



# *Grassroots: A Fine Dining Literate Activity Experience*

SAM MOE

## **Abstract**

This article explores the restaurant industry as an activity system while also drawing on scholarship from rhetoric and composition to help readers learn more about how to explore the everyday literacies they might encounter.

## **Introduction: I Like to Cry in the Walk-In**

In which we enter the restaurant activity system and think about how we learn new things and transfer our knowledge across different settings.

## **Fire: Appetizers, Activity Systems and My History with Restaurants**

An exploration of antecedent knowledge and a breakdown of activity systems.

## **Burn the Ice!**


We're really in the weeds now, especially since the author broke (another) glass into the ice bin. Don't panic: we're going to talk about the interaction of tools and texts that permeate the restaurant.

## **~~I Dropped Your Entrée on the Floor~~ We're Just Running a Little Behind, Have an App**

We're going to start thinking about knowledge transfer. We'll focus on some of the more important questions to ask when starting any new restaurant job and how transfer exists in each restaurant space.

## **The Kitchen Macerated Berries for Hours, Please Order Dessert**

Did you enjoy my service performance? Please order dessert so we can spend more time together (\$).



## In the Weeds with Literate Activity in the Restaurant Industry

Sammy Moe

In this article, Moe explores the restaurant industry as an activity system while also drawing on scholarship from rhetoric and composition to help readers learn more about how to explore the everyday literacies they might encounter.

### Introduction: I Like to Cry in the Walk-In Freezer

Waiting tables is both thrilling and terrifying. Most of my learning at the restaurant was anxiety-inducing, but through research I learned to find my way and even became pretty good at keeping the guests on my side by handling small difficulties calmly, and occasionally offering a free drink or appetizer to smooth the way. In framing this article through activity systems, I hope to show that there are different ways to engage in literate activity, knowledge transfer, and uptake. As Stephanie Danler writes in her first novel, *Sweetbitter*, “A certain connoisseurship of taste, a mark of how you deal with the world, is the ability to relish the bitter, to crave it, even, the way you do the sweet.” This can be true not just in learning new genres in the classroom, or perhaps in an office workplace setting, but in all kinds of everyday workplaces, like restaurants, that you might not see as filled with literacies.

I also want to share my own process of knowledge making—both thinking about how I learned about working in restaurants and how I learned to think about how my learning happens across settings as diverse

as restaurants and classrooms. So let's do dinner. Waiting tables will never be easy, but just like writing in a new setting or genre, it can be worth it, especially once you've cracked the code of what to do and how to do it. And if someone yells at you, just go cry in the walk in (the last walk-in because it's where the bins of ice-cream are kept). Without further ado, please keep reading and someone will explain appetizers and activity systems to you shortly.

## Fire: Appetizers, Activity Systems and My History with Restaurants

Even though we weren't allowed to hang out in the kitchen, I would always linger after my orders went in, eager to hear either of the head chefs shout "Fire!" before listing off specific entrees. If they read my order out loud—fire ribeye, salmon, calamari—I was in the clear to walk away and proceed with the rest of my tasks. I was hiding during this time, tucked into the corner between the salad station (also referred to as the **cold window**) and the computers. Beyond every station, hot and cold, were anywhere from one to fifty ticket slips containing appetizers, entrees, and desserts. Some slips were stamped for allergies, others written on with pen (something else we weren't supposed to do). If we thought we were hot standing in front of the line, a heated metal space where all hot plates rested before we picked them up and carried them to guests, it was nothing compared to the heat of the kitchen. The only solution for cooling off was to hide in the walk-in freezers, which were also spaces for crying and gossiping.

From the very first weeks of a graduate seminar I took in rhetoric and composition, I've been thinking about the ways I might use rhetorical theories in communicating with my research interests and goals for my degree. I've also been thinking about ways to combine my **antecedent knowledge** of everyday genres (such as pens, notebooks, and sometimes even menus) with my interest in exploring how literate activity systems work—specifically in the restaurant industry. In reflecting on my ten years working across seven restaurants, as well as my own everyday literacies in these spaces, it is obvious to me that the restaurant industry is historically situated, community based, and communicative (which are features of an activity system). What surprises me in my reflection, though, is how much literate activity is involved in working (or even dining) in a restaurant. What started out as confusing to me when I first entered restaurants as a worker—what the heck was a "refire" order, a dupe, or burning ice?—quickly became a set of activities, terms, and knowledges that were deeply embedded in my muscle memory. It can help to visualize waiting tables as a complex activity system with many moving parts. It became a muscle memory of activities.

