

## Let's Sit Down for a Talk

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Captive audiences are some of the trickiest kinds of audiences to write for. They do not always receive information positively. But Holdsworth finds that the Illinois State University (ISU) Health Promotion and Wellness office is calculated in their representation of important information to encourage positive audience uptake. In this article, Holdsworth discovers how they use "Toilet Talks" to communicate important messages about general health, safety, and well-being to the ISU campus.

I am scratching my head as I start this article, mostly because I am not sure how to approach the taboo topic of reading in the bathroom. I'm going against my private nature (and sense of decency) to talk openly about a subject that would make my grandmother blush. For the past several months, my classmates at Illinois State University (ISU) who knew about my writing research project over ISU's Health Promotion and Wellness "Toilet Talks" have been saying things like, "Every time I go to the bathroom here, I think about you." That was never my intention, and I will be relieved when people wipe away thoughts of me every time they step into a stall. *So why am I talking about reading in the bathroom?* Honestly, I am fascinated by the genius idea behind them: a beneficial message is distributed to a *captive*, but targeted, audience. Everyone uses the bathroom, and a bathroom goer will read what is on the wall. Message delivered.

### Go Away. I'm Busy.

When I usually think of the activity of bathroom reading, I think about novels or other interesting reads, or reads one would only feel comfortable perusing

inside the private, sacred space of the home bathroom. There is even a series of books dedicated to bathroom reading. I used to browse through the *Uncle John's Bathroom Reader* series, a popular book series which contains information geared towards trivia (see Figure 1) because I greatly enjoyed the random facts about word origins, presidents, town names, etc. People take novels, magazines, even phones (gross) into the bathroom to accomplish some solid reading for enjoyment. No matter the form, bathroom reading is usually based on personal choice.

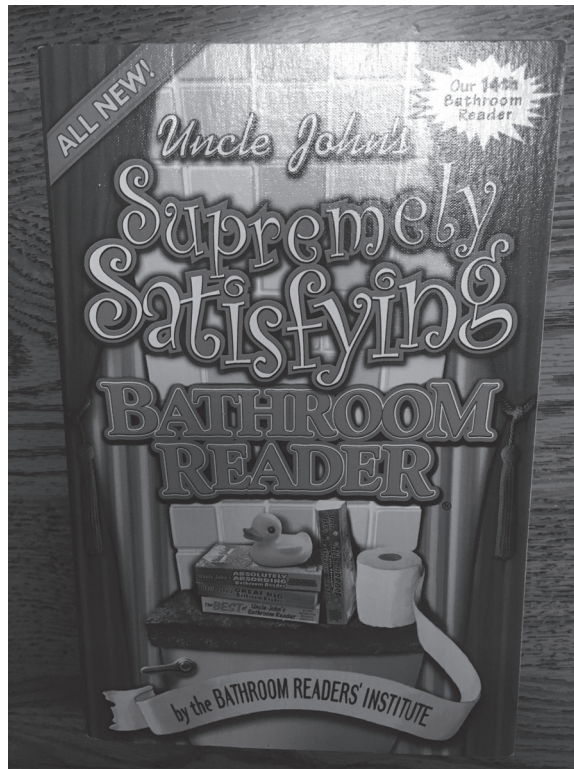


Figure 1: A book in the *Uncle John's Bathroom Reader* series.

## I Have to Share a Bathroom with Forty Other Women?!

My first memorable encounter with “Toilet Talks” was over ten years ago when I was an undergraduate student. These fliers are distributed inside a plexi-glass case on the door of each stall of the bathrooms of the dormitories, student center, library, and classroom buildings (see Figure 2 below). It was the distribution of the “Toilet Talks” fliers that got me interested initially. (**Distribution**, a term in cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), is the forum in which a writer chooses to place his or her work. For example, some writers distribute writing online on blogs, while others use print books, or writers may distribute writing in pamphlets or fliers, like the “Toilet Talks”).

To me, the “Toilet Talk” placement was great because I felt weird taking a novel inside of the bathroom, but I did not want to give up my bathroom reading. At that point in my life, I was very interested in self-improvement, and I found the “Toilet Talks” to be informative and beneficial to the transition of being a college student. The graphics were friendly, and the content was interesting even if it did not always directly apply to me.

