

Reading Responses as a CHAT-ty Genre

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The article deals with the genre of Reading Responses that students have to produce in almost any subject they study at university.

Writing about reading is worthwhile, but it is only likely to lead to learning when students are actively engaged in the reading and writing tasks—recognizing the value of the activities and meeting their challenges with determination and self-awareness (*Best Practices in Writing Instruction*, 2013).

Introduction

Imagine coming home (well . . . your ‘new’ home in Bloomington-Normal since your ‘real’ home is still across the Atlantic Ocean in Ukraine). Almost every day at about 9 p.m., after teaching in the morning through afternoon and taking your own grad courses in the evening . . . then comes the long-awaited weekend (Homecoming week at ISU, BTW!!), and . . . oops . . . you realize that you have to create Reading Responses in all three courses you are taking as a student! OMG!

Now, why don't we try a quick multiple-choice test? This article will focus on:

1. The pleasures of doing homework during the Homecoming weekend;
2. The challenges of being an international grad student at ISU;
3. A day in the life of a Ukrainian teacher at ISU who also happens to be a graduate student;
4. Reading Responses as a genre and their role in developing our writing research identity.

Well, dear readers, you guessed right—you can pinpoint the correct answer immediately—#4, and you can probably relate to this story from your own studenting experiences. The key focus of the article is “Reading Responses as a genre and their role in developing our writing research identity,” which means that you DO know some reading strategies, which you used to quickly extract key concepts from the first few paragraphs in any text.

In a nutshell, the goal of the article is explicitly stated in the title: I really want to understand for myself and share with you how we can make our Reading Responses better or more aligned with P-CHAT elements. Yes, I did intend to create a pun with the word “chatty” (Reading Responses are a conversation, right?) but I also want to make you think of the possible deciphering of how P-CHAT or pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory might be applied to the genre of Reading Responses. I hope by the end of reading this article, you will easily come up with several variants!

You might ask, what are Reading Responses and how are they related to my writing research identity? Well, the point of the article is simple: Reading Responses are a type of writing that most university students have to deal with on a daily basis, because many teachers use this genre in teaching a variety of courses. Even in classes that don't require a lot of writing, teachers might use a “response” genre to try to engage students in the readings or to check their learning. Like all seemingly simple things, creating Reading Responses as a regular, required assignment in a course might cause a gamut of negative reactions: boredom, misunderstanding, confusion, and even frustration, thus blocking our creativity. How can we make this ~~monster~~ genre easier to tackle for students?

As for the connection between Reading Responses and our **writing research identity**, let's look at how the latter is defined on the ISU Writing Program website: “A successful writer needs to use their knowledge flexibly in different situations, and must also be able to determine when new skills

and knowledge are required.” Indeed, we will look at how and why writing Reading Responses can make us more flexible and creative as writers.

With these questions in mind, the article is going to deal with Reading Responses as a **genre** or “a kind of production that it is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable,” according to the definition on the ISU Writing Program website. In other words, we will look at it through the lens of **pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory (P-CHAT)**, the basic framework consisting of seven elements that we use in our Writing Program “to think about and study the complex genres that we encounter in the world,” with the following objectives in mind:

- To unpack and explore Reading Responses as a genre with the help of ISU’s P-CHAT tools, as a way to make this genre easier and perhaps a bit more enjoyable.
- To consider, a little bit, the bigger picture of why we find this genre so often in educational settings. What’s it for, and how can it be used effectively?

At the theoretical “heart” of this article lies Carolyn Miller’s definition of **genre** as a “social action”; or the idea that genres aren’t just static artifacts that always look and act in the same ways. Instead, they’re social—they are made up of the decisions and actions of people over time, and they are endlessly evolving (Miller). So, for example, when two teachers say “reading response,” they aren’t necessarily talking about the same thing. And when two students (even two students in the same class), hear “write a reading response,” they don’t necessarily imagine (or produce) the same kind of text. In order to get a better understanding of the range of ways people understand and produce this genre, I decided that I needed to explore both how different teachers understand Reading Responses and how they incorporate them in their writing pedagogy, and how different students view and cope with this genre. My research involves interviews with both teachers and students at Illinois State University. I asked them all to answer 5 questions about Reading Responses. Of course, this small set of questions (and answers) can’t tell us everything there is to know about this genre, but thinking about my respondents’ answers can be a way to get at some of the differences in the way the genre is understood and performed.

