

Baking Reinvented: Strategies and Tips from a Pro

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In this article, Kotowski analyzes how Pedagogical Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (P-CHAT), Antecedent Knowledge, and Trajectory are incorporated in the process of baking. She gives insight to her family's baking traditions, including their kolachy cookie recipe, to illustrate her desire for readers to try the recipe with their own families.

Batter Up!

“This is my invariable advice to people: Learn how to cook—try new recipes, learn from your mistakes, be fearless and above all have fun,” says Julia Child, a cooking teacher, author, and TV personality. Child received many awards and nominations some of which include being a Cookbook Hall of Fame Inductee by the James Beard Foundation in 1987, and receiving the Culinary Institute of America's first female Hall of Fame inductee in 1993, and the Best National Television Cooking Show by the James Beard Foundation in 1996. Now I am not saying we can all achieve this, but what I am saying is we should all try something new and maybe some good will come out of it. Whether it is cooking or baking I have found my passion. Getting to create something, even if it turns out to be a failure, I get to see the end result, and I have fun.

Cooking and baking are relaxing activities that allow you to spend time with family, as well as let you expand on previous traditions that came before you with new flavors and styles. In this article, I am going to use Pedagogical Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (P-CHAT) terms to better understand

and to show the process of baking. According to the ISU Writing Program, P-CHAT is defined as a way to help us think about and study complex genres that we encounter in simpler, smaller concepts (ISU Writing Program). P-CHAT is a system that was created to help students better understand how humans engage in producing and using texts in the world. P-CHAT can also be helpful for students who wish to better apply knowledge they learn in class to real world applications. In this article I am going to focus on the P-CHAT terms Production, Activity, Representation, Reception, and Socialization. By looking at baking through the lens of P-CHAT, I'm hoping to show how it can work to unpack activities we engage in every day, and hopefully illustrate how you might use P-CHAT to think about other parts of your life outside of your writing classes.

The Evolution

Now, before I go more in depth as to how P-CHAT is related to baking, I think it is important that I define some other terms first. First, let's start with something simple. A **Genre** as defined by the ISU Writing Program to be "a kind of production that is possible to identify by understanding the convention or features that make those productions recognizable." This definition of genre is different from the traditional meaning of genre because the traditional definition of genre is a style of writing authors choose to write in. Some of these traditional genres could include comedy, drama, fiction, nonfiction, etc. However, in this article, I will use the ISU Writing Program genre definition by looking at the genre of baking. Baking is a type of genre that when you look behind the scenes at the end result you see how a dish was produced as well as how the features were pulled together to make the final product possible. In addition, there are subgenres within baking, such as cakes vs. breads. The features used to create these items include specific tools, things such as ingredients, measuring tools, a mixer, and an oven.

Genre is not the only thing that you need to understand before you can start getting your hands dirty. Another term that I think will come in handy when baking is **antecedent knowledge**. This is a term used to describe all the things a writer already knows about the topic being discussed. Antecedent knowledge can influence how you approach new genres and can be important to the end result coming out the way you imagined. There are certain skills that you need to know before you begin, such as how an oven and mixer work—and how to use them—understanding basic measurements, and knowing the correct way to read a recipe. All of these skills can drastically impact the way your end result turns out. Sometimes people use antecedent

knowledge without even being aware of it, so considering what you already know and do not know before starting a project can really help the outcome. Another aspect worth considering is where your antecedent knowledge comes from and how you acquired it. Antecedent knowledge can be used in baking by remembering terms that you use while cooking and applying it in a different, but still similar way.

Traditions can help you find where the recipes originated as well as where your antecedent knowledge came from. According to Merriam-Webster, **traditions** are long established customs or beliefs that have been passed down from one generation to another. In my experience, I have many traditions that my family and I have been doing over the years, some that I was not even aware of until I started to think about what we do every year. When looking back at the traditions my family and I do every year around the holidays, I think of decorating the Christmas tree, watching the movie *ELF*, decorating gingerbread houses, making kolaches, and so forth. Since all of these traditions have been taking place over several years there is a lot of memories and history behind them. For me, it is getting to spend time with family. Despite the yearly traditions, something new always happens that makes us laugh, cry and smile all at the same time, creating new memories for us to share for years to come. Behind all the fun times, what we do not see is the history of where these traditions and recipes came from. The recipes may have come from our grandparents or older ancestors, whom may have lived and created these recipes and memories in the past, which can makes us feel as if they're with us as we make some of the same foods. I believe that sharing traditions with the ones you love helps to show who you are and where you came from in the best light.

