

**INTERNET MEMES: CLASSROOM PERSPECTIVES
IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL CULTURES**

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at presenting some reflections upon adopting Internet memes as possibilities for teaching in the context of digital cultures. In Brazil, millions of people interact in social media, on a daily basis, by editing, sharing, reading and reacting to a great variety of graphic texts, videos, photos, and songs that reflect their everyday relationships, namely, they produce internet memes. This study is a literature review (MACHI; McEVOY, 2009) grounded on the multiliteracies perspective (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2000, 2008; LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2007; LEMKE, 2009; MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2011), as well as on the studies on memes, made by Dawkins (1976), Shifman (2013, 2014), Gal, Shifman and Kampf (2016), Chagas (2017, 2018) and Glaveanu, Saint-Laurent and Literat (2018). The teaching suggestions are based on categories of memes analysis; remixing existing memes in order to explore discourses of dominant ideologies, issues of race, age, gender and social class; and reading and writing political memes, that operate as instruments of persuasion.

KEYWORDS

Internet memes. Classroom perspectives. Digital culture.

**MEMES DA INTERNET: PERSPECTIVAS PARA A SALA DE AULA
NO CONTEXTO DAS CULTURAS DIGITAIS**

RESUMO

Este artigo objetiva apresentar algumas reflexões acerca da adoção de memes da internet como possibilidades para o ensino no contexto das culturas digitais. No Brasil, milhões de pessoas interagem em redes sociais diariamente por meio da edição, compartilhamento, leitura e reações a uma grande variedade de textos, gráficos, vídeos, fotos e canções que refletem as nossas relações cotidianas. Este estudo é uma revisão de literatura (MACHI; McEVOY, 2009) e está baseado na perspectiva dos multiletramentos (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2000, 2008; LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2007; LEMKE, 2009; MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2011), bem como nos estudos sobre os memes realizados por Dawkins (1976), Shifman (2013, 2014), Gal, Shifman e Kampf (2016), Chagas (2017, 2018) e Glaveanu, Saint-Laurent e Literat (2018). As sugestões de ensino baseiam-se nas categorias de análise de memes; na remixagem de memes existentes para explorar os discursos de ideologias dominantes, aspectos de raça, idade, gênero e classe social; e na leitura e escrita de memes políticos, que operam como instrumentos de persuasão.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Memes da Internet. Perspectivas para a sala de aula. Cultura digital.

MEMES DE INTERNET: PERSPECTIVAS PARA EL SALÓN DE CLASE EN EL CONTEXTO DE LAS CULTURAS DIGITALES

RESUMEN

Este artículo objetiva presentar reflexiones acerca de la adopción de memes de internet como posibilidades para la enseñanza en el contexto de las culturas digitales. Los memes implican en la edición, compartición, lectura y reacciones a una gran variedad de textos gráficos, vídeos, fotos y canciones que reflejan nuestras relaciones cotidianas. Este estudio es una revisión de la literatura (MACHI; McEVOY, 2009) y se basa en la perspectiva de los multiletramentos (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2000, 2008; LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2007; LEMKE, 2009; MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2011), así como en los estudios sobre los memes realizados por Dawkins (1976), Shifman (2013, 2014), Gal, Shifman y Kampf (2016), Chagas (2017, 2018) y Glaveanu, Saint-Laurent y Literat (2018). Las sugerencias de enseñanza se basan en las categorías de análisis de memes; en el remixado de memes con el propósito de explorar los discursos de ideologías dominantes, aspectos de raza, edad, género y clase social; y la lectura y escritura de los memes políticos como instrumentos de persuasión.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Memes de internet. Perspectivas para el salón de aula. Culturas digitales.

1 INTRODUCTION

In Brazil, more than 79% of teenagers and young adults are connected to social media and instant messengers, such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. This means that, on a daily basis, over 20 million people interact by editing, sharing, reading, and reacting to a great variety of graphic texts, videos, photos, and songs that reflect our everyday relationships. They are responsible for producing one of the main narrative expressions of the present time in cyberspace – the Internet memes. The production of memes are so big that it has reached the status of “meme factory”, i.e. millions of users create intertextual work about celebrities, athletes, pets, movies, TV series, games, and so on (CALIXTO, 2018). Everything can turn into memes nowadays thanks to the ubiquitous use of the Internet through mobile devices.