But before we look at the results of my interviews, let’s take a moment to first look at the genre of Reading Responses through the magnifying glass of P-CHAT. Hopefully, it will help us understand all the WHYs about this genre: as we say in a well-known Ukrainian idiom, “*shcho tse take i z chym yogo yidiat*” (literal translation: “what it is and what they eat it with”).

CHATting about Reading Responses (WHAT, WHO, and HOW)

If we try to come up with some definition of Reading Response (WHAT it is), it becomes obvious that dictionaries are of no use as they do not provide any explanations to the meaning of this term. However, it turns out that many Internet resources deal with Reading Responses and give detailed tips to students on how to craft them, for instance:

- “A reader response assignment asks you to explain and defend your personal reaction to an assigned text” (“How to Write a Reader Response”);
- “A paper recording your response or reaction to the material. In these reports—often referred to as response or reaction papers—your instructor will most likely expect you to do two things: summarize the material and detail your reaction to it.” (“The Writing Process”).

Using some of these resources, I’ve come up with my own definition of Reading Response as a **genre**: *Reading Response is an academic genre in which students have to produce a piece of writing as a response to the reading assigned by the teacher, providing the summary of and their reaction to the ideas in the reading material.*

Looking at all of these definitions, it becomes obvious that if we want to understand the essence of Reading Responses, we should know what we need *to do* to produce them. This is exactly where P-CHAT comes into play, for its **activity** element deals with “the actual practices and actions that accompany the creation of the text” (Walker). It looks as if Reading Responses exist mostly in the realm of college assignments, so the **production** element of P-CHAT for this genre (WHO), or “people, places, and technologies that shape the production of this genre” include students, college instructors, and professors. Another important aspect of Reading Responses is **representation** (HOW), or “how people think about and plan this text or what frameworks influence how people represent material in the text” (Walker).

So, in order to get to the core of these three aspects of Reading Responses (**activity**, **production**, and **representation**), I felt that I needed to ask those involved in the production of this genre, that is, the people who write responses as students, and also those who create the “frameworks” for students to follow, or the teachers. I decided to conduct a series of interviews with ISU professors, instructors, and students, the results of which are presented below. Most participants responded to my questions via the Internet. Because of space constraints, I will summarize the responses of participants in each category.

Participants' Responses in the Light of CHAT

Student Participants' Responses

In this section, I will present the ideas expressed by three graduate students in the Department of English, ISU, who helped me conduct this research: Rebecca Olson, Hunter Sheaffer, and Matt Medrala.

1) What is your general attitude to Reading Responses as a type of assignment?

Most of the people I interviewed had mixed attitudes to Reading Responses: for some, the attitude is neutral, their goals were primarily to find out what the professor specifically wanted for the assignment; most believe that the assignment can be an obligation, but if the subject matter intrigues them, it can be motivating. One person mentioned that Reading Responses are essential to his own personal learning and thinking process as he produces a “write up” whenever he reads a book or watches a movie.

These answers tell us a lot about the **representation** aspect (“the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize it”) of creating Reading Responses (Walker). This genre can be viewed both as an obligation and a motivation. It’s an obligation in that they produce responses because they are assigned, not because they necessarily want to. But for some people, creating written responses to the texts they encounter can be motivating, in that they help the reader understand their own thinking and ideas. Besides, we also see that **socialization** (“the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute and use texts”) plays an important role (“Key Terms”). Because Reading Responses are social (a kind of communication between teachers and students), a successful reading response will always be a local kind of text—a negotiation between what the teacher is expecting and what the student produces. I also want to mention that the person who responded that “write ups” were important to him illustrates the role that Reading Responses can have in helping us develop our **writing research identity**, enhancing our learning and thinking, as well as helping us become more flexible with our writing skills (Walker).

2) How do you approach production in this genre?

