Chapter 16
Living the YOLO Lifestyle: The Rhetorical Power of Memes in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT
In this chapter, the authors discuss what it means for students to create, remix, and disseminate memes today—especially considering the connectivity and participatory nature of youth culture. The authors then discuss the importance of a critical media literacy pedagogy. Next, the authors investigate and rhetorically analyze some current memes. The authors also analyze the digital affordances of tools, the ways that messages are privileged and silenced, visual rhetoric, and remix. Finally, the authors explore further implications for educators to consider when using memes in the classroom.

INTRODUCTION
Knobel and Lankshear (2007) define memes as “contagious patterns of ‘cultural information’ that get passed from mind to mind and directly generate and shape the mindsets and significant forms of behavior and actions of a social group” (p. 199). Memes today are created, remixed, posted, and reposted on social media and serve to simultaneously define the individual creator and the audience of the meme. In this chapter, we suggest that the messages, specifically memes, that adolescents in particular create and share define what Dredger, Woods, Beach, and Sagstetter (2010) call “adolescent space.” While adolescent space is different for each decade, today’s youth, with access to smart phones and internet, leverage their meme literacy to assert their beliefs, to affect change, and to be part of larger social groups. This publishing of beliefs reflects our modern age and gives readers insight into how such out-of-school digital literacies can inform educators as they seek to transcend mandated and sanctioned literacies that may drive instruction. Seeing and analyzing such out-of-school literacies can help educators...
value student identity growth and foster independent thinking and critical consumerism that is needed in future generations if we hope to subvert what educators are now experiencing—a world where John Dewey’s (1897) words are reflected in America’s public education system where the:

*Only true education comes through the stimulation of the child’s powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs.* (p. 77)

The social situations in which adolescents today find themselves today are online, and meme creation is an act of unity. What we unpack here is the ways that identity is realized in relation to others and is visible in online spaces. While youth of today are honing their identities, they harness dispositions of New Literacies: participation, distributed expertise, sharing, experimentation, and innovation (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2014). This theoretical framework privileges dispositions over tools. It offers a distinction in the teaching of current texts written for young adults even as pop culture because what may engage adolescents can change based on the students and what is read. When teachers and learners adopt dispositions of New Literacies, they are always asking, “Are there other ways that we could do this?” This spirit of innovation breeds more innovation, more tinkering, more play, and ultimately, includes more people and helps us to resist the urge to create and perpetuate canons, either of texts or tools. In this resistance, we honor a more Deweyan view of education, when we “believe that knowledge of social conditions, of the present state of civilization, is necessary in order properly to interpret the child’s powers” (Dewey, 1897, p. 77-80).

Thus, in this chapter, we note what it means to create, remix, and disseminate memes today in a third space that bridges in and out of school literacies (Bhabha, 1990). We then discuss the importance of critical media literacy pedagogy. Next, we investigate and rhetorically analyze some current memes. We also analyze the digital affordances of tools, the ways that messages are privileged and silenced, visual rhetoric, and remix. Finally, we explore further implications for educators to consider when using memes in the classroom.

**“YOLO” LIFESTYLE**

It’s 6:50 Monday morning. While most students make sure they are not too early to school – especially on Monday – I see several students filing into my room at the end of the hall. This is not surprising given that my classroom has become home to many students (some whom I’ve never even taught). As I turn into my room I hear shouts of “YOLO!” I ask what they’re listening to this morning since they are plugged into their phones. Dane (pseudonym) says, “You know, “The Motto” by Drizzay? You know, because I forgot my homework and all, I had to get here earlier, so YOLO.”

Yet, “YOLO” isn’t the only message being remixed into memes all over social media networks. In fact, there are many social justice issues that adolescents are engaged with in online spaces in the forms of memes, such as issues of race, gender, and sexuality equality; political candidate support; and online movements that call for diversity in books (“We Need Diverse Books,” 2014). Sometimes criticized as hashtag activism that doesn’t do much beyond informing others of opinions (Dewey, 2014), memes can serve as an introduction into the ways that teens explore issues of audience, propaganda, and appeals to
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