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Staging Encounters: Assessing the Performance of Context in Students' Multimodal Writing

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Abstract

Acknowledging the nearly universal recognition of the significance of *context* to writing and writing assessment as well as the bedeviling nature of this vague term, this article sketches a theory of context that is at once appropriate to multimodal meaning-making and practicable for multimodal writing assessment. This theory, which insists that texts and contexts are mutually constitutive, reveals the ways in which multimodal texts perform contexts of production and reception. Using a student example, the article models how to assess the performance of context in students' multimodal writing.
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Almost all of us in writing studies seem to agree—*context matters*. Indeed, we might say that "context" functions as a kind of god-term in the field in general and in writing assessment in particular. Perhaps this claim seems a bit extreme—as Kenneth Burke (1969) explains, god-terms are vague but powerful words or phrases around which people organize their lives. One might think of "freedom" or "money," perhaps—a term load-bearing enough "that we can treat the world in terms of it, seeing all as emanations, near and far, of its light" (Burke, 1969, p. 105). But when we compositionists talk shop, this is not too far off from the way we discuss "context." Our most robust scholarly conversations—about writing assessment, WAC/WID, multilingual/translingual writing, and transfer of learning, for instance—turn on the importance of context, variously described as rhetorical situations, discourse communities, scenes, locations, spaces, activity systems, geographies, environments, or ecologies. We agree that classroom contexts must be facilitative of writing activity. That students must have meaningful contexts for their writing. That writing must be understood within the context in which it is practiced. That any attempt to interpret or assess writing "out of context" is tantamount to an act of violence. Our professional motto might as well be "You had to be there."

Compositionists may not have a motto, but we do have posters. The very first *CCC* poster page (Fig. 1)—a feature intended to introduce key terms to general audiences—elucidated "rhetorical situation," complete with an image of the rhetorical triangle (subject, composer, audience) surrounded by a circle representing "context." I will return to this image in a moment; my point here is that it demonstrates the centrality of "context" to the field. (Also consider: a CompPile keyword quick search for "context" returns almost 1700 hits; compare this to 154 hits for "multimodal.")

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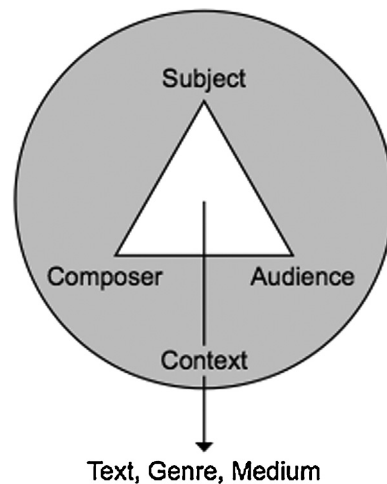

Figure 1. Rhetorical Situation (NCTE, 2010).

In writing assessment in particular, "context" might be said to function as a kind of shibboleth among compositionists, a mark of our fierce resistance to decontextualized, standardized writing assessment promoted by the testing industry, many policymakers, and some psychometricians. *Context matters* is one of the few principles on which our writing assessment scholars, deeply divided on other matters, agree. For instance, Brian Huot's (2002) influential principles for writing assessment—site based, locally controlled, context-sensitive, rhetorically based, and accessible (p. 105)—made abundantly clear his commitment to context. While Patricia Lynne (2004) forcefully critiqued Huot on several fronts—most pointedly for what she views as his complicity in advancing a psychometric worldview—she also grounded her thinking in a "contextual paradigm," in which "literacy is profoundly situated: literate acts occur only in specific circumstances, and without an understanding of the historical, theoretical, and political context, literacy has limited value" (p. 56–7). It appears there is no theoretical fault line in our writing assessment scholarship that "context" cannot span.

The problem with god-terms, Burke suggested, is that they "explain too little by explaining too much" (p. 107). The image on the *CCC* poster is emblematic: while the "context" circle envelops the rhetorical triangle, there is no indication of what is included in, and excluded from, its circumference. Aside from the triangle itself (in which we find "text, genre, medium"), the space inside the circle is blank. The written explanation included on the poster is no help: the word "context" does not appear even once. Context is invoked, but not specified.

Perhaps specification is too much to ask of a humble poster, but this move is representative of the field at large. For all our commitment to the term, we do not seem to have achieved much clarity about what a context *is.* On a basic level, what we talk about when we talk about context is *what surrounds texts*—what is outside and beyond them. For example, The National Writing Project's promising Multimodal Assessment Project (MAP), which identifies "context" as one of the five recurring elements of multimodal composing, defined context as "the world around the artifact, around the creation of the artifact, and how the artifact enters and fits into the world" (National Writing Project, para. 2). But this understanding of the term raises more questions than it answers.

First, it is not clear precisely what "the world" around the artifact and its creation includes—or *would not* include. We might agree, for instance, that a writer's physical context matters, but does it matter in which chair she sits? Whether her back hurts or her head aches? The slant of light through the blinds? The clamor of children playing or dogs barking? Whether she used a coaster for the coffee (or whiskey) she has placed on the coffee table? This can get very silly very quickly, but we know, as writers, that the most quotidian details often *do* matter. And we have not yet begun to account for other kinds of contexts—historical, psychological, technological, economic, cultural, or political—that are surely relevant here. This bewildering complexity of multiple, overlapping contexts is particularly confounding in writing assessment situations, where the kinds of information we would need to account for them are in short supply and where, even if we had this information, we would not have the time or labor power to sort through it.

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