Meme Monday: Meeting Students Where They Are to Take Them Where You Are Going

Abstract

With the rapid shift to online learning activities, in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, we saw a need to develop alternative ways to engage students in the course material. As a result, we developed *Meme Monday*, which leverages the meme medium to connect course material to the meme culture in which most students are living. Grounded in motivation theory, *Meme Monday* provides a fun way to increase students' motivation and improve information recall. In this session, we will provide a full conceptual overview of *Meme Monday* and a step-by-step guide for instructors to implement *Meme Monday* in their classrooms.

Keywords: Motivation, information recall, memes

Introduction

Learning is an ever-evolving process. Accordingly, the way in which teachers engage students in the learning process must continue to evolve, as well. As many courses were forcibly moved online in the spring of 2020, in response to COVID-19, this need to evolve became paramount. Teachers who were highly engaging in face-to-face settings needed to find new ways to interact with students and earn their attention in the virtual environment. As the fall semester approached, with no end in sight for the global pandemic, we (teachers) saw a need to meet students where they are in order to lead them on their learning journey. To do so, we implemented *Meme Monday*, which capitalized on a growing medium of communication (i.e., memes) to enhance the students' learning experience in a variety of ways. Put simply, we used a theoretically grounded activity to enhance motivation and make learning fun. Not only did this activity help to motivate students, but it also helped them to organize and apply the course material in a systematic way for information retrieval.

Students are living in a meme culture. A meme is "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" (Merriam-Webster, 2021). For example, the image of Bernie Sanders, with his mask and mitten-covered hands, can be found comically embedded within thousands of other pictures, as the original picture of Sanders at President Biden's inauguration has become a meme (see Figure 1 for an example). Memes have also contributed to the undercutting of the U.S. stock market system, as so called "meme stocks" (Ponciano, 2021) are being promoted via online platforms, such as Reddit, and subsequently costing hedge funds billions of dollars. Additionally, in an academic context, I-O (industrial & organizational) psychologists have begun using memes to engage others in I-O psychology content (Jimenez, Kath, Islam, & Schmidt, 2020). In essence,

this meme culture, in which most of our students live, has reverberated across generational lines,

through a variety of contexts, and become a staple in our everyday lives.

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As such, we leveraged the popularity of the meme medium to engage our students in a

new way. Each Friday, students had to submit a meme that summarized the course material for

the week. Then, the next week started with *Meme Monday* in which groups of students would

review groups of memes to nominate a winner, based on their subjective evaluation of, not only

how funny the meme was, but also how well the meme captured the course content. We

(instructors) would subsequently choose one winning *meme of the week* from the nominees. The

student who submitted the winning meme received extra credit for the course. In other words, we

not only leveraged the popular meme medium, but we also gamified the process (Landers, 2014).

While our idea for *Meme Monday* was borne out of necessity, in response to the forced

shift to online learning, the activity is not limited to the virtual classroom. On the contrary, *Meme

Monday* can be implemented in traditional face-to-face or hybrid formats, as well. Not only is

this a fun way to engage students in the course material, but it also provides several benefits to

the overall learning experience.

Theoretical Foundation and Teaching Implications

The overarching theoretical foundation, upon which *Meme Monday* is built, is motivation

theory. If students do not find the course to be interesting or relevant, they may not see the value

in attempting to master the content (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010).

There are two forms of learner interest: 1) personal interest and 2) situational interest. Personal

interest is relatively stable (*How people learn II: Learners, contexts, and cultures*, 2018);

however, as Hunsu and colleagues noted (Hunsu, Adesope, & Van Wie, 2017), students'

situational interest is malleable. Accordingly, the tasks and materials educators choose to use in

their classes can influence students' situational interest. Not only are memes interesting, but they

may help to increase a student's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977a). While the new course material

may be difficult to comprehend, the memes are something most students are very comfortable

creating. The memes provide an easy win for students to build confidence as they work toward

the larger goal of mastering the course material. Additionally, through gamification (Landers,

2014), we frame the activity as an opportunity for students to *approach* success (i.e., extra credit)

rather than try to avoid failure. According to Locke and Latham (Locke & Latham, 2015), this

approach framing may help individuals to achieve their performance goals.

