Against the Grain

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Reading in Context, Reading for Sense: A Call for Contextual Intention and Attention

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Reading in Context, Reading for Sense: A Call for Contextual Intention and Attention

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On the campus of a liberal arts college serving 5,000 in Austin, Texas, the concrete-minimalist library houses rows of slick, broad LCD monitors that hum in the abundant space, undisturbed by the paper pungency of the stacks. The print books are resting upstairs, their floor the ceiling of the glass-walled office of a public services librarian, who is — not really, but in her mind's fantastical somaticizing of the complex emotions she feels — cowering, behind one of her own dual monitors, from the insistent hunch that a student has just left her office more confused than on arrival. Meanwhile, across campus in academic support programs, the coordinator of the online writing lab is — in her mind's fantasy only — taking cover from the confusions and convolutions of which the essay she's reading is a shining example.

No doubt others in academia — academic support staff, library staff, and faculty — find themselves in imagined escapes and real distress caused by the loss of, or changes in, context in reading. The digital collections made available by our library and on the open Web offer students access to multitudes more writing, videos, images, and data than our campus could ever house in print and other analog archives. But in today's reading environment, which is a hybrid of the analog and the digital, it is difficult to extrapolate mutually understood contexts that are required for synthesis of a professor's guidance and a student's experience. There is a disconnect between what contexts assigning faculty may assume a reader can readily discover and the contexts students experience. While a professor may know a particular journal article as having the context of a themed, finite issue within a specific body of scholarship, the student discovers and accesses the article outside of the themed-and-bound, among the thousands of other orphaned articles, citations, and abstracts that are results of a digital search. As **John Wilbanks**, former Vice President for Science at **Creative Commons**, has suggested, "container culture" is giving way to "nano-publishing." The "containers" — books, periodicals, bodies of work, histories of publications and publishers — are still relevant, particularly in the liberal arts, but they are often not readily apparent in the digital environment.

If context is the binder that connects practices and records to form a culture, the de-emphasis of context feels catastrophic to the cultural legacy of reading. We find ourselves *in media res* along the print-digital continuum, where "page" can mean both html and paper, undergraduates may have very little experience with print periodicals, and citation manuals are outdated, confusing everyone. There are incongruences in concepts between analog and digital reading: the reader must understand the similarities and differences between articles and PDFs, volume and issue numbers and DOI numbers, collections and access, index cards and marginalia, and bookmarking and markup tools. Whether we believe that the sky is falling or that the winds are merely changing (and we reserve the right to straddle these views), students are waiting for help. In order to better help them — because as support staff, our main purpose is to help — we feel a need to legitimize the context problem and begin a conversation: How can we — library staff, academic support staff, and faculty — be more mindful of student-readers' experiences as they attempt to navigate seas of extracts, innumerable search results, and analog-born (and profit-skewed) categories and hierarchies? How can we work intentionally to ensure that readers leave college with respect for the role of context in knowledge and records of knowledge — that they know how to *read* — while respecting the contexts in which they, as digital readers, exist and to which they aspire?

Contextualizing Ourselves: Skeptics and Optimists in a Hybrid Reading Culture

In the interest of disclosing and respecting our own contexts as helpers, we must situate our own work and thinking. Our roots are in the last century and, therefore, in 20th-century media and communication theory. We're cozy with **Marshall McLuhan** and **Quentin Fiore's** 1967 *The Medium is the Massage,* which aimed to prove that meaning is tied up in medium, in that it is impossible to distill an essence of pure "content" from any piece of work. In the following two decades, other theorists worried that we readers-turning-consumers were losing our edge to the barrage of what **McLuhan** had called the "massage" of our senses by television and consumerism: In 1977, **Gene Youngblood's** *The Politics of Desire* prophesied an Internet-like system with the warning that communication was becoming commercial, focused on production and consumption rather than "on how we conceive and perceive and on how we communicate" (8). In the mid-eighties, **Neil Postman**, in the first edition of his seminal *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business,* was concerned less with the effects of the "massage" on the individual than with the warping of discourse norms: "a major new medium changes the structure of discourse… by encouraging certain uses of the intellect, by favoring certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom, and by creating new forms of truth-telling" (27). In the decontextualized information environment that might ensue, **Postman** warned, information could become a "commodity" fragmented and commercialized, which "could be bought and sold irrespective of its uses or meaning" (65).

