

Angela Rides the Bus: A High Stakes Adventure Involving Riveting Research, Amazing Activity Systems, and a Stylish Metacognitive Thinking Cap

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Illustrated by Daniel Sheets

In this children's story style article, Sheets explores her process of re-searching and learning to navigate the Bloomington-Normal bus system. She discusses how her awareness of her own learning process helps her adapt to the new situation. Additionally, she examines how the various genres in the Connect-Transit Bus System make the bus-riding activity possible.

Preface

When I was an undergrad, I had a visual literacy textbook that was particularly dense. Talking to my peers, I discovered that half the class wasn't even doing the reading . . . that is, until the day we were assigned an article by Scott McCloud. McCloud's article was about comics, and the whole thing was written as a comic strip. Everybody read that one.

I've heard people say that genres evolve because they are the best possible way to mediate (or make possible) a particular action. I don't think this is always true. Textbook chapters are probably effective, but they aren't always the most entertaining way to spread ideas. McCloud's chapter was informative *and* entertaining. It did the work of a textbook chapter, even if it didn't look like your average textbook chapter.

But, McCloud didn't subvert* the genre norms just because he could. Since he was writing about comics, it made sense to *show* his ideas rather than just *tell* his audience about them. Conforming to traditional genre standards would have held him back.

When I set out to write this *Grassroots* article, I knew I could present my research in the style of a “traditional” *Grassroots* article, but I wasn’t sure this was the best option. My story about learning to ride the bus reminded me of children’s stories about learning basic daily activities (tying your shoes, washing your face, riding the bus safely . . .). Having read a lot of these types of books growing up, I was already pretty familiar with the conventions of this genre. I knew I would need to invent a protagonist the readers could relate to. This character would begin the story not knowing how to do something, but through trial and error (and perhaps with a little help), the character would eventually succeed at doing something new. If I was following the children’s story genre conventions, I would also need pictures, somewhat sparse text, and an appropriate font. Since this is a journal article, I still needed to cite my research, so I opted to include an “acknowledgments” section at the end because I had seen such sections at the end of children’s stories I encountered in the past.

“Angela Rides the Bus” is and isn’t a children’s story. Although it conforms to the genre conventions of a children’s story, my primary audience is made up of adults learning to add something very complicated to their daily routines—genre/CHAT based writing research. Just as stories helped us learn to tie our shoes (which was very complicated business at the time), I figured a good story with pictures might help me illustrate my initial uptake of genre studies and CHAT. Perhaps this familiar genre would help my readers to take up these ideas too.

*Underlined words throughout this article are listed in the glossary.

Angela doesn't like driving.

She was tragically born without a sense of direction, and her version of traffic is "Oh no! There's another car on the road!"




When Angela came to ISU, she found out that one of the magical properties of her ISU Redbird ID card was free access to the Bloomington-Normal Connect-Transit Bus System.


Angela was a newbie to the Connect-Transit system, so she put on her metacognitive thinking cap.

First, she thought about antecedent genres.


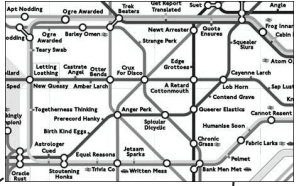
Well, I rode the bus that summer in Kazakhstan. You got on the bus, and a little lady squeezed through the crowd and took your money and gave you a ticket.



I've seen American buses on TV... I don't think they come around to collect your fare. You give it to the driver or something.

