Teaching context in Language A

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The International Baccalaureate Language A course teaches rigorous analytical skills and helps to develop students' thoughtful personal responses to varied texts both in writing and orally. Recently, Language A has placed increasing emphasis on the importance of context, which includes the social and historical forces that shape discourse. This article surveys critical perspectives on both "reader-response" teaching approaches and those that foreground context. Then, drawing on research with IB Diploma Programme students in the US and Japan, the article suggests that immediate or "gut" reactions to texts provide an important base for greater understanding of context. While IB students sometimes lack specific historical and cultural background knowledge about particular texts, they have important experience with the often fluid and contested nature of culture, experience that can enrich their development as reflective, inquiring readers.

INTRODUCTION

The IB Language A course offers the intensive study of diverse texts and genres, including world literature in translation and non-print media, to upper-level high school students at over 2,300 schools worldwide. The most recent programme guides to Language A, while not diminishing the importance of formal analysis, place increased emphasis on exploring "the nature and meaning of art through an understanding of its social, cultural or historical context and the role of the reader or audience's response to the text in generating meaning" (IB, 2011, p. 15). Understanding context might include how cultural norms, ethnic or national identity, and socio-economic forces—as well as literary conventions and traditions—contribute to meaning.

The task facing Language A instructors—to engage students' personal response and responsibly consider context, without shirking attention to close textual analysis—is necessarily complex. Purely "reader-response" teaching approaches, those that focus on students' thoughts and feelings as they read, risk glossing over historical or socio-economic differences among groups and individuals represented in literature. In addition, when students lack essential information about historical events or cultural terms and concepts, their comprehension can be set adrift. On the other hand, since adolescent students especially are drawn to texts that have an immediate sense of personal relevance to them, imported outside information might depersonalize their reading experience and diminish their level of interest. Imposed context knowledge could even have the effect of abruptly discrediting students' immediate responses to a text, alienating them from the text under study, and leaving them less trusting of their personal reactions in the future.

This considerable pedagogical challenge to help students be both personally engaged and informed about context can be met most effectively by considering individual response and context, not as distinct approaches to deciphering texts, but as converging pathways leading toward greater intercultural understanding. When students react to characters and situations in a text, they are also often responding either intuitively or consciously to the cultural and historical tensions characters experience. Language A instructors guide students to develop these connections between the personal and contextual by exploring with them the multiple influences and pressures that shape individual lives and impact many forms of discourse. In so doing, teachers support the IB's conception of "open-minded" students

as described in the learner profile: "They understand and appreciate their own cultures and personal histories, and are open to the perspectives, values and traditions of other individuals and communities" (IB, 2009, p. 5).

In what follows, I outline perspectives from scholars and IB students in the debate between reader-response teaching approaches and those that stress the necessity of context. Drawing on my research with IB students, I then suggest that immediate or "gut" reactions to texts, even if they are in some ways limited or incomplete, often create fertile ground on which to grow greater understanding of context. The written responses I collected, as well as my interviews, reveal that, while IB students sometimes lack specific historical and cultural background knowledge about particular texts, they have important experience with the often fluid and contested nature of culture, experience that can enrich their development as reflective, inquiring readers.

READER RESPONSE VS. CONTEXT

Reader-response theory foregrounds the subjective reactions of individual readers and embraces plurality of interpretation. Literary analysis involves the description of readers' experiences as they absorb a text. Indeed, reader-response proponents might say that no text exists outside of a reader's interpretation of it. Students' personal reactions, therefore, are crucial and necessary for their growth as proficient readers. Reader-response theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1978) argued that both the "efferent"—the intellectual responses that readers carry away from the text—and the "aesthetic"—the immediate, lived experience of reading—are mutually reinforcing. Wilhelm (2008), drawing on Rosenblatt, observed that students become more connective and reflective readers once they have been able to express their feelings about a text. Effective teachers nurture an inclusive atmosphere in their classroom; they create an interpretive community in which the students' own life experiences are positioned in relationship to written texts (Fish, 1980; Desai, 1997; Encisco, 2001). Reader-response oriented perspectives are connected to the broader idea that we develop understanding best by applying new knowledge to existing schema; we learn with and against what we already know (Anderson, 1994). Students' lived experiences, rather than external context knowledge, should have first priority, according to proponents of reader response.

