

Instacart-ing Is Quite an Intense Literate Activity—Here’s Why

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In this article, Chamelia Moore discusses the different literate activities and literacies present when working for Instacart, a grocery delivery service.

Introduction

Graduate student by day and night; professional grocery shopper in between. The latter identity is not something I readily disclose upon meeting new people. Not that I am ashamed, but being a grocery shopper via the Instacart app is something I typically save as a “fun fact” for the once-in-a-blue-moon game of Two Truths and a Lie. Truthfully, my supplemental role and placement within the gig economy remind me of a general unsettling truth of graduate student life: Making a livable wage often entails unpredictable, and arguably rewarding, sacrifices. And luckily, this one affords me very specialized types of bodily and spatial literacies that go beyond the dairy aisle of any Chicagoland supermarket.

Instacart is a grocery delivery and pick-up website and app that allows subscribers to shop a variety of retailers (mostly grocery stores) through a personal shopper.

Gig economy refers to an employment/labor market overly saturated by freelance, temporary, and independent contractor labor.

Before getting into that super interesting conversation on bodily and spatial literacies, I think it’d be appropriate to first unpack what I mean by

“literacy,” and with that, “literate activity.” Both terms encompass what is entailed in the doing of an activity—whether that be baking a cake, riding the train, or ordering a drink at Starbucks. **Literacy**, particularly, focuses on the set of knowledges or skills that are necessary to do a thing—anything—and **literate activity** is a term used to broadly describe what and how people do and produce all the things they are doing and producing in the world, going “beyond our typical ideas about ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ to include the broad range of practices and processes we employ in the creation and use of a wide array of texts” (Prior, 1998). I like to think of literate activity as networks of literacies that accomplish all the things we humans seek to do . . . or pay others to do (in the case of Instacart).

Many writing and English studies scholars who talk about literate activity do so in the context of texts being produced and disseminated within and across different publics. Here, with you, I am doing something a little different as I cannot speak to the texts (if any) that are particularly produced in the world because of Instacart-ing. “Why?” you ask. The simple answer is because I have not encountered much writing outside reviews and app-specific forums. However, I can and will speak to the do-ing of Instacart, the literacies it has required of me (both bodily and spatial literacies), and how I feel about being an Instacart shopper.

How to Instacart

To work as an Instacart employee essentially means that you are grocery shopping in place of the Instacart customer you have agreed to shop for. In understanding the Instacart shopper’s role as the eyes, ears, arms, and legs of a customer, the expectation is that all decisions concerning items must

A **shift** is a commitment to working at a certain time for a certain number of hours in a particular location within your city.

be made by the customer through the shopper. This happens through directives and requests communicated via the Messages or Call features on the app. If requested items are present and available in the store as indicated by the app, all is well. If not—and this happens more often than not—notifying the customer through the previously mentioned communication features must happen. Shoppers can either substitute or replace unavailable items with similar ones (with the approval of the customer) or refund the items (also at the approval or request of the customer).

Question: So, what happens after getting hired by Instacart, completing the mandatory protocol tutorials and exams, and downloading the Instacart Shopper app?

The semishort answer: Let the shopping commence! But there are steps: (1) deciding whether to pick up a shift or a batch order; (2) selecting an order to shop from what is available; (3) getting to the grocery store; (4) shopping the order and “paying” for the order; (5) driving to the customer’s residence or drop-off address; and (6) delivering the order.

Below is a list of some tools and practices that will make driving and shopping way more efficient:

- Setting the GPS preference from the outset of downloading the app (the only choices are Google Maps or iMaps)
- A full tank (of gas)
- A portable charger (as the app takes up a lot of energy on my poor and ancient iPhone 6s Plus)
- A pair of comfortable shoes (for walking anywhere upwards of a mile across the grocery store)
- A bottle of water (must stay hydrated)
- A jacket/coat with pockets or a purse (a place to store the Instacart card, ID for alcohol orders, and your portable charger)

Batch orders are leftover orders or orders that have not been picked up by someone working a shift; these can be located anywhere within your city.

