

The Adventures of CHATPERSON and THE ANT: Cultural-Historical Activity Theory as a Writing Pedagogy

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"All I can say is, I hope that whoever decided that CHAT should be the focus of this Writing Class is fired and then put in jail." -- Anonymous student

The purpose of the above quotation is to illustrate that we don't "do CHAT" as part of the writing curriculum at ISU because it's easy, or because it has some incredibly simple structure that will cause students to immediately become more powerful, accurate writers. We don't use CHAT because people encounter it in our curriculum and invariably say something like, "Wow, this is so great! Why did no one ever teach me this before?" (although some do). And, sadly, CHAT won't create perfect Zucchini spirals, or fix holes in your leather upholstery, either.

The motivation behind using CHAT concepts to investigate literate activity (*and by "Literate Activity" we mean all of the various things that people do, all the tools they use, all the interactions they have when they write in the world*) is that writing is **complicated!** And in spite of the many "simple" models for creating "clear and concise" writing, and the millions of textbooks and self-help books sold every year that claim they can help you to become a "good writer," the fact is that writing across time and space, in very different settings, with and for different kinds of people, (who all have different kinds of language habits and traditions), using different kinds of tools in different ways...well, that's complicated.

icoolgadgets



Note: You can buy this product online at www.peoplekitchen.com if you really do want to make zucchini spirals.



(A "Brown Bag" presentation means you get to eat lunch while someone is talking, but sometimes you have to bring your own lunch).

Let me illustrate. This text, this one you are reading right now, was begun sitting with my laptop (one that I don't have any more), in my apartment (where I don't live in any more), on my sofa (which I do still have, actually). I was working on a presentation for a brown bag discussion I was asked to participate in at the University of Illinois Center for Writing Studies. But *this* version of the text is very different from the one I created for that setting, and even that text was different than the one I thought I would create when I sat down to write it. Over a single year, this text has been in many different places and has interacted with many different people and tools. It contains multitudes.



This is where I was sitting when I started this article in 2017.



This is where I moved when I need to draw, not type.



This is where the blue sofa lives now.

Not Just a Couch or a Table, but a Different World of Writing

As I was originally working on this piece, I was struggling to explain what concepts of CHAT can do when they are linked up with writing pedagogy (the teaching of writing). But nothing was working.

So I'm sitting there, laptop in lap, and thinking, "What does it mean to me that we use a CHAT-based pedagogy in our Writing Program? How can I explain this to people in just a short talk? How do I get them thinking in different ways about writing, which I need to do, because they are already writers, and the ways they think about writing are already there, locked in place, in their brains, and that "antecedent knowledge" will make it hard for them, maybe, to make room for my ideas. [Note: One of my mentors calls these already-in-place ideas "the stories we tell ourselves about writing" — many of which aren't actually true, but more on that later].

So I am sitting. Frustrated and a little sad.

But then I had an idea, so I moved (physically) from one place to another in my apartment.

And I started to **draw pictures!** Because even though I really, *really* "can't" draw, (as you will see on the next page) I do find my own pictures funny, for some reason. Plus, the "activity" of drawing them seems to make me less frightened of sounding stupid when I write (because I can't possibly write worse than I draw, I guess).

