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Okay Boomer: Overcoming Cringe to Teach a Unit on Meme Analysis

John Sparks

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Introduction

“The Cannon” is a long standing tradition in the English Classroom. It is a compilation of works taught across the English classroom, and it is full of well established texts that many of us most likely encountered in High School. However, due to the fact that it is full of dead white men while classrooms are becoming more and more diverse, many teachers have moved away from it in their curriculum. Teachers prefer more modern texts that interest and relate to students in their lives. This has also come with the advent of skill based teaching, which emphasizes enduring skills and practices rather than just learning the content of the text. One step toward relevant teaching is including memes into the classroom in order to help students understand texts that most of them consume, and possibly create, daily.

Abstract

This project goes over a detailed explanation for why and how memes should be included in the classroom. It explains the components of a meme in detail, describes how to teach them, and how to overcome those awkward embarrassing moments that come from trying to be relevant known as “cringe”, in the classroom. The unit itself is split into 5 days of lessons that discuss the structures, allusions, and multiple creators that make up a meme. Content such as propaganda and how memes impact the broader conversations is also taught in these lessons. There is an accompanying slide show and collection of worksheets that can be used to teach the material.

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Literature Review

This literature review will be discussing the key educational theory, memes as they have been discussed in scholarship, and how memes have been incorporated into the classroom. These are the ideas that this unit hopes to build on, but also to enter the conversation with. This project is in many ways an extension of what other academics and teachers have done with other modern material, and hopes to be successful in the same way that many of them were.

Educational Framework

The overall framework for this project is the concept of working with students' funds of knowledge. This is the concept of accessing previous knowledge that the students had coming into the classroom, and linking it to the concepts that are being taught in class. The research for this concept began in the early 90's, and as many teachers know, has become common practice in the classroom. It was in many ways the formal beginning of teachers trying to make the content "relevant" to students (Moll, 1992).

One of the key reasons the idea of funds of knowledge was revolutionary was that it acknowledged culture beyond what was simply the white hegemony at the time. Rios-Aguilar et. al. (2011) expanded on funds of knowledge and discussed how educators need to go further than just discussing how useful the funds of knowledge are, and find a way to meaningfully use the theory in the classroom to benefit student learning. A theory they explore is that the classroom is designed to reward those who conform to the standard school curriculum, that is what is designed by those in power, and ignores those who have interests or ideas that do not align with the highschool curriculum (Rios Aguilar, 2011).

This ties into the project of creating a culturally sustaining pedagogy (Alim, 2017). This is when the backgrounds and diverse histories are taken into account in a meaningful way

throughout the curriculum and unit design process. Culturally sustained pedagogy is distinct in that it is beyond simply including rap in a lesson for the day, or having a cultural fair where students can exhibit the different background they come from. It is about continuous and explicit efforts to include diverse content and ways of teaching to reach a wide variety of students.

A modern example of engaging in student's cultures is Visco's (2019) discussion on his use of Twitter in the classroom. In his project, he used Twitter as a community building activity, and eventually as a learning one for them to format a tweet. The project required understanding hashtags, and the style of a tweet. More than just taking something else they wrote and putting it in a tweet, students were using the style of a tweet and creating something wholly unique in that format, hashtags and all (Visco,2019).

Another concept in which this project is framed is New Media Literacy. New Media Literacy pertains to how literacy has evolved in the wake of the internet. As Donald Leu (2011) discusses, the internet is changing human literacy from what it was in the past. Context is changing more rapidly than ever before, and navigating the internet and different web pages is fundamentally different from reading a book. The way people search for information, how they evaluate sources, and even how they communicate information is different on the internet than say reading a text. Memes are definitively a form of this new media literacy in how they change and evolve, and are very much a form of New Media Literacy.

All of these are modern educational theories that reflect a growing and changing world. They promote engagement with new material and ideas that goes beyond what is seen in just reading literature. They all show that engaging with these materials both help students with attaining long terms skill that help them in life, and with keeping them engaged in the classroom. All of this is vital to teaching students, and is a part of a growing effort to modernize the

classroom.

Meme History

In this section, memes and how they have been discussed will be covered. Memes are complicated pieces, and in order to teach them they need to be understood. Most scholarship on the topic mentions the origins of memes themselves, which were created as a concept by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. To put it simply, memes are cultural units of information that can be compared to the likes of DNA. Analogously to the way DNA replicates and reproduces itself to reproduce, memes are cultural ideas that replicate and reproduce themselves throughout our culture.

A valuable source for information on memes and what they are is the 2016 text “The World Made Meme” by Ryan Milner. Though, as with all texts on the subject, it is dated, it offers a unique and in depth discussion on all of the valuable components of the meme. The key components of the meme, as outlined in the text, include the structure of the meme, which is how the meme is set up i.e. one example of this in language is the set up and the punchline, the referential nature, which is how memes reference other memes and cultural events, and how many different people are involved in making a meme, such as the creator of the original content and the people who turned it into a meme (Milner, 2016). Though there are multiple extra components that could be considered important to the making of a meme, these are the key elements that every meme contains.

