Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)
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What is CHAT?

In a very general sense, CHAT represents the combination of three bodies of theory, that is, three ways to think about the world—cultural theory, historical theory, and activity theory. Each of these theories, of course, have oodles of scholars and research associated with them across a variety of disciplines. What’s more, scholars within and across many disciplines have debates over the proper work of these theories. So in a general sense we might consider the combination of these theories a bit unwieldy, a bit big to do anything with.

But in our program, we draw on specific theorists (see Appendix 1) and articulations of their theories for our purposes of teaching writing as genre studies. And importantly, we imagine these three theoretical approaches to thinking about the world in a specific formation that can be useful (and even quite practical!) in thinking about the production and life of texts. That is, while these theories can be used independently (or as a collection) in all sorts of scholarly and pedagogical projects, in the Writing Program we use pieces of them in particular ways to help us (and our students) think about writing.

Cutting to the chase, then, drawing on scholars of rhetoric and writing (who draw on scholars of culture, history, and activity), we define CHAT as an attitude and approach to studying texts that acknowledges them as complex and situated in specific histories, cultures, and activities that can never be divorced from one another.

Why would we want to use CHAT?

In a really basic way, we want to use CHAT to help us study texts and writing in ways that we do not think about when we use other approaches. Using CHAT to think about texts means that we pay attention not just to their features and not just to the process(es) an individual writer might go through to write/produce a text but to all of the ways that a text participates in culture based on a history of activities, norms, and technologies. While CHAT does not replace other approaches to writing and producing texts, we believe that it does invite us to ask particular questions that we would otherwise not be able to (or be motivated to) when we rely on other approaches (See Figure 1).

We believe that the questions made possible by CHAT allow us and our students to better understand the complicated work involved in creating and understanding texts, and we suggest that this understanding offers our students a more nuanced approach to be successful in the myriad and numerous genres they will encountered throughout their lives of writing.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Approach to Writing</th>
<th>Basic Tenets of Theory</th>
<th>Questions the Theory Makes Possible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Current Traditional Theory      | Language has one-to-one correspondence with reality  
                                 | Language constrained by rules of correctness  
                                 | Rules-based approach to text  
                                 | Emphasis on product  
                                 | - What errors are present in a text?  
                                 | - What is the correct form of an essay?  
                                 | - What is the right way to write, in general? |
| Expressivist Theory             | Language as a tool of expression  
                                 | Self-expression and authenticity more important than correctness  
                                 | - How does writing help a writer come to know herself?  
                                 | - How does a text reflect a writer’s identity? |
| Process Theory                  | Writing is a process that include steps  
                                 | Revision is important to that process  
                                 | The process is more important than the product  
                                 | - What steps does a writer go through to produce a text?  
                                 | - How does the process a writer goes through help make better product? |
| Social Epistemic Theory         | Language and the mind are inseparable—people need language to think  
                                 | Writing is political—reflects cultural values and ideologies  
                                 | Texts are never produced or read in isolation—they produced in “discourse communities”  
                                 | - How does the cultural context of a writer invite specific texts?  
                                 | - How does ideology inflect our understanding of correctness?  
                                 | - How has power to articulate the “rules” of texts?  
                                 | - How do race, class, gender, and other social categories inflect the value of texts? |
| Cultural Historic Activity Theory | **Texts are complex**  
                                 | **Texts are produced at specific socio-cultural moments**  
                                 | **Texts are produced based on the activities, technologies, and processes available to writers in specific socio-cultural moments**  
                                 | **The histories, cultures, and activities that sponsor and maintain a text can never be divorced from one another**  
                                 | - Why does a text take the form that it does?  
                                 | - What makes a text appropriate or inappropriate in a specific context?  
                                 | - Why do particular texts have the conventions they do?  
                                 | - What activities, social formations, and arrangements of power preceded the emergence of a text?  
                                 | - What activities, social formations, and arrangements of power are involved in the production of a text?  
                                 | - What activities, social formations, and arrangements of power are involved in the maintenance of a text? |
What Does This Mean for Your Teaching?