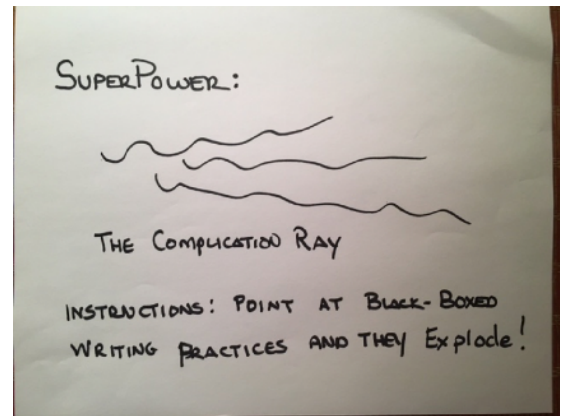
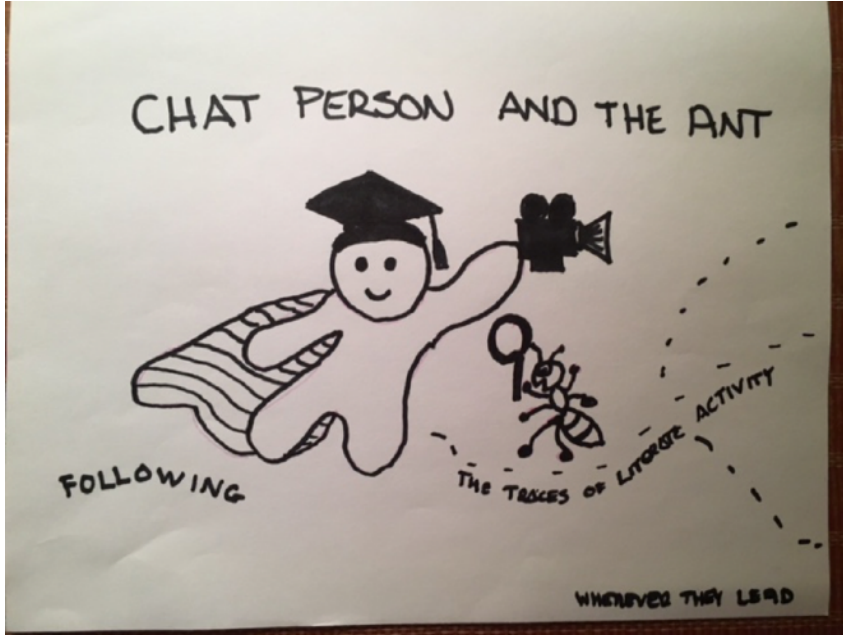
What I came up with was the idea of CHATPerson, a superhero who changes the way people think about (and do) writing in the world. CHATperson has a slogan, and superpower tools and even a sidekick.

Because, who doesn't need a superhero sometimes to save the day and make things easier?

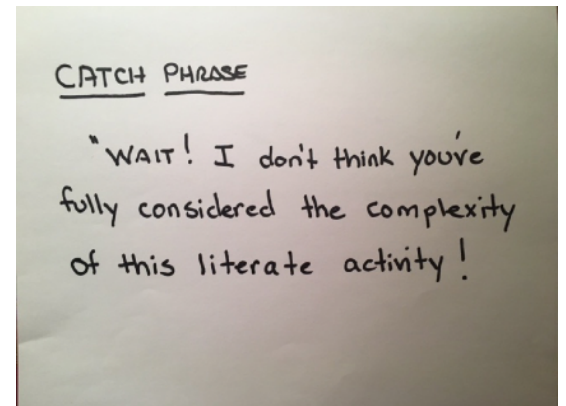
So, in a brief set of illustrations, I answer the question:

What can Cultural-Historical Activity Theory bring to the teaching of writing?

CHATperson and the ANT: Following the Traces of Literate Activity Wherever They Lead!



The "Complication Ray" un-blackboxes writing.

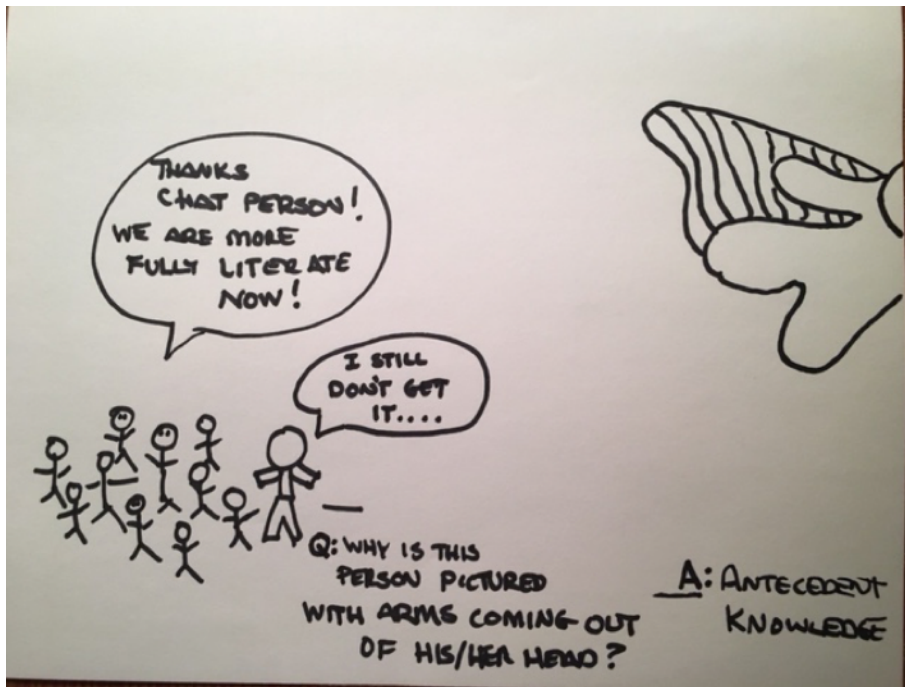


CHATperson's Catchphrase, "Wait!" I Don't think you've fully considered the complexity of this literate activity!"