In the classroom, teachers can take advantage of such a long-standing and substantial phenomenon. Internet memes are massively incorporated into the students' daily lives, and can be easily accessed or produced by a couple of touches on the cell phone screen. They are part of the digital culture in which we are inescapable immersed. Not unlike Buzato et al. (2013), I understand digital culture as a set of products and

processes that are shared by people who use (and people who don't really use) technologies everyday in order to spread and support the mindsets linked to post-industrial societies, which privileges participatory culture as well as network practices of consumption, leisure, learning, knowledge management, and subjective construction (BUZATO, 2012; BUZATO et al., 2013; LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2007; LEMKE, 2009). Therefore, Internet memes, as cultural information of our digital times, "[...] get passed from mind to mind" (LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2007, p. 199), and shape significant forms of behavior and actions of our students.

With regard to language classes, edited texts such as memes can support multiliteracy practices, as stated in Boa Sorte (2018). It means that reading and writing can be materialized in various forms of representation, and conventionalized from the manifestation of multiple cultures, such as codes, gestures, symbols, images, sounds etc. Photographs, videos, figures, and/or drawings combined with other images, graphic texts and/or sounds are part of the new practices of understanding and sharing texts, whose meanings can be (de)constructed from what we listen, speak, read or see (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2008; LUKE, 2000; ROJO, 2012). Thus, teaching through memes may be an empowering way of promoting multiliteracies in the classroom into this very context of digital cultures, since the texts broadcasted in mainstream media and pop culture can be remixed into various forms of representation, especially the ones stereotyped by issues of race, age, gender, and social class.

Grounded on the multiliteracy studies (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2000, 2008; LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2007; LEMKE, 2009; MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2011), and especially on the studies of Internet memes made by Dawkins (1976), Díaz (2013), Shifman (2013, 2014), Gal, Shifman and Kampf (2016), Chagas (2017, 2018), Benaim (2018), and Glaveanu, Saint-Laurent and Literat (2018), this paper presents some reflections upon adopting Internet memes as possibilities for teaching in the context of digital cultures and multiliteracies.

In order to reach the above-mentioned objective that guides this paper, I start by presenting the conceptions and examples of memes as cultural units of transmission through the idea we conceive nowadays on memes as being texts we read, write, and share on social media. After that, I present some possibilities of using memes for educational purposes, based on the multiliteracies perspective of reading and writing. To

conclude, some final remarks are presented in order to reassert aims and outcomes from my suggestions that are geared towards reading and writing online in a critical way.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on Machi and McEvoy's (2009) conception of advanced literature review. According to the authors, this sort of review takes the inquiry step further because it selects a research interest and a research topic; then it reviews the literature.

According to the authors, the steps are: 1) selecting a topic, which is the result of an interest in a practical topic – Internet memes in the context of digital culture, especially focused on classroom perspectives; 2) searching the literature that determines what information will be in the review, assembling, synthesizing, analyzing, surveying and critiquing the current understanding of the topic – the studies I selected are geared towards the main published materials on the topic in Brazil and worldwide, such as Cope and Kalantzis (2000, 2008), Lankshear and Knobel (2007), Lemke (2009), Menezes de Souza (2011), Shifman (2013, 2014), Gal, Shifman and Kampf (2016), and Chagas (2017, 2018) and; 3) developing the argument, forming and presenting the case – what are the possibilities for teaching in the context of digital cultures and multiliteracies through the use of memes?

My choice is justified by the reason why there is no need to “[...] reinvent the literature review process” (MACHI; McEVOY, 2009, p. 1). It is also relevant to highlight that this type of literature review is the representation of an accurate and thorough model of such a perspective of research methodology.