Let’s start with what it doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean that either you or your students are now responsible for the bodies of scholarship associated with each of these theories individually (we do, of course, encourage you to read up on CHAT—see Appendix 1 for references). It doesn’t mean that you or your students should be able to recite the definitions of terms associated with CHAT (we do, of course, want you to be familiar with them and we think they are helpful in understanding CHAT—see Appendix 2). It doesn’t mean that you are getting rid of the other approaches that you use to teach writing: studying the formal features of a text (its organization and style, its tone and syntax, its visible arrangement and media), discussing processes and activities that individual writers go through to produce texts, and discussing and accounting for how texts are produced in cultures with ideological norms and commonplaces, for example, are all still important to teaching writing.

What it does mean, then, is that we would like you and your students to consider where texts come from, what practices surround them, why they take the forms they do, and how their conventions are produced and maintained because of the histories they emerge from which include specific cultural arrangements and activities. While the writing program draws on a number of terms that we believe will help you and your students do this work, it is important to remember that the goal is to use CHAT in order to study writing. We believe that when students learn how to study writing, they will have a better chance to be successful in their writing in the future (both inside and outside the academy) because they will know how to ask tough questions about what they are producing. Using CHAT students can engage both individual texts as well as the situated-ness of texts: how texts are always situated in specific histories, cultures, and activities that can never be divorced from one another.

So What Is the CHAT Map Thing I Keep Hearing About?

Because using Cultural Historical Activity Theory involves thinking through the complexity of texts, we have found that it is useful for students to create visual representations of the history, cultural influences, and activities that converge in a specific genre, which we have been calling CHAT maps. You see, sometimes it can get quite complicated to try and write about the histories, cultures, and activities that sponsor and maintain a genre, so we ask students to create visuals that let them get a handle on the relationships between those histories, cultures, and activities. Important to the idea of the map, then, is not that students get it right but that they have the opportunity to work through some relationships between ideas that are complicated. Rather than think about this in terms of creating a CHAT map, then, it might be helpful to think of students mapping relationships, to think about mapping as a verb.

Now Let’s Get Specific...

In the following pages we offer some specific activities (including mapping) to help you begin to think about incorporating CHAT into your teaching of writing, which can, of course, take any number of forms. And while we encourage you to take a look at some of the supplementary materials we have directed you to toward, we believe that your success with CHAT will center on your ability to direct your students’ attention beyond specific texts to those texts’ construction and maintenance in histories, cultures, and activities.
Mapping
Because the idea of a CHAT map might be most familiar to you (even if it is not yet clear what that is), let’s start there. As noted earlier, using mapping to represent the complexity of texts can take a number of forms. Below are a couple of activities that you might consider (using or adapting based on your goals):

Create A Visual Representation of the Life of a Text:
For this assignment you are asking students to consider a broad view of as much of the history, cultural, and activities that go into a text as possible. Because this is such a big undertaking, you might find it helpful to introduce your students to some of the categories Paul Prior et al. use to talk about CHAT—Production, Representation, Distribution, Reception, Socialization, Activity, Ecology. Many of the teachers who ask students to map a text end up with maps that look like the one in Figure 2, with the text in the middle and each of the categories around the outside describing how a text is produced and mediated in complex ways.

- **Representation:** How do people think about and plan this text? What ideologies, institutions, and frameworks influence how people represent material in a text?
- **Production:** What were the means through which this text was produced? What people, places, and technologies shape the production of this text?
- **Ecology:** What are the physical and biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of the text? How does the environment impact the production and distribution of a text?
- **Distribution:** What were the means through which this text was produced and distributed?
- **Reception:** How has this text been taken up? What are the constraints on reception? What are some of the reactions and responses to the text?
- **Socialization:** How do people and institutions interact as they produce, distribute, and use texts? How are these interactions related to the social and cultural norms of particular institutions?
- **Activity:** What are the actual practices and actions that accompany the creation of the text? When do these involve conflict or indifference?

Thinking about representing a text in this way gives students guidance through ways of thinking about writing that may be quite new to them, but it also limits the ways the text can be represented to these specific categories. And because answers to these questions must all fit on one map, students will have to be quite brief in their descriptions, limited by space. Other—perhaps complementary—mapping activities, then, might ask students to focus in more specifically on either one of these categories in much more detail (see Figure 3) or to map the connections between some of these categories (see Figure 4).
Map the activities that lead to the creation of a text considering how you can best represent their differences, their relations to each other, and their progression in time.

In this map, the different circles represent drafts of a text that are produced by two people, while the triangles represent emails & texts between them. The rectangles represent formal meetings held by the people working on the text. Each of these symbols could be annotated in terms of how they work together, why they are arranged the way they are, and how they contribute to the next draft and final project.