Understanding who is involved in making a meme is particularly vital to the unit design and some of the content being taught. Particularly, the propagandistic nature of memes (Beskow,

2020). Propaganda does not necessarily equate to negative, however propaganda involves the spread of information that comes from a biased viewpoint. Memes themselves are excellent tools to speak propaganda of this nature, and have been used by members of political parties to spread information. Beskow discusses the evolution and spread of these political memes. The memes were created by one side, then evolved as that side continued to use them, changing their message, but then the same meme was used by a different party, meaning the memes message had been entirely flipped. The memes were being edited into propagandistic pieces for both political parties. This is a complicated evolution, and one could even share some of these memes without being aware of the explicit political aims, making it all the more essential to teach and understand memes. Students could be unknowingly spreading misinformation into the world just by casually sharing a meme, and they need an understanding of how to avoid this and be conscious of these biases.

How Memes have been Incorporated into the Classroom

This section will highlight how memes have been incorporated into the classroom already, and where the work needs to be done to improve what has been done. While there is some usage of memes, it is important to move towards a more meaningful integration. Though there is a lack of scholarship on the topic, memes are being used in the classroom right now. They are found in the hallways, on teachers walls, and even in lessons. When the topic is googled, dozens upon dozens of webpages with potential ways to use memes in the classroom pop up on Pinterest and teacher blogs. Teachers are using memes to reach their students already, and the curriculums and units that are designed must work to help teachers use memes effectively.

One unit that does this effectively for High School students is Harvey and Palese's (2018)

#NeverthelessMemesPersisted: Building Critical Memetic Literacy in the Classroom. This unit teaches about many of the universal themes of memes, and really dissects the memes for what they are. They want to teach their students meme literacy, and engage them critically with memes in every aspect, having them analyze memes and break them down through questioning and paying attention to detail. They break memes into 4 separate categories, and one of their ideas for the class involves creating and explaining how these memes fit into their categories (Harvey & Palese, 2018).

While informative, Harvey & Palese (2018) it lacks applicability in a highschool classroom. For example, many of its questions aimed at students are not only based on outdated memes, but also are leading. They ask things about when the meme was first created, how long did it spread, what parts of the meme stay the same from version to version, and why did it spread. Due to the complex and evolving nature of memes, these questions are mostly unanswerable by students, especially if the meme is from 10 years ago. Many of the concepts discussed in this unit will be addressed in this project, however over improving and fleshing out these ideas to make them more accessible is vital when moving forward. For example, some of the discussion questions seem to not work in a lesson, such as “Did this meme spread rapidly? Why?” this is not a question students can answer in context, and depends on students having too much of an understanding of the meme being talked about.

When designing this unit, engagement was one of the main aspects that went into making it work. The key to making an instructional unit work is having it fundamentally built on student engagement. While the content being relevant is an important first step in moving towards this, it is not the only important consideration. As is discussed by Karl Smith (2005) in his essay on participation and group based work in the classroom, it is vital to have group work and students

involvement in the learning process for students to be engaged. Lecturing at the front of the room is not the method to get students engaged in the classroom. Students need to be a part of every aspect of the learning from the moment they step in the room. Lessons involving student learning need to be filled with engaging questions, and group activities when possible (Smith, 2005).

Unit Development

Memes Defined

In order to properly begin, it is vital to explain memes and how they will work in this project. There is the core of memetics, which comes from Richard Dawkins' (1976) initial description that describes memes essentially as a cultural unit of information that transfers and reproduces similar to how a gene reproduces. People make minor alterations to memes, however the core structure and many of the patterns remain the same (Dawkins, 1976).

More recently, many have offered a new more descriptive definition of memes. *The World Made Meme* offers a particularly nuanced definition: "Memetic media are aggregate texts, collectively created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants..."

This is the core of memes as they exist in the modern day. They are aggregate texts, a collection of images and references that is constantly added onto and evolves. The persons changing them are the "cultural participants" who engage in the culture and spread the memes.

"They're innumerable—as dense as they are vibrant—and understanding their implications for public conversation requires understanding intertextual connections, even when assessing singular texts" (Milner, 2016, p. 2).

The definition stated here addresses the key ideas that come to mind when we think of a

meme. They are circulated pieces of culture that revolve around what can often amount to a large inside joke, having you make “intertextual connections” (Milner, 2016) in order to be in the know. They are also not limited only to jokes, and have even become a way to spread cultural information, though few would deny that jokes are at the core of memes.

Harvey and Palese (2018) use a similar idea with their meme definition by breaking the meme down into 4 parts. While some of the elements discussed in their definition are found in this unit, they are constructed quite differently. Harvey and Palese’s concepts of reference and structure are found here, however they use the idea of replicability as its own idea, rather than as a part of replicable structures. Their idea of indexicality, which is that a meme can be used to comment on many topics, fits under the concept of references/allusions. This is to make the concepts split more cleanly into lesson chunks, and to create a simpler definition for students and teachers to understand.

