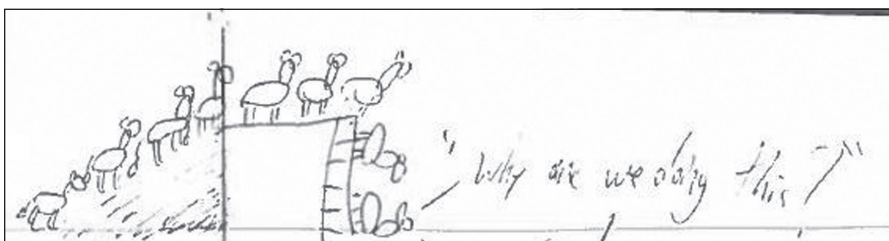


The March of the Llamas: Or, How to Be an Effective Note-Taker

Nathan Schmidt

In this article, Nathan Schmidt considers how notebook doodles can actually be an important part of a writing activity system, and how a healthy relationship with distraction can help a writer cultivate a confident writing research identity. He examines his own doodling practices, applying CHAT as a theoretical model for understanding how doodling may be related to concepts such as representation, socialization, and reception. He does not offer any note-taking advice.



The first thing you need to know about this article is that part of the title is a lie. Since you can already see that there are marching llamas above, I'll let you guess which part it is. There are many methods of note-taking: the “outlining method,” the “mapping method,” the super-special “Cornell Method,” the “charting method.” Just do a quick Google search for “note-taking” and you’ll find all kinds of useful and reasonably effective note-taking and study tips.

This article is about none of those.

As you may have already noticed, this article is about marching llamas. You can see them up there, trundling away, until the one at the bottom asks:

Why Are We Doing This?

Trying to understand what we're doing when we don't think we're writing is a big part of writing research. You might even get away with saying it is the big question of writing research: before, during, and after I sit down to put words on the page, what is all the other stuff that is going on that contributes to *this* exact group of words, in *this* exact order, at *this* particular moment in space and time? There are several words we use for this: production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology are some common ones from cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), and there are a few more that you might come across elsewhere in this journal.

I am especially interested in **representation**, which we might somewhat simplistically just call "planning." What do you do before you actually put your pen to the paper, or your fingers to the keyboard? What's happening when you're staring at that blank glaring white wasteland of an empty document on your monitor, trying to de-jumble the pile of words in your head so you can dump them out on the screen through your fingertips? What image are we holding in our minds before we move on with the actual production of the text, and how is that image related to the thing that ultimately ends up on the paper or on the screen?

The shortest way for me to answer these questions for you is, "I have no idea. I just dink around on the Internet for a while and then I check in with the word processor to see if anything has magically appeared there in my absence." But that's not very helpful for anyone, nor does it involve any llamas. I've already broken one promise (you know, about the note-taking, in the title), and I'm sure not about to break another one (*there must be llamas*). See, sometimes representation is easy to notice: you outline, you map, you chart; it's easy to see how those things are representing the thing that you ultimately plan on making. But what if it's not as cut-and-dry as all that? What if it's a messier, more chaotic process? What if, instead of expecting a linear 1:1 ratio of representational activity to finished product, you just kind of . . . doodle?

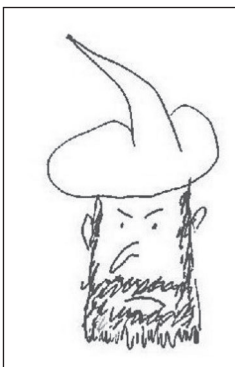


Figure 1: This article is about doodling, and I'm not even good at it.

Gandalf Is Grumpy

I've been a pretty avid doodler for as long as I can remember. It's not that I'm not listening; it's just that my brain can't sit still. Let me tell you: some people I've sat next to in classes are just amazing. They'll get to the end of a class or training session and have this gorgeous mandala, or some kind of immaculately detailed anime cyborg-warrior, or a complete still life with perspective and everything. I can do none of those things. Grumpy Gandalf over there (Figure 1) is probably the best you're going to get. But that

doesn't keep me from doodling, because guess what? *I don't care what it looks like*. It completely doesn't matter. Where does it come from? Beats me. What was the purpose? Anybody's guess. Why Grumpy Gandalf? It was probably a class in the twentieth-century fantasy novel, and I was probably short on coffee that day (brief digression: yes, that is exactly why Grumpy Gandalf). I wasn't making it for you, or anyone, to look at. I opened my head and it fell out onto the paper. Simple as that.

