Just CHATting

Joyce Walker

Q: What are we chatting about?

A: CHAT

Q: I know, but what about?

The acronym CHAT refers to the term *Cultural-Historical-Activity-Theory*. It's an important acronym for our writing program, because it refers to a set of theories about rhetorical activity (how people act and

Joyce R. Walker is an associate professor of English/Rhetoric & Composition. She is also the director of the Writing Program for the English Department. Dr. Walker received her doctorate in English with a specialization in Writing Studies from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. She holds an MA in English with major field of study in Rhetoric and Composition from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and a BA in Speech Communication from SIUC. Prior to coming to ISU, Walker was an assistant professor at Western Michigan University and at the University of South Florida. Her research is primarily concerned with the intersections where humans and their composing tools meet. Her 2007 article, "Narratives in the Database: Memorializng September 11th Online," published in Computers & Composition, won the 2008 Elllen Nold award for best article from Computers & Composition, and her collaborative article with James Purdy, "Digital Breadcrumbs: Case Studies for Research Practices Online," published in 2007 in the online journal Kairos won the Kairos best webtext award for 2008. She is currently working with Jim Purdy on a project related to student research identities.

communicate in the world—specifically through the production of all kinds of texts), that help us look at the how/why/what of writing practices. CHAT is useful because it's a more complicated and interesting way to look at writing, but it's also a challenge (because it's complicated). In a lot of traditional writing classes, we aren't really taught to see writing in complicated ways. Instead, we are mostly taught a set of generalized "rules" about writing, usually within the context of some kind of essay-style writing.[1]

Now, breaking down a particular genre into its component parts to discover its boundaries and key features is a great idea. We do this kind of work in our Writing Program courses at ISU, as do writers engaged in many different writing tasks in a wide variety of professions. The problem really comes in when we don't spend enough time and effort to really understand the genre we're working in. We just try to follow the "rules" we're given, making assumptions about how we can use what we already know about writing (or about the genre). This isn't always very successful. For example, we assume that because we've written a school essay we'll be fine in our upper-level psych course, but then we find out that the requirements for writing a "case study" (one of the genres the discipline of Psychology uses frequently) are really different than the writing we've done on our generalized "school essays." The only thing that can really combat this inability to see a genre clearly is to step back—to learn to see all the details of a particular situation in which writing happens. We then usually have to spend some time making our own recipe for the writing task, or adapting a generalized recipe to our specific needs. This research and analysis is often the step we skip when we first start working in a new genre or writing situation. But a more complex and complete understanding of a new genre allows two things: (1) We can create a "recipe" or adapt an existing template more successfully, because we've analyzed closely how the genre works, and (2) we can better see the gaps or discrepancies between our first drafts of a text in a new genre and the models we've used. The usefulness of CHAT as a framework is that it can help us to investigate a writing activity from a lot of different perspectives. For our purposes, CHAT isn't really useful as a way of doing large writing-research projects (like Writing Studies scholars do), which might mean looking at a writing situation through every one of the following categories. Instead, we use specific categories from the CHAT framework to help us understand a genre in practical ways that will impact our writing.

---

[1]For a much more in-depth critique of generalized writing instruction, see Russel, David. (1995). Activity theory and its implications for writing instruction. In Joseph Petraglia, Ed. *Reconceiving writing, rethinking writing instruction*. (pp. 51–78). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Step One: The Journey Begins (However Reluctantly)

I want to begin by quoting a fairly large block of text from a text titled, "Re-situating and Re-mediating the Canons: A Cultural-historical Re-mapping of Rhetorical Activity":

We turn here to *cultural-historical activity theory*…CHAT argues that activity is *situated* in concrete interactions that are simultaneously *improvised* locally and *mediated* by historically-provided tools and practices, which range from machines, made-objects, semiotic means (e.g., languages, genres, iconographies), and institutions to structured environments, domesticated animals and plants, and indeed, people themselves. Mediated activity means that action and cognition are *distributed* over time and space and among people, artifacts, and environments and thus also *laminated*, as multiple frames of field co-exist in any situated act. In activity, people are *socialized* (brought into alignment with others) as they *appropriate* cultural resources, but also *individuated* as their particular appropriations historically accumulate to form a particular individual. Through appropriation and individuation, socialization also opens up a space for cultural change, for a *personalization* of the social. Cultural-historical activity theory points to a concrete, historical rhetoric…a cultural-historical approach asks how people, institutions, and artifacts are made in history (p. 18).[2]

What?

This quotation illustrates that the production of texts is indeed a lot more complicated than any of us might think when we flip open our cell phone and fire off a text message to find out where our friend wants to meet us. We don't, when we do it, think about the complicated space that is created…

- We understand text messaging, as a genre, in relation to a whole bunch of other genres, like email, telephoning, letter-writing, and speaking.