But along with the skepticism of 20th-century communication theory, we have adopted the optimism of the quest to understand learning and knowledge, which pervades the copious literature on information seeking in library sciences as well as in sociology, psychology, computer science, and cognitive science. Broadly, this literature explores the ways in which humans, in the words of information science scholar **Reijo Savolainen**, "deal with information" (109); from a humanist perspective — a perspective in which, as humans helping humans, we must ground ourselves — we understand this literature as an archive of attempts to understand how people learn to learn.

Finally, we indebt ourselves to **Brenda Dervin**, the communications scholar who has worked for decades to identify and support the human phenomena of "sense making" and "sense unmaking." **Dervin's** approach, formalized as "Sense making," is characterized by attendance to the whole, dynamic "person-in-situation" (40); what makes and does not make sense depends on the context experienced. In order to make systems that are helpful to real people, **Dervin** suggests asking "not how we can reach them, but how we can change ourselves to be useful to them" (42).

Sense Making Fluency: A Call to Intention

While we won't go as far as to suggest that **Dervin's** structured Sense making approach be applied unilaterally in academic and library support, we humbly appropriate the term "sense making" for our work. As sense making requires attendance to contexts — personal, historical, and cultural — it is a useful way of thinking for those who support college-student readers.

To be fluent in sense making — across media and disciplines — means to understand that the mind makes sense of texts, other media, and the objects and ideas within them by organizing them in relation to others (**Jabr**; **Faisal**, **Attfield**, and **Blandford**); it is to acknowledge

and understand that objects and ideas have contexts and to understand that there are recursive relationships among them. Sense making-fluent readers — and sense making-attendant helpers — understand that the relationships between objects and ideas occur within a unique reader-created context, which is both more and less than the sum of the other contexts. Just as understanding the context in which one is working is equally important for the auto mechanic, the CFO, and the yoga teacher, fluency in sense making is essential and transferrable across disciplines and media. Characteristics of sense making-fluent reading and research are the application of skepticism, connections with prior knowledge, inquisition rather than declaration, and agency rather than passivity. Sense making-fluent readers are both format-agnostic and aware of the limitations, qualities, and work-around requirements of different formats and media. Sense makers are able to approach the legacy as well as to innovate and solve new problems with an open mind, reverence, creativity, and the confidence and initiative to seek.

While aspects of sense making appear in discourses claimed by other disciplines — "information literacy" in library science, "critical thinking" in education, "evidence-based practice" and "knowledge management" in business, the **New London Group's** "multiliteracies" — the softer term "sense making" is understandable across and outside of disciplines. "Sense" is subjective, as it is a characteristic of humanness. "Making" refers to human activities that aren't essential for immediate survival but are inherent to our nature (art making, organizing, mapping, making of texts, recording, the combining of raw foods into elaborate meals, ritualizing). "Sense making" encourages us to value humanness — humans-in-situation — and agency in readers as they approach information and texts.

Freshmen come to college to see how it's done and what's important; they're looking to us for guidance and as examples. Sometimes, we're confused ourselves, which can make us feel like repudiating our roles as stewards of reading and knowledge. It is to avoid this worst-case scenario that we synthesize the problems in college reading and call for increased attention to college readers-in-situation. How can we act as stewards of sense making? How can we usher readers into both our cultural legacy of reading in context and the moving target of the hybrid reading ecosystem? We need to consider whom we're working with, the contexts they're experiencing, and the obstacles that hinder them from reading in context and, therefore, from making sense of what they read.