Explanation: This is CHATPerson and its sidekick, "The ANT." CHATperson's mission is to help people see that literate activity is complicated, and that we shouldn't try to pretend it's not (which is what we are really doing when we try to break "good writing" down into a series of hard-and-fast rules or when we point to a single type of writing and say, "**THAT'S** what Good Writing Looks Like, Darn it!"). CHAT person has a "Complication Ray," which can be pointed at literate activities. Like a "writing x-ray," it takes everyday writing tasks and lets us see what's really going on. The ANT is an homage to Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory. He's holding a magnifying glass so he can look at activity more closely.

the mission of CHATperson and the ANT is to help us see that we can be more successful (over time) in our efforts at writing (and at teaching writing), if we work to investigate the different people, tools, situations, genres, mental perspectives and emotions that shape how, why, when and what writing gets done in the world. Once CHATperson and the ANT have been through our town, we can no longer pretend that there is "**only one way to write well**" or that "**all good writing has the same qualities.**" We also can't believe that because we've been told that we're not good writers — or that we **are** good writers — that this judgment of our skill covers all kinds of communicating in all kind of situations. CHATperson and the ANT show us the reality that learning a single way to write (and calling that "good" or "bad") isn't really very useful in the diverse settings where writing happens in the world. What we need to do, really, is to learn to look closely at the activities of writing. We need to look closely at what's happening within a single piece of writing, and also to investigate how the elements within that single piece of writing are, in fact, connected to all of the hordes of people and tools and situations that surround, influence, and categorize it. We call these kinds of activities **Writing Research**, and we use these skills of observing, identifying, and tracing connections to become better writers in the day-to-day kinds of writing we encounter and find important in our lives. We'll become "better," "stronger" writers over time, not because we learned to write in a single way, or because we followed all of the different (sometimes conflicting) advice we got from teachers and professors, but because we can really learn to SEE 🍓 what is happening when writing is going down.

And This is How it all Turns Out...



Explanation:

The people say, “Thanks CHAT PERSON! We are more fully literate now!” The blob on the right is CHATPerson with its cape, flying away, probably thinking, “My work here is done.”

But then there is one person, Somehow larger than the others (I don’t know why). This person says, “I don’t get it....”

I ask the question, “WHY doesn't this person get it?”

Note: I love this picture, especially the slightly larger person saying “I don’t get it.” I also like the Q: and A: that points to the “why” of that person’s comment. I felt like I was both making fun of the idea that a writing superhero could “fix” everyone’s writing stories, but at the same time I was explaining that our CHAT pedagogy has a word for why this person would be unaffected by the benefits of the complication ray. His/her “antecedent knowledge” about writing (a combination of specific knowledge, memories of learning and of writing, and emotions and attitudes about literate activity) is acting like a “*no new learning*” protective suit.

But really now, what is Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, and what does it have to do with teaching (and learning) writing?

This text isn’t meant to be an introduction to Activity Theory or even to our particular version of CHAT, which uses a specific set of terms to help us unpack and investigate *literate activity*; which is all the stuff that goes on when people write.

What this article is trying to do is to connect our ISU writing model of **Cultural-Historical Activity Theory** to various other models that exist and are used in the world. CHAT has a long history (more than a century, now) and it started out as theory to help explain learning and child development.

It has dealt, in its various early forms, constructed by Lev Vygostky and other scholars in early 20th century Russia, with the idea that, as humans, we learn and grow not individually (or not only individually) but also collectively, in a wide range of social groups. As we learn (and in order to learn) we use and adapt tools in all kinds of ways, and our learning (even what we *can* learn and how we learn it) is shaped by both individual and collective meaning-making, including the idea that we both *interpret* and *mediate* tools and texts and ideas and relationships. As Kristen Foot explains,

There is significance in each word in the label cultural-historical activity theory. Cultural points to the premise that humans are enculturated, and everything people do is shaped by and draws upon their cultural values and resources. The term historical is used together with cultural to indicate that since cultures are grounded in histories, and evolve over time, therefore analyses of what people do at any point in time must be viewed in light of the historical trajectories in which their actions take place. The term activity refers to what people do together, and is modified by both cultural and historical to convey its situatedness. Theory is used in this label to denote a conceptual framework for understanding and explaining human activity (Foot, 2014).

