

Activity 5.6 Building and Shifting the Discourse

Submitted by Timothy Ruback¹

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Description

This activity uses memes to introduce participants to the concept of discourse. Participants will be challenged to change the world by changing our discourse about the world.

Learning Goals

- Understand how ideas shape our worldview and identify hidden assumptions.
- Recognize tactics used to make ideas gain traction and consider how these could be creatively challenged.

Instructions (60 minutes)

Set Up	Prepare for the Activity Share these Scenarios for Memes , or create scenarios of your own, for each group as handouts or a shared document. Organize participants into three small groups (4-8 ppl). Begin by introducing the learning goals of this activity.	
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¹ **Citation for this activity:** Timothy Ruback (2023). Building and Shifting the Discourse. In Hartman and Byrd (Eds), The Interactivity Foundation Collaborative Discussion Toolkit. Retrieved from <https://www.collaborativediscussionproject.com/activities/module-5>

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	<p>Facilitator Tip: If you have the time to do so, this activity works well over two sessions. One advantage of breaking up the activity into two sessions is that you can ask participants 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.</p>	
<p>Step One</p>	<p>Introduce the Activity and Discuss Memes</p> <p>Share this short introduction to the activity:</p> <p>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, you will be challenged to change the world by changing ideas about the world.</p> <p>Start a brief conversation about memes:</p> <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? 	<p>10 min</p>
<p>Step Two</p>	<p>Introduce the Concept of Discourse</p> <p>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 part of discourse. Important points here include:</p> <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. 	<p>5 min</p>
<p>Step Three</p>	<p>Share Instructions and Scenarios for Memes</p> <p>Explain that participants will be working in small groups to generate a series of original memes designed to change peoples' minds about an important issue. They can caption their creations by using an online meme-making site like Meme Generator.</p> <p>Remind participants that their captions must be original captions written by the group. They have the option of captioning their own images or using a popular image (e.g. Kermit drinking tea, Distracted boyfriend, etc.). ALL meme content <u>must</u> be appropriate for a classroom or group setting.</p>	<p>10 min</p>

	<p>Assign one of the three scenarios to each group. Ask the groups to read through their respective scenarios.</p> <p>Facilitator Tip: Be prepared to answer technology questions about how to create memes. Some participants will do this quickly, others may not. Rather than giving them a set number (like 6 or 10), encourage the groups to make as many memes as they can.</p>	
<p>Step Four</p>	<p>Brainstorm Strategies for Creating Memes</p> <p>Before small groups start to create their memes, brainstorm strategies as a whole group about ways to create memes that can shape discourse. Possible important points you can share to spark ideas 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 Five</p>	<p>Create Memes</p> <p>In small groups, invite participants to start creating their memes. While creating memes together, ask them to keep the following questions in mind:</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>It may be helpful to share these questions on a board, shared screen or other surface visible to the whole group for participants to refer to as they create their memes.</p>	<p>15 min</p>

Step Six	<p>Debrief as a Full Group</p> <p>Invite each group to present their memes in order (i.e. group A, B, and then C). Discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do you see common themes and strategies? • What important differences do you see? • When considering all the memes together as a collection, how would you order the memes for the greatest effect? 	15 min
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Reflection Journal

- 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

- [Memes and Critical Thinking](#): 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>
- [Get Bad News \(An Online Game\)](#): *Get Bad News*, TILT, Cambridge Social Decision-Making Lab, DROG, and Gusmanson, www.getbadnews.com/en. Accessed 9 Sep. 2023.
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.

Activity Cluster

[2.5 Cultivating a Willingness to Play](#)

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