

Plant Parenting as a Literate Activity

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Cultivating houseplants requires skills, practice, and a set of interrelated, often overlapping, and evolving activity systems. In this article, Cynthia Nwakudu draws on her antecedent knowledge of houseplants and P-CHAT to investigate her literate activity as a plant parent.

Reconnect: Nature and Activity Systems

Houseplants exemplify the characteristics of living things like growth and development, response to stimuli, ability to reproduce, adaptability, cellular organization, and the use of resources for energy. To see these characteristics as they happen is such a fascinating experience that it inspired my desire to cultivate houseplants. These days, I can't help but see my interest in houseplants as a practice that involves understanding, using, and creating different kinds of texts. When I buy and grow the plants that form the decor and ambience of my home, it has something to do with my past relationship with plants, my interactions with people who are connected by their shared experiences, and a series of complementary actions, routines, or ways of being. Writing requires skills and practice to produce results the same way growing houseplants needs skills and practice to produce the desired outcomes. In this article, I look at who I am as a writer through the lens of the activity of plant parenting. Writing and the writing process itself are cultivated over time through a set of interrelated, often overlapping, and evolving activity systems—and the same goes for plants.

Who am I as a writer? What counts as writing? What kind of writing do I write? Where and when do I write? What tools do I use when writing? Why do I write, and who do I write for? How does past experience and culture influence my current writing activities and practice? These are questions I never analyzed in depth until I got into the ISU Writing Program, where I gained a new awareness of my writing researcher identity through the program’s philosophy, concepts, and key terms. **Activity systems** describe actions and actors working together to achieve a purpose (ISU Writing Program). Writing and the writing process are part of complex interlocking activity systems which, by their very nature, can be difficult to untangle, making writing not only confusing but also difficult to see why it matters. Writing is more than the finished product but includes the range of activities that impact the writing situation (ISU Writing Program). The concepts of literate activity and pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory (P-CHAT) highlight ways to talk about all the factors that go into understanding who I am as a writer and make visible the everyday lived experiences; communities; rules; processes; practices; boundaries; constraints; and social, cultural, historical, and antecedent knowledges that surround and are wrapped up in the writing and activities I engage in. This construction of P-CHAT has seven components which—according to Joyce Walker, editor-in-chief of the *Grassroots* journal—“‘track’ the movement and evolution of people and texts through the world” (“The Adventures of CHATPERSON and THE ANT”). In this article, I rely on three of these components of P-CHAT to investigate plant parenting as a literate activity: socialization, activity, and production.

My Story: The Activity of Childhood

My antecedent knowledge of plants encompasses the network of activity systems, people, institutions, communities, human and nonhuman actors, and geographical and cultural factors working together to achieve my

Activity Systems

Activity systems refer to “cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal” (ISU Writing Program). Furthermore, according to the ISU Writing Program, activity “encompasses the actual practices that people engage in as they create text (writing, drawing, walking across the hall to ask someone else what they think, getting peer review, etc.).”

current goals as a plant parent. This is also where the P-CHAT concepts of socialization and activity can help me to think about cultivating houseplants as an activity and look closely at the network of my activities and social interactions in my experience growing up in Nigeria and my life now in the US. **Socialization** is a category of P-CHAT which refers to all the interactions that happen when a text is produced or used (ISU Writing Program).

Socialization asks the following questions (“Just CHATting” 76): How do people and institutions interact as they produce, distribute, and use texts? And how are these interactions related to the social and cultural norms of particular institutions? My interactions with family members, teachers, Girl Guides, friends, and horticulture experts point to socialization. The specific activities I performed cleaning artificial plants, planting different seeds, learning agricultural science as a subject in school, working on school farms, using farming tools, gathering manure, mulching, writing reports, and other activities apparent in my story represent activity systems. Let me tell you how it all began.

