

Understanding Language and Culture with Cultural Historical Activity Theory

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Drawing from his experience in ENG 145, an undergraduate writing course at Illinois State University, Kostecki breaks down the terminology of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Using the terminology of CHAT and conventions from examples, he explains how each of the terms can be used to form a better understanding of genres, writing situations, language, and culture. Tyler also uses CHAT to analyze some aspects of the healthcare field and its communicative practices.

Genre analysis is a process in which we analyze productions, or texts, to understand the language and cultural aspects that impact them (Walker 72).¹ At first, the concept of genre analysis can be difficult to understand. Like many of my peers, I had been “primed” by middle school and high school teachers to write in a specific way. This way of writing involved creating a paper in a “standardized” format that included an introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion. There is nothing wrong with this type of writing, but upon giving it more thought, I realized that I had been introduced to only one specific type of writing—one genre. In high school, all of the papers I wrote contained a similar format, audience, use of research, layout, and purpose. I now appreciate that being exposed to and encouraged to think through many different types of genres are a key to becoming a successful writer. Being familiar with different types of genres and analyzing them help writers make their productions, whether it is an article, advertisement, or casual email, more effective.

Utilizing genre analysis, I questioned how I would go about analyzing productions in my academic field before truly understanding it. This is a tough question, and a question that I could not answer until I was introduced

to Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). This theory was developed to help people think about the complexity of the production of all different kinds of texts. CHAT sets up a model and offers a way of understanding the complex nature of analyzing textual productions. This theory also helps people get a better understanding of language and culture (Walker 71-72). In her article entitled “Just CHATting,” Joyce Walker, the director of the Writing Program at Illinois State University, discusses the seven terms associated with CHAT: production, reception, representation, ecology, activity, socialization, and distribution. These terms can be used to investigate the factors that impact how, why, and when certain texts are created (Walker 72). CHAT is only one of many different ways that genre analysis can be done.

The terminology of CHAT can be very difficult to grasp, but applying these terms to texts in an academic field can be really helpful when conducting a genre analysis. During the process of analyzing a production, questions can be asked that pertain to each of the CHAT terms and many of the conventions of text, such as audience, language, layout, and organization. For example, the organization of an advertisement poster, a convention of text, can have a profound impact on how attracted people are to an advertisement poster. If shorter paragraphs and larger headings were used on the poster (aspects of the CHAT term “production”), it may have an impact on how many people take the time to read the poster and how well they understand what the poster is advertising. An endless amount of connections like this can be made to understand the reasons behind the creation of a text. Next, I will discuss the seven aspects of CHAT in more detail and then follow with a flowchart and a detailed example.

Production refers to all the aspects that went into creating the text. These can include tools, practices, materials, and other related elements (Walker 74). For example, if someone were to try and make a patient history form for medical doctors to use, they would have to consider whether they have sufficient materials to do so, such as a printer, ink, and computer. They would also have to think about the standard conventions of a patient history form, considering which formats and layouts should be used to make the form more familiar to patients. This would make the form easier to understand and fill out. Below are some questions that can be asked in order to think about how production can be applied when creating a genre analysis.

General

- What tools were used to create this text? Was a printer used? Was internet needed?
- Was the production created using a “standardized format?” What impact does this have?

- Is the text written in an informal or formal style? How was research cited in the text?
- What style of citation is used?

Layout

- What type of format is the article using and why might this be effective?
- If references were included, why were they placed in the text in this way?
- Are tables or charts used? Are page numbers included?

Organization

- Where are headings used? Why?
- How long is the document? What effect does this have?
- How long are the sentences and paragraphs?

Use of Research

- How many sources were needed to create the text? What difficulties may arise?
- How is the research presented in the text? Are endnotes used?
- How can the research be used to make the text more credible?

