You All Made Dank Memes: Using Political Memes to Promote Critical Thinking

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Abstract
In the time following the 2016 presidential election, much has been written about the spread of false information on social media websites. Given the potential influence false information has had on American politics, it is more important than ever for people to critically evaluate the content they view and share on social media. This article describes an activity that encourages students to develop evidence based arguments and think critically about content shared on social media. In the activity, students are asked to generate an internet meme related to U.S. politics and write a short essay defending the position they have taken in the meme. This article explains how the activity can promote critical thinking and includes suggestions for future implementation.

Keywords: Critical Thinking; Teaching; Undergraduate Education
You All Made Dank Memes: Using Internet Memes to Promote Critical Thinking

Active learning techniques are an important part of university education. They encourage students to collaborate with each other and their instructor. Active learning techniques engage students in the learning process through activities such as structured debates and simulations (Archer and Miller 2011). Studies in political science show that students learn more when engaged in active learning (Frederking 2005; Shellman and Turan 2006). Additionally, active learning increases knowledge retention (Bonwell and Sutherland 1996) and attracts majors into the discipline (Shellman and Turan 2006). Research shows that innovative assignments motivate students and that active learning can help students develop critical thinking skills (Damron and Mott 2005; Pleschova 2007; Oros 2007). Although active learning techniques have proven beneficial to students, their use in introductory level political science courses is sparse (Archer and Miller 2011). This article describes an activity that requires students to generate a political meme and write a short essay providing evidence to support the position taken in their meme. This activity engages students with politics beyond the typical classroom lecture and can help students develop critical thinking skills necessary to navigate the current social media environment, where false information is frequently shared.

First, this article provides a description of memes and an explanation for why they are an important part of modern politics. Second, this article describes the framework used to identify critical thinking in student meme activities and explains how memes can be an effective tool for developing critical thinking skills. Third, this article thoroughly describes the political meme activity and uses examples from student memes to identify the use of critical thinking skills. Fourth, this article provides feedback from students on the political meme activity. Finally, this article offers suggestions for future implementation of the political meme activity.
What are Memes and Why are they Important?

The term “meme” was first coined by Richard Dawkins in the book *The Selfish Gene* (1976), as something that spreads throughout a culture. In recent years, the internet has allowed content to spread rapidly from person to person, creating a media environment suitable for the creation of internet memes (Borzsei 2013). The internet meme has been defined as “a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission” (Davison 2012, 122). When a meme has been spread to a point of losing comedic value, it is often labeled as “dank.” However, the term is also sometimes used ironically as a synonym for “cool” (Klee 2017). An internet meme can be generated in multiple formats, including a still image or a video and the presence of websites that allow people to easily generate internet memes has created an environment ripe for sharing information, including false information (Borzsei 2013).

Internet memes often focus on current events, engaging people with political issues even if only for the sake of humor (Borzsei 2013). Much like political cartoons, they can catch the attention of a reader in a way that an article cannot (Dougherty 2002). Although sharing an idea or information related to political issues rapidly can be beneficial, the ease to which internet memes are generated also allows for the dissemination of false information. With 62% of Americans receiving news from social media (Gottfried and Shearer 2016) and strong evidence suggesting that millions of Americans viewed and shared false content about the candidates in the 2016 presidential election (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017), it has become increasingly important for people to critically evaluate the content they are exposed to on the internet. In fact, one study found 115 pro-Trump fake stories shared on Facebook 30-million times and 41 pro-Clinton fake stories shared 7.6-million times. The same study estimated that the average American was exposed to at least one fake story (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). The widespread
exposure to inaccurate political stories makes the political meme activity especially useful. Not only can the activity encourage critical thinking, but it can also serve to remind students to be critical of content shared on the internet.

**Critical Thinking Skills**

There is a need for more ways to develop the critical thinking skills of students. Students perform poorly on critical thinking evaluations in college courses that rely heavily on memorization (Stein et al. 2007). Although other active learning strategies, such as simulations or class debates, can be effective; they require time and resources which make them impractical for larger classes. Simulations and debates are rarely used in introductory level political science courses (Archer and Miller 2011). There is a need for critical thinking activities that are practical for a wider range of classes. Although the political meme activity can be used in a classroom of any size, it is less limiting than other critical thinking exercises and is particularly useful for large classes where other activities are impractical. Identifying types of informational statements and various levels of intellectual activity in student political memes shows how the activity can help develop the critical thinking skills of students.

