ENGLISH

MODULE A Requirements

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<u>The Module: Comparative Study of Texts and Contexts</u>

This module requires students to compare texts in order to explore them in relation to their contexts. It develops students' understanding of the effects of context and questions of value.

Each elective in this module requires the study of groups of texts which are to be selected from a prescribed text list. These texts may be in different forms or media.

Students examine ways in which social, cultural and historical context influences aspects of texts, or the ways in which changes in context lead to changed values being reflected in texts. This includes study and use of the language of texts, consideration of purposes and audiences, and analysis of the content, values and attitudes conveyed through a range of readings.

Students develop a range of imaginative, interpretive and analytical compositions that relate to the comparative study of texts and context. These compositions may be realised in a variety of forms and media.

<u>Elective: Intertextual Connections</u>

In this elective, students compare texts in order to develop their understanding of the effects of context, purpose and audience on the shaping of meaning. Through exploring the intertextual connections between a pair of texts, students examine the ways in which different social, cultural and historical contexts can influence the composer's choice of language forms and features and the ideas, values and attitudes conveyed in each text. In their responding and composing, students consider how the implicit and explicit relationship between the texts can deepen our understanding of the values, significance and context of each.

<u>Elective: Intertextual Perspectives</u>

In this elective, students compare the content and perspectives in a pair of texts in order to develop their understanding of the effects of context, purpose and audience on the shaping of meaning. Through exploring and comparing perspectives offered by a pair of texts, students examine the ways in which particular social, cultural and historical contexts can influence the composer's choice of language forms and features and the ideas, values and attitudes conveyed in each text. In their responding and composing, students consider how the treatment of similar conten

Explanation of the Module

The key focus of Module A is the link between **the circumstances of the text's composition** and **the text itself**. This means that even though we're still interested in the main question of English – how does language shape meaning? – we're now also interested in what happens *before* that language is created. What is in the soil that the text takes root in? Module A can thus be reduced into a simple flowchart[1]:
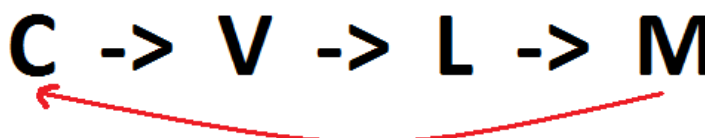
$$C \rightarrow V \rightarrow L \rightarrow M$$

The context of the text influences its values, which in turn influences the language of the text. This language then shapes meaning. The red arrow indicates that after the *original* text has been created, another composer then comes along and reimagines this meaning by the very same process according to their own, new circumstances.

As such, we're concerned about what is happening *before* the text comes into existence and what is happening when the composer sits down to compose.

The key sentence in the module (sentence one, paragraph three) tells us this in two ways: either by studying how context *influences* text or how text *reflects* context. This is the same relationship, but looked at from two different angles.

One easy method to understand this is by analogy to parents and children. Parents (composition) influence their children (text). For example, if I look at a pregnant light-skinned couple, I know their child will be light-skinned. Conversely, children (text) reflect their parents (composition). If I see a light-skinned child, I know his or her parents are also light-skinned. Texts works the same way. The circumstances of the text's composition (C and V) tell me about the text, whereas the text (L and M) reflects the circumstances of the composition.

But every *individual* text does this – so why do we need a *comparative* study?

A comparative study helps us draw contrasts and connections and changes more starkly. Looking at a single text, we don't know how much we can attribute to the context and values of the day. It could all be a big coincidence. But by doing it *comparatively*, we have a stronger basis for our answers. It's kind of like a 'control' in science experiments. Or think about it in terms of cause and effect. If the texts deal with the same themes (or one text

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[1] Hurlstone teachers hand out something very similar.

is based on another), but they are still *somehow* different then they must have a different 'cause'. What's the different cause? The circumstances of their composition.