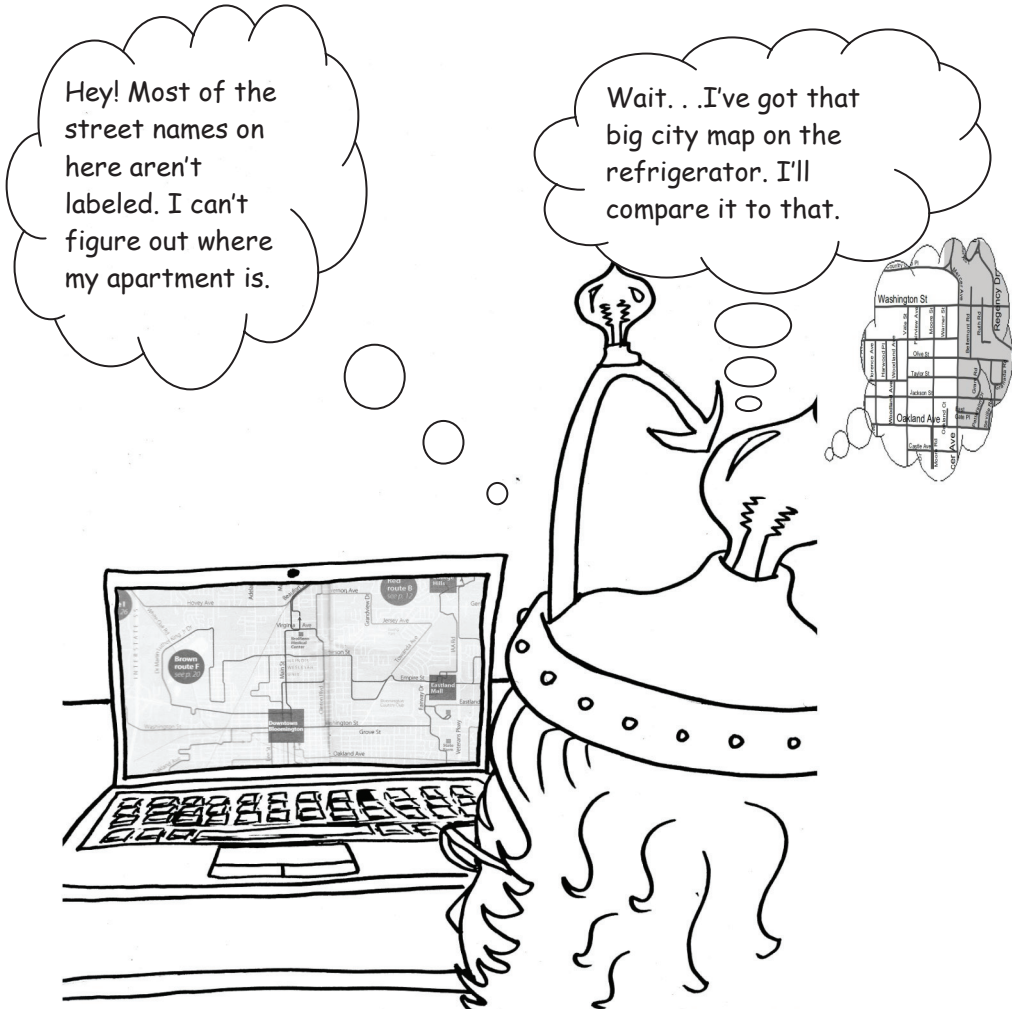


But which bus do I take and where do I find the stops? Well, everything is online these days... I found the Tube map online when I was in London.



The metacognitive thinking cap told Angela that she probably needed to research.

She got on the Connect-Transit website and found a route map. But it was kinda hard to read.



After lots of pensive chin-stroking and squinting at tiny font, Angela figured out that two different buses came near(ish) to her apartment and then went to campus.

It was time to try actually taking the bus.

Angela had figured out through careful observation (a.k.a. looking out her window) that the buses were labeled.



So she stood at the bus stop until she saw the Red B coming. Her heart raced as she raised her arm and waved her hand like she'd seen people do on TV. . .



. . .And the bus stopped for her!

Once she was on the bus, Angela read the signs and observed the other people to figure out what to do.



WHEELCHAIR SEATING AREA
SECUREMENTS ARE LOCATED
BELOW THESE SEATS.



AREA PARA SILLAS DE RUEDAS
LOS SEGUROS SE ENCUENTRAN
ABAJO DE ESTOS ASIENTOS.

I should probably sit in
the back.

But I probably
shouldn't sit
right next to
anyone because
Americans have
big personal
bubbles.

If you pull that cord, a
sign lights up saying,



Then the driver stops.

Everyone
says thanks
when they
get off.



Thanks!

KEEP THE BUSES CLEAN
Please No
Eating or
Drinking



A bunch of signs say no food.

