Collective R(i)ot: Figurative Wisdom and Digital Citizens

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Abstract

Poet and philosopher Jan Zwicky argues that, "The experience of understanding something is always the experience of a gestalt—the dawning of an aspect that is simultaneously a perception or reception of a whole." For this piece, we draw on Zwicky's notion by sharing our negotiations of the competing rhetorical contexts of 2020. As an English teacher-educator and a novice high school teacher, we each have experienced unique difficulties reconciling the absurdities of COVID-19, racial injustice, police brutality, and political corruption with the oftentimes conflicting realities of our jobs. Zwicky continues to note that, "One way the facilitation of understanding may proceed, then, is by the judicious selection and arrangement of elements of that whole. Another is by the setting up of objects of comparison." In this light, we offer the following project: a messy ensemble of our critical reflections, humble admissions, and pedagogical decisions regarding the role of figurative language in our practice, and how we might employ these linguistic structures to promote a sense of democratic citizenship in our students.

Keywords: Curriculum, literature, multimodal, literacy

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Swallowed Whole: Opening Vignettes

Nate

I used to love the thought of a chaotic classroom. My ideal space would function like an 18th century coffee shop with people shouting knowledge and others challenging and listening intently. How quickly that changes. I realize now that I do not own the cage, I am in it too. Normalcy is an illusion. There was a tension before with the Trump flagged Truck Boys and the future Political Science majors, with their bleeding hearts and rainbow flags. That tension continues to persist somewhere more nebulous because I can't put my finger on a place or space.

Where can I make space for my kids to coexist? Where can all of my students *really* learn something and grow? If I can get them to believe in the metaphor of a "good human" instead of "democratic citizen," maybe I can sell them on independent thought and critical thinking. Language needs rules, and so does my classroom. Maybe I will teach the expectation of language: Without these expectations, the classroom and language both crumble beneath us. Maybe I'll find beauty in the anarchy of an unhinged system. But we still need to follow the rules. Maybe my coffee shop will remain a daydream, or maybe I will be brave enough to embrace the chaos and brittleness of language and schools. Perhaps I can even craft a world where these two things can exist together.

Jeff

I really did feel like I was stuck in a hole. And by hole, I mean *hole*, and not like some rut or a funk or something else people get stuck in when they're sad or having a bad month or something. Seriously, for real, this was a hole. Like the kind you see on the news sometimes that just opens up in the middle of a field and for some reason there's a car whose back wheels are

sticking straight out, pointing to the sky, and there's always a fire hydrant nearby spraying water everywhere and there's a siren and barking dogs and babies crying and the blinking flashers and sometimes there's a horn. Covid hit, the world broke, and we all fell in, alone, together. And some of us couldn't breathe.

Turns out, you just can't do the same things in a hole that you can do outside. Everything changes. Our relationships, hopes, and worries. How we engage with and treat each other and ourselves. How we think and move. See, listen, and read. You gotta move slow and keep your hands in front of you and your steps can't be too big. In short, the whole of Covid changed how I experienced the world—and of course, that included my teaching. *What will the world look like when we leave?* I began to wonder. *What will the marks we leave on the wall say about where we came from, who we became, how we did, and where we went?*

Background and Context

Since 1802, the most popular artifact at the British Museum has been the Rosetta Stone. Dating back to 196 B.C.E, the stone contains three versions of the same text written in Ancient Greek and Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic and demotic scripts. For over two hundred years, the Rosette Stone has been highly regarded as the initial key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics and, by extension, understanding Ancient Egyptian culture and civilization.

As a metaphor itself, the term "Rosetta Stone" often refers to any significant key that accesses a new field of knowledge or discovery. In this sense, we wonder—as citizen-teachers and teacher-citizens—the extent to which our society has already created, or is in the process of creating, its own set of uniquely complex Rosetta Stones that, when decrypted, might lead future researchers, scholars, or citizens to a more comprehensive understanding of who we were and how we operated.

It was partly this concept of "decryption"—the process of applying various literacies to specific texts—that first sparked the inquiries that resulted in this essay.

For this reflective piece, we've tried to marble two distinct voices, each coming from two distinct teachers. Jeff is a former high school English teacher and current English teacher educator at a midsized, Midwestern University. At the time of this article, Nate is concluding his second year as a secondary English teacher at a rural Midwestern high school. As an undergraduate student and preservice English teacher, Nate worked closely with Jeff throughout two upper-level courses and during his student teaching practicum. Since graduating from college, we have remained in close contact, developing a friendship and professional comradery that extends well beyond the walls of our institution.

