

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory: Because S*#t is Complicated

Joyce R. Walker

Why use a complicated model for understanding people and their literate activities? Because literate activity (all the things people do when they produce and use different kinds of writing in the world) is messy and complicated, especially for writers who are writing in new situations. In this article, Doc Walker argues that the traditional model of the Rhetorical Triangle doesn't work as well as a more modern construct, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), to help us see where we are and what we're doing when we write.

. . . since every piece of matter in the Universe is in some way affected by every other piece of matter in the Universe, it is in theory possible to extrapolate the whole of creation - every Galaxy, every sun, every planet, their orbits, their composition, and their economic and social history from, say, one small piece of fairy cake.

From The Restaurant at the End of the Universe (61).

A good friend of mine likes to randomly text message me match-ups and get my response. He's a musician, and he's often up really late, so a 3:00 AM message might read, "Pete Townsend vs. Mick Jagger?" I don't always know too much about the people he'll send, so I mostly have to depend on quick Google searches to find anything out about the match-up before I send something back. Since he knows I love reading, he might send me something like this (Figure 1).

Seth: Samuel Beckett or George Bernard Shaw?

Joyce: While you have to give Beckett props for his explorations of the limits of stupidity and boredom, Shaw was both a socialist and a kick-ass gardener and cook. He probably could have rocked his own HGTV cooking show. So Shaw gets the win.

Figure 1: A 2013 text message communication between Joyce Walker and Samuel Seth Bernard.

With the aid of my smart phone (which is way smarter than me), I can almost always find some quick facts to help me respond, even for musicians or writers I don't actually know anything about. I mention this activity here, because, in a way, it's a kind of *research* that I'm doing. Why one thing over another? What are the differences, and why do they matter?

This article, at its core is also about "why one thing over another?" And so I want to begin it with a match-up question for my readers (Figure 2).

Joyce: CHAT vs. Rhetorical Triangle?

Reader: What? Not Fun! And I don't even know what these things are!

Figure 2: Fictional text conversation between Joyce and someone reading this article.

Even if you are immediately interested in this match-up (I admit, that's highly unlikely), there isn't any way to quickly research this on your smart phone and come up with a pithy response.

But, believe it or not, this is a match-up worth exploring.

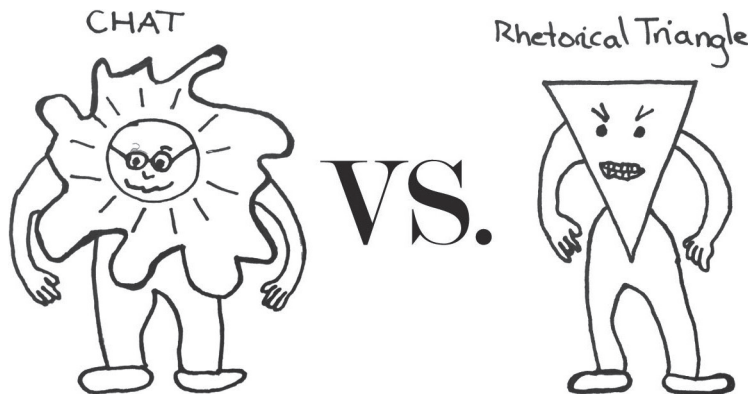


Figure 3: A CHAT figure and a Rhetorical Triangle figure.

[*OK, so not a musician or an English Literature expert or an artist. Sigh.*]

CHAT (which stands for cultural-historical activity theory) and the Rhetorical Triangle (sometimes also called a Rhetorical Situation Model) are two different ways of looking at how people go about producing texts in the world. The Rhetorical Triangle or Rhetorical Situation Model has roots in ancient Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition. It has a ton of different expansions and modifications, but at its core there is a triad: *Speaker, Audience,* and *Purpose*.

CHAT, on the other hand, is much messier. It has seven components: *Production, Representation, Distribution, Reception, Socialization, Activity,* and *Ecology*. That's why my CHAT figure (Figure 3) is a blobby, ill-defined shape. (Yes, I know it looks like a fried egg—it's supposed to represent a complex ecosystem—go figure.) It moves and re-forms and re-shapes as it adapts to all the different activities, thinking, and tools that can go into the production of something as simple as a text message, a grocery list, a stage plot, a football play . . . well, you get the picture.

My point in this article is that CHAT—although it doesn't have a 2,000+ year-old pedigree like the Rhetorical Triangle, and it lacks a cool and visually simple triad structure—is actually a much better tool for looking at literate activity. Yeah, it's complicated, but it can also be more responsive to our twenty-first-century literacy needs. The ways in which people write, inside of school and outside, have changed, and the ways in which we talk about and learn about writing should adapt to meet these changes. The CHAT nebula can help us map our actions in complicated systems, and it can move with us across digital and physical environments. It's a tool that can help us to tease out all kinds of people, objects, spaces, tools, institutions, traditions, and texts and attend to the always-shifting interactions between them. Can a rhetorical model like the Rhetorical Triangle, which focuses primarily on Author/Audience/Text (with context kind of thrown in there to stand in for all the possibly complicating factors), do this job? Well, kinda. Can it do it as well? This article tries to show why the answer to that question is no.