In this map, the rectangles represent the activities involved in the production of a text while the circles represent social and cultural norms for participating in these activities. Color Coding would allow students to show patterns across activities—how certain drafts invite certain types of communicative actions and interactions.

Figure 3

Figure 4
Notes on Visual Representations of Texts

Importantly, there is no standard or prescribed model for representing the life, histories, activities, or cultures associated with CHAT. Different approaches to representation can allow you to focus on the long history of a text or its trajectory (or both); the interactions and activities that surround the text at a particular moment in its production, circulation, or reception; or the interactions and activities that tend to recur multiple times; the values and norms that contribute to the life of a genre; or some combination. The following prompts might help you encourage your students to use visuals to understand the complexity of texts through CHAT:

- Think of all of the examples of (a particular set of texts/genres) that you can. Now create a visual that shows how those examples converge and diverge based on particular conventions that they demonstrate.
- Create a family tree for (a particular text/genre). Use the “family tree” metaphor to show which texts preceded the one you are studying (its “ancestors”) as well as which follow it (“its progeny”).
- Draw the “life” of (a particular text). Include its “birth” and its “death” as well as major life events. After you have represented the “life” of the text in some detail (paying attention to major developments and milestones), make sure to represent the necessary requirements that precipitated that life and what seems to follow its death.

As perhaps is becoming clear, you (as well as your students) have innumerable options for how to proceed with visual representations. But CHAT can also motivate lesson plans and activities not centered on visuals.

Discussion Questions

Like visual representations motivated by CHAT, discussion questions motivated by CHAT can—but do not have to—center on the formal vocabulary associated with it. A CHAT-based discussion does not have the goal of teaching vocabulary but of thinking about the complexity involved in the construction and maintenance of texts. Moreover, and like the visual representations, a CHAT-sponsored discussion can include many of the ideas and concepts associated with CHAT or just focus on one. Again, the goal is studying texts. Consider, for example, the following line of questions:

- What are some of the conventions associated with genre x?
- Why do you think that genre x has these particular conventions?
- Who are some of the intended audiences for this genre?
- Why might these audiences appreciate these conventions?
- Are all of the conventions of this genre about the audience?
- What else might motivate these conventions?
- Who is involved in the production of genre x?
- What values do the groups involved in the production have?
- What effects do you think those values have on the production of genre x?
- What technologies are involved in the production of genre x?
- What impact do those technologies have on the conventions associated with genre x?
- How is genre x distributed?
- What technologies are involved in the distribution of genre x?
- What impact do those technologies have on the conventions associated with genre x?

It might be helpful to use a particular metaphor to help students think through visual representations. Of course, specific metaphors provide specific allowances for representation: a “family tree” emphasizes relations; a “life” highlights changes; a “map” offers positions and directions; to name a few.

Notice that any of these questions could easily lead to a next/basic question or begin a much more complex discussion in its own right.

You can use discussion questions for breadth or depth depending on what you are trying to help your students understand: to see the "big picture" or "long view" of a text or to work through some of its details.
Writing Activities

In addition to using discussions or visuals to trace out the complexities of texts, you might also find it useful to ask your students to take some time to write in response to CHAT motivated prompts. Consider, for example, some of these questions that might push students to think through the cultures, histories, and activities that sponsor and constrain a text:

Write for 10 minutes about...
- who was probably involved in creating genre x.
- what research someone would need to do to create genre x.
- what technology someone would have to have access to create genre x.
- where you think there might have been disagreements about what to include/exclude from genre x.
- what other forms you think genre x could take and still be effective.
- what would have to change in order for genre x to take the form of genre y.
- who think genre x is intended for.
- who else you think sees genre x besides it’s intended audience.
- wow you would go about replicating the design of genre x.
- who you might ask for help if you had to create a text similar to genre x.

Like the discussion questions, these writing questions can be isolated or layered. You could ask students to use them to start projects, transitions between them, or complicate their thinking about a genre in the middle of a project. Using CHAT motivated activities and assignments, then, can really complement and enrich the work that you are already doing in a genre based class rather than function radically separately.

Group Activities

Group activities are a particularly good way to teach students to study texts using CHAT because they can enlist each other to bring multiple perspectives to a text or genre.

- Assign individual members of groups to act as different stakeholders or different potential recipients of the texts, for example, to allow them to conceptualize how complex reception is.