It started with my grandfather, Ojo, a farmer who owned large tracts of land where he grew cocoa trees. Cocoa farming was a family tradition that passed from father to son. Ojo inherited his farm from his father who had a flourishing business at the time, exporting cocoa to other countries where it was processed into chocolate (he never tasted the chocolate made from his beloved cocoa—a story for another day). Cocoa farming was arduous and my father, Gabe, was not interested in the farm. He became an attorney instead. In our home, plastic flowers decorated the coffee and dining tables, and that was it. The bouquets consisted of daisies in pastels of blue, pink, and peach. Back then, cleaning the living room and dining area was my daily chore, and by the end of the month, the petals would have gathered so much dust that they needed a good soak in warm soapy water. Artificial flowers are made from synthetic materials that become a magnet for particles, dirt, stains, and dust. Over time, these particles accumulate, settle on the flowers, and become grimy so that no amount of washing could get them clean. In the end, even though we avoided the headache of caring for natural plants, the dusty fakes became a health hazard and had to be thrown out.

It was a different story outdoors, though. It was a house in the middle of a garden. Over the fence in front of the house was a glorious blanket of green and yellow scrambling vine. They could have been Cat’s Claw creeper (*Dolichandra unguis-cati*) or Black-eyed Susan vine (*Thunbergia alata*). On the fence around the house, the showy green and fuchsia of *Bougainvillea* grew in wild abundance. We spent many evenings playing within sight of this colorful backdrop. Behind the house, we had a mini orchard of fruit trees: mango, banana, plantains, pawpaw, and guava. We pretty much let the plants do their own thing. This “garden” was my father’s only concession to the family tradition of farming.

My active involvement with gardening began in elementary school. My siblings and I had to study agricultural science as a subject that involved working on the school farm and demonstration plots. The practical aspect of

the subject also required understanding the soil, seeds, fertilizer, and farming implements; conducting experiments; and using records and reports. Overall, the subject promoted practical agricultural skills and marketed the products. It felt natural to transfer these skills to my home. The ISU Writing Program calls this **uptake**, or how I processed the information in school but also how I applied my knowledge to a different setting. The garden at home began by accident. My siblings and I became actors in this new activity system when we discovered that after washing vegetables (beans, corn, tomatoes, and peppers) and throwing the water away in the backyard, seeds sprouted. Fascinated, we became more intentional by allotting different parts of the backyard to ourselves and planting whatever we liked. In those days, gathering seeds was a delight and watching the garden grow was pure joy. Then we became competitive, planting sweet potatoes, carrots, onions, African spinach, and even yams! The skills we learned in agricultural science were useful in our gardens at home, and they worked. We plowed the soil, planted the seed, watered it, watched it break through the ground, cared for it, and saw it grow from a tender shoot to a fruit-bearing plant. No other food tastes as delicious as the food you grow yourself.

Unfortunately, I went away to college and later moved to my own home. I lost that connection to the soil, the joy of watching plants grow, the endorphins that relieved my stress and improved my mood. Then I joined the Girl Guides where I mentored a group of girls. One activity we did often was growing potted plants around the school. As I helped the girls work with the soil, learn how to grow something from scratch, and witness its transformation, I reconnected briefly with my childhood passion. However, moving to America and living in apartments made me go back to artificial plants.

Socialization

“Socialization describes the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute and use texts. When people engage with texts, they are also (consciously and unconsciously) engaged in the practice of representing and transforming different kinds of social and cultural practices” (“Just CHATting” 76).

Before I became a plant parent, I looked for resources and people to recommend plants suitable for my space. The P-CHAT term socialization comes into play here. I thought of my friend, Flora, in Texas who started with a few potted plants, mostly vegetables, and later moved on to large-scale potted fruit trees. Flora was not the right person to interact with because her hobby had become a business. I wanted someone who would have the time for my simple concerns. For that, I reached out to my daughter, Amax, who became a plant parent when she adopted a dying *Monstera deliciosa* abandoned in the lobby of her apartment building. She has since added other indoor varieties, one of which was the *Dracaena trifasciata*, commonly

known as the snake plant. Amax recommended the snake plant because it required minimum care. The attendants at the retail stores were also helpful. While I understood that they were there to help me make a purchase, they also provided useful tips to help me raise plants.