Even before March 13th, 2020, near the middle of a semester that history will remember as the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we found ourselves independently searching for inspiration and comfort beyond the traditional sources. We were getting bored. The usual avenues no longer sufficed. Professional development seemed hokey and fruitless. Otherwise acclaimed textbooks and webinars lacked grit and punch. Sterility prevailed and we were thirsty.

Of course, once the pandemic eclipsed our lives, it didn't take long before Zoom fatigue set in, accompanied by the lethargy that came from granting seemingly endless exceptions for late work, failing grades, or projects that normally just wouldn't cut it. We were sick and tired and being sick and tired. We needed a jolt. Perhaps more so as a means of escaping the chaos of COVID than evolving as teachers, we continued seeking out materials that resonated with us more as people than educators. As if the two could ever be separated.

Unflattening **and** *Wisdom & Metaphor*

Two books anchored the early days of this pursuit. Nate had come across Sousanis's (2014) *Unflattening* a few years before; but even though he recommended it to Jeff as pleasure reading prior to graduating, it wasn't until the pandemic struck that the book began to take on entirely new meanings and implications for their respective teaching.

Unflattening takes readers on a visual and metacognitive journey that solders visual allegory with poignant critique of various cultural, psychological, and linguistic structures. Sousanis's doctoral thesis showcases a world where complex content manifests in "comic" form that demands attention and critique. This ultimately bridges the gap between visual and linguistic forms of being which prompts a critical examination of that liminal space between symbols and meaning and ultimately "unflattens" how we communicate and navigate our world. It's a trippy ride, for sure.

The other book that reshaped how we framed ourselves within our praxis (and, perhaps, our praxis itself) was Zwicky's (2014) *Wisdom & Metaphor.* Jeff had first learned of Zwicky while reviewing a manuscript for a journal in the Fall of 2019. Zwicky's text was only cited a few times in the article, but something about the nature of the particular quotations, as well as the author's poignant allusion to the text and its connections to English instruction compelled Jeff to seek out the book on his own and eventually share it with Nate.

Though Zwicky and Sousanis work in different fields and write for different audiences, their projects dialogue with each other in provocative ways. Just as Sousanis privileges the unique insights that derive from visual images (as well as the literacies needed to decode them), Zwicky champions metaphor's capacity to "override calcified gestures of thought by being" (p. 8). For Sousanis, words themselves have a lifeless constriction that renders their efficacy bound at best, and nonexistent at worst; for Zwicky, thoughts often risk a calcification that results in

isolation, marginalization, or other form of perpetual disconnect. For Sousanis, the way to circumnavigate this cognitive and linguistic stagnation is through the integration of images; for Zwicky, we overcome mental calcification through the appropriation of metaphors. In short, these scholars believe that images and metaphors offer the key to unlock cultures/communities and cultivate the empathy and mutual understanding that eventually leads to wisdom.

Though neither Sousanis nor Zwicky work in secondary English education, it's safe to say that we each found tremendous comfort in the way these scholars described the transformative power of images and metaphors, especially as the various crises of 2020 continued wreaking havoc on our collective states and minds.

With the pandemic blurring into summer and the prospect of soon zooming into an unprecedented era of education looming on the horizon, we each began noticing how ideas about wisdom and metaphors and images and citizenship were showing up in other contexts in our lives. Specifically, we kept seeing how people were using memes to frame—or, as Zwicky would say, "calcify"—their various responses to our moment. Some of these memes were funny, others sad. Some optimistic, others steeped in futility. Some of them espoused a spirit of collegiality and hope and community. Others were just plain mean. Or made no sense at all. At least to us…

But regardless of their rhetorical function, each of these memes had a few things in common. 1) They all used images to share a message; 2) That message was infused with some sort of capital and desired resonance; 3) Access to the meme was limited only to those who "spoke its language" or knew how to decrypt it; and 4) The memes themselves almost exclusively functioned as placeholders for grander and more nuanced ideas. The images were

both messages and metaphors, in other words. They as always meant both what they said *and* something else.

And this is when we started thinking about our students, our classrooms, and our teaching to come. Of course, memes weren't new, and we knew this. But something about these digital artifacts started speaking to us in ways they never had before; and something about not knowing our future for the Fall convinced us that there just might be something to these little aesthetic ensembles that was worthy of exploration …

For, truly, what can we learn/teach about our society through studying our memes; *reading* them, being the key, in the same way that scholars have studied the Rosetta Stone? What do these memes reveal about our culture and civilization? How, like hieroglyphics, do they operate linguistically and aesthetically, as well as culturally? What stories do they tell, and how might mastery of these stories grant an outsider citizenship into our worlds? What can our students learn from our memes, and how can we aid in the pursuit of such wisdom?