A Small Digression: The Rhetorical Canon

But before I can really get to the Smackdown, I have to digress for just a paragraph or two (sorry!). Consider it a commercial break. Get yourself some chips and a soda.

The original scholarly article that I use to think about CHAT is called “Re-Situating and Remediating the Canons: A Cultural-Historical Remapping of

Rhetorical Activity.” But this article didn’t organize CHAT in opposition to the Rhetorical Triangle model. Instead, it built up CHAT from a discussion of the Classical “Canons of Rhetoric,” which are as follows:

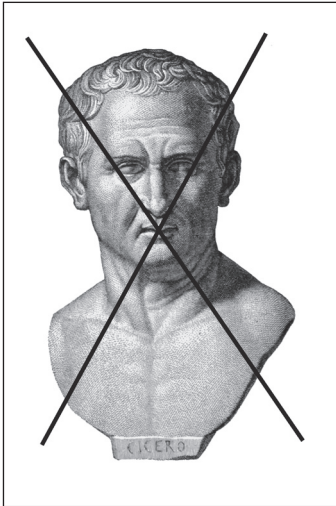


Figure 4: Marcus Tullius Cicero. Doesn’t get to be in this article.²

- Invention
- Arrangement
- Style
- Memory
- Delivery

These terms were originally developed by a guy named Cicero (Figure 4), around 50 B.C.¹ But in most writing courses these days, the Rhetorical Triangle Model is a much more popular way to introduce writers to models for thinking about how literate activity works than the Rhetorical Canon. So in this article, I decided to abandon the canons altogether (sorry, Cicero) and match up CHAT with the Big-R Triangle and see how it comes out.

Considering the Match-Up: The Power of Three

If you’re interested in checking out all of the links included here but don’t want to type in all of those long URLs yourself, visit http://isuwriting.com/2015/11/05/walker_chat/ for live links to all of the websites listed in the article.

At first glance (once you get beyond the weirdness of my Fried-Egg CHAT figure) a reader might pick the triangle figure as the more obvious winner. I mean, my triangle is very pointy and looks kinda fierce, but it’s also true that as a model for thinking about literate activity,³ a triangle can provide a really easy and useful way to break up ideas in manageable parts, because groups of three have a special place in human thinking and language. Grouping things into threes is an important part of visual design.

(For example, see this link for the rule of three in graphic design and home decorating, <http://www.ceciliawalkerdesign.com/2011/01/21/rule-of-three-and-odd-numbers/>, and this link describing the “rule-of-three” in rhetoric,

¹The best scholarly source for learning about Classical Rhetoric terms and history is George Kennedy’s three-volume set, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton University Press, 1994). But a website called “The Art of Manliness” has a pretty good short explanation of the canons, which you can read here: <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2011/01/26/classical-rhetoric-101-the-five-canons-of-rhetoric-invention/>.

²This is a Creative Commons License image of Marcus Tullius Cicero, Roman Orator, 106-43 B.C. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cicero.PNG>.

³*Literate activity* is just a term you can use to describe ALL the stuff that goes into people producing texts in the world. I know that people might say, “Why can’t you just say WRITING?” But literate activity is a much broader (and I think better) way to think about how literate humans move around in the world.

especially oral skills like speechmaking, <http://www.presentationmagazine.com/presentation-skills-3-the-rule-of-three-7283.htm>.) We like things grouped into threes. They feel interesting because they're asymmetrical, but three is also an easy number of things to remember.

This “rule-of-three” is probably why Aristotle, champion of the three-part everything, liked to put things into threes (Figure 5). But Aristotle was mostly focusing on situations involving more speaking than writing, which means that putting ideas into sets of three kept them interesting and easier to remember and process for listeners.⁴



Figure 5: From a Google search for “Aristotle and groups of three.” Check it out. This guy REALLY liked to group things in three.

The Rhetorical Triangle

So, back to our two contenders. A little bit of background. If you Google search “Rhetorical Triangle” or “Rhetorical Situation Triangle,” you’ll find a ton of different images. But here is one that I have permission to reprint (Figure 6). (I’ve modified it slightly to include the concept of “context,” which is a common part of rhetorical triangle models.)

You can see that the model is based on the three parts I mentioned before, the Speaker, the Audience, and the Purpose. Most explanations of this model stress that (1) all of the parts are equally important in any act of communication, and (2) that understanding all three components of the triangle can help an author (or speaker) to consider all the important elements in a particular situation; however, the concept of “context” is also important and complex. *Context* is an important part of the model because it implies that a rhetorical act (meaning any act of communication that could potentially have an impact on someone else) can’t be understood without reference to

⁴One of the most common Aristotelian three-part structures is used a lot in writing classes. Ethos, logos, and pathos were Aristotle’s three types of persuasive appeals. Confusingly, this triad is sometimes ALSO called the rhetorical triangle. If you’re interested, you can watch a pretty good video about ethos/logos/pathos here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf81d0YS58E>.

