UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST
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WILLIAM LEVINE FAMILY INSTITUTE
FOR HOLOCAUST EDUCATION

Memes in the classroom

Memes—attention-grabbing images with clever captions that pepper social media feeds—permeate our cultural discourse. The word "meme" was first coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976; he believed that cultural ideas, like genes, can spread and mutate. Their magnetism is scientific: a surge of dopamine is released when we see or share them because of the emotional responses they provoke[1].

Memes can be entertaining, insightful, or divisive—or all of this at the same time.

"**Memes replace thoughtful conversation and prevent us from finding common ground between different opinions**," argues Ottawa-based digital media consultant Mark Blevis[2].

However, **memes *can* be the entry point for a deeper conversation.**

When students bring memes linking current events to history into the classroom, it's important to recognize **memes are a way to construct collective identity** and students can strongly identify with the meme.[3]

Therefore, it is important to use *critical thinking skills* to unpack the message in the meme, encouraging deeper conversation.

1. Acknowledge the negative *and* positive **power of the medium** and refrain from a personal response, giving the task of critically analyzing the meme back to the students.

2. Ask students to consider the differences between belief, opinion, and fact, Does the meme express a fact, opinion, or belief?

   ● A **fact** is verifiable. We can determine whether it is true by researching the evidence.
   ● An **opinion** is a judgment based on facts, an honest attempt to draw a reasonable conclusion from factual evidence.

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/mar/04/has-dopamine-got-us-hooked-on-tech-facebook-apps-addiction
[2] https://o.canada.com/life/global-voices-beware-of-hidden-messages-in-memes
[3] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1461444814568784

- Unlike an opinion, a **belief** is a conviction based on cultural or personal faith, morality, or values.

3. For a meme to provoke critical thinking it should make a good argument, not simply express an opinion or belief. It should make an **assertion that is backed by reason and evidence (ARE).**

- **Assertions (A)** are statements about what is true or good or about what should be done or believed.
- Assertions are backed by **reasons (R)**
  - **Reasons (R)** are statements of support for assertions, making those claims something more than mere opinions. Reasons can be linked to assertions with the word *because.*
- Assertions and reasons are supported by **evidence (E)**
  - **Evidence (E)** supports the reasons offered and helps compel audiences to accept the assertion. Evidence answers challenge to the reasons given and can include examples, case studies, narratives, statistics, testimony, eyewitness accounts, and expert opinions[4].

4. Ask students to identify the assertion they think the meme is proposing.

5. Next, students construct the reason why the creator of the meme would make this assertion.

6. Students then conduct research to see if they can uncover evidence to support the message of the meme. Cite all sources.

7. Once completed, ask students to research and support the opposite message of the original assertion. Can it be done?

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[4] https://www.comm.pitt.edu/argument-claims-reasons-evidence

What is the assertion?	

What is the reason for this assertion? (the *because*)	

What evidence can you find to support this assertion?

The first piece of evidence is the visual and the text. ● **Can you verify the image?** ● **Who took the photo?** ● **What is in the photo?** ● **What is missing from the photo?**	

A good argument has at least three solid pieces of evidence to support it. Research to find facts, narratives, statistics, and other types of evidence to support the assertion

Type of evidence: **Can you verify this? Cite source(s)**	**Type of evidence:** **Can you verify this? Cite source(s)**	**Type of evidence:** **Can you verify this? Cite source(s)**