

# Contextual Understanding

## Overview

The Contextual Understanding substrand focuses on how the interpretation, choice of language and the shaping of a text vary according to the context in which it is used. From an early age, children know that the language used in the playground may not be as appropriate or effective in another context. Several factors influence the use of language.

- Purpose of communication
- Subject matter
- Mode of communication (spoken, written, visual)
- Roles and relationships between the participants
- Social situation

It is important that students are provided with opportunities to reflect on how language varies and needs to be amended according to purpose, subject, mode of communication and roles.

Included in this chapter is Section 1—Developing Contextual Understanding.



Figure 2.1

## SECTION 1

# Developing Contextual Understanding

**Refuse to be put in a basket**

The two different readings and two different meanings of the above sign depend on where the reader places the emphasis in the first word. This sign exemplifies the role of contextual understanding in language. If the reader assumes REFUSE to be trash or rubbish, it could be assumed that the sign is a command or a direction from an authority in a particular place such as a school or public park. If the reader assumes REFUSE to mean 'decline', then the sign takes on a more abstract, deeper meaning about not conforming with mainstream beliefs. The sign may be found on a bumper sticker or as a T-shirt slogan.

Much hinges on where the sign is located, who put it there and the relationship between the writer and the reader. The collective situational aspects of the reading, and the social and cultural perceptions of the writer and the reader, make up what is known as contextual understanding.

## Contextual Understanding and Critical Literacy

Contextual Understanding is an awareness of how the context affects the interpretation and choice of language. From an early age, children become aware that the spoken language varies according to the situation in which it is used. Children often receive timely feedback about what they have said and how they have said it. However, the development of contextual understanding by a reader is often less overt and requires explicit teaching. Students need to be aware, for example, that an advertisement on a website is aimed at persuading them to buy something and will use a number of devices to influence them.

Critical literacy is an approach to literacy that involves analysing and questioning texts to reveal the beliefs and values behind the surface meanings, and to see how a reader can be influenced and affected. By interrogating texts, readers become aware of how language is used to position particular social and cultural groups and practices, often preserving relationships of power. For example,

a reader may question an historical account of land settlement that leaves out or understates the importance of an indigenous population. Because critical literacy can challenge existing power relationships and social practices, it is inevitably political, so teachers need to reflect regularly on what constitutes critical literacy in the classroom, and its impact on the school community.

To be critically literate, students need to know how context affects the interpretation of language. Having an understanding of situational and socio-cultural contexts equips a reader with the fundamental knowledge to deconstruct, analyse and interrogate texts. Although Contextual Understanding and critical literacy are not synonymous, teaching students to be aware of the relationship between context and the interpretation of language provides a sound foundation for critical literacy approaches.

## Contextual Understanding and Reading

To become effective readers, students need to become aware of the ways the author or illustrator has used devices for various effects in the text and how this influences them as readers. Readers need to be taught about situational context and socio-cultural context, including how their own view of the world leads them to make an interpretation of a text. Students need to understand how and why their interpretation may differ from the interpretation of others.

Even the simplest texts carry messages of various kinds, that reflect the background, biases and culture of the author and illustrator.

### Situational Context

An author's choice of language can vary according to the context in which it is used. Several factors influence this choice of language:

- the author's purpose of communication
- subject matter
- the text type—report, email, formal letter
- the roles and relationships between the communicating participants—memo from a company director to the employees, memo from one colleague to another.

Changing any of these factors may have an impact on the language being used.

The same factors influence how a reader uses and interprets text. The reader is influenced by:

- the purpose for reading
- their knowledge and familiarity with the topic or subject

- the situation in which the reading takes place
- the relationship between the author and the reader.

