

Activity 5.6 Building and Shifting the Discourse¹

Description

For many, our experience of the world is dependent on our worldview. In some ways, this is exciting because it can be easier to imagine people changing their minds than it can be to conceptualize large, systemic material change. But it can also be unsettling because ideas and beliefs may sometimes be based on factually incorrect information, or unstated assumptions that have important consequences. In this activity, participants will be challenged to change the world by changing ideas about the world.

Learning Goals

- Understand how ideas shape our worldview.
- Identify the important hidden assumptions behind seemingly simple “face-value” texts.
- Recognize tactics that are commonly used to make ideas gain traction.
- Creatively consider ways in which people can begin to change their minds.

Practice (65 minutes)

Step One	Start a brief conversation about memes: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Where do we see memes?• When, if ever, do we share them?• What are some of our favorite memes?	5 min
Step Two	Introduce the concept of “discourse” as a series of ideas, shared in many different places, that communicates some important meaning about the world and peoples’ place in it. Talk about the ways in which memes may be a <i>part</i> of discourse. Important points here include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Each meme is only a part of a larger whole.• It seems unreasonable to think that any one meme can shape how people think about things.• But when similar ideas are repeated often enough, they seem to become normal.	5 min
Step Three	In small groups, generate a series of original memes designed to change peoples’ minds about an important issue. You are encouraged to caption your creations by	5 min

¹ **Citation for this activity:** Timothy Ruback (2023). Building and Shifting the Discourse. In Hartman, Britt, & Byrd (Eds). *The Interactivity Foundation Collaborative Discussion Toolkit*. Retrieved from <https://www.collaborativediscussionproject.com/module-5-civic-collaboration-1>

	<p>using an online meme-making site like Meme Generator. However, you do it, your captions <i>must</i> be original captions written by the group. You may caption your own images, but you also may choose to use a popular image instead (e.g., Kermit drinking tea, Distracted boyfriend, etc.). ALL meme content <u>must</u> be appropriate for a classroom or group setting.</p>	
<p>Step Four</p>	<p>Assign students or participants into 3 small groups. Members in each group should read their respective scenario:</p> <p><u>Group A:</u> It's 2024. Zombies have started to emerge in cities across the world. But they're not a big threat. Last year, 27 people were killed and 240 were injured by zombie attacks in North America, with over half those attacks between Nashville and Orlando. In most parts of North America, you're more likely to have a vending machine fall on you, or be struck by lightning, than to ever see a zombie. However, last week, on an unusually warm day, there were two zombie attacks in Niagara Falls. Starting on the Canadian side, the zombies caused panic as they moved across the bridge to the USA. No one was killed, but because it was the first zombie sighting in the Northeast in 15 months, because there was a lot of clear amateur video footage, and because it was an international incident at a culturally significant place, it is front page news. Now, there has never been any serious talk about building a wall on the US-Canada border, and it is hard to imagine that one incident would change years of good border relations. But since zombie attacks rarely happen in cold weather, the countries near the Arctic Circle are starting to realize that there may someday be wars for territorial control of the Arctic, so behind the scenes, things are more tense than usual. You work for Iceland's Intelligence Agency, and you want US-Canadian relations to deteriorate to the point where a wall will be built between them. After all, if these two powerful Northern nations are busy distrusting and policing each other, then they will have fewer resources to devote toward containing your plans to consolidate power in the Arctic. Create a series of memes that would take advantage of the spectacular current events to support your point of view.</p> <p><u>Group B:</u> It's 2029. Over the last year, hundreds of millions of zombies have arisen across most of the world, with one exception. They still have not yet appeared in any large numbers in North or South America. Even the nations closer to the equator have suffered fewer zombie attacks than nations with similar climates elsewhere. In fact, since Panama closed the canal in late 2028, the number of attacks is going down. As the rest of the world is actively fighting zombies, with some limited success, countries in the Americas are trying to figure out what they should do. Right now, it looks like most countries want to become isolationist: close all borders, end all travel, and invest heavily in military technology to keep out the zombies, to keep out those fleeing from zombies, and to be prepared for a fight if the zombies arrive. You are an expert on military strategy, and you think this is a mistake. The co-founder of your think-tank is an epidemiologist, and she agrees. You both think that the Americas should be actively working to help the world fight the zombie menace, or it's just a matter of time before the zombies arrive. But most people don't see it that way. Create a series of memes designed to make people more likely to consider joining the fight against the undead.</p> <p><u>Group C:</u> It's 2034. Zombies have taken over entire nations. They're present in most large cities around the world. And far from being mindless agents of destruction, the</p>	<p>10 min</p>

