

CHATting Doors: Examining University Office Doors as a Genre

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In this article, Nina Jang presents her findings from walking down the hallways of offices in the Stevenson building at ISU, and she analyzes university office doors as a writing genre. Incorporating cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), Jang comes to the realization that certain elements in CHAT play more prominent roles than others in this writing genre, and she traces the development of her own office door.

When the Doors Started Talking to Me

Never have I ever thought that doors were interesting (except *The Doors*, but that goes without saying). There was nothing interesting about them except that you open them to go in and out and occasionally to knock on to indicate that you are a civilized human being.

That was until I went to college.

When I was heading towards my college classrooms for the first time as a freshman, I encountered many doors of professors from various departments. There were doors that had nothing on them, but a lot of them had *some kind of writing* on them: name signs, the spinning wheel that indicates if the occupant of the office is in the room/a meeting/on campus/off campus, office hour signs, artwork, poems, advertisements, and other random collections of things. Back then, I surely didn't have the frame of mind to think that those doors were a **writing genre** that I was getting newly acquainted with. To me, writing was writing only when letters were printed/inscribed on a sheet of paper or on some sort of an online document like a blog or news article.

It also had to be either fiction or non-fiction-like things that people who call themselves writers create for artistic purposes or that students occasionally have to produce for a class. My idea of writing genres was limited.

You see, I think it is very common in life that things happen to you while you are not realizing that they are happening. You have to look back on a memory to really see that a meaningful moment happened to you. You need time for things to sit so that they become *something*. You know, like cheese (a rather gross simile, but whatever). After all, John Lennon once said, “Life is what happens to you when you’re busy making other plans.” Who would have thought that those encounters with the office doors as a freshman would later become a subject for my article, or that I would become more deeply involved in their production myself? I hadn’t the slightest idea of that, but I did notice that I started to stop in front of those doors to let them speak to me and to listen to what they had to say.

One Graduate Assistant Starts Talking Through Her Door

Once I arrived at Illinois State University as a graduate teaching assistant, the department gave me a door along with my office. It meant that now I could decorate my own office door, and, another way to put it, I could now actively participate in the **production** of office doors as a writing genre.

When people ask me what a writing genre is, I just get this overwhelming urge to shout out, “O, behold, the thing that speaks!” in a tone that is used in a Shakespearean play. Don’t ask me why because just like Lauren Graham said on my beloved TV show *Gilmore Girls*, “My head is a wild jungle full of scary gibberish.” To come back from my sidetracked pop-culture reference, I think, in my humble opinion, a writing genre is defined by its ability to communicate. *Any kind* of communication, that is. I was about to become an active participant in this office door genre as an author and make some sort of communication through my door.

On the first week of my employment, my coordinator took me to the graduate teaching assistants’ office hallway to look at my office for the first time and see if the key worked properly. I soon realized that the hallway was overwhelmingly entertaining for the eyes. Just like the time I saw the professors’ office doors in my freshman year of college, I saw both doors with nothing on them and doors with things on them. However, the cases of decorated doors tended to be rather extreme in here. Colorful, haphazard, simply extravagant. Extremely entertained, I wandered around the hallway looking at each door, sometimes cackling with laughter and sometimes tilting my head to the side in question when I did not understand what the doors



Figure 1: One extreme example of office doors with flourishing conventions.



Figure 2: The naked face of my office door at the beginning of the semester.

were talking about. Then I turned, and there I saw my own door. Next to the door, there was a sign that indicated that it indeed was my door. However, this door did not indicate *itself* that it was my door. I have always been the queen of clutter and a talking-machine. Something this clean and quiet cannot be what says, “Welcome to Nina Jang’s office! Here are some things that she finds **DOPE!** She would not mind talking about them on random occasions **AT ALL**, so please come on in.” (I don’t know why, but if my door had a voice, I think it would sound like male show hosts like John Oliver or Stephen Colbert. See? Again, a wild jungle.) This door was unacceptable. I had to do something about it.

