

Inked: How a Tattoo Comes to Be a Bigger Part of Our World

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In this article, Serenah Minasian discusses how tattoos attend to both language and writing. Minasian shares her experience with her own tattoos and applies the process of a tattoo entering the world to Illinois State University's version of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT).

How Does a Tattoo Relate to Language and Writing?

When I first wanted to get a tattoo, I thought, *What on Earth do I want to get? Why would I want to get that specific thing, and have it inked on me for the rest of my life?* I was conflicted; I wanted a tattoo that had meaning, but I also wanted something that I would not grow tired of once I was an old wrinkled woman who wore a sleeveless shirt. Thinking of what design I wanted and what the meaning behind it would be (if there would be any) was a very long process. Tattoos are more than just awesome permanent things on people's bodies; they become a text. To show how tattoos relate to language and writing, I will be using Illinois State University's Writing Program concepts of CHAT and multimodal composition. Specifically, I will use the CHAT terms representation, activity, distribution, reception, and socialization as well as the Writing Program concept of multimodal composing.

The Process

The process of getting a tattoo is actually very detailed and complex when you break it down, so that is exactly what I will do in relation to my own experience. Personally, I have many different tattoos that all have their own



Figure 1: My tattoo inspired by my grandma.

unique story, so I will describe a few of those processes. The first thing you are usually faced with when wanting to get a tattoo is thinking about whether there is any specific inspiration behind the tattoo. Inspiration often helps spark an idea (at least, it did for me). My inspiration behind my first tattoo was my grandma. My family on my dad's side is Armenian, and my grandma has always told me a certain Armenian saying since I was a child, which has impacted the person I am today. The statement literally translates into English as: "you are my foot's power," but direct translations do not always work from language to language. Because I am fluent in Armenian and English, I know the statement can be translated in our modern English language to mean "you are the strength beneath my feet." To me, this process seems similar to my writing process when completing a project or paper for a class in academia. I first ask myself, "What do I want to write about, and why do I want to write about it?" Therefore, I realized that my tattoo inspiration and preparation followed

the same path as my inspiration and preparation behind my writing. Next, when getting a tattoo, the person getting the tattoo may have some words or photos in mind. For me, specifically, I chose a basic Christian cross shaded in black. Above and below it, my grandma's saying is tattooed in its original Armenian form in her handwriting.

The next step in a tattoo's production is finding a tattoo artist. For me, I went to a tattoo artist who was close to home after hearing good reviews about them. Next, you must contact the tattoo artist. After you contact your chosen tattoo artist, you go and discuss the tattoo with them. Then, they draw up your tattoo and show you. If you do not like the original draw up, you ask them to revise it and draw up another one. I did not like the original drawing, so I asked my tattoo artist to revise it. Once they did, it fit my expectations. After you decide on your imagined tattoo and it is exactly what you have dreamed of, the tattooing begins. The tattoo outline will be placed on you, and then it will be permanently inked into your skin. This process can take any amount of time, depending on what you are deciding on getting. Your tattoo will now be introduced to the world and others will

probably see it. Your new tattoo has officially become a piece of language and writing, and now we will examine how.

How Does a Tattoo Involve Multimodality?

As humans and students, we communicate in many different ways. A tattoo involves many different modes of communication. Thinking back to the Writing Program’s definition of multimodal composing, ideas that are turned into tattoos can be alphabetic, visual, or symbolic. For me, personally, my tattoos began as alphabetic and oral. One of my tattoos was a letter from my grandpa, which was alphabetic, and another one of my tattoos is a saying my grandma always said to me, so it was oral as she said it and aural as I heard it. I later took these modes and turned them into other modes by having my tattoos drawn up and then inked into my body. Now, my tattoos serve as visual and symbolic modes of communication that are a part of society and my personal identity.

