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A Critical Case Study of Teacher Education Student Created Memes

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Abstract

From Facebook to Twitter, social media has introduced the world to memes. Memes are an innovative way to express an opinion or show true feelings without feeling pressured to answer in a certain way. The methodology related to using internet memes has been around for almost 20 years (Downes, S., 1999; Heylighen, F., 1996; Knobel, M., & Lankshear, C., 2007), but no one has yet combined it with the field of education research. Colleges of Education are already reaching out to students via Twitter and Instagram, so using memes to gather information from students is a logical next step. This article demonstrates how this has been done to improve teacher education programs.

Introduction

The state of public education in the United States has been a growing concern since *A Nation at Risk* (1983) was published. Since then, research has been conducted on students, teachers, and even the layout of classrooms. In over 30 years of research, and the application of multiple programs, the state of public education is still a concern.

The research has tended to focus on students, teachers, and the interaction between these two groups. Teacher education programs have not escaped scrutiny, and new educator preparation programs have been proposed and implemented at some institutions. Rarely, however, has the research analyzed the perspectives of the pre-service teachers in the educator preparation programs.

This article examines the perspective of pre-service teachers at a southern regional university. This study was guided by the research question:

How do southern pre-service teachers view the field of education?

To explore this research question, the use of memes was employed to gather responses from pre-service teachers. From Facebook to Twitter, social media has introduced the world to memes. In the past, memes were relegated to street art and were seen as part of a subculture. Today, everyone has access to making and viewing memes. Memes are an innovative way to express an opinion or show true feelings without feeling pressured to answer in a certain way. Using memes to gather qualitative data is an innovative and creative way to showcase the participants' perspectives. The methodology related to using internet memes has been around for almost 20 years (Downes, S., 1999; Heylighen, F., 1996; Knobel, M., & Lankshear, C., 2007), but no one has combined this with the field of education research.

Over the last 25 years, technology has become an organic part of everyday life that should be utilized in education research. The next 25 years will be an exciting time to be a researcher making use of this growth in technology. Colleges of Education are already reaching out to students via Twitter and Instagram, so using memes to gather information from students is a logical next step. This article demonstrates how this has been done to improve teacher education programs and how this methodology will change and grow in the future.

Research Design

The research design for this study is a critical case study. As such, this critical case study will be based on *A Critical Case Study of Selected U.S. History Textbooks from a Tribal Critical Race Theory Perspective* (Padgett, 2015). In that case study, the questions of who, why, how, and where are addressed. According to Janesick (2004) these are critical questions to answer before conducting a case study. This critical case study analyzed teacher education students and their perception of the teaching field. To analyze the qualitative content, this study relied on Rubin & Rubin (2005) to break the content analysis into five steps. While their research is on interviewing techniques, the basic principles are equally applicable to a critical case study. These five steps, as identified by Rubin & Rubin (2005) and illustrated in Table 1, capture our approach:

Table 1: Rubin & Rubin Steps Toward Data Analysis

Step	Action	Purpose
1	Recognize	Find the concepts, themes, events, and topical markers in the interviews.
2	Examine	Clarify what is meant by specific concepts and themes and synthesize different events in order to put together my understanding of the overall narrative. This leads to elaboration.
3	Code	Figure out a brief label to designate each concept/ theme and mark the text where they are found. This allows for the easy retrieval and examination of the data units.
4	Sort	Group all of the data units with the same label together. Then, look for how the concept was seen overall and examine for nuances.
5	Synthesize	Put the concepts and themes together and show how they answer my research questions and produce broader implications.

(Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 206-208).

Critical Case Study

Who

According to Janesick (2004), the first question to answer is, who? The population for this study was comprised of students wishing to enter the teacher education program in the spring semester. This population consisted of male and female, traditional and nontraditional, and secondary and elementary education major students. The broad cross-section of students was selected because the course they were taking at the time was a required course and allowed for a comprehensive sampling of potential teacher education students.

This allowed us to gather data regarding how pre-service teachers wishing to enter the Teacher Education Program viewed their selected career field. As students from a regionally significant university known for its teacher education program, this population can serve as a representation of this region's pre-service teachers.

Why

Case studies are usually selected "because they are highly effective, not effective, representative, typical, or of special interest" (Neale, Thapa, Boyce, 2006). The first quality of an exemplary critical case is that it is of significance to the researcher (Janesick, 2004). As both researchers are educators, a critical case study of pre-service teachers' perceptions of the teaching field is personally significant. Both researchers also identify as being from the south, so it is also significant to teachers and scholars in that it reflects the southern region's perceptions; a viewpoint that is often overlooked in educational research.