Memes, Metaphors, and Meaning: A Review of the Literature

We spent our Covid summer exploring the links between various forms of figurative language (memes and digital metaphors, chief among them) and the broader wisdom and democratic citizenship we believe they can achieve. While Shifman (2014) wagers that political memes, especially, may encourage online citizens to "[participate] in a normative debate about how the world should look like" (p. 120), it seems that many of our current social media practices have operationalized online artifacts in such a way that they divide, alienate, oppress, and offend rather than unify or democratize. As teachers, though, we believe that through a critically literate engagement with these structures, we may foster in our students increasing

senses of empathy and cultural understanding which, we argue, are the cornerstones of democratic citizenship.

Instead of limiting citizenship to a "consciously recognized, self-contained, non-contradictory system that provides some sort of stable, nationally-contextualized frame of behavior" (Fishchman and Haas, 2012 p. 390), we believe that citizenship has always operated with a certain degree of fluidity and flexibility. While citizenship education perhaps too often gets reduced either to knowledge acquisition about government structures/functions or an insistence that individual citizens develop singular, bound notions of identity and roles (Fischman & Haas, 2014; Heilman, 2011; Isin, 2009; Knight-Abowitz & Harnish, 2006), we spent our summer thinking of ways to marble critical literacy with progressive citizenship education.

Just as learning multiple languages allows people to span cultures and tether themselves to other communities, we believe that studying memes as complex, figurative languages can allow diverse members of the same community to establish a healthy sense of democratic citizenship based on empathy, equity, and inclusion. In addition to evolving our approach to citizenship education, this also demands that we expand our parameters of how we teach and engage with memes and metaphors, instead of deferring simply to reductionist, discipline-specific views of figurative language (Glucksberg, 2001; Lankshear et al, 2007; Lazar, 1996). Metaphors are more than simply comparisons without using *like* or *as,* in other words; they are the language of possibility.

As unique semiotic "units of cultural evolution" (Cannizzaro, 2014, p. 581), memes especially have become specific linguistic structures in themselves. Either you "get" the meme or you don't. And this "getting" depends on a complex system of various linguistic and cultural

masteries, not too unlike Gee's (1989) notion of an "identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions…so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize" (p. 7). In that sense, the way we share and interpret memes mirrors the ways we read, write, and share other linguistically based media. More than a language, they're a "Discourse" (Gee, 1989) in themselves.

And this makes sense. After all, English, as linked to both language and culture, is *not* German; Italian is not Russian; and Chinese is not Yiddish. There's nothing *wrong,* of course, with any of these languages, but certainly fluency in one affords particular rights and privileges not privy to those who haven't mastered its discursive expectations. The same is true with memes. Either you speak them, or you don't.

This gets messy, though, when people use memes-as-language-as-culture to marginalize or otherwise disparage certain outgroups or communities. Just as languages are inextricably linked to culture, so too can memes serve as mechanisms of oppression or ridicule. We see this in our online spaces. Rather than serving productive ends, memes and metaphors have often been used to perpetuate various cognitive and cultural chasms. We share them with our friends to make fun of those who can't understand them. The weaponization of figurative language historically has had traumatic implications not only for marginalized populations (Allen, 1976), but also for issues of citizenship and community membership writ large (Karabulut and Celik, 2017; Plevriti, 2013). To put it simply, instead of serving as bridges, these structures now function as motes.

As Lowery (2013) notes, "difficulties in understanding metaphors from one language to another are not only due to linguistic differences…but also the way each culture views the various components of the idiom being learned," (p. 15). While metaphors, memes, and other

forms of visual rhetoric all offer "frames of reference from which to see the same world

differently" (Sousanis, 2015, p. 96), the derisive and divisive manners in which digital citizens

often appropriate these figurative linguistic structures risks undermining the democratizing,

educative capacity they ostensibly wield.

Lakoff (2008) argues that our understanding of the world originates in a deep rationality

that is "structured by frames and metaphors and images and symbols" (pp. 13-14). This

"embodied cognition" (Damasio, 2010) not only helps illuminate how citizens reconcile their

respective roles in society, but also augments Zwicky's (2014) claim that "those who think

metaphorically are able to think truly because the shape of their thinking echoes the shape of

their world." In other words, "the shape of metaphorical thought is also the shape of wisdom"

(Zwicky, 2014, p. 11). And it's precisely at this intersection of wisdom, metaphor, memes, and

citizenship that we found ourselves late in the summer of 2020.