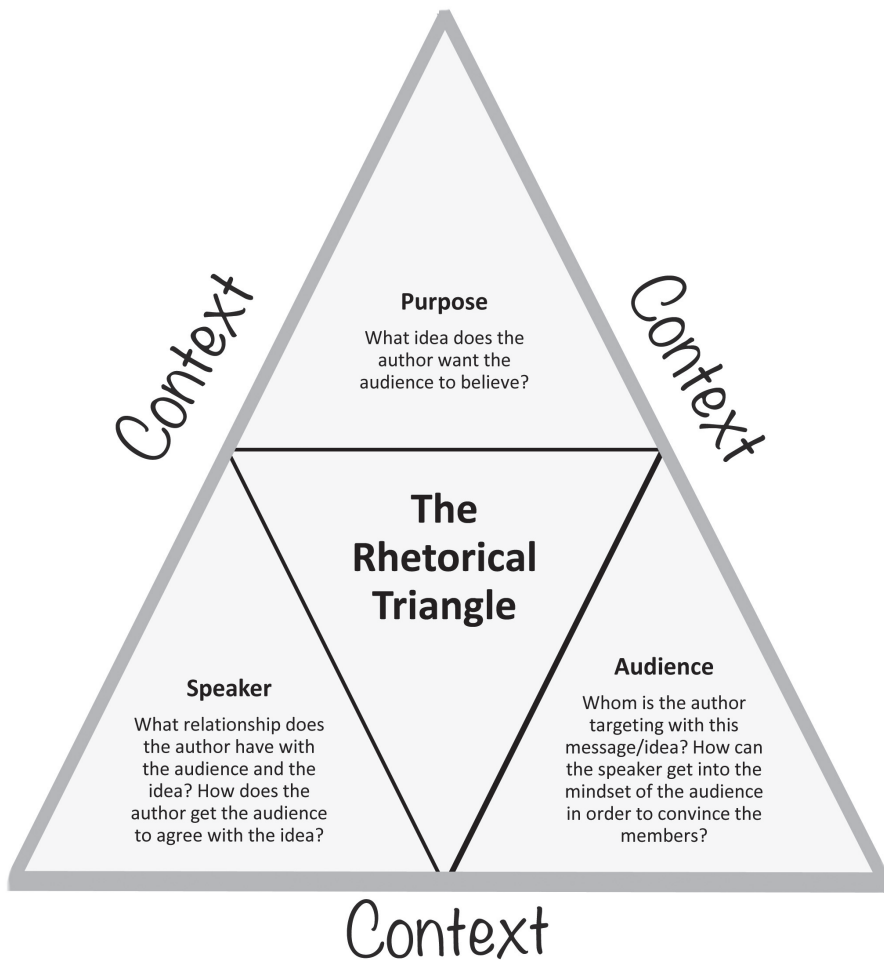


Figure 6: The Rhetorical Triangle. Downloaded from *Teachers Pay Teachers* website⁵.

the situation where it's occurring. There are even some scholars who have claimed that understanding what contexts can be considered “rhetorical” is a key aspect of understanding communication models. For example, Lloyd Bitzer, a twentieth-century rhetorician who is pretty well known for his work on the concept of “the rhetorical situation,” wrote this in 1967:

In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes mediator of change. In this sense rhetoric is always persuasive. (4)

⁵Created by Angie Kratzer, United States, North Carolina. <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Rhetorical-Triangle-Graphic-294886>.

There are lots of different arguments regarding this view, but basically what it means for our purposes is that the most important moment of any rhetorical situation is when that situation is acknowledged (by the rhetor/speaker/writer) to be a potential moment of change or alteration.

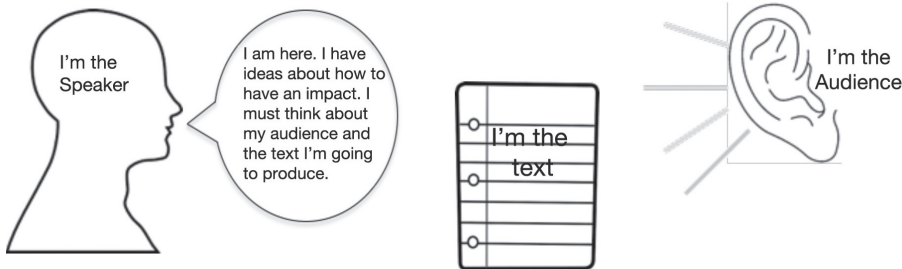


Figure 7: An alternative graphic of Rhetorical Situation.

The Speaker/Writer finds him/her/itself in a situation where something needs to happen (or could happen). Then, in order to address this Purpose, some sort of text (spoken, written, visual) is produced that moves between the text producer and the text receiver (the Audience), and (at least potentially) alters the situation (Figure 7).