If, on the other hand, a teacher presents knowledge about the author or historical context as an explanatory key, students may not fully experience the interrelated emotional and intellectual responses that create rich, engaged reading experiences. Context information can potentially limit students' sense of personal investment and interest as readers. Applebee (1996) argued that hastily providing information about cultural traditions or ethnic history might lead to what he terms "knowledge-out-of-context", which detracts from student engagement and openness to multicultural literature. Instead, he posited that a course should provide its own context for learning; thematic relationships among class texts provide a more organic and meaningful framework for students to build on and learn from. Reader-response oriented classrooms do not succumb to pure impressionism or free association, but reading literature moves beyond decoding texts and analysing formal structures, or placing works of literature within neatly delineated historical periods or "isms". As DeBlase (2005) observed, "When classroom discourse does not accommodate students' narratives, then the enacted pedagogy is likely to move … to an authorial reading of literature, which turns the attention of the reader to recognizing literary codes and conventions" (p. 15). These categorizations can lead students to fall into the misguided belief, the "essentialist trap", that writers and texts reflect all of the characteristics of a particular culture (Fail, 2011).

Critics of a reader-response approach in the classroom are wary of giving free reign to students' personal reactions to narratives without providing them proper grounding. Dong (2005a, b) raised concerns about students focusing too narrowly on their personal responses to multicultural texts since this may diminish consideration of cultural differences. Consequently, some believe that reader-response pedagogy falls short in addressing questions about social justice. Beach (1997) argued that, while students might respond to examples of personal prejudice or intolerance in literary texts, they are not on their own likely to consider the deeper structural forces that underpin social and economic inequity. Smith (1997) critiqued a "Pedagogy of Personal Experience", warning that students tend to over-identify with characters, thus falsely equalizing all of human experience. This is what Richard Penniman (2009) called the "multicultural mistake" of universalism. Consequently, students' sometimes uncritical sense of familiarity with characters and situations in a text inhibits cross-cultural understanding. Furthermore, as Carey-Webb (2001) commented, reader-response pedagogy can romanticize the uniqueness of an individual reader's perspective. Louie (2005) cautioned against students' inclination "to interpret … texts on the basis of their self-centered world view and experiences" (p. 567). Critics of reader-response are all questioning, in various ways, the value of studying

multicultural literature when students simply use texts to affirm their own experiences, validate uncritically examined ideas, or fuel stereotyped perceptions.

STUDENT VIEWS ON THE VALUE OF CONTEXT

What do student themselves think about the role of context? How does context knowledge or the lack of it affect reading engagement and comprehension? In order to better understand the significance of context knowledge for IB Language A students and to learn their thoughts about how context should best be taught, I gathered written responses from approximately 30 eleventh-grade students at each of three IB World Schools and conducted follow-up interviews with eight randomly chosen students at each school. This research, which took place between May and December of 2011, was conducted at the Harrisburg Academy, a private school in Pennsylvania; North Hagerstown High School, a large public school in a small Maryland city; and Yokohama International School, a private K–12 school in Japan. These three schools were chosen because they reflect the range of socio-economic backgrounds and varied levels of intercultural experience of students at schools with IB programmes. Students were given stories to read by US writers: "Children of Loneliness" by Anzia Yezierska, first published in 1923, and "Everyday Use", first published in 1973, by Alice Walker. Students were not provided any background or introduction to the stories so as not to prejudice their responses. These particular stories were chosen because they portray parent–child tensions to which most students in my experience could relate, and at the same time, each has a distinct context that would likely be unfamiliar to the students. In their written responses, students briefly explained what interested them about the stories and described the extent of their knowledge about the cultural context of each story, specifically the tradition of Jewish scholarship and Jewish immigration to the US for "Children of Loneliness", and Black Nationalism or "black power" for "Everyday Use". The individual follow-up interviews provided students with an opportunity to elaborate on their written responses. The student writing was coded and the codes grouped according to emerging themes. (All references to specific students below use pseudonyms.)

"Children of Loneliness" depicts a second-generation Jewish-American, Rachel, who returns to live with her parents on the Lower East Side of New York after graduating from Cornell University. The story dramatizes Rachel's discomfort, even disgust with, her parents' Old World ways, particularly with what she sees as their uncouth eating habits. Rachel seeks a more refined, fully Americanized life but remains somewhat alienated from mainstream culture. Despite Rachel's resentment toward her parents, she also finds a sense of comfort and familiarity at home, particularly in the cadences of religious texts that her father studies devotedly. "Everyday Use" describes the visit of a young woman, Dee, to the poor, rural Georgia community where she grew up. Although Dee was eager to leave her mother and sister Maggie to pursue her education, she is now very interested in the cultural artefacts of her provincial childhood, such as quilts and a butter churn. She regards these items as if they are museum pieces or decorative ornaments rather than having practical use. "Everyday Use", told from her mother's perspective, also reveals that Dee has adopted a Swahili name and, moreover, an interest in her distant, African heritage.