Lots of people have food with
them though. They just aren't
eating it. Whew! That means I
still can bring my morning tea.

Some of the genres talked to one another. . .

Redbird Card
ANGELA RENEE SHEETS
GRADUATE STUDENT

**Uptown Station
Bus Departure Times**
Phone: 828-9833
www.connect-transit.com

Route	Departs At:	Heading To:	Also Serving:
A	:25 & :55	Downtown Bloomington	Advocate BriMann Medical Center
A	:25 & :55	Heartland College	N. Main St., Orlando/Manchester

Green route A Week Saturday

Additional late-night service
Down Normal to Government Center only
Thurs - Sat 11:00 PM - 12:30 AM
Fri - Sat 11:00 PM - 12:30 AM

She's an ISU student.

Okay. That's on the approved list.

This is when the Green A shows up.

I'm the Green A!

This is where you go, Green A.

. . . And they adapted to the rhetorical situations.

We all say the same thing.

I'm handy if you have internet and want to look at the whole map.

Riders Guide
Maps and timetables to help you get around Bloomington-Normal August 2013

I'm right on the bus. So even if you don't have a smart phone, you can still find info on the go!

**Uptown Station
Bus Departure Times**
Phone: 828-9833
www.connect-transit.com

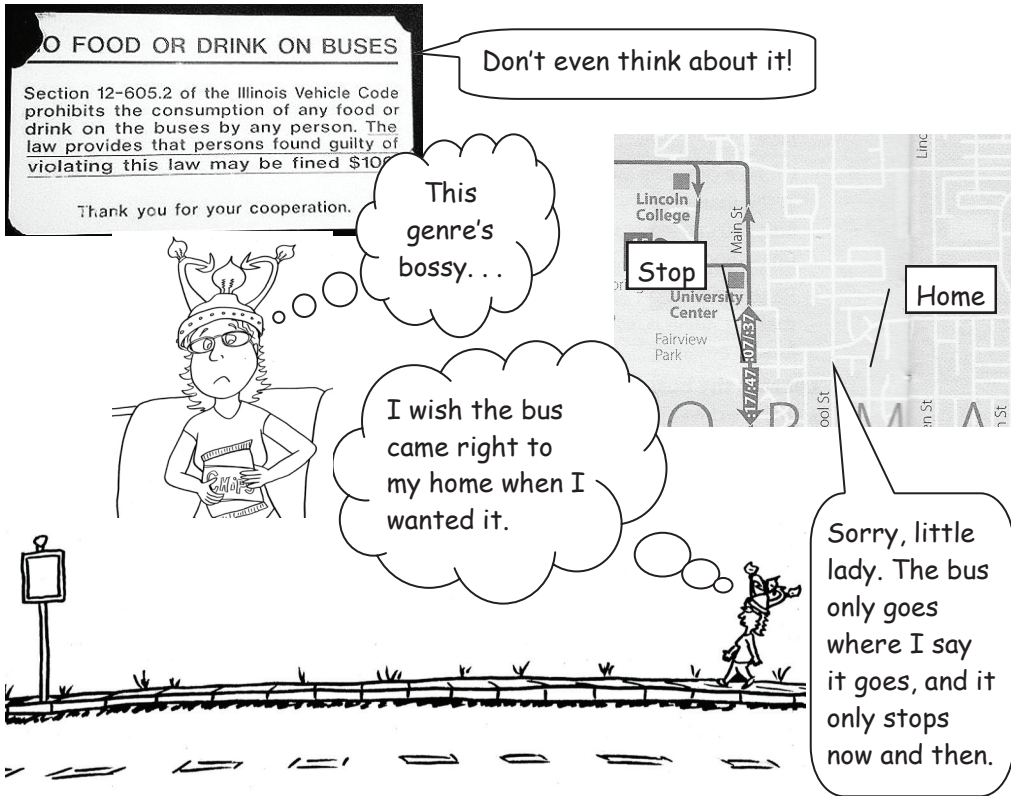
Route	Departs At:	Heading To:	Also Serving:
A	:25 & :55	Downtown Bloomington	Advocate BriMann Medical Center
A	:25 & :55	Heartland College	N. Main St., Orlando/Manchester
B	:35	Parking Services	Madison County Nursing Home, Cardinal Court, Di Robert
B	:55	The Shoppes at College Hill/College Park	E. College Ave., IAA Dr., Knott
D	:55	Wal Mart, Shoppes at College Hill	Sarkis Club, Memorial, Meijer
E	:10	Downtown Bloomington	Carson Dr., Heritage Manor, Shalonna Apartments
E	:40	N. Lincoln St./Woodward	Franklin Elementary
G	:05	Normal Community High School	College Ave., Parkside Rd.
H	:25	The Shoppes at College Hill/College Park	E. College Ave., IAA Dr., Knott
G	:35	Lincoln Square Apartments	Local St., Rockingham Dr.
H	:55	Eastwood Mall	Palmer, Jersey Ave., Knott
A	:25 & :55	Wal Mart West Market St./Downtown Bloomington	Wal Mart, Danza Plaza