Pretty abstract, right? But really, we don't even need a specific example here because ALL the examples of texts in the world are examples of the Rhetorical Situation. School papers, posters, whispered secrets. Whatever. You pick. Just plug them into the triangle and color in the context. Ask yourself, how does this text respond to a particular situation or need? Who produces it? Who uses it? *Voilà*. You are using the Rhetorical Triangle.

So what the Rhetorical Triangle has going for it, in part, is that the three parts are always findable—there's a speaker/writer and some kind of audience (although you should see the rhetors get worked up about whether a story you tell yourself could be rhetorical . . . think about it), and there is a purpose, some situation that requires some kind of text (spoken, written, visual).

Teachers and scholars make all kinds of models using the rhetorical situation as a base. They spin it out, add categories, and do some fantastic analysis using the trusty triangle as a starting point. But in my view, there is one particular shortcoming of models built on the Rhetorical Triangle, and that is that these models tend to focus on the rhetorical situation as a kind of potential-filled backdrop that comes to life in the moment the rhetor (speaker/writer) gets involved in some way—makes a decision to act or at least acknowledges that action is possible. Now, I've got to admit that a lot of rhetoric scholar-types who use the Rhetorical Triangle as a starting point also move beyond that kind of thinking in their analyses. But to me, there is an inherent problem in always

starting one's analysis at a static moment in time, especially one that places the author/writer/thinker at the center. It's not that this view isn't useful, because as we approach any kind of writing/communication task, it's often our own point of view and our own possible actions that are most important to us. The problem is that this kind of model has a tendency to obscure and even distort our possible understanding of the larger systems we find ourselves working within.

To drop another ancient Greek on you, we could compare this kind of thinking about rhetoric to Ptolemy's Earth-centric celestial model (basically, the Earth as the center of the universe) of celestial movement (Figure 8).⁶ Ptolemy's model made a lot of sense to folks at the time, and it did help to explain the movement of the planets in our solar systems to people looking at them from Earth, but in the end it was missing critical information about how the system really worked. Eventually, the Ptolemaic model was replaced with a Heliocentric (the sun as the center of the solar system) and more accurate model, but not before more than 1300 years and some excommunications and inquisitions and stuff.⁷

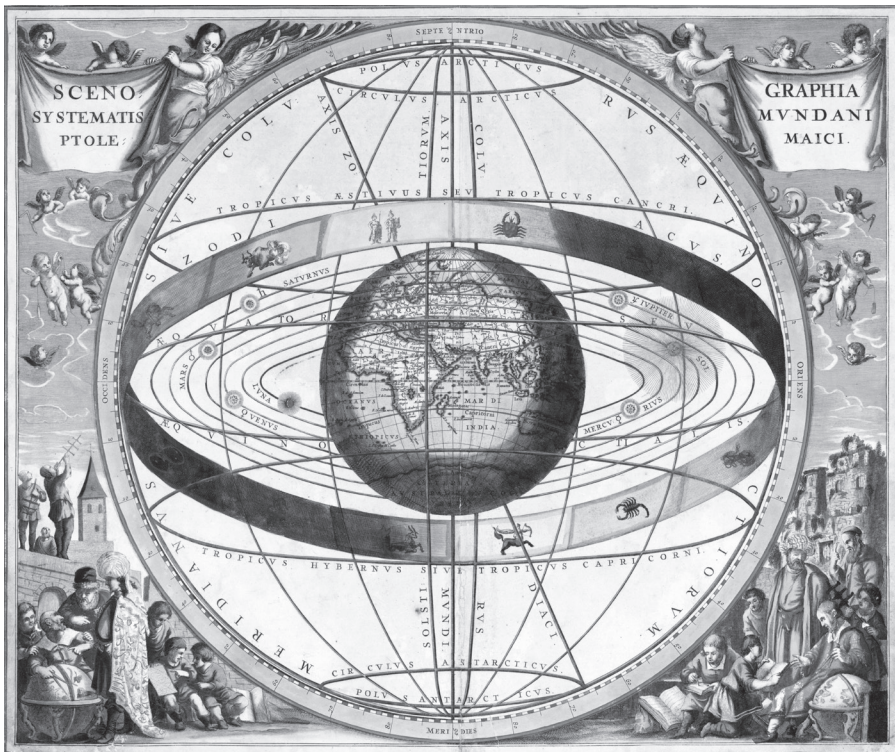


Figure 8: The Cellarius Ptolemaic System.⁸

⁶This was the site that I found most useful for understanding the Ptolemy's earth-centric model, and subsequently Copernicus's more accurate, sun-centered (heliocentric) solar model: http://www.polaris.iastate.edu/EveningStar/Unit2/unit2_sub1.htm.

⁷Ptolemy was a Greek astronomer (A.D. 100–A.D. 170). Much later on, an Italian astronomer, Galileo (1564–1642), re-thought Ptolemy's model, and subsequently got in some pretty hot water with the Catholic Church. You can read more on Wikipedia (of course) and many other excellent reference sources.