Constructing arguments is important to the development of critical thinking skills and it is important that students ask themselves why they believe what they do (Atwater 1991; Cohen 1993). Critical thinking is also considered a highly valued pedagogical objective in university education (Bok 2006). Though there are many definitions for critical thinking, commonly accepted components include the ability to recognize faulty arguments, rash generalizations, claims that are based on unreliable authority, and claims that lack evidence (Burbules and Berk 1999; Fitzgerald and Baird 2011). Critical thinking also involves the ability to understand complex ideas and use evidence to justify reasoning (Moon 2008).
Evaluating the use of critical thinking can be challenging for educators. Understanding the type of statements being made is one component of critical thinking. Fitzgerald and Baird (2011, p.620) identify four types of informational statements:

1. **Factual Statements:** Statements that are verifiably true or false.

2. **Normative Statements:** Statements that express values of right and wrong, good and bad.

3. **Interpretive Statements:** Statements that derive from textual materials to establish the intended meaning of the author. Arguments made from the text can be advanced or countered using the same text.

4. **Causal Statements:** Statements that make an observable argument of cause and effect between two concepts.

In addition to correctly using and identifying the types of informational statements made in writing, critical thinking requires evaluating the logic behind informational statements. Similar to Cavdar and Doe (2012), this article uses the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal to identify the critical thinking skills of students. According to Watson and Glaser (1952), critical thinking requires five levels of intellectual activity, presented below as listed by Cavdar and Doe (2012, p.299):

1. **Inference:** The ability to derive logical conclusions from premises of varied approaches.

2. **Recognition of Assumptions:** The ability to recognize assumptions and presuppositions implicit in the approaches.

3. **Deductions:** The ability to judge whether propositions made by the approaches can be logically drawn from evidence.

4. **Interpretation:** The ability to judge whether the conclusions and arguments made by the approaches can be logically drawn.
5. *Evaluation of Arguments:* The ability to distinguish relevant, strong, and weak arguments.

Writing is pivotal to student learning and writing activities are helpful in developing critical thinking skills (Paul and Elder 2007; Tsui 1999). Well-designed writing assignments can encourage students to critically evaluate their assumptions (Cavdar and Doe 2012). The political meme activity described in this article encourages students to construct and evaluate informational statements and engage in the various levels of intellectual activity required for critical thinking.

**Political Meme Activity**

Students in a large section (121 students) were asked to generate their own internet meme related to U.S. politics and/or U.S. public policy. Although internet memes can be generated in multiple formats, for the sake of practicality, students were asked to create one in the form of a still image. Students were required to write their own original caption for their meme. They were allowed to use a popular meme image (e.g. Socially Awkward Penguin; Captain Hindsight; Philosoraptor; Lazy College Senior) or they could caption their own personal image.

Internet memes shared on social media do not include written explanations of the content of the memes and the limited space for explanation in internet meme captions can often oversimplify political arguments. For their memes, students were required to write a short essay explaining the stance they took on a political issue. In their explanation, they could explain the personal relevance (if any) and the connection to American politics or public policy. In addition, students were required to cite at least one credible source to provide evidence in support for the position they chose. Although students were encouraged to use peer-reviewed academic studies, they were also allowed to use credible news sources (e.g. New York Times; Wall Street Journal)
or reports from credible research firms (e.g. Pew Research Center). Students were given two weeks outside of class to complete the activity. A sample handout of the activity is provided in Appendix A.

The writing requirement for the meme encouraged students to question their own thinking about political issues and make their own evidence-based political arguments. Beyond the relevance to the American politics course, the activity encourages students to be more critical of the content of the internet memes they are exposed to on social media.

Critical Thinking in Student Political Memes

Students generated their memes on a variety of political topics, including but not limited to foreign policy, education, and electoral politics. Students used a variety of the informational statements identified by Fitzgerald and Baird (2011) in their meme essays. Of course, using the types of informational statements is not all that is needed to demonstrate critical thinking. Students also used informational statements in a way that demonstrated that they were thinking at the various levels of intellectual activity identified by the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal. A couple of examples show how the political meme activity can promote critical thinking.