After the first day I spent in my office, I brought a bag of *stuff* to my office. Preparing the bag was the weirdest thing since I didn’t know what to bring. I would grab a random picture I took during my trip to New York City and go, “This would be cool!” and then go, “Nah . . . this is way too personal. What on earth am I thinking?” Then again, I would ask myself, “Does it have to be impersonal? I mean, what is considered personal on the door? Isn’t *everything* personal on there?” And these questions had no answers. These questions were definitely too silly to ask my newly-acquainted colleagues who might end up thinking that I am the new weirdo in the hallway. These questions of mine were, I later found out, the aspects of **representation in cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)**. Whoa, I love it when I can call my silly thoughts something that sounds so big and fancy, don’t you? It’s like

one of those rare moments when you are sitting in a classroom and you just share a random thought out of a whim and the teacher goes, “That is a great observation, Nina! Well done!” and you just get a little red and secretly think to yourself, “OMG, I must be so smart!” The term representation describes the conceptualization and planning of a text by the people who produce it (Walker 160). In a much simpler explanation, it is about your thoughts on what the writing is supposed to be and your plans on how you are going to write it. In the case of the office door genre, the word “write” would have to change since I am doing more than just “writing” while producing the genre. In the world of genre study, genres often include more things than just alphabetic text. If you want to be Mr./Ms. Fancy pants and brag about some progressive knowledge of the literary world when you are hanging out with a bunch of your friends, you can call this **multimodality** and you might enjoy the befuddled looks on your friends’ faces.

After thinking a little bit about the representation of my office door, several things ended up on my door: a picture of a fictional pirate ship from a Japanese manga called *One Piece* (which painted my childhood with laughter and tears), postcards that I bought all around the world in my travels, an advertisement for Ghibli film festival that I got from a professor in my young adult literature class, and a Harry Potter poster I bought at the campus poster sale. Wait, what am I doing? Here, I will show you the picture of my door, and it will tell you about it way better than my words.



Figure 3: My office door with some initial decorations.

Right? Sometimes one visual mode can speak more than a thousand words. These things I put on my door were all things I considered safe choices. Why? It’s because things like posters and postcards were what people also used on their doors as well. I wasn’t just going to put *anything* on there. What am I, crazy? Not that I care too much about what other people think (I am not saying that I am cool enough to *not* care either); it was more about figuring out what works and doesn’t work. When you are writing a love letter, you are not likely to use charts and graphs to indicate how much you love a person in your letter, don’t you think? It’s more likely that you would use romantic language to deliver your heartfelt affection. What I was trying to figure out was exactly that—what would

work the best on my door. In hindsight, when I was trying to figure out what would work and not work on my door, I was doing **genre research** without realizing it. (Whoa, I did it again! Am I oh-so-fancy or what?) When you are doing genre research, you try to find the *norms* of the genre. These norms, in genre study, are called **genre conventions**. I would like to talk a little bit more about those.

What Am I Missing Here?

Even though I had put some cool stuff on my door, I wasn't really satisfied yet. My door just seemed like it was missing something. *But what is it?* I asked myself. Since I am writing an article about it and all, I decided to take an adventure to the hallways of the Stevenson building and explore some conventions of office doors. As a result, I collected fifty-one pictures of office doors of people who work in ISU and felt myself plenty creepy. These included office doors of English Master's students, English Ph.D. students (both graduate teaching assistants), English professors, mathematics professors, and economics professors. Some conventions were more predominant in certain departments and titles, but a lot of them were ubiquitous in all areas. Here is the list of the conventions I discovered on those office doors.

- Joke
- Advertisement
- Sign-up sheet (for various class-related purposes)
- Office-hour chart
- Dry erase board
- Cork board
- Wall pocket
- Poster
- Drawing
- Post-it
- Stickers
- Pamphlet
- Calendar

- Envelope
- Printed online meme
- Newspaper cartoon
- Name sign
- Postcard
- Inspirational quote
- Craft (paper owl, felt carrot and bunny, etc.)
- Nothingness

While examining the conventions, I noticed that different styles and trends were going on in this genre. On Master's students' doors, jokes, memes, and hand-drawn art seemed like they were especially popular conventions. On professors' doors, on the other hand, I could see more teaching-related conventions, such as wall pockets in which you can drop your papers, sign-up sheets, office hour charts, and also some ethical statements for social topics such as diversity and LGBTQ and animal rights.

