



**ESREA Access, Learning Careers and Identities Network
2-4 November 2017 University Rennes 2, Rennes, France**

**Perspectives on context:
metaphors, images, and definitions**

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«Context» appears in different disciplines and theoretical approaches. A general, universal definition is not possible, and contradictory with the notion itself of contextuality.

Multiplicity, vagueness and implicitness are constitutive of it (Wittgenstein).

Nonetheless, it is a powerful theoretical and heuristic tool when we try to cope with issues of meaning, communicating, interpreting and knowing. **Learning is such an activity.**

Dictionary.com:

1. The **parts of a written or spoken statement** that **precede or follow** a specific word or passage, usually **influencing** its meaning or effect: *You have misinterpreted my remark because you took it out of context.*
2. The set of circumstances or facts that **surround** a particular event, situation, etc.
3. *Mycology.* the fleshy fibrous body of the pileus in mushrooms.

Merriam-Webster:

1. The parts of a discourse that **surround** a word or passage and can **throw light on its meaning**
2. The **interrelated conditions** in which something exists or occurs: ENVIRONMENT, SETTING the historical *context* of the war

Cambridge:

The situation within which something exists or happens, and that can help explain it:

- *This small battle is very important in the context of Scottish history.*
- *He thinks smacking is OK in the context of a happy family.*
- *His remarks were very tasteless in the context of a memorial service.*

Context can refer to parts and/or the whole surrounding a *focal event* - interpreted as a communicative event - that needs **appropriate interpretation**.

Without a focal event (text, content, object), there is no context (and vice-versa): the relationship text/context is constitutive. And both are in relation to an interpreting individual/community. Who decides the **pertinent differences**?

Peirce's semiotics: «the science of relationships between signs and their interpreters» (Morris).

The context of context

How do we use this word, in discourse, and for what? What does it do to us?

When is it used? In which context(s)?

How did we learn about context? Learning biographies are themselves contexts for present learning.

What can we learn, during this conference, about the different meanings and connotations of context in our research?

Different perspectives

Context is used to bring attention to what precedes, follows, surrounds learning, often to claim for relativism, or to foster the analysis of circumstances and determinants of learning.

Playing with the idea of context, exploring its etymology, our imagination, and narratives, we can develop a generative theory, interrogating our (different) presuppositions.

A four-fold analysis of a strange object

1. Experience = context-as-senses
2. Representation = context-as-image
3. Theory = context-as-proposition
4. Practice = context-as-action

(re-elaborated from Co-operative inquiry, John Heron, 1996)

1. Experience = context-as-senses

“the very way in which living organisms are connected with and are part of reality” (Biesta - on Dewey -, 2009)

What is “context”, **here and now**, for each of us and for us as a community?

Is it outside or inside? Given or built?

The forgotten role of the body and relationships

“Atmosphere” - multiple, vague and elusive

2. Representation = context-as-image

How do we imagine the context?

As fixed, dynamic, fluid, layered, closed, open, thick, evanescent...

as “real”? “Out there”? Constraining or sustaining us?

If it was an image, a metaphor, a story, a sound, a smell, a flavor...