- We understand the situations in which it's appropriate to textmessage based on all of these connected genres, but also through media representations of text-messaging and our awareness of how other people use text-messaging. (For example, think of that series of commercials where the mom gets frustrated by her family "speaking" in texting language—IMHO, LOL, my BFF—and then think about why the joke is that the grandmother can also use the jargon.)[3]

---

[2]This excerpt and the concept described in the following chart are drawn from "Re-situating and Re-mediating the Canons: A Cultural-historical Remapping of Rhetorical Activity: A Collaborative Webtext." With Paul Prior, Janine Solberg, Patrick Berry, Hannah Bellowar, Bill Chewning, Karen Lunsford, Liz Rohan, Kevin Roozen, Mary Sheridan-Rabideau, Jody Shipka, and Derek Van Ittersum (2007). *Kairos*, 11.3, May 2007.

[3]A Cingular/AT&T advertisement—see http://www.metacafe.com/watch/795294/idk_my_bff_rose_new_at_t_ad/

- Even the simple act of pushing the buttons on the phone shapes how we text in important ways (no caps because it takes too much time, also use word shortcuts whenever possible).

- Texting in some ways remediates the genre of the telegram, in that they are both genres that value short messages where abbreviations are used to save text space.
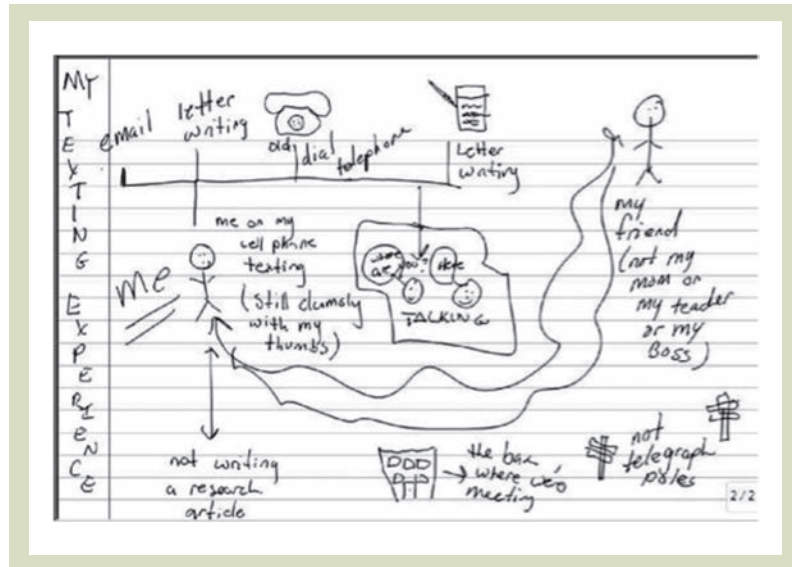
You don't really need to know these things to send a text message to your friend, but your success as a writer in a world where writing genres are changing quickly and employers expect employees to be able to write well in a variety of different writing situations may depend on your ability to think about acts of writing in more complicated ways.

Literate Activity

The following terms can be used to help researchers investigate the complicated factors that impact what/how/when/why we write. I have adapted this information from Paul Prior's article, "Re-situating and Re-mediating the Canons" (see footnote #3). It is generally a summary with my own examples added, but occasionally I have used the exact text from the article (which I helped to write).

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). Production also considers the genres and structures that can contribute to and even "pre-shape" our ability to produce text (think of filling out a job application form—the form directly controls the kind of

information we can produce, and consequently, the kind of image of ourselves we can project to potential employers). If we got to make a video instead of filling out the paper form, we could create a very different self-representation.

When thinking about or investigating production for a specific text, an author is really trying to uncover how individuals and groups create texts under specific conditions, using specific tools, and following certain practices. Researchers looking at *production* investigate how the intentions of the producer (what he/she intends the text to do) are negotiated, and how the contexts, tools, texts, and other issues affect that negotiation.

Representation: The term "representation" highlights issues related to the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it (how they think about it, how they talk about it), as well as all the activities and materials that help to shape how people do this. Do they have meetings, do they pass the text around to other readers, do they draw outlines, create maps, write proposals, etc.? NOTE: Representations can include things we do (have a meeting to talk about a text or ride the bus to visit a library), things we say or think (the ways we talk about the text or the plans we make in our heads), the things we use (the media or technologies used to produce something), and the larger frameworks that shape how we understand what we're doing when we produce a text (for example, in school settings, the idea of "research" is represented in certain ways that shape how we even begin to think about what might be possible to write). We know, for instance, that research in college doesn't usually mean "go stand at the corner and ask people what they think," although it could mean that in a particular setting like a newspaper story.

