the entertainment industry.

Memes and GIFs are a way of connecting with our students in a way they likely don’t expect. There are many stereotypes and preconceptions students have about professors and librarians, but it is probably safe to generalize that they do not consider professors and librarians as having their fingers on the pulse of pop culture.

Most instructors are not natural entertainers, and many of us have been dismayed by seeing our students’ faces directed at their computer screens midway through each class, despite our enthusiasm for the subject. Two of the most important elements of making what we teach memorable to our students, according to Heath and Heath in their 2008 book Made to Stick, is unexpectedness and simplicity. Using memes and other pop culture references in one’s instruction can visibly surprise students, prompting them to eagerly anticipate your next slide.

The function of surprise is to “increase alertness and cause focus—to grab people’s attention.” And “the most basic way to get someone’s attention is this: Break a pattern.” So by the simple act of using a meme, you are disrupting students’ preconceptions of what a college class is like, and temporarily increasing their focus. Heath and Heath also argue that simplicity is an important factor in helping people remember what you say. As faculty working in higher education, we are particularly susceptible to what they call the Curse of Knowledge, where “we become more and more fascinated by nuance and complexity[…] and we start to forget what it’s like not to know” what we know. In practical terms, this means that we can assume students have more prior knowledge than they actually do or tell students too much new information at once. The obligatory brevity of the text on the meme or GIF, however, requires distillation of a concept into its simplest form. Memes and GIFs therefore have great potential to be used in the classroom to increase student engagement and thereby increase retention of what was discussed in class.

If you’re ready to start making your own memes, the most important thing to keep in mind is to find memes
that are currently trending. Avoid using outdated memes, as students will be unimpressed with a display of insufficient cultural prowess. Popular memes can be found via Reddit, which has a number of subreddits devoted to them. Reddit uses a voting system to ensure that the most popular posts are on the subreddit’s front page, ensuring that what you see here is popular. MemeDad.com has a ‘Hot on Reddit’ section that directs you to a page of trending memes on Reddit. If you mouse over one of these images, you’ll see the ‘name’ of that meme (such as Success Kid, First World Problems, etc.).

Once you’ve found a popular, relevant meme, an educational caption can be added to the image. There are many websites which will quickly and painlessly do this and which can be found by doing an internet search for “meme generator.” With most meme generators, it is also possible to upload and ‘meme’ one of your own images, but for the most impact, you will want to use a meme that is currently trending.

Most memes have text on top, and additional text on bottom. The text on top is often a question or provocative statement, while the text on the bottom is often sarcastic or unexpected in some way. KnowYourMeme.com will give you all the details you need on whether any language is typically associated with a meme. For example, The Most Interesting Man in the World doesn’t always… but when he does, he… The main font used in memes is Impact in white with a black outline, unless the meme is a Rage or Hyperbole and a Half comic, which use different fonts.

GIFs, on the other hand, are short animations, usually evocative clips from celebrity interviews or the entertainment industry. Often GIFs have no text, just an amusing facial expression or action, such as a llama rearing its head in a strange way. Because the GIF field, so to speak, is so wide—all recorded content—there are many to choose from. Finding GIFs that use a trending phrase (such as ‘on fleek’ in the 2014-2015 academic year) or currently popular celebrities and actors therefore is not as critical as it is for memes. GIFs can be found by doing an internet search for a particular ‘emotion’ + the word GIF, such as ‘surprised GIF.’ Alternatively, you can search for the name of a TV show, actor, or character + the word GIF, such as ‘Joffrey GIF.’

It can be virtually impossible to track down the original creator of a GIF or capturer of a meme image, so providing proper attribution can be difficult. If using a meme creator, include the title of the image, the name of the meme generator, the upload date (if possible), and the download date when citing your meme. When citing GIFs, include the title or at least a description, the URL, the creation date (if possible), and date of download.

If you work in academic support services (such as a library), most of your teaching probably involves guest lecturing for professors once or twice a semester, so your entire slide deck could be made up of memes and GIFs. Traditional faculty can use them more sparingly in slide decks to introduce a new topic or include them on handouts, captioned with a bit of disciplinary wisdom. Screen readers cannot parse memes and GIFs. If using them in online environments—for example, in course-wide emails, or as profile pictures in Blackboard or LibGuides—include alt text with a description of the image/GIF and any text or caption to make your memes and GIFs accessible.

Memes and GIFs can help bring humor and pop culture into your classes and presentations quickly, and with minimal effort. Give it a try!

REFERENCES

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