### **Socio-cultural Context**

These are broader influences that have an impact on language usage. All texts reflect, to some extent, the expectations and values of the social and cultural groups of the time they were written. This understanding of socio-cultural context involves knowing that:

- the way people use language both reflects and shapes their socio-cultural outlook—the beliefs, values and assumptions of their socio-cultural group, especially with regard to gender, ethnicity and status
- texts will be interpreted differently by different people according to their socio-cultural background—awareness of the influence of socio-cultural factors on composing and comprehending texts is pivotal
- language and culture are strongly related
- language is intentionally crafted, communicated and manipulated to influence others, often to maintain or challenge existing power relationships between groups like employers and employees, businesses and consumers, and governments and citizens
- various forms of English are used around the world that reflect and shape socio-cultural attitudes and assumptions, including variations of standard English generally used in formal communication, education and some professional settings.

When an author writes a text, his or her socio-cultural context will influence the type of language he or she uses. Likewise the moment a text is picked up by a reader, the reader's view of the world, society and culture will influence their reading and interpretation of the text. Texts are not neutral. Each reader will have a different reading of the text according to what he or she brings to that text. For example, an environmentalist and a mining engineer might react very differently to a report on Antarctica as each person reads the text with a different set of values, beliefs and understanding about the topic.

### **Why Teach Contextual Understanding?**

The world today is swamped with information from a range of media and a variety of sources. Developing contextual understanding allows students to analyse this information and:

- become aware that texts are open to several valid interpretations
- monitor, evaluate and reaffirm their understandings of texts
- recognise the 'power' of texts and how they can be influential in positioning readers.

- recognise and evaluate the beliefs that influence texts
- make informed decisions about their view on specific topics
- become aware that language is constructed, used and manipulated in powerful ways.

A wide variety of materials is necessary for teaching contextual understanding. Authentic reading materials such as magazines, advertising brochures, food packaging and newspapers often reveal more about the beliefs, values and assumptions of the authors than school books. However, old reading series that are often deemed 'politically incorrect' and fairy tales are worth interrogating as they reflect the values of times and circumstances that contrast with modern, dominant social norms.

### **What Students Need to Know**

If students are going to be able to offer opinions and justify and substantiate those opinions, they need to be aware of the following.

- Authors and illustrators present a view of the world that can be challenged.
- Authors and illustrators represent facts, events, characters and people in different ways.
- Authors and illustrators use devices to achieve a specific purpose.

### **Authors and illustrators present a view of the world that can be challenged.**

- Texts can be looked at from various points of view.
- Texts are selective versions of reality, told from a particular point of view.
- There is no one right interpretation of a text. It is possible to challenge and resist the preferred or dominant reading and the way people, places and events are depicted.
- Authors write for a particular audience and assume that audiences have specific cultural knowledge and values.
- The values of a dominant group or culture are often represented as the norm.
- There are gaps and silences in every text. Readers will fill these gaps differently based on their own socio-cultural context.

### **Authors and illustrators represent facts, events, characters and people in different ways.**

- Facts and events are chosen or omitted and then represented by authors and illustrators to present a particular point of view.
- Characters from literary texts are not real but are constructed by authors and illustrators to create a particular representation.

- When creating informational texts, authors select information to represent people in a certain way.

Consider the following representations.

<b>Text Excerpt</b>	<b>What Does This Say About...?</b>
Often the class would have parties where the girls would bring something they had cooked, and the boys brought the drinks.	Gender
Day after day, Grandma sat in her chair, rocking back and forth, unaware of most of what was happening around her.	Age
The librarian peered over the top of her spectacles, shook her bob of greying hair, and narrowed her eyes.	Occupation
Everyone except Jake went to see the show. His dad had spent the house-keeping money on a horse race.	Socio-economic status
Each captain took turns to pick kids for their teams until only the skinny kids with glasses remained.	Physical appearance
We asked Phuong to join our group because we wanted someone who was good at mathematics.	Cultural background
The farmer was confused by the modern escalator.	Geographical background

**Figure 2.2 Representations**

**Authors and illustrators use devices to achieve a specific purpose.**

***Devices Used by Authors***

Authors use language devices to influence the reader. The author’s use of language devices often reveals their socio-cultural background. To comprehend a text and interpret the author’s message, a reader

needs to understand the socio-cultural perspective from which a text is written.

Authors also choose language devices that suit the situational context of the language event, e.g. purpose, subject matter, relationship between the author and the reader.

Consider the following devices used by authors.

