

## Constructing a Little Free Library and Building Literary Citizenship

Courtney Cox

Drowning in extra copies of her campus literary journal, Courtney Cox found a solution to connect her work as a writer and editor with the intended audience of her campus journal. Through the implementation of PCHAT, she examines how Little Free Libraries serve as a complex activity system that can help foster community-based literacies and improve literary citizenship.

I pass them by on my walk to campus, when I drive through town completing errands, and when I least expect them, such as at the zoo, local coffee shops, and alongside the trailhead as I finish a late summer hike. Little Free Libraries seem to pop up in the strangest of places, and despite their prominence, I cannot resist peering into each one I pass. Inside, I will find a lending library filled with books of all kinds, texts that are mine for the taking. When I unlatch the handle, creak open the doors, and browse through the books inside, I'm reminded of the transformative potential of words, of the valuable time I could spend losing myself within the chapters of these free texts. Most days, I close the doors with a resigned sigh, continue my walk to my office, and page through the seemingly endless reading I've been given to complete.

The presence of Little Free Libraries is relatively new. Established in 2009, the initial model of the new-fangled generation of lending libraries was dreamed up when a man from Wisconsin built a miniature replica of a one-room schoolhouse in honor of his mother, a passionate teacher and reader. Quickly, a non-profit organization to foster this idea was developed, and the



Image 1: A residential Little Library that's located in Normal, IL.

trend spread. By 2012, there were more than 2,500 Little Free Libraries ([littlefreelibrary.org](http://littlefreelibrary.org)). The mission statement of the non-profit organization has remained true to its origins; it reads: “Little Free Library is a nonprofit organization that inspires a love of reading, builds community, and sparks creativity by fostering neighborhood book exchanges around the world” ([littlefreelibrary.org](http://littlefreelibrary.org)). In October 2015, Little Free Library was awarded the Literacy Award from the Library of Congress, a designation that honors organizations that have made a significant contribution to innovate nationwide literacy efforts. The last count in 2016 revealed that there are more than 50,000 registered Little Free Libraries throughout all 50 states and in over 70 countries. Little Free Libraries continue to emerge as spaces

where community literacy can thrive, where access to texts is unhindered ([littlefreelibrary.org](http://littlefreelibrary.org)).

As an English student and instructor, I’m thrilled by this access to texts and by the concerted effort to make evident that reading and writing matter in the world. Little Free Libraries provide a space where writing can be shared and savored. They’re a visual reminder that books matter, that words have power, that the pages within have something vital to share with any reader who may pass by the library. When we examine how physical places act rhetorically (meaning how they persuade us to behave or not behave in certain ways), we can see the ways that the features around us fit into our understanding of our complex **literate activities**. When we use our rhetorical lenses to examine the places where composing becomes complicated, we realize that literate activities are all of the practices, routines, and processes surrounding writing, language, and communication.

When I was working on my Master’s degree in Publishing, I spearheaded the installation of a Little Free Library on my campus. Our campus publication, which we spent months laboring over, accompanied a long tradition of community disengagement. Regardless of the number of flyers we posted, announcements we shared, or books we placed around campus, we struggled with student engagement. I voiced my disappointment to a friend outside of the department who had been attending the university as an undergraduate. At the end of my rant, she hesitated, “Wait . . . we have

a campus literary journal? That’s actually really cool. I had no idea.” Endless copies filled the supply office of the English department, with journals spanning through the entire 40-year history of the publication. Not only was this a fire hazard, but it contributed to an increasing sense of apathy among the editorial staff. What was the use of our publication if we were the only ones who read it?

As the managing editor, I was distraught that my effort was futile, but also that the creative work of my fellow students was going unnoticed. I racked my brain for a way we could share the books, reach beyond our insular circle of English students, and maybe even encourage those outside the department to begin their journeys as creative writers. While on a walk a few days later, I saw my first Little Free Library. I was immediately impressed by what they represented: an open-access space where books could be exchanged. With a free book in hand, it occurred to me that this sidewalk fixture was more accessible than my campus’s imposing brick library. Rather than boring texts students are forced to study, the books from the Little Free Library were there to be enjoyed. By the end of my walk, I’d already begun a scheme to bring a Little Free Library to my campus to help foster greater engagement and pride in the literary community there. With this goal in mind, an **activity system** began to unfold before me.