But it isn't, right? It can't be that simple, because (spoiler alert) nothing is. When I was first sitting down to write this article, all I really knew was that I wanted to talk about distraction, which is not one of our seven key CHAT terms, but which I believe is a really important part of the writing process, especially of **activities** related to representation. You're sitting there, you've got your word processor open, you're all ready to write . . . then the dog barks, the phone bleeps, the Instagram beckons, and three and a half hours later, you're back at the blank white screen. What happens in all that time and space? How does all that dog-walking, what's-apping, selfie-admiring activity contribute to the thing you ultimately end up putting on paper? I don't think we can really know for sure, but I do believe we can make a really good, educated guess (the technical term for which would be "research").

Distraction, however, is a difficult beast to track, because you're only really performing a distracted activity when you don't know you're doing it. Sure, you might be walking the dog to distract yourself from writing a paper or a memo, but as long as that little voice is in the back of your head going "writing, writing, writing, you've still got writing to do," you haven't really been successful now, have you? You're only really distracted when the dog slips the leash and goes tearing off through the neighborhood, and every last little thought of the writing work to be done has vanished into the void of adrenaline and profanity. The only way for me to study the way that my distraction participated in my representation would be to somehow catch myself in the act of distraction, at which point I would not be distracted anymore. This was a problem. So I started thinking about a **genre** (another really important writing research word) of distraction: some type of writing/making/creating activity that happens only in a distracted state; ideally, one that you have to be distracted in order to do. Texting while driving seemed like a good one, but I wasn't really interested enough in my question to tempt fate the way I would have to in order to pursue that particular line of inquiry. Then I remembered: the doodles! Grumpy Gandalf, the Marching Llamas, and the Elbow Guy! For some reason or another, fully knowing that I will never, ever look at them again, I've kept every notebook I've ever doodled in during my (relatively long) college career. I didn't have to catch myself in the act of distraction, because I'd already created a perfect written record of my

distracted brain in lecture after lecture, written evidence of my coffee jitters, my 2 AM study guide marathons, my feverish attempts to prepare for the next morning's essay test. It was all right there, but what could I do with it?

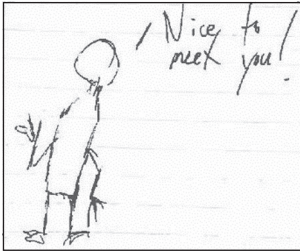


Figure 2: The product of completely inattentive exhaustion.

Enter the Elbow Guy

See, the act of taking notes itself is already a really interesting writing phenomenon. Why do it at all? Sure, you want to remember the information that people are giving you, especially when you are going to be held responsible for using that information to earn a grade on a test or an assignment. Maybe there's also a sense in which you really want to hang on to that information to refer back to later for your own use, or (like me) to just obsessively keep it

because you “never know when it might come in handy” to know the names of all the bones of the inner ear or how many phyla of fungi are native to Madagascar. It just so happens that the Internet is full of ideas about taking notes, and most of them (by which I mean “most of the stuff” on the first page of the Google search”) come from colleges, although there are certainly other settings in which note-taking is appropriate and necessary. Right there we can guess what elements of **socialization** and **ecology** (the physical world around us) might go into our notebooks (and our doodles). Note-taking happens in a *room*, where a bunch of people are *sitting* and one person is *standing* and *telling* all the sitting people things they want them to *remember*, because they have the *authority* of an *instructor*. There is a power structure involved, we might say. Maybe the instructor put together a PowerPoint presentation, or they scribbled all over the dry-erase board, and your notes are a part of your **reception** of the text that they are giving you—the way you take the text and work with it, making your own thing.

But the funny thing about it is that if you ask the experts what the purpose is of taking notes, they generally seem to assume that you already know. California Polytechnic's Academic Skills Center has a great page on note-taking, but it doesn't really say much about why you're doing it in the first place other than a reference to “recording and reviewing” (“Note-taking Systems”). Purdue's OWL writing site offers note-taking as a practice for avoiding plagiarism (“Best Practices”). University of Redlands says that they offer methods that “are proven to be successful” (“Five Notetaking Methods”), without really indicating what success would look like. Dartmouth's Academic Skills Center says that “students frequently do not realize the importance of notetaking and listening,” but only offers that “lecture notes can be a critical tool for preparing for exams” (“Classes”). Virginia Polytechnic's Division of