3 MEMES: FROM DAWKINS THROUGH THE DIGITAL CULTURES

The biologist Richard Dawkins coined the concept of meme, in 1976, in his book *The Selfish Gene*. He proposed the term as a Darwinian, gene-centered approach to cultural evolution, defining it as small cultural units of transmission that spread from person to person by imitation or copying. He also states three characteristics that make a meme successful: longevity, fecundity, and copy-fidelity (DÍAZ, 2013; SIFMAN, 2013;

GAL; SHIFMAN; KAMPF 2016). Nevertheless, the idea of getting passed from mind to mind is not something new. We can find it in sayings – for instance, *don't count your chickens before they're hatched* –, catchphrases, lullabies, clothing fashion, epic poetry, jingles, viral marketing, advertising or any idea that can be learned, rephrased or repeated may be related to the essential idea of memes defined by Dawkins. Memes shape mindsets, actions of social groups, and forms of behavior. This means that, although they spread on a micro basis, their impact is on the macro (LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2007; MACIEL; TAKAKI, 2015; SHIFMAN, 2012; SHIFMAN, 2013).

Brazilian *telenovelas*, for example, have always been strong meme generators. Even before the popularity of social media, *telenovelas'* catchphrases had impacted our everyday forms of communication. Image 1 below brings the “*Não é brincado, não!*”, which, in English, would be equivalent to “You're not kidding, right?”. The character Dona Jura, interpreted by the actress Solange Couto, in *O Clone*, usually used it to refer to something laborious, difficult to deal with or understand what is expected.

Figure 1 – Dona Jura and her *telenovela* catchphrase



Source: Huffpost Brasil.

Architectural styles are another example of memes. This expression is used for the purpose of naming periods of the history of architecture according to formal, technical and material characteristics. This means that, in many countries and at different times, architects and engineers have propagated their styles of building and decorating, i.e, the idea of replicating that is essential in memes. It is not by chance that one can identify and classify certain constructions by virtue of their style, linking it to a historical moment, country, religion, year of construction, and so forth.

As from the exponential growth of the Internet, the concept of meme has been described as a new form of communicating online, since there is propagation of content

items, such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites from one person to others. The difference between this perspective and Dawkins's is related to the way messages are edited and replicated, because now images, hyperlinks, videos and phrases can be combined into one product, sometimes exactly the same way it has been received; others, by means of change (DÍAZ, 2013; SHIFMAN, 2013). This is the universe of what Castells (2010) calls mass self-communication, namely the production of the message is self-generated by individual users, it is self-directed to specific addresses, and it is also self-selected, when it comes to using different sources. There is no need of media conglomerates anymore. Therefore, Jenkins (2006) can also be highlighted here as of memes being a crowned example of cultural convergence directed towards a participatory culture as opposed to a consumer culture.

As examples of such relevant elements of digital cultures, I present two popular Internet memes from the Brazilian context. The first one is *Ruth Lemos's sanduíche-iche* (Figure 2), which viralized in 2005, and has humor effect. It happened when Lemos, a dietitian from Recife, was interviewed by a local TV concerning free dietary advice she was giving to passengers at a subway station in order to celebrate the Dietitian Nutritionist Day. Since it was a live interview, she was using a headphone, but there was broadcast delay, and she kept on repeating the last syllable of almost each word she had said until the end of the interview. The humor effect was produced because, during the whole live transmission, the reporter did not ask her to take the headphone off, and went on asking more questions as if nothing different were happening.

Figure 2 – Screen-capture from Ruth Lemos's interview



Source: museudememes.com.br.

Lemos's video has more than three million views on YouTube. The sanduíche-iche sensation was reported in many TV shows, and generated national attention back in

2005. At that time, the dietitian was invited to participate in the most famous talk show in Brazil, *Programa do Jô*, where she revealed how scared she was because of the speed in which the video had been spread, and how suddenly famous she had become. But, after that, she took advantage of her unexpected fame to make business, and she even ran for a chair in the legislative assembly, but did not get enough votes to be elected.