The ISU Writing Program uses concepts based in **cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)** to provide a framework for understanding literate activities as they exist and interact with the complex world around us. Literate practices can have far-reaching trajectories, and ISU’s version of pedagogical (or teaching) CHAT (or PCHAT) provides us with a complex lens to examine the broad impact of words in the world. Rather than thinking of our interactions and the texts we encounter as closed systems, impenetrable to outside forces, PCHAT envisions aspects of our existence as influenced by and shaping features of our literate activities. Oftentimes our literate practices are intersectional and overlapping, so with PCHAT as a guiding framework, we can trace the complicated network of people, objects, spaces, tools, and texts that contributed to my goal of bringing a Little Free Library to campus. In order to examine the negotiations that accompany

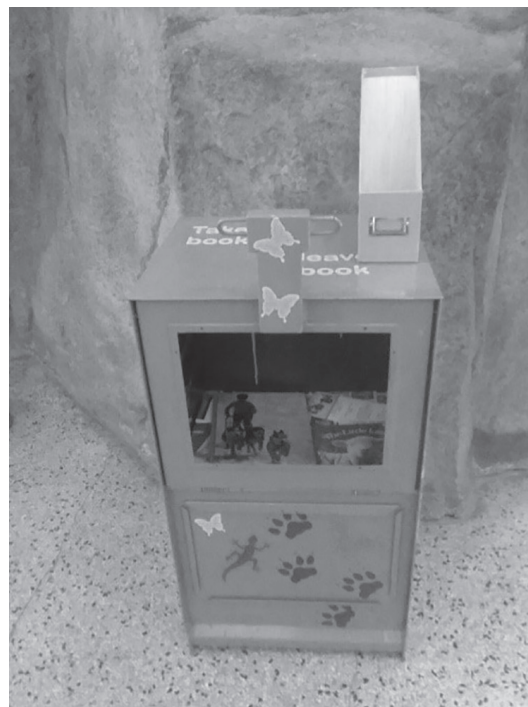


Image 2: A Little Library from Miller Park Zoo in Normal, IL.



Image 3: A Little Library located inside a local Bloomington, IL business.

literate activity, I direct our critical thinking to considering the activity system I travelled through to establish the Little Free Library. An activity system encompasses all of the people, places, objects, and so on that interact to achieve a goal. In this case, the activity system of constructing the Little Free Library as a place of literate activity is complicated because it examines both the library as a space and also the texts that are contained within that space.

Once I presented my half-baked idea of bringing a Little Free Library to campus to the rest of the editorial team, I sprang into action. Our faculty mentor offered enormous support in asking his father to build our library based on the dimensions that we found online. I scheduled meetings with administrators around campus with the goal of

finding an ideal place to put our Little Free Library. Once the meetings were scheduled, I secured permission and fostered engagement within my community to delegate tasks among us. This was an unprecedented endeavor on my campus, and since the stakes were personally high for me, they became increasingly complicated and muddled.

Through the lens of PCHAT, **production** includes the tools and practices that contribute to literate activity. In the production of the literary journals, we are restrained by different sociohistorical ideas about what a literary journal is, by assumptions about the materiality of a literary journal, and by the nature of literary journals as collaborative efforts. The journal's production is a tradition on campus with a 40-year publication history. This shapes how the text is presented, what sorts of writing it includes, writing that is, potentially, negatively shaped by the practice of disengagement that pervaded my campus literary community. In order to produce a place where the journal could be successfully distributed to students, we had to take these factors into consideration. Constructing the Little Free Library was complicated because of the various stakeholders involved in it and the distinct roles those stakeholders played in the process of building the library. Each member of the team, especially members of the editorial staff and our faculty mentor, had a distinct view of our audience and of how we could



successfully catch their attention with our Little Library.

Our library materials were donated and assembled with the help of our faculty mentor, who volunteered the help of his father in constructing our book box. When building the library, they consulted an established building plan for Little Free Libraries. This included the dimensions for the library, as well as the design elements of the presentation. These features of production affect the way that writers can expect users to engage with the space and also affect how users are invited to the literate activity of taking a book from the library. By standardizing the form of the Little Free Library with those that are already present in my



Image 4: A residential Little Library in Bloomington, IL repurposed from a newspaper stand.

community, users are guided to interact with the library in certain ways based on their existing expectations of what a lending library is and does. The standardized design of the libraries that we consulted for our own library allowed users to draw upon their antecedent knowledge, or what they already know about lending libraries, and also provided users with context clues for how the library should be used and how students could interact with the Little Free Library. Yet, after the library was placed on campus, we personalized the box so that it was welcoming to students. We accomplished this by affixing signage to the library clearly explaining its purpose and use and by drawing attention to the library itself by painting it a subtle but eye-catching blue. Not only is blue my favorite color, but it also directs students to the presence of the lending library, inviting them to take a book if they so choose.

Production is always embedded in the **ecology** of a literate activity. Ecology is the biological and environmental features that serve as the background to the textual production. The particular ecosystem of my campus is that of a community with a lack-luster sense of literary citizenship. In addition to the obstacle of students' unawareness of my literary journal's presence, my campus was one with few communal spaces where students could gather because the majority of the students, myself included, are commuters.