College Readers-in-Situation

In some fields, the reader is the "user," a practice which subordinates the person to the technology: a user is defined only by the thing being used. In the field of education, the reader is the "student," a term that is often entangled in economic and political connotations that can have little to do with human learning and knowledge. Like "user," "student" refers to a means to a means (both "studenthood" and "userdom" are paths to reading, which itself is a path to knowing), and both are temporary statuses; moreover, both subordinate the individual to a system. "Reader" is a lifelong title, and reading is a more direct means to knowing. The reader is autonomous rather than under the control of a system.

While every reader-in-situation is unique, we identify three broad contexts that affect many readers in the hybrid academic reading environment. No doubt these contexts overlap and are dynamic, but we feel that mindfulness of them is a starting point for sense making-attendant support.

Confusion, Distraction, Overwhelm

"I'm looking for an eBook, but I keep getting redirected to a strange Website." — Student chat, **Munday Library**, **St. Edward's University**

Because libraries lack control of third-party proprietary writing, the reader must be aware of and learn multiple platforms, layouts, and rules. Whatever efforts are made — and we know they are great — by instructional designers to make library Websites attractive and intuitive, the interfaces offered by third-party vendors of academic eBooks and databases are not always "easy, elegant, and engaging" (as entrepreneur **Andrew Roskill** has described the best commercial sites). Readers — faculty and staff as well as students — are often perplexed by the various interfaces.

Finding citations and abstracts, keeping track of them, and obtaining full texts all require the reader to navigate different interfaces, checkout rules, and print and download permissions. In a preliminary study at **Washington State University**, **Lorena O'English** found that that even seniors and graduate students were often unable to find the full texts of sources from database citations. There are two possible scenarios for this deficiency: the students desire to find full-text but aren't proficient at navigating the systems, or the students don't often desire to find full-text and thus could not demonstrate how to do so.

Though interfaces are different, sameness — the same screen fonts, the same size pages, the same keyboard, and the same physical location — may contribute to shallowness, tedium, and distraction. Tracking down the full text on the Internet may require no more time than, say, it would have taken to track an article from citation to card catalog to microfiche reader to coin-slot printer. But while the number of steps involved may be the same, the dynamics of activity are not: working on the screen makes us feel less like foragers and more like data-entry slaves, so it's no wonder readers allow themselves to become distracted at frequent intervals. As **Ken Robinson** has noted, students are "besieged with information … from every platform… and we're penalizing them now for getting distracted. From what? Boring stuff." Avoiding distraction and feelings of futility — if all of this stuff has been written already, how can *my* voice matter? — when tasked to choose among 10,000 articles is difficult and has costs beyond stress. Collections, when not limited to a certain width of shelving on the stacks, are all the same size: vast. If there is too much to ever comprehend, why bother? **Postman's** foreword to *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is terrifyingly tangible:

> *"What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one."* (xix)

The situation of overwhelm is, to some extent, amendable, through opportunities for faculty-provided guidance to readers, in the form of curated reading lists or reserves. Systems such as ARES, which integrates with learning management systems, make it convenient for faculty to shrink the reading landscape to a scale manageable for particular courses and groups. Additionally, library staff have opportunities to build awareness of the excellent resources for background research that most libraries subscribe to, but which are underutilized.

The adaptations that have evolved in nonacademic etexts — extreme brevity, bullets, meaningful visuals — aren't being adopted as standards of scholarly writing anytime soon; in fact, they may be in direct conflict with in-depth analysis and building of knowledge. For this, the reader has to read and then make his own notes, lists, visuals, and maps. Exploring the future of digital textbooks in the digital journal *Hybrid Pedagogy,* **Kris Shaffer** points out that, despite their limitations, traditional print textbooks are "physically hackable," a characteristic to which digital textbooks should aspire. In the hybrid library, "hacking" requires navigation of multiple interfaces and systems for note taking — most of which are incompatible across platforms and incomparable to annotating a physical text. Annotating digital reading takes different types of planning and organization than annotating print by hand. Readers who have prior experience with annotating in print need to be helped to develop digital processes, lest they feel perpetually frustrated by the feeling of something just out of reach. Those readers who haven't yet developed methods to engage with what they read might be worse off: seeing little importance placed on engagement with texts, they may not understand that engagement is essential, believing instead that they should be able to simply absorb the information via osmosis (and feeling inadequate if they cannot).