The second example of a meme from the Brazilian context (Figure 3), *Barbie de direita* (Portuguese for right-wing Barbie), is somewhat recent, and uses sarcasm along with political criticism. Although the use of Barbie dolls to make memes is not something new, during the presidential elections of 2018, in Brazil, right-wing Barbie viralized because the sentences edited on the images are known as being said by those who identify themselves with/as the Brazilian upper class. All of them express criticism to the workers' party progressive agenda, such as affirmative actions, free health care system, free of charge universities etc. There is sarcasm on those memes because they relate rich people to a "discourse of suffering", that would only fit into poor people's demands in real life.

Figure 3 – Screen-capture from the right-wing Barbie's meme



Source: museudememes.com.br.

In the aforementioned figure, the sentence translated into "PT (Brazilian workers' party) almost destroyed my life" is written on a popular representation of a Barbie doll,

which is white, blonde, heterosexual, skinny, and rich. According to the developers of the webpage *museu de memes* – which will be explored next session, the combination of those images with sentences reflecting political issues, such as racial quotas, racism, homophobia, and labor rights are a straight, ironic, and even comic reference to privileged groups inside the political debate, especially during the fierce 2018 presidential elections in Brazil.

Although Figure 2 shows an example of a humorous meme as opposed to the political (but not less comical) message presented by Figure 3, research has shown that both of them can fulfill important functions beyond amusement. According to Glaveanu, Saint-Laurent and Literat (2018), memes often function as visual political rhetoric; can have significant implications for collective identity, activism, and public discourse. In the classroom, teachers can provide multiliteracy practices by having students reflect upon the senses and meanings that might be (de)constructed through reading, editing and sharing memes. While questioning what lies beneath a meme, Díaz (2013) states that, in terms of language, syntactic properties might be important, but they are not so important as the semantic aspect. Thus, the story, the characters, and their meanings are key elements that identify memes when they are shared either online or from person to person. Teachers would benefit from using memes as a means to promote multiliteracies in the classroom, if they intend to raise awareness of their students' readings and construction of meanings through memes as well as to get in contact with possible ways to develop lesson plans on the subject – as presented in the following section.

4 MEMES FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES: SOME CLASSROOM PERSPECTIVES

Proposing the use of memes in the classroom is understanding, as Glaveanu, Saint-Laurent and Literat (2018), that memes are characterized by strong intertextual ethos, since they borrow images from dominant media, aiming to remix or recombine them in order to generate new and often subversive meanings. Apparently, they can have “stupid forms and contents”, but they hide symbolic values embedded in a complex cultural context (BENAIM, 2018, p. 902). Thereafter, the teacher plays an important role to guide students into the various ways of (de)constructing senses and meanings. Students and teachers discover that the only truth is out of question, and they can also

look at different events from different perspectives. Besides, according to Recuero (2011), memes are an invitation to social interaction. Therefore, when it comes to language classrooms (and I dare to suggest, all kinds of classrooms), interaction is always welcome.

By mentioning (de)constructing senses and meanings, I am referring to Menezes de Souza's (2011) idea of reading as dissent. In this metaphor, reading never has a single meaning, that is to say, depending on the place from where we read, we may not understand it the same way as another person's, who reads the same message from another place. There may always be conflict of interpretations. The author explains that the act of reading consists of reading a text at the same time we read ourselves, in other words, we need to be aware, all the time, of the way we read texts, and the way we construct meanings. Thus, reading is not a transparent process, we always have to think: "Why do I understand it this way? Why do I think this is it? Where do my ideas and interpretations come from?" (MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2011, p. 296, my translation). It means you take responsibility for the way you read, for your own interpretation. Both the writer and the reader produce meaning in Menezes de Souza's perspective. In the classroom, the exercise of (de)constructing senses and meanings from memes may involve, among other things, being in charge of your own interpretations, otherwise attention to semantic aspects (DÍAZ, 2013) will not make any sense. My three suggestions for working with memes, in the classroom, are presented henceforward:

The first possibility of teaching through memes is having students share their own memes with their classmates, and analyze them through Shifman's (2013) dimensions of this specific type of genre. If the teacher does not prefer to pre-select memes before going to class, s/he can start from the ones that students share and receive on their own social media, so that the concept of memes as part of digital cultures can be better understood. The teacher explains the three Shifman's categories on memes analysis (SHIFMAN, 2013; GAL SHIFMAN; KAMPF 2016), namely;

- 1) content**, refers to ideas and ideologies incorporated in the texts, e.g. themes and their framings, such as bullying, endangered animals, precarious public transportation – and the solution to those problems;
- 2) form**, refers how the message is composed, e.g. amateur/ professional production quality, private/public settings, settings, number of protagonists;

3) stance, refers to participation structures, e.g. identities of addressor/ addressee (ethnicity, gender, social class, occupation, religion etc.), tone of speech, and the embedded communicative functions. The case in point is also focusing on the reasons why students read the memes the way they read, following Menezes de Souza's (2011) perspective as well as raising awareness on the existence of more than one interpretation. Students may work in groups, and share their analysis with their classmates and teacher.

If the teacher prefers to pre-select memes before doing the activity, my suggestion is using the webmuseum called *museu de memes*, which can be accessed on www.museudememes.com.br, developed by professors, undergraduate and graduate students from the Department of Media Studies and Graduate School of Communication at Federal University Fluminense (UFF), in Rio de Janeiro. They aim at building up a collection of reference for researchers interested in the universe of memes; holding open events to the public for discussion of topics related to Internet memes; developing a project of experimentation in media language aimed at the exploitations of themes through playful-interactive resources and multimedia exhibitions and; advising research projects and technological innovation. The webmuseum is easy to navigate, and teachers can find a great number of collections and exhibitions. The collections can be filtered by origin, category, date, and country/ region. The exhibitions, named *memeclubs*, are a mixture of academic events and film society, which promotes virtual and physical seminars, workshops, consulting and roundtables. When the teacher selects a meme from the collection, s/he can find the origin of each meme, the reasons why they were shared, their repercussion, examples, and deployments.

The second possibility of using memes for educational purposes is remixing existing memes based on the broader view of writing as a multimodal practice (BOA SORTE, 2018). I understand remixing as a combination of elements from different sources, gathering information, media or objects without changing the first source of information. The main purpose of this activity is to understand reading and writing in a different prospect, expressly the edition of codes, symbols, images, sounds, drawings etc. in order to explore discourses of dominant ideologies of patriarchal, heteronormative culture, issues of ethnicity, gender, social class, age, and sexual orientation, to name a few. As Tosenberger (2008) puts it, fanfiction, and I add, remixing, offer safe spaces for

students not only to improve their writing skills, but also to explore those discourses that are not pondered by mainstream media. Representations like those are both exploited and policed, and this freedom is especially valuable for a younger audience, whose self-expressions are heavily monitored in institutional settings. Accordingly, the classroom may be responsible for pointing out distinct ways of representing our daily lives, strongly inhibited by media (TOSENBERGER, 2008; STEIN, 2009). Based on my previous suggestions (BOA SORTE, 2018, p. 286), the teacher can ask students: “What argument is the author of the meme trying to make?”; “What is revealed about the topic on a given meme that you hadn’t noticed in the original sources?”; “Who is being represented, and who is not being represented?”; “Which voices are not being heard and could be included or represented?”.

After having students speak their minds, the teacher can ask them to remix different memes, in which distinct discourses, ideologies, and self-expressions can come to light.

The third possibility of using memes for educational purposes is based on Chagas’s works on political memes (CHAGAS, 2017, 2018). The author understands them as discursive formulas or cultural artifacts that, through interaction and the access to various social media, are capable of arousing political engagement of their users as well as socializing them with the public debate. The language used in this context is mostly metaphorical, and it is oriented towards the construction of a plot or framework of its own, that often makes use of references from popular culture.