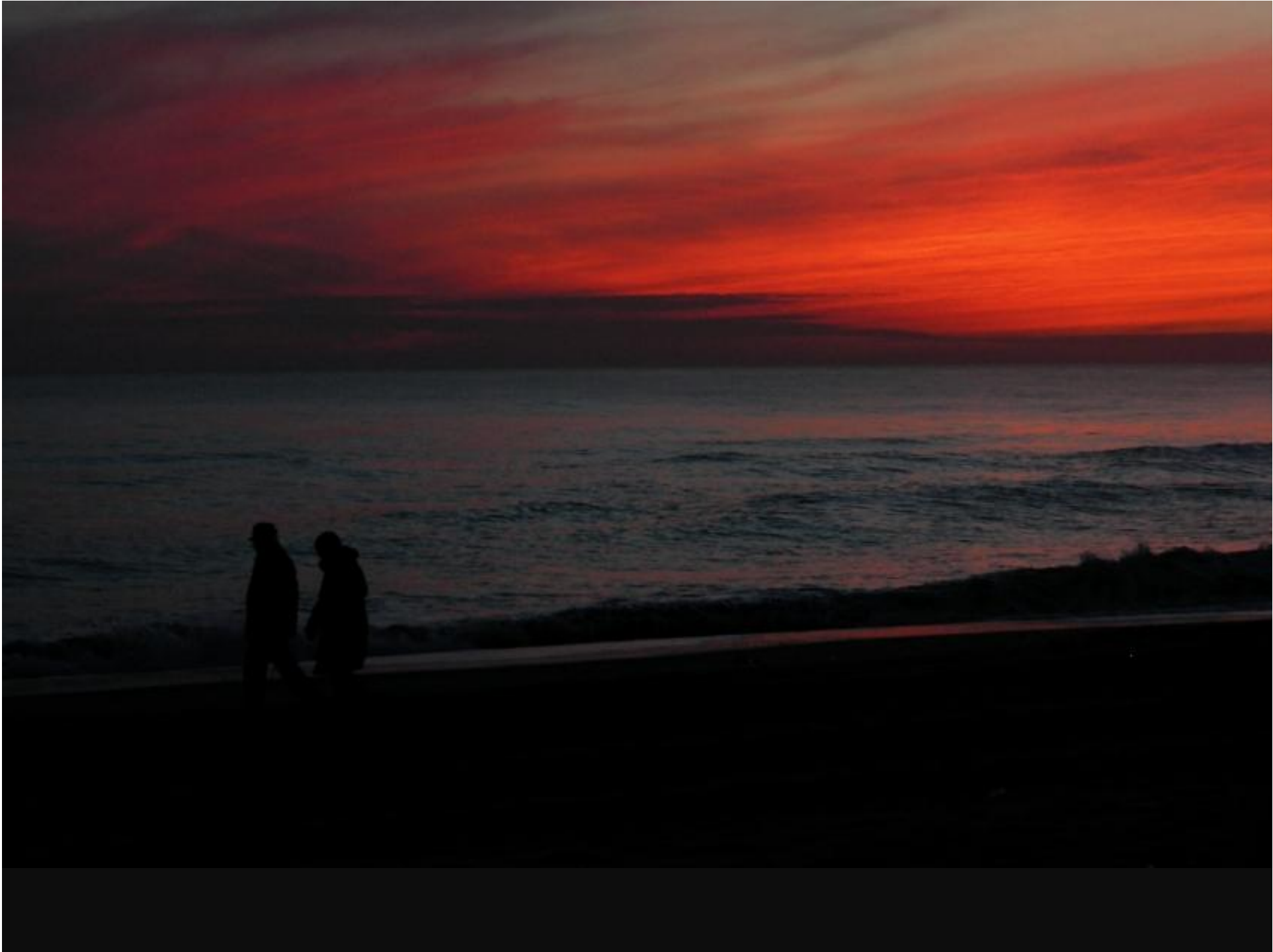












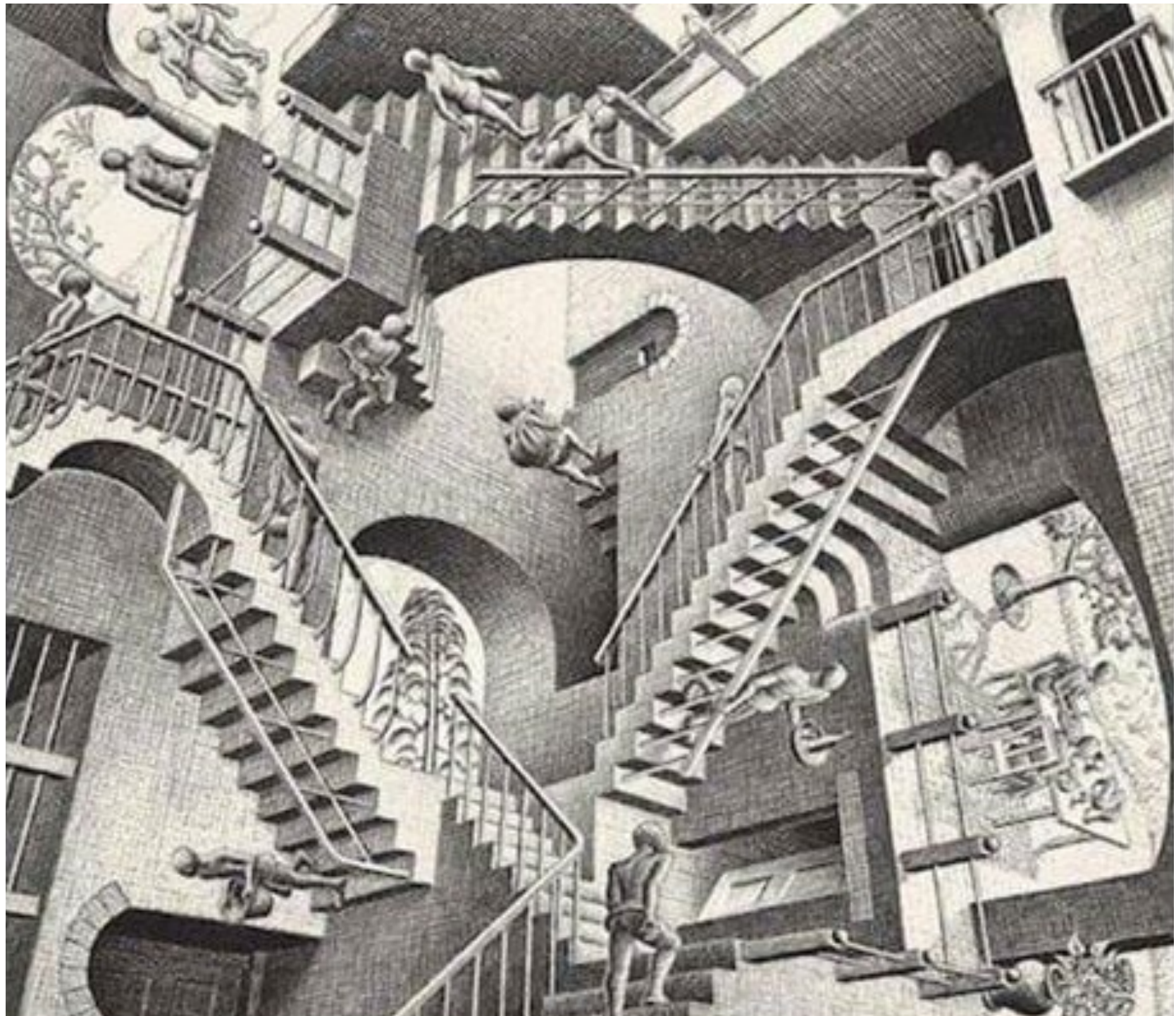


moodboard



















Samramansang [Kang Ikjoong]
“All things and phenomena of the universe”



3. Theory = context-as-proposition

Contexere "to weave together" from *cum* "with, together" and *texere* "to weave, to make". Its root ***teks-** "to weave" also means "to fabricate"

Polarities – “cybernetic complementarities” (Keeney),
“disorienting dilemmas” (Mezirow) - of context:

- Text/context
- Material/immaterial
- Surrounding/inside
- Fixed/mobile
- Presuppositions/results
- Intentional (organized)/happening (co-evolving)
- Etc.

The need to specify

Verbal context = text or speech surrounding an expression and influencing its interpretation.

Analysis of **discourse structures**.