⁸By Loon, J. van (Johannes), ca. 1611-1686. [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cellarius_ptolemaic_system.jpg.

We've Always Done It This Way

Like the geocentric model, the Rhetorical Triangle has been around for a long time—and it's still a model that is used today in many school settings. It's important to remember that the weight of this history can make it tough for people to think about new models. (This is also true of Cicero's Canons of Rhetoric, which CHAT was originally developed to remediate.) People don't just like the Rhetorical Triangle because it has a nice grouping of three, but because it "feels" right—it feels like a smart way to think when we're trying to figure out how different types of communications and texts work in the world, and it especially feels right as a way to understand our own power within a particular situation. Moreover, it feels right to teachers as a way to get their students to think about writing in a more complex way. *"No, no. Don't just write the paper and get a grade, think about real writing situations and how you get the right kind of information and make the right kinds of decisions to create an effective text. For GOODNESS SAKE! Think about your audience!"*

Hearing echoes of that last call ringing in your ears from some English or communication teacher somewhere in your murky, distant (or not-so-distant) past? That's because thinking about audience really is important—maybe centrally important in many writing situations.

And let me say, CHAT doesn't really argue with the elements of the Rhetorical Triangle Model, so much as with its "speaker-centered" perspective. Here is what my CHAT figure might say about the Big-R Triangle:

"Well, yeah, it makes sense that we, in our need to make choices and actually DO writing, tend to *center* ourselves in the middle of the rhetorical act. But in actuality, we're not so much the one at the center as we are a member of a large group of actors (some are human and some might not be). And all of us are moving around and inside and through multiple settings where certain kinds of texts are produced. Of course, we make moves and take actions and have thoughts and directions. We're individuals. But we do so within a shifting network of things and tools and people and institutions and relationships. And all this stuff works to control and shape the texts we produce, either through us (because we've learned certain ways of doing things) or in spite of us (because the demands of the situation make choices impossible—like learning to write five-paragraph essays in response to timed writing situations)."

As I write my CHAT-person's dialogue, I can definitely see how it might be a turn-off for you. (Again, it's too complicated!). But if you'll just hang with me for a few more pages, I think I can show you how CHAT can work practically—and better than a Rhetorical Triangle model. And it can do it because it IS a complex model for looking at complicated activities.

Learning to CHAT

So, what is it that CHAT *actually* lets us do? What's *different*? (Maybe you are still wondering what CHAT even is.) Well, to start that discussion I'm going to excerpt a section from the *isuxwriting.com* Key Concepts page, which gives a brief explanation of CHAT and outlines its components:

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory is developed from the work of Paul Prior and a group of other scholars ("Re-situating and re-mediating the canons: A cultural-historical remapping of rhetorical activity," *Kairos* 11.3, 2007). CHAT is a useful tool for thinking about and studying the complex genres that we encounter in the world. In traditional rhetorical models, one might describe the author, the audience and perhaps some of the features of the genre. CHAT allows us to focus on any aspect of the myriad elements of textual production, so it's more robust than these other methods for investigating texts. The key terms in CHAT are:

- **Production:** Production deals with the means through which a text is produced. This includes both tools (say, using a computer to produce a text vs. using a cell phone to produce a text) and practices (for example, the physical practices for using a computer vs. using a cell phone have some similarities, but also many differences). Production also considers the genres and structures that can contribute to and even "pre-shape" our ability to produce text (think of filling out a job application form—the form directly controls the kind of information we can produce, and consequently, the kind of image of ourselves we can project to potential employers). If we were allowed to make a video instead of filling out the paper form, it would be a very different kind of document.
- **Representation:** The term "representation" highlights issues related to 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 think about texts.
- **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 purposes intended by the author(s).
- **Reception:** Reception deals with how a text is taken up and used by others. Reception is not just who will read a text, but takes into account the ways people might use or re-purpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended).

- **Socialization:** 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.
- **Activity:** Activity is 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 peer review, etc.).
- **Ecology:** Ecology points to what we usually think of as a mere backdrop for our purposeful activities in creating texts—the physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing. However, these environmental factors can become very active in some situations in shaping or interacting with our textual productions (think of putting on a play outdoors when it’s raining, or think of the people of New Orleans using the Internet to find family members after Hurricane Katrina).

So, yeah, CHAT is way more complicated than author/audience/purpose, that’s for sure. But to connect it back to my discussion about the Rhetorical Triangle model, let’s look at how CHAT situates an individual actor (a writer or producer of a text) within the system. The way these seven categories are organized doesn’t allow us to begin at the moment when the author sees a chance to make something change (like in the Rhetorical Triangle Model). Instead, CHAT focuses on the moment when individuals begin (even really tentatively) to see themselves as working inside situations where texts are produced and distributed and taken up (production, reception, distribution). From this perspective, we can see some new and different things:

- We can see that *many* different kinds of activities may need to take place (sharpening pencils, taking pictures, drinking coffee) beyond just the action of “making a rhetorical move (that’s **Activity**).
- We’re made aware that all the people involved in the life of a text can have different understandings about what the text is supposed to be and do (that’s **Representation**).
- We’re sometimes forced to acknowledge the larger physical and conceptual systems that might be in place and the actual material stuff that goes into producing texts (that’s **Ecologies**).
- And we can observe how interactions and understandings between people and institutions can have incredibly strong shaping effects on what can actually be produced in a given moment in time (that’s **Socialization**).