Online Orders

Online orders do not require the Instacart shopper to use their Instacart debit card.

Delivery Options

Customers have a “Leave at the door” or “Hand to” option for delivery. Both require the Instacart shopper to safely park their vehicle nearby and leave it unattended to physically deliver the order.

Bringing It Back In

Out of the six processes of Instacart-ing, I want to focus on the literacies involved in the third and fourth: that is, in getting to the grocery store and shopping the order; the bulk of my bodily and spatial literacies gained from Instacart-ing comes from these two steps. Very quickly: What do I mean by bodily and spatial literacies? When I discuss **bodily literacies**, I am getting at the ways in which my body understands or is made to understand how to accomplish different tasks and activities. When I talk about my bodily literacy of Instacart-ing, I am directly speaking to the things my body has had to learn in order to do Instacart. What I have

Order Cost

Orders can range from five dollars to around sixty dollars, depending on travel, distance, the number of items, and estimated physical labor. Orders can be “Full” or “Delivery only.”

Full: The Instacart shopper both shops for and delivers the order.

Delivery only: The Instacart shopper doesn’t do the shopping themselves but rather picks up the pre-packaged order from a designated area in the grocery store and delivers it.

described here is what geographer Diana Sinton (2014, p. 24) understands as “spatial thinking,” that is, “the ability to visualize and interpret location, distance, direction, relationships, change, and movement over space.” My understanding of spatial literacies as a larger and more encompassing extension of spatial thinking is simply put as this: **Spatial literacies** are the literacies my body has had to learn in navigating different spaces. In this context, “different spaces” refers to grocery stores, roads, highways, interstates, and the different geographies of cities and towns. Even though I distinguish the type of learning and literacy that is required of the body in completing activities from the type of learning and literacy that is required of the body when moving about the world, the two are not necessarily independent or separate from each other. I say this because the literate activity of Instacart-ing cannot be fully grasped without an understanding that the body in particular spaces has to learn and do extremely specialized things. So, what are the Instacart-ing bodily and spatial literacies I possess that were not as developed prior to downloading the app?

- **Grocery store literacies:** I may be the first one to coin this, but “grocery store literacies” are particular bits of knowledge about how grocery stores are set up. This includes the following: understanding the layouts and floor plans of grocery stores; knowing where items are located based on how they are categorized, the season, and their popularity; the likelihood of certain items being stocked based on the geographic location of the grocery store; the days of the week and times of day grocery stores are most populated; and the average number of employees working at a time.

Shopper’s Note: The only way this literacy can come about is when a person is physically in a grocery store and actively exploring it. Over time, the body will remember where and how far items are from each other, faster routes or paths across sections of a store, and the items to prioritize on a shopping list based on location in the store. From my experience, the most difficult grocery stores to learn have frequent stock and inventory changes, have more specialty or niche items, and are generally larger in size.

- **App literacies:** The Instacart app attempts to help shoppers locate items more quickly by organizing the grocery list by food category. Recently, the app has also begun listing items according to aisle and/or section within the store. Physically pressing “start shopping” once at the store will automatically generate a grocery list that is organized in these ways. In short, these organization or list features are the app’s attempt to help the shopper learn certain grocery store literacies (i.e., locating food

items). One thing to note is that not every grocery store will have their items organized by aisle on the app—meaning, stores can have different interfaces on the app that allow for certain literacies to be acquired (or not). A shopper would only know this by picking up orders from a variety of stores. If a shopper only selects orders from a store like Fresh Thyme, which does not group items according to aisle, they would never know it might be easier to complete an order from a store that does—like Kroger or Jewel. This feature—food aisle listing—impacts the time it takes to complete orders, which is HUGE: the less time it takes to complete orders, the more you can work.