Distribution: Distribution involves the consideration of who a text is given to, for what purposes, using what kinds of distribution tools. For example, is it a printed text, a handwritten text, an electronic text, cell phone message, etc? Is it a letter sent through the mail or tucked under someone's car windshield? Is it put up on a flyer or written in chalk on the sidewalk?

Reception: Reception deals with how a text is taken up and used by others. Reception is not just who will read a text, but takes into account the ways people might use or re-purpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended). To cite a recent controversial example, think of pedophiles using *Friendster* or *Facebook* to meet children. The creators of the site certainly did not intend for the site to be used by these people in these ways, and now they must retroactively "re-write" the site (controlling access or monitoring pages) to try to exclude people from this kind of use.

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 (think of filling out a tax return—or writing a standard 5 paragraph essay for that matter! These activities are "writing," but they also have a lot of social implications about who we are, what we do, what we know, etc.).A text like the 5-paragraph essay is highly socialized—this means that when a teacher assigns this kind of essay, he/she is (conceptually) interacting with a whole set of ideas and beliefs about what this essay is and what it does. These interactions are "made up of" the ways people have discussed and used the 5-paragraph essay over time.

Activity: Activity is a term that 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.). Thinking about activity allows us to focus on the actions that are involved in producing texts (which we often forget to think about, because we're caught up in thinking about all of the issues mentioned above). It's important to remember that these processes and activities can include conflict (attempts to disrupt or stop a text from being produced) or indifference (the refusal to participate) as well as cooperative activities.

Ecology: Ecology points to what we usually think of as a mere backdrop for our purposeful activities in creating texts—the physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing. However, these environmental factors can become very active in some situations in shaping or interacting with our textual productions (think of putting on a play outdoors when it's raining, or think of the people of New Orleans using the internet to find family members after Hurricane Katrina). Think also of the ecological cost of producing paper, or the history of (and ecological ramifications of) using lights as a part of Holiday displays. Ecology can be a practical part of an actual production (i.e., make sure we have a tent for our play or an alternate venue in case of rain), or it can lead to philosophical considerations (i.e., deciding to put texts online rather than printing them out).

An investigator might wish to consider a literate act through any one or combination of these perspectives. In a practical sense, it's often true that one or a few of these categories are more relevant than others for a particular writing situation. For example, in the cell phone texting production map, the cell phone as a tool could be considered from the perspective of **production** (e.g., the effects of little bitty keyboards and a tiny screen on the number of typographical mistakes in text messages). But that same technology could also be considered in terms of **socialization** (the decade-long process of negotiation in attitudes about when

and where it's appropriate to use one's cell phone—i.e., texting might be o.k. in the movies, where talking on the phone wouldn't be, while talking works better when walking across campus). So which of these categories is most interesting depends on what we're trying to figure out. It also depends on what, exactly, we need to know about a writing situation or genre in order to produce a successful text. For example, in a situation such as sending an email to one's instructor, an understanding of **reception** and **socialization** becomes important (what the instructor will expect to see, how he/she will respond to what he/she actually sees). Understanding that "email," as a genre, might include a different set of expectations for the reader/author who is connecting it to a formal letter than the reader/author who is connecting it to texting could be important in a practical way.

