Learning from My Mistakes

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Using the antecedent knowledge of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* that she gained from a previous submission, Anya Gregg uses genre studies and CHAT to explore why and how her original submission didn't quite fit the conventions of the journal.

Another group text. Something about a bonfire. I reach to delete the messages when my mother's voice rings out behind me. "Y'know if you keep staying home from these things, no one will want to invite you anymore." I roll my eyes as I reply, "Good. I don't like parties." I make my way up to my room and never answer the invitation. These situations seem to happen quite a bit in the Gregg household. Most people would brush it off as just not being in the mood to party, or being anti-social. It very well could be, but psychology has discovered an alternate solution. This solution is the introvert-extrovert scale (Bushak).

Introvert? Extrovert? What are those? What do they have to do with writing, anyway? Before I get to that, you should know that I did write a different article that was not published. This is the (sort of) revision of that article. In my first article, you would have known that the terms introvert and extrovert are two very important topics having to do with social psychology. That is not the article you are reading; however, I will use that article to help you learn about writing. In my 8th grade English language arts class we were assigned articles to write. These weren't just any articles, though. These had a chance of being published in a college journal, the *Grassroots Writing Research*

Journal. Of course, we had to involve our curriculum (which was based around CHAT) in our articles somehow. As a normal research guideline, I picked a topic I was interested in. Most of the paper went something like this: an introvert is an inward drawn person who enjoys time by themselves more than social events, and extroverts are the opposite … dopamine … brain … survey … blah, blah, blah. In short, that article was not published in this journal. I made a very obvious, common mistake that a ton of my peers make. Using CHAT (or even common sense), I could have picked up the conventions of this journal; *Grassroots* Writing *Research Journal*, not *Grassroots* Science *Journal*. Thus, most of the articles are about *writing*. I just came up with a topic I was interested in researching and continued on my merry way with that idea. I realize that many students begin this way, and many instructors might be interested in expanding upon and teaching about this idea. The purpose of this article is to explore the types of writing I have encountered and relate how this **antecedent knowledge** affected my general ability to write the original article in the first place. Hopefully, it will take you through the problems I encountered and explain them in quite some depth.

Fantastic Terms and How to Use Them

Now you might be slamming on your mental breaks if this is the first experience you've had with some of these terms. "What's CHAT? What are conventions? How can it help me?" I hear you scream. I will kindly summarize the ways I use and understand **CHAT** (**cultural-historical activity theory**) in some long, weird sentences and give you a few examples. CHAT is weird at first, and as I use it you may not get the terms straight off the bat, but I'll show you how to apply them, too.

The terms I learned to use were **ecology**, **reception**, **distribution**, **production**, **activity**, **representation**, and **socialization**. They originated from an article called "Re-situating and Re-mediating the Canons: A Cultural-Historical Remapping of Rhetorical Activity" by Paul Prior and many other authors. That article is as long and difficult to understand as the title is, and you can find that article in *Kairos*, an online journal of rhetoric, technology, and pedagogy. You probably won't be asked to read that article, though. My class didn't read it, but it is the article that introduced the terms my classmates and I used to understand our writing. I'll break down just the terms I used for you. There are a few more out there, of course, but I'm going to focus mainly on distribution, production, and representation.

Representation deals with all of the planning, activities and materials you use to get your writing done. This is generally done before and while

the text is produced, as it sometimes has to deal with the planning and goals we make in our head. An example of representation is if you were going to make a t-shirt for a family reunion, you would have to find out where you're going, who's family it is, what company you will be using to print them, etc. Like I said before, I did have an outline sort of forced on me for my previous article, such as deadlines for completion of certain sections like the abstract, but I did have some questions before I just started writing, which was part of the representation of my original article. An example of one of my questions was, how do I write an abstract? I researched this using other articles and my teacher.

Distribution is exactly what you might suspect; it's how your text gets distributed, to whom, and for what specific purposes (Walker 75). Along with distribution, I like to throw in the terms representation and trajectory. The term reception deals with how other people end up thinking about using texts that get produced. Trajectory on the other hand deals with any unintended audiences and how your text got into their hands. Trajectory is a really stubborn term, as you can't predict it well. Trajectory isn't exactly a CHAT term, though, and there's a bit of debate going on about it. The distribution and trajectory of my original article worked out in the best way possible. The editor and assistant editor at the *Grassroots Journal* saw my article, read it, and gave me a letter of edits they would like for me to make. My teacher also gave me a high grade on the paper, too, so she must have seen it either through the digital or physical version, then graded it and given it to the editors as the *Grassroots Journal*. I didn't actually know whether or not I would get a response from the journal, as I was not the only one who wanted to publish my article.

Production is how a writer goes about writing the text. Specifically, production includes the materials used and genres you select. I personally struggle with production, admittedly. One second I will be producing my text by typing about why CHAT is useful and the next I will be looking up giraffe turtlenecks on google. When I was writing my original article, I did get a little distracted, but it all turned out ok. I had a plan sort of forced on me so that I wouldn't be intimidated by the 2000 words I was supposed to write, but I didn't (really) use that plan much. I used a slew of different materials, including two computers and two wifi connections, google docs, a printer, google forms, snacks, and a class roster. I also tend to write with unreliable materials (production) and with no plan (representation).