I'm a quick guide when you're at the stop.

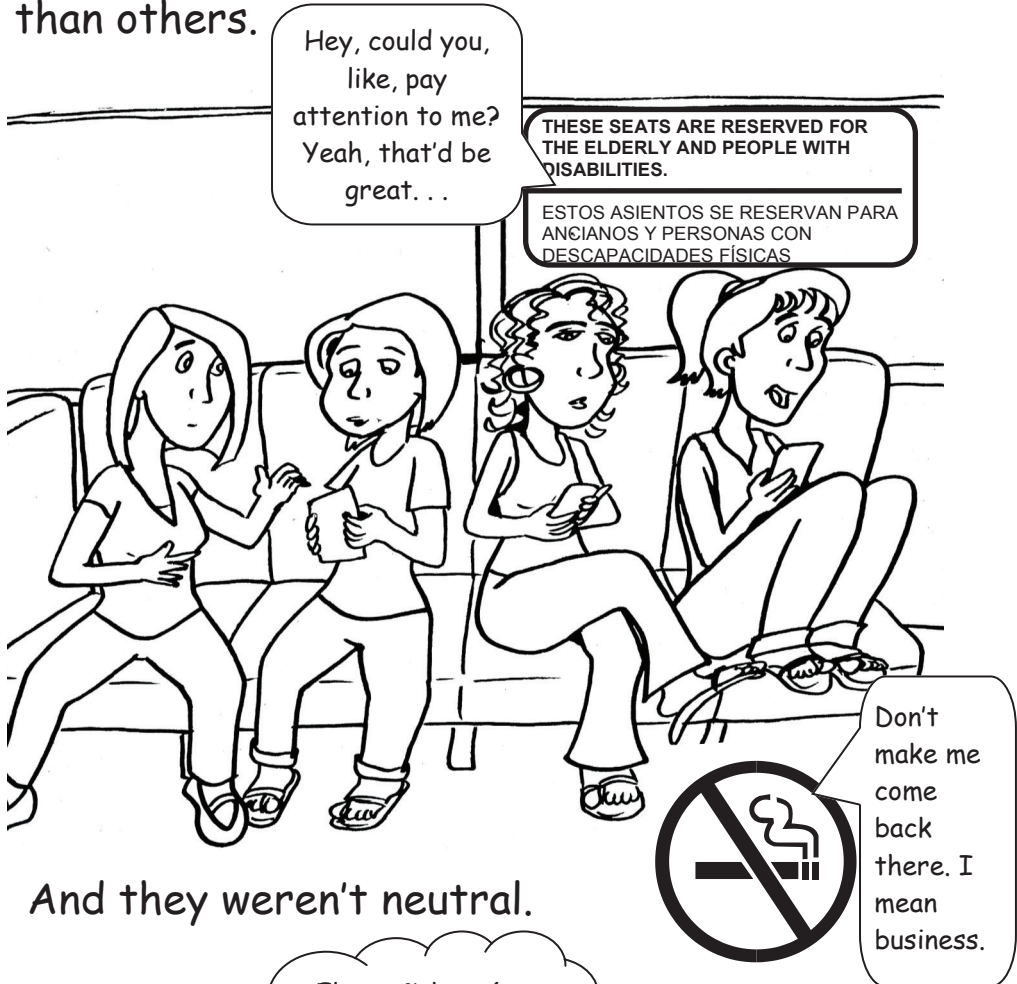
Angela had control over some genres. . .