Inspired by Sousanis (2015) and Zwicky (2014), and longing to combat the malaise, hate,

and general state of various distancings plaguing our communities, we entered that first Covid

August fully prepared to change our respective teaching approaches. As a progressive teacher,

Nate sought to introduce content that would be both topical and accessible. However, the

uncharted virtual landscape of Covid made this difficult. The community in which Nate taught,

for example, already had an inherent distrust for education as a system. Fears of indoctrination

and certain "agendas" made it difficult for Nate to incorporate any material that flirted with

being contemporary or political in the slightest. And that was even Before, when students were

in classrooms, unmasked and sitting in seats.

The demands of virtual instruction exacerbated the already large disconnect between the

students and the material. In his first year in the classroom, Nate found ways to incorporate

various visual elements into his teaching. But with the closing of schools and the move to virtual

instruction, he found that he was simply no longer able to teach these same things in the same

way. Because of this divide and the unknowns of E-learning, Nate felt compelled to revert back

to traditional texts (short stories, novellas, etc.) in order to accommodate the unique learning

needs and educative circumstances that Covid had presented. This meant, of course, that Nate

had to sacrifice his use of more multimodal, aesthetically dynamic materials in favor of texts that

kids can access with their computers and wouldn't result in him "losing" any of his students

because they checked out. Consequently, Nate started to worry that his progressive praxis would

eventually fall by the wayside.

With Nate's experience driving the decision, Jeff wanted to focus his upcoming methods

course much more on notions of critical (digital) literacy and citizenship education. Jeff's job

was to prepare future English teachers for exactly the type of tensions Nate was currently

experiencing. If Nate was struggling with specific curricular/institutional limitations, Jeff knew

that he should modify his collegiate methods classes accordingly so as to hopefully alleviate at

least some of the predictable pressures that result from the obstacles he knew his students would

likely encounter.

We both knew that, if nothing else, the election alone would pose certain challenges for

our new semester. But we also knew that rather than cow to the pressures of the moment or

succumb to the temptation simply to close our eyes and hold on, we wanted to capitalize off what

the worlds we were seeing and the words we were reading.

We needed to reconsider how we, as English teachers, approached citizenship education

in our classes. We needed to reevaluate the discursive potential of figurative language by way of

disrupting the calcification of our praxis. We needed to get smarter about how we made wisdom,

and we needed to start putting things together until similarities dawned. Yeah, we may have still been a hole. But we knew that because we could see ourselves at all, light must be getting in from somewhere; we just needed to find it. In the sections below, we discuss our attempts to do just that. Attempts, being the key.

Some Fresh Assessments

Every assignment teachers make, like all creations, stems from imperfection. We create language to transcend the imperfections of human relations; tigers could eat us, so we invented a sound for "tiger" that was different than the sound for "berry." We make meals because our bodies are imperfect and demand nourishment in order to survive. We paint or sculpt or sing because our minds are imperfect and need other modes of meaning-making in order to understand the world. And as teachers, we design lessons because our world is imperfect, as is our capacity to navigate it, and thus we need instruments to help reconcile the gaps of our collective knowing.

With the various imperfections of 2020 as our springboard, we created the following two lessons for our respective classrooms. Nate's lesson uses political memes as a way to engage students in the process of considering the values and beliefs of alternative worldviews. Jeff grounds his project in the notion that as future English teachers, part of his students' responsibilities involves cultivating civic literacy in their students so that they could then apply it to various multimodal texts. Essentially, the goal of Jeff's assignment is to prepare future teachers to do precisely the type of work that Nate hopes to achieve in his assignment. Just as the needs of Nate's students drive his instruction, so too do the needs of Nate, as Jeff's former student, drive Jeff's teaching.

Given that the roots of the word "assessment" comes from the Latin word meaning "to sit down with," we hoped that these projects would serve as opportunities for us to sit down with our students, gauge their burgeoning civic literacies, check for understanding, and ultimately help them on their path toward productive democratic citizenship.

In the sections below, we present the actual assignment sheets for our respective projects. Jeff incorporated his assignment in his high school English classes. His project served as a midterm assessment for his college-level, literature teaching methods class. Following the assignment descriptions, we've offered our reflections on the experiences of introducing the projects in our classrooms. We conclude this essay by discussing the implications of our experience not only on the future of our praxis, but also on the intersections of critical civic literacy, digital spaces, and the field English education, both on the secondary and collegiate levels.

