

Critical Memes by Leonardo Flores

This workshop will focus on different approaches to teaching image macro memes as format for student engagement with a work of literature or a topic of study.

Genre: Any

Course Level: Any

Student Difficulty: Easy

Teacher Preparation: Medium

Class Size: Any

Semester Time: Any

Writing Component: Up to you

Close Reading: High

Estimated Time: Variable: minutes in class, potentially hours of assignment time.

Exercise

The goal of this activity is to use a popular digital media genre-- the image macro meme-- and use it as a vehicle for critical analysis of a work of literature or whatever topic is being studied in class. This way students can express their insights on a topic or work in a format that they are familiar with and habitually read, share, and create.

The basic parameters of the assignment are to create an image macro meme using an image and/or text relevant to the assigned material. The meme needs to critically engage the material, its meme type, and preferably (but not necessarily) be funny and shareable. Presenting the meme to class and discussing it is an essential part of the activity not only to explore how the work or topic is engaged by the meme, but to discuss potential issues that arise from naïve choices in image and language which can be inadvertently or subconsciously biased.

This can be as simple an activity as having a few students become meme respondents for an assigned reading at the beginning of class, or having everyone shape their response to the text with a meme. It can also be more elaborate, such as my Hamlet Memes or Waste Land Memes activities, detailed below:

Hamlet Memes

1. Class reads and discusses *Hamlet*.
2. Divide class into 4 groups and assign a *Hamlet* film adaptation to each.
3. The groups subdivide so students cover each of the 5 acts in the play.
4. Create a meme using:
 - a. An image from your film.
 - b. Some text from your act.
 - c. Your own text.
5. Share, discuss in class, and revise.
6. Publish on Twitter with #HamletMemes hashtag.

Waste Land Memes

1. Class reads and discusses *The Wasteland*.
2. Divide class into 5 groups and assign a section from the poem to each.
3. Create a meme using:
 - a. An image of your choice.
 - b. Some text from the poem.
 - c. Your own text (optional).
4. Share, discuss in class, and revise.
5. Publish on Twitter with #WasteLandMemes hashtag.

Reflection

This assignment is a fun way to connect with students, in part because it validates ways in which they are already expressing themselves, humorously, politically, and socio-culturally in social media networks.



My students' first reaction when I assigned Hamlet Memes was best captured with this student's meme:



But the students not only enjoyed the activity, but also managed to express their responses to the play, its characters, themes, and conflict through an activity that required them to pay close attention to the text of the play and the images in the films. Some of the memes they created showed and allowed us to safely address sexist, racist, homophobic, and biased language and image choices.

We then performed "Hamlet: the Meme Edition" on Twitter by tweeting all the Act 1 memes on Monday, Act 2 on Tuesday, and so on. And they were very well received on Twitter, so well, that the assignment has been adopted by many teacher and professors on the Web. We also made a selection of these and performed them at the Out Loud! festival in 2014.

The Waste Land Memes assignment was simpler and produced more versatile results because students (and other folks who joined the activity online) put the poem in conversation with popular culture and meme culture.



There were also serious memes, emphasizing the serious themes of the poem.



The activity and social media campaign were very popular, and it got some international attention partly because it happened in April, during National Poetry Month.

I have written two essays about these activities and they have both been accepted for publication in a forthcoming book, titled *BuzzAdemia*, a movement that focuses on using popular internet forms (memes, listicle, etc) for serious academic purposes.

Read more about these assignments here:

- Hamlet Memes write-up in my blog: <http://leonardoflores.net/blog/teaching-hamlet-in-digital-media/>
- Twitter #HamletMemes hashtag: <https://twitter.com/hashtag/hamletmemes?src=hash>
- Waste Land Memes assignment: <http://leonardoflores.net/3325/2016/04/11/week-13-wastelandmemes-and-more/>
- Twitter #WasteLandMemes hashtag: <https://twitter.com/hashtag/WasteLandMemes?src=hash>