It is also important to address what a meme is not. A meme is not just a funny picture found on the internet. It is not just a joke, a popular post, or something found on social media. It is a type of social interaction that involves that manipulation and sharing of a concept based around one common structure. This idea of structure is vital, and an idea that will be returned to. A popular joke or post is one common way for a meme to begin. If someone makes a good joke or concept it will often result in the creation of a meme. But it is not a meme until it has been imitated and repurposed in a way that imitates the structure of the original post, but changes the punch-line or the concept. This is based on Milner’s and Dawkin’s definition of what makes a meme a meme.

The Components of a Meme

From the definition stated above that describes memes as aggregate texts created by multiple cultural participants, one can draw the 3 vital components of a meme. That is its progression and evolution, the necessity of structure, and the presence of allegory. The concept of evolution is how a meme grows and changes over time. As a meme grows and changes, its message and intentions can vary greatly over time, and can even oppose what the original poster intended. The image below shows how these meme messages can change and evolve in political circles.



(Beskow 2020)

In this study on memes, Beskow the evolution of memes within political circles. Someone would post the original joke, which was already a meme but not prevalent in the political group at the time, and the meme would quickly evolve into something else, occasionally into a complete distortion of the original joke or intention. What is important though is the memes all maintain some semblance of the original post. Look at how the image is the same, and the wording of the set up is the same. On the bottom line, all of the memes begin with the same phrase “and just like that” however the message changes drastically depending on which party is using the image. Though the image can be changed and the wording of the introduction can be adapted, the core of the post is still clearly recognizable as derivative of the original image. This is also a good example of a very simple meme progression, though they can grow much more complicated.

One more sophisticated meme that illustrates a more complicated structure is the meme known as “Loss.” As with many meme histories, the beginning of the “Loss” meme is complicated. To summarize, a webcomic author known for making jokes about video games attempted to make a comic that took on a more serious subject. The comic was reviled, and instantly mocked as insensitive and a bad way to dramatize his writing. As is often the case with things publicly disliked, the topic got turned into a meme relatively quickly. It was imitated mercilessly, and became a relatively popular meme. However, it soon became much more than just a joke about the original joke; it became a joke about the structure of the comic panels. The panels from the comic were stripped down to their very basics until the concept became just a series of lines that mirrored the shape of the original comic. The following figures show just how important the structure of a meme is, and how a single comic can be reproduced to just lines:



(Know your meme)

Look at the lines from the last panel compared to the first image. You have the one line representing the man walking into the hospital, then the two lines next to it showing the his conversation with the person at the desk, then 2 more representing his second conversation with the doctor, then one standing line and one lying down to represent him and the woman in the last panel. This is a complicated joke, and not one easily understood unless one was a member of these communities at the time, but it was popular and well liked, and comment sections at the time were often filled with people identifying the loss meme in comics, and meme creators often hid it in their content for eagle eyed viewers (Odd Guy, 2008).

This meme is a popular example of the internet's interest in the structure of the memes. There was not a particular joke in a picture of 7 lines that imitate a comic, but whether it was really being talked about, meme viewers were playing quite openly with the structure of meme comments. At its core, the meme was just these lines, these structures, that were imitated and repeated. At the end of the day the meme is just a structure that we build content off of.

It is also important to address the intertextual nature of memes. Intertextuality is in many ways the soul of memes (Milner). Memes as a text are almost always responding to themselves, while also pushing the meme narrative forward. This gives them layers, and creates a piece of media that meaningful engagement increases considerably once one has the whole context. For example, I will offer my interpretation of this image I saw on my twitter page:



(Know Your Meme, 2019)

This meme may look like complete nonsense to someone not online, and at the time of its creation required one to be an active participant in multiple different kinds of media. The first context is the immediate situation surrounding the memes creation. The man at the center of the meme is Michael Bloomberg, a primary candidate for the Democratic Party in 2020. He is a multi-billionaire, at the time worth over 50 billion dollars. His run was unsuccessful, and he dropped out after a relatively bad performance day in the primaries where he lost in several states. Due to this, people started mocking the fact that he spent 500 million dollars campaigning to relatively little success. However, the counter response to this was that 500 million dollars was less than 1% of his net worth, and did not meaningfully affect him. Hence why the main part of this post is joking at the fact that he only used a small percentage of his wealth.

The other aspect of this joke is the context of the memetic imagery and phrase. The meme is actually a reference to the image seen below here:



(Know your meme)

This image in itself is also a reference to several memes going around the internet at the time. The line being quoted at the bottom is one commonly quoted in Japanese anime as a threat to a different character. The image imposed above it is a man in a fedora holding a katana blade. This is a reference to a phenomenon in American culture when anime gained much more popularity in our culture, and many became interested in Japanese culture. However, many gained a very shallow understanding of the culture, and that lack of understanding is often parodied in images like the one above. The way the Bloomberg meme builds on this as well

Discussing the context of this image could be done for while, and the amount of layers and references go even further than what I have mentioned. I have not even discussed how even who is posting the image changes the meaning of it, and how it is interpreted. However, it is not

important for the teacher to be able to understand the cultural meaning of the memes, or what they are referencing. This would be an impossible task to ask of anyone, and is not vital to teaching them in the classroom. However, knowing that memes are intertextual and that this affects their meaning is important to understand, and that to look at them in isolation does miss the point. Memes are constantly talking to and responding to each other, and to look at a meme means a necessity to understand part of the broader conversation. Memes themselves are a sophisticated topic of study, and have a very complicated structure and cultural significance. Understanding a meme can be a big deal, and part of the joy of it is getting the reference and being “in“ on the larger joke.