Personally, I've always felt strongly that what makes CHAT different (and useful for teaching and learning about writing) — are two key concepts:

ACTIVITY

The concept of **ACTIVITY** is particularly important to the study and teaching of writing, because we tend to see “writing” more as the texts that get produced than as the practices we engage in when we produce texts. And even when we do see activity, we tend to have a “writing story” in our heads that involves a single person who “sits and writes.” This story tends to exert so much power over us that we have a hard time, at least initially, seeing the ways that literate activity, in all situations and in every single act of writing, is never as simple as a single writer, holding a writing tool and making marks on some type of media. We tend to think all the other stuff isn't important — (i.e., “it's the **words** that matter!”). But this type of story about writing can really get in the way when we're trying to understand writing or trying to do writing (especially new kinds of writing). So it's important that CHAT says that **activity** is a key to understanding how meaning gets made, and especially how people learn to make meaning in certain kinds of ways, within and between different communities.

MEDIATION

The second critical concept is the idea of **MEDIATION** (we also can use words like *movement* and *transformation*). In its simplest form, the idea of **mediation** deals with how we don't just use tools to accomplish specific tasks, we *innovate*. We repurpose. We expand. As tools users, we live lives of constant invention, where tools, and the activities used to produce effects or products, and our understanding of and knowledge about these situations, are always in motion. This interactivity is also contingent on things like location and social networks of people and institutions. The purposes of certain tools, both culturally and practically, change over time and are changed by how (and for what purposes) people use them. Although CHAT, as a theory, did not originate with the discussion of **literate activities** specifically, we can use it to explore how mediation is taking place when we engage in meaning making through textual production (writing).

In thinking about CHAT specifically for situations (and activities) where writing is involved, the first “new” thing that a CHAT focus offers is the critical importance of investigating how the activities of writing happen, over time, with various tools, among different people and in different institutions, and also in how the *productions* (what actually gets written, shared and used) of writing are impacted by the sometimes complicated relationships between these factors.

The second new idea, which I think specifically connects to the idea of teaching and learning how to **do** writing in the world, is that it’s not just about tracing things like where texts go, how they are made, how they change over time, who uses them, etc. It’s also about making a place for the individual writer within a particular framework at a particular time. **This** writer, at **this** particular time and place, trying to learn to write in **this** way, for **these** reasons and hoping for **these** effects.

As *writing researchers* of our own lives and writing activities, we combine our abilities to investigate the complexity of literate activity with the needs and exigencies of our particular writing experiences. For example, CHAT (as a conceptual framework for investigating and working in the world) won’t allow us to make generalizations like, “clarity and brevity are the most important skills for technical writers.” Instead, CHAT would first ask us to investigate the situations within which people who might call themselves “technical writers” work and compose texts. It would ask us to investigate **why** “clarity and brevity” seem to be important skills for these individuals (if indeed they are). Then it would ask us to consider what something described as “clarity and brevity” (which is pretty vague, really) actually **looks and acts like** in some of the different situations and genres these people compose. We might ask questions such as:

- How many words?
- What kinds of punctuation or graphic organizers?
- What kinds of words?
- What kinds of sentence structures?

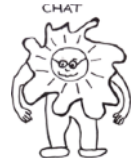
It would also ask us to consider relationships between people, genres, specific instances of textual production and environments. This is the kind of work that CHAT scholars who study writing do all the time. For example, Clay Spinuzzi, in his article, “Secret Sauce and Snake Oil: Writing Monthly Reports in a Highly Contingent Environment” (*Written Communication*, 2010), investigates what can be discovered when a researcher takes a close look at the inter-relationship between employees and their writing knowledge within a specific work environment, and the evolution of specific texts that are designed to fulfill specific goals for the company, employees and customers.

But the example of Spinuzzi’s work also serves to bring us to our next important question:

CHAT is used to study activity systems. How can it be used to learn how to write?

Why *Pedagogical* CHAT and What's with the Fried Egg Person?