In addition to all the traditions that have taken place around birthdays, holidays, and weddings, many of these types of events are where large gatherings take place between family and friends bringing different cultures and communities together. When cooking and baking recipes are shared with others of different cultures and backgrounds it opens their perspectives to the ways of others. Discussing differences with people of different cultures opens up new and interesting conversations that may not have taken place originally.

But sometimes sharing recipes that have been in a family for a long time can feel risky. Some recipes may be more precious to the family or creator, so the family may be unsure of whether or not they wish to share. Precious recipes like this are usually the original recipes that start an entire tradition of saving and sharing recipes within a family. However, there are some recipes that families like to share with others to see what kind of

different spices they can add or alter to change the whole flavor profile of the dish. Moreover, most recipes that have been passed down in the family for generations start out handwritten but over time recipes wear and tear, these might get transferred to a digital file or rewritten and printed out. Because of advancements in technology more and more recipes these days are typed and printed and then handed out to other friends and families or shared online. What I am getting at here is the way that these recipes are distributed and passed around continues even though the initial recipe may change slightly.

Knowing your past and keeping traditions alive are not the only secret to making new memories. Over the years things and people change based on many factors such as personality, where you live, if you traveled, etc. A term that the ISU Writing Program uses that I believe really shows us these changes is called trajectory. **Trajectory** is a way for us to understand “what texts/genres do and how they move around the world” (ISU Writing Program). In simpler terms, it describes the shifts and changes that occur in a genre as it gets used over time. Tradition and trajectory share similar characteristics but differ in an important way. Traditions describe your past, but trajectory describes how those traditions change over generations. Trajectory looks more at how genres are produced and distributed by different generations over time. For example, when baking at my house everyone has different styles and flavors that influence or change the trajectory of a recipe. A popular cookie recipe that my family and I make around Christmas time is a kolachy. A kolachy is a polish cookie that is folded with jam in the center. When you take a bite of the cookie it melts in your mouth and makes you want more. This recipe has been adapted over time, such as the amount of jam in the center, flavor of the cookie, size of the cookie, and some batches even seem different with some more crumbly than others. These are just a few of ways that a family recipe has turned into a tradition and the recipe’s trajectory has evolved.

Let’s CHAT Baking

In this section, I want to share more about the process of baking my previously mentioned kolachy cookies. This process does not take simply an hour like a batch of Tollhouse chocolate chip cookies. The process of making the dough, letting it chill in the fridge, rolling it, cutting out the squares, filling it with jam, folding it, and putting it in the oven, takes time. Patience is key in this recipe! Before I start to explain the process, I want you all to be aware of some terms I am going to be using from the P-CHAT theory. These include production, activity, representation, reception, and socialization. With these



Figure 1: Preparation process of rolling out the dough to be cut into squares for them to be filled.

terms in mind, I will define them, and give you examples as to how they are used in making the kolachy cookies.

First let's start with the P-CHAT term production. **Production** is the tools/materials and practices you need to make the kolachy cookies from Suzy Crofton's recipe down below. Such tools include a mixer, measuring spoons, measuring cups, the ingredients, and lastly miscellaneous tools, for example, a spatula, spoons, knives, a bench scraper, a rolling pin, etc. Along with production, a term that I previously mentioned that could be helpful in this process is using your antecedent knowledge of things like how does the mixer work or how to use measuring spoons/cups.

Our next P-CHAT term is activity. **Activity** is the physical action or process that an individual does to make the cookies. In creating kolachy cookies, for example, gathering the ingredients, combining the ingredients, mixing them together, rolling out the dough, filling it with jam, and putting it in the oven, are all steps in the recipe that involve the activity of baking the cookies.

Representation is our next P-CHAT term and is defined by how you plan to carry the recipe out and what materials can help you do that. For example, representation can involve following the recipe's instructions, thinking about the mise en place (or "putting everything together" in English). In other words, you need to think about the prep needed to be done

before you can start baking and consider how the tools/materials listed above can be used.

Our next P-CHAT term is reception. **Reception** is how others might react to the gesture (of being given the cookies, in this case), how they use it (eating it, of course!), and how others might use or repurpose it. How others might use or repurpose the recipe or the cookie itself can become a tradition by making them every year, when they are passed down from generation to generation, or the creators make their own spin on the style or flavor of the cookie.