Why Should We Be Teaching Memes?

A discussion on what memes are is not quite enough to start the conversation on teaching memes in the classroom. Many may have reasonable reservation on integrating something so seemingly new into the classroom, especially since we as teachers may feel out of our depth. Some may also agree that memes should be used in the classroom, but are hesitant to teach them in the classroom. They may see memes as fine for putting on the walls, and maybe as a supplemental assignment to teach a book, but would not necessarily agree that memes should be taught as their own text worthy of a study. The response to this is two pronged, and ties heavily into the discussion on integration of nontraditional texts in the 90’s as well.

Moll (1994) conducted a study where hip hop songs and lyrics were integrated into the classroom. Moll used songs that were familiar to the students, and found that these texts could serve the same purpose as any traditional text does in the classroom. They were able to teach the same skills, with increased engagement, and saw their test scores go up alongside it as well. This

was seen as a resounding success, and thousands of teachers across the country integrate the music and styles into their classroom today (Moll, 1994).

While this is a great step forward, 30 years later many issues are prevalent in these classrooms. While integration of hip hop material was an early attempt at Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), for many teachers it has evolved into a stale gimmick. As one researcher observed, teachers do not really integrate these texts into their classroom in a meaningful way. They spend 1 or 2 days going over a piece of music, use it to teach one poetic technique or rhyme scheme, and move on to a different style. While there are some benefits to this, it treats these texts as secondary and not as a serious introduction into the classroom (Aguilar, 2011).

Memes themselves fall into a similar idea as discussed here. Memes are the language that youth use to communicate with each other. They are their social interaction, and they read and watch memes every day. Integrating them into the classroom not merely as a minor sideshow, but as a whole text worthy of study, is vital to moving the classroom forward and engaging students in learning that they can directly see as relevant to their lives. This ties into the idea of Culturally sustaining pedagogy, which goes beyond using these materials as just little engagement tactics, and teaches them as serious units of study. Seeing them as just a tool to increase participation or have fun is missing the point entirely. Students interact with memes daily, and any piece of media being observed that frequently needs to be understood and studied (Alim 2017).

Another major, and very relevant, reason to teach memes is the propagandistic nature of them as a tool. We have already looked at memes as having a political purpose and evolution in image that showed how they can switch political sides, but even less obvious memes give us

insights into the viewpoint of the creator and society at the time. One obvious example is Wendy's twitter in advertising.



There is not exactly a traditional advertisement. The popular meme of “waiting for a text back” typically after asking someone out, does not really tell us anything about the product at hand. It would be very possible to interpret this image as just another meme reference on the internet. However, we as discerning adults can tell that this just a successful advertising tactic that has made them popular on twitter. It is Wendy's attempt to insert themselves into a larger conversation, whether it contextually makes sense or not. Students are not quite as ready to do this however, and need to be taught how to break down this information (Beskow 2020).

A Step Further

It is important to not attempt to teach memes in an assimilationist manor that ignore their unique traits. One example is “The Rose that Grew From Concrete” (Shakur, 1999). A good poem, and one that is just as deserving to be a part of the curriculum as any other. It is taught because it comes from a less recognized source of poetry, and because many students can relate to it. However, it is just that, a very standard poem. One looking at it probably could not distinguish it as coming from someone who writes hip hop and rap music unless told. This is a flaw in the teaching. Hip hop is not the same thing as poetry, and cannot be taught in the same way. The texts integrated into the curriculum should not be ones that can merely slip in without having to change the teaching styles too much, they should push the literature forward, and engage with texts that embrace the cultures that students come from (Alime, 2017).

This is the main point with integrating memes and memetics. Memes are unique creative texts that convey information in a manor unlike other forms of media. To try and take a meme and adapt it into a literature project is missing the point. As was defined earlier, memes have specific structures, participants, and references that are made in unique ways that differ from traditional texts. When this is ignored, it is not really teaching memes in the classroom, but using memes as a tool to teach other types of texts. This leads to “cringe” in the classroom, and can easily ruin the lesson.

Avoiding Cringe

The number one issue with this unit, and the fear that many teachers most likely have when engaging with this material, is cringe. Cringe has become a bit of a slang term over the years. It has gone from beyond just someone reacting poorly to a joke or awkward statement, but a more sustained idea. Cringe is a reaction in the meme community specifically applied to people

who are clearly outsiders trying to make jokes just like those who are in on the joke. People can identify when someone is making a meme when they clearly know nothing about memes, and this is immediately a source of ridicule.

