

Literacy professor researches the 'meme-ing' of life and education

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Sometimes going online can feel like an entirely new world. Whether it's a reference you don't understand, a running joke or a parody image, it's not uncommon to feel lost no matter your age. Still, there's hope for managing the memes.

This idea of "[meme](#) culture" is something College of Education & Human Sciences (COEHS) Literacy Associate Professor Mary Rice is exploring. It's already a unique topic to barrel into, but Rice is adding an additional layer to it: tying it to education.

"In these times of social and political upheaval, it's important to help students understand the kinds of texts that they see in these online spaces and mediums," Rice said. "This jumped out to me initially because a lot of the research about judging or evaluating online text is based on who made it, and then deciding if that is good information. With a meme you can't tell any of that."

Rice's pedagogical framework on connecting memes as visual and digital literacies for teachers has been [published](#) in *English in Education*, the research journal of the National Association for the Teaching of English.

"Memes just sort of emerge from the ether. You have to really get into the meme itself and try to figure out how to make sense of it in your own cultural context and your own psyche," she said. "It used to be easy when I was younger because like the flow of information would come to me in the same streams that it would come to students. Now I have to be much more proactive."

Before comprehending the application of a meme, it's important to

understand the meme-ing (meaning.) The word actually first appeared in 1976, as a way to explain cultural transmission by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. Memes eventually, in popular culture, are defined as: "An amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through [social media](#)." It was added to Merriam-Webster in 2015.

"It's this sense, a meme can also encode some idea worth preserving or worth striving for. It can be very simple—a meme that on its face is just to make everybody laugh, but also you can get really deep into deep moral and social meaning," Rice said.

Rice was first inspired to combine meme and teaching when she was a middle school educator.

"You're trying to find things that are interesting to them and that draw on the strengths that they have. It's important as a teacher not to be panicky, like, 'oh, my gosh, they can't do this.' That doesn't help them and it doesn't help you," Rice said. "Instead, you really do want to think about, well, what are the strengths that they bring and what are the kinds of things that they're good at and that are interesting?"

Over time, Rice understood the dynamics of interest, relevance and timeliness when it came to integrating memes into a classroom setting.

"We always talk about if students aren't engaged or how to get them to care about their learning, but then we never make any space for them in the curriculum. You have to think about it in terms of thinking about student reaction, then their production, their manifestation. That's how I usually think about it and talk about it," she said.

She saw it had an improvement on critical thinking and rapport among her students, and gave her a boost with relating to her daughter outside

of the classroom.

"She sends stuff to me or I'll send things to her that I think are funny, and she'll be like 'oh that's an old one.' This kind of stuff that I do for work sometimes makes it very useful to stay engaged with her because it helps me if I have had insight into what my students might be interested in and what stuff is trending. It's useful if there's discourse in your house going on." Rice said.

Now, as a teacher educator in COEHS, Rice is collecting and analyzing sets of these micro or macro-trends. She believes any meme can be utilized for teaching and learning through understanding technical construction, formal aesthetic, aesthetic response, media context and social context.

"I've continued to kind of collect those because one of the things I talk about was how usually there's this sort of flood of the meme initially, and there's lots and lots and lots of images within that meme and then they can sort of fade out," she said.

Some of the memes she used to prove that included the [Bernie Sanders mitten meme](#), [Larry the Cat](#), the [Chris Rock and Will Smith slap](#) and the [Mar-A-Lago classified documents](#).

"Mar-A-Lago is kind of a fun one and in that there's an interesting subset that is just for academics where the captions for those are about, the boxes stacked and there's all the papers I have to grade this weekend," Rice said. "It actually doesn't say anything political, which I think is interesting. There is still, you know, a bunch of stuff that has more of a political bent."

Not every meme fits the bill. Rice's framework is equal to a rubric when it comes to checking what can evoke the proper lesson. One of those

ways is the idea that the [student](#) is not being assessed, they are doing the assessment.

"Where they make the meme, that's their assessment of you and how. They're the assessor and not the assessed in this instance. Doing that repositioning helps them understand and to sense that they are going to be teachers helps them consider when to give the space to the learner," Rice said.

It's important to Rice that teachers can also connect that digital literacy to understandings of policy and specific rhetoric, as well as the future of online life.

"Finding out what is good with social media, I think is important with youth. We're finding out more and more that social media is causing harm to [young people](#), so is there anything good on social media? Should we scrap it? And that's a good question. Looking at memes is also an opportunity to have those sorts of discussions," she said.

That's also why one of her required class assignments is a make your own meme adventure. Students in COEHS experiment with plenty of classics to topical issues their classmates, and anyone in or out of the education sphere can relate to.

"I have a lot of ones that students actually made about you UNM are very fun. We start out talking about some things they think are curious or that they'd like to change. They meme about the parking

situation, they meme about campus bureaucracy and things like that," Rice said. "It's about trying to show students in different ways to pause and reflect and think about their experience at UNM. It's an arts based way of processing experience."

It's a form of communication, after all.

"Memes help recognize that it is a strange place in human existence and that maybe we should do something else right. Maybe we should be striving for a different kind of social political landscape. Maybe we should be demanding more of our leaders," Rice said.

As highlighted in her own experience, Rice also emphasizes to teachers how important it is to think about literacies of all kinds of learners and students.

"There's lots of different options, but originally you just have to think about what you're going to do in order to draw on strengths and to evoke different kinds of literacies to think about," she said. "It's an alternative to a setting where the teacher should only assign and give points instead of an actual learning experience. That settling won't do the things you need it to do."

Whether you've been "Rick Roll'd" or the first meme you ever saw was the dancing baby, "I can has cheezburger," or "one does not simply walk into Morodor," memes are not going away anytime soon. In fact, they're evolving, and Rice intends to stay ahead of the curve.

"What we need to be doing is actively working towards a vision of what we want. Art has got to be the way right to advance that vision. Bernie can help write and the medium can help," Rice said. "It doesn't seem like it, but that's what I'm doing. I'm fighting the good fight one meme at a time."

More information: Mary Rice, Making meaning with memes through a multilayered approach to visual literacies, *English in Education* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/04250494.2023.2269201](https://doi.org/10.1080/04250494.2023.2269201)

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