First, there are specific tools you'll need to excel in this restaurant activity system: strong coffee, slip-resistant shoes (trust me, you will trip and fall otherwise), a serving book (formerly referred to as a "credit-card holder"—this is where you'll store all your cash and receipts), and at least ten pens. If you need something to write guest orders on, you can always steal paper from the ticket printers. Or you can use the back of discarded menus, just don't let the guests see the water and wine stains covering the paper. However, before we continue further with all this restaurant and rhetoric talk, I want to bring in David Russell's explanation of the five key elements of **activity systems** as a way to help you understand this concept. According to Russell, **activity systems** are:

1. **historically developed**, meaning that they developed over time and interactively with the culture in which they operate
2. **inherently social**—that is, they are changing systems of interaction between people, their environments, and their culture
3. **dialogic**, meaning that they are in constant conversations with their objectives and how best to achieve them
4. **collective**, rather than individual. Activity systems are not the product of one, but of many
5. **always changing and adapting** to meet the needs of participants within the system

It might be obvious to me now how these five key points are present in the restaurant industry, but I didn't always have this knowledge. After looking at the tools used in the industry, the second, perhaps most important aspect of the restaurant activity system, is the community. Any server, cook, host, or even your guests who are willing to socialize with you will also be part of the system, although they may or may not see or understand the activity in the same way. The servers and I used to repeat the silly saying, "Teamwork makes the dreamwork," until we got so weeded we couldn't talk to each other anymore. The activities we took part in for preparation and teaching became the lifelines we utilized during a busy—or, **weeded**—shift. We couldn't have made it to the end of each shift without supporting one another. On the other hand, while guests are also a necessary part of the system, they don't have the same goals (surviving the shift, making money) and also don't have access to a lot of the tools and knowledge that the employees have.

In order to exist and thrive in the activity system that is the restaurant, a participant needs to learn how to use the tools (genres, communications, human interactions) in successful ways. But that doesn't happen

instantaneously. Instead, a new participant has to learn, usually by making a lot of mistakes along the way. In the next sections, I want to talk about the language and procedures involved in making mistakes, including the steps I had to take when I shattered eight martinis in front of an entire bar of guests.

## Burn the Ice!

When you are new to a restaurant, the bartenders, food runners, bussers, and kitchen staff don't always care about why you are making mistakes. They just want you to stop making them. In the midst of a busy shift, which involves multiple steps to service, your coworkers only care about two things: using the proper code words to call for help, and fixing the problem(s) as soon as humanly possible.

The first thing I tell new servers when I train them is balance. It's impossible to survive any shift if you can't balance two plates of food on your nondominant arm or a tray of drinks or a stack of dirty dishes. For this section, however, we'll just focus on drinks, or what we like to call, "bar service." Each guest in your section of tables needs a drink. Even if they never touch their water, they at least need one water glass throughout the meal, which must be filled away from the table. I learned this the hard way, of course, when I grabbed a guest's drink at the top half of the glass and the server training me yelled at me. Scolded is perhaps a better term, but believe me when I say we would also get yelled at—by each other, and by guests. But back to the glasses. We learn something called the 50/50 rule. The top half of any glass is for the guest, and the bottom half is for the server to hold. Depending on what type of restaurant you work in, your drinks, nonalcoholic or alcoholic, will be served in (deceptively delicate) glasses atop a drink tray. This tray must be balanced by one hand only—your nondominant hand. For me, my nondominant hand was shaky at best. Prone to anxiety throughout the shift, it was at times nearly impossible to carry a drink tray to my guests. Then one night, I broke glass behind the bar itself, shards of a once-full glass of sauvignon blanc flying into our bucket of **consumption ice** (ice that is consumed by the guest). I had to burn the ice, and quick.