Representation refers to all of the ways the people who produce a text think about it and plan it (Walker 75). It also refers to all of the activities and materials that help make the creation of the text successful. For example, when creating an academic article, an author must carefully consider which academic journal they will try to publish their article in. This can have a huge impact on what type of audience will have access to the article. Representation might seem a little like production, and in reality, there is a lot of overlap between the two terms. Below are some questions that can help distinguish between the terms.

General

- Is the text found online or in a printed form? How might difficulties arise because of this?
- Are there restrictions to who can access the text?

Audience

- What is the text's purpose? What does it inform the audience about?
- Is there an audience impact on the terminology chosen by the author of the text?

Language

- How much jargon is used throughout the text? What aspects might impact how much jargon is used?

Layout

- Is the format standardized at all? Why might using this type of format benefit those who read the text?

Reception deals with how the text is perceived by the audience and how it can influence them (Walker 75). Many factors can have an impact on what sort of impression the reader is left with after reading the article. For example, if a text includes too much jargon, the reader may not be able to understand what the author is trying to say.

Audience

- What is the educational background of the audience? How might this impact how well the audience understands the text?
- What effect does the topic have on the perceptions of the audience?
- How might the author alter audience reception?
- Where was the document found or presented to the audience? If the article was hard to access, how might this alter reception?
- Were professional organizations mentioned in the text?

Layout

- Is the audience familiar with the format?
- How long is the text? How might this alter audience reception?

Visuals

- If pictures, tables, diagrams, or charts were provided in the text, how might they have altered reception?

Language

- In what way does jargon alter audience reception?

Distribution is concerned about whom the text is given to and where the text can be found. It also talks about how the text is distributed, or given, to people (Walker 75). For example, a text could be distributed by mail, the internet, plane, phone, or boat. The way a text is distributed can impact what materials were used to make the text, what audience can access the text, and how many different types of interactions can take place between people because of the text.

General

- How might distribution of the text become easier?
- What trends in technology have an effect on the way the text is distributed? Does access to the internet have an effect?

Audience

- What difficulties may arise when trying to distribute the text to the audience?
- Depending on if the text can be found online, in a printed journal, or in other public areas, does it have an impact on the type of audience that can access it (Walker 75)?
- If the text was distributed through the internet, how might this make it easier for people to share their thoughts and interact with one another about the text?

Organization

- Is the way the text is distributed impacted by how the text is organized, such as the length of the text?

Socialization refers to the interactions of people that were initiated by the creation or reading of the text. When people are engaged in the text, they consciously and unconsciously engage in other types of language and cultural practices (Walker 76). An example of socialization is when a woman reads a brochure on heart disease. The information in the brochure causes the woman to think about her health and the risk factors that are associated with the disease. Wanting to learn more, the woman calls a number that the brochure provided. She then talks with a local cardiologist and sets up an appointment. Reading the brochure, a specific type of genre, initiated the interaction of the woman and the cardiologist. This is an example of socialization.

General

- What event initiated the text?
- Is a “call to action” provided in the text? How might this affect how the information in the text is distributed throughout a community?
- What aspects do people who read the text become more aware about?

Language

- Does the text help people communicate with each other?
- Are blogs or other types of language started as a result of reading the text?

Citations/References

- How might references included in the text bring about more research by people who have read the text?

Ecology refers to the biological and environmental forces that exist and impact many factors of the text (Walker 76). Ecology can impact how the text is produced and how it is distributed. For example, if someone wanted to read a scientific journal article that was only available in a library located 100 miles from their home, then the likelihood of that person accessing the article would decrease. Now if the journal article was available in that person's local library just 5 minutes away, then the likelihood of that person accessing the article would increase.

General

- How might weather have an impact on the text or on someone's access to the text (Walker 76)?
- Are there any ecological costs when producing the text? For example, how much ink or paper is needed to create and distribute the document (Walker 76)?

Audience

- If the text is available online, how might not having access to internet or technology impact the audience accessing the text?
- Is the text located at a public building such as a library? How might living far from this public place impact whether the text is read?
- If the text is located on an online academic journal, is membership (and thus a login and password) needed? How might this narrow the audience of the text?