Cringe comes from multiple places. While there is not a whole lot of formal studies on cringe particularly, it has been observed and discussed by many. When it comes to memes, the generational disconnect is the biggest issue. Teachers are stuck in an area of the unknown, many are only partially literate in memes, and even then the ones that they engage with are nothing like the memes that teens engage with. And no teacher wants to be up in front of the classroom trying to make jokes that relate to the kids and failing, it can be embarrassing. Attempts to bridge this divide are more than possible however, and can be done with commitment and effort.

The best example to look to when tackling this topic is the integration of rap and hip hop into the classroom. This in its initial inception, and in subsequent studies, has been successful, but with certain caveats. Initially it was shown to raise test scores, however later studies have found that integration of these topics into the classroom has been less than successful, and there is a whole genre of comedy based around how cringey and not successful this can be due to that integration. Based on the initial study on the topic, and the follow up studies, one can extrapolate that there are certain methods that are necessary to overcome the “cringe” wall (Moll,1992).

1. Do not be half hearted

This comes from the same source of struggle that comes with making meaningful integration in general, as was discussed with the crack in the concrete poem. Students are able to tell when a teacher is simply including a meme as a quick method to try and increase engagement. It does not do much for them, and results in cringe. It is important that teachers engage this material seriously, despite its joking and modern nature. Treating memes as on the

same level as other material covered in classrooms is vital to having students take you seriously and avoiding an eye roll.

2. Engage with memes actively and with a desire to learn

Some teachers will attempt to avoid this cringe by embracing it. They can immediately dismiss themselves, and act as if they are in on the fact that it is a bit cringey. This immediate dismissal of the material may avoid cringiness to some extent, but really sets the lesson up to fail, as the students can tell that the teacher is disconnected from the material. Yes, students will probably know more about this than the teacher will. But that does not mean that the teacher does not know about memes at all. Embracing both the knowledge already had of memes and a desire and interest to learn more from the students creates a stronger bond moving forward, and shows the students that the topic is both serious and worth learning.

3. This cannot be teacher centered

This is the opposite of the previous reason, but still misses the mark. Standing up and lecturing about memes misses an opportunity to discuss them in the classroom. Teachers have a strong tendency to make the lesson about them and their knowledge. The more teachers try to make themselves the expert on memes, the worse they look. Teachers may be knowledgeable about the topic, but trying to lecture students on something they already know a lot about may appear quite out of touch. It is ok to let students correct the teacher (Emdin, 2016). Teachers will understand more about how to break a meme down, but students will know what types of memes are interesting and relevant. Letting them have an active say in how the lesson progresses and what types of memes are broken down is vital to having them learn.

Unit Framing

The unit begins with the Kentucky state standards. This is a common practice, and when planning a unit it is important to justify every activity with how they align with, or build to, the Kentucky standards for English. While this unit is organized into days, each classroom could split these topics up into multiple days depending on their students needs.

Each lesson of the unit comes with a worksheet, and corresponding slides that go with each talking point. For the worksheet, it would be ideal if teachers allowed students to keep the sheets as a packet or in a folder or journal as the lesson goes on, so students can have access to all of the material at once as they go through. The more students can access previous material, the less time that will be spent on looking for memes and maintenance each day. The slide show gives an in depth guide into how this unit might be taught. This gives teachers an easily accessible and unit plan that has all the components pre made and ready to teach.

A potential limitation for this unit is overcoming the digital divide. This lesson can be done entirely on a smartphone, however it would be most optimal on a computer of some kind. Overall, it is impossible to create a fully optimized unit on memes without access to the internet, as this is such an integral part of meme creation.

Day 1

The day begins with asking students to define what a meme is. Question of the day is a common practice used to engage students with the material. This will be the lead in for all days of the unit. The discussion acts as an engagement tool as it taps into their prior knowledge on a topic they most likely have some knowledge of, and allows the teacher to adjust and adapt the lesson based on the students prior understanding.

The lesson then transitions to the definition of memes. Students will not go over this definition today, and will spend the rest of the unit breaking down this definition. However, it is important to introduce this definition early on, to see if students have any contributions or changes they would like to make. It is vital for this unit that the students have a say in the learning. Asset-based approaches are essential to the unit. . The teacher will have more technical knowledge of them, but students will know how to shape and mold the definition so that it fits more into the world that the student's know. Recognizing and honoring student funds of knowledge (CITATION, YEAR) While I encourage teachers to maintain this structure, it is also really valuable to work with students and build on this unit with them. The bigger the role students have in their learning, the more encouraged they are to learn it.

The lesson then outlines the different genres of memes that will be used. This is where videos, reaction images, and video memes are introduced. Not too much time is spent on the instruction, as it will be more important for students to spend time on finding their own memes that fit into these categories. This is not the most content standards heavy lesson, however it sets up multiple important concepts that students will come back to. Most importantly, as students search and collect these memes, they will be able to return to the memes that they have found on this day, and use them for their explanations. This will cut down on overall time spent on finding memes, which would be the trickiest part of this unit.

Day 2

The second day centers students' conceptualization of a meme. It starts with another question of the day, asking them if the memes that have been shown reflect the memes that they see in their daily life. The students are then shown a very out of date meme. This is when the

concept of the structure of memes starts to be discussed, and how that relates to whether a meme is dated or not.

