

A Conversation about *A Conversation with a Grassroots Author*: A Look at the Podcast Series Created for the Writing Program Community

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In this article, authors Cintron-Gonzalez, Koenig, and Moe pulled from episodes of *A Conversation with a Grassroots Author* (a Writing Program podcast series) to highlight examples of how two *Grassroots* authors (Sammy Moe and Edcel J. Cintron-Gonzalez themselves!) approached and researched their own unique articles. After introducing the podcast series, the authors walk through the ways in which they performed research, made theoretical connections, and studied literate activity, all while writing for the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*.

A *Grassroots* Podcast? Documenting Writing Processes

A Conversation with a Grassroots Author is a podcast project originally created by Emily Capan, that involved her interviewing of *GWRJ* authors about their writing process, ideas, and research on their *Grassroots* articles. Edcel J. Cintron-Gonzalez has continued this project by reaching out to authors from the current *Grassroots* issue, and from past issues, to keep this project growing as a writing program resource for Writing Program Instructors.

Using a pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory (P-CHAT), genre studies, and multimedia, the ISU Writing Program encourages students to seek out additional resources when reading and studying the variety of articles within the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*. The podcast series offers our community the opportunity to learn in more detail about the brainstorming and literate activities of our different *Grassroots* authors. Readers will also gain an understanding of the review process from the *GWRJ* editors, and the conversations authors experienced when receiving feedback on their articles. Additionally, this podcast also offers advice on how people can get started in writing their own *Grassroots* articles.

A Conversation with a Grassroots Author is also a great resource for aspiring authors to learn more about the literate activities that occur when authors are composing their articles. There are a lot of steps that go into writing each article, and each individual writer composes differently with different resources, timelines, and goals. These podcast episodes are a way to learn more about how we are all writing researchers and our methods for composition reflect that. In any given podcast episode, an author might talk about the motivations behind writing their specific piece and the inspirations behind their writing, as well as the steps each writer took to edit their article as they were preparing for publication. The podcast series is a great example of genre research that we hope will benefit students who are writing their own *Grassroots* articles. As not all instructors assign the same *Grassroots* articles in their classrooms, these podcasts can be helpful to students who are working on different types of writing-research projects, such as their own podcasts, or even **genre remediations** (taking one genre, such as a text-based artifact, and remediating it into a different modality).

From *Grassroots* to Podcast: What Inspired this Project?

We had the opportunity to ask Emily Capan what inspired her to start the series. Emily explained how there were two primary reasons. First, many of ISU's writing program instructors teach a *Grassroots* project in their ENG 101 classes. Emily thought this might be an effective resource to use in the classroom to show students a "behind-the-scenes" look into how articles are created. Emily explained how getting to hear from the *Grassroots* authors directly makes these texts feel that much more real for the students. Writing instructors can also use these podcasts alongside a discussion of P-CHAT—thinking about how production, activities, ecologies, and other concepts present in *Grassroots* articles—form this genre. Second, this podcast can be used by graduate students and undergraduate students who are interested in contributing to the journal. For example, not everyone is going to be writing a *Grassroots* article for a class, but they may still want to submit their work to the journal. This podcast gives this group of listeners insight into how they can make their own articles.

We also asked Emily why she thought having a podcast about the *Grassroots* articles was important:

Emily: By having conversations with a variety of different *Grassroots* authors, it helps to illuminate the different perspectives and writing processes that folks can have. Each writer has a particular identity that is exhibited through their work. People create differently and

this should be celebrated, as well as examined. It is my hope that students, instructors, and writers who are thinking about uptake will find these conversations enlightening and useful.

In the two podcast episodes we’re looking at in this article, each author (Sammy and Edcel) explained how they used both antecedent knowledge and genre research to investigate particular literacies in their everyday lives, as well as wrote compelling *Grassroots* articles about those literacies. For Edcel in his article titled “Tools Add Agency in Mario 3D Platforms: How F.L.U.D.D. Engages in Activity Theory in *Super Mario Sunshine*,” this investigation investigated the use and agency of tools, specifically F.L.U.D.D., in the 3D platformer *Super Mario Sunshine*. In his discussion of the idea for and process of composing his article, Edcel explains how he was able to use material rhetoric and games studies to argue that tools add agency. For Sammy, her article, “In the Weeds with Literate Activity in the Restaurant Industry”—which was also prefaced by a menu of her own design—explored the restaurant industry as a complex activity system. As she walked through the steps of drafting and revising her piece, Sammy kept coming back to literate activity and menu design as crucial factors in her writing and process.

