

Flossed in America: How Discourse Communities Participate in Literate Activity

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In this article, Bethany Ebert dissects and analyzes how a community built around floss picks actively participates in literate activity. Through the means of P-CHAT and multimedia texts, Ebert explores the complexity of writing in the world around them.

Have you ever taken a break from your phone to look around at the sidewalk while on a walk? The next time you do, you may be surprised to find a recurring piece of trash everywhere you go: the epitome of American convenience and on-the-go hygiene, the floss pick. You could be thinking to yourself that you have never encountered such litter, but would you believe me if I said there was a whole community that actively documents each floss pick they find?

The origin of the floss pick community is fuzzy; however, my understanding of it began with my Uncle Dan. The six-foot-three friendly giant travels the world as a pilot and dabbles in culinary arts on the side. His wife, Auntie Leigh, is a gifted and artistic individual. The two of them appreciate art in a way I haven't seen before. They were the perfect storm for the creation of this **discourse community**. What started as a coincidence turned into

Discourse Communities

In her discussion of “sociocultural activities” that different types of groups participate in, Julie Hengst says, “Cultures and communities organize interactions about a wide variety of highly recognizable and easily named activities . . . [which can have] long histories, broadly understood goals, and recognizable social roles and patterns of participation.”



Figure 1: Floss found in Crystal Lake, IL
by Dan Ebert (@TossedFloss).

a gallery of stories depicting what would otherwise be deemed meaningless trash. The ISU Writing Program defines a discourse community as “a grouping of people who share certain language using norms and practices.” My aunt and uncle had noticed the trend of floss picks on the ground and began sharing their findings with others, documenting each floss pick they found with a photo. An example of these findings can be seen in Figure 1, as well as in the other images I’ve scattered, like forgotten floss picks, throughout this article. This eventually led to the creation of the Flossed in America Twitter profile, which is known on Twitter as @TossedFloss. Conveniently, the name doubles as a username for the social media profile and the name for its discourse community. Below is the origin story in my uncle’s own words via a phone interview.

Interview with Uncle Dan

Bethany: What caused you to start the Twitter account?

Uncle Dan: It started with your Auntie Leigh. She was the first one to mention to me that she was seeing floss picks everywhere. After she brought it to my attention, I started to see them a lot too. Shortly thereafter, it started coming up in conversations, like with your parents and others. “Hey, have you ever noticed . . . ?” Pretty soon we started taking and sharing pictures of them whenever we saw one. After a few weeks of that, we were sharing pictures so frequently that a Twitter account seemed like a logical way to share pictures with everyone who was already in on the joke and to see if there were others out there noticing all of the tossed floss. The hashtag “flossed in America” was a play on words based on one of your aunt’s favorite movies called *Lost in America*.

Bethany: What was your initial goal for the account?

Uncle Dan: The initial goal was just to facilitate and consolidate the ongoing inside joke between family members and a few friends.

Bethany: Does it have any deeper meaning relating to the environment?

Uncle Dan: I wish I could say with a straight face that there was some more noble cause behind the account, but in reality, it just started as a joke. If it

happens to raise any kind of environmental awareness in the people who see it, that's just a happy accident.

Bethany: What are your goals for the account in the future, or if you develop a bigger following?

Uncle Dan: Again, it'd be great if I could tell you I had any serious goals, but right now I'm just happy to make a few people laugh. If by some miracle it were to explode into a much larger following, then maybe I'd reevaluate things and decide if I would want to make it into something more meaningful. That's the beauty of a large gathering: everyone can interpret it as they want.

The Tossed Floss Community

The setting for this specific discourse community is on the social media platform Twitter. It is here where people are able to post their discoveries along with the location for the rest of the community to see. This kind of social media allows for easy reception, as well as the socialization of the practice and widespread, ongoing participation. The ISU Writing Program defines **socialization** as the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute, and use texts; in this case, the interactions involve taking photos and documenting locations and then sharing them through different social media platforms (as well as additional goals, which developed over time). Socialization is a subunit of a set of terms called **pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory**, or **P-CHAT**, which the ISU Writing Program uses to explore how writing happens in many different forms, or genres, in our everyday lives. You could be thinking to yourself that the practices of Tossed Floss cannot be considered a literate activity, but it is important to think of these small interactions in the bigger picture by using P-CHAT. With every photo taken, the context tells a story beyond just floss. Literate activity is not limited to sentences on a page, rather it expands to include anything that has to do with engaging in and sharing ideas, knowledge, and experiences. We will dive more into Tossed Floss in relation to

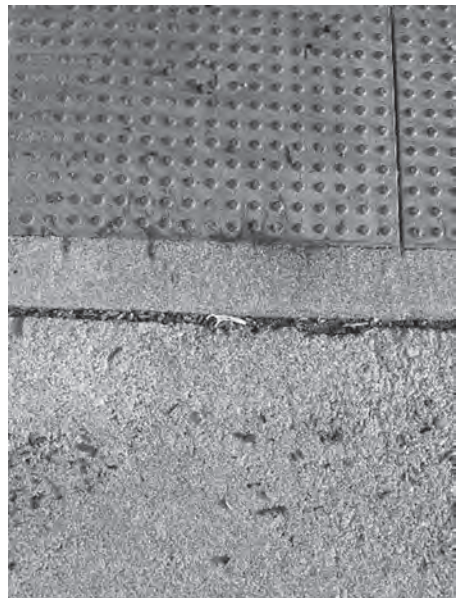


Figure 2: Floss found in Elgin, IL by Sarah Cossiboon (@sallysunshine17).