The goal of the “Toilet Talks” was evident: the authors wanted the ISU community, mainly students, to benefit from concise and pertinent information about living a healthy lifestyle. In other words, the writers were hoping the audiences’ **reception** (a CHAT term referring to how a reader, not always the intended audience, will apply and possibly repurpose a text) of the “Toilet Talks” would result in positive change for the reader. In my case, I had a positive uptake of the “Toilet Talks.” I used the information they provided to change my habits and better my health.

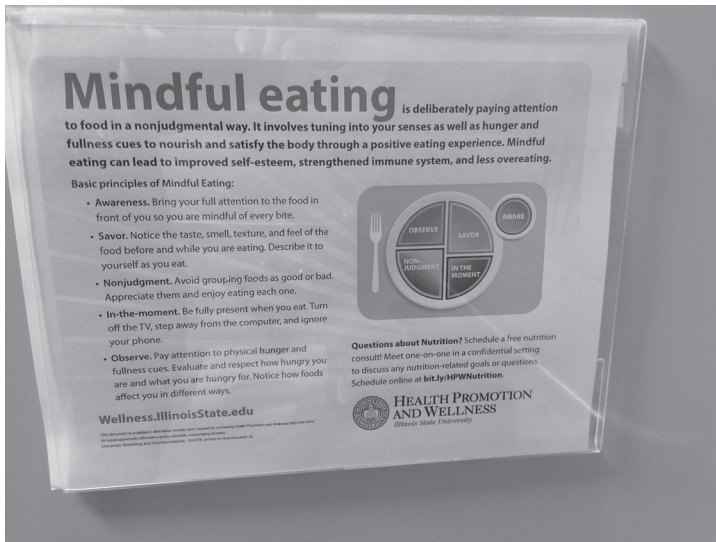


Figure 2: A real-life “Toilet Talk” picture taken in the bathroom stall at Stevenson Hall!

## The Approach of “The Throne of Discovery”

Fast forward ten-plus years to my tenure as a high school English teacher. I recently took the position of National Honor Society (NHS) advisor, and I was helping students brainstorm projects to better the academic environment of our high school. Then inspiration hit me: Like the ISU “Toilet Talks,” our NHS students could involve themselves in the **production** (a CHAT term that refers to the people and tools used to create texts—in our case it would be NHS students and Google Docs) and distribution of fliers in our school bathrooms. My rationale was that if kids were going to miss class to use the bathroom, they

ought to be learning something. I thought we could have a team produce a new topic each month, with student members splitting the writing tasks up to create something fun and useful for the student body to read. At the time, I did not necessarily think it needed to pertain solely to health and wellness as ISU's had.

The genius struck. We would call it "The Throne of Discovery<sup>1</sup>." What I envisioned was a collision of two similar genres: the ISU "Toilet Talks" and trivia bathroom reading. The formatting and distribution of the "Thrones of Discovery" would be like the "Toilet Talks," but the content would resemble *Uncle John's Bathroom Reader*. One of the goals of the NHS club is to transform the academic environment of the school positively, and "The Thrones of Discovery" could be one way our organization could change the social practices of the school. CHAT defines **socialization**, in part, as transforming social and cultural practices. NHS student writers could research what the student body needs, and they could work to influence the practices of students. My hope was that students would have a reception of the "Thrones" that created a stronger academic environment. Like the "Toilet Talks" aiming to change students' health behavior at ISU, the goal of the "Thrones of Discovery" would be to encourage good study habits and to gain other useful academic knowledge. Our fliers would be a means towards positive socialization.

I shared the "Thrones" idea with my NHS students, and I got a few half-hearted smiles and a few groans. The students were willing to give it a try, but they wanted to know how they would produce such a text. To answer their question, I decided to look more closely at how the ISU Health Promotion and Wellness department made choices to produce and distribute its "Toilet Talks." I wanted to know how the writing **activity** (a CHAT term referring to the people and practices involved in the pre-life to post-life of a text) used to produce "Toilet Talks" could help the NHS students produce "The Thrones of Discovery."

I began my writing research with these questions:

- How did the Illinois State Health Promotion and Wellness department choose content to create social change in students or socialization?
- Why would they opt to distribute important health information via "Toilet Talks" vs. using a website?