Teaching students the structural integrity of the text they are reading is a vital skill for students to have. This is when the unit begins to touch on learning target “RL.9-10.5: Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it and manipulate time create such effects as mystery, tension or surprise” and RL 9-10.9: “Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work” these are vital skills for students to have, and gives the unit a strong backbone in higher level thinking Kentucky State standards.

This unit is most firmly rooted in some of the theories used to teach sonnet, and also one of the more foreign to students in terms of texts they have seen before. It takes much more time to walk students through the content, and will be gone back to every day to ensure retention. Other scholars when teaching this concept have used the term Templatability, which refers to how the meme as a template. This is similar, however the term is associated purely with image based memes, and the goal of this lesson is to expand that definition to both video and word based memes as well, and the term structure is more broad and inclusive.

Day 3

Students will explore allusions on Day 3 and the ways in which they work on and in memes.. Students begin with a question of the day on references, and then go into another meme discussion. At this point, students will actually use the first meme they see as a quick review of concepts gone over in previous lessons. Then, this meme acts as a set up for the meme on slide 18, which references the previous meme on slide 17. This lesson also follows the I do, we do, you do structure, which allows for students to learn a new topic in multiple stages.

Day 4

This day is on propaganda. When students study and discuss propaganda in a critical environment, they are more likely to be critical of propaganda in their daily life. That is the goal of this lesson with memes. For this topic, propaganda is framed in the idea of how many parties are involved in making a meme. The key to identifying the message and goal of a topic is to understand what parties are involved in making the meme.

First students will simply go over how many people were involved in making a specific meme. They will look at a meme they have already discussed on day 4 to draw in that previous knowledge, and ensure that students are really breaking down how many parties are involved in making a meme. There is the original creator, those that made their creation into a meme, and those that made it into a different meme. And oftentimes these memes are blended with other memes over time, and all of those have their own creators. Overall, there are a lot of people involved in the process of making a meme, and this lesson breaks it down.

The aspect of propaganda is made most apparent in the meme made by Wendy's. Overall, it is made clear that the meme itself is not sending a message at all, merely making a joke about waiting for a text back. However, it is clear that since Wendy's is posting a meme they are just doing so to sell their product. This teaches children about how propaganda is not always explicit or even outwardly trying to manipulate you, but can sometimes subtly cause you to associate certain things (Wendy's in this case) with certain emotions (positive and funny). This lesson also uses the I do, we do, you do structure.

Day 5-6

This is the project where students design and describe 3 memes and their function in full. There is a full rubric on the worksheet. This project was designed to be completed entirely in class, and students should have access to their notes. This is meant to be a collaborative effort, and though it is not necessarily a group project, students can work together and collaborate to come up with their meme ideas. If students want to film each other or take pictures, that would be acceptable. Memes are fundamentally a social concept, and a project on them should be social as well.

UNIT PLAN

Unit objectives:

To identify the key components of a meme

To create memetic image, text, or video

The students will create and describe a meme

Grade level:

9-10

Unit length:

5-6 days

Kentucky English standards addressed:

RL.9- 10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone

RL.9- 10.5 Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it and manipulate time create such effects as mystery, tension or surprise.

RL.9- 10.9 Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work.

Link to powerpoint

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1g1mtqUzDfKso73LJmGX1yt_MYkW9e-M69OtpMwa8drg/edit?usp=sharing

Link to Worksheets/ rubric for the final project

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1krnYwhKWIR4RiMfxwhrJLy_SspWsjUa2GhI6tvijKxE/edit?usp=sharing

Pre unit preparation: have students each send you one example of the meme. Ask students to explain to you what the joke is as best they can, then based on their explanations decide which meme fits into the outline for a meme.

Unit instructions: This unit can be taught entirely from the powerpoints, and explanations with the powerpoint slides.

Day 1

5-10 minutes

Start the day with a question: What is a meme?

What does a meme do? Have students write for 2 minutes. The goal for this writing time is that students will continuously write and not lift their pen from the paper. Students will then share out their findings. You will probably get a variety of answers, and students may struggle to pinpoint exactly what a meme is. They have definitely seen memes, but to define them is a different skill entirely.

During the discussion, one key distinction to make is to ask them: Is a meme just a funny joke you see on the internet?

The response we need them to get to is that it is not, it is more than that.

Ultimately, it does not matter that they know an exact definition, but that they can identify the key elements of a meme. **The key elements that they need to understand is that a meme is some kind of transfer of information from person to person that involves a format/structure that can be manipulated and copied.**

The key to this lesson is letting the students become the teacher. If you see students begin to discuss this content passionately, let them. This is one lesson where the students might know more than you, and letting them change the lesson a little bit or expand on the definition as they see it is a great way to get them involved.