### ***Analogy***

Using analogy involves the comparison of one thing with another, sometimes extending the comparison too far in seeking to persuade, e.g. A classroom is just like an extended family, so every student deserves the sort of care and affection they would receive from their parents.

### ***Bribery***

This is a persuasive device commonly used in advertising. Bonuses, free products, discounts and privileges are offered to the reader, e.g. Buy one packet—get one packet free.

### ***Connotation***

Connotation refers to the suggestion of a meaning by a word beyond what it explicitly denotes or describes. The suggestion can create positive or negative influences.

Millionaire Sophie Enwright had a reputation for being **thrifty**.  
Millionaire Sophie Enwright had a reputation for being **stingy**.  
Millionaire Sophie Enwright had a reputation for being **frugal**.  
Millionaire Sophie Enwright had a reputation for being **penny-wise**.

### ***Euphemism***

News articles often use a euphemism or a mild expression in place of a blunt one. For example, the word **eliminate** will be used instead of **kill**, when describing the actions of a nation's army.

### ***Exaggeration***

This involves the use of sweeping statements, e.g. **Prefects had the power of life and death over junior boys**.

### ***Figurative language***

Figurative language refers to using language not meant to be read literally. These include similes (e.g. **cute as a button**), metaphors (e.g. **he was a lion in battle**), idioms (e.g. **it's raining cats and dogs**) and hyperbole (e.g. **I could eat a horse**). The understanding of figurative language is determined by a shared socio-cultural context.

### ***Flattery***

Flattery (particularly in advertising) involves an appeal to the reader's self image, including the need to belong or the need for prestige, e.g. **Any intelligent person knows ...** Flattery also includes association — discrediting or enhancing a position by association with some other person, group or idea, e.g. **You must be joking about secret ballots for trade unions. I expect that sort of comment from a communist.**

### ***Flashback***

This is a device commonly used in literary texts that explores events that have occurred previously and have had an impact on the current situation. Flashback is often achieved through dream sequences, reflecting on memories or the narration of one of the characters. Flashback may be used to create a sense of nostalgia or illustrate selective recall.

### ***Foreshadowing***

Foreshadowing is a device commonly used in literary texts to hint at what is to come. For example, advertisers use foreshadowing by showing a preview of an advertisement in one television break and the entire advertisement in the next break.

### ***Inclusion of details***

The author has selected only those details that support his or her perspective. Other details that would contradict the perspective have been omitted.

### ***Irony, wit and humour***

Irony, wit and humour are devices that rely heavily on a shared socio-cultural context to achieve the author's purpose.

Irony uses a contrast between the reality and the expectation, what is said and what is meant or what appears to be true and what is true, e.g. **As he watched the rain fall, Peter remarked, "Lovely day for a picnic"**.

Wit refers to the perception and expression of a relationship between seemingly incompatible or different things in a cleverly amusing way.

Humour is the perception, enjoyment or expression of something that is amusing, comical, incongruous or absurd.

### ***Irrelevance***

Irrelevance is including points or arguments that do not contribute to the main idea, with the aim of distracting the reader.

### ***Omission of details***

The author has omitted the fact that Jones' two major rivals had been injured and were unable to compete.

### ***Overgeneralisation***

This is the use of a statement that encompasses a wide group of people or situations and is not based on fact, e.g. Everyone knows that ... dogs are smarter than cats.

### ***Oversimplification***

This occurs when a simple (and often single) statement is used to explain a situation that is the result of a number of complex and interwoven factors, e.g. The Allies won World War II because of their ascendancy in the air.

### ***Personification***

Personification means to give human qualities to inanimate objects and abstract ideas, e.g. The XYZ Company believes....., The stuffed bear smiled as he was lifted from the ground.

### ***Personalisation***

This involves adopting a tone of intimacy through the use of personal pronouns, e.g. We were attacked because of who we are and what we believe. It can include commands, e.g. Your country needs you! and rhetorical questions, e.g. Are you getting a fair deal at work?

