Exploring the Roles in the Activity System of Community Theatre

Allison Mool

In this article, Allison Mool dives into the world of community theatre, exploring the different roles and how they are filled. As this activity system becomes more complex, she finds that breaking each piece down lets you truly see the whole.

Beginning My Writing Research Career

As I was entering English 101, I was assigned some *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* articles to read. The articles talked about many ideas casually, like literacies, genres, and texts. I really didn't understand what I had gotten myself into by taking this class, and the great understanding that the authors showed of these complicated terms was a little daunting. They were vastly more complex than I understood. I knew that I needed to become familiar with these terms and this practice of treating your writing and interactions as research.

One term that particularly caught my eye was "**activity system**." It seemed to be a common occurrence, but it was complex. I felt like everything was an activity system, but I didn't know how to describe them or put them into words. After the realization that I couldn't quite pin this idea down, I knew I had to think about it more.

What Even Is a Literate Activity System?

I learned that an activity system is basically a group of people (subjects) working towards a common goal (objective). They use tools, texts, and rules to accomplish this goal.

It seems simple, right? For example, Johnny and Sally are working on a book report. They use the tools of papers and computers. Their rules are that each of them must do some of the work. They use texts like their books. But in day-to-day life, activities and the systems they are a part of are more complicated. Usually, it's hard to pinpoint the exact rules or the exact tools when complicated life kicks in.

When diving into activity systems, I also realized that there are many other terms and ideas that connect to them. For example, we need to consider **cultural-historical activity theory** (**CHAT**). While CHAT can be used in various ways, ISU's version of CHAT is a method that specifically allows us to talk about the production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology of a text.

We also explore **literacies**, which are the literate parts of the literate activity system. Literacies are bodies of knowledge that certain people have. For example, a professional football player is literate in football. He knows the rules, teams, and strategies that people use. I, on the other hand, am not literate in football … at all.

With all of these terms to understand while exploring activity systems, I needed to look at a real-world example to understand how it truly worked. I thought about what subject in my life could challenge my understanding of activity systems. Because I have been around it for a while, I decided to explore my experiences in community theatre.

Community Theatre

When I started to think about this topic as an activity system, I realized that this is a very complicated process with many literacies and multiple activity systems running throughout. I decided to break them down and look at them from start to finish, from the very beginning of the process to the last show. So, let's look at the show I was recently a part of, *Evita,* at the Muni in Springfield, IL.

Scene #1: Bringing the Show

Before the performance, the rehearsals, and the auditions, there is a step that is done only by the director and their staff (assistant director, vocal director, and choreographer). They decide on a show using tools like scripts, videos, and discussion. Their objective is to pick what they want to do in the summer. When thinking about what they use in this process, I noticed that the scripts they use are not only a tool, they are also a text. These are made up of words and music, and they communicate to the directing staff what each play is about. Therefore, a text in an activity system can often also be classified as a tool.

They have rules. For example, they have to take into consideration their budget and their audience. They will also need to pick a show that will bring sponsors. This is important because every show at the Muni has a local business behind it. These shows would not be possible without their support, because the Muni is a group made up entirely of volunteers. The board members, the staff, the performers, and the concession workers are all volunteers. The board and many volunteer cast members put on four musicals each summer for the crowds of Springfield, Illinois. Without the sponsors, this wouldn't be possible.

Once the staff decides on a show that they would like to do, they then have to convince the Muni board to accept their show through a proposal process. They present their vision and ideas to the board, and if the board approves them, they are a part of the next year's season. The staff of *Evita* underwent this process last fall.

Scene #2: Auditions

The audition process is another activity system that builds into the whole activity system of community theatre. The people involved in auditions are the staff of the four shows that are casting all at once, the people auditioning, and the people running the auditions, like the people who check you in and the accompanists. This whole process takes place to accomplish one goal, to cast a show for the summer.

When I first decided to audition, I went online to sign up for a slot and filled out my information, such as conflicts and past experiences. I rehearsed my music and waited nervously for the moment to arrive. On the day-of, I checked in at a table and was given a number and my picture was taken. Looking back, I realized that an audition number is actually a very important text in this activity system. Using ISU's version of CHAT, we can look at

the representation of this text. It connects many documents and helps with communication. The number is the order that I sing in during the first part of the audition. The staff put me in a place to perform the dance based on my number. They keep track of their opinions and comments about my performance based on my number. They access my audition form and my communication information through my number. This is how they gave me a call for callbacks and offered me a part in the show. All of these texts (the number, the audition forms, and the notes) are connected, and these decisions were made based on the texts connected to the number. Therefore, these three digits represent my entire audition process.