What we 'learn' from the Comparative Study

- Meaning is created through the interaction between text and context.
- It also is influenced by the relationship and interpretation that develops between the text and responder.
- The audience needs to combine linguistic meaning with context to derive inferences about messaged being received (cultural codes help us to accurately decode a text). Accurate meaning of language can depend upon the context in which words, expressions and sentences are used.
- The social and cultural environment in which texts are produced influences its interpretation.
- Contextual assumptions contribute to coherence. Social and cultural contextual knowledge contributes to interpretation and meaning.
- In order for accurate meaning to be derived the responder must recognise cultural codes, queues and constitutive rules. Context also includes shared beliefs and assumptions.
- Language contextualises and is contextualised.
- Language does not just function in contextual situations but also forms context.
- The text/context relationship is not fixed. It is a continuous evolving process.
- Language has rules and systems that allows users to make continuous sense of their environment. Aspects of language influenced by context, rhythm, syntactic structure, diction all contribute to reflecting and constructing the context.
- Links between language and responders context influence the interpretation of a text.
- We are able to convey and interpret meaning because we use core features of language (phonology, syntax etc) to signal relationships between text and contextual knowledge.
- The knowledge signalled by these features (queues) is crucial to the accurate inferencing of meaning.
- Language operates within a system of cultural beliefs and the relationship between text and context highlights that meanings are continuously adjusted. Text and context are interdependent in constructing meaning. The interactions between text and context are complex - there is no clear line between the two.
- Different contexts act upon the same text to give rise to diverse interpretations. Salient features of the textual genre are also influenced by the context:

- Genre acts as a frame to foreground the composers main purpose. Framing signifies the context. Shakespeare's language which is complex in meaning is defined by words, meanings and situations we are not familiar with. Being familiar with the context of a text allows the reader/responder to decide between multiple meanings which are appropriate and meaningful to them.

- Responders interact with the text and through text composers/responders interact with each other - allowing for a cyclical re-evaluation of both texts.

- Context and values influence how writers/directors compose a text and how responders construct meaning from a text.

- Social context affects the extend to which writers/directors compose a text and how responders construct meaning from a text.

- Social context affects the extent to which writers/directors/responders share common experiences and messages from a text

- Responders cultural context affects the fundamental beliefs and values that they bring to a reading of a text. Readers knowledge of a particular concept also effects their reading.

- A readers experience of a text is influenced by their own time and the social/historical determinants of the composer.

Text and Contextual Meaning

Like medium and genre, text and context are intimately related to each other. Text and context are like the old chicken and egg conundrum. You can't really have one without the other. The process of representation occurs in relation to a whole network of signs, in a context of systems of symbols together. The meaning of a story comes out of the relationship between text and context. Aspects of space and time form a context around a text. There is the time and space when the author wrote, and there are the repeated performative moments when readers engage the text. The reception of a text occurs within a context, within the many different spaces and times that a text is engaged.

The meaning of a story is related and experienced through and within text and context. M.M. Bakhtin explores this process in his book, The Dialogic Imagination. He discusses how the meaning of a given text is fostered by an open experience between the reader and the author of the text. The text has "an indeterminacy . . . a living contact with unfinished still-evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present)" of the reading experience (7). So, there is a reciprocated dialogue occurring between both parties involved across the text and the meaning comes out of this conversation.

Similarly, Roland Barthes has written many books exploring the ways a text can have meaning for its reader(s). In S/Z, he defines two types of text; writerly and readerly (4). Both of these terms apply to what a text in relation to the position of the reader. A writerly text can be rewritten in the act of reading. The reader is "the producer of the text." Meaning comes forth in the reading (4). A readerly text is one that is simply read and not rewritten. It is a "classic text" that is read (4). In his poetic

books, Roland Barthes and The Pleasure of the Text, Barthes attempts to give the reader writerly texts.

Like Bakhtin and Barthes, Arnold Berleant is also interested in studying one's contextual experience with an object rather than the interpretations of that object. In The Aesthetic Field, he looks to examine the process of experiencing a text itself. Likewise, Hayden White is concerned with the questions of how the form of a text means something for a reader. In his book The Content of the Form, he looks at the types of narratives we use and how these types, or genres, help us fill out the content of the story. The context of genre is a vital part of the medium of the text. Genre gives an intertextual framework to a narrative's elements that form the text.

In their article, "Reading Intertextually: Multiple Mediations and Critical Practice," Beverly Whitaker Long and Mary Susan Strine do an excellent job of delineating a process that they call intertextuality. Intertextuality is the process of drawing on one's experience with a myriad of texts and making connections between these various texts and the present text being experienced (468). It is the context of other texts that help us to experience a new text. This intertextual context with a text exists on a continuum between unique and universal. There are our own personal and unique experiences that we bring to bear and there are the more universal and critical dialogues found in other related and critical texts. One type of intertextuality is not necessarily more valid than the other, they both contextually add meaning to a text. Long and Strine illustrate how the process of experiencing a text necessitates that the audience brings an intertextuality to bear in order to understand the text being experienced. So, when we read a book, we bring our intertextual experiences of all the other books we have read to play with the current text itself, and from this playfulness we garner a deeper meaning of the text(s) involved. The stories I am examining and telling are related through texts and experienced in context. Bringing an intertextual awareness to bear will help to fully understand and explain these stories.