Figure 3: Floss found in Vernon Hills, IL
by Dave Ebert (@debert26).

P-CHAT later, but for now, I would like to focus on its specific discourse community and how socialization is at play for the development of the profile. The socialization and re-creation methods are the foundation for this community to thrive and grow. When people have been introduced to the idea of commonly discarded floss picks, they will be more inclined to look for them. Once they do find them, the participation process is easy enough to motivate people to post and further socialize with the movement. The key activity that marks someone joining this community would be for a person to snap a photo of the floss pick, add a location to the photo, and perhaps make further comments. This is the primary activity through which the discourse community continues to grow. This idea is not specific to the Tossed Floss

community; it can be applied to any group of people who share similar ideas and participate in common practices.

Sister Communities

The Tossed Floss discourse community has many other different “sister communities” as well. The concept of sister communities is kind of abstract. It describes a discourse community that is similar to another but with different participants or comparable values and shared ideas. For example, my uncle’s discourse community is the one I and many of my other family members are a part of, but there are other communities of people discussing floss picks on different platforms. Uncle Dan’s community is specific to Twitter, which is not to say there aren’t other sister communities on that platform too, but I have yet to discover them. As I researched my uncle’s site, I also came across other individuals sharing similar ideas and concerns about the floss picks, one of which was on Reddit. Reddit is an online website that is a collection of conversations, or forums, in which people can share ideas, news, commentary, or questions. It is a breeding ground for small discourse communities. You can join a group, or “subreddit,” of like-minded individuals to discuss topics of interest. This is what makes a discourse community. It is also a good example of **multimedia composing**. This term is defined by the ISU Writing Program as all the different media—tools, methods, and spaces—



Figure 4: Other users in the community are agreeing with the original post made about seeing an abundance of floss picks (@CanuckAussieKev).

that writers can use when they are composing. *Flossed in America* cannot only be shared via Twitter; it can also be distributed through other means of social media like Reddit and Instagram. The more multimedia composing that is done, the more the text can be distributed and influence others.

The discourse community I found on Reddit was started by a random user asking a simple question: “Why are there always dental floss picks on the ground?” (@CanuckAussieKev). This formulated a response from others who had also noticed the phenomenon (Figure 4). “I was wondering the same thing,” (@snave_) and “It’s the new ciggy butt” (@duccy_duc) were just a few of the reactions in the comments. This second comment hints at the fact that the floss pick is the new cigarette butt, yet another sister community of Tossed Floss. My Dad explained to me that before the floss pick, he had noticed, and even still does notice, cigarette butts littered everywhere. We may even be on the brink of the creation of a new discourse community: lost and forgotten masks due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. But that’s not all. Many blog posts and articles discuss their own commonly noticed trash like dog waste bags, rubber bands, and plastic water bottles. These can all be examples of sister communities under the greater discourse community of recurring and persistent trash in our world that gets noticed daily.



Figure 5: Floss found in Huntley, IL by Chris Calato (@syliach).

Floss 'n' P-CHAT

At this point, we are all thinking about how in the world finding dental picks has anything to do with literate activity. As I said before, P-CHAT can help us more deeply understand how elements in the world around us relate back to writing. By using P-CHAT, we can dissect the many moving parts of the Flossed in America community and understand how it actively participates in literary elements. To start, we need to distinguish the key terms in P-CHAT: production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology. Each aspect analyzes the elements of textual production and how people interact with different kinds of media. Tossed Floss uses images, social media, and short personalized descriptions to create a unique type of literate activity that tells a story and relates back to its discourse community.

Production

Production refers to how a text is produced and carried out (ISU Writing Program). It is important to focus on the tools with which the product is composed. In this case, I will be specifically focusing on the Flossed in America Twitter page and the requirements needed to run the account and participate. It begins with a discarded floss pick. Without this crucial element, the discourse community and its platform would not be possible. Other essential tools would be a phone and access to the Internet. These are needed to run the account as well as follow the page on Twitter. It is also necessary to acquire a camera. This allows for the capturing of photos of the floss picks found. This is key for participation because it is how the documentation process begins. By looking at Tossed Floss through the lens of production, we can see how simple the process is to participate in. This is what allows the discourse community to grow so easily.