Not only are there many scholars who use CHAT to study human activity and learning (Yrjö Engeström may be one of the most well-known of these scholars, currently), but there are many scholars who specifically study literate activity using CHAT concepts. Some of our favorite CHAT authors in the ISU Writing Program include Paul Prior, Kevin Roozen, David Russell, Clay Spinuzzi, and Jody Shipka . Many of these scholars



have already illustrated that we can use CHAT to study literate activity (So, not just studying people learning and doing all kinds of things, but specifically studying people learning how to and doing **writing**). However, our writing program is trying to use a CHAT-based curriculum to **teach and learn** about writing, to make it usable for writers who are just trying to do stuff with writing in the world (sometimes even stuff we don't really enjoy and wish we didn't have to do). And if you are familiar at all with our program you know that what we call "Pedagogical CHAT" is not based on the triangle model of Activity Theory that starts with Tools | Subject | Object.

Instead, we use a set of terms, based on a multimodal article by Paul Prior & company, "Remediating the Canons," that tries to explain how concepts of CHAT could be used to think about "rhetorical activity," replacing the Greco-Roman "Canons of Rhetoric" that continue to be used in writing instruction settings, and in the field of Rhetoric and Composition in general. In developing this model, which focuses specifically on people learning to compose various kind of texts, through what Paul Prior and Julie Hengst call "various semiotic means and tools" (*Exploring Semiotic Remediation as a Discourse Practice*, 2010), we're interested in some of the same kinds of things that CHAT researchers more generally are interested in. But instead of being researchers *looking at activity systems to see what writers do*, we want build models that writers can use to **become their own researchers**; that is, to become researchers of their own writing practices.

Our CHAT model for investigating literate activity gives writers terms & concepts that help them to specifically identify aspects of texts and textual activity systems they can use to help them make something (a text of some kind — which can be composed in many modes — aural, visual, alphabetic, etc.). If you think about it, it makes sense that since we're engaged in a different kind of activities (learning about and doing writing rather than studying writers engaged in activity systems), we might want to use a different kind of model, one that can focus specifically on what a writer (or writers) need to find out about in order to do the work at hand.



In this context, you can read "**semiotic**" tools as any tools used for meaning making in the world. So pencils and computers, yes, but also body language, speech (recorded and real-time), smell, visual images. For Prior and Hengst the idea of "semiotic" tools means anything a human could use in the aid of making meaning (for oneself or other humans). So, pretty much everything right?



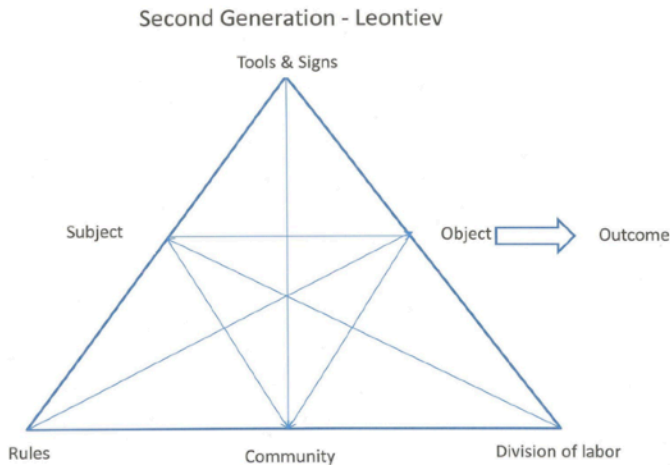
Quickly — what does this mean to you? Could it mean something else?

Pedagogical CHAT Terms:

Socialization
Representation
Distribution
Ecology
Activity
Reception
Production

How are CHAT and Pedagogical CHAT different?