	<p>zombies are starting to build their own societies from the rubble of the human-zombie wars. Once a team of human & zombie scientists developed a processed vegetarian food for zombies that could replace human brains, a fragile peace has emerged. Zombies no longer eat humans. But humans and zombies still distrust one another greatly and live in separate communities. This is a problem because your country faces challenges that neither the human community nor the zombie community can resolve on their own. Specifically, most of your country's infrastructure was destroyed during the zombie wars. Rebuilding that infrastructure is important. People cannot get back to normal without roads, bridges, train tracks, airports and harbors – to say nothing of wireless internet service. Unless these things are restored, communities will go hungry. But, to succeed, it's clear that work needs to take place in areas controlled by humans and zombies alike. You are the chief urban planner for the human community in New-New York, and you believe that for your city and your country to thrive, the living and the undead will have to work together to rebuild the infrastructure network that has been so badly damaged.</p> <p>Create a series of memes to help the living and the dead do what is necessary to rebuild your country.</p>	
<p>Step Five</p>	<p>Before small groups start to create their memes, as a whole group-- brainstorm strategies about ways to create memes that can shape discourse. Possible important points, coming from the group or the instructor, include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Don't advocate for a specific policy position, if it's very far from what most people currently believe. ● Think about the unstated assumptions behind your preferred outcome. What do people need to believe before your position will seem reasonable? ● Ask yourself – how do you change those assumptions? ● Think about appealing to emotions – both positive and negative ones. ● Think about whether you want your memes to be based on the facts you know, or whether you want to stretch the truth. 	<p>5 min</p>
<p>Step Six</p>	<p><i>In small groups, start creating memes. While creating memes together, keep the following questions in mind:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Who is the audience you're trying to convince? What values are important to them? ● What do they currently think about the world and their place in it? ● What do you want them to think about the world and their place in it? ● What needs to change before people will accept your point of view? How do people need to think differently? ● How did your memes contribute to the discourse? Which ideas were you trying to change with your memes? How were you doing it? ● Do your memes fit the facts that you know, or did you try to contradict those facts? If you tried to fake the facts, how did you do it, and why? ● Which of your memes seems to you to be the most effective? Why do you think it is effective? 	<p>20 min</p>
<p>Step Seven</p>	<p><i>As a class, discuss the full set of presented memes.</i> Sequence the presentations (A, B, and then C). Together the group should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explore where there are common themes and strategies. ● Point out important differences. ● Consider the effect of the memes together versus any one of the memes on their own. One good way to do this is to ask the class to organize the memes for the greatest effect. 	<p>15 min</p>

Reflection Assignment

- What was the effect of seeing all the memes from each group together? Did it feel the same as seeing only one or two at a time, or was it different? If it was different, what do you think the difference is?
- How did you figure out which ideas your memes needed to address? Did finding the assumptions behind the ideas you wanted to support feel easy or difficult for you? Why do you think that is?
- What do you think the most effective memes did well? Were they primarily sharing information? Eliciting an emotional response? Something else? Why do you think these memes were so effective?
- Choose any one meme and analyze it closely. What is it saying and what is it leaving out? What assumptions is it trying to reinforce or change? What does it contribute to the discourse about this topic, and how does it do so?
- Could you see a difference between the memes that stuck to the facts presented in the scenarios and the ones that did not? Why does it matter?

Practice Journal

This week, pay attention to memes. What sort of memes are most common in your digital world? Do you feel compelled to share them? How many do you think you see on a typical day? What effect do you think these memes have on you? After completing this exercise, do you think you'll view memes differently? If so, how? If not, why not?

Dive Deeper: Additional Resources

- Because this activity is based on a far-fetched hypothetical scenario it is difficult to dive deeply into questions of truth and misinformation. But developing critical awareness skills is important when it comes to memes, because they have been prominently used to spread disinformation. *Get Bad News* is an internet game, which also has an info sheet for educators. It helps students develop tools to recognize disinformation, and to understand (and inoculate themselves) against psychological strategies that are commonly used in memes. Find out more at: <http://getbadnews.com>
- Dominic D. Wells (2018) You All Made Dank Memes: Using Internet Memes to Promote Critical Thinking, *Journal of Political Science Education*, 14:2, 240-248. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2017.1406363>

Pro Tips

- If you have the time to do so, this activity works well over two course sessions.
- One advantage of breaking up the activity into two sessions is that you can ask students to send you electronic copies of their memes prior to the second session. This allows you to check each group's memes for appropriateness and prepare them to be shared with the whole group.
- Be prepared to answer technology questions about how to create memes.
- Some students will do this quickly, others may not. If you're doing this in class, rather than giving them a set number (like 6 or 10), encourage the groups to make as many memes as they can.