Mapping the Literate World with CHAT
What’s up with that?

CHAT MAPS. These diagrams and drawings with circles and triangles and little icons, with arrows and squiggly lines. They can be found all over the place in the ISU writing program: on whiteboards and paper sheets, in student portfolios and in articles in the Grassroots Writing Research Journal. If you’re new to our program, you may find yourself saying, “Drawing maps in a writing class? What’s up with that?”

In answer to that question, I could explain that literate activity doesn’t just mean putting alphabetic texts into sentences on a blank, white page, but maybe we’ll just skip that lecture for right now, because hopefully you already know about multimodality. I’m also not going to give a big, long explanation of CHAT here. We’ve got a lot of resources on our CHAT learning outcome page at www.isuwriting.com, so if you need to know more about CHAT, you can go there and find out what you need.

So let’s assume you know that writing (literate activity) is more than just alphabet-on-paper, and that writing genres can include spoken word, video, images, sounds, and even objects (like statues, or give-away drink Koozies). And let’s assume that you ALSO know a little something about activity theory and the terms we use in the ISU Writing Program to describe and explore literate activity. If not, you might want to check out the exploits of Driver Dave and Gary the Snail.

But in order to talk about CHAT MAPS, let’s start with the image on the next page, which offers a reminder of our CHAT terms and the aspects of literate activity they highlight.
In CHAT MAPS, these terms are often shown raying out from a “text” that sits in the center. The terms can help us to unpack and explore all the activities and tools and people that go into making texts in the world. CHAT MAPS can also be use to explore the way texts move around in time — how they evolve and change as people use them for different purposes over time, and how genres (for example a letter to someone hand-written on a piece of paper) can change over time as people use different tools and technologies (an email, a text message, a Snapchat photo?) The rayed-out shaped is designed to show that literate activity doesn’t really happen in a line — the way writing is often represented in school (i.e.. You start, you do research, you draft, you finish, you get a grade). In our model we try to show that all kinds of activities, other texts, people and tools can impact the texts we make and use.

But it’s also important to remember that in our “pedagogical” CHAT model (PCHAT), our goal is to help writers, who are actually trying to write in the world, to think about all of these things so that they can write more successfully. It’s not just complicating things to show we’re smart and cool. It’s unpacking really complicated texts and writing activities that, even when they seem simple, have all kinds of hidden components that shape what they are, how they’re used, and even when they can be considered “good” for a particular purpose at a particular time. And since this is the reality of all texts that exist in the world, it make sense that as writers we’d do better if we could learn to map all that complexity.
The ME at the center of Pedagogical CHAT

The next image I want to share is very messy, as it should be. It illustrates how CHAT can work to help an author understand how s/he writes in the world. Notice that this map (unlike the one above) puts the writer at the center of the map — but not as a single, uniform power (THE WRITER) but as a composite — a multi-faceted construction of knowledge, memory, emotion, activity, operating within a range of different kinds of activity systems. VERY complex!

When we write in the world we don’t always consciously think of all the things on this map, although we often think about more of these things than we sometimes realize. For example, If I want to write something personal to someone I care about, I might want to think about whether to write something on paper or send them a picture from my phone. What I’ll do depends on so many things, like what I want to say, how I want the other person to feel, what tools I have to use, and even my understanding of what the “rules” of personal messages are.
So, using CHAT to understand (and actually create and use) writing in the world is pretty much what the ISU Writing Program is all about. The idea is that sometimes in order to see where writing goes and what it does and all the forces that can influence it, we can use CHAT terms for literate activity to help us see what's going on. And “mapping” — that is, drawing things out and showing directions and actions — is an activity that can help our brains make connections in different (and interesting) ways. So, we MAP!

But there is no one “right” way to make a CHAT MAP, because CHAT MAPPING is not a particular type of text (or a set genre). It's an activity. And it doesn't always have to be the seven CHAT terms lying out around a text. We make maps when we want to visualize what writing is doing and where it's going (and where it's been).

**CHAT-MAPPING a Text**

For example, CHAT concepts can be used to map a single text — following how it's made, where it goes, who uses it, and how it fits into different activities and institutions.

**WHY** would you do this activity? This kind of CHAT MAP could be used to help writers understand CHAT concepts, and to see how a text as more than just a single object that a single author creates and then gives to a reader. This can be a new idea for people who have learned to understand “writing” as something that happens only within school contexts, where that pretty much IS what a text is: You write it, you turn it in, it gets graded, you get it back. Done. When mapping a single text, the word “trajectory” is often used to describe the movement of a text in time.

