

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION SETTINGS

The Six Kinds of Context

Lee McGaan

We all know that speaking the same words in one location may not produce the same result as if they are spoken somewhere else. In most settings jokes are acceptable and they will get a laugh, but not at a funeral. Part of being "rhetorically sensitive" is knowing what kinds of messages are appropriate in which settings and being able to anticipate how your messages will be interpreted by others in various settings.

The most important influence on **WHAT IS APPROPRIATE** and **HOW MESSAGES ARE INTERPRETED** is context. You can better understand communication events by becoming aware of the six kinds of context. All 6 kinds of context are present for EVERY act of communication; but in different settings one or another may become more important.

PHYSICAL CONTEXT: includes the material objects surrounding the communication event and any other features of the natural world that influence communication. (e.g. furniture and how it is arranged, size of the room, colors, temperature, time of day, etc.)

INNER CONTEXT: includes all feelings, thoughts, sensations, and emotions going on inside of the source or receiver which may influence how they act or interpret events. (e.g. hungry, sleepy, angry, happy, impatient, nauseous, etc.)

SYMBOLIC CONTEXT: includes all messages (primarily words) which occur before or after a communication event and which influence source or receiver in their actions or understandings of the event. (e.g. previous discussions (words we've said) in this class influence how you understand this handout.)

RELATIONAL CONTEXT: the relationship between the sender and the receiver(s) of a message. (e.g. father-son, student-teacher, expert-layman, friend-friend, etc.)

SITUATIONAL CONTEXT: what the people who are communicating think of as (label) the event they are involved in -- what we call the act we are engaged in. (e.g. having class, being on a date, studying, playing a game, helping a friend with a problem, etc.)

CULTURAL CONTEXT: The rules and patterns of communication that are given by (learned from) our culture and which differ from other cultures. (e.g. American, Japanese, British, etc.) Some people have suggested that within the U.S. there are sub-cultures. (e.g. Hispanic, Southern, rural-Midwest, urban gang, etc.)

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