## Plunging Towards the Goal

I hoped my research into the activities of the "Toilet Talk" fliers would lead to a solid answer for my students' production of "The Thrones." I wanted to be able to guide them in production and distribution. I hoped at the end of my research I could show students how to write a text that had the

precision of content like the “Toilet Talk” but contained academic trivia like an *Uncle John’s Bathroom Reader*. Thinking through the goals of the written text would help with our **representation**, or the way we think about and make plans to create a text. While both styles seek to inform, I believed *Uncle John’s* goal in representation of their content was to entertain individuals in a varied audience (the audience is uncertain), and “Toilet Talks” goal in representation was to disseminate valuable health information to a university campus. The *Uncle John’s Bathroom Reader’s* audience would have a quiver of random facts, but “Toilet Talks” are designed to result in a change of behavior (socialization). *Which one would be best for the socialization goals of the National Honor Society?* My answer became clear as I began my research.

Tracking down information was not difficult. I busted into a bathroom stall in Stevenson Hall one evening after my graduate class, and I took a picture of a “Toilet Talk” before anyone could see that I was taking pictures in the bathroom. (*Taking selfies in front of the mirror is one thing . . .*) The “Toilet Talk” listed the Health Promotion and Wellness website, and from there I found the contact information of Erin Link, the Coordinator of Communication and Marketing for Health Promotion and Wellness. Because I had limited time to meet in person, I asked Ms. Link if she would be willing to answer some questions I had via email, and she agreed.

While I waited for her responses, I did some digging on my own. According to my very scientific Google search (keyword searching “Toilet Talks”), “Toilet Talks” are part of a university initiative to spread awareness of health and wellness. And, Illinois State University’s program was one of the top hits of my search. There are currently sixty-four “Toilet Talk” flier archives available on the ISU Health Promotion and Wellness website<sup>2</sup>. They cover a variety of topics such as healthy eating habits, sexual wellness, alcohol consumption, and social health, etc.

Ms. Link responded to my questions, and I was surprised by the amount of work in representation, or planning, for the “Toilet Talks.” The content of the fliers is all researched based on, and specific to, the needs of ISU’s campus, and the goal of the “Toilet Talk” fliers is to “fulfill an important need for ongoing education on important health and wellness-related topics” (Link). She wrote that a collection of data from such sources as the National College Health Assessment Survey<sup>3</sup> determines topics. This survey asks ISU students if they have received information on issues of health and safety as well as if they would be interested in receiving information. Ms. Link also wrote that the team of writers is aware of “emerging issues or occurrences that need to be addressed.” Ms. Link believes that the “Toilet Talk” fliers are impacting the intended audience, the entire campus community. In other words, Ms. Link believes that the reception has aligned with the intended goal determined during representation. One of

the questions I posed to her was, “What kind of impact do you believe the ‘Toilet Talks’ are making?” She replied, “We know that people are making behavior changes based on the information, or it is at least moving them along the Stages of Change, helping them move closer towards the action taking phase.” I did a quick online search to find that the Stages of Change is a psychological theory that moves a person from a harmful behavior to a safe one<sup>4</sup>. Based on my personal experience as an undergraduate student years ago, I would agree. I thought the information on the “Toilet Talks” were helpful and easy to implement. While my habits were not necessarily harmful, I benefited from the tips such as those on studying well and reporting sexual assault. The “Toilet Talk” writers hope to develop a more direct and designed system to gain feedback from readers in the future but don’t currently have a system in place to assess impact (Link). They want to know from us if the “Toilet Talks” help.

After reading Cody Parish’s ‘the shit house poet strikes again’: Trials and Revelations of Bathroom Graffiti Writing,” a *Grassroots* article on graffiti at ISU, I wondered if any person had written on an actual “Toilet Talk” in response to the content. In several of Parish’s encounters with graffiti, people had responded to one another much like the commentary on Facebook posts (146). “Toilet Talks” are more protected than the “open commenting” of graffiti on a stall wall. The fliers are positioned behind plexi-glass, which would require more effort for students to remove and write on them. Ms. Line responded in our email exchange that, in fact, some people had written directly on the fliers as well as drawn on them. When Health Promotion and Wellness student workers change the “Talks,” they bring the ones with messages to the writing team so that they can discuss any ways the fliers should change based on feedback. Link wrote:

For instance, on a campus safety message some people thought that the graphic made it look like the police officer was drawing his gun. While the officer was not, we had enough people provide this feedback that we recreated the message with a different graphic since the graphic was deterring from the actual content of the message.