Taking What You Know and Finding Out What You Don’t: A Combination of Antecedent Knowledge and Genre Research

Antecedent knowledge, which is all the things a writer already knows that can come into play when they take up a new kind of writing or literacy (“Key Terms and Concepts”), was the crucial starting point for both Edcel and Sammy’s *Grassroots* articles, and they each talk about this in their own ways in their interviews for the podcast. Edcel relied on his antecedent knowledge of previous *Super Mario* video games to help him identify an idea for an article about *Super Mario Sunshine*, specifically. Alternatively, Sammy talked about drawing from her experience and knowledge of the restaurant industry and serving as she thought about and composed her article:

Sammy: I actually read through a few of my journals from the years I was still working in the restaurant industry. I also was re-reading Stephanie Danler’s novel, *Sweetbitter*, to help get me in the mindset of what it was like to be a server (and I was watching the show of the same name).

But one cannot live, and write, on antecedent knowledge alone—that’s where genre research comes into play. **Genre research** is “research that focuses on

Genre: What does “genre” mean again? In the ISU Writing Program, when we talk about genre, we mean productions that can be identified by the features or conventions that make it recognizable (“Key Terms and Concepts”).

how to go about creating a specific kind of text for a specific kind of situation” (“Key Terms and Concepts”). In the case of writing about video games and tools, Edcel found it most helpful to look closely at the different iterations of Super Mario games and how they differed in mechanics and tool use:

Agency: Using Abate’s perspective on agency, this is the social action when a character uses their own voice and autonomy to call out moments of injustice oppression, and fight against pre-determined structures of power. However, **agency** looks different for tools (non-living agents) because in part, tools are co-actors with the characters and their agency is dependent, in some ways, on whether the character uses them for good or ill.

Edcel: I grabbed my Nintendo Switch, started playing *Super Mario Sunshine* again to relive my GameCube years and thought about what made this game from the Super Mario franchise unique from its other titles. This is when the idea hit me! This is the only game where Mario’s game mechanics are adapted because Mario is using a tool to defeat different goo-like enemies in the game, while also helping restore the natural sunlight while at the same time cleaning the environment in Isle Delfino. . . This was just the idea

I needed to write a paper to explain why F.L.U.D.D., the water cannon tool Mario uses in the game, adds to Mario’s game mechanics as a form of agency.

By figuring out the “genre” of Super Mario tools, so to speak, Edcel was able to better analyze and comment on the ways in which the F.L.U.D.D. tool stood out and added agency. And when it came to writing about the genre of menus for the *Grassroots*, Sammy’s genre research looked a little different:

Sammy: I also looked up genre conventions of menus, to try and draft what would ultimately become the first page of the article, designed with a menu layout from Canva. In the end, this became a genre “mash-up” as I adapted the genre of a menu to try and make it work for what I wanted to say about “server literacies.” My goal was to use the genre conventions of a menu as an outer shell of sorts, with each section explaining a different section of my article (like how a menu might move through meal courses and drinks). Lastly, I did some research into the genre conventions of headings and subheadings in the *Grassroots* journal—most authors use really quippy or funny language, and so I tried to design my headings in a similar format (using personal anecdotes and humor).

By familiarizing herself not just with the ins and outs of menu design but also with the features of the *Grassroots* journal, Sammy was ultimately able to craft an article that both cohered with the style and tone of the journal and included a new kind of feature that does not appear in previous issues: an activity-rich menu to preview the article and tempt the reader. In this way, Sammy remediated the menu genre—a document that shows customers

what they can order, usually organized from the beginning of a meal to the end—into something to help readers move through the sections and content of her article from start to finish. The result was a helpful, useful genre mash-up of sorts, one that guides readers through her work, as you can see in Figure 1.

Using Theoretical Concepts to Make Connections with Everyday Life: Edcel's Connections with Material Rhetoric and Video Games

Part of the challenge of writing a *Grassroots* article is thinking of ways to use the cool theory you have been studying and apply it to everyday life. When reading a variety of information, it is important to learn how to involve this knowledge in conversation with the key terms and concepts of the Writing Program, and in turn, learning how to involve into the conversation the key terms and concepts you learn in the Writing Program. Edcel also had these thoughts when he was figuring out how to incorporate activity theory, autonomy, agency, and material rhetoric in his *Grassroots* article. It is interesting he got inspiration for his article just by doing one of his favorite hobbies, playing video games. During the time he was working on his article, *Super Mario 3D All-Stars* was released for the Nintendo Switch. Edcel got to play his favorite video games again after years of not playing them. It was interesting because after Edcel had studied enough theory about activity systems, autonomy, agency, and material rhetoric, so he was able to identify how these terms connected with *Super Mario Sunshine*—one of the *only* Mario 3D platformer games where Mario uses a physical tool named F.L.U.D.D. on his adventures. The following section is pulled from Edcel's podcast interview, explaining how he made connections between theory and video games:

Edcel: I had a lot of fun writing this article. It gave me the space to play my favorite video game and have a real hands-on experience with the game mechanics used on *Super Mario Sunshine* for the Nintendo Switch. It's very different writing about video games if you are watching another player engage with the game via live stream or as a YouTube video. Me playing the game allows me to really experiment with how useful F.L.U.D.D. is in the



Figure 1: The first page of Sammy Moe's article, "In the Weeds with Literate Activity in the Restaurant Industry."



