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Article

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How grumpy cat helped students learn management concepts

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Abstract

Purpose – Management educators often seek out innovative ways to introduce theories and concepts in such a way that students are more engaged and connected with the course material. A meme is an image juxtaposed with short text that elicits emotional responses from its readers and is now a staple in social media. Examples include: grumpy cat, success kid and distracted boyfriend. The authors have successfully used memes both online and in-person as a teaching tool. This paper aims to describe how the authors have used memes and some of the best practices and lessons learned from this experience.

Design/methodology/approach – Students in a training and development undergraduate course and an organizational behavior MBA course were tasked with creating and presenting memes that reflected the subject matter in their respective courses.

Findings – Their fellow students were successful in identifying the course theory or concept when these student presenters presented their memes in class. This suggests that this type of activity is helpful for students to apply a key course concept or theory in a way that was fun and interactive. Follow-up feedback from the students indicated that they enjoyed this type of activity and felt that it aided in their retention of course material.

Originality/value – While memes are quite popular in social media, there is a paucity of academic articles on the application of memes for teaching management concepts. This article guides instructors on how the authors have used memes in the classroom and offers some suggestions for doing a debrief afterward.

Keywords Popular culture, Memes, Innovative teaching tools, Management courses, Participative pedagogy

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Management educators often seek engaging ways for students to learn material and to illustrate understanding and application. Our innovative learning activity involves students creating their own memes to illustrate a concept or theory (e.g. equity theory, adult learning principles, stress, etc.) in a variety of management courses. Memes are social phenomena that convey meaning and are shared electronically, typically via social media (Davison, 2012). While a meme simply depicts a short text juxtaposed with an image, the intention is often to elicit emotional responses to a humorous, satirical or serious issue from politics and popular culture in movies, TV, sport or music. They have become a widespread way of capturing people's attention as we see in various classic memes such as: grumpy cat, success kid and distracted boyfriend [1]. Teacher-scholars have incorporated these in other disciplines to teach psychology (Jimenez, Kath, Islam, & Schmidt, 2020; Kath, Schmidt, Islam, Jimenez, & Hartnett, 2023), economics (Al-Bahrani, Holder, Patel, & Wooten, 2016; Jahangir, 2022), immunology (Mendez-Reguera & Lopez Cabrera, 2020) and the humanities (Kayali & Altuntas, 2021). Leveraging memes in management and business education pedagogy will add a unique teaching tool to further support student learning of complex concepts and theories.

Our activity empowers students to critically and creatively demonstrate competency with a particular management topic. Learners develop a meme and document how and why this meme is an appropriate illustration of the theory or concept. Thus, the creation of the meme involves them understanding the concept well enough to be able to communicate its essence to others.

The rapid expansion of content on platforms such as YouTube and TikTok (Auxier & Anderson, 2021) suggests that this generation of students is eager to share their creative efforts. This activity taps into this creativity and gives students the freedom to apply memes to an aspect of the course. Anecdotally, we have found that students have really enjoyed this activity and that the learning goals (as seen below) associated with the activity were met.

Learning goals

- *Demonstrate a clear connection between the chosen theory or concept and the meme.* Do they understand the material; can they develop something new to integrate knowledge with practice?
- *Communicate how and why the meme teaches the audience about the specific content.* Can they evaluate and analyze the degree to which their meme message is reflective of the concept/theory; can they deconstruct their development of the meme so that they can explain and analyze its relevance to the material?

Instructions for faculty and students

This versatile activity has been used for a variety of courses including: organizational behavior, human resource management and training and development at the undergraduate and MBA level. It can be done as an in-class activity, online or as a reflection paper. Students can choose to work individually or in teams for this activity.

Step 1 Introducing the activity (in person or online) (allocate 30–45 minutes)

Instructors can introduce the activity by explaining what a meme is, providing some sample memes, contextualizing the activity (to connect your meme to a course theory or concept) and to remind students to choose appropriate memes that are not discriminatory. This can be done face-to-face, in a synchronous online format, or asynchronously through an instructor video.

Students can use that time to brainstorm concepts and theories and browse various meme imagery. Students will require a computer or mobile device to create their meme. For those instructors or students who may not be familiar with memes or who may feel self-conscious about their own technological skills, it is reassuring to note that creating memes is quite feasible through websites such as <https://memegenerator.net/> and <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator/179126847/Quick-meme>.

For instructors who are tech-savvy, they can also post an example of a meme they have created along with a short video showing the step-by-step process used to create the meme. This is especially relevant for online classes.

Step 2 Creating the meme and demonstrating understanding (allocate 3–4 hours)

Students should budget an additional three to four hours outside of class to finish creating the meme and accompanying explanation. Students must clearly demonstrate precisely how this meme reflects the theory or concept they have chosen. For example, this Grumpy Cat meme (U.S. Department of Labor [@USDOL], 2014) illustrates the frustration of many workers losing purchasing power due to rising prices (see <https://twitter.com/USDOL/status/513141829676838913>).