In addition to increasing motivation to learn, the meme activity also provides a systematic

way for students to organize and store the material they are learning. The process of information

retention and recall is enhanced through the use of symbols (Bandura, 1977b). According to

Ambrose and colleagues (2010, p. 46), "People naturally make associations with patterns they

experience in the world". As we established in the introduction, students are fully immersed in

the *meme culture*. As such, the patterns they are experiencing in the world are often associated

with some sort of meme. Thus, we facilitated the process of connecting the course material to the

patterns in their world, which serve as symbols to help the students make these associations.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for *Meme Monday* coincide with the learning objectives for the

course, as *Meme Monday* is a tool to increase motivation to learn and facilitate information

retention. Through the creation of memes, students connect the new course content, which is

unfamiliar to them, to pop culture, which is very familiar to them. Not only is this a fun activity

that helps to increase students' motivation to engage with the course material, but the memes also serve as a mnemonic device to aid students in information retention and retrieval.

Exercise Overview

We incorporated the *Meme Monday* activity throughout the semester to promote motivation and facilitate information retention in students. The exercise overview outlined in Table 1 provides a step-by-step guide to utilize *Meme Monday* throughout a semester. A modified version of this implementation could also be used as a standalone exercise to augment existing pedagogical activities.

Insert Table 1 about here

Session Description

This session will be highly interactive and allow attendees to work through the *Meme Monday* process, step-by-step. The proposed agenda, and timeline, is outlined in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

References

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meme-stocks-wallstreetbets-traders-are-pumping-up-during-this-extremely-erratic-reddit-

rally/?sh=5d60a6a85bb7

Table 1

Meme Monday Overview, Including Logistics for Implementation Throughout a Semester

Step	Action
1	After the class roster is relatively stable, assign each student a memeID (1 - 130, in our case). The memeID tells the students in which folder to post their meme on Google Drive.
2	Create a shared Google Drive folder for the class.
3	Create sub folders for each week (Week 1, 2, 3, etc.). Link these weekly folders to a weekly module/task list/schedule on Blackboard (or other LMS) for convenience.
4	Create sub folders in each week's folder titled "Group 1: 1 - 10", "Group 2: 11 - 20", etc. or whatever size groups you want. Students will post in the folder associated with their memeID.
5	Each Friday, students post a meme that summarizes the course content for the week in a clever/humorous way. To get course credit, they post it in the "Weekly Meme" discussion forum on Blackboard. Then, they also upload it to their respective Google Drive folder as described above.
6	On Mondays, we have *Meme Monday* where students are randomly placed in breakout rooms on Zoom (# of breakout rooms = # of folders you created). The room number tells students which folder to discuss as a group. For example, Zoom Breakout Room 3 would visit and discuss the memes in folder "Group 3: 21 - 30".
7	Each group reports out with the best meme from their discussion in the Blackboard discussion board. For example, "Group 3 chooses memeID 27 as the best because it was hilarious and made us think about personality in a whole new way."
8	Each of the group's selections is a finalist for meme of the week, which the instructor(s) ultimately chooses. The weekly winner gets extra credit points.
9	Upload weekly winners to the course website, if applicable. Click here to see an example: https://sites.google.com/binghamton.edu/bu-mgmt-311/home

Note. LMS = Learning Management System (e.g., Canvas, Blackboard, Google Classroom)

[a] Some topics may not be meme-appropriate. Infographics serve as a great alternative, in those cases. They actually provide a more thorough content summary, but they take longer for students to make and are not quite as fun. See Appendix B for sample infographics.

