Context, Communication and Learning

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To me, the experience of learning is dependent upon the context in which it takes place. Educational institutions have developed in tandem with a series of grand expectations about their impact and usefulness. That history is bound up with the hope that there will be social and economic benefits from what students learn and what they become. I use the word hope advisedly because the history of education is littered with the remains of many failed experiments to fulfil those goals. There have also been many successes. The last twenty years have been difficult for the educational system. Expectations have grown and at the same time, institutions have had great difficulty in keeping pace with demands from all sectors of our society. This is not due to a lack of effort. Quite the contrary, the story of education in the 20th century is about educators trying, at every level, to resolve the issues of learning, empowerment and student development. The problem is that institutions do not change willingly and when changes occur, they are often difficult to maintain.

The most important question that needs to be answered about the future of the educational system is how we are going to encourage the creation of new paradigms of learning. Learning is largely based on the complex circumstances and context of classroom and school culture. Learning is also profoundly affected by the ways in which educational institutions are governed, as well as the expectations of students. This mix of features is made more difficult by the challenges that faculty and staff face in keeping the educational system in good shape. The complexity of all of these elements, their interaction and the challenge of planning for improvement have become central features of the debate on the future of education as we know it.

Context is about stories and in most instances, the stories that surround and underlie learning are rather more ephemeral than we would want to believe. Many of our theories of learning and so much of the practice of teaching does not account for the profoundly subjective nature of the school experience. The desire to convey information

and the social and cultural pressure to make learning into something that can be validated empirically makes it appear as if subjectivity is a distraction. It is not supposed to matter if students are experiencing some of the most turbulent periods of their lives as they move through the educational system. Somehow, they have to suffer through all of the expectations of the system and of their families, all of the social pressures and physical and psychological transformations that transitional periods of life engender and still succeed. Thankfully, many do. Because of a variety of societal pressures, the complexity of the context that I have just described is often marginalized in discussions of education. If you add in the various layers of experience that teachers go through as they transit from one stage of life to another, then it becomes clear why there is no simple way of describing how, or even whether, learning takes place inside educational institutions. This situation has been made even more difficult by the fact that over the last decade the demands for change in schools has become very intense. The subjective space of the teacher, for example, from family problems to illness is more often than not kept in the background of institutional life. Yet, communication cannot be abstracted from the realities that people are experiencing and from the pressures that they are under. I am not suggesting a focus here. Rather, I am discussing a territory that is more complex than we are often ready to admit.

I have worked as a teacher and administrator for over thirty years and these reflections on context are a product of my effort to understand and change the way our educational institutions think about teaching and learning. I have also been the head of an undergraduate university of art and design for over four years and have "learned" a great deal about the institutional, cultural and social constraints on innovation and change.

I continue to be amazed at the resistance to change among various groups in my institution. There is nothing malevolent or intentionally negative about this resistance. Institutions build complex layers of activity and interest to keep themselves running and the employees who have to live within those institutions, of necessity, develop a stake in what they do and how they perform their roles. The extraordinary thing is that context develops into micro-context—broader expectations and breadth of vision turn towards

highly individualized strategies of survival. This is also to be expected. But, in order to understand what happens in our classrooms, we have to understand the often highly charged sense of self-interest that teachers, staff and administrators develop in their daily practice. This occurs both in their pedagogical choices and in their perceptions of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in their relationship to the institutions of which they are a part.

One of the difficulties is that learning often takes place in environments that have not necessarily been designed to optimize the relationship between learners, teachers and institutions. This is not a claim that most teachers or school administrators would agree with and I make it in order to provoke some debate on the present situation inside the school system. I also make the claim knowing that there are numerous institutions struggling with the issues I am describing. Moreover, many institutions have developed rich and creative solutions to some of the issues I have mentioned.