Nate's Lesson: Satire, Memes, and Politics

Now that we covered satire and visual metaphors, we need to put all this information to good use. You are going to be a fact checking squad of reporters that is determined to bring down this year's presidential candidates. Instead of just taking information for granted, we will be looking into the *cultural context*, the *historical context*, how your meme fits into the *larger conversation*, how it fails to *effectively communicate* its idea, and offer a suggestion to *further the conversation* in a productive way.

Unfortunately, there is a twist. Instead of a candidate themselves, you must pick a social issue from this past year and investigate the view opposing the stance they have taken. A lot of you in here have *incredibly* strong emotions and opinions about the Black Lives Matter movement, the pandemic, law and order, abortion, gun control, and many other issues, but how

often do you engage with the other side of the table? Not very often. One day when you vote you will have a lot of different people on your ballot. Your grade is in no way impacted by your personal beliefs. You are being assessed on how you connect the information you find to what we studied in the last Johnson University segment to new information and how thoroughly you analyze the information you found.

The Mission

Entering the Lion's Den: Go out and find memes that really irritate you. From those, select a single meme that you want to dedicate your time to. Reminder: this meme should support the candidate and views that are not your own.

Build your Case: Just like a lawyer, you now need to investigate every possible angle of your meme. What is the format? What is the message? How is that message being communicated? Who is the message for? What knowledge do you need to know to understand it? If you don't understand it, then where should you go to get that information? Explain the meme like you are ruining a bad joke or explaining it to a first grader who has no idea what is happening in the world.

Go to Court: Defend your meme and the analysis that you conducted. Keep in mind that you have some excellent resources that you can cite like the Sousanis excerpt, the elements of satire presentation, and the research that you conducted in your analysis. In your defense you need to answer these questions:

What does the meme make you feel/how does it evoke a response from you?

How does this meme communicate the subject matter (BLM, Covid, etc.) effectively?

What is missing from your meme to help people understand the message better?

Who benefits from knowing this new information and how do they benefit?

How does this meme interact with your community?

Decompress: Think on the work that you just did and respond to the following questions: Was it easy to defend a meme? Was it difficult to investigate a view that was not your own? How hard was it to find reliable information? What do you now understand that you didn't before?

Jeff's Multimodal Midterm Project

Teacher preparation, as a field, has a long history of asking students to frame their perceptions of the teaching profession as a metaphor (Alsup, 2019; Shaw and Mahlios, 2008; Bullough, 1991; Leary, 1990). Yet, while a great deal of research has focused on how preservice teachers couch teaching in metaphorical terms, little work has explored the pedagogical viability of metaphors (and other multimodal forms of figurative expression) to promote a democratic sense of civic literacy that transcends the traditional literary limitations of these devices. We begin this project in the spirit of doing just that.

Rather than emphasizing the creation of personal teaching-metaphors, this project invites you to design an assignment centered around the rhetorical analysis of a singular digital artifact. In an age when memes, metaphors, and other digital media are being used to oppress, segregate, and subjugate, it's incumbent on teachers to equip students with the skills needed for critical, progressive media consumption. In other words, it's not enough to simply know what a metaphor *is* or *that* a meme is funny (or offensive…); instead, we must teach students to understand *how* metaphors work and *why* memes elicit their desired emotional response.

The Task:

Collect a CURRENT MEME or visual, online metaphor. The internet has plenty. Given the pursuit of this assignment, please make an effort to find an artifact that has its roots in politics, social justice, activism, or citizenship in some way. NOTE: The particular agenda or message of your artifact will have no bearing on my assessment of your project! Just choose a good one and do smart stuff with it…

Conduct a brief original ANALYSIS of the artifact: what *is* it? Where did it come from? What is it saying? How does it work? What are its *parts*—its "gestalts"—and how do they dialogue with one another? Who is the audience? What context or background knowledge is needed to understand it? What rhetorical devices does it employ and to what extent are they successful? (roughly 500 words)

Compose a brief PEDAGOGICAL RATIONALE (roughly 1000 words) that explains the incorporation of your artifact in a class. Specific things to consider in this section could include:

- Why are you bringing this into your classroom? Why *this* artifact? Why does it speak to *you?* What current issue does it highlight, and why does that issue matter? What learning objectives and/or standards does it address? What theories/practices frame your decision?