Distribution is another P-CHAT term that I would like to talk about. **Distribution** involves how a text is given to others and who takes them up. For example, how might the recipes shared at a holiday gathering be distributed to others, such as through text, email, or paper, as a handwritten recipe on a recipe card? Also, distribution can extend further than just sharing with your family and friends. It could be shared with the world through a blog post or a YouTube video demonstrating how to cook or bake a recipe.

The last P-CHAT term I am going to talk about is socialization. **Socialization** can be defined by the interactions between people as they produce/create the cookies, distribute them to others, and use them (to eat). Furthermore, socialization can unintentionally be spread through social

media. For example, recipes can be shared through videos on TikTok, Pinterest, blogs, or even YouTube. While producing or making the cookies you get to spend time with family and make memories and really bond with them in ways you might not have been able to before. When you distribute the cookies to others—for example other family members, grandparents or cousins interact with each other and thank you for the generous gift. Of course, you can't forget the part where you get to indulge and eat the delicious cookies. When others engage with the cookies and the people who made them, they are consciously and unconsciously engaged in the practice of representing and transforming different kinds of social and cultural practices. For example,



Figure 2: Nothing better than waking up to make a batch of cookies!

they are engaging in how a recipe changes and transforms from generation to generation with people’s different styles and flavors of their take on the family recipe and tradition.

Don’t Forget the Crumbs!

So, now that you have learned that recipes (and the cookies that result from them) can be a genre, and how the P-CHAT terms apply to a genre as different as this, I hope you consider some of your passions as genres and see if you might apply P-CHAT terms to them as well. Throughout this article you learned about baking, traditions, and some English tools that can be applied to pretty much anything. But why? Why might it have been important for you to learn all this? I think the most important aspect of thinking about our everyday activities through P-CHAT is to better understand that some of the same skills we apply to learning to bake cookies, or write and revise recipes, are also utilized when we are learning to write something new for school, or for work. Trying to understand the approaches and important features of these texts through P-CHAT might make it less confusing and scary. Like with baking, you might find that you learn something new and get to be creative.

I also chose to write about baking because it was my hope that you and your family have some baking or cooking traditions of your own that you want to continue. By making these recipes that have been shared with family and friends, and passed down over time, you are carrying on a legacy, and keeping the memory of loved ones alive while you carry on their recipes for generations to come.

As an added bonus I have attached the popular kolachy cookie recipe that my family and I make every year around the Christmas holiday. I hope you consider the challenge of making this a new cookie tradition in your own homes! After all, no one said it better than Julia Child, “The only real stumbling block is fear of failure. In cooking [and baking!] you’ve got to have a what-the-hell attitude.”



Figure 3: Holiday tradition at the Kotowski House!

Kolachy Cookie Recipe

Preparation time: 40 minutes *Chilling time:* 4 hours or overnight

Cooking time: 15 minutes per batch *Yield:* About 25 cookies

- 1 cup (2 sticks) of unsalted butter, softened
 - 4 ounces of mascarpone or cream cheese, softened
 - 1½ cups of all-purpose flour
 - ⅛ of a teaspoon of Salt
 - ⅛ of a teaspoon of Sugar
 - ½ cup of preserves (the filling)
 - Confectioners' sugar (the garnish)
1. Put butter in bowl of electric mixer. Beat on medium speed until butter is light and fluffy, about two minutes. Add mascarpone/cream cheese; beat until smooth and well incorporated, about two minutes. Beat in flour, salt, and sugar just until most of the flour is combined. Stir by hand until all flour is incorporated (this is to ensure you are not overmixing!), result will be tough if overbeating or overmixing occurs. Flatten the dough into a disc; wrap in plastic wrap. Chill for four hours or overnight.
 2. Heat oven to 350 degrees. Divide dough in half; return one half to the refrigerator. Roll dough out on a lightly floured surface to about 1/8 of an inch thick. Cut dough into three-inch squares with a sharp knife. Put the squares on an ungreased cookie sheet; place 1 teaspoon of preserves in the center of each square. Fold each corner to the center of the square; press lightly into preserves (with water to ensure it doesn't break open). Repeat with the remaining dough.
 3. Bake in batches until very lightly browned, fourteen-to-sixteen minutes. Let sit on cookie sheet for five minutes. Remove cookies to a cooling rack. Generously sprinkle with confectioners' sugar while still warm. Enjoy!



Figure 4: Congrats you made kolachys!

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