Burning the ice isn't easy. I had to scoop out the entire contents of the bin, melt the ice in a large sink out back, then ferry hot water to the bartenders so they could send any last remnants of broken glass down the drain. Last but not least, the ice bin must be wiped down. You might be wondering how such a devastating mistake factors into literate activity, or you might even be wondering what my guests were up to while I was cleaning up my mistakes. The entire time I was burning the ice, I was also moving,

communicating, and socializing with my coworkers and guests. Every single person I walked behind, I had to say “behind you.” I had to walk quickly (never run in the restaurant) to my guests to let them know I’d be just another moment with their drinks. At the same time, I was getting sat with a new table—who would also need to order. I was socializing in many ways with different actors: polite and apologetic with guests, sometimes silly with the bartenders, and always quiet in the kitchen.

However, the beverage list is just the tip of the iceberg, or rather, the tip of the restaurant activity system. To quote Jerry Stinnett’s article “Using Objective-Motivated Knowledge Activation to Support Writing Transfer in FYC,”

The relationship of the actions and tools in an activity system and their collective relationship to the objectives of the activity not only reveal why particular actions make sense but also identify the usefulness of particular tools as tools and the particular knowledge needed to use them effectively within that system. (360)

The relationship between the different tools we use—in this case, the drink lists we created and memorized—is an example of the ways in which our relationships are formed in the restaurant activity system. More specifically, we use these beverage lists to provide knowledge for our guests, while also helping them to consider different **flavor profiles**—the ways in which different foods and drink work together to harmonize on the palate—in order to create the best experience possible. Our lists may seem messy, stained (often with red wine or sauce) and frayed at the edges, but their usefulness within this activity system takes priority over appearance. Besides, our **server booklets**, the place in which we store all these notes, are meant to be messy as well as out of the guests line of sight, stashed in cabinets or hidden in our aprons.

White wines are paired with seafood and chicken, red wines are paired with beef and dessert. Rosé is best in the summertime, and martinis can either come straight up in a glass, or on the rocks with ice. Servers use a myriad of genres with which to write down their lists, from notecards purchased at the grocery store, to receipt paper when we’re low on notecards. Sometimes we use birthday card envelopes or sticky notes, any dry surface that will allow us to write key information that we’ll need to recall later on when talking to our guests. The creation of these beverage lists is an example of a server’s **antecedent knowledge**, or, our prior-existing knowledge of writing, note-taking, and the different literate activities we’ve taken part in. Many of us applied study methods from school. For me, I always use a notecard booklet (Figure 1) to help me keep track of the different types of beverages, both

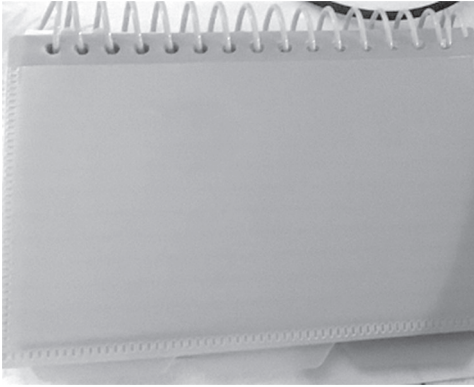


Figure 1: A notepad booklet with three tabbed sections.

alcoholic and nonalcoholic. Normally, a server would need to study their notes for a menu test, which all new servers are supposed to take early on. I'll let you in on secret though, I never took the menu test, which I've kept from my fellow servers for over a decade. My manager bumped me up to server one fateful season when we were lacking in staff members with deep knowledge of the menu, and she told me she trusted me enough to not take the menu test. Though I knew the titles of each dish, I knew nothing about

their ingredients. Not wanting to let anyone down, I started compulsively taking notes, hanging out in the back prep station with the kitchen staff as they crafted recipes and skinned fish. I learned that sea beans taste best with flavorless fish, like halibut, and found tiny blue crabs in the buckets of oysters we used on Mondays. I studied paring knives versus butter knives (the former is sharper, more able to pry open a mussel) and what it meant to reduce something (to cook it down until it's half the original amount) to make a sweeter or more flavorful sauce, (regardless of the ingredients). I quickly became obsessed with the culinary world, not realizing back then how greatly my serving skills would transfer into my academic projects and research interests.