. . . But others controlled her.



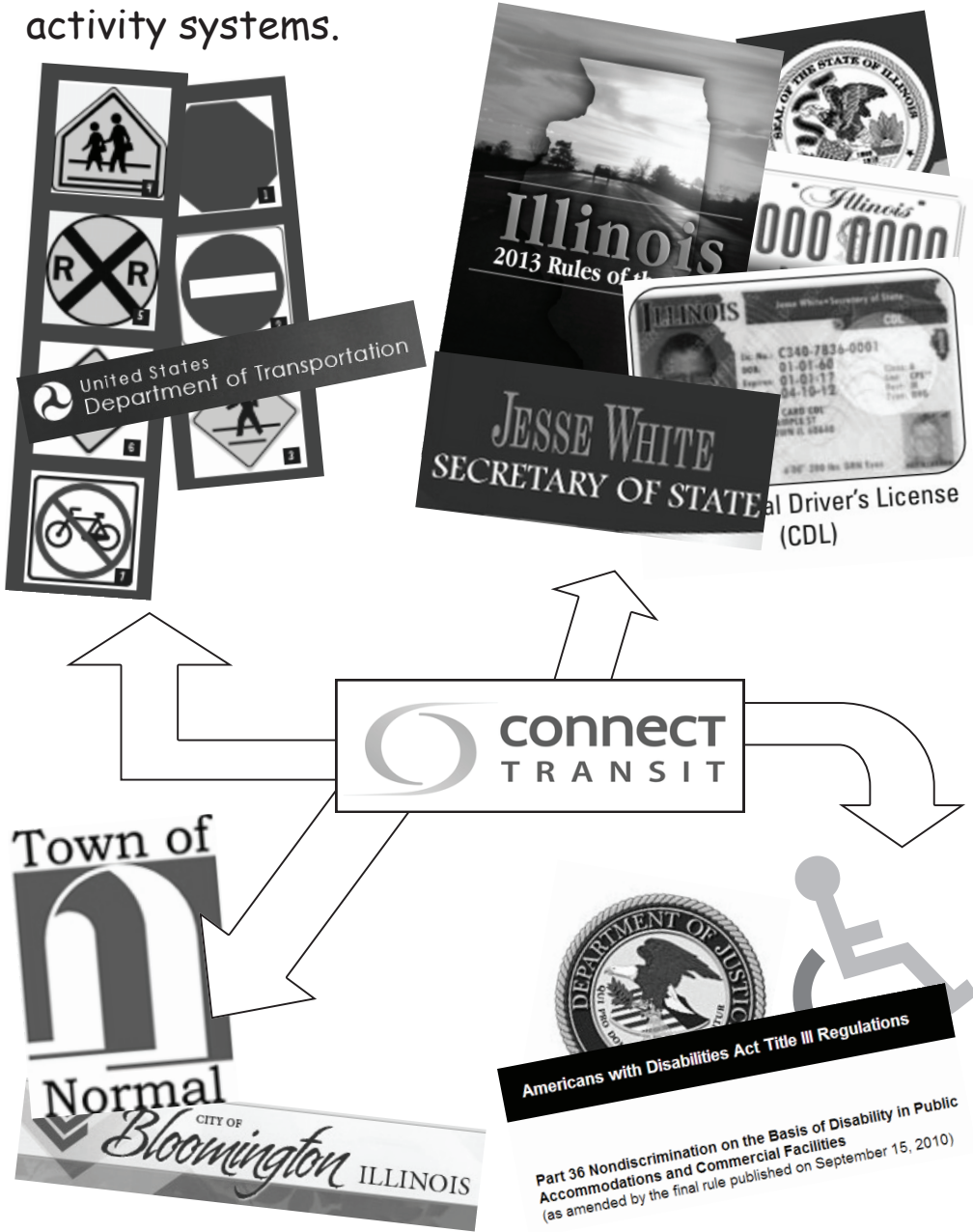
Some of the genres were taken more seriously than others.