On Master's students' office doors, those conventions I commonly found on professors' doors were harder to find, and the conventions of the Master's students' office doors were scarcely appearing on professors' doors. Interestingly, the doors of Ph.D. students seemed like they were in the middle of the two: a wee bit more of social activism, but with a hint of comedy as well on their doors.



Figure 4: Common conventions on professors' office doors.



Figure 5: Professors' doors with ethical statements.

After realizing that there are different trends on the doors, I started to wonder if these doors are influencing each other. It was like they were having a conversation. If you are talking to each other, you don't just yell random things to the air. That's not a conversation. There are certain common topics you share, and you try to respond to each other's ideas. Suddenly, the doors seemed more alive than they ever were (Spooks!). I wasn't the only *chatty* one standing in the hallway. (A-ha! See what I did there? "Chatty"? "CHAT"? Yeah? Ok, never mind.)

Joyce Walker defines **socialization** as, "the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute and use texts . . . they are . . . engaged in the practice of representing and transforming different kinds of social and cultural practices" (161). Some brilliant and big words were introduced here. Basically, in some way or another, we are all influenced by other people when we are producing a genre and sending it to the world. You know, like life. No person is an island, and we are always influencing each other even when we are not aware of it. Wow, we got really deep here all of a sudden just like that, but we are going to save all the life topics and the meaning-makings for another time. Socialization is definitely an important aspect in the genre of the office door. How people interact with each other comes into play in people's representation of their office door undeniably, since certain trends and styles exist based on people's places and titles in the university. The important aspect of socialization is that it is deeply rooted in what is social and cultural. It is not shocking that my door got chattier as I got to know more and more colleagues in the graduate assistants' hallway as the semester

moved along, and that it also got sillier and more random as other graduate assistants' doors did too. The bottom line—literally in this section—is that what I lacked on the initial stage of decorating my door was the aspect of socialization. My door was not properly socialized enough yet. But, then, this happened.

Somebody Else Spoke Through My Door. MY DOOR!

Another interesting finding about this genre of the office door is the characteristics of its audience. The audience of the doors not only looks at the doors, but they often participate in producing the genre. A few days after I put up a Harry Potter poster, I found something else on my door that I hadn't seen before. There was a tiny Post-it note left in the corner of the poster. The person who left the Post-it that said, "I LOVE this!" on my door later turned out to be one of my colleagues who is also a passionate Potterhead. Before, my door was shouting, "I love Harry Potter! Yay!" After her Post-it, the door was shouting, "We love Harry Potter! Yay!" Since I have no intention of removing the Post-it ever (because, like, why would I? It's super dope), her comment is probably going to be part of my office door until I move out of the office or maybe until I have an epic fight with her . . .

Hey, B, we good, right? (I hope some of you readers got the *Gossip Girl* reference here.)



Figure 6: Harry Potter poster on my door and the Post-it note that says "I LOVE this!"

Reception is how people receive, react to, and use a genre production. I was getting a bit of reception on my door decorations from the people that I was interacting with in the hallway. One person commented on how the door was looking better and asked where the pirate ship picture was from, and a dozen people told me how much they loved the Harry Potter poster, and we talked about Harry Potter approximately for two hours (my definition of "approximately" is very flexible, just F.Y.I.). The Post-it incident, though, was an eye-opening moment for me. I realized that I wasn't the only one who produces and influences this genre production of my

own door. Like how I mentioned before, socialization plays an important role in this genre, and the audience's reception influences the genre production.