Table 2

Proposed Agenda for the Session

Session Minutes (0 – 60)	Activities	Learning Outcome(s)
00:01 – 5:00	Working along with us, participants will create their own memes to be used as their Zoom video background in the session	1) Understand the process of meme creation 2) Identify resources available to help students with this process
5:01 – 15:00	Big picture overview of the *Meme Monday* activity, process, objectives, and examples	Develop foundational knowledge to implement *Meme Monday* in an undergraduate course
15:01 – 20:00	Create memeIDs	Establish a systematic method to reduce bias in the *Meme Monday* activity
20:01 – 30:00	Create shared folders and subfolders for students' meme submissions	Create a system to store and access students' memes
30:01 – 35:00	*Meme Monday* small group discussions	Process to engage students in a fun content review
35:01 – 45:00	Create a system for students to report out/debrief	System to capture the best memes and incentivize students to put forth effort in the process
45:01 – 55:00	Create a free course website to proudly display winners and increase engagement with course content	1) Re-engage students with the course content 2) Reward students for their effort 3) Share helpful resources with students
55:01 – 60:00	Q & A	TBD

Figure 1

Sample Meme Featuring Bernie Sanders
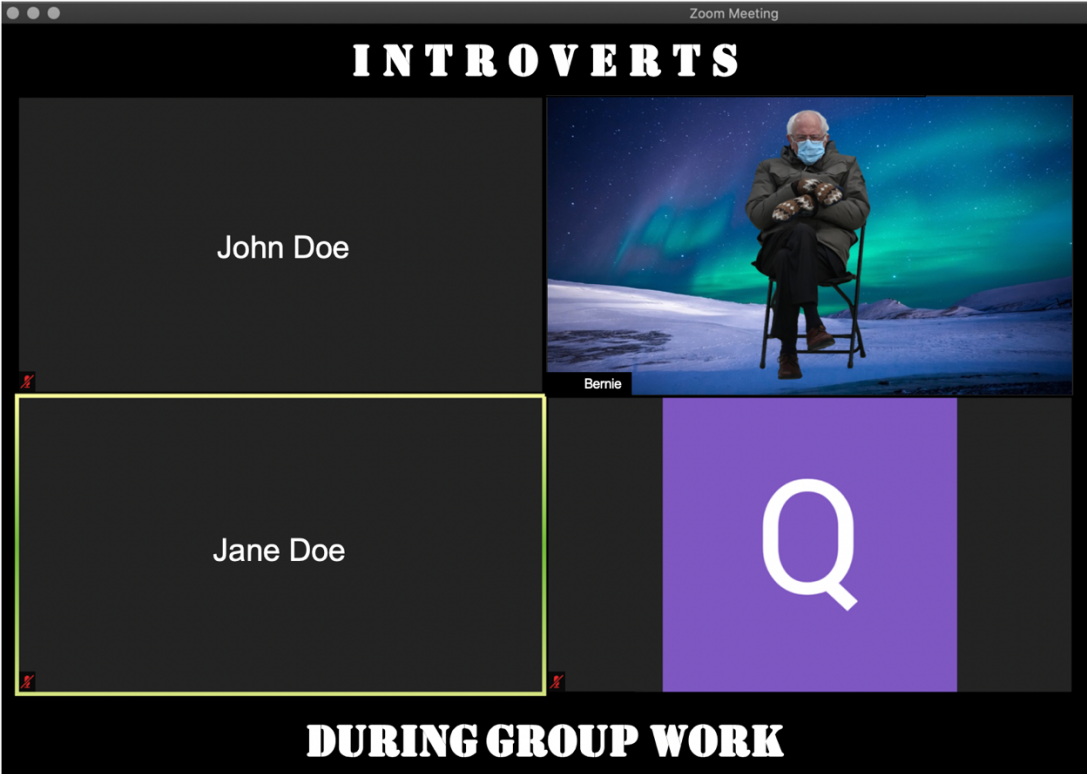
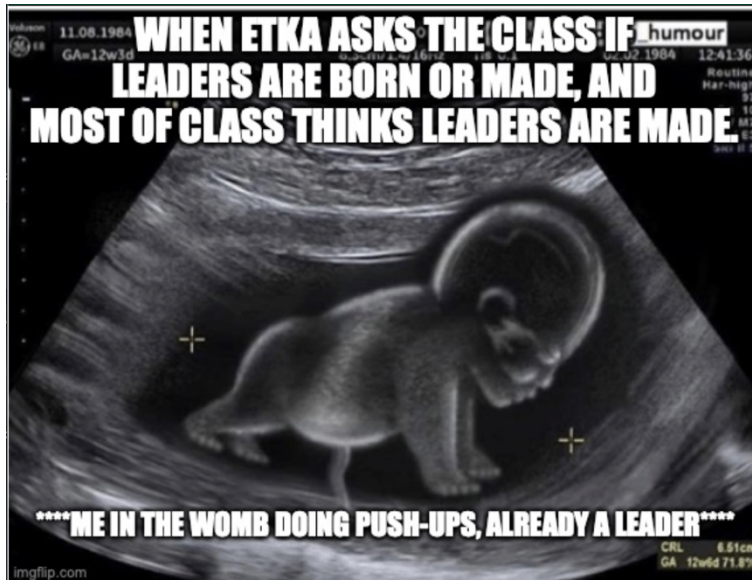## Appendix A: Sample Organizational Behavior Class Memes