There are also other tools through this process, like sheet music and sides, which are small pieces of the script that you read at auditions. As an auditionee, I also used dance and my voice to complete this process. But since this is a long day, you also use tools like water and snacks. You usually dress more nicely at the vocal audition to impress the staff, and then you dress in clothes that you can move in and dance shoes for the dance auditions. These are tools that are necessary to succeed in this process.

While thinking of rules, I remember that every audition process has different rules and requirements. At college, we were supposed to perform a monologue. But at the Muni, I had to complete both a vocal and a dance audition. While I was singing at the Muni, I had to stand on the big red "x" in the middle of the floor. At college, I was allowed to use a chair and stand wherever I chose. I also had to bring music to the Muni so that an accompanist could play with me, because you aren't supposed to sing *a capella* (with no accompaniment). Whereas for college auditions, you don't usually sing.

After initial auditions, there are callbacks with more rules and challenges to complete, like dance numbers and songs that we had to learn on the spot and perform in small groups. This process can involve different texts, like a schedule of what shows are holding what callbacks where. There are also maps and people to help you. You may also need dance shoes and music with you. It is a very complex and nerve-wracking part of the process, but it's very important to try your best and stay calm in this part of the activity system.

Socialization in terms of CHAT is made up of the interactions that people have when they are producing, distributing, and using texts. So as these people use the audition numbers, the script, and work towards producing the show, it is socialization.

Auditions are also an example of a literacy in theatre, because people speak of auditions and the process in ways that people who have never experienced auditions wouldn't understand. They wouldn't know what happens in a dance callback or relate to our audition horror stories the way that other theatre people do. These experiences build a common language. Before I received a callback, when people spoke about what had gone on, it seemed like a mystical, unattainable world. Now that I have been through multiple auditions, I know how scary and exciting they can be.

Scene #3: Rehearsals

The rehearsal process can start a couple months before a show opens. It is a process involving the cast and the directing staff. There might also be a stage manager keeping everything in line and taking notes. There could even be a rehearsal accompanist to help with vocals. These people working together is another example of socialization in ISU's version of CHAT.

There are many texts and tools involved in the rehearsal process. Some texts are very important like the scripts and the schedule. The script is the map for the show. It is where cast members can write notes and learn what they are supposed to be doing during the show. Without the script, we, as a cast, would have been very lost. Without the schedule, no one would know what to do. The schedule determines what is being worked on and who needs to be where. It is a very important part of rehearsals, because without it, I probably wouldn't have ever shown up, and then I would've been kicked out of the show, and no one would want that.

We used other tools like dance and music to produce this text of the show. Without these, the rehearsal process would have just been us sitting around quietly, staring at each other. These are tools that the cast has to work hard to master. In order to do this, we used other tools like cameras to film the dances and allow us to practice later. We used pencils to write down instructions and notes. The rehearsals were a long process, but these available tools made it possible to improve and build this show.

We had many rules in the process, many of them seem obvious, but they are still necessary for the activity system to run smoothly. There were rules like don't talk when the directors are talking, because they needed to communicate with us and show us what to do. We needed to bring our tools like our dancing shoes and our scripts. We needed to show up on time and be ready to work. We needed to be kind, positive members of the activity system. These rules were mostly unspoken and taught by example. There were times, however, when the directors had to quiet the cast down or ask

us to be on time and focused. If you have never been in a show, discovering exactly how to behave is a learning process, but it's a very important part of the activity system.

The goal was to enable this cast to put on great performances by learning the music, blocking (instructions on where people are supposed to go on stage, like sitting down or falling at certain times during the show), and dancing. It prepared the cast to move to the stage and tell a magnificent story.

Scene #4: The Tech Side of Things

During this process, there are also many other people working on the show. They are people who understand their jobs very well. They are the crews that design the costuming, the sets, the sound and the lighting for the show. They take up the text of the script and repurpose it into the visual text of the show.

Figure 1: This is a picture of me in costume during the show. The costumes we wear help us be in character and fully represent the show.

They use many tools such as sewing machines, saws and drills, cords and soundboards, and lights and ladders. They also use texts like the director's vision through maps, charts, or pictures to guide them. Our director could have set *Evita* in the future and on Mars, instead of in 1940s Argentina. The costumers could have designed space suits and alien fashion. The set crew could have made a backdrop of a sprawling Martian landscape. However, in this case our director wanted it to be true to the original setting. The crew made balconies and costumes for the classes of Argentina. Figure 1 is a picture of me in a costume from the show, and as you can see, our designer didn't go for the Martian look.