When I talk about context, I am talking about the many complex factors that institutions have to work with in order to accomplish a variety of tasks and respond to a vast number of demands and expectations. Educational institutions bring with them a heritage that cannot be disengaged from their role as social engines for change and economic, cultural and social well being. And, that history has seen schools and the education system carry the weight of our societies' conceptions of children and adults and the ways in which institutions should and should not operate in response to all of their needs. The definition that our society has of schools is determined by paradigms that are utopian and geared towards the future. So, the weight is not only to provide immediate solutions to the social, cultural and economic needs of society, but also to envision what future generations will do and what skills they will need to become active participants in the development of society. The modern university has become so big in large measure because of the complexity of all of these expectations. Smaller institutions often have problems surviving because those expectations are superimposed onto their mandates. Professional institutions are in an even more difficult position because they are required to play the dual roles that come with specialization and breadth.

Context is of course a very fluid concept. We can speak of many different approaches to context, many different ways of understanding the role and influence of a variety of factors on individuals and on society. At the beginning of 1970, I was fortunate enough to be involved in the early development of a college in Montreal. I say fortunate because it is rare to begin a teaching career with an institution that has no immediate history. Those of us who started there found ourselves in the business of building an institutional context for learning. This paper will not address the many exciting events that made the experience a unique and exhilarating adventure in institution building. However, there is one aspect of that history that I do want to explore and it relates right back to what we mean by learning and context.

Let me use the model of human conversation as a starting point. When two people address each other, they make many different assumptions about the process of communication and interaction. For example, I may walk up to a stranger and ask the time. He or she will decide if my invasion of her private space warrants a response and then whether or not the request can be responded to. Once I have the time, we can quickly part ways or decide to exchange some pleasantries. All things considered, this is a very simple interaction. Yet, is it? Won't both of our histories play an important part in the exchange? Lets say that he walks away from me and mutters something about crazy people, the city and the lack of privacy. Or perhaps, if it is a woman, she justifiably may see my intrusion as a danger and become frightened. Suddenly, a seemingly simple event has become the pivot for many different possible scenarios. I have merely described a few.

It is this sense of multiplicity that makes any context both unpredictable and fluid. A short conversation may have a desirable or undesirable effect, but the bottom line is that our conversations are generally impossible to plan. This is one of the sources of a continuous desire to communicate and I would add, to clarify the meaning of what we say to each other. For the most part, clarification is what conversations are about. We try to convert assumptions, misinformation, and lack of knowledge into a structure of exchange

that may lead to a meaningful understanding. We move from some sort of lack to a process of partial fulfillment. The road may be rocky and more often than not difficult, but the conversational process is all about trying to find a common ground that will allow two people the chance to understand each other.

Now, how possible is it to extend the communicative experience that I have just described into a context where a large number of people are being addressed by one individual? Surely, the problems multiply. The burden of history that schools bear is governed by the utopian notion that modes of address can be found to overcome the barriers to communications that are created by the school context. From the start, we have built schools on a foundation that needs continual patching. So, working backwards from the inevitable problems that classrooms create (and I have taught classes with five hundred students in them), teachers and administrators try to find solutions to the overwhelming cacophony of information that a diversity of students of differing backgrounds bring to the public arena of the classroom. The complex emotional and intellectual phase that any given student may be experiencing at any particular moment in his or her life further complicates all of this. And, the stage of life in which teachers find themselves adds additional complications to the interaction. The fact that so many teachers are aging in the institutions of which they are a part would not be a problem if the aging process were acknowledged as having an important effect on the quality of life of teachers **and** students. We cannot expect the same excitement about pedagogy from someone who has spent thirty years teaching students who seem to get younger with every class. Nor should one dismiss the impact of repetition on the discourses that are exchanged among all participants in teaching institutions. Some problems seem to appear and reappear with great regularity. Some issues (such as the value of examinations) go in cycles of concern and relative disinterest driven by factors that are far beyond the control of educators themselves.