Student Affairs says that “adequate notes are a necessary adjunct to efficient studying and learning in college” (“Note-taking”), which is nice, but again doesn’t tell us why. The Academic Advising webpage at the College of Saint Benedict gave the best answer I could find to help us with our question. They offer a six-point numbered list on “why take notes in class”:

1. Organized notes will help you identify the core of important ideas in the lecture.
2. A permanent record will help you to learn and remember later.
3. The lecture may contain information not available anywhere else. This will be your only chance to learn it.
4. Lecture is where you learn what your instructor thinks is important, and he makes up the exams.
5. Class assignments are usually given in the lecture.
6. The underlying organization and purpose of the lecture will become clear through note-taking. (“Lecture Note-taking”)

It’s a great list, right? I don’t think I would even add anything to it. Core concepts, learning and remembering, an exclusive chance at key information; all excellent goals. A nod to the fact that the biggest reason a person is probably taking notes at all starts with an E and ends with X-A-M, whether that’s in school or for a professional license. Preparation for future assignments, and a key to the purpose of the lecture—notes help you figure out why you’re sitting there in the first place! Perfect. But then . . . enter the Elbow Guy (Figures 2 and 3).

Why? Why do we do this? Why do *I* do this? If the purpose of note-taking is basically to participate in the reception of the instructor’s text to the point at which one can perform the activity appropriate to the text’s socialization (i.e., remember the stuff and write the paper/pass the test), what on earth is so satisfying about scribbling nonsense all over the margins? I’m sure we can agree on one thing: whatever the reason is, it has nothing to do with any of those six bullet points above.

Doodling introduces *disorganization* into an otherwise organized system, a sort of mathematical chaos into a neat 1:1 ratio of representation to finished product. It doesn’t really help you remember anything, and if anything it makes it more likely that you will miss your only chance to hear a part of the lecture, if the instructor is only going to say it once. It won’t help you with the exam, it won’t help you with any assignments, and it certainly will not make the “underlying organization and purpose” any clearer. So, what gives? What’s the value here?

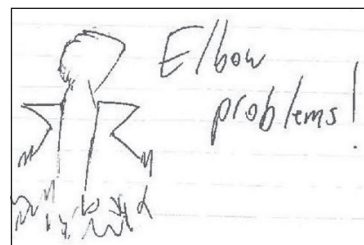


Figure 3: Seriously, why?



Figure 4: Hot beverages.

See, the beauty of CHAT as a theoretical model is that it allows us to acknowledge *every part* of the writing process, even the parts that seem to be useless. And from a production standpoint, maybe all that doodling really does is reveal my unhealthy proclivity for hot beverages (Figure 4). But CHAT doesn't start or end with production. Production is only part of a whole network of activities that sometimes all happen at once and sometimes happen separately. Remember how we said earlier that your notes are a part of your reception of the text that is being given to you? For CHAT, that includes *all* of your notes: not just your nice, neat outline, not just your list of dates, not just your Cornell Method Whatever. When your response to that PowerPoint includes dots and squiggles and blobfish, CHAT says that your writing activity system is now home to dots and squiggles and blobfish, along with whatever "actually relevant" information you wanted to write down. Your notes are your notes, and whatever you make with them includes everything, all at once.

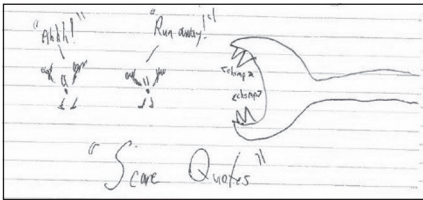


Figure 5: Get it? Me neither. Not really.

But We Were Talking About "Distraction"

Right. Yes, we were talking about "distraction" (Figure 5). Because this is all fine, how CHAT means that you can doodle and scribble all over the place and it's as much a part of your writing process as anything else, but we were going to talk about representation, right? We were going to discuss the place that this stuff all comes from, the planning part, so we can understand how to overcome that scary blank page-space that's waiting to be filled by your next writing assignment. On a cognitive level, of course, I have no idea. Some part of the brain probably makes doodles. Maybe the hippocampus. That's a brain part, right? Sure. That's not what we're talking about here. But from a theoretical standpoint, two incredible writing researchers named Paul Prior and Jody Shipka did a study that should help us answer some of these questions.