## **I Dropped Your Entrée on the Floor We're Just Running a Little Behind, Have a Free Appetizer**

I wasn't so much worried when I began working in the restaurant industry about breaking glassware or forgetting information. I was more worried about the overall chaos of the dinner shift. The entrées on any menu don't have to only apply to dinner—it can be applicable to breakfast or lunch depending on whether or not you work from the opening of the restaurant (generally around ten in the morning) til the close (around nine, ten, or later if you're behind the bar). Dinner, and its complexity, was the meal that taught me about transfer. Now, it's true that if you had asked me about how I was transferring my **antecedent knowledge** when I was just learning about being a server, I wouldn't have had the slightest clue what you meant. But learning transfer (taking existing knowledge and practices and applying them in new situations) is in fact something that we're doing all the time, and transfer can be particularly interesting when we're looking at people moving

around in a complicated activity system. When I first started as a server, learning how to work a busy dinner shift drew on my antecedent knowledge of running food in and out of the kitchen (in order of how guests are sitting at my tables) and cleaning after the guests left (also known as “bussing”) and knowledge about good customer service that I had learned from hosting. Follow me to take a look at the high highs and low lows of restaurant transfer. Oh, and never balance three plates on one arm, you’re going to drop the fried zucchini sticks on your guest’s lap.

I learned the language of the restaurant industry over more than a decade working in restaurants and hotels, and I’ve also learned a few of important concepts about writing from taking classes in rhetoric and composition. One key thing I’ve learned is that all the activities I listed as part of my learning in restaurants were, in fact, part of a process of high-and-low-road transfer of knowledge. Jerry Stinnett writes that “writing studies researchers have demonstrated that effective transfer of writing practice demands the ability to call on and transform existing writing knowledge for new contexts. Indeed, one of the ‘five essential principles about writing transfer’ identified by Jessie L. Moore is that ‘Successful writing transfer requires repurposing prior knowledge’ (5)” (357). While I didn’t know anything about the terms **high and low road transfer** during my time in the restaurant industry, that didn’t stop me from transferring my skills between different settings. I’ve worked in the hotel industry, in restaurants a few steps below fine dining, and I also helped to open a brand new restaurant. Looking back, I can see I was engaging in low-road transfer across these different restaurant spaces. Each time I got a second restaurant job to help pay the bills (sometimes working seven days a week between both locations) I had a practiced list of questions and activities memorized. Below is a list showing some of the ways low-road transfer was at work between each restaurant:

#### **Low-road Transfer**

From ISUWriting.com:

According to Perkins and Salomon, “Low-road transfer ‘reflects the automatic triggering of well-practiced routines in circumstances where there is considerable perceptual similarity to the original learning context’” (Perkins and Saloman qtd. in Reiff and Bawarshi 315).

- At each restaurant, I knew to ask about their allergy process. Some restaurants have you stamp your tickets so the chefs know, others require you tell every manager on duty, the food runner, and the head chef.
- Where was the dry storage? (Paper goods, sauces, salts, sugar).
- Where was the side-work sheet? Side-work involves ongoing tasks we complete throughout the shift that help service to run smoother. Examples of side-work can be anything from refilling sauces, getting ice



for the bar, stocking paper towels, and bringing out racks of glassware to the bar.

Even though these steps appear as questions, once I figured out the layout of the restaurant, I had already incorporated every task (and more) into the routine of each shift. I learned where things were located and the rules for using familiar tools (which can be different in different restaurants) at the same time that I was mapping and finding my way through the physical space of the restaurant.

Since the main restaurant I worked at (while oscillating between side restaurant jobs) was only open for dinner, I engaged in a lot of high-road transfer for tasks I never would have imagined were a part of dinner. These are the tasks that took me the longest to learn. In order to prepare myself better for each shift, I began taping static notes into my server book, wanting to make sure that until this knowledge became ingrained in me, I would always have an answer ready for a guest.

