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# Contextually Speaking: Considering Context in Teaching

Kimberly Ilosvay

*University of Portland*, [ilosvay@up.edu](mailto:ilosvay@up.edu)

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# Contextually Speaking: Considering Context in Teaching

Kimberly Ilosway

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## INTRODUCTION

Read the letters *g y p d g*. Now read the word *pedagogy*. Which was easier to read? Which made more sense?



Though it was not impossible to read the individual consonants, the consonants contained in the word had more meaning. According to Zeitler (as cited in Huey, 1968), it takes the same amount of time to read a whole word with as many as 25 letters as it takes to read a single

letter. This is due to the brain's necessity to analyze and form patterns for making sense of information (Calvin, 1996; Sprenger, 2013; Sylwester, 2003; Willis, 2008). The word has more meaning than the random string of letters. Further, a sentence has more meaning than a word, a paragraph more than a sentence, and so on. In order to assign meaning to the word "content," one must have the word's relationship to other words, i.e., the context. Of concern here is the fact that reading and understanding involve more than just the recognition of letters or even words. It is important to consider the context of a word or sentence to acquire accurate meaning.

For an educator, context is vital to teach to students' individual needs and to assess their understandings. This paper highlights some situations that arise in a typical school day in which the context is important and also provides examples of how teachers might emphasize context in the classroom.

Though the context of any given situation has always been important in the interpretation of a particular scenario, state standards in education (or possibly the interpretation of these standards) have not always reflected this importance. Until recently, assessments have measured performance in schools on isolated skills and knowledge (Gojak, 2013). Depending on with whom you talk about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS),

curriculum and teaching are still driven by an "autonomized taxonomy of separate skills" (Willingham, 2009). However, scholars such as Schmoker and Jago (2013) offer an interpretation of the CCSS that represents a shift in instructional focus—a focus that represents a more holistic vision of education. The shift demands that educators spend time on contextual aspects of information being taught. Though no educator intends solely to teach isolated information, because of time constraints, information often gets condensed to brief synopses with little synthesis or consideration of context. Yet, the key to true understanding is in knowing the context of a particular idea, issue, or event. Without explicit consideration of context, students often end up with inaccurate assumptions about the content being taught, or teachers miss the logic a student used to get a particular outcome. Judging observed behavior alone is problematic, because a student's underlying motivations might differ from those assumed by a teacher. For example, observation of a student disrupting class complaining that he does not want to read a book could indicate that he struggles to read or that he wants to impress his peer group.

The topic of context in teaching and learning is well explored in the literature. One critical aspect of learning is knowledge of the context in which information is developed and presented. Considering the context of content as well as context of language and behavior interactions is important for educators to remember throughout the school day. Arguably everything needs to be placed in context. Even educators who have crafted their instruction to teach content effectively and meet the needs of their students might not fully examine the context of a given subject or specific issue. Consider the following examples of classroom situations that provided reminders and opportunities to recognize the importance of contextualizing teaching.

31<sup>ST</sup> ANNUAL  
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The Oregon Writing Festival is an annual event designed to recognize and encourage the efforts of Oregon students and teachers to improve writing. It is co-sponsored by the Oregon Council of Teachers of English and the Graduate School of Education at Portland State University. More than 800 students from across the state participate every year. Join us at the 31<sup>ST</sup> Festival.

### Keynote Speakers

#### *Grades 4–5*

**Bart King**, a long-time teacher, has now made a successful writing career with his award-winning *The Big Book of Boy Stuff*, *The Pocket Guide to Mischief*, *The Big Book of Girl Stuff*, *The Pocket Guide to Games*, *The Big Book of Super Heroes*, and *The Pocket Guide to Brilliance*.

#### *Grades 6–8*

**Graham Salisbury** comes from a long line of newspaper reporters, but he has made his mark as author of middle and young adult novels, winning an impressively long list of awards. His award-winning books include *Calvin Coconut*, *Lord of the Deep*, *Night of the Howling Dogs*, *House of the Red Fish*, *Eyes of the Emperor*, and *Under the Blood-red Sun* (which has just been made into a movie).