Prior and Shipka wanted to really get into people's writing minds, to see what's really going on in there when we're trying to put some words down on paper. They did three in-depth case studies on what they called "environment selecting and structuring practices" (ESSP's for short). Basically, they had their three study participants sit down and draw out their writing process and their writing space, on paper, sort of like a (you guessed it) doodle. Just little

stick people, in a graph or diagram showing what the writing space looked like. I tried it out myself, using my living room in my apartment as a subject (Figure 6):

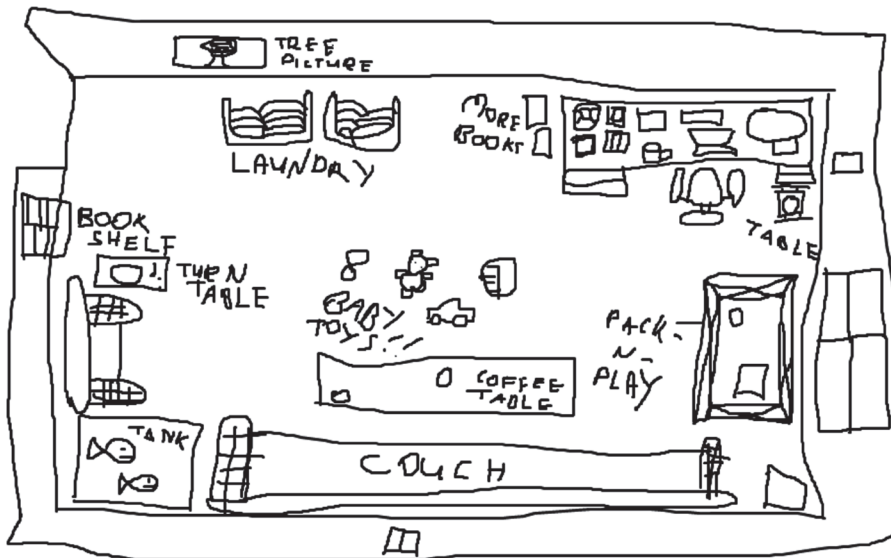


Figure 6: The writing space, courtesy of Paint.

As you can see, a masterpiece. Anyway, what Prior and Shipka discovered is that “self structuring is achieved through environment structuring,” that the spaces we carve out for ourselves when we write are actually part of the same activity system that helps us define “who we are” for ourselves. In the study, they talk a lot about “interior practices,” how writing necessitates a “translation between an iconic, and still somewhat unknown, interior world and a linguistic articulation that must be formed and externalized for others to apprehend” (Prior and Shipka). So, my little map of my apartment there tells us a lot about my writing process, which also says a lot about me. There’s baby stuff everywhere; I need to be able to write with a lot of distracting stuff going on in the background. There’s laundry on the floor; sometimes the practical needs of the day have to wait until later if the writing has a deadline. All these things speak to and across each other, because all the background distraction also changes the finished product. We don’t know what a distraction-less paper would have looked like, because we don’t have that one. But we know that the one with the distraction in the activity system is different from the hypothetical one that would have been created without the distraction. The way I structure my environment reflects the way I am, the way I want my world to look, and that structure directly impacts the way that my words get translated from that mushy interior world in my head out onto the concrete page and into the concrete world.

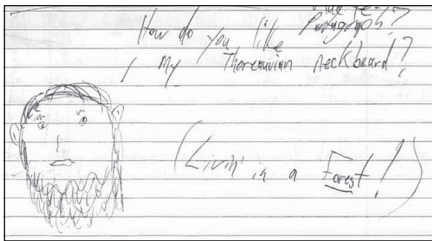


Figure 7: How do you like my Thoreauian neckbeard?

So, Finally, the Doodles

Here's what we have so far: CHAT says that notebook doodles are actually part of the activity system that we would call "taking notes." Notes have a surface-level purpose: we've got to get ready for that exam/assignment/other-situation-in-which-I'll-need-this-info! But they also have what we might call a subliminal purpose; they give you something to do when your mind just needs to escape for a little bit, when you need to, shall we say, re-select and re-structure your environment in the classroom. The doodles are part of the reception of the instructor's text, but they are also part of a system of representation on your part: when you draw that silly Thoreau neckbeard joke (that nobody will even get), you are making something (Figure 7).



Figure 8: Steaming samovars.

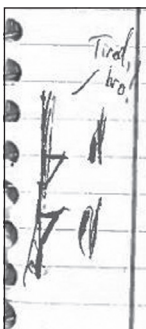


Figure 9: The perforation line lets his mouth open and close.