The other important thing to remember here is that we are dealing with students at a time of their lives when they may or may not be receptive to learning and this is of course largely dependent on what the schools are teaching. In fact, the variables are many

and multi-layered. How can all of these variables be included in a model of learning? How can a context as complex as a school allow for and encourage enough diversity of approaches, to create an exciting and interesting environment for students to make their own intelligent choices about what to know and how to approach learning? Choice and the ability to make empowered decisions are what schools should be about. More often than not, the culture of schools does not permit students to move at their own pace towards an empowered decision about their futures. Yet, the context of schooling from the point of view of society and government policy suggests that empowerment will lead to employment and a recognition of civic stature and duty.

I began this paper by saying that learning and context go hand in hand and I have perhaps belabored the point. For me, context becomes even more complex when I factor in the broader social and cultural as well as political context that defines so much of a student's life. Let me come to what I consider to be a very crucial point through another story. Some years ago, I gave a presentation on media ethics and euthanasia to a very large group of doctors, nurses and hospice workers. I spoke to them about the role that media play in defining the most basic elements of what we consider our culture and social context to be. I asked the following question: " How many of you have watched the Oprah Winfrey show?" The vast majority of the audience had not watched the show. The discussion that followed was very revealing. I tried to point out that for many patients, it is possible that the Oprah show, with all of its emphasis on the wellness movement was an important element in people's subjective perceptions about their health. Oprah's advice and her guests might have a determining effect on a patient's view of themselves as well as their doctor. At a subsequent reception after the lecture, a hospice worker from South Carolina came up to me and mentioned that at his hospice the cancer patients, who were mostly men who had gotten cancer from their jobs as tobacco farm workers, watched Oprah everyday. I suggested that he spend some time discussing the show with them and get back to me. Subsequently, he wrote me a long letter about the experience. For the first time, he felt as if he had found an entrée into their lives. They joked about Oprah but felt that she was a real person and had some very important things to offer. Most importantly, he was able to find the measure of their concerns, fears and

hopes. In other words, he was able to develop a shared base with them and a shared language that encouraged further exchanges and a deeper understanding among everyone.

Clearly, this suggests something very important about context. How can a teacher address a group of students whose central obsession might be the Backstreet Boys from a position of shared knowledge and understanding? Why do students have to learn from people who may have very little respect for the cultural context in which students live? The same question could be asked of students in relation to teachers. This issue of intergenerational communications and sensitivity is often forgotten as teachers and students struggle with the everyday problems that they face in schools. Popular culture provides a central if not crucial foundation for the lives of students. In not recognizing the importance of this, teachers may be missing some of the most important elements in a student's understanding of their own lives. Yet, it seems clear that an improvement in the level and breadth of communications cannot be achieved if there is not some mutual giving in all quarters. I am talking here about more than just a shared discourse. We need a shared language and that will require a profound shift in the ways in which culture is both seen and understood within learning environments.

I am suggesting that popular culture from television to music to films to video games and the Internet must be a part of all school curricula. I am not suggesting this because I want some courses added to the already burdensome number that students have to take. Rather, I am talking about the inclusion of popular culture in workshops and discussions. I am arguing for the importance of shared knowledge even as I also recognize how fundamentally difficult it is to create and sustain sharing through conventional forms of communications within school environments.

This brings me to the next point about context. Many of the models that we work with in the school system at all levels are based on assumptions about individual development, stages of growth, age, gender and background. There is no way of disengaging the complexity of these variables from the communicative process. Every one of these variables is at work during every conversation that we have. At the same

time, in order to make sense of the need to communicate, a variety of assumptions are made about cognition and human development that are in large measure based on popular notions of the human mind. These popular conceptions, irrespective of their scientific validity govern both sides of the conversation in schools. For example, there is the presumptive idea that simply speaking about a topic will result in 'some' comprehension. This presumes that there has been listening and it also presumes that there has been some remembering. Quite often, conversations are also about forgetting. So much information is exchanged when we speak to each other and so much is going on in our minds, that it is often impossible to concentrate, often difficult to specify what has been heard and what hasn't. For a conversation to be truly dialogical, we have to recognize these weaknesses and build on the elements that do work. This presumes a context of nurture and personal attention that our present structure and its economic base, the way schools are funded and why, hinders if not undermines.