#### *Grades 9–12*

Featured frequently on the New York Times bestseller list, **April Henry** has written more than a dozen mysteries and thrillers that students can't wait to get their hands on. Her award-winning books are igniting a love for reading. They include *Girl, Stolen*; *Torched*; *Shock Point*; *Buried Diamonds*; *The Night She Disappeared*, and *The Body in the Woods*.



**Bart  
King**



**Graham  
Salisbury**



**April  
Henry**

For further information contact:  
Ulrich H. Hardt  
Graduate School of Education  
Portland State University  
PO Box 751  
Portland, OR 97207-0751

## CONTENT KNOWLEDGE

### Social Studies: Thinking like a Historian

Langer (2011) suggests that an important part of developing understanding is the ability to consider the context of a particular era, event, or issue. Students learn critical thinking strategies and a holistic understanding from knowing the context. In Mr. James' 4<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, students are learning about President Jefferson. During a whole-group discussion, several students explain that because Jefferson had slaves, he was a bad president. Other students express that it is wrong to have slaves. And still other students question why he was allowed to have slaves without going to jail. As a historian, Mr. James wants to explore this further with his students. He wants them to understand what life was like in Jefferson's life time to see if grappling with the context of the time period will change the views of his students. As he guides his students into the necessary critical thinking and historical perspective, the students discover facts and opinions that help them interpret historical information and see how Jefferson's viewpoints might have differed from their current belief systems. Following this exploration, students still believe it morally questionable to have slaves, but understand that, in that time, it was societally and politically acceptable to own slaves. This is further reinforced as students learn that constitutionally, slaves were not considered as humans, but as property. Exploring the context gives students a historical perspective about the issue and insight into contextualized motivations for what now seem to be abhorrent actions.

### Math and Science:

#### Symbolic Representation in Formulas

Henry is a middle school student who moves from his math to his science classroom and uncovers a conflict. During math class, Henry is taught  $V = lwh$ . He uses this formula to calculate the volume of several objects. After a busy math class, he arrives in science class where the teacher is writing the formula  $V = d/t$ . Henry is excited because he knows  $V$  is volume. However, when Henry volunteers his understanding of  $V$ , he quickly realizes that this  $V$  is not representative of volume, but velocity. As he tries to make sense of  $V$ , he worries that he will not know when  $V$  is volume and when  $V$  is velocity. The context of the discipline makes a difference in the con-

cept and meaning of  $V$ . Some students come to accurate conclusions about the use of the symbol  $V$  in varying contexts, and others will need explicit instruction. According to Parker and Pardini (2006), daily routines within a subject area frame the meaning and purpose of particularized words and symbols. It is teaching students these specific meanings that drives acquisition of the terms. Teachers need to provide the context so students can incorporate concepts particular to the discipline they are teaching.

## LANGUAGE INTERACTIONS

### The Use of Multiple Languages

Marcus, a Vietnamese student, is writing his memoir. His teacher is conferencing with him about his use of fragments and his seemingly random use of English and Vietnamese in his paper. The teacher is attempting to explain how writing changes format in different contexts by using examples from his texts to friends in contrast to formal writing. Marcus adamantly explains that his writing is his identity, and he is not going to change the way he says things when he writes. The teacher is at an impasse.

There is much literature explaining how speaking and writing changes depending on the audience (Delpit, 1995; Baker, 2002). Delpit argues that integrating experiences and the prior knowledge of students is important in helping students learn when to use different languages and registers. Baker finds that modeling different language "codes and formats" in the classroom, and explicitly explaining when one is more appropriate than another, is advantageous for students. Additionally, Auer and Wei (2008) assert that code-switching between contexts is a valuable tool not only for students to learn, but also for teachers to use. Marcus and many other students can benefit from explicitly examining how writing in various formats still reveals identity.