Before the dinner rush began, I had to learn wine service, how to roll silverware, side plate policies, and alcoholic beverage garnishes. The first seemed easy. I had watched the bartenders rip off wine bottle foil with their bare hands before quickly uncorking every bottle and pouring each glass without spilling. At first, I kept forgetting my wine key (wine opener). I dropped a bottle of champagne on the floor, which didn't break, but I did make a joke with the guests about how they would be getting "extra bubbles"—they didn't laugh. I had to roll seventy-five silverware bundles a night or I wasn't allowed to leave (each containing two forks and a knife). I wasn't allowed to put metal sauce boats on entrée plates or salad dishes. This last part was complicated for me. I asked what a sauce boat was, and my coworkers explained they were also called "ramekins." What they really meant were small containers of sauce and salad dressing that appeared "unprofessional" jammed onto a plate with an expensive steak. I had to carry all sauce out of the kitchen on a separate, smaller plate, with a napkin underneath to prevent slippage. I wasn't a server, yet, and I had a long ways to go before I would master food running (carrying every dish from the kitchen to the guests). Temporarily demoted from food running, I was back to hosting, then bussing tables. Once the kitchen was convinced I could recognize every dish, I was allowed to train to food run.

I haven't mentioned this before to anyone, but I wasn't trained to wait tables. My manager, confident in my abilities, tossed me onto the floor after doing everything but wait tables. I had exactly three days of training, no menu test, and only two tables for the first month. I cared about succeeding because I loved my job. I studied every shift until I could recite the entire

menu from memory—including ingredients of every single dish. I worked my way up from waiting two tables at a time to waiting on seven. The most I've ever had in one night was half the restaurant—over ten tables, including a party of eighteen. Half the staff had called out sick, so my friend and I took over the front-of-house. Though I was unfamiliar with transfer and antecedent knowledge, that shift was an example of how I had successfully used my antecedent knowledge of customer service and carework to successfully complete the shift. The way I see it, all of the low road transfer (memorizing tasks and menu items, studying how others did things) ultimately meant I was engaging in **high road transfer** (where you see the system as a whole and adapt your knowledge more easily across situations, rather than just learning specific, isolated new skills). I transferred knowledge I learned from outside research—spending nights watching *Chef's Table* and reading Anthony Bourdain, Alice B. Toklas, and Ruth Reichl until I had bags under my eyes—to the tasks I did as a server and to my interactions with guests. Luckily that evening, I was only yelled at once, for uncorking a wine too late. This, too, I filed away into my memory: get the guest a drink before anything. If you're busy, give everyone water, then free bread. Return with alcohol and an apology, take their entrée orders, and move on as quickly as possible because you're about to get **double-sat** (when the host sits you two tables at the exact same time, usually during a busy rush).

The last, most important lesson to learn in order to be a successful server are the table numbers in any given restaurant space. Memorize the guests who like the window seats, the guests who need extra lamplight, and the guests who don't care where they sit as long as it's with you. Just like in a classroom setting, there was terminology I needed to study so that I could be good at my job, and terminology I needed to study so I could make myself a better team member. I didn't realize until I was working

### High-Road Transfer

From ISUWriting.com:

Conversely, “High-road transfer . . . ‘depends on deliberate, mindful abstraction of skill or knowledge from one context for application to another’” (Perkins and Saloman qtd. in Reiff and Bawarshi 315).

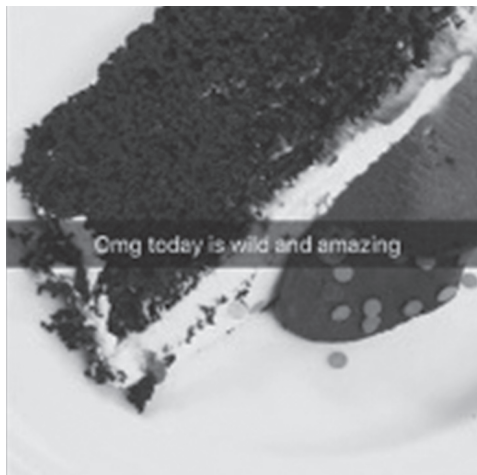


Figure 2: A slice of birthday cake my guest gave to me during a shift. Image text reads “Omg today is wild and amazing.”

and studying at ISU that I began to that the restaurant industry is full of these literate activities. As servers, we were all taking part in calling forth our antecedent knowledge, low-and-high road transferring our knowledges across different shifts, and making meaning out of all these activities—sometimes positive, sometimes negative, but always part of the ongoing knowledge we were building.