And they weren't neutral.

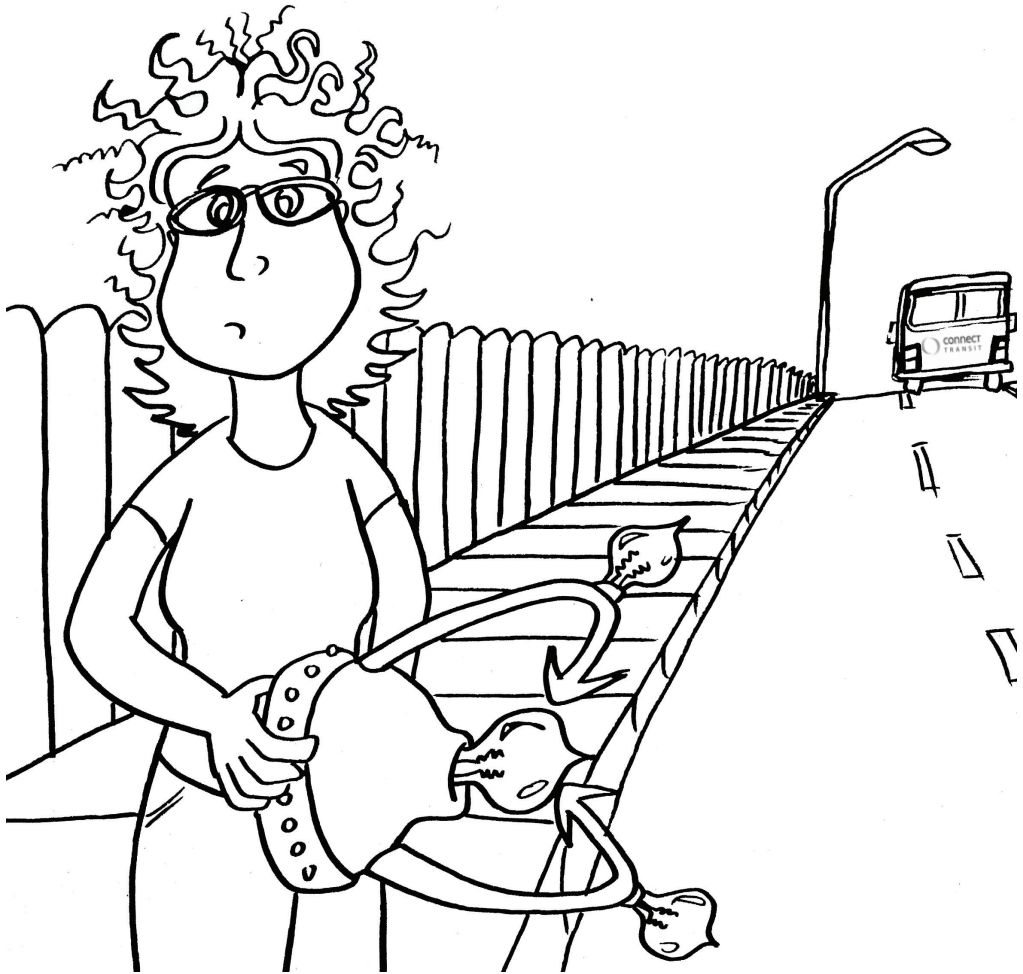


All the genres worked together with passengers, bus drivers, and buses to make trips across town possible. Plus, the Connect-Transit activity system worked together with lots of other activity systems.



After a while, Angela metacognized herself into an existential crisis.