As must now be clear, I am less than convinced that educational institutions have been designed to handle the essentially personal nature of the learning experience. My discussion so far has centered on the gap between the private world that we all occupy and the public spaces within which we communicate. The word gaps provides me with many useful metaphors. We would not find it necessary to communicate with each other if there were no gaps. We would certainly not do any significant research if the gaps between present knowledge and future knowledge were easy to bridge. The social context of information and the ways in which information circulates could easily move from data to knowledge, if there were not so many mediators between information and understanding. Gaps are about mediators and this then adds another crucial element to the explanation of context within the educational system. If the cognitive model that we have of learning is limited to what can be validated empirically and to the realization of expectations and close approximation of anticipated results, then it is likely that we will find it very difficult to succeed. Mediation suggests that many different and unrelated elements may be working together to separate people from each other. It is when we recognize both the layers and what differentiates them, that we will be able to work on rebuilding the communicative space within the school system.

I have mentioned cognitive paradigms and as we know, models of mind and models of human practice are crucial to most discussions of learning. Since I work in an institution that is dedicated to creative work and exploration, it might be useful to evaluate the underlying assumptions that govern the way students are taught at Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design. There is a very strong emphasis at the Institute on studio courses. There is also a tradition of separating the academic courses from the practical courses which tend to be focused on materials and on projects. This separation, which also exists in engineering and in the computer sciences, ends up marginalizing theoretical and historical thinking. There is a long tradition of teaching and mentorship that is at the root of the studio approach. One of the most important aspects is the assumption that budding artists must be taught by professional practitioners. There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach. It can however lead to narrowness and most importantly to a model of mind that separates and compartmentalizes learning. So, only certain things can happen in a class that is 'practical' in orientation. Richer forms of discourse, those that might reveal many different layers of intellectual thought, are frowned upon. The 'object' in a sense, becomes the primary focus. In fact, students in their fourth year spend a great deal of their time working on their graduation projects. They see academic courses as an interference to their creativity and often delay taking the courses until their fifth year. Academic inquiry becomes an add-on. Imagination and intellect are divided and seen as antagonistic to each other. The pressure to stay with these flawed strategies to learning comes as much from faculty as it does from students.

In reality, the impact of these divisions is that they highlight the lack of contact between many educational institutions and the ongoing developments in cognitive theory and learning. The most recent answer to many of these dilemmas has been to refocus the energies of teachers on the outcomes of their classes. This is another way of saying, irrespective of the many contradictions, that by structuring your classes to fit into an 'outcomes' approach, you are likely able to anticipate the results of the pedagogical process that you are engaged in. At a minimum, this seems to make course outlines more relevant to what is taught. But, it is an illusion. The reality of classroom practice (as well

as studio-oriented courses) is that it is not possible to anticipate how the interaction will turn out. Information that is more precise does not necessarily mean learning that is more precise.

Context. The introspective nature of this paper is a reflection of my own frustrations with the slow pace of change. I recognize the many hurdles that those of us who have dedicated ourselves to education face. I believe that the creative models now available to educators, as well as the impact of Internet technologies will shift the balance of power to students. I look forward to the moment when first year students entering a university are not lumped together in large classrooms. I keep hoping that the context for change will accelerate as we learn more about the human mind and the extraordinary ability that students have, to learn in the face of obstacles that are often hard to overcome. I look forward to the joining of educators from different disciplines so that engineers can learn from artists and artists can learn from social scientists and so on. All of this will only happen if we can address the structure and context of our schools and think in terms of ecologies, environments, balance and holism.