CHAT and Tattoos

Before we move on to CHAT terms, it is important to know that the ISU Writing Program explains CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory) as, “a tool to help us think about and study the complex genres that we encounter in the world.” In this case, the complex genre is tattoos. After getting seven different tattoos, I’ve realized that the process for each was so different that I wasn’t sure how they could be described as a single activity: getting a tattoo. But by doing some CHAT mapping of the process of one of my tattoos, I was able to see how all of my tattoos do engage in a kind of literate practice where writing and language are important. To examine one specific tattoo process that I underwent, I created a CHAT map of one of my tattoos as well as how each individual tattoo has a different relationship to language and writing. By doing this, I was able to see how language and writing are important to the genre of tattoos. Let’s dive into some specific CHAT terms and how they relate to the genre of tattoos.

Representation

In the tattoo process, the first CHAT term I thought of was **representation**. Our ISU Writing Program defines representation as “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” (ISU Writing Program). In terms of a tattoo, this includes the planning process. CHAT helps an individual think about what influenced the tattoo and what words or images an individual decides to incorporate into their tattoo. The materials that shape how you came up with your tattoo idea are an important part of representation as well. For me, my grandma was the inspiration behind my first tattoo, so the materials that shaped it were words and feelings. Since I came up with my tattoo idea, I then brainstormed several design ideas for it and planned out the process. First, I needed a hard copy of the statement, written by my grandma. Next, I found a picture of the Christian cross that I wanted to be paired with my grandma’s words. I also had to decide on the way that I wanted the image and text to correspond with one another and how I wanted it to be laid out on my skin. Then, I had to find a tattoo artist and then schedule a date and time with my tattoo artist to complete the actual tattoo and bring it to life. Now I see that this entire process was representation!

Activity

During the actual process of being tattooed, there are many elements of the CHAT term, activity. ISU Writing Programs defines this as “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 a peer review, etc.)” So, in terms of activity, what happened *during* the tattoo? In my case, my tattoo artist sanitized my arm first, shaved it, and then they wiped it down to make sure my arm was dry and clean. After that, my artist had me sit on a chair and keep my arm still while the process began. The practices that occurred during the creation of this text were my tattoo artist wiping my arm about every five minutes. There were also times that my artist got up and left the room for a few minutes during the tattooing. They asked me several times how I was doing, and I answered each time. During the tattoo my tattoo artist also had to dip the tattoo gun in the ink several times. I also heard the tattoo gun continuously buzzing the entire time. In addition, I listened to music during this process to try and relax.

Distribution

There are a couple different ways the CHAT term distribution can be seen in the process of getting a tattoo. First, it is important to consider how the Writing Program at ISU defines distribution: “Distribution involves the consideration of where texts go and who might take them up. It also considers the tools and methods that can be used to distribute text, and how

distribution can sometimes move beyond the original purpose intended by the author(s).” A tattoo begins by being only a draft; it is an idea that is then distributed into an actual text or image on an individual’s body. The tools that are used to distribute the text (tattoo) are the ink and the tattoo gun that cause the text to be permanent. An unfortunate example of distribution is the pain that the one getting tattooed undergoes; the pain isn’t intentional, but it does occur when the text is transforming from an idea to an actual permanent piece.

An example of distribution that I have personally experienced was when I planned to get a tattoo on my leg. The tattoo ended up becoming an inspiration for my dad’s tattoo. My text (the tattoo) and the idea behind it was distributed to my dad who then took it up and made it his text (his tattoo) as well. This was totally unexpected! We ended up getting tattooed together, and it was clearer than ever that my tattoo and the idea around it had surpassed my initial expectations regarding its distribution. In this case, my tattoo’s distribution was personally significant and this connection between my dad and I imbued the tattoo with more meaning than I initially expected. My experience showed me how distribution is evident when we see tattoos influence others or become a part of something larger than originally planned.

