

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION



Considering Context

Literacy researchers are increasingly called upon to contextualize their studies by attending to the physical, social, political, historical, linguistic, cultural, and other types of settings that affect the way that literacy is learned, taught, and used. Stephens and Pearson (1992) note that literacy researchers from diverse perspectives have been attentive to features of context for at least fifty years, arguing that what has changed over time and among perspectives is the construct of context itself. They describe the field as moving toward an “expansive conceptualization of context” that “involves not only what has been and what is, but what is expected to be” (p. 346).

Rex, Green, Dixon, and the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group (1998) make a similar argument in their analysis of how context is operationalized in a variety of studies. Their answer to the question, “What counts as context?” is “It depends.” They found that the term has different meanings both across and within articles. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to consider further what it means to contextualize a study and discuss how the articles in this issue of *RTE* attend to context in compelling and informative ways.

We begin by returning to the origins of the word *context*, which first appeared circa 1568 in Middle English. The Latin root for text is *texere*, meaning to weave; context comes from the Latin terms *contextus*, meaning connection of words or coherence, and *contextere*, meaning to weave together (Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, 1994-1996). The more recent coinages intertext (Kristeva, 1984) and intercontext (Floriani, 1993) suggest that discourse involves an interweaving of language and the social practices that engage and connect its participants both immediately and over time and place. The notion of context suggested by its etymology differs from conceptions that distinctly separate people from their surrounding environments. Context is instead viewed as a relationship among people and their settings, which typically include multiple sets of overlapping goals, values, discourses, tools, and other artifacts of social life (Cole, 1996; Lave, Murtaugh, & de la Rocha, 1984). We see this relational notion of context played out, albeit differently, in the articles that make up this issue of *RTE*.

Diane Stephens revisits ideas generated through the study she coau-

thored with Gail Boldt, Candace Clark, Janet S. Gaffney, Judith Shelton, Jennifer Story, and Janelle Weinzierl, "Learning (about Learning) from Four Teachers," which won the 2000 Alan C. Purves Award for the article from the previous year's volume of *RTE* judged to be most likely to have the greatest impact on educational practice. Stephens attends to context primarily in terms of the kinds of contexts that teachers create in their classrooms, both in elementary schools and universities, particularly as a result of conducting inquiries into their own teaching practices that focus on the skills and strategies of individual learners. In Stephens's own practice as a teacher educator, she realized through her own inquiry that she needed to change her relationships with students by providing them with opportunities and encouragement for inquiries that they could reflect on relative to the inquiries of other students. She concludes that these inquiries need to be grounded in the particulars of their classrooms, requiring careful attention to the contexts that they create and the processes that unfold in relation to those settings. Inquiries emerging from these principles are, she argues, likely transforming, both for classrooms and for teachers themselves. For Stephens and colleagues, then, context is a dynamic construct that teachers have the agency to change through a process of reflective practice.

The fact that learning occurs in multiple and overlapping settings is central to the research of George Newell, Randy Gingrich, and Angela Beumer-Johnson. In their study of student

teachers making the transition from university program to school setting, they are concerned with the ways in which novices negotiate tensions among settings whose values and priorities suggest and reinforce different approaches to teaching. They focus on nine student teachers whose beliefs about teaching are affected by their own apprenticeships of observation, the concepts emphasized in their preservice education coursework, their field work prior to student teaching, and the schools and classrooms that provide the settings for their student teaching. Not surprisingly, Newell et al. find that when the various settings are well-aligned in terms of beliefs about effective teaching, student teachers readily appropriate the theoretical and practical tools for teaching stressed in their university coursework and reinforce that appropriation through the teaching practices they use in the schools. Yet the pragmatics of running a large teacher education program inevitably place student teachers in settings where their university-based teaching practices are discouraged or contradicted. Newell et al. stress the importance of understanding the kinds of relationships that student teachers develop within each setting. Furthermore, they emphasize that researchers should attend to how student teachers negotiate conflicting social settings and how those negotiations affect the teaching identities that they construct for themselves. As novices working to get established in the profession, the student teachers studied by Newell and colleagues have less agency in constructing their own teach-

ing contexts than do the more experienced teachers studied by Stephens et al. They are, rather, in the process of developing conceptions both of teaching and of themselves as teachers through their engagement with the goals, tools, and social practices of the university and school settings. The potentially reduced agency that comes from their less secure status in the profession elevates the importance of creating educational settings in which novice teachers have opportunities to develop robust concepts about teaching that they persist with in settings that discourage them.

Jean Ketter and Jonelle Poole move the scope of their investigation more broadly still, studying teachers' activity within the policy context of a state-mandated writing test. Their focus is on what happens when teachers work to prepare students to pass a high-stakes, direct writing test in a rural Maryland high school. Students were required to pass the test according to assessment standards set outside the school and standardized for schools throughout the state. The teachers brought to their task their own conceptions of effective teaching and learning that were sometimes incompatible with the goals of the state writing test. Moreover, the students themselves brought cultural resources to the task that frequently appeared to equip them poorly for the kinds of writing required on the test. Ketter and Poole look at the immediate contexts that teachers construct within the larger, more distant, less flexible, less interactive context of the state writing exam. Though the teachers were suc-

cessful in helping their students pass the test, Ketter and Poole argue that the policy context in which the teachers operated distorted their efforts to teach in what they regarded as rich and rewarding ways.

Carol Donovan attends to context more historically, focusing on two schools of thought with which teachers and students are in dialogue. Donovan looks at the genre knowledge that students use in their informational and story writing at different grade levels in an elementary school. Her notion of genre views discourse as a conversation taking place over time, taking on characteristics that embody a worldview and set of social practices that constitute the history of a discipline. This disciplinary context provides the setting for the writing that students learn in school. To learn to write effectively in different genres, students need to become conversant with the conventions—what Donovan refers to as macro-level and micro-level features—of those genres. Donovan further contextualizes her study by locating it within the expectations of the school community, composed primarily of upper-middle-class, mainstream, European Americans. The community valued achievement as evidenced through high standardized test scores and conventional literacies that would give the community's children access to the opportunities for higher education attained by the majority of parents. These expectations were embodied in the school curriculum, which was deliberately tied to national education standards, state curriculum frameworks, and learning objectives from

district and state mandated assessments. Given that these values were traditional in this community, Donovan examines a second type of historical discourse context, that of the community's relatively high socio-economic status and the discourse required to sustain it in academic work.

On the whole, these studies suggest the multiple ways in which attention to context can inform literacy research. The authors of each use their attention to context both to interpret their participants' thinking and to consider, in Stephens and Pearson's (1992) words, what is expected to be: Each article attempts to consider the kinds of changes that educators can make in classroom, institutional, or policy context in order to make schools and universities the sites of more effective teaching and more fulfilling learning. We see this move toward considering the relationships that teachers and students construct with their environments to be an

important contribution to literacy studies, suggesting a number of questions for researchers: How can these relationships become more satisfying? How can overlapping contexts retain their integrity while becoming sufficiently congruent to provide for coherent concept development? What kinds of circumstances best enable teachers to construct satisfying teaching identities that keep them open to prospects for growth and change? What kinds of knowledge do teachers require in order to understand which contexts best support which learners? How do teachers get that knowledge? With what traditions do students engage in school, what will follow from engagement with those traditions, and through what social practices does this engagement occur? We look forward to seeing how the field addresses these questions in the next generation of literacy studies.

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