Step 3 Instructor evaluation and feedback (allocate 1–2 h depending on class size)

Instructors should expect to spend 1–2 h (depending upon the number of students enrolled) reviewing each student's meme activity to provide feedback and select a cross section of memes to present to the class either in person or online. While we did not receive memes that were offensive or discriminatory, we would still suggest requiring students to send the memes to the instructor before these memes are shown in class or online.

Step 4 Demonstrating understanding of various theories and concepts (allocate 30 min)

Instructors can select student-generated memes that highlight various course concepts (e.g. equity theory, stress management) as well as different meme bases (e.g. grumpy cat, jealous girlfriend) and show them in class or online. The students can write down which specific course concept or theory was being illustrated in the sample memes. This allows the instructor to measure the effectiveness of each meme to evaluate whether students were able to identify the relevant concept as intended by the creator of the meme. For the majority of memes we have shown (approximately 80%), students correctly identified the concept or theory. The instructor asks the creators to explain their rationale of the intended concept as well as discuss any challenges they have had. This process allows students to have dual benefits, one through direct participation in the creation of the meme and second through the analysis of their classmates' memes and their rationale. Instructors also have the option of incorporating memes into a quiz where students must identify the concept or theory illustrated by the meme.

Step 5 Debriefing (allocate 30–45 min)

We do a debriefing with the students to end the exercise. We provide our debrief questions below and a summary of typical responses:

- *What did you like about the activity?* Student feedback has been very positive. Students enjoyed the creative freedom to apply the course concept to their meme and expressed enthusiasm for the exercise. Several students noted that many classes require them to regurgitate and/or memorize theories and concepts. They enjoyed the challenge of choosing the right meme to accompany their theory or concept and felt that they were comfortable when explaining the theory or concept to others.

- *What challenges did you encounter?* One surprising response was that several students admitted their comfort level with technology was much lower than their peers. This surprised us because we had made the assumption that most, if not all, students in their twenties were savvy when it came to technology. On the other hand, a co-author who taught an MBA section of organizational behavior found that several of the students in their 30s and 40s were very comfortable with the technology. Students also noted that many of their peers seemed to also focus on a few of the most popular memes (e.g. grumpy cat or the most interesting man in the world) and some felt that next time the instructor could assign different types of memes as a way of addressing this concern.
- *In hindsight, what would you do differently?* Many students said they wished they had worked with a partner instead of working individually on this project. They remembered the organizational behavior chapter on groups and teams and how there is the potential for greater creativity in a group than as an individual. Thus, this debrief and activity has the potential to reinforce essential concepts from previous courses. Students also said they would have kept working on the activity right after class to keep the momentum going instead of waiting until the last minute before the activity was due.
- *How did creating your meme add to your understanding of the concept?* Students were consistent in their explanations that their meme enhanced their chosen concept or theory. They would break down the explanation to draw a clear line of sight between the theory and what the meme illustrated. For example, many students chose stress as their concept. Their chosen memes showed stressed out people, but the explanations offered delved into causes of stress (versus symptoms) and healthy ways of coping with stress. Students often related the course material to their own efforts to cope with stress and explained how managers might be able to help employees reduce stress (e.g. giving employees the resources required and sufficient time to complete the project, giving frequent feedback and being understanding if personal situations impede their progress).
- *Do you think this activity could be done with trainees as part of a training session?* Students were enthusiastic in recommending this activity for trainees provided that this activity was supported by the training objective and the trainees had the requisite level of technological knowledge to create memes. In other words, they applied the course material to make the connection that the choice of training method must support the corresponding training objective and the trainees (via a training needs assessment) must have the ability to achieve the task. Thus, for objectives addressing deficiencies in knowledge or attitude, students felt that a meme-based training exercise could be used in conjunction with other training methods such as case study.

Variation: Meme activity as an assignment

Instructors may also consider doing the meme activity as a stand-alone assignment. Many of the previous suggestions with respect to providing guidance and structure to the activity in the previous sections of this paper would still apply. This assignment was worth 10% of the student's final grade. We assessed the quality of the writing, the clarity of the connection between the meme and the course material and their explanation of the course concept itself. Instructors can incorporate some or all of the debrief questions from the previous section to promote further student reflection. Instructors should be aware that students may use artificial intelligence (AI) to complete some or all of this assignment. Instructors may wish to consult their college/university's policy on academic misconduct and/or Center for Teaching and Learning (if available) for further direction.

Instructor reflection and conclusion

Memes help instructors engage in participative pedagogy (Carter & Arroyo, 2011) that create opportunities for students to emotionally connect to the material. We found this a useful activity to verify the degree to which students (both creators and consumers of the meme) understood course material. The versatility of the meme activity translates well to multiple courses, multiple delivery methods (in person, online), undergraduate as well as graduate classes.

Note

1. www.pocket-lint.com/apps/news/140427-best-stupidest-and-most-famous-internet-memes-around

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