This serves as an excellent example of how a visual can affect the intended reception of writing; the audience focused more on what the flier didn’t actually say in the text instead of benefitting from the message. The “Toilet Talks” are never designed to support violence, but perhaps because of the current upswing of social unrest regarding police brutality, people were influenced to see what they wanted to see. As I prepared to venture out to the bathroom stalls myself, I wondered and hoped I would encounter written responses on the “Toilet Talks.” Now that I had a solid understanding of the representation and reception of the “Toilet Talks,” I was ready to do my fieldwork investigating the bathroom stalls.

I could not enter the men's restrooms on campus, so I knew I would need to ask a few friends to help me. I decided to ask some friends who I went to ISU with during my undergraduate years, and one of those friends had written a *Grassroots* article before, so I knew he would not think my research demands were too strange. He also worked on campus, so he could see the ever-evolving "Toilet Talks" and update me since I am only at ISU one night a week.

I assembled my research team of two via exuberant text messaging, asking if they would like to "relieve our undergrad days" and "couldn't they spare an hour or two for a friend," and after they said yes, I asked if they could go in the men's restrooms at ISU while I went into the women's. (I still owe them coffee for agreeing to it.) We met at 9 a.m. at Stevenson Hall on a Saturday to avoid the student traffic (none of us wanted to explain why we were visiting each stall).

I will admit to you, I was hoping to unearth some shocking secret, some dirty fact, some kind of plot twist, but building after building, we found the exact same three "Toilet Talks" in all of the restrooms: A homecoming tailgating invite from ISU Health Promotion and Wellness, "How to be a Sexual Assault Ally," and "Mindful Eating." There were no gendered differences except for one instance where "How to be a Sexual Assault Ally" was missing entirely from a men's restroom (see Figure 3 for a picture of the "How to be a Sexual Assault Ally" flier).

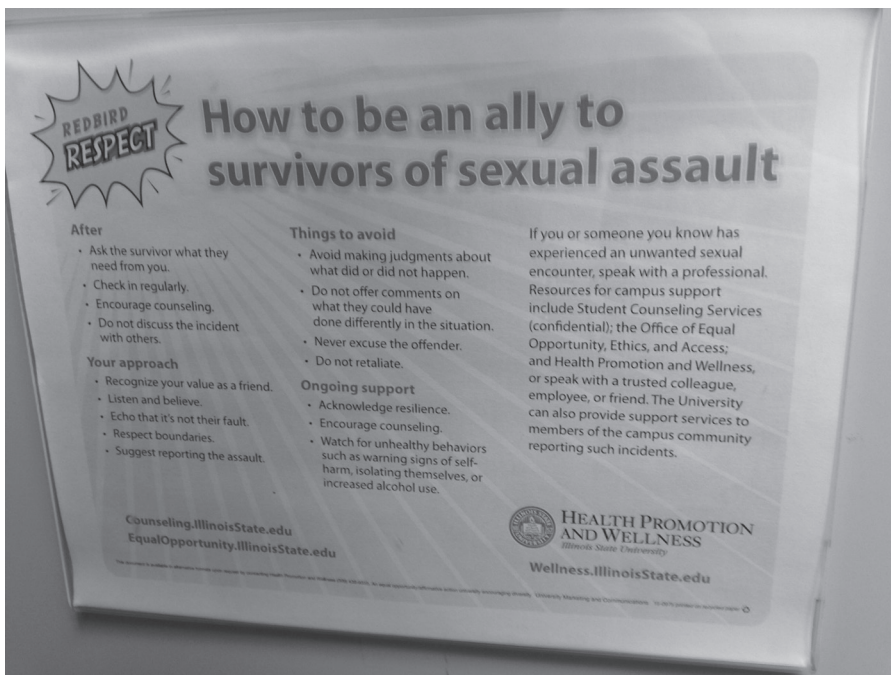


Figure 3: A "Toilet Talk" that was not present in one men's restroom in Stevenson Hall.

Regardless of which university building we were in, all the “Toilet Talks” were the same and fairly evenly distributed. After I parted ways with my research team, and one of them muttered something like “no worries, this is true friendship,” I poked my head into a few more buildings on South Campus. I noticed that in the Center for Performing Arts (CPA), no fliers were posted. I emailed Ms. Link to find out why. She responded that the CPA has many off-campus guests—families, community members, and since it was not an academic building, they did not request to put “Toilet Talks” in there. This solidifies that the intended audience is the daily campus traffic rather than university visitors and that the “Toilet Talks” are geared towards meeting needs specific to what the Health Promotion and Wellness determined while researching for the test, an activity of representation.