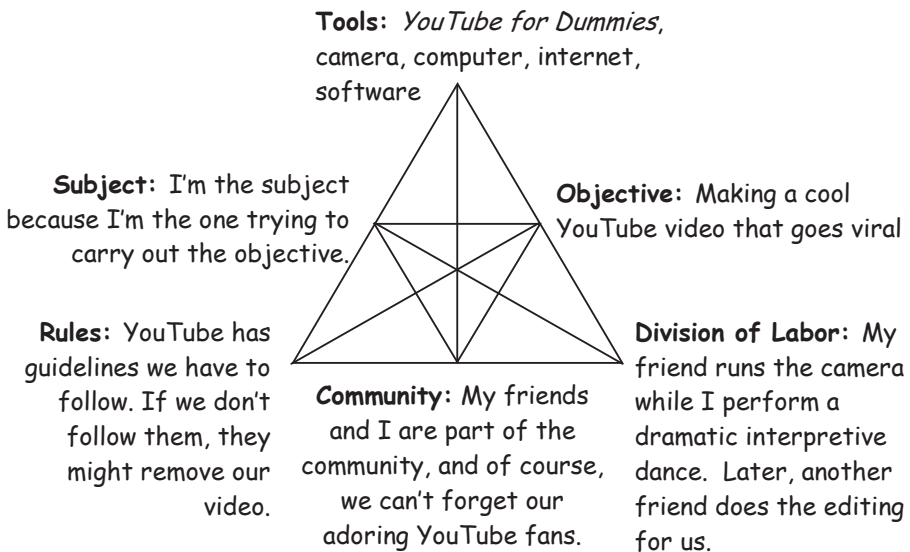
So she took off the metacognitive thinking cap. . .



. . . And dealt with the hat hair.

Glossary

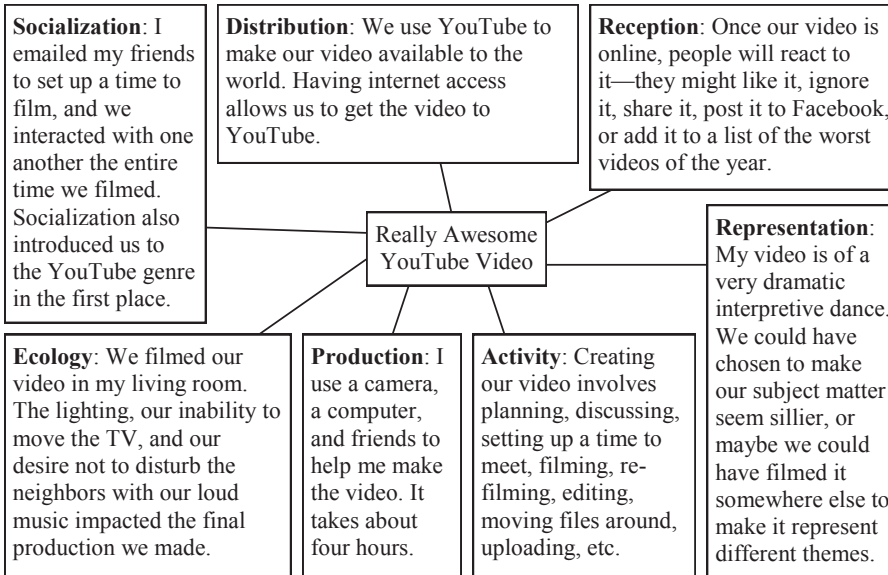
Activity System – An activity system is all the people, texts, tools, and rules that work together to achieve a particular objective. For example, if my objective is to make a cool YouTube video, I might need a book called *YouTube for Dummies*, a camera, a friend to co-star with me or help me film, video-editing software, internet access, a computer, etc. All of these objects/people/ideas work together to make my objective (the YouTube video) possible. If you remove any of them, the activity doesn't happen. The diagram below illustrates this:



Antecedent Genre – When we enter new research/writing situations, we often think back to situations we've been in before that seem similar. The texts we produced in those past situations are our antecedent genres. We think about how we dealt with the earlier situation and how we could possibly deal with the new situation in similar ways. For example, if my biology professor asks me to write a lab report, I might think back to lab write-ups I did in high school and try to apply the techniques I used there to this new situation . . . which may or may not work.