One student used the popular meme “Push it Somewhere Else Patrick,” an image of Patrick from the popular children’s cartoon SpongeBob SquarePants, to make a statement about President Trump’s immigration ban. The upper caption of the meme reads “Trump: We should take the immigrants…” and the lower caption reads “and move them somewhere else.” In the image Patrick is making a gesture consistent with pushing something from one place to another. In the cartoon, Patrick is known as a dimwitted character and in one episode actually suggests pushing the town all of the characters live in, Bikini Bottom, to another location as a problem
solving strategy. The student using the “Push it Somewhere Else Patrick” meme used the image, and the dimwitted character, to criticize President Trump’s immigration policy.

Another student used the popular meme “One Does Not Simply Walk into Mordor,” an image of Boromir from the film Lord of the Rings, to make a statement about freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The upper caption of the meme reads “one does not simply support the right to free speech” and the lower caption reads “and then condemn the press for doing their jobs.” The facial expression of Boromir in the image shows that he is making a serious point. In the film, the Council of Elrond tells Boromir that the ring must be destroyed by being thrown into a volcano in Mordor. The character states, “one does not simply walk into Mordor” in an effort to make the council aware of the difficulty of the task. The student used the “One Does Not Simply Walk into Mordor” meme to criticize President Trump for his arguably hypocritical stance on the 1st Amendment and to demonstrate that to support free speech but not freedom of the press is a difficult task.

In their essays, each of these students used the four types of informational statements to defend their positions. Examples of the statements made in each meme are presented in Table 1.

[insert Table 1 here]

The students also demonstrated the various levels of intellectual activity described in the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal. A description of the different levels used in the memes is presented in Table 2. Taken together, the information in Table 1 and Table 2 show how the political meme activity can promote critical thinking.

[insert Table 2 here]
Student Feedback on the Political Meme Activity

Not only did students use critical thinking skills in the political meme activity, they also enjoyed it. Students were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the activity on course evaluations and in a survey. In the comments section of the course evaluations several students gave positive feedback for the activity. They wrote things like “I loved the meme assignment” and “keep the meme assignment.” In addition, a student wrote, “One assignment I really enjoyed was our political meme. It was something fun and really helped me learn more about current political situations.”

Following the conclusion of the semester, students were asked to take a voluntary survey specifically about the political meme activity. Given that the survey was administered after the semester was over, students had no incentive to be dishonest in their feedback. Of the students who responded (45), the feedback for the activity was overwhelmingly positive. A strong majority of students believed the activity enhanced their critical thinking skills (86.7%). A smaller number, but still a strong majority, believed that the activity increased their skepticism of information shared on social media (75.6%). Lastly, the strongest majority believed that the activity allowed them to demonstrate their knowledge about politics (93.3%). Complete results from the student survey are presented in Table 3.

[insert Table 3 here]

Suggestions for Future Implementation

The political meme activity can encourage students to engage with evidence and use critical thinking skills, but a few improvements could be made to further the goal of critical thinking development. The opportunity for revision can improve critical thinking (Cavdar and Doe 2012). This activity was assigned to a large section of introduction level students, which
made providing constructive feedback and allowing students to revise their political memes impractical. For future implementation, especially in smaller sections of political science courses, instructors may provide feedback to students with the requirement that they revise their political meme essay. The opportunity for revision would help students draw clear connections between the type of informational statements they make and the evidence they cite.

Research shows that active learning and debate encourages student participation and critical thinking (Oros 2007). Instructors may also wish to divide the class into groups to discuss and critique their memes. Debating the merits of each meme would allow students to reflect on their use of evidence and help them recognize the strengths and weaknesses of arguments. This would also help students understand the difficulty of accurately representing a political issue in one internet meme.

Fitzgerald and Baird (2011) suggest having students categorize every sentence in their essays to have students reflect on their informational statements. Following submission of the political meme, instructors may consider having students categorize each statement made in their writing as factual, normative, interpretive, or causal. If the student is making a causal argument with their meme, then writing mostly causal statements and engaging relevant facts and logic would be appropriate. This exercise would help students recognize the logical connections between evidence, statements, and the content of their political meme.