As Shifman (2014) asserts, political memes can operate as instruments of persuasion; as popular action; and as modes of expression, and public debate. My suggestion is that teachers work with possible ways of reading and writing political memes with their students, taking into account the ones that express a persuasive rhetoric, which, according to Chagas (2018), refer to memes that are edited and shared by regular people or by interest groups who campaign in favor of someone’s candidacy, and seek to imitate the format of online political posters by, at least, three characteristics: employing direct quotes from candidates or their supporters; relations of proposals or achievements of the politician, or simply her/his slogan next to a call for the campaign; an infographic or other graphics that present survey data or compare specific indicators.

While reading those texts, the teacher can ask students to point out, and take a closer look at the following elements that may be present on the persuasive memes:

- 1) propositional rhetoric, and pragmatic appeal;
- 2) seductive or threatening rhetoric, and emotional appeal;
- 3) ethical-moral rhetoric, and ideological appeal;
- 4) critical rhetoric, and appeal to credibility of the source (CHAGAS, 2018).

The debate should be directed towards deepening the understanding of the rhetoric that underlies the memes. If necessary, the teacher can explain and give examples of those elements. Furthermore, the teacher should be mindful of the students' readings along with the reasons why they read that way, based Menezes de Souza's viewpoint (2011). It is very important to highlight that, considering we suggest reading and writing political memes since the beginning of the class, the teacher needs to state clear objectives in order to avoid heated debate that might disrupt the purpose of the activity, especially if the class is taught during a specific year of elections or strong political debate in a specific city, state, region or country.

The three foregoing teaching suggestions with memes can be adapted into various contexts and subjects. When it comes to introducing the topic, the teacher can brainstorm not only the origin of memes – as any idea that can be rephrased and repeated from person to person – but also the techniques for reading and writing memes through mobile devices. It may be a good chance of exploring possible creative ways to spread ideas, and remixing pre-existing texts whose characters might be silenced regarding touchy subjects that might be neglected by mainstream media and pop culture.

5 AS FOR THE FINDINGS

Considering the teaching suggestions made herein, my intention was not to assign recipes or magic formulas for the classroom. That is why I did not set out scenarios, target audience, subject matter or methods/ techniques. My point here was proposing possible (and different?) conceptions of reading and writing online at school, trying to show that the teacher is supposed, above all, to state clear objectives from her/his area of expertise based on her/his own situational context and syllabus. Since my aim herein was also to instigate critical reflections on the role of memes in and outside

the classroom, teachers and students can get involved in debates where the role of school is carried out. Besides, the role that media plays – or is supposed to play – can be questioned and re-evaluated. This prospect also reinforces that technology itself does not promote any changes, that is to say, only the way we use it can promote changes in our educational practices and attitudes inside and beyond the school walls.

6 FINAL REMARKS

Internet memes have been taking part of our daily lives since the global increase in the use of social media. The meme factory is real, especially in Brazil, where events, either regular or extraordinary are excellent reasons for users to exercise creativity and humor. My purpose, on this paper, was suggesting the use of memes for educational purposes, in which students and teachers can take advantage of such a popular element of digital culture to debate, exercise critical literacies, and learn more with one another, both in the various ways of reading/writing and the possibilities of exercising technical skills for remixing, editing, and sharing content online.

Creativity and copyright are possible outcomes for my suggestion. We should take into account that rewriting conventional and stereotyped stories – such as the ones I mentioned from mainstream media – is a possible way of expressing and promoting the existence of complex narratives and identities (LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2015). When we ask students to remix memes, either political or the ones known as “lol cats”, we should also have them aware that copyrighting is not only a case of prohibition versus permission. As Burwell (2013) puts it, we are talking about debating on the concepts of ideology, appropriation, intellectual property, and fair use (their concept and the reasons for it). The author reminds us that fair use allows for the reuse of copyrighted works without a license when the value to society is greater than the value to the copyright owners. This way, students can understand the culture of appropriation, in which, at school, can be learned and exercised via the creation of works that can be both ethical and imaginative.

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