### **Are You About Done in There?**

So, what is the difference between trivial bathroom reading and a “Toilet Talk”? Plenty. Let’s consider Joyce Walker’s definition of distribution: “Distribution involves the consideration of who a text is given to, for what purposes, using what kinds of distribution tools” (75). Let’s revisit the distinction made earlier. Bathroom reading is the choice of the individual. People choose the texts they want to bring in the space of the bathroom for their own personal enjoyment. So, if bathroom reading is a choice made by the reader, it might not be best for the writers of the “Thrones” to seek to entertain because tastes in entertainment are so different. Just try to play a rap song for a die-hard country fan (like my dad) and see what happens. Health Promotion and Wellness’s representation, the goals in how they represent their content, is far more universal than mass entertainment. And, as my research into the “Toilet Talk” genre developed, I realized that the “Thrones” could have a much greater impact on students than just being used for a giggle or random facts like the content represented in *Uncle John’s Bathroom Reader* series. Initially, I correlated an increased positive environment in our school with light-hearted trivia, but as I investigated “Toilet Talks,” their precision of content to student needs made me rethink if humor is what students needed. Maybe, what students need is information that will help them overcome difficult academic tasks.

“Toilet Talks” are “talks,” informative fliers of information intended to fulfill the “need for ongoing education” (Link). Let’s consider the implications of the word “talk.” One definition is “to talk to in a manner that indicates that a response is not expected or wanted.”<sup>5</sup> In my own experience, when someone says, “I need to talk to you” or “Let’s talk,” it does not foreshadow a dialogue as much as one person expounding on information he or she wants



the listener to hear. Sometimes it's an intervention to help someone make better choices, which is the function of the "Toilet Talks." This information is important for the speaker to say, so much so, that she prefaces it by preparing the listener that "she needs to talk." The "Toilet Talks" are given out of concern for what is best.

Let's also consider the space or ecology of the public bathroom stall at the university. **Ecology** refers to where the text is distributed and how the environmental factors can influence the reception. This is a private space. The individual is the only one in the space. In some ways, the "Toilet Talks" function as a life advice flier or a guidance counselor. Every counseling room I've encountered is small and intimate. The space allows us to feel secure. The "Toilet Talk" anticipates answers to questions that students may be too scared to ask or are unaware that they need to know. But, just as people choose to sometimes reject advice, some students choose to ignore messages. Some make fun of the content, which I speculate in some cases stems from annoyance to something the reader thinks students should already know. Regardless, some students take comfort that it is fulfilling a researched need.

To merely distribute this information on a website doesn't guarantee the student body will see it. I have never Googled "How to Have Positive Self Image," but I know some tips because I was "talked" to, and it made my day a little brighter when I implemented its advice. And, Health Promotion and Wellness firmly believes this information is relevant for students and employees to hear especially in light of their research through the National College Health Assessment Data. So, why don't they just put it on their website? Well, my guess is students would not see it. The only time I go to a health or wellness website is if I am in need of something specific, for example, diagnosing maladies on WebMD. My guess is the website does not see much traffic, but the bathroom stall makes a captive audience. The student will see the flier, whether they want to be informed of healthy sexual practices, study behaviors, and bicycle safety, or not.

My NHS students want to produce a text that makes an impact. The "Toilet Talks" are a fantastic example of a well-researched piece of writing. The Health Promotion and Wellness office of ISU is convinced that their "Toilet Talk" fliers are making an impact, and I don't see how they couldn't impact students. They have researched what ISU students need to know, and they distribute that information in a personal space in a low-key, but compelling manner. I will encourage my students to produce "The Thrones of Discovery" similarly. I look forward to my students taking the plunge to create a document that overflows with relevant information for our student body.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> A play on words based on the "Throes of Discovery." How clever.
- <sup>2</sup> [wellness.illinoisstate.edu/living/toilet/](http://wellness.illinoisstate.edu/living/toilet/)
- <sup>3</sup> [wellness.illinoisstate.edu/data/ncha/index.shtml](http://wellness.illinoisstate.edu/data/ncha/index.shtml)
- <sup>4</sup> <https://psychcentral.com/lib/stages-of-change/>
- <sup>5</sup> According to [dictionary.com](http://dictionary.com)

**Becky Holdsworth** does not limit her reading to the bathroom. She lives an informed life because she is an avid reader of all print including food labels and shampoo bottles. When she is not teaching high school English, you will find her having a good meal with friends or belting out a song while playing the guitar.