Instructors may also consider varying the activity to encourage students to be more critical. Instead of having students generate their own political meme, instructors may consider having students select a popular internet meme about politics or public policy and write a short essay explaining why they disagree with the meme. This would encourage students to engage
evidence and think critically about political issues while also teaching them to be critical of content often found on social media.

**Conclusion**

One of the primary objectives of university education is to develop the critical thinking skills of students. In recent years, it has become increasingly important for people to view content on the internet with some skepticism. False information and faulty arguments spread on social media websites like wildfire. This activity not only encourages students to engage in politics in an innovative way that extends beyond the typical classroom setting, but also accomplishes two objectives. First, the activity encourages students to engage in various levels of critical thinking. Second, the activity encourages students to be skeptical of what they view on social media websites and to be mindful of the accuracy of the content they share. Political internet memes are going to continue to influence political dialogue. Through activities like this one, viral dank memes in the future can be well-reasoned and supported by evidence.

**References**


Appendix A

Political Meme Activity

Students will generate an original meme related to U.S. politics and/or U.S. public policy. Students are encouraged to caption their meme using Meme Generator (https://imgflip.com/memegenerator) or Quick Meme (http://www.quickmeme.com/caption). However, they may also choose to caption their image in a Word document. The caption must be an original caption written by the student. Students who turn in a popular meme from social media with an unoriginal caption will not receive credit. Though the caption must be the original work of the student, students may choose to use a popular meme image (e.g. socially awkward penguin; Futurama Fry; Philosoraptor; Lazy College Senior; Captain Hindsight). Students may caption their own image (e.g. a personal photo). Meme content must be appropriate for Academic work. Students will write a short explanation no more than 2 double-spaced pages in length (not counting the meme) of how the meme is relevant to U.S. politics or U.S. public policy. Students will upload a Word document with the meme, an explanation, and a reference page to Blackboard Learn.

The first page of the assignment should feature the political meme. The following pages should be an explanation of the meme. The explanation should cover any personal relevance (if any) and explain how the meme relates to American politics and/or American public policy. At least one credible source should be cited in support of the position taken by the meme. Academic studies and peer-reviewed journal articles are ideal, but credible news sources (e.g. New York Times; Wall Street Journal) or reports from credible research firms (e.g. Pew Research Center) are also acceptable. Explanations should be double-spaced and written in 12-
point Times New Roman font with 1-inch margins. The completed assignment must be uploaded to Blackboard Learn by [enter due date].

The political meme assignment is worth 40 points and accounts for 5% of the final course grade. The assignment will be graded by the following criteria.

Organization and Clarity of Writing: 10 points
Spelling and Grammar: 10 points
Content of Meme: 10 points
Quality of Evidence: 10 points
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Meme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>Trump signed a record number of executive orders in the first week of his presidency.</td>
<td>Trump barred CNN and the New York Times from attending the White House press briefing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative</td>
<td>The Supreme Court was right to revoke the travel ban.</td>
<td>Trump has been waging war against the media since he was elected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive</td>
<td>The travel ban is racial profiling.</td>
<td>Trump has violated the 1st Amendment by barring news organizations from attending the White House press briefing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causal</td>
<td>The travel ban caused emotional distress for countless families.</td>
<td>Denouncing the press in the U.S. makes it difficult to promote democratic values abroad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Inference</td>
<td>Recognition of Assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inferred the travel ban would disproportionately impact Muslims</td>
<td>Recognized assumption being made about Muslims and terrorism in ban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inferred that Trump makes decisions to disadvantage media outlets he views as liberal</td>
<td>Recognized assumption being made about specific news media outlets being too liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey Question</td>
<td>Student Response (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The political meme activity enhanced my critical thinking skills</td>
<td>Agree 86.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neither 11.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree 2.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The political meme activity increased my skepticism of information shared on</td>
<td>Agree 75.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social media</td>
<td>Neither 22.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree 2.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The political meme activity helped me demonstrate my knowledge about politics</td>
<td>Agree 93.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neither 4.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree 2.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Political Meme Survey n = 45. Strongly agree and agree categories are collapsed. Strongly disagree and disagree categories are collapsed.