- Where would you teach this artifact, in what sort of school, grade level, course? Who are your students, and what makes this artifact suitable for this context? (Offer some context…)

- How does the artifact relate to/with your curriculum? What texts would/could it follow? What could it precede? What critical inquiries guide its inclusion in your class?

- What are the potential risks of including this artifact? Who might it offend? What concerns might they have? Who would it benefit and how? How would you address any potential obstacles?

- What scaffolding might you need to do for your artifact? What prior knowledge might you need to activate in your students, and how would you assess this knowledge?

Create an ASSESSMENT for your students to complete using this artifact. What will they *do* with it? What will they *learn* from it? How will you *grade* it, and how will they be able to explain the whole process (the project, the purpose, the points, etc.) to their families at, say, Thanksgiving?

How It All Went

In the narratives below, we share our reflections of our experiences with these projects. Through our continued conversations, we've found that in our own ways, we've each emerged, at least in part, from our holes and have finally, albeit awkwardly, stumbled upon the nearest coffee shop, so to speak, where we now find ourselves shouting knowledge amidst the clashing din of chaos, while also challenging and always listening.

This, as we see it, is the essence of reflection. And it is precisely and singularly through sustained and critical reflection that either of us can ever hope to make meaning from the imperfections of 2020, the lessons that stemmed from them, and the blemishes that continue to inform our practice.

Nate's experience was ultimately hindered either by his students' inability or refusal to engage with memes as anything other than funny pictures or inside jokes. They learned the structural elements of memes, but when it came to analyzing or decrypting them beyond the initial, superficial level, his students never quite mastered the critical civic literacy he hoped to

achieve. They could *make* memes, sure, but they couldn't read them. They babbled, but never

spoke.

Jeff's students, by contrast, very much demonstrated a mastery of memes' linguistic

conventions. As college students preparing for careers as English teachers, their literacy

proficiencies were on full display in their projects.

When charged with teaching *their* students to engage critically with memes, however--to

cultivate a multimodal, civic literacy/fluency by way of reading and studying memes-as-

language-as-culture, their projects fell short. Just as Nate's students favored meme creation over

meme decryption, Jeff's preservice teachers privileged having their future students simply make

memes, as opposed to teaching them how to engage fully with, in, and through a new language.

These future teachers were fluent in memes themselves, but their projects merely encouraged

more babbling, never seeking to develop past infancy.

Nate's Experience

As a digital native, I am surrounded by technology. As a teacher, though, I was always

haunted by my students' inability to deconstruct a traditional text while also relishing in memes.

This was a slippery slope. How can they love engaging with one form of text but be so woefully

unprepared to engage with another? Not that it's their fault, of course--but how can I help them

develop literacy skills that transcend medium and mode?

Initially I looked at memes' close cousin, the political cartoon, as my basis to combine

my students' love of digital metaphors with the need to develop as critical readers. I already used

political cartoons in my teaching and thought it was an easy synaptic hop from one form to

another.

It wasn't.

There was an initial level of distrust in memes that my students displayed through puzzled looks, laughs, and blatant dismissal of the assignment. I wanted to know more about how to break that barrier. I wanted my students to trust that any form of writing that is used frequently is a form to be understood. Just because memes are popular, that doesn't mean we can ignore their potential for legitimate civil discourse.

Students learned to deconstruct memes to their base parts by applying concepts such as panels, gutters, captions, speech balloons, reversal, exaggeration, and parody to memes and cartoons/comics that I provided. They were largely proficient in identifying the structure of these visual metaphors but many struggled greatly when explaining the abstract connection operating within memes or creating the visual and written metaphors on their own.

This confusion seemed to arise from the lack of engagement with memes in their daily life, which isn't to say that these kids didn't enjoy reading memes, but when it came to critically examining them for meaning and function, for the most part, they seemed to lack this skill. Beyond this issue though students were keen on the creation of memes for topics they cared about. There were some students that genuinely took this as an opportunity to express their thoughts, but most of the memes that were created further propelled a narrative of humor that seem to oversimplify and devalue both serious topics and the world around them. The memes continued to serve only as insular texts full of inside jokes and passivity. And even though a large portion of the lesson focused on students' abilities to create/find meaning in memes, their ultimate inability to do so at the end rendered the entire pursuit futile from that start. Their pleasure aside, I just don't know if they learned anything. At least not anything significant enough for them to apply in new and more challenging contexts.