Tracing the history of my interaction with gardening and plants helps me see how I embodied and represented my literate activity as an aspect of my social identity. Kevin Roozen, in his *Grassroots* article, “Unraveling ‘Writing,’” states that

Paying attention to the histories of people’s use of particular tools invites us to view the literate activity people are involved in at present as a part of lengthier historical pathways, and thus to consider how activity is being shaped by those histories. Attending to histories also pushes us to inquire about how people and their tools have developed, how they have come to be, and to be on the lookout for the historical pathways of their emergent becoming. (103)

My interest in nurturing indoor plants has an origin and will evolve into different trajectories. To illustrate a trajectory, I started to care more about my physical and mental well-being. It is rewarding to walk through the park before sunrise, listen to the birds call out to each other, watch the ducks sit on the pond or swim toward me for food, and enjoy the light show in the sky as the sun heralds a new day. I meditate, breathe, smell, taste, and set out into the day with a clear head only to repeat the process in the evening and the next day. The activity of walking feeds the desire to bring nature into my home—an indoor garden with potted plants—and my interest in parks, zoos, arboretums, and conservatories. These recreational activities are trajectories of my interest in nature and reflect my interaction with institutions and events related to those plant-parenting activity systems. To summarize my networked connections, I came up with the map in Figure 1. This map is messy and incomplete because I’m evolving as I follow new trajectories in this literate activity.

Literate Activity

“Developed by Paul Prior (1998, p 138), the term ‘literate activity’ is meant to address all of the many ways that texts are part of people’s lived experiences in the world. It extends beyond our typical ideas about ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ to include the broad range of practices and processes we employ in the creation and use of a wide array of texts” (Roozen 96).

The Goals of the Activity Drive the Activity System

What are the benefits of cultivating houseplants and what are my goals? Drawing from the definitions of activity system and literate activity mentioned earlier, the objectives of the activity are important. Consequently,

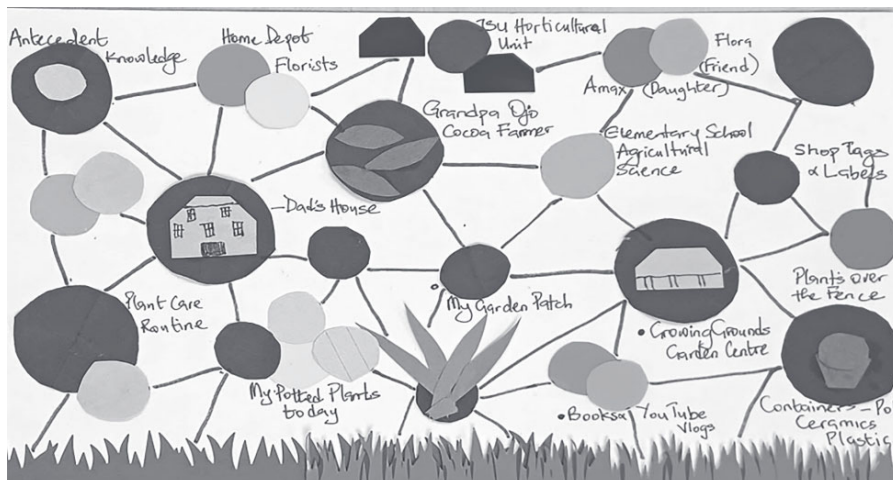


Figure 1: A map of my plant-parenting history, current activities, and networked connections.

I cultivate indoor plants to bring the wholesomeness of nature into my living space and add that aesthetic to my space. An indoor plant with fragrant blooms generates aroma, cleans the air, defines the space, strikes a mood, or sets the tone. Plants are also amazing because of the health benefits we derive from growing them, indoors or outdoors. In reading and thinking about the process of caring for houseplants, I came up with the list of benefits summarized in Table 1.

According to the list, the plant is an important actor in my activity system. The visible part is the plant’s foliage, maybe the pot it sits in, and

Table 1: The six health benefits of indoor plants.

<p>Indoor plants . . .</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Purify the quality of the air by drawing out the carbon dioxide and diffusing oxygen; 2. Offer a unique symbiotic relationship to humans; 3. Reduce stress with gardening; 4. Improve the sense of well-being by decreasing depression and anxiety; 5. Support cognitive health by lowering mental fatigue; and 6. Improve environmental wellness.

where the plant functions as decor. The roots, soil health, nutrients, moisture level, and so on are hidden in the pot. However, the work going on in the pot is crucial to what appears above the pot. According to Angela Sheets' article "Angela Rides the Bus," **activity systems** are "the people, texts, tools, and rules that work together to achieve a particular objective" (134). Activity systems work in conjunction with genres (more details on genres in a later section). My plant-parenting activity systems are shown in Figure 2.