Shopper’s Note: Currently, Food 4 Less, Jewel, Kroger, and Aldi are the only grocery stores that have food aisle listing as a part of their interface on Instacart.

- **GPS/land literacies:** This set of literacies refers to the learning of a particular geography, in my case, having specific geographical knowledge of Chicago and Chicagoland—and now, Bloomington-Normal. In Instacart-ing discourse, it is not only about the physical land but also where grocery stores are in relation to each other and where they are likely to appear in each community.

Shopper’s Note: This literacy can also (typically) only come about from actually moving around (physically) in and across space. Over time, landmarks, street names, interstate signs, and other visual markers of location are recognized to the point of not needing a GPS. In order to acquire this literacy, my body had to acclimate to driving in a way that allowed me to also observe the land (which usually entailed driving a bit more slowly), and for a total of four to six hours per shift. It also requires being attentive to individual community layouts (i.e., the location of shopping centers and plazas in relation to residential neighborhoods, the number of fast-food chains populating a major street, the distance to and from a major highway/road/interstate, etc.).

Learning the Locations

This saves battery life on my iPhone while using the Instacart app and allows me to travel more quickly through the City of Chicago and surrounding areas.

- **Parking and double-parking literacies:** After shopping and driving to the delivery address, the order must be physically delivered. There is no way to avoid not leaving the car unless the customer comes directly to you—which has happened to me probably three times in my Instacart-ing life. To complete this final step, the car must be parked temporarily and (hopefully) legally, and this is harder than you might think.

Shopper’s Note: Knowing how to park as someone who delivers food is essential for obvious reasons, but this literacy in many ways ties into the former. It is not just a matter of knowing how to park a car—knowing where to park is the key. In Chicago, most residences are located in densely populated areas, and many are located on main streets. Having a parking and double-parking literacy includes having an eye for open parking spaces, knowing the location of free parking, knowing nearby lots to park, and being double-parked for no more than three minutes (if you take the chance, which I usually do). In Bloomington-Normal, I typically do not have to concern myself with parking because most residences have parking lots or plenty of parking in front.

The Larger Picture

So, what of the grocery store, land, and parking literacies? How do these things help me outside the context of Instacart-ing? When I initially set out to be an Instacart shopper, it did not occur to me that I would need to build a working knowledge of Chicago and Chicagoland geographies, or that I would become as knowledgeable of a grocery store’s layout as an employee. I thought of it quite superficially, that I would simply just go to the store and shop. But in retrospect, I realize that acquiring these bodily and spatial literacies through Instacart-ing has allowed me to understand that the experiences I deem as mundane, such as shopping, actually invoke hyperspecific actions, processes, and memories in my body. And that these things are tangible and traceable because they are a part of me in that they are a part of how I move about and do things in the world. I am thinking

Bio Mapping

Christian Nold—the researcher and inventor who really pioneered Bio Mapping as a re-exploration of space and land through the lens of emotion—measures emotional responses to space through a device that he invented, which records a person’s Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) in relation to geographical location. Essentially, mapping emotion is tracing the emotional arousal of a person as they move across space (Barnett, 2012; Nold, n.d.).

of my Instacart-ing literacies as also **bodily memories**, or memories that my body physically holds (Solberg, n.d.). My Instacart-ing memories, even while doing other activities (but especially shopping), influence how I both move and feel in a space (especially grocery stores). The term Bio Mapping comes to mind when I think about how my body reacts to and processes being in a grocery store both for personal and work purposes. **Bio Mapping**, which has also been used interchangeably with emotion mapping, is defined as a “methodology

and tool” for recording or “visualizing” emotional responses to the environment (Nold, n.d.).