Ultimately, the goal for students is to understand that a racist joke is a racist joke whether it is told by your salty grandfather or an edgy Nazi recruiter behind an LED keyboard. The difference lies in the consumption: most of us chuckle uncomfortably with grandpa and laugh without thinking twice when the domestic terrorist uses a .jpeg because it is just a meme, a joke, a punchline. With further engagement in these spaces of conscious and subconscious dialogue, we can only hope to begin civic discourse. At least, that is the hope.

Nate's Experience

It's an odd thing when a lesson ends up being a total success and a terrible failure at the same time. My students all found great memes. They did. That was the easy part. Their memes were topical, on-point, poignant, powerful, political, and everything else I asked them to be. And without exception, my students all seemed to really enjoy this part of the process.

They also rocked their analyses. Maybe because they were the ones who picked the memes, but their engagement with their material was profound and refreshing—definitely congruent to what I was hoping we'd achieve with this task. Seriously, the analyses were all just awesome.

Likewise, when thinking like teachers—like *artists,* as we like to say in our classes— these student-teacher-citizens each did a magnificent job explaining their rationale for their memes. And again, I think this makes sense; they were all excited to share how they would incorporate the thing that they were all excited about. The joy was cyclical and contagious. Their documents showcased not only their understanding of the memes, but also, and more to our point, the logistics of how and when and why and where, etc., they would use them. And I was glad to see this! After all, this step is important. It's one thing to excel at thinking like students; it's another thing to think like teachers. So far, so good.   Things started to unravel when it

came to the assessment portion of their projects. Even though they all worked independently, every one of my students designed a summative assessment that, in some way, asked their hypothetical students to *create* a meme of their own based on the material they covered in class. Now, in itself, this is certainly not a bad idea. It's actually pretty common, at least in my experience. Makes total sense, right? Production logically extends from consumption. The same holds true for all kinds of language acquisition. We absorb before we make. We enjoy looking at memes, they're popular and easily shareable, so let's make some of our own! Again, this all tracks, as my students would say.

What I started to notice, though, was that these assessments—*making* memes—didn't quite align with my students' stated learning objectives as presented in their rationales. Like, at all. Each of their units claimed to have elements of analysis and interpretation as their primary learning objectives, but nothing about the way they articulated the expectations of their summative, meme-creation assignments seemed to reflect those goals. My students said they wanted to teach one thing but ended up assigning another; really without any way, other than aesthetics, to measure if they were successful. The evaluation criteria just had nothing to do with the goals of the project.

What made things more complicated was the fact that none of the skills necessary for meme creation were covered in the lessons leading up to the assessment. In other words, none of the awesome things that my students planned to teach in relation to their chosen meme would in any way help their students succeed on their final projects—they just became assignments untethered from instruction, learning objectives, or evaluation criteria of any sort. Just fun things to do. The memes their students would ultimately make would end up being simply those; things they made, without any reason, instruction, or measure of learning.

As I dove further into their rationales, it became clearer that there was just this massive gap between what my students said they wanted to teach (the objectives), how they planned to teach it (the lesson), and how they'd know if they were successful (the assessments). Their kids would definitely be doing some cool things and having some fun conversations about politics and social justice and citizenship and stuff—but in terms of cultivating their critical civic *literacies* by way of *studying* memes *as* texts, each of these lessons, despite their potential for other types of enlightenment, just seemed to miss the mark.

As We Leave Our Hole

It seems so obvious to us now, but Nate's assignment really exemplified the type of project that Jeff hoped his students would create for their lessons. The kind of critical thinking and civic literacy that Nate hoped to cultivate in his students mirrored the pedagogical considerations that Jeff longed to see in his. The difference, of course, is that Nate had the luxury of experience on his side; he *knew* the struggles of *real* teaching. He had *real* students with *real* needs and *real* objectives to address and assess. He could use student performance to inform his instruction, and he could harness the tensions and imperfections of his world to create lessons that served a variety of cultural and intellectual purposes. Nate's students just had a methods class, a pandemic, and some hypothetical kids to consider when they did their projects for his class.

Still, despite the difference between Nate's real-world experiences and Jeff's students' inherently artificial lesson creation, both projects ultimately highlight the continued need for English educators at all levels to emphasize the literacy demands of multimodal consumption. Because memes *do* have power, if only because not everybody gets them. By teaching students to decrypt memes in order to understand their linguistic, aesthetic, and sociopolitical contexts,

we simultaneously demystify the memes themselves while also democratizing access to them. This was and continues to be Nate's goal.

And by preparing future English teachers to help their future students develop multimodal, critical, civic literacies, we are ensuring that democratic citizenship, at least in some capacity, remains an integral part of English Language Arts instruction at the secondary levels. This was and continues to be Jeff's goal.