CHAT definition 1 – CHAT stands for Cultural-Historical Activity Theory. Activity Theory is an exploration of how people, objects, and ideas work together to carry out objectives (see Activity System for an example). But the "Cultural" and "Historical" part talks about how the objects, ideas, and genres we use reflect certain cultural values at a certain point in history. The fact that I made grilled cheese for dinner, for example, reflects my cultural values in this historical moment . . . I don't have much time, so I made something quick . . . I'm not vegan so eating cheese is okay with me... there's not a global cheese shortage on, so I could afford to buy it . . . I eat it without a fork because that's a cultural norm for grilled cheeses . . . etc.

CHAT definition 2 – Some folks find it easier to understand CHAT if they break it down into seven different sub-concepts: production, distribution, reception, representation, ecology, activity, and socialization. Let’s revisit the example of making an YouTube video and look at it through these sub-concepts:



Existential Crisis – The mental breakdown that results when something forces you to question the very foundations of life, the universe, and everything. Like that time you saw your kindergarten teacher at the grocery store and found out that he or she didn’t live at the school all the time.

Genre – There are many ways of defining genre. I have three favorites:

1. A typified response to a recurring situation . . . for example, when I apply for a job (the recurring situation since I haven’t found a single job that seemed to stick yet), I write a resume (the typified—or typical—response to the situation). A less typified response to the I-need-to-apply-for-a-job situation would be sending the employer a very desperate “please please hire me!” letter via carrier pigeon.
2. A genre is a text that makes a particular action possible (or impossible). For example, if I want to send my husband to the grocery store to get our food for the week (and make sure that he doesn’t just buy a week’s worth of macaroni and cheese), I might make a grocery list telling him what to buy. On the flip-side, my landlord’s no-pet policy makes it impossible (or at least a very bad idea) for me to own a puppy.
3. A genre is a “stable-for-now” category. As communities change and need to carry out different actions (or the same actions in different ways), the

genres they use to make those actions possible often evolve. If you looked at a take-out menu from fifteen years ago, you might see the restaurant's address and a phone number. These days, that same take-out menu might also include a QR code, a website URL, and an invitation to "like" the restaurant on Facebook or follow it on Twitter.

Metacognitive – Metacognition is just a fancy way of saying thinking about your own thinking. I liked to put on my metacognitive thinking cap any time I think it might be useful to figure out *how* I should try to learn something rather than just *what* I should be learning. For example, instead of just thinking, "I need to figure out how to make grilled cheese," I might think, "There are YouTube videos that teach you how to do everything. I can learn how to make grilled cheese from YouTube. I've used YouTube to make other foods, and I'm usually able to follow their instructions pretty well."

Rhetorical Situation – In simple terms, the rhetorical situation is the who, what, where, when, why, and how that impact your writing/communication. If I wanted to tell my mum I'd arrived home safely from her house, for example, I might text her. My goal is to inform her (the who) at her home (the where) that I'm home (the what). But because it's 10 at night (the when), I text her (the how) since she might be asleep already, and I don't want to wake her (the why).

Subvert – When you subvert a genre, you purposefully break some of the conventions or rules of that genre. Subverting a genre can be risky because people might take it to mean that you don't understand the rules of the genre, or they might not like that you're breaking the rules. However, bending the rules of a genre sometimes lets you do something original and unexpected that catches your audience's attention more than playing by the rules.

Uptake – Uptake is the process we go through to "take up" a new idea and think about it until it makes sense (if we get that far with it—sometimes we don't!). Our uptakes are highly individual because we all have different past experiences that impact the way we see the world. Say your instructor comes in and says, "There will be an ice cream social for our class on Friday afternoon." One student thinks, "I bet there will be waffle cones!" Another thinks, "Awesome! Class must be cancelled." Still another laments, "Ugh, forced socialization!" Notice that the instructor didn't say any of those things, but because of each student's past experiences or beliefs about ice cream socials, they take up the news to mean very different things.

Acknowledgments

A special thanks to the following for their help with graphics in this article . . .

- Daniel Sheets, master illustrator
- www.cityblm.org
- www.connect-transit.com
- www.cyberdriveillinois.com
- www.dot.gov
- www.normal.org



Angela Sheets is an English MA student at ISU, specializing in online composition instruction. She enjoys reading, writing, drinking tea, walking in parks, and public transportation.