After the Potterhead incident, I started paying more attention to where the audience participated in producing the genre. Or, simply put, what kind of stuff do people leave on other people's doors? I went and knocked on a few colleagues' doors. Actually, that is a figure of speech. In reality, I just walked into their offices, since their doors are rarely closed unless they are not there, and we have no sense of civilized-human behaviors such as knocking. I asked them what kind of stuff people have left on their doors, and they kindly provided me with some examples. They were mostly memos to leave messages to each other and pictures and drawings to serve as small gifts. In the genre of the office door, there is no definite line between the **intended audience** and **unintended audience** since the university is a public space. And there is also no definite line between the **author** and the **audience** either. After examining this genre, I would like to say that the office door is sort of a hybrid of a bulletin board, a school locker, and a yearbook. Like a bulletin board, it's out in public and includes advertisements and campaigns for the audience. Like lockers, some people choose to decorate them to their own taste based on what they are interested in, but some people just leave them blank. Like yearbooks, people leave (mostly) friendly messages and draw silly stuff on them for the recipient. In all genres, the audience is always a very important element. However, it is somewhat rarer to find a genre that the author and audience can co-produce like this. In that sense, the office door is a unique genre with the special role of the audience and their reception.

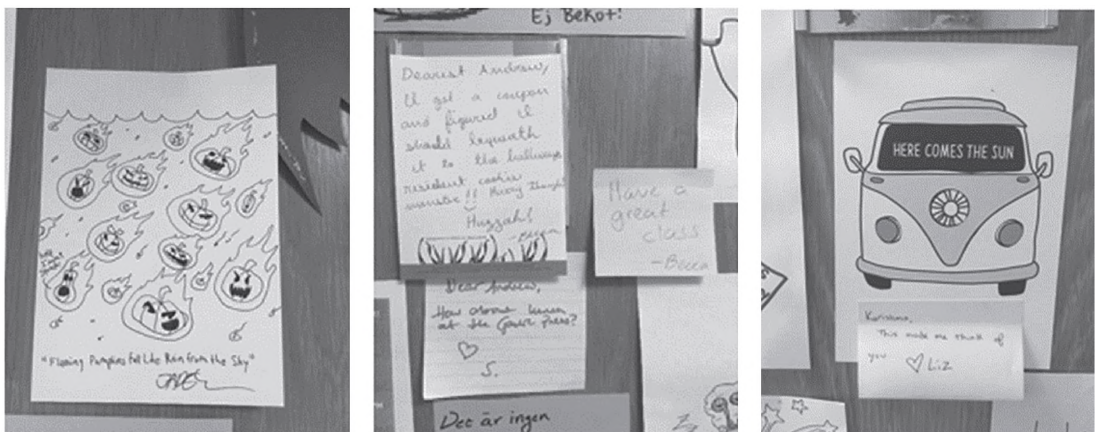


Figure 7: Examples of audience participation on office doors.

The CHAT Roundup

I used some CHAT terms to analyze the genre of office doors throughout this article. The thing about CHAT is that its use can be quite flexible depending on what you are trying to do and which genre you are trying to investigate. It's like a little toolbox that you can use for a genre research or a production. Inside the CHAT box, there are seven tools: production, representation, activity, distribution, reception, socialization, and ecology. I present you an image of this CHAT box to help your visualization. I will leave it up to you to imagine the tools inside, since they come in different shapes and sizes according to your needs each time. Yes, it's practically magic. I will also leave it up to you to imagine why my CHAT box is a pirate's treasure chest (I would like to think that the toolbox also changes its design depending on who you are, like a *Boggart*). The specific CHAT tools that especially came in handy for me in examining office doors as a genre were representation, socialization, and reception because of the nature of the genre and the purpose of my genre research for this article. However, I will also give you

the CHAT map below that I made that includes other tools since it doesn't hurt to explore other aspects of the genre.

Many aspects of CHAT served useful for me to understand the office door as a genre. Some of them were more important in this research and some of them were less significant. Now, as the last part of this article, I would like to tell you about how my office door ended up looking in the end of my first semester at ISU as a graduate assistant.