When thinking about this in terms of ISU CHAT, we can see that representation is very important. That is the tech department's job: to represent the script and ideas on stage for the audience to see. They help the audience understand the text of the show. For example, Eva Perón dyed her hair blonde during her lifetime. So, in this show our costuming department gave everyone brown wigs to contrast with Eva and have her stand out (and it is Argentina, so most people had brown hair).

They also use texts like patterns for designing costumes and measurements of the actors. They might need instruction manuals for new equipment. There are endless

resources that could be used for the technology side of things, because it is just as important as any actor. As I've heard many people say, without the tech department, actors would just be crazy people, naked and alone in the dark, and I doubt people would pay to see that.

They also have rules like how to use the tools, how much money they can spend, and how much time they have. For instance, our costume designer only had so much money to spend renting costumes from other places. She also had many rules. For example, she wasn't supposed to run over her finger with the sewing machine. She also wasn't supposed to send anyone onstage unclothed. Every tech department had their own rules of these sorts in order to make the process run smoothly. I've been in shows like this one where we only had to find shoes, but I've also been in shows that made us find our costumes based on the director's instructions. Every show is different and has different expectations.

Rules like these may originate from the Muni board, or they could be decided on by the tech crew and the directing staff working together. Therefore, every show could have slightly different rules. For example, there are shows, like *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, where actors will wear riskier clothes, but the staff decides how things will run and what they want the budget and final product to be.

There are also many different literacies on the technical side of things. The terms used in costuming wouldn't make sense to some people. Some of the lighting terms, like the degrees of light or how to shutter lights, are not common knowledge, either.

Scene #5: The Run of the Show

The run of the show is the time from the first performance to the last. It involves the performers, the crew, and audience members. They are all working in harmony to accomplish the objective of performing and taking in the show.

There are tools like programs, food, seats, speakers, costumes, music, and tickets. The biggest text used during this part of community theatre would probably be the programs. Programs are their own **genre** of text. The genre of programs usually includes the cast list, the cast bios, the order of scenes in the show, and many advertisements. These programs are given to audience members upon entering and they use them many times. They can find out who plays the characters or what's next at any time they choose. It is a nice thing to have because it gives information and adds to the overall experience.

Figure 2: This photo shows my friends and I after the show was over. We were able to discuss the aspects of the text (the show) through socialization.

There are many rules for the audience members, like no talking during the show, turn off cellphones, and no flash photography. There are also rules for the cast. One big rule is that the show must go on. No matter what happens, we can't break character or stop performing. If we get off track, we have to bring it back and continue as if nothing has happened. (Unless it starts raining, then we run inside because it's an outdoor theatre.)

People come to see the show to enjoy it or to support their loved ones. At this moment, in terms of ISU CHAT, the show is getting distributed and people are receiving it. When the show is over, they get to take the text of the show and talk about it. This is also socialization.

Scene #6: Strike

The very last part of the community theatre process is the tear down, or strike as it's called in theatre. All the cast and crew help in order to do this in a timely manner the last night of the show.

There are some texts used. The stage manager posts a list of teams and jobs, so everyone knows what to do and how to help. Without this list, people would stand around and not know exactly where they should be. Things wouldn't move as quickly and wouldn't be as successful. Many other tools are used like drills, brooms, baskets, trash bags, and cleaning sprays to get the backstage area spotless and ready for whatever comes next.

There are some rules that come with the job. All of the wood used in the set needs to be stored or disposed of properly. The costumes need to be returned and cleaned. In order to do this, every cast member must bring their list of costume changes and costume pieces to the costumers and get "checked in." The floors and sawdust need to be swept. The props must be stored. The screws need to be picked up off the ground.

All of these things happen so that the next show can come in and we are out of their way. We also want to take care of the materials we have, so using them properly and then putting them away lets us use them longer and have better shows in the future. It also shows respect to the space, the people coming next, and the people who have worked so hard to build and gather all of the materials. If everything was destroyed after one use, it would be wasteful and unappreciative of the gifts given to us.

What Have We Learned?

During this breakdown of the activity system of community theatre, I realized how complex activity systems are. There is so much under the surface of everything we do. Hopefully moving forward, we can appreciate everything that goes into the activities we are a part of. Through production, reception, representation, and socialization, we saw a small peak at how CHAT is always working in the activity system of theatre. We also saw how different genres of texts are present in each system, such as scripts and programs in theatre. We can see all of the moving parts and understand exactly how we fit in. Hopefully we can better appreciate those things in play around us and act our roles in the many activity systems of life.

Allison Mool is currently a sophomore majoring in Molecular and Cellular Biology at Illinois State University. She is interested in going to medical school in the future. She is usually doing homework, but when she catches a break, she might be watching a Marvel movie or eating Dairy Queen.