A Practical Example of the Value of Research into Complex Literate Activities

This section tries to provide a more extended example to help show how this kind of study of literate activity might be useful for the kinds of texts we produce every day. Why not just write that history paper and forget about it? Why not just send that email off quickly and get it out of the way? Because there are times (especially when we are writing in an unfamiliar situation and/ or genre) when thinking critically about these kinds of issues can help us make decisions about what to do, how to write, how to engage with the texts of others, how to situate a text for a reader, and many other issues. Consider the following diagrams related to the production of a research paper assignment:
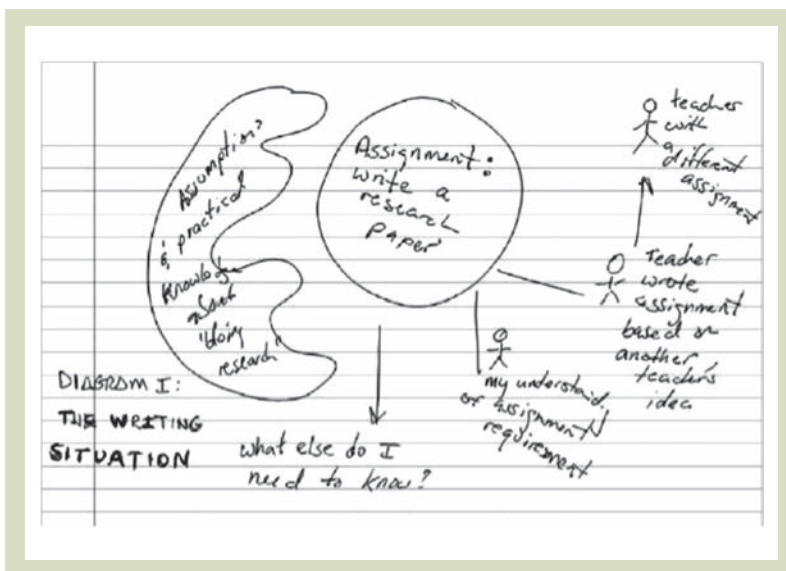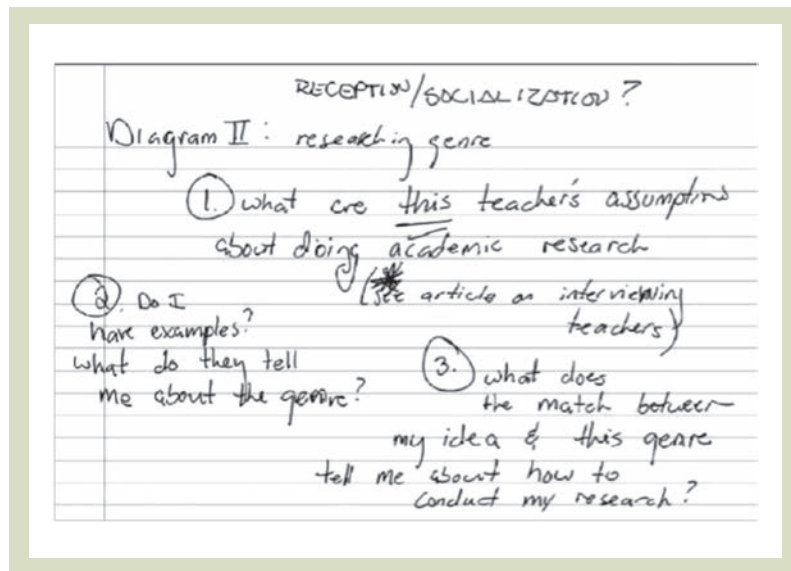
Diagram I: The Writing Situation

Diagram II: In thinking about how to learn about the research project, I was thinking both about how the teacher's reception of the text might be influenced by a range of factors, and how I might use examples of research papers written in that class to help me understand the instructor's expectations, etc.

Diagram IV: I'm thinking here about the expectations of various audiences will have for the text (and all the ideas and information that might be influencing them), and also thinking through how somebody may take up my text and use it for some other purpose.

There is no "right" way to use these categories to consider literate activity. When using the categories for thinking about writing situations, some categories may be more interesting than others—because they specifically relate to the aspect of the activity you want (or need) to learn about. For example, if I am asked to create a PowerPoint presentation on problem drinking that will reach college-age students, I might think about the following issues:

- How might the tool (and the perception of PowerPoint as a kind of cheesy, school-based tool for presenting information) actually negatively impact how my audience will take up and use the text(Production/Reception/Socialization)?

- Practically, how might audiences use the text? If I put the Power-Point up on the web then people will be able to access it, but the text won't have the cachet or usability that a video would have (Distribution/Reception).

In the end, I might suggest that a YouTube video would be a more appropriate genre for this message, based on my analysis.

SUMMARY

In many of the situations we encounter as writers—in school and out of school—we are asked to write without a clear understanding of all of the elements that might help us to be perfectly clear about how to produce an effective text. Often this is not intentional. Those asking us to produce writing may not even be aware themselves of some of the complicated nuances of the kind of writing they want or need to see. So we're asked to write a paper, or write an article, or write an email, and we do it, guessing, on-the-fly, making complicated choices in the time it takes to hit delete a couple of times and replace our text with some new idea. The suggestion I am making with this article is not that we need to become writing researchers in the sense that we should all begin to study and produce research projects about writing practices (although, as a writing researcher I think that would be great). Rather, I'm suggesting that we are all ALREADY writing researchers—in a practical sense. However, we aren't usually trained to observe our own research processes, and this is a problem. We are researchers, but we are unaware of what we've discovered, unable to make it visible to ourselves. We move by intuition and make adaptations and changes to our practices based on clues we don't even realize we've uncovered. My suggestion, finally, is that we might find that we can improve as writers and readers (especially in situations where we find ourselves at a loss regarding how to proceed) if we learn to uncover what we know, and what we need to know, in

order to understand more fully the complicated nuances of writing in different situations. And I'm suggesting that we do this by learning to take time—to observe our own practices, and to study the nuances of the kinds of writing we encounter each day.