The qualities of literate activity become even more obvious when Kevin Roozen describes it as

activity that involves people producing or using some type of text, broadly conceived. Their use of the term "literate" helps illuminate that human action involves not only words written on a screen or page, but also a wealth of other kinds of semiotic signs inscribed on a variety of other media and the processes and practices involved in making and using those signs. The term "activity" helps to foreground that people make and use texts to act in the world, not merely for the sake of creating the texts themselves. (96)

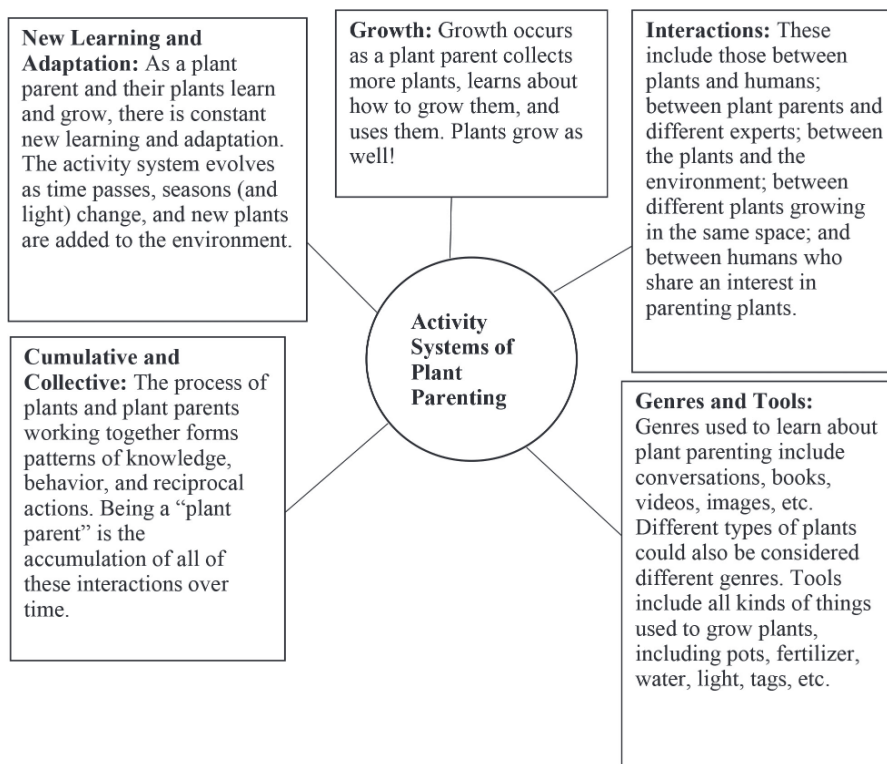


Figure 2: The activity systems of plant parenting.

Texts and genres commonly associated with growing and maintaining indoor plants function as actors within a network of activity systems. In the video “Activity Theory: Because Things Are Actors Too,” The Word Bird explains, “Actors are the people, ideas, social concepts, rules, and tools that make the activity possible.” Several human and nonhuman factors influence cultivating indoor plants by working through a network of cultural tools to participate in the activity, ideas, texts, and genres of a system. As an aspect of P-CHAT, **activity** “is concerned with the actual activities that people engage in when they are creating the text” (Kostecki 84). In other words, what do I do daily, weekly, or monthly in relation to my snake plants, and what tools do I use? Some of the things I do around my home with my plants begin on the day I bring the plant home from the retail store where I chose and purchased the plant. I need the right spot in my home for my small plants. To determine the design that goes with my plant, I look at my containers, the furniture around it, and the rest of the room. The initial place of choice is my kitchen countertop, far away from the stove but close enough to be seen in the living room of my small apartment. In the future, I might want bigger varieties to complement the decor of different spaces like the bedroom, bathroom, and living room depending on my budget.