None of the students who submitted written responses had read either story before, and they had very limited prior knowledge about setting or cultural context. Several students at all three schools were confused about when "Children of Loneliness" was set and mistakenly thought the characters in the story had fled the Holocaust, when in fact the story is set at the turn of the twentieth-century. Only a very few students commented on the role of religious scholarship for Jewish immigrants and their remarks were quite broad. For example, one student wrote, "All [Jews] study for bar-bat mitzvah; many continue to study throughout life." For "Everyday Use", most students, but not surprisingly less so at Yokohama International School, had some knowledge of US civil rights history, and several were able to distinguish Black Nationalism from the philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr. However, only a very few, either in their written responses or in the follow-up interview, without prompting saw the relevance of Black Nationalism to Walker's story.

Although students possessed scant prior context knowledge, they clearly appreciated the importance of historical background. One Harrisburg Academy student, for example, commented that providing context about Black Nationalism would help readers better understand Dee's zealousness and newfound interest in cultural artefacts and heritage. Another student stated, "Background knowledge helps us understand where characters are coming from and understand where Dee is coming from on more levels. This would make her more of a three dimensional character." Another student, after reading "Children of Loneliness", admitted that her lack of knowledge about the tradition of Talmudic scholarship in Jewish life might have led her to judge Rachel's father too harshly. In general, students affirmed

the value of teachers sharing contextual information so that, as one student put it, they could "identify with the subtleties of the text".

Students also described how the stories themselves taught context. Several North Hagerstown High School students said that "Everyday Use" presented a perspective on African-American history to which they had little prior exposure. As one student stated:

In school we go into depth into the civil rights movement. We only glaze over black power. But after reading [the story], I feel it is an issue that needs to be discussed further. In history, we never hear about people changing names or other steps to remove themselves from their ancestors. The only way that we can fully understand the civil rights movement is to learn all sides of the story. This story was the other side that we never hear.

Another commented that "Everyday Use" provides a "fresh perspective" on Black Nationalism: "We don't hear about the everyday citizens, the people the civil rights leaders were fighting for." The story led another student to think about cultural identity as actively chosen, rather than merely inherited, an idea that shaped not only Black Nationalism but the wider "ethnic revival" movement in the US: "I never came across anyone who did not appreciate his or her original heritage but tried to have nationalistic or cultural pride through things that are not part of his or her heritage."

At the same time as students recognized how historical and cultural forces significantly impact literature, they also voiced reservations about frontloading context knowledge. Nick, a North Hagerstown High School student, commented that before students read a text, the teacher should "give basic information", but he "wouldn't have the teacher tell you everything". He acknowledged that teachers should help students "get in the mindset" of the story. From there, however, they can find their "own way of looking at the text", according to Nick. If a student obviously misreads, the teacher can step in, but too much intervention and "the students can't find out their own way of looking at the thing"; then, as he said, "You would lose the freedom to think your own thoughts." Yokohama International School student Chris strongly believed in the idea that readers should experience an unmediated relationship with literary texts. An avid reader of fantasy/science-fiction literature, he deliberately approaches new stories with a "blank slate" so he won't blend his understanding or appreciation with other texts that he has read. He did acknowledge the value of teachers providing context, but not so much that reading becomes a "purely academic pursuit". In addition, several students commented that when teachers provide information about the cultural background of a text, they might project some kind of bias—a skewed perspective about a particular group of people, for example—that gets in the way of students' personal encounter with the text.

CONTEXT AND INTERCULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Students saw little value in teachers deferring information that would help clarify their reading comprehension, and they were clearly interested in the wider forces that affect characters' attitudes and choices. On the other hand, students voiced concern about context being imposed as an interpretative structure that blocks their personal engagement. When teachers heavily frontload or abruptly jump in with external context information, they risk denying students the psychological or emotional hook that pulls them forward toward critical engagement and empathy with the experiences of others. Furthermore, if the cultural context of a narrative is presented as *the* legitimate framework on which to build their understanding of the narrative, students may feel a limited sense of what is important for them to know and be interested in. Unfortunately, they might also use the presented context knowledge as a way to explain everything about a text. On the other hand, if students have occasions to form their own questions and areas of inquiry, they can create a personal framework of understanding, one that gives them a greater sense of ownership in their reading experience and that can spark their interest in learning more about context.