- Finally, instead of an author/speaker and an audience, we can see a whole mob of people whose hands and brains and intentions and tools shape texts as they come into being and are used (that's **Production, Distribution, and Reception**).

What this model shows us is that the writing world is, in fact, bigger and messier and more complicated than we have been taught to see and observe. It's also more controlled by forces that extend beyond our fingertips, our intentions, and our will to act. It's bigger than our keyboards and pens or our understanding of a particular audience. And it's a much, much bigger space than we can imagine if we're only looking through the lens of the Big-R Triangle.

CHAT vs. R-Triangle in Action

There isn't really much room left in this article (just one of the ways that I'm constrained by the activity system that also contains this article) for me to offer a bunch of examples of the power of CHAT in action, although I do have to admit that I'm pretty sure it can't stop bullets or leap tall buildings. But let's take these last pages to consider an example and see what these two figures (CHAT and the Rhetorical Triangle) can respectively do.

Here is where I find my way back to my friend Seth. He has, in the past, asked me to become a contributor to the blog on the website for the music collective that he belongs to (Figure 9). (You can find it at <https://www.earthworkmusic.com/blog>.)



Figure 9: Screenshot of the blog on the Earthworks Music Site. Sept. 7, 2015.

Earthwork Music is a collective organized to help Michigan musicians and to promote music as an important tool for community organization and communication. It's a non-profit organization without a big budget, so if I were to contribute entries to the blog, I wouldn't get paid. But on the other hand I know and respect a lot of these musicians, and I care about many of the same things they do, so I'd want to do a good job and contribute entries that were effective (whatever that might mean). To be honest, my response to Seth has always been, "Who, me? I couldn't possibly do that." I write a lot of things, but since I'm not a blog writer and not a musician, I feel like I wouldn't have much to offer. Secretly, though, I'd love to feel like I was a more of contributing member of this community, because I love the music and the people and believe in a lot of issues they also care about. So let's experiment with what our two models could do for me as I explore the possibility of producing this kind of text.

Using a Rhetorical Triangle model (Figure 10), I might begin thinking about my task in this way:

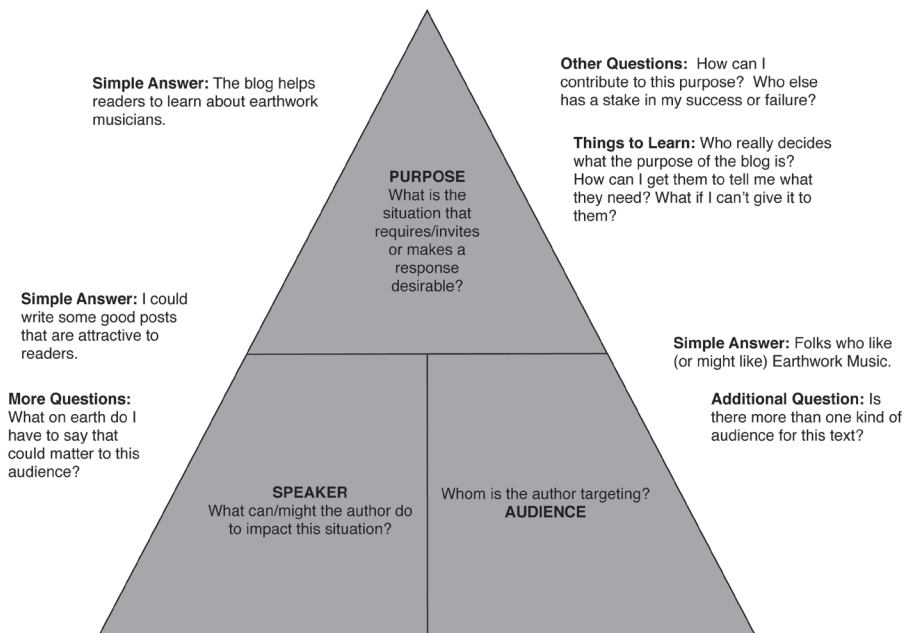


Figure 10: Rhetorical Triangle Model of me thinking about blog posts for the Earthwork Music site.