The nature of text

When we think of a **text**, we typically think of a stretch of language complete in itself and of some considerable extent: a business letter, a leaflet, a news report, a recipe, and so on. However, though this view of texts may be commonsensical, there appears to be a problem when we have to define units of language which consist of a single sentence, or even a single word, which are all the same experienced as texts because they fulfil the basic requirement of forming a meaningful whole in their own right. Typical examples of such small-scale texts are public notices like 'KEEP OFF THE GRASS', 'KEEP LEFT', 'KEEP OUT', 'DANGER', 'RAMP AHEAD', 'SLOW', and 'EXIT'.

It is obvious that these minimal texts are meaningful in themselves, and therefore do not need a particular structural patterning with other language units. In other words, they are complete in terms of communicative meaning. So, if the meaningfulness of texts does not depend on their linguistic size, what else does it depend on?

Consider the road sign 'RAMP AHEAD'. When you are driving a car and see this sign, you interpret it as a warning that there will be a small hump on the road ahead of you and that it is therefore wise to slow down when you drive over it. From this it follows that you recognize a piece of language as a text, not because of its length, but because of its location in a particular context. And if you are familiar with the text in that context, you know what the message is intended to be.

But now suppose you see the same road sign in the collection of a souvenir-hunter! Of course, you still know the original meaning

of the sign, but because of its dissociation from its ordinary context of traffic control, you are no longer able to act on its original intention. Furthermore, prompted by its alien situational context, you might be tempted to think up some odd meaning for the otherwise familiar sign, particularly when you see it in relation to other 'souvenirs' in the collection. (Needless to say, this is probably exactly what the souvenir-hunter wants you to do.) From this example of alienation of context we can then conclude that, for the expression of its meaning, a text is dependent on its use in an appropriate context.

The nature of discourse

We may go even further and assert that the meaning of a text does not come into being until it is actively employed in a context of use. This process of activation of a text by relating it to a context of use is what we call **discourse**. To put it differently, this contextualization of a text is actually the reader's (and in the case of spoken text, the hearer's) reconstruction of the writer's (or speaker's) intended message, that is, his or her communicative act or discourse. In these terms, the text is the observable product of the writer's or speaker's discourse, which in turn must be seen as the process that has created it. Clearly, the observability of a text is a matter of degree: for example, it may be in some written form, or in the form of a sound recording, or it may be unrecorded speech. But in whatever form it comes, a reader (or hearer) will search the text for cues or signals that may help to reconstruct the writer's (or speaker's) discourse. However, just because he or she is engaged in a process of reconstruction, it is always possible that the reader (or hearer) infers a different discourse from the text than the one the writer (or speaker) had intended. Therefore, one might also say that the inference of discourse meaning is largely a matter of negotiation between writer (speaker) and reader (hearer) in a contextualized social interaction.

So we can suggest that a text can be realized by any piece of language as long as it is found to record a meaningful discourse when it is related to a suitable context of use.

Textual and contextual meaning

At this point, it will have become clear that in order to derive a discourse from a text we have to explore two different sites of meaning: on the one hand, the text's intrinsic linguistic or formal properties (its sounds, typography, vocabulary, grammar, and so on) and on the other hand, the extrinsic contextual factors which are taken to affect its linguistic meaning. These two interacting sites of meaning are the concern of two fields of study: **semantics** is the study of formal meanings as they are encoded in the language of texts, that is, independent of writers (speakers) and readers (hearers) set in a particular context, while **pragmatics** is concerned with the meaning of language in discourse, that is, when it is used in an appropriate context to achieve particular aims. Pragmatic meaning is not, we should note, an alternative to semantic meaning, but complementary to it, because it is inferred from the interplay of semantic meaning with context.

The notion of **context** has already been introduced, if somewhat informally, in the previous chapters. We now need to be more precise. It will be recalled that we distinguished two kinds of context: an internal linguistic context built up by the language patterns inside the text, and an external non-linguistic context drawing us to ideas and experiences in the world outside the text. The latter is a very complex notion because it may include any number of text-external features influencing the interpretation of a discourse. Perhaps we can make the notion more manageable by specifying the following components (obviously, the list is by no means complete):

1 the text type, or genre (for example, an election poster, a recipe, a sermon)
2 its topic, purpose, and function
3 the immediate temporary and physical setting of the text
4 the text's wider social, cultural, and historical setting
5 the identities, knowledge, emotions, abilities, beliefs, and assumptions of the writer (speaker) and reader (hearer)
6 the relationships holding between the writer (speaker) and reader (hearer)
7 the association with other similar or related text types (intertextuality)