Figure 2: A QR code for Episode 7 of *A Conversation with the Grassroots Author* featuring Edcel Cintron-Gonzales.

game. I got to use the different nuzzles available for F.L.U.D.D., listen to F.L.U.D.D. dialogue in the game, which made me think of how F.L.U.D.D. was given a lot of agency by its creator because it had the ability to talk and communicate its thoughts throughout the game. As I played the game, I would take notes on Mario and F.L.U.D.D.'s gameplay and interactions in the world of *Super Mario Sunshine* and used Activity Theory to break down how these characters expressed their autonomy and agency to help form my original argument. It was also refreshing to write about Mario 3D platformers in general and talk about my favorite video game as a joy in itself.

In this next excerpt, Edcel explains why using theory is important when writing a *Grassroots* article.

Edcel: My main advice would be to have fun writing your grassroots article. If you ever feel like your idea is not worthy of writing or it can't be academic enough, then push those thoughts away. Theory and scholarship are meant to be used for action and do real work in the world. And I do agree that as a scholar, I want my writing to be accessible to a wide audience, so other people can read my work and start thinking about their favorite video games and media in different ways.

Literate Activity and Menu Design

Sammy returned to the restaurant industry the first semester after she started at ISU. She worked at an entirely new restaurant since the restaurant she had previously worked at (for ten years) had shut down. Sammy used what she had learned about genre research and literate activity to help her understand this new restaurant system. There were a lot of familiar steps for her to learn, such as where to stock certain items, and how to support the kitchen staff when they got busy. After returning to Illinois, she began the rhetoric and composition seminar. Though she had a lot of antecedent knowledge that helped her write this article for class, she still had a lot of genre research to complete before the article would be ready for publication in the journal. The following quotes are from her article, and they detail some of the steps she took to recall vital information about working in restaurants. These steps included reading novels set in a restaurant, reading through her journals (which contain recipes on note cards as well as memories from her time in the industry), and lastly, reading different *Grassroots* articles to ensure Sammy was abiding by the genre conventions for the journal:

Sammy: The writing process looked like a lot of drafting and revision. I tend to write in a really cyclical manner, which means I

might repeat a thought, and so when I go back to revise, I have to do a careful read-through of my own work to make sure the piece actually flowed correctly.

Sammy: I actually read through a few of my journals from the years I was still working in the restaurant industry. I also was re-reading Stephanie Danler’s novel, *Sweetbitter*, to help get me in the mindset of what it was like to be a server (and I was watching the show of the same name). I also looked up genre conventions of menus, to try and draft what would ultimately become the first page of the article, designed with a menu layout from Canva. Lastly, I did some research into the genre convention of headings and subheadings in the *Grassroots* journal—most authors use really quippy or funny language, and so I tried to design my headings in a similar format (using personal anecdotes and humor).



Figure 3: A QR code for Episode 8 of *A Conversation with the Grassroots Author* featuring Sammy Moe.

Check Out our Podcast Series: *A Conversation with a Grassroots Author*

Using a variety of Writing Program concepts and individual composing practices, Edcel and Sammy have produced not just two unique *Grassroots* articles, but also contributed to the podcast series in enlightening ways. With that, we leave you on this encouraging note:

Sammy: I would say to embrace your own unique voice and style when writing a *Grassroots* article. I also try to advise new authors to read older issues of the journal, to give them some sense of the genre conventions and style choices other authors make.

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Edcel Javier Cintron-Gonzalez is a Puerto Rican scholar and graduate worker who is pursuing a PhD in English Studies with a focus in Children and Young Adult Literature. His research interests focus on interdisciplinary ways to study Children's and Young Adult Literature. Currently, he is interested in exploring topics on Mental Health; Women, Sexuality, and Gender Studies; Game Studies, and Material Rhetoric. When he is not working on academic things, he enjoys cooking, playing video games and writing about them in the website Gamers with Glasses, and fighting for his rights alongside his fellow graduate workers as part of the Graduate Workers Union at Illinois State University.



Charley Koenig is an English Studies PhD student studying creative writing at Illinois State University. When she is not rewatching *Parks & Rec*, she is probably rewatching *Schitt's Creek* or listening to the *Harry Potter* audiobooks while trying to write, teach, student, parent, and crochet with her partner, daughter, and dogs in Bloomington, Illinois.



Sammy Moe is a PhD student studying creative writing. When not researching and reading, she is currently working on a novel about her experience in the restaurant industry.

