

LESSON PLAN: Media Literacy

Memetics & Mind Viruses: The Power of Ideas

Grade Level: High School (ages 14-17)

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- define memetics and its significance in understanding the spread of ideas
- explore the key components of a meme
- analyse real-world examples of memes and their influence on culture
- understand the role of memetics in shaping public opinion and behaviour

Materials

- whiteboard and markers
- handout on memetics
- excerpt from MAGE (optional)

Introduction (10 minutes):

- introduce the topic by asking the students if they have ever heard the word "meme" and what they think it means
- explain that a meme is not just a funny picture on the internet, but it is also an important concept in the study of culture and communication
- distribute the excerpt from MAGE and ask students to read it (optional)

Activity (40 minutes):

- provide a brief history of memetics and its founder, Richard Dawkins
- explain the concept of memes, including the definition of a meme as a unit of cultural information that is passed from one person to another
- in small groups, ask the students to think of examples of memes, including songs, jokes, and catchphrases, and explain how they spread through culture
- explain how memes can change and evolve over time and how they can influence behaviour and beliefs

Conclusion (10 minutes):

- summarise the key points of the lesson and emphasise the importance of understanding memes and their influence on culture and communication
- ask students for their thoughts on memetics and the memes they have shared

Assessment

Assessment will be based on:

- students' understanding of memetics through their participation in group discussions
- their answers to questions about memetics on the handout and/or the discussion questions on the excerpt from MAGE

Memetics

Overview

Memetics is about how ideas spread, evolve, and shape our culture. Understanding the principles of memetics offers insights into the viral nature of information and its impact on society.

What is Memetics?

Memetics is the study of how cultural information, ideas, behaviours, and practices spread and evolve, in a manner similar to biological evolution. The term "meme" (coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*) refers to an idea, behaviour, or style that spreads within a culture. Just as genes replicate and mutate, memes replicate and adapt, often undergoing changes as they pass from person to person.

Components of a Meme

- replicator: the fundamental unit of memetic transmission. It can be a phrase, an image, a tune, a dance, a fashion, or any form of cultural information that can be copied and shared.
- vehicle: the carrier of the replicator. It's the physical or digital form through which the replicator spreads. For example, a viral video is the vehicle for a funny catchphrase.
- environment: the cultural and social context in which a meme exists. The environment determines how well a meme can thrive and spread. Cultural trends, current events, and social media platforms are all part of the environment.

Evolution of Memes

- replication: memes spread through imitation, sharing, and communication between individuals. The more a meme is replicated, the greater its potential for becoming viral.
- variation: memes undergo changes as they are shared, either intentionally or due to imperfect replication. Variations can be minor (e.g., language differences) or significant (e.g., remixing an image).
- selection: memes compete for attention and replication. Those that resonate with the culture, emotions, or current trends tend to spread more effectively, leading to their selection for further replication.

Memetics in Action

Internet Memes: explore popular internet memes and analyse how these memes spread, evolved, and became cultural phenomena.

Political Memes: investigate how political ideas are spread through memes. Examine the impact of political memes on public opinion and their role in shaping discourse.

Influence and Impact

Cultural Evolution: understand how memes contribute to the evolution of culture over time. Explore how they shape behaviours, beliefs, and societal norms.

Behavioural Changes: learn how memes can influence human behaviour, from encouraging charitable actions to influencing purchasing decisions.

Ethical Considerations

Misinformation and Fake News: discuss the potential for memes to spread misinformation and fake news. Explore strategies to critically evaluate the credibility of meme-based information.

Cultural Sensitivity: emphasise the importance of considering cultural context when sharing memes, as what might be humorous or acceptable in one culture can be offensive in another.

ACTIVITY

Divide up into groups of at least two, and assign or choose one aspect of memes (each group to have a different aspect) and write down your groups thoughts on the question for your aspect:

Memes in Action Group: what examples of cultural and political memes, including songs, gestures, jokes, and catchphrases, can you identify?

Influence and Impact Group: can you think of examples where memes have shaped political decisions, consumer behaviour or social norms at both the individual and societal level? What about the pre-digital era?

Ethical Considerations Group: what ethical issues should be considered in the creation and sharing of memes in relation to misinformation? Cultural sensitivity?

Conclusion

Memetics offers a unique lens through which we can understand the power of ideas in shaping our world. By delving into the study of memes, we gain insights into the complex dynamics of cultural transmission and the role of information in shaping society. Memes have a profound influence on our behaviour, beliefs, and the way we communicate.



MAGE Excerpt

www.magethenovel.com

www.youtube.com/@magethenovel - free audio version

The block to our civilisation's challenges - including, but not limited to addressing climate change - is not the *intellectual understanding* of scientific fact, but the *emotional acceptance* of it. Human beings tend to act according to what we believe and feel, not what we know.

More so than knowledge, more so than the rational mind, it is beliefs that shape behaviour.

Every species has two evolutionary tendencies that humans share.

Firstly, to expand to fill all potential habitats, and secondly, to use all available resources in a habitat.

But throughout most of our evolution, we humans have simply not been capable of destroying whole ecosystems. In the absence of massive habitat destruction, there was no selection pressure, no biological inhibition in our evolutionary history for more moderate behaviour, so modern humans still lack instinctive restraints against doing the scale of damage made possible by technology.

And now, the same genetic traits that have assured our competitive supremacy have become maladaptive in the very circumstances that our competitive superiority has created.

There are no evolutionary 'brakes' in terms of human biology.

However, because of uniquely human social and cultural factors, human beings are not only transmitters of genes, but also beliefs, values, assumptions, and ideologies that shape how we see the world.

That means human evolution is as much determined by cultural factors as by biological factors, and to survive, we must understand that while maladaptive biological mutations will be 'selected out' in an environment for which they are unsuitable, maladaptive cultural patterns can also be selected out.

Our cultural programming is the key to keeping our biologically determined, but increasingly dangerous behavioural patterns, in check. We need a way to help our cultural programming overcome our biological impetus.

Humanity is running out of time to avert future scenarios that we are currently trending towards - climate change, crop failure, flooding, extreme weather events, biodiversity loss, total economic collapse, and civil breakdown.

Blazing new neural pathways in the brain, so that physical and emotional experience informs and activates the intellectual information we acquire through a virtual reality experience, brings the consequences of choices closer in both space and time, and lets people feel what happens if we don't work consciously to override our genetic code.

We need to be able to try a 'meme virus', a way to fast-forward a shift in consciousness and behaviour that overrides our genetic tendencies.

Memes - in the sense of memetics, or transmission of culture - can spread across the same generation, as well as between generations, and can create change quickly.

ACTIVITY

Divide up into groups of at least two, and write down your group's thoughts on these questions:

What do you think is being proposed in MAGE that harnesses the power of memetics, and why?

What positive outcomes might there be? What negative outcomes might occur?