10-15	<p>There are many different genres of memes that can be discussed here. Look to the power point for examples of more wordy memes (these are common on Tumblr, twitter, and Reddit) and more video based memes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Reaction images -Specific templates, which includes: -Word templates -Comic templates -Video templates <p>Go over the power point with the examples of a meme.</p>
10-20	<p>Work time. Have students find memes that are appropriate for class and fit into one of the genres that has been described here. Make sure they label and save it if it is a video, image, etc. Tell them to try and find 3 total, each of a different type, and tell them to make sure they can understand and explain the meme. If you are worried about inappropriate content, have them share the memes with you so you can look at them before the next class. This is a collective effort. If they want to share memes or use a meme someone else found (with permission) that is more than ok.</p> <p>Accommodation: tell students less familiar with memes that they can simply google each of the meme genres, and memes of that variety will come up. Though slightly inappropriate content may come up, google will filter out most obscene images unless the student explicitly looks for them. However, it is good to be wary of these things. If you are still worried about obscenity, restrict students to the terms “wholesome memes” and only clean memes will show up.</p>

5-10	<p>Opening question: have the memes we’ve discussed matched what you are used to seeing online? If not, why not? Are they still “relevant”?</p> <p>Have students write on this for 2 minutes.</p> <p>This is when we really start digging into what the students already know. We have laid out the groundwork for analyzing memes, now we are tapping into what types of memes the students really interact with, and going over the referential/allusion aspect, along with the temporary nature of memes</p>
5-7	<p>Pull the next slide on day two with the captioned image</p> <p>“Is this a typical meme you’d see on the internet today if you were to go looking for one? Why or why not? Write your thoughts for 30 seconds and we’ll share out.”</p> <p>There is one key thing that students should touch on here, and that is how the meme is formatted. Nobody really uses “Top text, bottom text” as it is often referred to meme formats any more. If students bring up the word structure in their discussion that is excellent, but if not bring it in here. Ask them if they know what it means for a meme to be structured in a certain way.</p>
10	<p>Go to the next slide</p> <p>Walk them through the meme on the powerpoint together. Give students the first panel described, and then work with them through the panel structure.</p> <p>What is the purpose of each panel here? Let’s look at each one.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The first panel the brain is saying a statement that is alerting the character to something or talking to them in some kind of way -The second panel the character is responding to this statement, and is still pretty calm (Use a guiding question to push them here. “Yes, the character is reacting to the statem being said by the brain. Are

	<p>they scared yet?)</p> <p>-Then the brain gives a more alarming statement, or one that makes the other character more alert or aware of the situation at hand</p> <p>-Finally, we see the reaction to the brain's statement, where the character is staying up thinking about what the brain has told them.</p> <p>Your students probably already are aware of this, and do this type of thinking every day. However, this is forcing them to think about and explain their thought process in detail. They do this fairly sophisticated thought process every day without even noticing it.</p>
10-15	<p>Now your students are going to take the time to make one of these themselves in groups of 2-3. Link students to https://imgflip.com/mememplates and have them make a meme using a template other than the one you presented. Then, have them describe the structure of the template they have found. The students can work together to come up with these descriptions, but should submit them on their own. Make sure they submit the image along with their descriptions.</p>

Day 3

References/Collective creation

5-10	<p>What does it mean for a meme to make a reference/allusion and can you think of any types of memes that make references? If you can think of a meme that makes a reference, please find one to share</p> <p>Again, have students write on this for 1-2 minutes</p>
10-15	<p>Pull up the slide on allusions. First have students define what allusion is. Getting them to use the word allusion over reference is just a way to make this product a little more literary. Once students define</p>

	<p>this word, have them look at this meme. This is a pretty basic reference to an event that happened at the time the meme was being made, which was a solar eclipse, which they should recognize easily. The goal of this image is just to set up what is coming later, it is not necessarily an allusion. As a way to bring in last class, have the class identify what type of meme this is and have the class work together to break down the structure again. This one is simple, we have the topic that the main character is really interested in, the main character, and then the topic that they should be interested in but aren't.</p> <p>Then on the next slide, we have the image that references the previous one. For this image, there is a new meme template, but with a reference to the meme we just saw on the slide before. Make sure to ask students if they see this connection. Then, the math problem itself is a reference to an older meme off vine where someone gets this question wrong to humorous effect. Now, walk students through this meme and how the reference works. Yes there is clearly a reference to the previous meme, but how does it work in this meme? What is being communicated here? It is important to guide them towards the fact that the reference here is not only just to add onto the joke, but also it informs the structure of this new meme.</p>
5-10	<p>With a partner, find a meme that references a current event or topic, and explain what the joke is about that topic. OR find a meme that references and jokes about another meme, and talk about how it is using that meme in its joke.</p> <p>If students are struggling, ask them to look up “clean memes” and see what they find there.</p>
10-15	<p>Make a meme that references either a current event or another meme, and briefly explain how it is referencing another meme or topic. They can use</p>

	<p>https://imgflip.com/memetemplates again, but if they want to use something like tik-tok or another app they like they can branch out. Make sure to explain the “punchline.” As the teacher, this is going to require monitoring and correction as students work. It is important to make sure that students are really explaining the reference, and what the “punchline” is involving that reference. Is it being made fun of? Or just being used to enhance the joke? Is the meme itself a reference to another piece of media (i.e. a TV show?)</p>
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Day 4, Parties involved in making a meme/ propaganda.