Yokohama International School student Kim's response to "Children of Loneliness" serves to illustrate how personal response can be a touchstone for consideration of context. In our interview, Kim observed that, like Rachel, she could not remain indefinitely in the culture that in many ways is most familiar and comforting to her. Rachel is now unable to stay at home amidst what she feels are her parents' stultifying traditions and habits; Kim, who is fully fluent in Japanese and intimately knowledgeable about the nation's culture, believes that she can never fully be rooted in Japan because she is white. Similarly, Rachel feels subtly excluded from the wider American culture, despite having earned a college degree from a prestigious institution. Although Kim stated that individually Japanese people are often welcoming to outsiders, on the whole, the nation, as Kim sees it, does not truly accept foreigners. Kim understands Japanese culture better than she does any other, but like Rachel, she feels that at some point she will "have to leave". While Kim's feeling that she must depart Japan one day will likely not create the same financial and personal vulnerabilities that Rachel will encounter by leaving the Lower East Side,

her personal response links her with Rachel's feeling of indeterminacy. Both Kim and Rachel experience conflicting cultural allegiances and seemingly intractable forms of exclusion. Neither fully belongs in any single culture. This shared feeling between student and character creates a pathway for Kim to learn more about cultural context—in particular, the dilemmas faced by second-generation Jewish Americans like Rachel caught between the Old and New World, living in a nation that both celebrated the immigrant as the "true American" and at the same time was moving toward immigration quotas.

Similar to Kim, the response of Naomi, a North Hagerstown High School student, to "Everyday Use" might not seem at first directly or specifically relevant to the story but is actually intuitively responsive to context and creates a springboard for further learning. Of "Everyday Use", Naomi observes, "I can understand feeling inferior to an older sibling. I have four older siblings. Dee acts as if she is better than her own family and it makes for an interesting story." This comment appears to be rather generic and perhaps exemplifies Penniman's "multicultural mistake of universalism". While "Everyday Use" dramatizes a fraught relationship between sisters, the story has much more culturally specific dimensions that shape meaning. The sibling rivalry Naomi touches on in her response seems to minimize the story's cultural situatedness, instead emphasizing a more universal theme.

While Naomi's reaction to "Everyday Use" could be seen as evidence for her being on the wrong track and in need of redirection by the teacher, such abrupt intervention might thwart the inquiry that can make context more integral to Naomi's reading experience. As I further questioned Naomi about her response to the story as well as her own bicultural background, she indirectly suggested how such inquiry could be pursued:

[The story] makes me curious about my father's family and how they view him because he comes from a poor Nicaraguan family and became generally successful. The story intrigues me to think of family relationships when there is room to be envious.

Naomi's curiosity about her family history personalizes her response and moves her toward the story's interest in how cultural and class mobility during the later civil rights era—significantly affected by education level—affected family relationships.

Teachers can serve students like Kim and Naomi by using a variety of strategies to build bridges between personal response and context. For example, after reading a text, students could generate a list of unanswered or unresolved questions about culture and history to address in subsequent class discussions or presentations. Alternatively, students could write creative dialogues between themselves and characters in which they discuss shared feelings and experiences. This could lead to papers analysing or further imaginatively exploring the social norms or cultural pressures that contribute to their feelings and those of literary characters. Whatever teaching methods are used, it is vital that student responses are not just acknowledged but engaged in a sustained way. At the same time, close reading skills remain crucially important, not only as a way to access meaning in a text but as a gateway to understanding context. Widdowson (2004) describes how relevant interpretations "conjoin what is actually said in the text with existing assumptions in the context and draw a meaning from the conjunction, a contextual effect, which could not be inferred from text or context on their own" (p. 45). In other words, context does not exist in a separate sphere from the text; rather, it lives within the text itself. The instructor's goal, therefore, is not to move students away from an intensive focus on textual features or from a seemingly reductive personal response toward knowledge of the culturally and historically issues surrounding a text, but to help them understand how conflicts and yearnings expressed within texts—and in students' lives—are always embedded in culture and history.