Layout

- How might the "history" of the format that is used in the production impact the format choices the author makes?

Activity is concerned with the actual activities that people engage in when they are creating the text (Walker 76). An example is when an author reads multiple published articles on a specific academic database to learn about the format and other text conventions used by the articles included on the database. Connecting activity to specific conventions of text can be difficult, but there are some general questions that can be used to understand activity.

General

- What aspects or activities inspired the author to create the text?
- Did the author perform research when creating the text? What kind?

- Did creating the text increase the knowledge of the author on the topic?
- If the text was published, what steps were taken by the author in order to get the text published? For example, was the text peer-reviewed?
- Is a “call to action” included in the text? How does this facilitate activity among the community? In other words, does the text inspire those who read it to make a difference in the world?

The terminology of CHAT can be confusing at first, but applying these terms to a specific genre can help guide an analysis of that genre and help writers learn more about a text and the culture and activity of the field in which it was created. In order to understand the language and culture of a specific field in which a text was produced, it can be also useful to think about the connections between each of the CHAT terms. In other words, a writer can learn how each of the terms interacts with another to form a better understanding of language, culture, genre, and the writing situation. Consider the format and layout of an academic article and how those conventions affect and are affected by the production, reception, representation, ecology, and activity of the text. As you can see in Figure 1 below, these terms can interact in a number of ways.

So, why does all of this matter? Why should we even bother to use CHAT to analyze genres? I asked myself these questions when I began conducting my first genre analysis. I could not think of a reason why genre analysis could help me in my own academic discipline of healthcare. As I began my analysis, I started connecting all of the CHAT terms together and I realized that CHAT could help me understand the communication—including aspects of language and culture—that happens in healthcare. For example, something as simple as a patient prescription form can connect different types of health care professionals with one another. After a physician writes out a prescription, the patient can give the prescription form to a pharmacist. The prescription form initiates an interaction between both the physician and pharmacist and tells the pharmacist what drug and dosage the physician wants for his patient.

To apply CHAT to my field, I analyzed a patient history form using the CHAT concept of **socialization**; I found that the form facilitates face-to-face interactions. As I listed earlier, one of the questions that can be asked when applying socialization to a genre is, “Does the text help people communicate with each other?” The form itself initiates communication between physicians and patients when they come together to discuss the questions and topics that are included on the form.

CHAT also helped me realize that there are many different kinds of people who interact in the field. When I analyzed a prescription form, I considered whether or not the form was “standardized” and what sort of impact the format had on the production of the document. Using the CHAT