Representation

Representation refers to how people conceptualize and plan out the process of creating and writing, or in this case posting, a text (ISU Writing Program). This element of P-CHAT allows us to understand the person producing the material better because we can gain insight into why they did what they did. For example, my Uncle Dan created this page with the purpose to inspire people to post and contribute to the Flossed in America page. His specific choice to use the social media platform Twitter makes it easy for his audience to engage, which further supports his original purpose. The participation methods used are also fairly easy, which makes people more inclined to submit their photos and tell their stories. It is also important to keep in mind that all photo submissions depend on whether someone

discovers a lost floss pick in the first place. This could affect whether or not someone is even given an opportunity to engage in the discourse community. It is key to understand the aspects of what goes into the making of a text in order to have a complete and deep understanding of the final product.

Distribution

Distribution refers to the process of texts reaching their audience (ISU Writing Program). It stresses the importance of where the product goes and how it gets there. Specifically thinking about *Flossed in America*, we know it is on the platform Twitter. This is key to understanding distribution because we know the viral nature of the content of this platform. The trending page is accessible to everyone on Twitter and allows people to follow and find new topics or accounts. Not to mention, the #TossedFloss or #FlossedinAmerica hashtags can link all posts related to the discourse community together and make them easily discoverable to the other users on Twitter. Commenting, quote tweeting, and retweeting are all mechanisms that allow people to interact with each post. Given the goal of the discourse community is to become mainstream, I think the use of Twitter was a smart move towards being discovered and for cultivating a community.

Reception

Reception involves how an audience interprets and interacts with the text (ISU Writing Program), or photos in our case. Physically, this can be seen through “likes” and comments, but it also refers to how people comprehend and perceive each photo. Although it is an abstract idea, each photo holds a story or memory behind it. Oftentimes, family members and other participants will insert their own inside jokes or personal verbiage in the caption to make each post unique to them. From my high school graduation to my sister’s move-in day at college, each has been documented in a photo that tells a story beyond floss. Not to mention the various locations that all hold some sort of meaning to that user. When people read and interpret the details within each image, they are actively engaging in reception.

Socialization

The term **socialization** stands for how people interact with each other through and with texts (ISU Writing Program). As I have said before, socialization is the foundation for the *Flossed in America* discourse community. Any growth of the community is thanks to socialization and recreation. Relating Tossed Floss back to the production lens of P-CHAT, we know the process of contributing is fairly easy. When people stumble across the Twitter page, they will be more inclined to pay attention to lost floss

and eventually contribute their own photo. Their photos provide a personal insight of their own life into the overall gallery of stories. Socialization is at play here because every post generates conversation between the other users. I personally love to poke fun at my Dad's posts and his choice of editing by leaving comments. These interactions help to create a sense of community or culture over time. Whether it be a dramatic blur or intense filter, he does his best to catch everyone's eye with his posts. He, on the other hand, likes to comment on my posts to remind me to add a location and hashtag to my tweet. The location, caption, and photo itself are all elements that are up for discussion, and Twitter makes it especially easy and convenient. This is key in any growing discourse community and especially beneficial for Uncle Dan's Twitter account. The discourse community itself was founded on the conversation of always seeing floss picks lying around, like we see in the Reddit thread.

Activity

When thinking about **activity**, this refers to the actions and behaviors that go into creating texts (ISU Writing Program). This can be seen on the Tossed Floss Twitter page as finding a floss pick, taking a photo, uploading it to Twitter, and contributing to the gallery. Although this term is simple, as it just analyzes the steps taken, it helps us to better understand the process so it can be recreated.

Ecology

Ecology, on the other hand, deals with the environmental factors that influence our writing (ISU Writing Program). Whether it be positive or negative, the environment has an effect on us in numerous ways, which can all be translated into our writing. This lens of P-CHAT specifically applies to Tossed Floss because as we know, the location of the photos can hold value to the story of the image. This comes into play with Uncle Dan, especially since he is a pilot. With every new state or country he travels to, his floss pictures reflect the specific trip he took. It is also important to note the time period in which each photo is taken. This has been especially valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since fewer people are going out, there may be a trend of fewer floss picks being found. It is also interesting to think about the flip side of that argument. Floss picks may be on the decline, but the creation of new kinds of discarded items is underway. More and more people may begin to notice masks being littered everywhere, thus creating perfect conditions for a new discourse community. Ecology impacts how the community evolves, changing the gallery of stories to make it more diverse in locations and meaning.

Signs of the Times

So, what does it mean to participate in literate activity? Traditionally, we limit ourselves to seeing writing and literature as textbooks and essays. However, with further analysis, those are only small genres of writing that make up the bigger picture. Literate activity is everywhere because stories can be found within everything. Whether it be through emojis, social media captions, podcasts, art pieces, or images, everything holds meaning. It boils down to whether we choose to observe these things from an analytical perspective or not.

The story of *Flossed in America* is one that I have actively participated in since the beginning, but it wasn't until the introduction of P-CHAT that I realized there was more to each floss pick. Each image, caption, and location provided small, intimate stories of each community member's everyday life. To understand these meanings, we dissect the process of creating each photo, or story, using P-CHAT. This discourse community is a good example of how literate activity is present in almost everything and how everyone can participate in it. So, the next time you see a floss pick on the ground, consider how you can tell its story and engage with the community it supports.

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