And while, yes, we recognize that meme creation—in language terms—should be valued with the same intensity as language production is to a learner of a new language, it's important to remember that any language production must exist alongside a healthy and sustained system of language consumptions. In other words, simply having kids make fun memes, while cool and quite possibly engaging, doesn't necessarily lead to those same students being able to critically decrypt the memes-as culture-as-language created and spoken by others. But if there's one thing this experience has taught us, it's that before any teacher endeavors to teach their students how to do this stuff, they need to learn first to do it for themselves. The Nate's of the world need the Jeff's.

If there's another thing we've learned, it's that the reverse is also true. As we put our experiences beside one another, similarities began to dawn. We hope it's left us wiser. We think it has.

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APPENDIX: Examples of memes used by Jeff's and Nate's students

Figure 1

Enel Face

Figure 2

So Anyway I Started Blasing

Cop: Walks into home at 2:30 A.M. to check on homeowner
Homeowner: sleeping on the couch
Cop:

So anyway I started blasting.
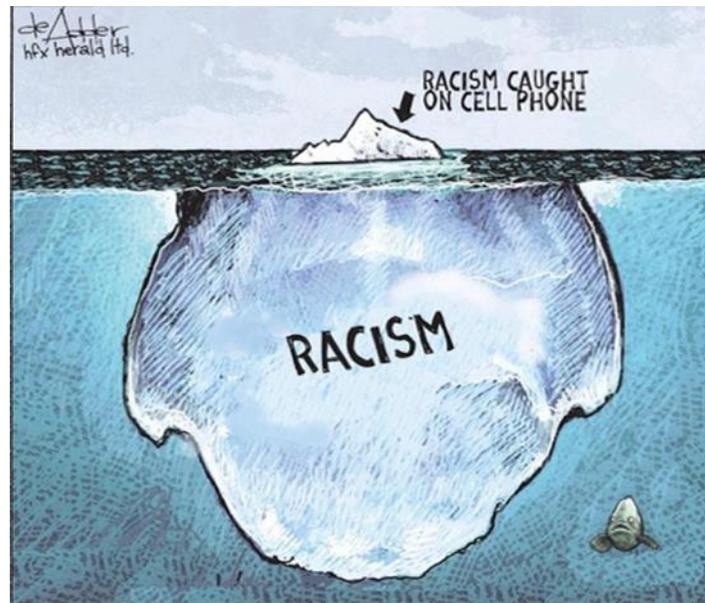
Figure 3

Ight Imma Head Out

Figure 4

Morland Political Cartoon

Figure 5

Racism Caught on Cell Phone

Figure 6
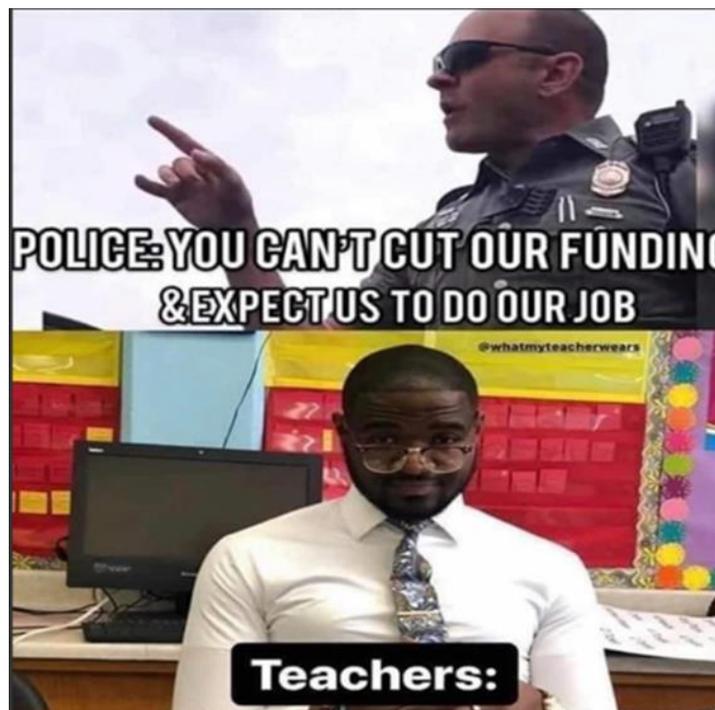
The Pride Lands: Before and after Scar's Reign

Figure 7

The Scroll of Truth

Figure 8

Urban Mosaic Center for Social Justice Meme

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