Most of my respondents said that they go over the guidelines given by the teacher, trying to connect their response to other relevant topics within the genre, and asking questions for class discussion. They also suggest that asking the professor about their requirements and about what they believe makes the best Reading Response is a good idea. One participant said he produces responses intuitively, in one sitting, without giving regard to

grammar because he has “to feel the freedom to write whatever he wants whenever he wants and not feel judged to any external standard”.

These answers point to some of the aspects of **production** related to Reading Responses (“the means through which a text is produced, including both tools and practices”) involves producing the text based on the reading material and according to the guidelines provided by the teacher (Walker). We can also see an important **activity** element here (“the actual practices that people engage in as they create text”): while some people might focus first on trying to understand exactly what the instructor is looking for, others might try to respond directly to the readings, writing freely in order to explore their ideas. Perhaps the most interesting thing we can learn from these answers is that while Reading Responses are definitely a teacher-constructed genre, the people actually writing the responses can have very different ways of approaching this work, and might build different kinds of writing identities from doing it.

The answers to my next question deal with both **representation** (“how people understand the text and its production”) and **activity** (“what they do as part of the production process”) (Walker).

3) What strategies help you cope with the genre of Reading Response?

Here participants mentioned “getting some tea” and having the text available in case they need it for quotations to support their response, which includes their thoughts and analysis. One participant suggests asking questions to understand what exactly the professor expects. Another participant mentioned that it is crucial for him to feel truly liberated and to release any expectations for himself as a writer.

On the one hand, here participants reveal another **representation** aspect: including some quotes from the reading material to support their Reading Response. Interestingly, answers to this question also shed some light on **ecology** (“the physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing”), which for this genre means getting some tea and having the text for analysis at hand (Walker).

My next question deals with aspects of **reception**—how people take up and use a text. In the case of the Reading Response, we might think of reception as involving the instructor (or the person who reads the reading response). But in fact, Reading Responses are often designed, at least in part, to be useful primarily to the person writing them. This question asked participants to tell me what value they thought producing Reading Responses might (or might not) have.

4) *What do you think are the potential upsides and limitations of Reading Response as a genre?*

On the upside, most participants believe that Reading Responses are flexible and useful, letting them express their thoughts in a more informal manner than a full paper would. Also, one participant said that this genre helps him develop his own personal voice as a writer, making him “a more thoughtful and empathetic person.” Among downsides, participants mention frustration because of lack of time for the assignment, vague genre conventions, as well as “the student’s own antecedent knowledge of the genre” that they have brought from previous schooling, which is more “a tell of participation, instead of a show.”

These responses can help us to see the **reception** aspects of the Reading Responses (“how a text is taken up and used by others”) (Walker). This genre can cause negative reactions in people who have to produce it because they are obliged to do it. Yet, we see that Reading Responses can help develop our voice as a writer, developing our writing research identity. Here we also see some ecology aspects of this genre, like the lack of time. Surprisingly, the participants point out the downside of antecedent knowledge (“all the things a writer already knows that can come into play when a writer takes up any kind of writing”) (Walker). Their prior knowledge of what should go into response might be limiting and different from the genre that a particular teacher, in a particular situation, is asking them to produce.

The fifth question I asked focused on how Reading Responses, as a genre, might be more useful, or more interesting, for the people who have to produce them.

5) *What do you think could make Reading Responses as a genre more exciting for students?*

In this category, student participants mentioned that they need to be encouraged to produce responses that aren’t entirely text, but also images, memes, music, etc. Besides, explicit expectations and purposes, as well as combining Reading Responses with a Post-Discussion Response after class can inspire students to “re-read the texts and truly explore the concepts.” One participant mentioned that teachers could provide their own creative response to the readings as a model for students.

These answers tell us a lot about the production aspect of the Reading Responses, which can include not only verbal information, but also images, memes, and music, thus becoming a **multimodal** genre that uses alphabetic, visual, and aural signs.

Teacher Participants' Perspective

As I mentioned above, I also asked questions of teachers to try to find out how they understand Reading Responses, why they might value them, and what they expect from students writing them. The four teachers who participated include Joyce Walker, Elise Hurley, Katy Lewis and Li Min Chen (pseudonym).

1) What are your main requirements for Reading Responses as a type of assignment in your course?