The next term, activity, is weird, abstract, and complicated, but many people overthink it. Activity is the action of writing the text. For example, if you are texting someone, then you have a goal of communicating a message. The ways you communicate that message are activities. Lifting your fingers

and pushing the screen to create text, adding emojis if desired, and hitting send are all examples of activities within texting. However, if you did not know how to work a keyboard, then you would have a problem with activity. I, of course, knew how to use a keyboard and knew what I was doing, so activity wasn't much of a challenge in that respect. However, activity includes ALL the actions that can surround the production of a text, so writers can experience challenges at different times, and texts can be involved in activities that go far beyond the author's original activities (like when the *GWRJ* editors made changes to my text).

Application

Now that you are familiar with the terms of CHAT, I can start to identify how, where, and maybe why I went wrong in my original article. The main concepts I struggled with were related to distribution, production, and reception. First of all, the main reason why my article didn't make the cut was because it wasn't about writing. Basically, the journal is meant for research on various writing and research strategies. Sure, my article was heavy on research, but it didn't necessarily explain how I did the research, which was my original idea. As a result, the editors of the journal ended up telling me I would need to go back to a focus on writing if I wanted to publish in the journal, and I realized that the things I did right were actually a product of me utilizing CHAT. I did, however, conduct a survey where I asked my peers a series of questions about introverted and extroverted qualities. From those surveys I drew conclusions about these qualities and about the different likelihoods of certain scenarios (i.e. losing a phone, going to a party). I also learned a lot about introversion because most, if not all, of my classmates were introverted. In the realm of representation, as well, I unintentionally veered off the course of where I was planning on going with this research. In lieu of explaining how I did my research, I simply explained my results. This is much like the example of the giraffe turtlenecks when I explained production. I went off on a tangent about data and never really remembered to route back to how I did my research before the due date. This could also be just my habit of writing with less than reliable tools and no plan, which might make me seem like a not-so-perfect student (more on "good" students later).

The second place I went wrong was distribution. If I had submitted my article to a science journal it may have gotten published. Yes, the assignment was to write an article for the writing journal, but when it boiled down to it, it was my choice to even turn in the article. I wanted a good grade, I wanted to get published, I didn't want my parents scolding me. If I hadn't cared

about any of that I may not have turned it in, or even worked on it at all. My problem with distribution was also a problem with reception. The editors of the *GWRJ* ended up pointing out to me that the structure and topic of my article weren't actually connected very well to the kind of articles the journal publishes. So, if I wanted to end up getting published, I'd have to revise.

I also didn't do the right **genre research**. Now a genre is really just a specific type of writing, like an essay. Most of us already know about genres without realizing it. In fact, I've known about genres since I was in third grade when I had to read a certain number of pages per week. I didn't read my pages one week and told my teacher that *technically* I was reading all week. From the menu at the restaurant on Wednesday to all the road signs I passed, I must have read all of my pages. Apparently that wasn't a valid answer. "That isn't actual reading," she said, "You need to be reading from books." However, menus and road signs all use words and all have certain **genre conventions**, which are unique characteristics that help us distinguish between different genres, or types, of writing. Thus, menus and road signs must be writing. If you read writing with conventions then why can't it be a genre? I was later specifically introduced to this idea in my sixth-grade English Language Arts (ELA) class, and the same teacher reinforced it in my eighth-grade advanced ELA class. From this evidence, we can see that I was already familiar with different genres of writing, but they were just brought to my attention and given a name in class.

To reinforce this idea, here is another example. I specifically remember one day when my teacher told us about an upcoming project. We had just gotten done reading the book *The Outsiders*, and we had to write in a genre that had a picture about one of the characters in the book. With my creative mind, I immediately started thinking outside the box. I came up with the idea of a picture with words somehow incorporated that I could draw. I asked my teacher at the time if I could carry out the project, and she, being a very understanding college professor/middle school teacher said, "Why not?" Her reasoning was that you read art as well. You may not realize it, but Image 1 showing a kitten wrapped in string is telling you that there is a baby cat, that it was probably playing with the string, and is very happy about that fact. You know it's a cat; you know it's string. You just successfully read art. Of course, an artist could go into depth

Image 1: Kitten playing with string.
Image source: ClipArt

about color theory and other things artists use to communicate things in their art.

I am describing genre in such depth because I realized that, for my article, if I'd spent more time thinking about what *GWRJ* articles are really about (what kind of genre they are), then maybe I wouldn't have gotten sidetracked with all my research on introverts and extroverts. Here I think it's important to talk not just about genres, but specifically about **mutt genres**. In most English language art classes, teachers don't introduce students to the concept of mutt genres. These genres technically fit my previous definition of a genre, but there are often project-specific conventions all under the same general name. Most are found only in schools where teachers need to give concise, but often vague descriptions of what writing conventions they want. You have to rely on the teacher to give you all of the information, although they usually have an assignment sheet, rubric, or checklist to tell students what to do. These genres are called the "mutt genres" (Wardle, Elizabeth). They are often a mix of two or more genres, taking and leaving out conventions from each. An example of this is a high school essay. Depending on the assignment, the essay could be more like an article, a book summary, a report, or it could even take a theoretic route. There's no way to research this kind of writing because the teacher is the sole source of the conventions. They chose which conventions you need to follow.