### ***Print size and font selection***

Choosing specific words to be printed in bold type, italics, colour or in a larger font size can indicate aspects the author feels are important for the reader to notice. Different fonts can be used for different reasons. A handwriting font, for instance, may be used to suggest a familiar or informal relationship between the author and reader.

### ***Quoting someone out of context***

Quoting someone out of context to mislead or influence the reader can create bias. Authors often select a particular section of a written or spoken text and can use this section to present a different impression or point of view.

### ***Repeating words or phrases***

Repetition is used to persuade readers by emphasising particular parts of a text, e.g. The company has offered no support to the community. Nil. None. Zilch.

### **Jones Blitzes Field**

The brilliant Archie Jones yesterday emphasised his dominance over other sprinters in the south-west region when he won the Regional 100-metre Summer Sprint. Jones led from start to finish, leaving his opponents trailing in his wake.

Figure 2.3 Jones Blitzes Field

### ***Symbolism***

A symbol is anything that can be used to represent something else, e.g. dressing a character in black, the sound of a small stream.

To understand the symbols used in text the reader needs to share a similar cultural background to the author. Symbols are often culturally specific and the same meaning may not necessarily be understood between cultures, e.g. the colour white is associated with weddings in Australia but with funerals in Bali.

### ***Sarcasm and satire***

Sarcasm and satire rely heavily on a shared socio-cultural context to achieve the author's purpose. Sarcasm is scathing language that is intended to offend or ridicule.

Satire ridicules human weaknesses, vices or follies with the intention of bringing about social reform.

### ***Testimony***

The use of quotations from experts or people positively associated with a situation or product is called testimony. Testimony also includes the use of statistics, e.g. *Nine out of ten dentists agree that ...*

### ***Understatement***

Understatement is used when trying to downplay the gravity of a situation or event, e.g. *In the recent floods, several lives were lost.* (Actually the death toll was close to twenty.)

### ***Devices Used by Illustrators***

Illustrators use visual devices to try to influence the reader. Consider the following devices used by illustrators.

#### ***Amount of detail***

Illustrators include varying amounts of details to enhance and complement the text. In a single picture, details can convey information that would take an author many sentences. Details also tend to give a more realistic feel to the illustrations.

#### ***Artistic style***

The artistic style refers to the way the illustrations are rendered. The artistic style may tend towards realistic or towards representational. In realistic art, subjects and objects are portrayed with detailed accuracy, as they would be in real life. On the other hand, in representational art, the illustrator has made no attempt to make the art appear realistic. Each artistic style conveys a different message to the reader.

### **Colour**

Colours have symbolic meaning. Illustrators often choose colours to create certain effects, e.g. strong bold colours may indicate happiness, dark sombre colours may indicate night.

### **Composition and page design**

The placement of visual elements on a page or in a text is another device illustrators use. Objects placed in the foreground tend to have more prominence than those in the background. Visual elements placed on the right-hand page have prominence over those on the left. Newspapers exploit this prominence by increasing the cost of advertisements in that section of the page. An illustrator or book designer can also attract the reader's attention through the use of white spaces in the page design.

### **Medium**

Medium refers to the material or technique an illustrator has used, e.g. collage, charcoal, watercolours, photographs. The choice of medium by the illustrator can provide readers with clues about the message or purpose of the text, e.g. photographs suggest the text is realistic.

### **Size**

Illustrators may indicate the more important characters or people by making them larger than others. The relative sizes of visual elements may also change at different places in a text as different points are emphasised.

## **Supporting the Development of Contextual Understanding**

Contextual Understanding is an integral part of a comprehensive approach to teaching reading. It is best taught within the context of established reading procedures.

*Modelled Reading* provides an ideal forum for the teacher to think aloud to demonstrate how the text is being interrogated during the reading.

*Shared Reading* enables the students and the teacher to question the text and the author's motives together, jointly constructing meaning.

*Guided Reading* is a forum for students to work almost independently, using a teacher-provided scaffold to pose revealing questions at pre-determined checkpoints.

Effective teaching and learning practices can also provide a springboard for supporting the development of contextual understanding.