Despite never measuring my emotional responses to a space through a tool—I have never seen a numerical measurement of my emotion across space, as I would if I were participating in a formal Bio Mapping study—I can feel the visceral, more physiological reactions in my body as I travel across Chicago or Bloomington-Normal for an Instacart order or whenever I need to be physically inside of a grocery store. The bodily changes I observe include increased heart rate (sometimes upon accepting an order—but definitely when a requested item is taking more time to find), higher body temperature, fluctuations in energy levels (a burst of energy at the onset of entering the grocery store, lower energy in frozen food aisles and check-out lines, and higher energy en route to the delivery address), increased levels of serotonin when finding items quickly and easily, and lack of appetite.

Even though all these physiological responses to getting and completing an Instacart order do not follow me across all grocery stores or when I am entering grocery stores as a consumer, many of them do. To list a few:

- I notice heart rate and appetite changes the most when I am shopping in grocery stores for myself.
- I do not typically feel hungry while inside grocery stores anymore. I am thinking my body has learned that hunger is a type of distraction, even though it knows suppressing the hunger response for too long is detrimental to my health.
- The grocery stores wherein I have had more negative experiences in finding items are also more avoided when I am not working.
- Knowing my likelihood of finding certain items in grocery stores across the city allows me to be more intentional about where I go.
- I receive a confidence boost when shopping quickly (beating my current completion times).
- I feel excitement when finding new items; I will usually make a mental note of new products to sample or buy for myself if I see multiple customers ordering them.

Learning grocery store literacies has also made me more knowledgeable about food in general—perhaps I have a more developed **food literacy**? This comes from understanding why food items are placed in particular locations, and I have found that food placements make the most sense to me when I know the relationships between different foods and food groups. For

A Note on Ingredients

Sesame seed paste is also perishable, but the way it is stored allows it to have a much longer shelf life than the other major components of hummus (garlic and lemon).

example, when I received an order that included tahini, in order to locate it, I needed to know what tahini actually is. This seems quite obvious, but for me, tahini was a food item I thought I understood from simply hearing it in conversations about hummus. I thought I knew what tahini was via its proximity to hummus, as it is a main ingredient. However, hummus and tahini are not similar even though one is made from the other.

Tahini is essentially sesame seed paste or dense oil, and hummus is a combination of chickpeas, tahini, garlic, lemon juice, and spices. Hummus is stored very differently than its major ingredient, typically in a refrigerator as it also includes fresh, perishable ingredients. Tahini is located with other seed and seed-based pastes and products, so it can typically be found wherever peanut butter is located (and even if the grocery store has an International Aisle, it will likely be placed there).

My journey in locating tahini for the first time for an Instacart order made me more cognizant of how I was understanding food—that I actually did not know what certain foods are or how they are made. I had to really ask myself “What is this?” and question if there had ever been a time in my life (beyond my initial learning of the food groups in elementary school) where I had to explicitly define a food or know the basic constitution of a dish. I realized that obtaining a recipe or cooking a meal alone does not force a person to know the essence of an ingredient or why certain ingredients can make sense together. And I think coming to this awareness has made my cooking experiences more meaningful, or at least more intentional.

In Closing

Congratulations on making it to the end. I could go on about Instacart for what seems like forever, but I will stop here. I think this is how every literate activity feels when you dive into all of the different literacies that make it possible. There is a lot to be understood in unpacking how the body learns and adapts to new spaces, expectations, technologies, and environments over time—and the emotional responses that come along with that. For me, even the process of getting to a particular place for an order resulted in bodily and spatial literacies that made my body have certain memories. These memories inform the experiences and emotional responses I have in spaces regardless of the context. You can see my “aha moments” about literate activity in analyzing Instacart-ing as one, but I think my concluding takeaway is this: being able to trace where my literacies come from is a huge part of

understanding literate activity and ultimately coming to an appreciation of the ones (or at least the one) I actively engage in on a regular basis. So now I'm curious, do you (yes, you) have an Instacart-like literate activity that changed the way you experience super mundane tasks like shopping? I just know that nothing is ever as simple as it seems . . . and I wouldn't have it any other way.

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