Type of production: Academic Article

Specific convention of the text: Format/Organization

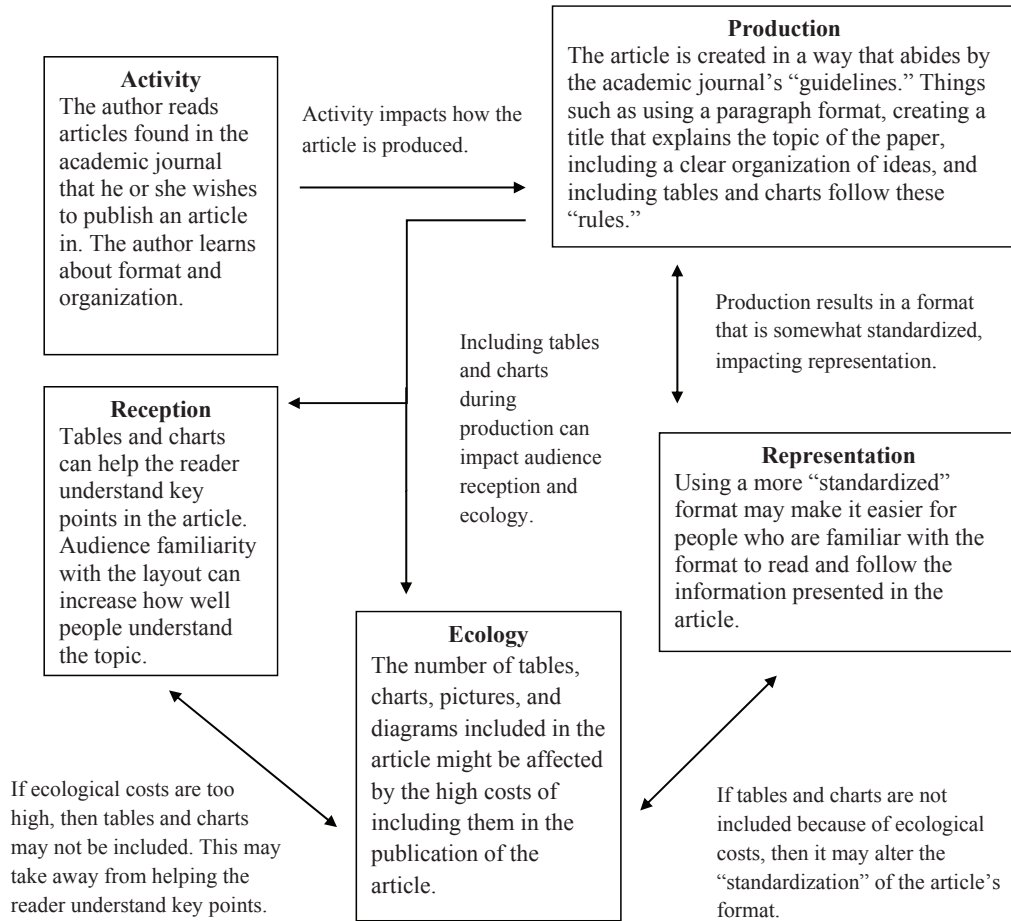


Figure 1: CHAT Flowchart

term **production**, I could see that characteristics of the prescription form, such as the size, the amount of check boxes and lines, and even where the space for a physician signature was located all fit into the "standardized" format of a historic patient history form. The "standardization" of this form makes the text easier to understand by many health care professionals.

In addition, CHAT helped me understand what sort of communication technologies and skills are used by professionals in healthcare. Using **distribution**, I noted how many different types of technology are used to distribute productions in the field, including print advertisements, phone calls, and the internet. I also saw how the use of medical technologies, such as an electrocardiogram (EKG), could make the distribution of information about

a patient's heart easier and more effective. Furthermore, the effectiveness and accessibility of the texts can be affected by how they are distributed. For example, if a person had an emergency, it would be much more effective to make a phone call and dial 911 rather than send an email to a nurse and wait for a response.

Another thing I learned is the importance of communication skills needed by professionals to distribute information clearly and effectively to patients. When a healthcare professional has an appointment with a patient, he or she must be able to present information in the best way possible. They can achieve this by emphasizing certain words or using hand gestures to make important points. These actions affect how well the message, or text, is distributed and impact the patient's **reception** of the production. If the healthcare professional uses too much medical jargon, the patient may have a hard time understanding the information.

All in all, features of CHAT can be used to analyze many specific productions, including a professional field and its communicative practices. It also can be used to better understand language and culture within that field. Professionals use genres in their field every day to facilitate the normal practices and types of communication that occur, and investigating these productions can help us better understand these communications.

Reference

1. Walker, Joyce. "Just CHATting." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* 1. (2010): 71-80. Web. 17 Feb. 2012. Available at <http://isuwriting.com/resources/grassroots/>.



Tyler Kostecki is an undergraduate student at Illinois State University (Class 2013) majoring in Biological Sciences. He is planning on pursuing a Master's Degree in Physician Assistant Studies. Some of the information in this piece has come from his experience volunteering for local hospitals and clinics in the Bloomington-Normal community and his hometown.