As you can see, it's not that this model doesn't let me think carefully about this situation. It's more that it doesn't really help me to think specifically about what I might need to do or might need to learn about in order to make any kind of decisions here. I can move beyond this model if I want to—I can expand it and think more carefully about things like the exigencies of the situation (what

makes these posts matter to readers) or the specifics of my text, like what kind of style or tone might reach this audience. But the model isn't really designed for this kind of thinking. It starts at a place that feels "static," as if there is only one situation: a blog post for a particular situation, for a particular audience, with a particular writer (me). But in reality, what scares me when I think about writing blog posts for Seth (or contributing to their newsletter) is that I feel like I'm looking at just a big mass of all the ongoing texts, over time, that make up a thing called "Earthwork Music." All of these texts help to connect the organization and the people in it and the people outside of it. All of these texts, together (including even the live shows the musicians might play) help to represent the organization and share important information with people who both need the information and want to be connected to the group. Most importantly for me, all of this text-making began before I ever entered the picture. The same is true for the genre of blogs—this kind of text has a whole history and evolution and it's not even a stable kind of text. I mean, there are lots of texts on the web called "blogs," and many are actually incredibly different from each other. What scares me is that all this "text-making" is already action (already in existence and doing things in the world), so I have a hard time imagining jumping in, as if it's a static situation with a single trajectory, one that begins as I start to think about the text and ends when I produce my first post. And although I write lots of things, I've never written anything like this—and I'm scared to, really. I mean, these people are musicians, with passions and interests and knowledge that I just don't have. So what I want is some kind of tool that helps to alleviate this anxiety, something that helps me to get practical, while also knowing that I'm thinking through the text in a way that's intelligent and sophisticated, a way that will hopefully help get to success more quickly (if that's not too much to ask).

So let's take a look at what CHAT could help me do in this situation. First, I'd need to ask myself, "What's the activity that I'm hoping to join and participate in?" I might even want to start asking a larger question, like what is the **Activity System** I'm trying to join?⁹ This basically means the larger, interconnected situation in which the activity I want to engage in is embedded. To illustrate, I've drawn a map that considers the activity I want to engage in and the larger system that activity is part of (Figure 11).

Do you notice how in this activity map I'm thinking about the bigger system or network of texts and people that my blogs are embedded in, and also about the specific activities I'm going to have to engage in to actually get the posts

⁹There is a great article in the *GWJR* (Issue 5.1) called "Angela Rides the Bus" that has an excellent explanation of how to understand "activity system."

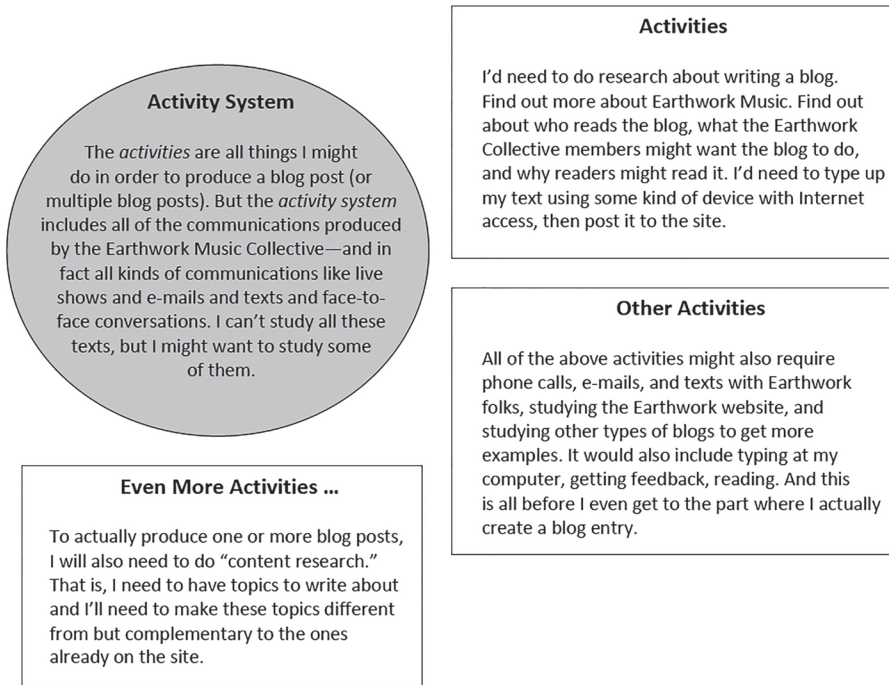


Figure 11: An Activity System of blog posting.

created? Another thing you might notice in the next image (Figure 12) is that while some aspects of CHAT generate a lot of questions, or tasks to complete, other aspects seems less important to me, either because I'm not in charge of that part of the activity or I already know what I need to know to accomplish the task.