Shallow Reading

"I'm studying."

*"Bull****. You're looking at my legs."*

"Only once in a while. Every chapter."

"That book has extremely short chapters." — *Love Story* (Segal 33)

College readers in the 21st century may simply not understand — let alone have prior experience with — the commitment to reading that is needed to gain understanding of a topic and absorb it as knowledge. In our experience, some student readers approaching a controversial issues assignment ask for help finding policies, statistics, and stakeholders; when we explain that the way to find these out is to read, they are not often happy about that. The fact is, readers today must make the same commitment as readers before the digital age, if not more due to the energy required to shut out 21st-century distractions; our cultural legacy of reading is also a legacy of attention, which has become more specialized, more fragmented, and less contextualized than it was in the age of **McLuhan** and **Youngblood**. Much of digital reading is nano-reading: When the container (the book, the whole article, the journal issue) isn't *there,* visibly or tangibly, it's much easier to ignore the fact of its existence, and it's harder to flip through the rest to gain an inkling of context. There may be no cover design to help us gauge the age of the record, no difference between the physical weight on the verso and the recto to give us cues about the chronology of the text. These contexts, readily available in analog "containers," are often not present in digital reading, and pretending that they are is a disservice to readers. But the act of reading itself, regardless of technology, desperately needs the legitimization of conversation.

Prior Knowledge and Disinformation

"As stated in the Executive Summary of the Journal titled **Building Trust Between the Police and the Citizens They Serve…"**

"In the journal by Garrett D. Trego, it is recommended…"

"In the article by Phillips and Hockey, **The Psychology of Social Media** *has a quote…"* — Evidence of lack of prior knowledge, from student drafts submitted to the OWL

Our hybrid academic and reading cultures often assume prior knowledge of analog reading, research, and libraries. Each generation has tacit knowledge that both drives and limits processes, strategies, and pursuits of knowledge; the role of tacit knowledge is so consequential that **Liam Fahey** and **Laurence Prusak** categorized ignoring it as one of the "deadliest sins of knowledge management" (268-69). In library instruction sessions designed to build on prior knowledge about information search, student readers exhibit tacit knowledge of the usefulness of **Wikipedia** but disclose closeted use of it, due to of discrimination against it (perceived or real) by their teachers and peers. Most freshmen can quickly look up the address of a restaurant using **Google** keyword search, but that tacit knowledge doesn't transfer to searching in **Google Scholar**, which, more often than not, they haven't heard of.

Student readers today may not be familiar with or practiced in the "breadcrumb" process of using one source to find others. They are unable to locate sources cited in **Wikipedia** entries unless they are directly hyperlinked, and, as **O'English's** study suggests, they may not have the know-how or drive to track down full text from citations or abstracts. To be fair, a print bibliography of, say, 1990, may have been just as confusing for students back then. But today, with a much greater abundance of sources to choose from, we expect all kinds of content — television shows, online purchases, news feeds — to *come to us*. As we move toward the "push" end of the pull-push spectrum, readers may not develop the agency needed for the deep dive. Shallow, uncommitted reading leads to shallow understanding — and, worse, disinformation — and lack of synthesis through writing.

On the other hand, readers' lack of prior knowledge, and disinformation, about the concept of "library" itself can result in some misguided search efforts:

Librarian: *What would you do if the library didn't own the source you needed?*

Freshman: *I'd just borrow my mom's credit card and buy it on Amazon.com.*

In this student's defense, we sometimes compare the library's collections (including physical materials and accessible content) to the merchandise in a "shop," hoping to draw on prior knowledge. In many respects, we present the library as a consumer product. But readers aren't consumers; they are (if we channel **Youngblood**) perceivers and communicators. We should count ourselves as lucky when students ask, "Is everything on the library's Website scholarly?" No doubt there are

others who just assume that the answer is "yes." These readers have misconstrued the academic library as a "safe" place, where all sources are scholarly, vetted, and inherently useful. While this skewing, or skewering, of the concept of "library" is disturbing in itself, the lack of agency in readers who perceive the library this way is chilling. Rather than taking control of their reading and acting to contextualize pieces of writing as they relate to their own goals and interests, these readers aim to consume the library's product, repudiating their rights and privileges and the cultural and disciplinary legacies of reading and scholarship.

