

75 Meme Making as a Research Methodology to Enhance the Student Experience

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Meme making presents a unique opportunity within the classroom to not only enhance the student experience but also to collect credible data to further develop the student experience and undertake research analysis. Although philosophically grounded in established research methodologies, such as photo-interview and photo-elicitation, meme making draws upon these established approaches in a more contemporary and relaxed manner allowing the introduction of group reflection through humour.

Participants were asked to produce a meme to convey sentiment in relation to a given topic related to either known anxiety points or wider reflection on self-development. Results were then shared and communicated to peers allowing the researcher to facilitate group discussion and further analysis.

This allowed the researcher a unique opportunity to better understand participants in relation to their anxieties and aspirations as well as enhancing the immediate student experience through the process of making the meme.

Full paper

Memes are defined as a contemporary cultural phenomenon that is spread from person to person, usually using social media (Iloh, 2021). In a post lockdown environment, over one million memes are shared each day on Instagram alone, making the format one of the most popular forms of visual communication (Growth Trends, 2023). Through the composition of digital images, videos, and text, the creator seeks to convey an amalgamated message of emotion, understanding and/or humour (Brown, 2020). Using memes as a qualitative research tool is philosophically grounded in established visual research methodologies, such as photo-interview and photo-elicitation (Pink, 2007; Currie, 2015; Ingelby et al, 2021). However, meme making further allows the creator to share their message in an acceptable and established manner with a wider audience by introducing humour into their message (Mortensen and Neumayer, 2021).

This popularity and familiarity enables memes to be used within the classroom to enhance the student experience and journey as an engaging and quirky approach to learning and teaching (Antón-Sancho et al, 2022). This can be achieved through the meme making activity being employed as a functional activity such as an icebreaker, plenary or used as a structural device to chunk blocks of learning.

Alternatively, and simultaneously, it can be used to embed reflexivity, assess the quality of understanding or extend or explore conceptions and perceptions of learning (Kyrpa et al, 2022). Meme making can also be successfully employed to support students in a pastoral, academic advising and tutorial context to facilitate engagement, sharing and student voice (Cabral and Klemenčič, 2021). This enables the process to be utilised as a primary research method allowing the educator to explore students' anxieties, beliefs and wellbeing or understanding of knowledge, content and skills.

Students were asked to construct a meme to convey reflection, sentiment or knowledge in relation to a given topic. Results were then shared and communicated to their peers allowing the researcher to facilitate group discussion and explore meaning through analysis.

Our case studies revealed that the use of memes, and their implied humour, generated discussion that might otherwise not have been forthcoming in a standard Higher Education environment through the transference of power,

focus and interpretation within the task to the creator. The subsequent subjective interpretation of the meme between creator and viewers creates further embodied knowledge resulting from the collaborative process which can form a powerful collection of data for the researcher. This data may only be related to the sentiments the creator is feeling within the classroom feeding into enhancement of the student experiences or it may be for a more abstract research need.

The strengths of this method have been revealed in the exploration of known assessment point anxieties and academic emotions within modules to facilitate discussion and allow students to engage in group and personal reflections whilst also developing and supporting peer communities. The resulting memes also allow course teams to reflect on, and explore, their perceptions of anxiety and emotional trigger points in learning to facilitate more effective course design and empathetic delivery.

The methodology has been further utilised within initial teacher training and on-going professional development across sectors. Here, we focussed on its use with early career academics to encourage reflection on their career identity, sector experiences and to facilitate Communities of Practice (Wenger, 2011).

It is also noted that the experience of making memes increased student enjoyment within the classroom at the point of creation thus immediately impacting on the student experience and enhancing the learning environment. Staff have also reported finding the process engaging, authentic, and cathartic whilst providing an 'interlude of light relief that brought a sense of fun into the learning and teaching space'.

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