Remember that power structure we were talking about earlier? To "take notes" is one way for socialization within that activity system to be expressed. But doodling in your notes is a different way, a way for you to take the text you're given (from the instructor) and *make something of your own*. Doodling is harnessing an otherwise largely analytical writing task and infusing it with chaos, which is another way of saying creativity. Doodling is creative; it's making something out of nothing, filling that blank space on the paper. Productivity and creativity actually resist and complement each other *at the same time*, because on the one hand you're not really paying attention, but on the other hand you're making something else, something new. In that newly opened creative space, you re-structure your environment. Sure, maybe you can't just get up in the middle of the lecture and move all the desks and tables around. But there's still something missing, something that, without it, the space doesn't feel right. Your mind wanders; you're distracted—your activity system needs life and color. So the pen meets the paper and all kinds of goofy stuff comes out; just whatever happens to be in your head at the time. Maybe you feel the need to try to draw big samovar teapots (Figure 8). Maybe you spent so much time trying to finish the required reading last night that you can't keep your eyes open, and you need a sideways toothy monster to help you express your exhaustion (Figure 9). Either way, the classroom doesn't typically give you a lot of space to select and structure your environment for yourself. So, you take the only other thing available to you and you structure your writing, your notebook, instead. This allows you to take the little slice of time and space that you spend in the learning space and make it yours. In this way, distraction actually becomes productive; it helps you to re-structure your environment in such

a way that you can take what you're given and make your own thing: your reception fuels your representation and your production. Or, as Prior and Shipka say, "Methodologically, private and public acts, meaning and sense, affect and attention, tools and spaces, all need to be woven together into a *single story* of productive activity" (Prior and Shipka, *emph. added*). Even your silliest, most distracted, "least productive" moments, if nothing else, are *yours*, and are part of the incredibly complex and diverse activity system that you're living in while sitting in class.

But You Promised Me Llamas

If you wanted to, you could say that this is our conclusion: our distraction can actually contribute to the writing that we produce, because that distraction makes space in the activity system for creativity to break in. Just like doodling in a notebook lets you take your reception of a text and form your own production in response, distracted moments in any writing activity system make room for the unexpected, the unlikely, the fun ideas that make you feel like you "really are" a writer, because (guess what?) you are, in fact, a writer, and as such you have access to the myriad possibilities that are open to you when you try to understand your own writing practices. In writing studies terms, we would call this your **writing research identity**. Notebook doodles are just one example of the myriad ways that we, as writers, select and structure our environments and ourselves. If you're at that representational stage and you have no idea how to plan or structure the words to fill that blank white void, just doodle something out. Start, make something terrible, and change it later. Let it flow out of you as simply as scribbling a silly cartoon in your margins.

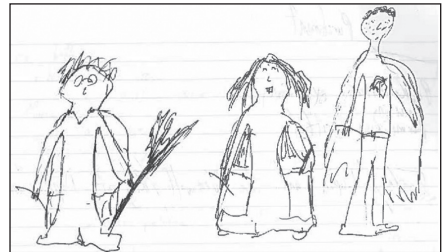


Figure 10: Ron's the only one with a waist.

That's the official conclusion. But, since you've stuck with me so far, there's one other thing that I want to leave you with, and here it is:

You are OK.

Maybe it feels like punishment to sit down in a class or a work-related training session and try to pay attention that entire time, and maybe you have to turn to doodling to deal with that. Maybe it feels like everybody else in the learning space is always participating, and you're not sure what you'd say even if you could pluck up the courage to raise your hand. Maybe you have the opposite problem and you're afraid you have too many questions and everybody wishes you'd just be quiet. I don't know, but I know this much:

whether it's doodling terrible caricatures of Harry, Hermione, and Ron (Figure 10), or wondering where all that time went on YouTube last night with a paper due in an eight a.m. class, everybody experiences distraction as a *regular* part of the writing process—we might even be daring enough to call it a *necessary* part of the writing process, because you can use it as part of your writing research identity. Find the way you write and do it, structuring your environment as you see fit. Sure, distraction can really get in the way. Too much of it can make you miss deadlines and lose track of things that really matter. But if your notebook looks like mine, and you find that your mind isn't always “on track,” don't worry: any part of your writing activity system can be turned to your advantage, if you choose to use it that way. You are the writer, and you can structure your environment any way you like. Surely you can do better than me: I could have filled my notebooks with anything, and all I've got are these stupid marching llamas.

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