One of my current math teachers brushed up against the general idea of mutt genres in one of his lessons. He mentioned that he wasn't a good writer (which we already know isn't true,) and how every piece of writing you will do for school falls into a basic format. This format is generally an introduction with a solid argument, then three paragraphs of support, then a conclusion that restates the intro. All of the students in my class are very familiar with this type of writing; they've been writing like this for six years! Only a few differences, only a few places to make a mistake. What my teacher didn't know is that he was actually talking about genres when he said that. Of course, you are always dealing with genres when you write, but he was simply explaining (without knowing he was) the general conventions of the particular mutt genre of a five-paragraph essay.

All of this is to show that, even if you aren't actively using CHAT as a lens or thinking specifically about genres, writing-related activities are still happening. A great example of this is riding the bus as discussed in Angela Sheet's *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* article "Angela Rides the Bus." Sheets discusses how there are unspoken understandings between people when someone rides the bus. It explains that genres and people work together to reach a certain goal. For example, the goal for the bus system is to give all people an accessible way to get around to where they need to be. Just one

genre that helps is the sign that lights up when Sheets pulls the cord. It tells the driver to stop so someone can get off. The driver then stops, and the goal is achieved. Obviously there are many more genres related to the activity system of riding a bus, and many places things can go wrong. This is just one example about how we can apply CHAT and genre studies everywhere in our everyday lives. In my case, I learned from getting my "revise" letter from the journal that I needed to rethink my topic. In the end, I decided to just write a little bit about CHAT, and how we use it in everyday life, as a way to create something that might be useful for the journal and its readers.

Why Do I Care?

Now that you have all this information about genre and CHAT, you can, hopefully, begin to understand how it can help to illustrate how writing works (and what's going on when writing doesn't quite work). I use it (although not always consciously) in school because of mutt genres and other variables, but I tend to use it more outside of school because of how mutt genres tend to focus more on what instructors want than what a specific genre might be doing out in the world. When I am trying to write outside of school or for speech club, I tend to use it more and with a better outcome. For example, when I first got on to speech team I was assigned the event radio speaking. Of course, I asked my coach questions, but after doing that I hopped straight online to figure out what exactly I was supposed to look like, sound like, and write like for the event. It didn't help very much, as not many people write about the conventions of high school radio speaking. Although, I did understand more about the general idea of what exactly I was doing.

Not only did thinking about CHAT help me to see where my original article went wrong, but it also helps me understand other situations where my writing has unexpected results. Over the summer I wrote a blog explaining a theory about a popular youtuber. It was a pretty big success. It got featured on the front page of the app and received many likes and comments. Needless to say, I was pretty happy. I wrote another theory about another youtuber expecting the same results. That was not what happened. Somewhere, somehow, something went wrong. I had the same audience, and they got it probably the same way, so distribution was out. Of course, I was writing this theory under pressure because I had promised it would be done almost two weeks beforehand. I had also thought out my first theory for 6–12 months beforehand, whereas with this I only had about a week to throw it together, with new info coming in the day I had to put it out on the app. The readers (reception) may have misunderstood some parts, or just not wanted to read it after they saw it. So, in this situation my problem areas

were production, representation, and reception. I am currently giving myself more time to write a part two where I will explain myself more clearly and hopefully have a better response.

Conclusion

All of this goes to show that, while we may unconsciously be using CHAT and thinking about genres and mutt genres, using CHAT and genre theory more consciously and explicitly can help us make more successful texts. I didn't consciously use these concepts when I wrote my first article for this journal, and that article did not get published. But, as you can see, I did think about CHAT and genre this time around, and, look! I got published. That said, I would like to end with a bit of a tangent about perfect students; there are none. The same goes for good writers. I'll explain this by first defining a bad writer. A bad writer is someone who, say, writes a narrative. Their narrative does not make sense even though they believe it does. (That might simply be an issue with representation or reception). So, if the writer does not know how to make a narrative cohesive but is very "good" at some other kind of writing, like producing cereal boxes, then the idea of a "good" and "bad" writer does not really make sense. They write cereal boxes well. The same concept can generally apply to students. It's easy to think you are a good writer if you have mastered a mutt genre (like the five-paragraph essay) that you've worked on many times, but that knowledge might not be so useful when you're trying to write a resume or a letter or a different kind of essay (or a cereal box). So, in theory, one could write an interesting and well-written article about, say, introversion and extroversion, but if it isn't submitted to the right place or written for the right reasons, i.e. if you're not thinking about CHAT and about your genre conventions, it could be a total flop.

Works Cited

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Anya Gregg wrote the original version of this article during her eighth-grade English class. This self-identified ambivert was introduced to the concept of CHAT during that very class. That first article was completely scrapped. With the help of her teacher, Deb Riggert-Kieffer, this article went through a year of rigorous revision. Anya plans to write more articles considering CHAT in the future.