Most teachers-participants mentioned that their requirements depend on the course they are teaching. For instance, for a graduate course, they might use a “questions and quotes” framework, where they ask students to pick two questions and two quotes that struck them as particularly interesting, giving “an opportunity for students every week to submit two questions that they want to talk about in class”; for undergraduate courses, teachers might use a ReggieNet forum, where students post their responses to readings and/or in-class prompts. While one teacher (Lewis) assigns Reading Responses to be completed before class so that students could better engage with the material and contribute to class discussion, another (Walker) uses an unconventional approach: she has students write responses AFTER the discussion. In this way, she says, they will “know better what they want to discuss once their ideas have been *primed* a little by participating in (or at least hearing) a discussion.” As for the length of the response, these educators have different requirements as well: while some of them assign word limit of at least 250 words (Chen), or 400–500 words for graduate students (Hurley), one instructor (Walker) is very casual about length requirements because, as she says, they might vary quite a bit from class to class.

Here we see representation element of the Reading Responses further explained: the Reading Responses might have a specific required length (from 250 up to 500 words), but it might not; responses might be done either before or after a class discussion of the readings; authors might be required to include quotes from the reading, but they might not. These teachers' answers also give us an idea about the **distribution** for the genre of the Reading Response (“where texts go and who might take them up, as well as the tools and methods that can be used to distribute text”) (Walker). Different teachers used different methods of distribution: responses might be written in a ReggieNet forum, a Google Doc, or submitted to the instructor.

2) *What are your expectations from students' productions in this genre?*

One instructor (Walker) notes that, for her, the main function of a reading response is “to observe the evolution of [readers'] learning and thinking rather than evaluating the ability to write” or the “ability to make an argument.” In fact, this instructor doesn't use Reading Responses as a way to prove that students did the readings; other teachers (Lewis) “ask them open-ended questions (attached in the assignment sheet), and they can choose what they focus on in their writing responses.” In her introductory writing course, another instructor (Chen) expects students to write a reading response for all readings assigned for the class, following directions in the guidelines.

These answers reveal the deep connection that instructors often make between the genre of Reading Response and the evolution of students' learning and thinking, which ultimately enriches their **writing research identity**. As we saw in the author's responses (above), that doesn't always match the way that students might see Reading Responses primarily as an obligation—something they do because it's assigned. Awareness of these differences in **representation** mean it can be important for teachers and students to understand each other. Students need to understand what value the instructor sees in the work, so that they can create representations that go beyond “because I have to.” It can also be important to have discussions about other aspects of **representation** for this genre, such as how long it should be, or whether it should include quotes, or whether the instructor expects the author to explore their personal responses, or to make arguments about text, or other purposes.

3) *What structure of Reading Response do you consider the best? What assessment criteria do you use in this genre?*

In response to this question, the teachers again offered a range of ideas. One instructor (Walker) often asks students “to incorporate the text of readings into response,” picking a quote and responding to it. Another (Lewis) stressed that she doesn't “want this assignment to be a reflection or about their feelings”; instead, she wants students “to critically engage with the readings in an academic way and explicitly connect this back to what they've been talking about in class.” Still another (Hurley) explains that she believes that a good response should make connections to the readings or to the larger conversations; it will provide citations and summation of the main points. In her guidelines for this assignment, one instructor (Chen) offers students an outline for the structure of the response, where they first reflect on the content, bringing in their antecedent knowledge; then students

analyze the article and finally write questions for the author or points they disagree with.

From these answers, we can see that representations of this genre really vary from teacher to teacher, which tells us that teachers might have different expectations for what makes a “good” response (use of quotes, analysis of the key points, connecting them to the larger conversations, etc.), as well as **reception** in Reading Responses that we have mentioned above when analyzing student participants’ responses.

4) *What do you think are the potential upsides and limitations of Reading Response as a genre?*

It looks like the learning potential of the Reading Response as an assignment genre depends on the approach the teacher takes. One teacher (Walker) believes that using Reading Responses as a “gatekeeping tool,” as a way to “make them” read is not an effective strategy, because some students can be really good at producing an acceptable response without “investing in the ideas.” She says that Reading Responses work best for her when she gets to see “a little bit *inside* someone’s thinking about a topic, to see how their minds work.”