Reception

The CHAT term that I find most intriguing in relation to tattoos is reception, which “deals with how a text is taken up and used by others.” Further, reception “takes into account the ways people might use or re-purpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended)” (ISU Writing Program). When I got a tattoo of text that was taken from a letter that my grandpa wrote me that was in his actual handwriting, one of the first things that popped into my head was, “How will this specific text be taken up by others?” After my grandpa passed away, this text became a tribute to him, which shows how a tattoo’s significance can shift over time. I am able to memorialize my grandpa through this tribute on my arm (Figure 2). When people see this tattoo, they are curious as to who wrote the text, and they end up using the text to gain more information about who my grandpa was and the relationship that he and I shared. When my grandpa wrote the letter to me, he probably did not expect that I would repurpose it into a tattoo. When he did see it, he was pleasantly shocked, but honored.

Now that he is gone, the tattoo serves as a way for me to remember the words my grandpa wrote to me and to keep his memory alive. The way

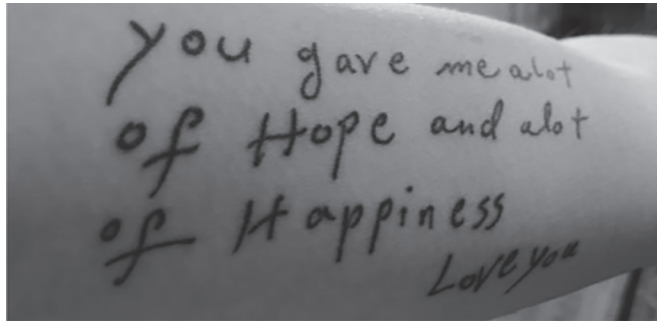


Figure 2: The tattoo repurposed from my grandpa's letter.

others may perceive the text may not be the same way I perceive the text. To me, my tattoo is special because they are the words that my grandpa wrote to me. Others may not be aware of the significance of these words, and it might not even be clear who wrote them. People could also repurpose this text and turn it into an idea that creates a text personal to them. It is important to ask: what does the text mean to you? What does the text mean to others? Reception is essentially the way that individuals perceive a text and how they can reuse the text in another way.

Socialization

According to the ISU Writing Program, "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." In the process of getting a tattoo, the individual faces several interactions with people while trying to produce their text. First, the person wanting the tattoo may talk to their friends or family about their ideas for their tattoo to as they brainstorm. Additionally, the individual wanting the tattoo will have to discuss the text with the tattoo artist.

Another example of socialization is how the text will be used. For me, personally, my tattoos are texts and images that describe what I have gone through in my life and the people who have impacted my life. I use these texts to express myself, showing the things and people that have shaped me and inspired me throughout my life. In addition, tattoos can represent and transform different kinds of social and cultural practices as described in socialization. For example, my tattoo that is written in my grandma's handwriting in Armenian can be seen as paying homage to my Armenian

culture. Many people will ask me what language my tattoo is written in, which then leads to a conversation about Armenia and the Armenian language and culture. As an Armenian individual, this text serves as a way of educating others about a culture that does not get much attention and acknowledgement. Socialization is a way for people to interact with a text and create more out of a text that can relate both to society and culture.

Conclusion

Related to both language and writing, a tattoo is a multimodal text that undergoes a specific process in order to enter into the real world. How is the tattoo composed and communicated? Visually, alphabetically, aurally, orally, or symbolically? In relation to tattoos and CHAT, things to consider relating to each term are the following questions:

- Reception: What does the text mean to you? What do others see?
- Representation: How do you plan out the text? What is the process?
- Distribution: How does the text enter into the bigger picture? Who does it effect and how?
- Activity: What occurred during the process? What happened physically as in motions, actions, etc.?
- Socialization: How does the text impact society or culture? How many people are involved in making this text?

All in all, these questions are important to thinking critically about the many texts that impact our identities and the world around us, which we can better understand through the lens of CHAT.

Works Cited

ISU Writing Program. "Key Terms and Concepts." *Grassroots Writing Research*, Illinois State University, isuwriting.com/key-terms.



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