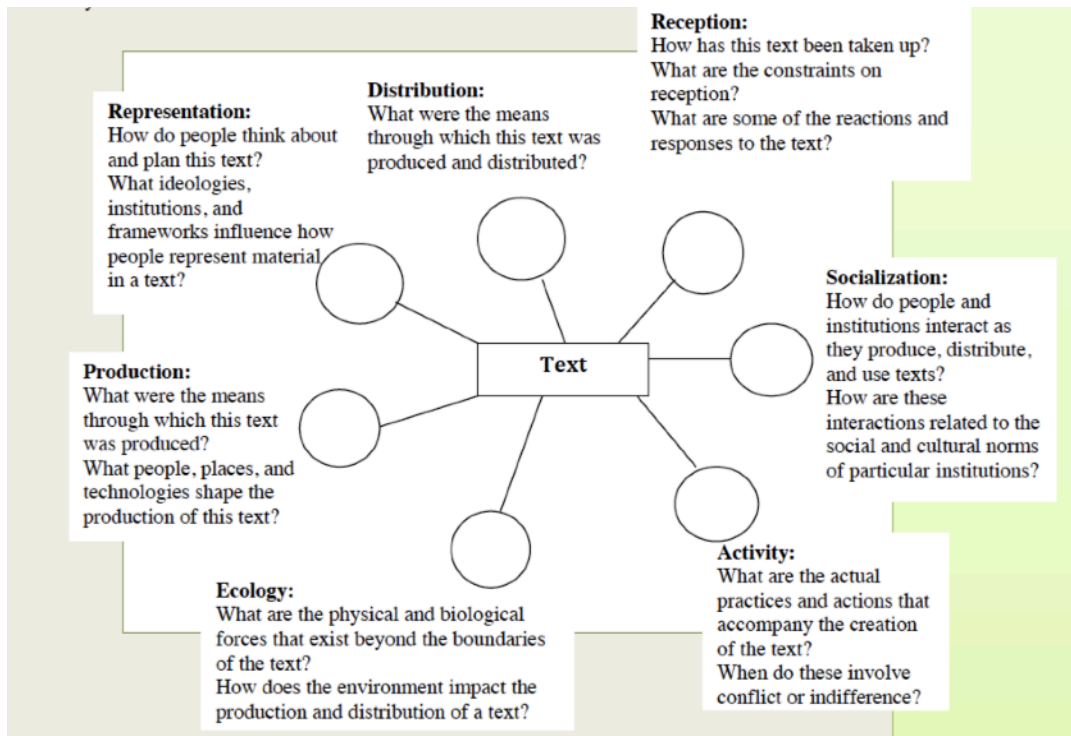
The Activity Theory Triangle



Note: I borrowed this image from the wikipedia entry on “Cultural Historical ActivityTheory.”

The model on the left is one of the variations of the Activity Theory triangle. Basically, this model tries to illustrate the idea that a person (subject) uses tools & signs (material and semiotic) to achieve something they want to do (object / outcome). Along the bottom, the words “rules,” “community,” and “Division of labor” are trying to get at the complications of how different situations, and groups of people (communities) have particular ways that things must be done (rules); and that tasks are often broken up — where different people are responsible for different parts of a task (Division of Labor). The reason this model is labeled at “2nd generation” is that the stuff along the bottom was added to the original triangle in an effort to make the model reflect some of the complexity how people act in the world.

If we compare this model to the terms that we use in the ISU writing program, you can see that our terms don't really model how an “activity system” works, so much as they are designed to allow people to see how various people, tools, institutions, genres and situations interact and impact (and are impacted by) texts are they are created and used in the world. So our terms can be used to “track” the movement and evolution of people and texts through the world.

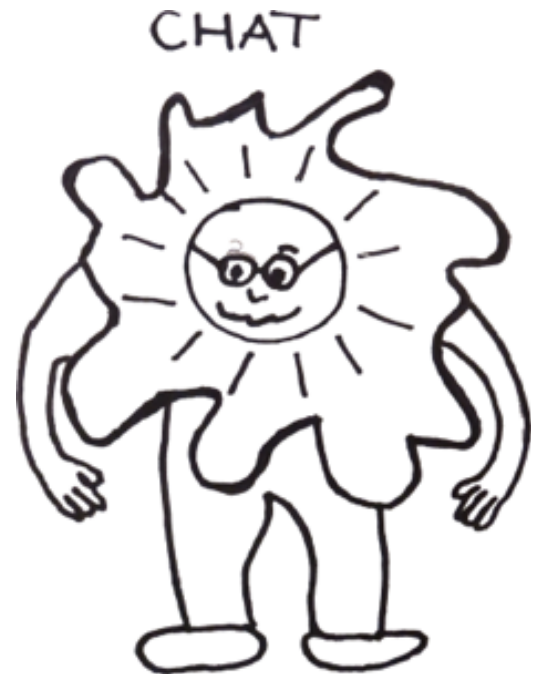


What's at the CENTER of a Pedagogical CHAT Model?