- Assign different group members (or different groups if the whole class works together) to research different historical moments in the life of a text or genre to understand how they shift and change in response to culture and technology.

- Assign group members to use different media to produce texts to call into relief for the group how connected technology and representation are.

The potential for productive complication and triangulation within groups make group work not just a pedagogical possibility but a real strength for teaching genre studies with CHAT.
Now What: Tips on Getting Started

You might be starting to feel overwhelmed by all of this—and to be fair, CHAT has the potential to really complicate not only our students understanding of writing and texts but our own lesson plans, assignment sheets, and the instructions we offer our students. So here’s some tips to help you incorporate CHAT in ways that support you, rather than take the rug out from under your pedagogical feel:

1. **Add in Small Doses**
   
   Rather than trying to isolate CHAT into a single project or activity where students have to learn all new terminology, try to include just one element to your project that pushes students to think about the history or activities or culture that surrounds a text.

   So, **for example**, at the end of a project early in the semester, you could have a discussion about where the genres they wrote in might travel: Where would it be made public if it were to be? Who would see it? How would those people react? What could those people do with it that preserve its purpose? What could they do with it that disrupt its purpose? While these questions get to issues of reception, socialization, and trajectory, they do so in ways that support the project you just completed. As you start another project you could ask students to map out the genres that they came before the one they are writing in or the ones that see fairly close to it in conventions, Etc.

2. **Use Questions and Activities, not Terminology, to Incorporate CHAT**

   While the terminology can be very helpful in organizing how we study and understand texts, students are often caught up in learning definitions of our terms (they have had years of reinforcement for this behavior). It might be helpful, then, to ask questions that are motivated by CHAT before you attach those questions to particular terms. It will also be important that your students learn to ask questions of texts in ways that motivate them to study the histories that sponsor them and activities and cultures that surround and produce them.

   So, **for example**, a student might get tripped up with the question “what is the ecology of this text?” They might better be able to respond to: What products and materials go into the making of a text? Where do those materials come from? What limits are there on the availability of those materials? Who has access to those materials? How much do they cost? What are the effects on the economy when those materials are scarce? What impacts does using those materials have on the environment? Etc.

3. **Link CHAT Activities Back to Learning Goals**

   When you incorporate CHAT-motivated questions, activities, and assignments into your lesson planning or course plan, make sure you include time to help students understand what they are learning and why. This will likely be the first class where students study writing rather than just practice writing. As you articulate the differences between studying writing—so that they can do so in other situations—and just practicing writing (which they have been doing for years), CHAT-motivated work will begin to seem essential.
Appendix 1: Bibliography for Further Reading


Wardle, Elizabeth. “‘Mutt Genres’ and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write the Genres of the University?” *College Composition and Communication* 60.4 (2009): 765-89. Print.


Appendix 2: Important Terms and Definitions in CHAT

**Activity** – all of the actual practices that people engage in as they create a text, which can be motivated by cooperation as well as conflict or indifference (or, most often, a complex combination).

**Culture** – all of the elements of social life that bind individuals together in particular formations

**Distribution** – who a text is given to, for what purposes, using what kinds of distribution tools.

**Ecology** – the physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing, which necessarily shape and interact with textual productions.

**History** – the chronological and social past

**Production** – the processes and negotiations involved in creating texts under specific conditions, using specific tools, and following certain practices; centered on negotiating intentions and activities with contexts, tools, and texts.

**Reception** – how a texts is taken up and used by others; not only shaped by contact (who will read a text) but by use (how will a text be used or repurposed).

**Representation** – the way people who produce a text conceptualize, think about, talk about, and plan it as well as all the activities and materials that help to shape how people do this.

**Socialization** – the interactions among people and institutions as they produce, distribute, and use texts. This interaction includes how people engage in texts based on social and cultural beliefs, commonplaces, and patterns of use.

**Technology** – all the different kinds of tools that humans interact with in the production of texts.

**Trajectory** – the ways that texts move, i.e. how a text might move through a process of production or how texts move through institutions and spaces and in relationships to different people.

While these terms can be enormously helpful in giving a shape or purpose to the ways we think about and study text, they can also interfere with our study when we use them too literally—as if answering questions about these terms in isolation will ever give us the whole, complex picture of how texts are created, received, and used.

Rather than use these terms as a vocabulary list, then, you might think of them as the seeds of activities, assignments, and projects in your classes that help students really study texts.