For other teachers, the value in Reading Responses as an assignment that “requires students to be responsible for their own learning,” taking the pressure off of the instructor to know everything and helping build a community of people who are willing to talk (Lewis). Also, Reading Responses help students to connect readings to their personal experiences and “reflect on their uptake by stating any questions they have about the reading” (Chen).

On the other hand, among the limitations of this genre, the educators participating in the survey noted that this genre is too broad to offer a set of guidelines for all the kinds of Reading Responses they might assign, or that students might be asked to do across different classes. One teacher explained that if a teacher looks only for “argumentative” or “analytical” responses, they might overlook the most interesting insights of students’ learning (Walker). In first year writing classes, one teacher notes that sometimes students prefer to “talk about their feelings, at least in the first few weeks of the semester” (Lewis). She has to work to overcome the difference in representation, to help students to understand that “this is a response, not a reflection” (Lewis). Another teacher uses explicit structures for Reading Responses she thinks that if the guidelines are not clear enough, students might misunderstand the purpose of the assignment and “just summarize the reading (which would not be useful)” (Chen).

The answers to my next question reveal an important perspective of the genre of Reading Response as a form of student **uptake** from the readings (“the process we go through to take up a new idea and think about it until it makes sense”).

5) *What advice would you give to students to make their Reading Responses more effective?*

All of the teachers who participated said that it can be crucial to figure out what a particular kind of response assignment is actually asking for, and they offered a variety of ideas about how students might do this. The following list offers my summary of their ideas and suggestions:

- Sometimes the syllabus or assignment instructions can be helpful in figuring out what the instructor is looking for, but sometimes asking the instructor what they “like to see” in responses can be a good way to start.
- It can also be important to step back (mentally) and think what you are producing and how it matches up with the stated goals for the response that might be in the syllabus or assignment sheet. In other words, it can be important *not* to rely on your antecedent knowledge of writing responses in other situations. Instead, try to see responses for different classes as related but sometimes very different genres.
- It might also help to look at other people’s responses, not to compare your work to theirs, but to see “the elements that different responses are including” for in this way, you “might be learning to identify what is actually there (visible) in your responses” (Walker). Further, participant teachers mentioned it is important to write about what you are really interested in, trying “to figure out what you value in your class” (Lewis). Chen said that students could “practice forming questions that could address any difficulties they have in understanding the reading,” even though it might be challenging.

The answers to this question highlight the **socialization** aspect of the genre of Reading Response that proves once again its social nature: in the end, Reading Responses aren’t just a single text that a single author (a student) produces for a reader (the teacher): they are part of a complex activity system. They involve not only all of the students in a particular class but teachers and students across classes in many different kinds of educational settings. But they are also very “local” documents, written in response to particular kinds of readings, and different kinds of learning goals. In order to make creating Reading Responses a valuable part of a writer’s evolving writing

identity, it can be important to spend some time thinking (with an instructor, as a class) about what Reading Responses mean (in a particular setting) what they can do to aid reading and understanding.

Final Thoughts

Well, it seems we are finally getting to the end of our exploration! Here, similar to a good Reading Response, I am supposed to finish the article by giving you the succinct and meaningful conclusion to all the complexity of ideas that we were discussing in the text! Not an easy task, indeed! But . . . we set the goal of exploring the genre of Reading Response using the framework of P-CHAT and examining this genre as contributing to our writing research identity. The analysis of the participants' responses to the questions in the interview pointed out many interrelated aspects in the way students and teachers view the specific elements of Reading Responses. Even though at the beginning of the research my goal was to look at three P-CHAT elements (activity, production, and representation) that I thought of as the most significant for this genre, this closer look at the ideas revealed during the interviews showed that if we want to succeed in making Reading Responses better, we should take into consideration all seven elements of P-CHAT analysis (that is, we should also think of ecology, distribution, socialization, and reception). So, here's my creative uptake (Figure 1) on each of the seven elements in the genre of Reading Response, viewed through the lens of P-CHAT map and based on the research we have done so far. I hope that this diagram (Figure 1) that I created taking into consideration all the various aspects of Reading Responses mentioned by the participants of the research will serve as a useful and effective tool, helping students make their productions in this genre more effective!