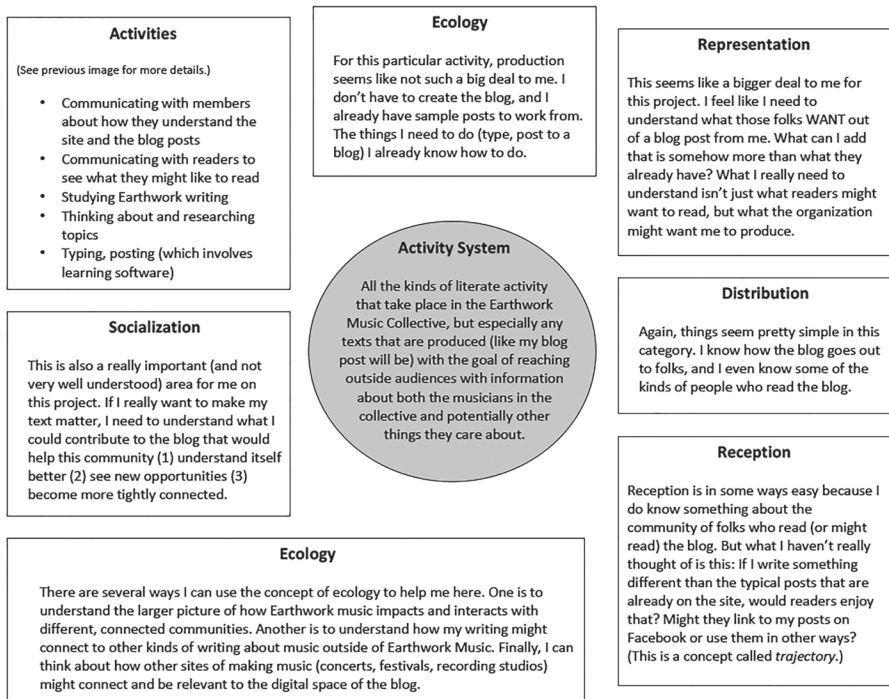


Figure 12: CHAT map of blog posting for the Earthwork Site.

For this project, the areas of production and distribution don't seem too complicated. I feel like I already have the basic skills sets I need for actually physically producing the blog (typing, sending e-mails, etc.), and I'm not in charge of distribution, so the tech involved there isn't really important to me (although Bill Chesney, the Earthworks web designer, needs to know about that stuff). However, other areas (like *Activities, Representation, Socialization, and Ecology*) are places where I need to do both thinking and research before even coming up with a concept of what my posts might be about. One of the things that came to me as I created this map was that, in order to feel like I was really participating, I'd want to find topics that aren't already being covered and that somehow represent my insider/outside status in the group. In that way, I'd be bringing something new and hopefully adding some value to the site and the collective.

But CHAT could also help me if I was in a different situation. Consider: What if I actually had to create the website for these posts? Or what if I was being put in charge of all the content on the Earthwork site? What if I were asked to be a contributor to MLive (<http://www.mlive.com/#/0>), which is a news website (part of a marketing group, actually) that covers news for all of Michigan, and make posts for them about the Michigan music scene? In the situation I've outlined here, I think my main fear is about connecting to the group in an important way, but what if my main fear was just creating a blog post that would make sense and not make me look like a "bad writer?" How would this change my maps?

All of these changes in my intentions and identity would make big changes in the boxes of my CHAT diagram. Some items would fade away, becoming unimportant, while others would become more important. Because of this flexibility, CHAT works better than the Rhetorical Triangle model to help me to see what I need to see, but also to see places where I might need to see differently.

An Ending (Of Sorts)

People who know me personally (and even some of you who've stayed with me through this article) might argue that I'm not really giving a fair shake to the Rhetorical Triangle Model. And it's true that a skilled rhetorician can do a lot with this model to branch out and make analyses and examinations. But I'll stand my ground that CHAT allows for an analysis of writing situations that can be both directly practical but can also allow me to see a bigger picture. It's like a "you are here" map in which I am both "infinitesimal dot"¹⁰ and an

¹⁰See Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Total Perspective Vortex. Douglas Adams (1981). "9". *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*. Ballantine Books. p. 70.

active agent of change. As I map it, I learn what I want to do, what I might need to do, and how I might fit into this larger picture (the activity system) in a meaningful way.

Joyce: CHAT vs. Rhetorical Triangle?

Reader (hopefully): Well, RT's got the whole easy triangle thing going on, plus you know, Aristotle was kind of a big shot; but CHAT (despite the fried egg costume) kind of meets you where you are, wherever that is. It helps you find your GPS and map out strategies for future movement. I think CHAT ultimately takes the win.

Figure 13: A final fictional text conversation between Joyce and someone reading this article.



For Dr. **Joyce R. Walker**, an interest in writing research has always acknowledged the differences between situations of “writing instruction,” which so often seems to involve something being done to us (or given to us) to help us be better writers, and *writing-in-context learning*, which often seems to be much more a practice of subtle, instinctive, even sub-conscious or unconscious choices that writers make as they work to make meaning, make connections, be successful in particular literate settings. Her research has often involved interviews and follow-along narratives, where participants examine and describe their literate practices. Through this work she has come to see the significant gaps that can exist between the kinds of writing and thinking that happen in the classroom and the much more complex and complicated writing and thinking that happens *in situ*, where writers, tools, texts, humans, and non-humans are all tangled together. Her goal as a researcher is to investigate the ways people remember and retell (to themselves and others) the stories of their literate practice. Her goal as a teacher is make these practices a more regular, more understood and accepted part of literacy learning in the academy.