Figure A1

Figure A2

Figure A3

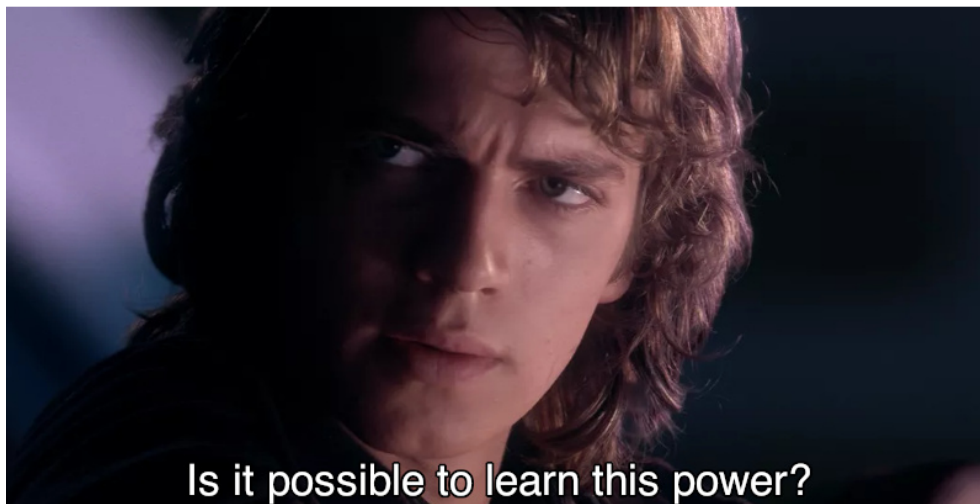Trying to identify the difference between a manager and a leader

Figure A4

Figure A5

Figure A6

Appendix B: Sample Organizational Behavior Class Infographics

Figure B1

THE TYPES OF DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

MGMT 311
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WHAT IS DIVERSITY
Identity based differences among and between two or more individuals that affect their lives as applicants, employees, and customers.

SURFACE LEVEL DIVERSITY
Diversity in the form of characteristics of individuals that are readily visible.

Age, Weight, Race, Sex, Disabilities

DEEP-LEVEL DIVERSITY
Diversity in characteristics that are non-observable

Attitudes, Values, Beliefs

HIDDEN DIVERSITY
Diversity in characteristics that are deep level but may be concealed or revealed at discretion by individuals who posses them.

Sexual Orientation

TIPS TO MANAGE A DIVERSE WORKFORCE
- Receive employee feedback
- Develop open communication
- Encourage employees to collaborate
- Build an inclusive workplace

Figure B2