The Literate Activity model above puts a “text” at the center of the model. (Think of “text” as something semiotic that someone — or multiple people — makes — or is trying to make — that is going to go out in the world and get used by other people). It's important to note that this model doesn't put the concepts in any one order. It isn't like a “process” model where someone can follow a text through a particular set of actions in a particular order. Instead, this model moves around — it expands and contracts, zooms in to focus on a single important action or zooms out to see how “big picture” activities and situations and “ecologies” impact the evolution of a text over time. Incidentally, that's why an Icon for CHAT I once made looks like a fried egg. In my mind, the weird, irregular shape could expand and move around to allow a writer to see different things about the text as they thought and worked. It's not a TRIANGLE. Instead, it's more like a stretchy blob that can go wherever a writer needs to go. It even (and this is **really** cool) can expand backwards and forwards in time to trace the origins and travels of a text (and it's makers and users) across time and space.

So our Literate Activity model needs to be different from the CHAT triangle model. Fine. But a final goal for this text is to talk about what might be really unique about a “pedagogical” CHAT model. I see this a “PCHAT” model as a framework that focuses specifically on **both** teaching people how to research writing (literate activity), **and** teaching them strategies and ways of thinking that are practical — that can actually help them as they try to do the work of writing in the world. And as I thought about our PCHAT concepts, it occurred to me that one key to understanding our particular uses of CHAT is to look at what might be in the **center** of a model that illustrates what we're trying to do. So I asked myself (and some other people) the question:

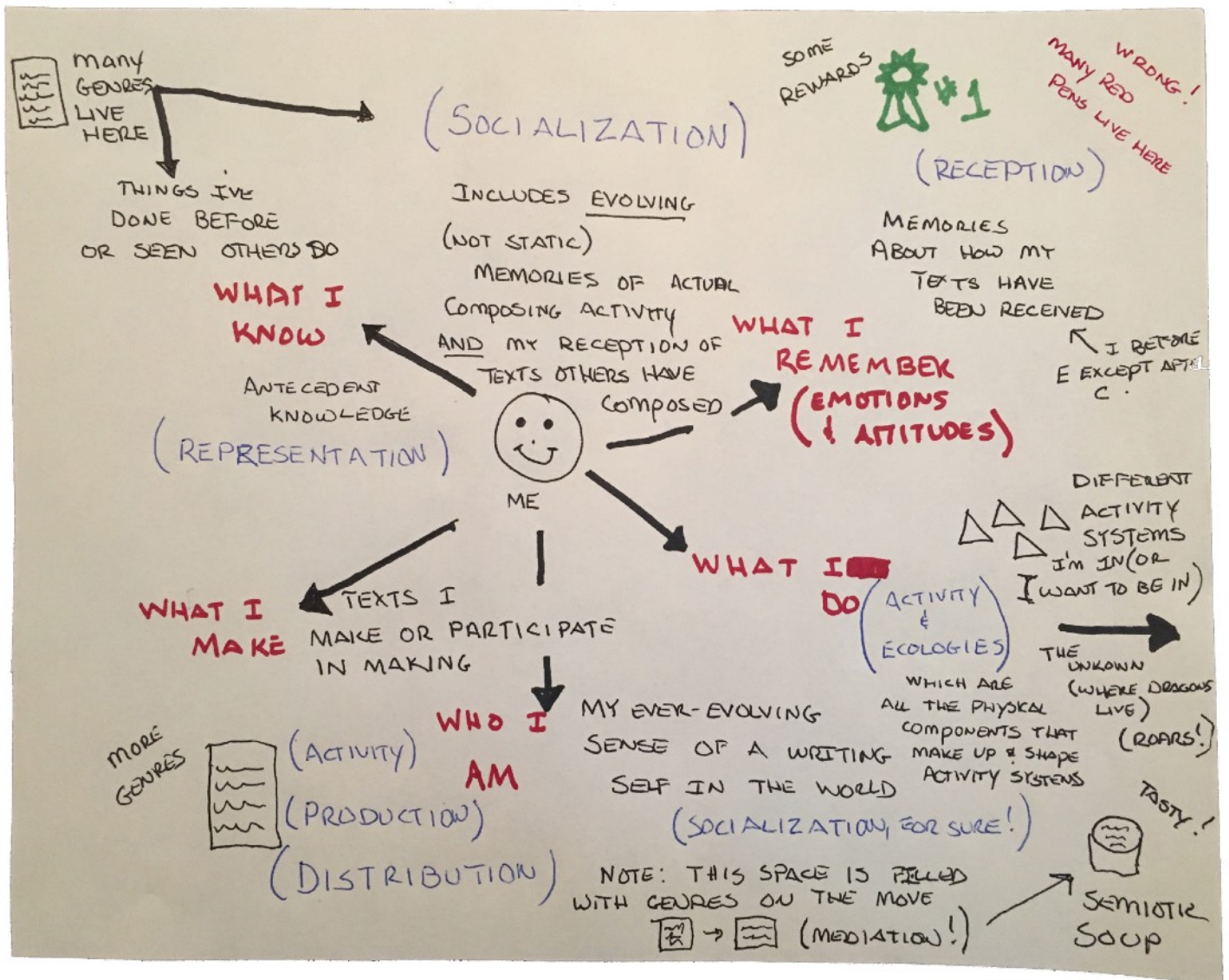
What's at the CENTER of a CHAT model (designed to be flexible, and permeable to a range of influences) that hopes to help writers do the work of writing in the world?