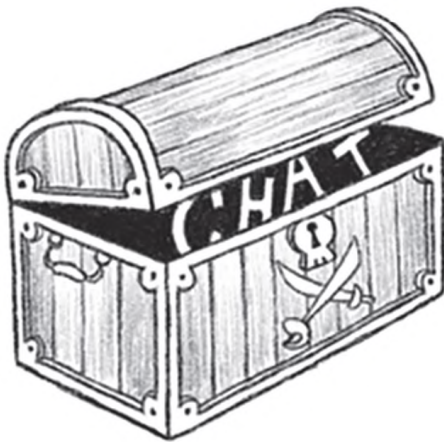


Figure 3: The CHAT tool box. (Artwork by Agathe Lancrenon.)

The Ultimate Socialization: The Beatles Coloring Papers and Other Music Etcetera

The most terrifying aspect of being somewhere new is that you don't know anyone there. You feel alone. Like *alone*, alone. Not "I'm gonna have some quality me-time taking bubble bath and read trashy magazines and nobody gets to judge me" kind of alone. Humans are social animals, and we seek



Figure 9: The CHAT map of the office door.

others for support and cooperation, and we (except a few) get very anxious in a situation where we don't know anyone to call for help. Throughout the semester, I was very lucky to make a few friends in the hallway. I am really thankful about it. I felt truly accepted in the graduate assistants' hallway because of all the weirdos I met and the common interests we shared. When my friends outside of Illinois make fun of me for living in Normal, Illinois, my response to that almost became a catchphrase: "All the wonderful abnormal people I met there makes me feel perfectly normal," and then I shoot an awkward wink.

One of the common interests I found with my now-friends-colleagues is music, specifically of our love for the Beatles. One day, we were lounging in the hallway talking about the Beatles, and we remembered seeing the Beatles coloring papers roaming around the Internet. Before we knew it, coloring them became our favorite pastime and ended up improving the quality of art on our doors.

The more our exploration and discussion of music developed, the more conventions started to appear here and there on our doors as well.



Figure 10: The Beatles coloring papers decorating our doors.



Figure 11: Other music-related conventions.

Now my door was getting properly socialized, and I was also socializing other people’s doors. My door wasn’t quite the “new one” anymore. My door and I were becoming one of *them*. As the semester was moving along, it was truly interesting and rewarding at the same time to see that my relationship with the people around me here at my new home and new work was slowly progressing, which was reflected on my office door.

Writing as an Adventure

Seeing how my office door transformed was a journey this semester, and this adventure got even more heightened because I was carefully paying attention to every step for the purpose of writing this article.



Figure 12: The most recent picture of my door.

Every writing genre in this world is way more complicated than we often expect them to be. In Joyce Walker’s article on CHAT, “Cultural-Historical Activity Theory: Because S*#t is Complicated,” she discusses how CHAT helps her during the processes of writing: “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” (167). I examined the activity system of the university office door as a genre for this article. And yeah, I’d say this office door s*#t is hella complicated, more complicated than I thought when I was beginning this adventure. (I was like, “Office door? What IS there to write about, really? It’s going to be a piece of cake.”) And then I wrote more than four-thousand words about it. I think the word count itself tells me how much more complicated this subject was. Did I have fun? Oh yeah, thanks to my adventure time buddies in the hallway who picked me up from the floor when I got overwhelmed with all the work and research and all the coloring papers we slayed together. And, importantly, thanks to my adventure swords, wands, shields, and whatever other tools that are now safely sitting in my pirate treasure chest until I need them again.

I have been listening to *The Doors* a lot while writing this article because, like, *DUH*. And now it sounds to me that Jim Morrison is singing, “Writers (Riders) on the storm . . .” Ok, I think I have maxed out my pop-

culture reference quota for this article. More for next time. But finally, like Ringo always says, peace and love to you all.

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Nina Jang is a graduate teaching assistant at Illinois State University, and she often finds herself daydreaming about nothing in particular. When she is not daydreaming about random subjects, she likes to write, play with her pet cat, Ringo, and upload pictures of food on her Instagram.