These effective teaching and learning practices include:

- Familiarising
- Discussing
- Analysing
- Investigating
- Innovating
- Simulating
- Reflecting

**Familiarising** involves bringing different texts and different aspects of texts to the attention of students. Material such as greeting cards, cereal packets and magazine advertisements can be collected, compared, displayed, and most importantly, discussed.

**Discussing** is central to helping students become text analysts. Initially teachers may stimulate discussion by posing critical questions about gender stereotypes in folk and fairy tales or persuasive devices in junk mail advertisements or magazine articles. A scan of the cover of a book may lead to a question about the intended audience or whether the text appears to be literary or informational. In time, students can interrogate texts alone, posing many of the questions listed later in this chapter.

Prediction and confirmation are additional important aspects to be discussed. By discussing these aspects students may then be able to detect familiar patterns of dominant cultural values in texts.

**Analysing** texts involves examining parts of the text to reveal the social and cultural values that are embedded in them. This analysis is often accomplished by comparing similar texts.

Consider the following.

- Compare two versions of the same story, same event or same phenomenon.
- Compare the way characters or groups of people are portrayed in different texts.
- Compare the characters, setting or plot of two literary texts.
- Compare the points of view, accuracy, validity and currency of 'factual' accounts. Include a comparison of the perspectives adopted by the media in different parts of the world and different interest groups.

Analysing parts of a text can also mean identifying devices that an author or illustrator has used. This may include finding examples of bias, exaggeration in text or the use of colour in illustrations or photographs.

**Investigating** a text can encompass finding out, analysing and questioning who has written the text, when, for what purpose and how the author or illustrator has chosen to convey the message. This might include investigating who owns a magazine or sponsors a website, whether the author has credibility in the field or the target audience of the text.

**Innovating** by amending an existing text or transforming a text by re-creating it in another genre, form, mode, medium or format enables students to disrupt the reading of a text. Students are able to deconstruct and reconstruct parts of a text to reveal different perspectives. Several fairytales have already been the subject of innovations, changing gender roles or altering the time or place. Simpler innovations could involve substituting alternative words for those with excessively positive or negative connotations. Innovation can also incorporate removing parts of a text, or adding parts such as a sequel or postscript.

**Simulating** involves assuming the role of another person or group of people to interpret a text from a different viewpoint. The point of view may differ on the basis of culture, time, geography, age, gender or other factors. Some books are based on varied perspectives, such as *The Town Mouse and The Country Mouse*, and provide insights into two alternative points of view.

**Reflecting** can be accomplished by promoting discussion about the different identities students may assume when reading a text. Students may, at different times, see themselves as a sister, a daughter, a supporter of the nation, a supporter of the state or province, a conservationist, a youth, a member of a cultural or religious group. Similarly, students can reflect on the divided loyalties that characters in texts may experience when they confront situations from their different identities.

Reflecting also involves the consideration of personal values that underpin students' responses to texts. When responses to reading are elaborated and substantiated, students can reflect on how their thinking is driven by their experiences, beliefs and attitudes.

## Generic Questions for Discussing Texts

Teachers can use the following lists to choose and frame questions that will stimulate discussion according to the needs of their students, the text selected and the purpose of the session. When answering these questions, students can be expected to substantiate, justify and extend their answers. It may be necessary to ask further questions such as:

*Q: From whose point of view is the text written?*

*A: From an adult's point of view*

*Q: Why do you think that? or How do you know?*

### What? (the subject matter)

- What is the text about?
- What type of text is this?
- What do you think the text means?
- What do others think the text means?
- What and who is included or left out?
- What and who is valued or devalued?

Figure 2.4a

### Why? (purpose)

- Why was it written?

Figure 2.4b

### When?

- When was it written?

Figure 2.4c

### Who? (the relationship between author and reader)

- Who wrote the text?
- What do you know about the author?
- Who was the text written for?
- From whose point of view is the text written?
- How does your socio-cultural context (values) affect your interpretation of the text?

Figure 2.4d

### How? (style and tone of communication)

- How does the author create his or her effect?
- How could it have been written differently, e.g. *different genre, form, mode, medium, format*
- How does this text compare with similar texts that you have read?

Figure 2.4e