Next, I consider the container. My plant came in its black plastic grow pot, so I bought white decorative containers or planters into which I placed the original grow pot to stage my plant. The decorative vessel has a natural drain for excess water built into its design to protect the surface where I stage the plant. The container of the plant, this physical object, is an integral part of the activity system of raising houseplants. The pot makes the activity of growing plants indoors or outdoors possible. There are different kinds of pots for different purposes and aesthetics. The most common kind of pot would be the plastic planter and the bags growers use in nurseries. These cannot work indoors. As a result, there are whole activity systems of pots, designs, and manufacturers who use a range of materials like ceramic, clay, plastic, and a host of others for plant parents to choose from.

The regular care of my plants is also part of my activity system. Plants thrive in an environment that has the right temperature and amount of light, which could range from direct to low. Light for plants could come from both natural and artificial sources. Snake plants typically survive in any kind of light. However, the care information tag recommends bright light for snake plants to flourish, so I move the plants around when they need bright light or other display options. Watering my plants is routine every two weeks or more because snake plants need the soil to dry completely before watering. When I do water, I use a spouted can and room temperature water on the soil, not the leaves. The biggest culprits of an unhealthy snake plant are overwatering

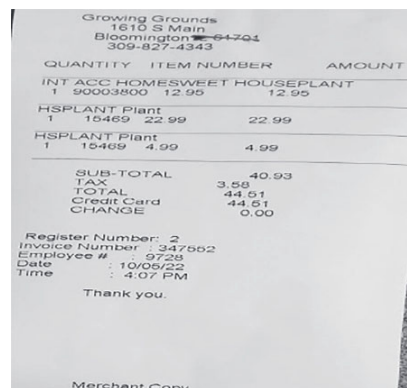
and bugs. I almost lost one of my plants to overwatering. After this incident, I made a habit of carefully watching the plants for signs of bugs, wilting, or rot. I cut off the dead leaves and keep them away from excessive heat during the winter months.

The custom of gifting flowers and plants found in many cultures across the world today is a huge industry. I give and receive flowers on Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, and other major holidays. Giving away my plants as gifts is always a satisfying activity. It is an easy and affordable way to share friendship, trust, and community. Whenever I give one plant away, I find another to take its place.

From Houseplant to Home Plant

The first snake plants I bought were from Growing Grounds and Home Depot in Bloomington, Illinois (see Figures 3 and 4). I noticed the plants right away in their various stages of growth. The green leaves, shaped like vertical swords, grow in a dense clump. This variation, almost a succulent like the aloe vera, was grayish green with the distinct darker green horizontal stripes often seen on snakes. The second variety had the same green horizontal pattern but with a striking golden-yellow edge. Of course, the bigger the plant the more expensive they are. Since I was not ready to invest more money on something that was still in its experimental stage, I chose two smaller snake plants with different cultivars. The cashier told me to water them once every two weeks and they'd be fine. I drove home with my plants, feeling like the clueless parent of two newly adopted children.

I learn about my “babies” through their labels and tags and approached this information-gathering process as genre research. If the definition of genre, according to Angela Sheets' article, includes a “typified response to a recurring situation,” texts that make a “particular action possible (or impossible),” and a “‘stable-for-now’ category” (135), then plant tags is a genre, a type of text that makes the activity of plant care possible. For example, the tags showed



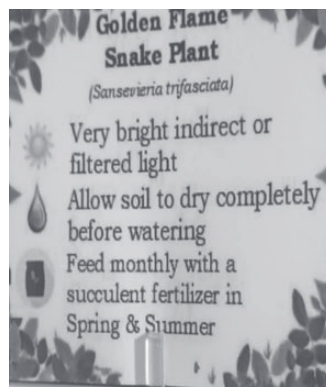
Figures 3 & 4: A price tag from Home Depot and a receipt from Growing Grounds.

Production

“Production deals with the means through which a text is produced. This includes both tools (say, using a computer to produce a text vs. using a cell phone to produce a text) and practices (for example, the physical practices for using a computer vs. using a cell phone have some similarities, but also many differences)” (ISU Writing Program).

that the plants I purchased have both botanical and common names: *Sansevieria trifasciata* “Futura Robusta” and *Sansevieria trifasciata* “Black Gold.” (Before 2017, snake plants used to be *Sansevieria trifasciata*, but they are now scientifically classified as *Dracaena trifasciata*; I will use both names in this article.) The first word in the botanical name represents the genus, the second represents the species. Production (another important component of P-CHAT) provides a framework with which to analyze the text on tags. **Production** looks at the work that goes into creating a text including tools, materials, and format (Kostecki 80). Plant tags are printed on acrylic, plastic, or laminated cards designed to stick out of the pot. They are also waterproof. These labels include photographs of the cultivar or variety of the plant. I purchased two types of snake plants: Laurentii with yellow lines that form margins on the leaves and the Silver Queen with pale green and silver swordlike leaves. Snake plants have over seventy other varieties.