### The Kitchen Macerated Berries for Hours, Please Order Dessert

In some ways, studying for work as a restaurant server has a lot in common with the kind of learning we do in lots of different activity systems, including those inside of school settings. Many of these settings have similar goals, which are to accomplish our tasks the best we can, with the tools we've got, in a timely fashion. If you time your guest's experience on your watch or

#### **Macerating Berries:**

Maceration is the act of soaking fruit in sugar and water to soften the berries—you can also add alcohol, and heat up the mixture to pair it with cold desserts, such as cheesecakes or ice-cream cake. Ordering a dessert with macerated berries takes longer, so make sure to alert your guests ahead of time. And if you get to work early enough, you can try all the dessert specials before your coworkers.

in the margin of your server notebook, then about an hour and a half should have passed by now, which means the last section of this article is dedicated to dessert. Dessert is the wrap-up of a meal, much the same way an article is meant to be wrapped up. However, rather than simply finishing this article and claiming that I've taught you all you need to know about working in the restaurant industry, I want instead to add my voice to an ongoing conversation about the ways in which the work we take part in both inside and outside of school is full of meaning-making opportunities and different genres of composition.

To cite “Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre,” by Amy J. Devitt, “Most of the scholarship on genre . . . fails to recognize the commonalities across different works. Text and textual meaning, whether literary or rhetorical, are not objective and static but rather dynamic and created through the interaction of writer, reader, and context” (697). Both the activity systems present in the restaurant industry and the tools and genres we employ are there, are dynamic, always changing, and always evolving. My note-taking habits while waiting tables involved taping key terms and ingredient lists onto my server notebook. In grad school, I find myself taping key terms and theories to the covers of my binders and notebooks, as it helps me study better. Where once in the restaurant industry I would prep the entire front-of-house with specific tools to help the shift move smoother, I

now prepare for writing in the same way—by setting up my desk ahead of time, so I can work on my creative projects with greater ease. Prepping ahead of time also means I get up less, and I can stay in the writing zone more—which is incredibly difficult for someone who is easily distracted (and then the food writing turns into hunger, but luckily I’ve already hidden snacks in my bookshelf before my *writing shift* began). As a freelance writer in my spare time, I use my restaurant knowledge to help me create plot and story. And if I’m ever in the weeds with a project, I just turn to my carework skills I learned in the restaurant: keep calm, retain all information, and complete the tasks of highest priority next.

To reiterate my original goal for this article, the methods we employ when we engage in everyday literate activities and take up new knowledge are unique in execution (we learn different things in different settings) but we often employ similar learning strategies across these boundaries. In addition, our learning is community-based (not just in the immediate community, like other workers in a restaurant, but from other sources, like books or TV shows). We learn from one another, from our antecedent knowledge, and most importantly, we can, if we’re lucky and pay attention, get the chance to transfer this learning across really diverse situations, even bridging a gap as wide as the space between a restaurant and a classroom.

## Works Cited

- Danler, Stephanie. *Sweetbitter*. Vintage Books, a Division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2017.
- Devitt, Amy J. “Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre.” *College English*, vol. 62, no. 6, 2000, p. 696, doi:10.2307/379009.
- “Key Terms & Concepts for the ISU Writing Program.” *Grassroots Writing Research*, [isuwriting.com/key-terms/](http://isuwriting.com/key-terms/).
- Stinnett, Jerry. “Using Objective-Motivated Knowledge Activation to Support Writing Transfer in FYC.” *National Council of Teachers of English*, 2019, [library-ncte-org.libproxy.lib.ilstu.edu/journals/CCC/issues/v70-3/29987](http://library-ncte-org.libproxy.lib.ilstu.edu/journals/CCC/issues/v70-3/29987).



**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.