In spite of its counterculture to the mainstream campus culture, however, I was certain that there were students such as myself who could build a dedication and enthusiasm for writing. In order to reach these students on campus, the placement of the Little Free Library was crucial. Since most of the staff also lived off-campus, we conducted research into campus ecology to determine what placement of the library would be most effective. We considered spaces in residence halls, in communal spaces in academic buildings, and nooks within the library, but ultimately decided upon a location within the campus food court. This was a space where students congregated during meals and could also gather in their free time. In addition to the space as a communal feeding area, it also provided a space where students could watch television on the several mounted screens positioned conveniently between the campus bookstore and an upperclassman dormitory. In considering the role of the campus community in contributing to the success or failure of the Little Free Library, the location that we selected was important in reaching the students in a space where they'd be receptive to taking a book and spending time within its pages. I met with representatives from the library, residence halls, and campus facilities to determine a place to mount the Little Free Library upon its completion. Ultimately, we found an empty wall under one of the television screens. This not only put the lending library within eyeshot of the students, but also positioned the texts in a space where students were spending time recreationally.

In selecting where to place our Little Free Library, the decision also had implications concerning the **distribution** of the journals and how they could help revive our campus literary community. Within the frame of PCHAT, distribution considers how a text reaches its audience. This term focuses on where a text goes and who it reaches. In considering how best to distribute our journal, we used our **antecedent knowledge** of campus to try to figure out how to invite students to take our journals. For instance, if we had placed our lending library closer to the campus library, this might have invited confusion over how these texts were to be used. This could have interfered with how students used and returned university texts. In order to fulfill the needs of our lending library and distribute the texts within our community, the placement of the Little Free Library needed to communicate that students and visitors are invited to open the doors and search through the books that are placed inside. Distribution involves not only filling the shelves with texts, but also inviting students to take a book and read it as their own. In this way, the position of the library and how it was presented also contributed to the success of our distribution.

With my lead as managing editor, I relied on the **socialization** of the rest of the staff and my support system around the university to help with

the development of our own Little Free Library. Socialization considers how the interactions between texts and practices transform those practices. The decisions that we made regarding the lending library sent off a flurry of socialized activity. This included spreading the word with my team, telling students I knew outside of the English department of my goals with spearheading the developing of our own Little Free Library, talking to on-campus students about the places where they would be most likely to borrow books from the lending library, and posting about our developments on social media to keep others in the loop with our process. The final socialization was the ultimate goal of the project: to present a fixture on campus that could serve as an active literary hub for students. The Little Free Library on campus provided a space where students could gain access to the texts, but also enter into the wider literary community.

The outcomes of the Little Free Library on campus intersect with **reception**, which is how a text is taken up, used, and re-purposed by readers. After filling the library with books, within a few days, we noticed that books began to empty from the unit. The following year, we had a much larger editorial staff, one that included perspectives outside of the English department. Additionally, for the first time in recent journal history, we also received visual art submissions. With these submissions, we were

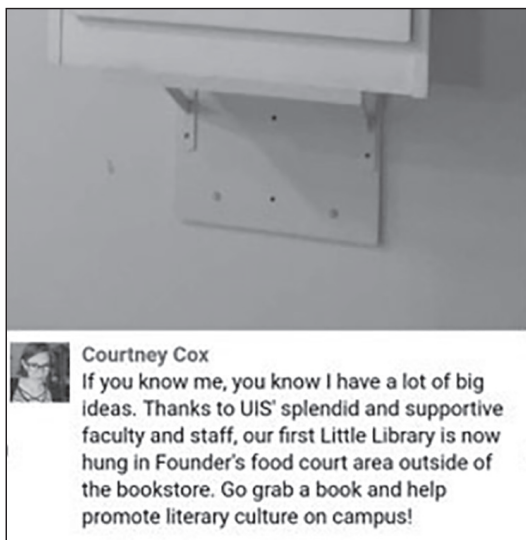


Image 6: My Facebook post announcing our campus Little Library.



Image 7: The final Little Library ready to distribute literary journals to students.

able to produce a text with the potential of engaging students through **multimodality**, which describes how certain texts use multiple different modes, like visual or audio or alphabetic modes, to communicate a message. This also sparked additional investment by our graphic collaborators, awareness of our literary contributions by university administrators, and a heightened morale boost for existing editors who were disappointed about the previous reach of the journal.

As a result of the Little Free Library and the activity systems that were developed through its introduction on campus, we saw a growth of the literary community and found an outlet where we could share our hard work so that the journal began to *do* something in the world. Rather than re-purposing the text itself, a shift in the distribution of the text presented an opportunity for students to become more aware of the potential for their voices to be heard and shared within our campus community.

### Works Cited

“The History of Little Free Library.” *Little Free Library*, 2017, [littlefreelibrary.org/ourhistory/](http://littlefreelibrary.org/ourhistory/). Accessed 15 Sept. 2017.



**Courtney Cox** is a PhD student in rhetoric and composition at Illinois State University. In her fleeting memories of free time, Courtney liked to ride her bike, cook eccentric recipes, and scheme to obtain free books.