"The instructor's goal, therefore, is not to move students away from an intensive focus on textual features or from a seemingly reductive personal response toward knowledge of the culturally and historically issues surrounding a text, but to help them understand how conflicts and yearnings expressed within texts—and in students' lives—are always embedded in culture and history."

The interviews conducted for this study provided opportunities for in-depth analysis of individual responses, but these were not generalizable because the students were chosen randomly. Nevertheless, it is clear that for IB students like Kim and Naomi, culture is a web of multiple affiliations, rather than a sharply defined group membership rooted in timeless national, cultural, or religious values (Grimshaw &

Sears, 2008). The culture of students in Japan, the US and elsewhere emerges from often contested values within the multiple communities—home, neighbourhood, school, nation, virtual, etc.—that they inhabit. In the Language A classroom, then, the shared complexity of multicultural texts—narratives that portray multiple loyalties and cultural negotiations like "Children of Loneliness" and "Everyday Use"—*and* IB student readers is a vital point of connection from which to build empathy and insight across cultures, to help students achieve "an appreciation of cultural differences in perspective" (IB, n.d.). Further research by IB practitioners might consider student responses to texts that present the experiences of global nomads or that explore various forms of diaspora. Such texts implicitly challenge us to consider what it means to read for context when context runs across national boundaries. Language A provides many occasions and varied texts for students to explore the interconnections between text, context and their own, often transnational, lives.

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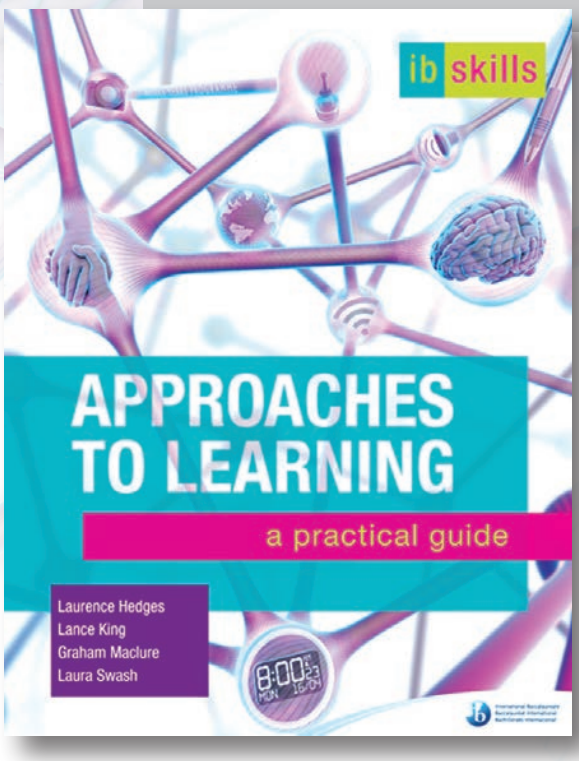

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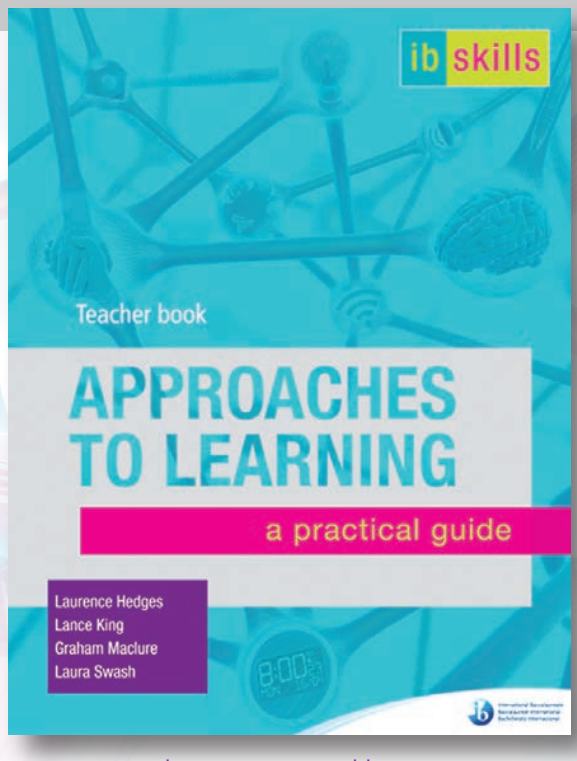

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