Conclusion: Reflection-in-Situation

As library and writing support staff, we often don't have the luxury of getting to understand student-readers over an extended period of time; in truth, often, they come to us only in their most dire academic moments. We must quickly assess their contexts, desires, and needs and make on-the-fly decisions about how best to serve within the time that is available. This humanist, empathetic work, along with the in-the-moment opportunities to be, as **Dervin** writes, "maximally useful and responsive to real living-breathing human beings and the real nitty-gritty, changing conditions of their work and lives" (42), makes attention to sense making essential in academic support.

When we attend to the sense made, and unmade, by both student readers and ourselves, we attend to flexibility and progress. If we respond to "human beings traveling through time-space" (Dervin 39) by swiftly observing and assessing ever-changing contexts, we will be able to utilize new findings from learning science and ethnographic research as parts of those contexts. The interdisciplinary expertise that informs sense making allow exciting opportunities to collaborate, and we ourselves must recognize not only our own limitations, but also the contributions and limitations of learning scientists, human-computer interaction experts, communications scholars, educators, and others. As we, in academic support, are working within an increasingly disintermediated and fragmented environment, we must continually reflect on our purpose and place within the ecosystem, making and unmaking our own sense about what we are doing, in what context, and whether we are making sense in our efforts to help humans understand what it is to *read*.

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BTW, **Mike** was at the very first **Charleston Conference** (he was with **Blackwells**, remember them?) where **Jake Chernofsky** of *A.B. Bookman's Weekly* (now defunct) was the keynote. *A.B.* used to be the best place to advertise a used book that a bookseller had for sale or a library wanted to locate. Times they sure have changed, 35 years later!

In fact, it's hard to keep up with all the acquisitions, mergers, etc., that are in the works and this year has only begun! We have the proposed merger of **Springer** and **Macmillan**, **OCLC's** acquisition of **Sustainable Collection Services (SCS)** and the **Big news** the end of last week! **EBSCO announced their acquisition of YBP**! **YBP** has been for sale for the past few months as **B&T** needed to strengthen its bottom line so some sort of change was inevitable. But — **EBSCO** has a lot of our business. Do we want to give them even more? There is a guest post by **Jeff Kosokoff**, the Head of Collection Strategy & Development for the **Duke University Libraries** posted on **Scholarly Communications @ Duke** (February 25) which raises some worthy issues.

http://www.against-the-grain.com/

https://www.ebsco.com/news-center/press-releases/ebsco-shows-major-commitment

http://blogs.library.duke.edu/scholcomm/2015/02/25/resistance-is-futile/#sthash.eIQ60mt1.dpuf

Speaking of which, *Publishers Weekly* (**Jim Milliot**) reports that **Readerlink Distribution Services**, the country's largest book distributor to mass merchandisers, has significantly increased its presence in the book creation business by acquiring the **Baker & Taylor Publishing Group** and **Baker & Taylor Marketing Services U.S**. Under the agreement, which closed late February 20, **Readerlink** takes ownership of **B&T's** 504,000 sq. ft. Indianapolis distribution center, as well as **BTPG's** general offices in San Diego, CA and its editorial offices in Ashland, OR.

http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/industry-deals/article/65674-readerlink-buys-b-t-publishing-marketing-units.html

More from **EBSCO**. **Koha** is the first open-source Integrated Library System (ILS). In use worldwide, its development is steered by a growing community of libraries collaborating to achieve their technology goals. **Koha's** OPAC, circulation, management and self-checkout interfaces are all based on standards-compliant World Wide Web technologies — XHTML, CSS and Javascript — making **Koha** a platform-independent solution. **Koha** is distributed under the open-source General Public License (GPL). **Koha** libraries reached out to **EBSCO**