### The Use of Sarcasm

Mahdi is the only African American student in 5<sup>th</sup> grade at his school. It is *crazy hat* day at school. Everyone is donned in his or her craziest hats. Mahdi did not want to wear a hat so he chose to put up the hood of his sweatshirt. However, his teacher asks him to take it off. He asks his teacher why he needs to pull his hood off

when all of his friends are wearing their hats. His teacher states, "O, you have to take off your hoodie because you are black." Madhi is confused, but he takes his hoodie off. Later, the teacher tries to explain that she was being sarcastic. This is problematic for many reasons, all of which will not be discussed in this paper. However, in terms of context importance, there are two main issues. One issue has to do with the fact that some 5<sup>th</sup> grade students are not developmentally ready to interpret a sarcastic statement from an inferential stance. Younger students interpret sarcasm literally. Second, the context of this sarcasm is also unknown due to the age or lack of experience of the student. In this case, Madhi used the context he literally saw to interpret the teacher's comments. Madhi saw that he was black and all of his classmates were white. He is not old enough to fully understand the context of interpretation that his teacher, parents, or principal used to try to make sense of the comment. The racial references that the teacher found to be funny, were not understood by the student. Finn (1999) describes one critical aspect of discourse as the ability to understand the underpinnings and to acknowledge individual perspectives. As with sarcasm, shared understandings between participants about the inferences and connotations of dialogue are important for negotiating interpretations in any communication situation. It is clear that this teacher and student did not have shared understandings.

An awareness of effective classroom communication is critical in order to allow teachers to determine their roles in students' language development. Proficiency in communication means different things to different speakers, depending on the context in which it is being assessed (Otteneimer, 2009). Students may have understood on one level what a teacher has said, but on another level they perceived teacher talk completely differently from what the teacher intended.

### Using More Than One Language

Alma Delia is a bilingual student in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. She is proficient in Spanish at her developmental level and is at an intermediate proficiency level in English. For the most part, she understands her teacher and fellow students. However, there are times when oral language causes confusion and an understanding of the context is

essential, for example, when she hears the concatenated sounds, /blu:/. When spoken in a sentence or story, she is slow to react, but makes the connection with the correct homophone. Yet, many times in her class, the teacher uses words such as /blu:/ in isolation in spelling tests and other situations. Without context, Alma Delia has a hard time deciphering whether the word is "blue" or "blew."

Snedeker and Trueswell (2004) conclude that language learners are able to parse sound, syllable, and word forms out of sentences by using the context. Only when this context is present does consolidation of meaning into memory occur fully. In addition, words not only name things, they carry layered, dynamic, culturally specific associations, beliefs, and values usually derived from the context or the activities in which they are used (Gumperz & Hernandez-Chavez, 1972). It is important to avoid isolating ambiguous language and instead explicitly use the context with regard to language.

### In the Classroom

In the above examples, there are three elements to consider with regard to context: 1) explicit teaching, 2) dialogue, and 3) contextual teaching. First, explicit teaching is sometimes necessary for revealing how information is provided and used in various contexts. For example, young children benefit from explicitly exploring the relationship between phonemes (i.e., when the letter 'e' precedes the letter 'a,' the 'a' assimilates to the 'e' and makes the sound /e/ as in meat), or explaining the etymology of a word to gain not only word recognition skills, but also semantic information. Second, teachers can guide students through contextual information using dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981; Finn, 1999). Talk plays a critical role in learning (Cazden, 2001). Providing time for asking questions and discussing a topic together allows students and teachers not only to reveal more of the context because it piques student curiosity, but also because it encourages students to think more deeply about the topic in general. Third, contextual teaching involves finding ways to help students relate the content to their personal lives and the world around them. Tapping into a student's background knowledge is a good way to begin discussion, helping to build or sometimes change students' understanding. Using real world contexts to explain information to help students see how they might actually

use the information provides a platform for relevance. Creating context, through explicit teaching, exploring the situation thoroughly through dialogue, and relating information to the world is critical to learning.

### Conclusion

Examples such as these are a reminder of the importance of attending to the context of situations throughout the school day. Though teachers often feel rushed to get through all required curriculum day-to-day, it is important not to resort to teaching information or skills in isolation. Many of our students, especially ELLs, make meaning using contextual cues (Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007).

Building schema through context helps build shared knowledge creating a more holistic, accurate picture of learned information. To operate in diverse environments, students will need the critical thinking skills to observe a situation, analyze it holistically and take into account many perspectives. A surface-level understanding is not enough in our multifaceted world.

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*Kimberly Ilosway, Assistant Professor at University of Portland, teaches literacy courses and a neuroeducation class. She recently graduated with a doctorate from Portland State University.*