5-10 minutes	<p>Question of the day: How many people work on a meme? Where do memes come from?</p> <p>The goal of today is that students understand how many people take part in the creation of a meme, and what different ideas those people can have or contribute.</p>
10-15	<p>Go to the slide on “Collective creation”</p> <p>What does it mean for something to be collectively created? How can we apply this to memes?</p> <p>This is merely introducing the content, and the idea of collective creation. All students need to understand and come to is that collective creation is when multiple people had a hand in creating one piece of media or work.</p> <p>Go to the next slide with the meme from last class</p> <p>Guide students to discussing who is involved with making this meme. In this piece, we have several layers here. Firstly, there was the creator of the original image. That is, the comic with the original joke. Then, on top of that, there is the person who turned that comic into a meme. Then, there is also the person who took the picture that is being used that is being spliced into this comic. There is also that old</p>

	<p>vine, which is being referenced here. That leaves a minimum of 5 people involved in this meme. We could go even further, and if your students do that is great, but the main point is that there are a lot of people's ideas and contributions going into one meme example.</p> <p>Go to the next slide with the Wendy's on it Students should be able to pick up on this one rather quickly. The party that invented the joke before Wendy's used it (Not Wendy's) Then Wendy's themselves using the joke, and the man taking a picture of the fry. However, it is also important to point out, why it is important to think about who is involved in making this meme. Though the image is not explicitly doing it, this is just an ad for Wendy's disguised as a meme. It is important to discuss and guide students through questions to the point that knowing who's making a meme is an important part of understanding it. These are not jokes made in isolation. Wendy's has 3.7 million followers as of now.</p>
5-7	<p>Turn on to the next slide Let students go into pairs for this one. Have them talk amongst each other and decide how many parties are involved in making this meme. There are at least 3, the creator of the show that the meme is from, the person who turned it into a meme template, and the person who is now using the meme.</p>
10	<p>Take two of the memes you have discussed or worked with in the past couple of days. How many people were involved in making them? Did they have a point beyond just a joke? What could they be saying about the broader world? Does it depend on who posted it?</p>

10 minutes	Did you learn anything new about memes? Was there anything that wasn't discussed that you wish had been?
30-40	<p>Have students create 2-3 memes and explain the details and how they work within the structures that we have taught.</p> <p>Today is purely for the summative assessments outlined in the rubric. What is most important to students is the explanation. If students are struggling to come up with memes to create, remind them that being flat out funny is not always the goal, but just being relatable. We can all think of easy things like when we're stressed about work, tired from waking up, don't want to go to school, lost a video game level, etc.</p>
	<p>This lesson particularly has quite a bit of leeway for the teacher. The amount of work here could easily span several days if you wanted to. If you are mostly concerned with content and understanding the concepts, this can be finished in one or 2 days. If you want to give students room to be a little more creative, this could take 2-3 days.</p>

Reflection

It is difficult to make a unit on such a shifting topic. Memes, at their core, stay the same, but on an exterior level change so drastically and so quickly that finding examples and teaching them in a relevant way is difficult. Even lessons and mini units that attempted this before as recently as 2018 have shown their age, and use memes and concepts that felt cheesy to the modern reader. There is not catch all solution to this problem, and it is one I think as a teacher I will engage in quite a bit as I continue to grow.

This project started in a vastly different place than it is in now. I originally had a whole unit designed around using memes as a tool to teach sonnets and their structures. I backed off from this for two reasons. One, teachers do not teach sonnets very much in the classroom. Students may encounter them once or twice in their entire high school career, but in the average high school classroom they are not used very much. Two, I felt that including sonnets made the memes feel secondary. That the memes themselves would be acting as a scaffolding tool to teach what the real topic would be, which was sonnets. I didn't want that. I wanted memes themselves to be the center of the unit. They are not just silly tools to pump engagement, they deserved a unit on their own.

One of the biggest struggles I had was discovering that someone else had done a collection of lessons on memes in 2018 that had a lot of similar ideas to mine. They broke their memes down into a multifaceted definition, discussed the different genres of memes, and one of the activities they designed was similar to my final activity in which students made a meme and broke it down. At their core, they were very similar, with similar goals. While my unit was unique, and had enough key differences to still make it viable, this was a massive shake up on how my project was to be viewed. I had to redesign my analysis through a whole different lens, and discuss in what ways my unit conformed to and differed from this previous piece. It was a serious lesson on the importance of thorough research, and very much a huge bump right when I thought I was at the end of my work.

The goal in writing this unit was to create work for myself and other teachers to build on and use to teach memes in the classroom, and create a more relevant pedagogy to students' lives. My biggest hope that teachers and educators take away from this unit is that memes deserve a major part in the curriculum, and should be incorporated into mainstream teaching. Memes are a

part of all of our lives, and I want people to realize that they are complex, and require social and political skills to interpret and break down. These skills do not come naturally, and must be taught. I think we often give students more credit than they deserve, and assume they understand technology and memes because they grew up with them constantly in their lives. But this is not as inherent as we might think, no more so than analyzing a book is inherent to us. It needs to be taught and promoted, teachers should be doing it in their classroom, or they are missing out on a major aspect of their students' literacies.

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