Hint: The answer is not a tootsie roll center.

The Writer

Yes. A Writer. A person. A person in a writing classroom who needs to learn more than just “rules for writing”, but who also needs concrete tools to understand and create writing (not just complications offered by some weird fried egg guy). So I want to offer another map. This model (very messy, like it should be) illustrates my understanding of what pedagogical CHAT is designed to help a writer observe and think about. You can see the the terms of P-CHAT are there, but they don’t have a particular order. They appear where they are needed to explain the action.



Ultimately, when we compose, we use our knowledge (either consciously or unconsciously) of the complexity within which the action is happening. But it’s also true that when we write we are often mostly concerned with what we’re going to do and how we’re going to do it, **right now**. As we compose, we continuously develop a huge range of strategies for coping with the writing we want (and need) to do.

How do I Understand the ME I am when I Write?

WHAT I KNOW

I think of this as the stuff I know I know about writing. So it's memory, but it's a memory of activities. Writing I've actually done, or writing I've seen others do. In our program, we call this knowledge "antecedent knowledge." It's not always completely accessible knowledge (that is, we can't always bring it up to our conscious memory of it at will) but it often pops up in bits and pieces when we are asked to do new kinds of writing.

WHAT I REMEMBER

Obviously, this is connected to the first concept, "What I Know." But I separated out "memory" because, at least for me, **memory** helps to cover all of the emotions and attitudes about writing — things we've experienced that shape not only what we know about writing, but how we perceive it, and what we perceive as possible when we write. This concept is tied to to the concept of "Laminated Chronotopes," which Paul Prior describes as "embodied activity-in-the-world" as it is represented and embedded in semiotic artifacts (See "Remediating the Canons", by Prior et. al).

WHAT I MAKE

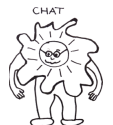
What I make refers to my awareness/memory of the actual texts I produce in the world, and the activities I engage in in order to produce them. This concept really deals with movements that take place as texts are represented, produced, distributed and received (see P-CHAT terms).

WHAT I DO

What I do is where we focus on the concept of **Activity** (so important!) It has to do with my understanding of how I (as a writer) move around in the world and participate in various activity systems. It's (obviously, again) related to what I make, but it focuses on my sense of **action** as I move around in the world, making texts with tools and people over time.

WHO I AM

Who I am includes the whole picture of me-as-a-writer-in-the-world. This concept has to do with Mikhail Bakhtin's idea that we are "always never finished." we're constantly evolving because we're constantly acting in the world with other people. We're actually made up of all of these interactions and experiences — with tools and people and institutions — and because it's always in action, it constantly changes over time. See — Fried Egg person **does** kind of make sense...



Why Not Keep it Simple?

The biggest challenge in advocating this kind of curriculum is that it refuses to be reduced to simple, rule-based structures that can be applied uniformly across writing situations, over time. However, on the up side, we can use PCHAT to make conceptual structures and *rules-for-now* to guide us as we encounter and work within particular genres in particular situations (remember the part above about the technical writers?). And we can use PCHAT to help us learn to use our knowledge and memory over time, adapting it through our examinations of what is new and different in each situation we encounter, including how we ourselves become different writers over time. In our program, we don't believe that it makes sense to "keep it simple," if doing so makes us less flexible, less adaptable writers in the world. We may moan and groan about some of the activities that a PCHAT curriculum encourages (a lot of examining what we do and what we know, when it would be **much** simpler to just "**do it and turn it in already!**") Both teachers and students (and we can all play both of these roles at different times) can (and do) sometimes find PCHAT frustrating. But even a little exposure to and experience with PCHAT concepts and thinking can pop back up as useful tools elsewhere (and *elsewhen*) in our writing lives.

Works Cited in this text:

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