Works Cited

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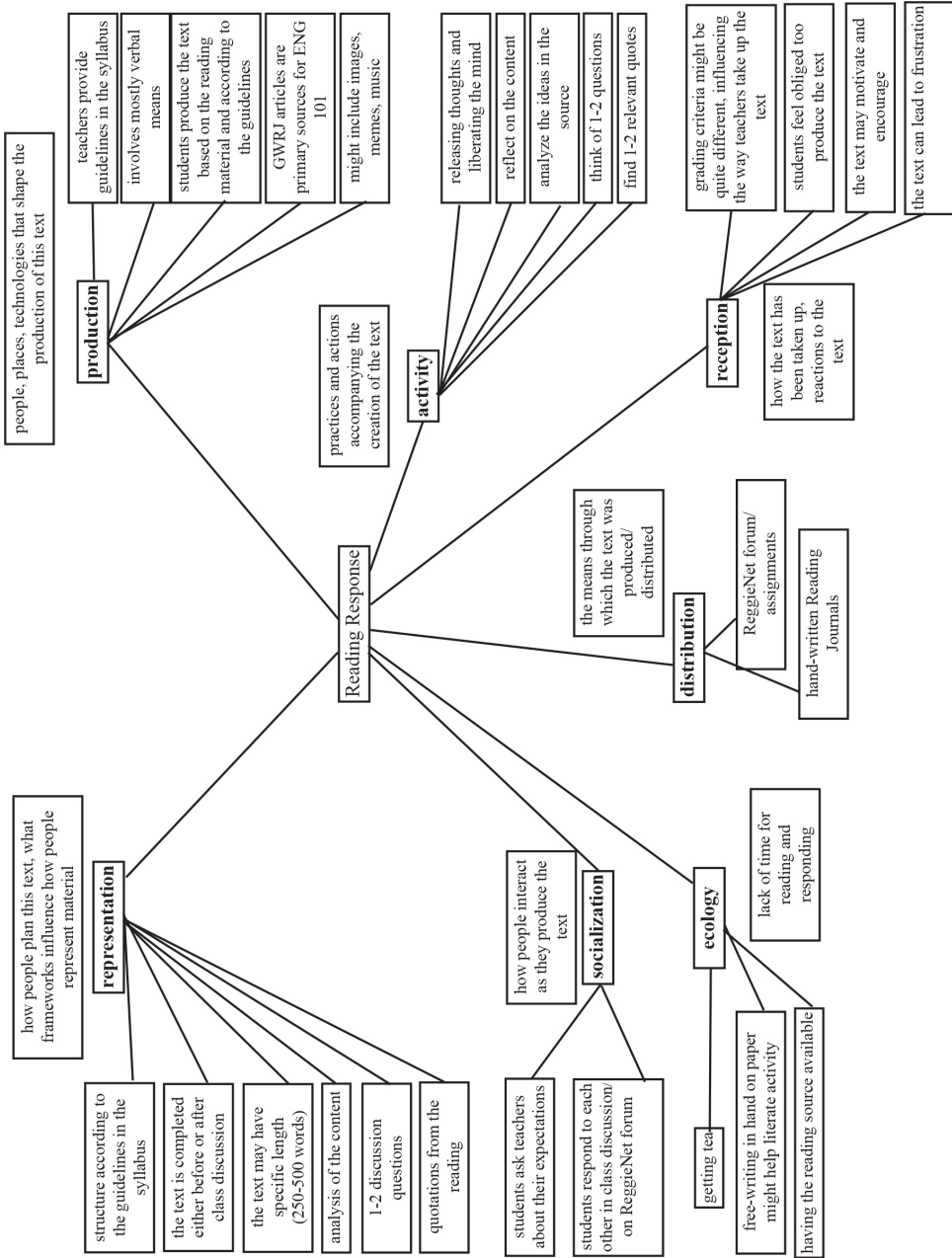


Figure 1: P-CHAT Map of the reading response. This map shows seven elements of pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory analysis applied to the genre of reading responses.

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