This is a CHAT map of the TV show “Family Guy.”
Another example of this kind of mapping can be found in This Youtube video by the WORD bird. It doesn’t specifically use our Literate activity CHAT terms, but it does focus on how writing moves over time in the world (and backwards and forwards in time, which is kind of cool).

When we “map” texts, we sometimes try to see them as “actors” — that is, we focus on how they do different things in different settings. How they “act” differently. As texts are used by different people to do different things, using different technologies, they “make meaning” for different users differently. The drawing below maps one writer’s understanding of a text that shifts through time and use of different technologies. Notice that the picture starts at the top left with a drawing of a person with a book (which is often how we thinking of “reading.”) But then it moves to a computer, which makes meaning differently. Finally, it moves to a particular software, which will read a print text out loud to you. Up in the right corner, the text (a scholarly article) talks about how it has “agency” because it makes new meaning as people read it.
CHAT-MAPPING a genre means moving away from a single text and thinking about genres of texts (so not just a single example of a specific text, but a category of text — for example, an event poster, a cookbook, a football playbook, a Facebook page). This kind of activity is a pretty common way that teachers in our program introduce students to CHAT. The idea is to take some genre and think about how our literate activity CHAT terms can be used to understand what that text does in the world. Doing this kind of activity can help us to see how categories of texts can move around in the world in different ways, depending on how people make and use them. It can also be specifically useful for real writing situations, when writers need to understand a genre they want to produce. In the image below, SpongeBob Squarepants (a T.V. show) is mapped. SpongeBob and Patrick are helping.
Here is another example of a mapping activity where a genre is explored. In this case, the map unpacks “genre” of letters, which is really not a specific kind of text, but instead represents a very broad writing concept. We write things we think of as “letters” in lots of different situations using all different kinds of tools. These “meta-genres” can be confusing, because people sometimes treat them as if they are simple kinds of texts, when really they can include so many different kinds of texts — specific to situation and purpose and other stuff. As you can see below, letters move around in different setting and just keeping breaking down into more and more specific “kinds” of letter. This image shows where the concept of “letter” can move, and how it changes as it moves into different situations and purposes (like person, professional, educational).
Mapping a specific kind literate activity is can be particularly useful for actual writers writing in the world in new situations. When we move into new kinds of writing situations, it can be useful to try to more fully understand what's going on within the “activity system” (or sometimes multiple activity systems) where the writing is taking place. It can help us to see what we might need to know or learn in order to adapt our writing skills, or gain new skills, in order to succeed within these systems. In the example below, Tyler Kostecki use CHAT terms to think about what it would be like to write a scholarly article in his field. This image was part of his Grassroots Writing Research Journal article, Understanding Language and Culture with Cultural Historical Activity Theory. 

GWRJ 3.1
Here is another map that is designed from the perspective of an author trying to create a text in the world. In this case the map is of a football play, which a lot of people wouldn’t even think of as writing, at least not right away. But if you look at this map you can see that our literate activity terms are all relevant to the coach’s activity of creating the new play and making sure if can be executed at the next game. If you find this idea interesting, we’ve got a bunch of Grassroots Writing Research Journal articles that focus on sports and genres, including “Let the Round Begin,” an article about golf scorecards by Nicole Hassels in issue 8.2 (Spring 2018), and “The Literate Practices of a Division II Men’s Basketball Team,” by Michael Rifenburg, in issue 6.2.
Author CHAT MAPS can be also really useful when an author is struggling to figure out why his or her writing isn't going well in a new setting. It can be one way to get past writer’s block, but it can also be useful as a way to analyze a writing experience that did get finished, but didn’t go well or didn’t “feel right” to the author. The map below is hard to see, I know, but it’s a map I drew with students, trying to understand why I was having trouble writing an article. See how messy it is? And the CHAT terms aren’t in a diagram — they’re all over the place!
CHAT-MAPPING can also be particularly good for authors who are trying to (or thinking about) writing an article for the Grassroots Writing Research Journal. The author takes an idea about writing or a type of writing, and uses the CHAT terms to help figure out what aspect of the writing is most interesting to the author (or might be interesting to the reader). Another good point of this activity is that it can help a researcher to appropriately narrow a topic — because it's often more interesting to look at a specific area of how a text works, then to try to map the whole text. The map here is one that a student created in an ENG 101 class — working towards a GWRJ article about note taking. In this map, the student was thinking through not HOW to write notes, but what aspects of note taking might most interesting to focus on for GWRJ readers.