Social context = the influence of social variables (class, gender, age, ethnicity, etc.), social identity as built in language, and/or material dimensions.

Local context (of communication) = the current situation, appropriateness of language, results.

And what about “**learning context**”?

Contextualism as a philosophy

Pragmatism – learning as mobile and relational, always connected with other events «in the same context»

Relativism - the validity of discourses and theories of/around learning is related to the historical, linguistic, cultural context where they are born, developed and used

Epistemic framing – a belief is legitimated by the context/implicit presuppositions

Localism – knowing does not exist in any abstract and universal way, but it is historical, situated, hence «perspective» and «present»

Theoretical perspectives

Materialist/structural: physical dimension, structures, discourse (objectivation)

Constructivist/symbolic: meaning, frameworks, a system of representations (subjectivation)

Reflexive/recursive: observer, strange loops, paradoxes, dilemmas

Enactive/co-evolutionary: observer community, action, cooperation

Systems theory (Bateson)

In the world of communication, nothing has meaning in absence of a **difference**.

The capacity to take pieces of information from a context and put them in a new frame, of play, imagination, illustration, etc. is an incredibly important aspect of mental activity.

Transcontextual syndrome

When we learn (learning I), we always learn (also) about the context of learning, and can occasionally transform them (learning II and III). “Is it allowed to think?”

Complexity

Complexity offers a view of the world as composed of multiple, nested, and open dynamic, self-organising systems that show coherence through differentiation (Haggis, 2009).

It connects learning to living together, communicating and knowing in observer communities.

It overcomes the implicitly dualistic approaches of “sociomaterialism”, “psychosocial perspectives”, etc.

The context of learning is **collective, biological** (structural determinism), **layered** and **organic**.

4. Practice = context-as-action

“If you want to see, learn how to act”

“Act always in order to increase possibilities”

(von Foerster)

Contextualizing: gestures and prosody (Gumperz), questioning, “unveil the obvious”, metacommunication

Context crossing: multiple realities require a capacity to enter/exit frameworks and universes, abductive thinking

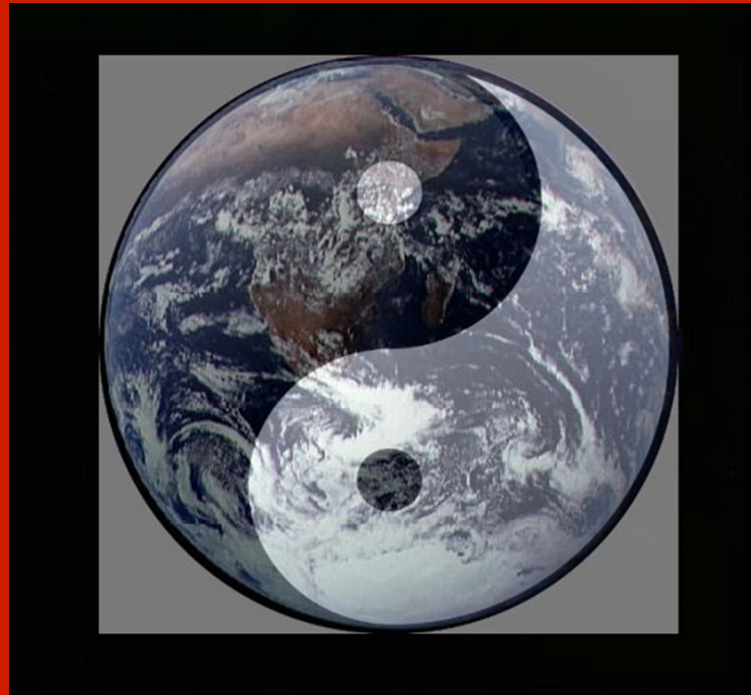
Drawing boundaries and distinctions (permeable, flexible)

Using/reading context markers in creative ways

Playing: with opposites and dilemmas, in extra-ordinary, de-contextualized, and/or “sacred” spaces

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Thank you