As teacher education programs work to professionalize the teaching field, the perceptions of the general public have to be taken into account as recruitment efforts, curriculums, and instructional strategies are being planned. To do this effectively, it is important to take into consideration the perceptions of those most effected – the students in teacher education programs. Collecting data from this population will provide insight into the needed data.

How

Janesick (2004) and Mukhongo (2010) describe the importance of conducting research with a clear set of questions to guide the research. Janesick (2004) states the questions should be open ended with answers that are able to be interpreted. The research questions developed by the research team allowed us to ask those open-ended questions as the critical case study was conducted.

Where

This study was conducted in Lauderdale County, Alabama, the geographic location of this study. Conducting the study in Lauderdale County, Alabama aided in the collection of data and allowed us easier access to southern pre-service teachers. As part of the south, regardless of which definition is used, conducting the research in and with southerners provided the research with an authentic voice.

Analysis

In this study we made use of Rubin & Rubin's (2005) five steps to analyze the data. The first step was to recognize, so we looked at each meme and identified the central message. Once the themes were identified, we moved to the second step; examine. To do this, we had to clarify what is meant by specific concepts and themes and identify key overarching themes. In this step we used triangulation to examine the memes. The first and second reviewer examined the memes and then came together to examine the memes jointly. After analyzing all the memes, we agreed upon five categories, including outliers. This allowed us to move on to step three; coding. The results of our coding are found in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Coding and Synthesis of Memes

Category	Number of Memes
The Passionate Teacher	17
The Blaming Teacher	18
The Lazy Teacher	14

The Struggling Teacher	34
Outliers	23

After coding all of the memes, we conducted step four; sorting. Each meme was analyzed for its content and placed in one of the five categories. The results of this step can also be seen above in Table 2. After completing the first four steps, step five allowed us to synthesize the results by putting the concepts and themes together to show how they answered our research question. The results of our synthesis are explored below.

Synthesis

The passionate teacher is made up of 17 memes that bring a positive image to teachers. These teachers are open to new possibilities, excited about learning and teaching students, and want their students to succeed beyond the classroom. They truly care about their students and believe that they are role models for them. The passionate teacher loves the "ah ha" moment. When a student who is struggling with their work and all of a sudden it just clicks, he or she understands and has an "ah ha" moment. That moment is something that passionate teachers cherish and it makes their job important.

The blaming teacher is comprised of 18 memes that showcase how teachers blame others instead of evaluating themselves as teachers. Some of the trends we saw included blaming the student for being disengaged, blaming the student for not following directions/listening, and blaming the student for an easy way out.

The lazy teacher is made up of 14 memes and is our smallest category. We noticed that there are many memes where the teacher is waiting for the holidays. They are excited that school is out and are not looking forward to going back to see their students. This category also shows that the teacher is showing up to work, but is not actually teaching.

The struggling teacher is our largest category, comprised of 34 memes. Classroom management is a big trend in this category. The memes showcase issues about discipline problems. The struggling teacher is unmotivated by the end of the semester. The educator feels there is not enough time due to a number of factors including snow days, grading, grading, and more grading. They feel like they are being pulled in too many directions. Although the struggling teacher doesn't push the blame on the students, he or she still feels student engagement is a problem. One meme showed a teacher holding up money as if to bribe the students to pay attention. The teacher feels overwhelmed because he or she gets no support, has parent issues, and feels that common core is a struggle.

Conclusion

Every educator has his or her own perspective of education. Culture plays a vital role in how every student learns and how they should be taught. The role of a teacher education program is to prepare pre-service teachers for their careers. Without knowing how southern pre-service teachers view the field of education, how can professors and universities know what areas to focus on?

This case study shows that there are three negative categories and only one positive. This is discouraging to find, and we would like to see all the negative connotations eliminated in the future. Teachers should view themselves as the passionate teacher and strive to become that. There were only a handful of memes from the passionate teacher category.

The largest category is that of the struggling teacher. As we can see, pre-service teachers value themselves as underappreciated and feel they will have little to no support. The teacher education program at the regional university where this study was conducted is currently restructuring their program to include more authentic methods of teaching and assessment. By rallying community support to to encourage more involvement with public school activities, we hope to deter the negative aspects that pre-service teachers see.

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