An effective plant tag displays information about what the plant looks like when it blooms or whether it is annual, perennial, or biennial (Figures 5, 6, and 7). Knowing the plant’s sun requirement is key to its survival. My snake plants don’t require too much sun to do well. This also applies to the type of soil the plant needs. If the soil is too rich, the plant might not do well. The tags also inform the buyer of the temperature that works best for the plant, how to care for the plant, and how often it should be watered. Nursery growers, retailers, and plant parents know that durable, extra high




Figures 5, 6, & 7: Each waterproof tag displays information about how to care for the plant.

resolution, and color contrast plant labels are essential tools. Other tags include grower's details, the price, and the barcode of the product. Tag production for growers and retail stores is a niche horticulture industry that recognizes that a well-designed label sells the plant. The tags in the images here give the customer the information necessary to identify and care for the plant. I never throw my plant tags away.

Tags and labels are not the only texts related to houseplants. I created an infographic to help me understand how to care for my snake plants with information I gathered from various sources online (Figure 8). It was necessary to do this because most tags are mass-produced and contain general information. I wanted a text that would also provide a record of the growth of the plants over time and how often I watered my plants with dates. This text is solely for my use. This infographic is attached to a table to record the plants' growth rates and when the plants are watered.

How to Care for Your Snake Plant



Common Name	Snake plant, viper's bowstring hemp
Botanical Name	<i>Dracaena trifasciata</i> (formerly <i>Sansevieria trifasciata</i>)
Family	Asparagaceae
Plant Type	Evergreen, perennial
Sun Exposure	Shade to partial sun
Soil Type	Sandy, well-drained
Native Area	West Africa (tropical)
Toxicity	Toxic to cats and dogs

Image: "sansevieria" by marissa is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#). "Sansevieria trifasciata Prain cv Hahnii" by Ahmad Fuad Morad is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#).

Figure 8: An infographic I created to care for my plant.



Figure 9: Scan this QR code for the website created by Growing Grounds Garden Center.

Other texts relevant to houseplants are books, websites, and *YouTube* videos. When I visited Growing Grounds to pick up my first plants, the attendant recommended a book by Baylor Chapman, *Home Sweet Houseplant: A Room-by-Room Guide to Plant Decor*. Her book provided the information I needed about watering, lighting, and placement. The book influences the activity system of nurturing my houseplants and helps me achieve my objectives. Websites about houseplants abound on the Internet. I explored Growing Grounds' website (Figure 9) and their gallery of plants, which also functions as a catalog of the plants they sell. They also have pages for the services they provide, accessories, garden tools, and events. As someone who is into this literate activity and intends to be there for a while, it is reassuring to know I have access to this information.

YouTube features a large community of vloggers (video bloggers) with many subscribers who use the information shared there to learn how to do many things with plants. These vloggers are successful landscape artists, top gardeners, florists, conservationists, and horticulture professionals connected to established organizations. I follow Amanda Switzer of Planterina and the Swedish Plantguys. Their content is highly visual, conversational, and practical. Not only do they provide useful information to the community they cater to, but they also advertise and sell their merchandise. Through these resources, I can follow the trajectories of my literate activity to wherever I want to go.

Action not Words

Writing is more than words, texts, or stories. Writing is the actions, the actors, the things embodied and represented (or not). Investigating the activity systems related to cultivating my snake plants created a new way for me to see the specific actions and decisions related to the psychological and social practices I engage with in collaboration with other people and tools to achieve my goals of reconnecting with nature and attaining mental wellness, physical health, and ambience at home. The activities we participate in, the things we make, the people we meet, the places we go, and the tools we use are all part of who we are becoming and what writing looks like in the world. The world is framed by action, not just words.

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