

Ongoing Discussion “Thought Piece”

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March 2010

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for

**Pratt & Whitney Rocketdyne’s
Enterprise Thinking Network**

**Understanding “Context” to Achieve Harmony in
Organizations and on Earth
Elaine Johnson**

“Context” is a fascinating subject because the term lends itself to myriad approaches. I’m interested particularly in showing that we have an urgent obligation to scrutinize every context we inhabit, whether it is familiar or new. Seeing it clearly, we must reason well about it and then decide, invoking sound values, what it calls upon us to do. We human beings have the power to shape our context. Shall we give it a new shape? What shape?

"We human beings think. That, we say, is our crowning glory--we are thinkers. And we believe that we are really good at thinking--that we do it even better than we drive, which everyone does with sublime confidence.

If we are such accomplished thinkers, however, then why did my hosts in Holland recently observe that being poor in the United States entailed terrible suffering compared with being poor in Europe--because in the States poverty entailed not only being homeless and hungry, but also being outcast and alienated? If we are such a adroit thinkers, why are we short of food, destroying the oceans, poisoning our soil, and eroding the ozone layer essential for our survival?

Examining the nature of "context" suggests that we humans are actually inept thinkers. Unaware of how to think, we readily embrace the dictates of our culture's social networks. Society hands us values, and unquestioningly we hold on to them. Unquestioningly, we also allow emotion to dominate our lives. Indeed, the brain is designed so that emotion rules. Given the pre-eminence of emotion in the brain and given the human being's failure to think well, then surely we must be concerned when we enter a new context or deal with a familiar context.

We are tribal creatures who want so badly to belong that we make up groups and then join them. When we belong to a *familiar* group, what do we see? What meaning do we derive from it? What shape do we give it, if any? When we join a *new* group, do we automatically impose on it our way of seeing and our cultural values, or do we approach it openly? We need to think well about how we behave in familiar and new contexts because we human beings do have the power to design and reconfigure the context we inhabit at any moment. Shall we influence personal and local contexts? And what shall we influence them to become? What shall we do about the Global context? And what shall we do about the context called ‘Earth?’"

The word “context” is used in myriad ways to refer to all kinds of conditions, of course. This presentation will address what “context” means and why it is imperative that we pay close attention to every context we can possibly examine. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alfred North Whitehead, and John Dewey viewed any particular context as part of a system. Thinking systemically, they encouraged uniting action and thought, practice and reflection. Modern educators, failing to see context as a union of the abstract and concrete, made education into

a purely sedentary enterprise. Modern businesses, furthermore, attached more importance to abstract numbers than to an organization's concrete practices.

The way human beings view any context matters, because humans alone have the power to change context. Something as seemingly innocuous as how we define "progress" or "economics" can compel us to alter our context in ways that transform Earth.

Unfortunately, typically we respond to context automatically and unthinkingly. We respond to a given context by automatically downloading the opinions and values we have long held. But to unthinkingly "download" and repeat the old values and beliefs that we long ago absorbed from parents, friends, and popular culture is to miss the meaning context holds. We need to explore and juggle any context's competing claims and values. We need in this way to achieve insights and wisdom that can unfold a harmony that changes the face of the earth.

Biography

Elaine Johnson, a Woodrow Wilson Fellow and Honorary Fellow of Huron University College, Canada, is the recipient of many teaching awards including the prestigious Outstanding Teaching Award from the University of Chicago. Johnson holds a B.A. with honors from Mills College, an M.A. from Indiana University, and a Ph.D. from the University of Oregon. Formerly a high school department chair, community college dean, and tenured university professor, currently Johnson is the Executive Director of MBM Associates. For almost twenty years, MBM Associates has helped business leaders and educators place their work in the context of brain research.

Widely respected for her work on contextual teaching and on the brain research that supports it, Johnson has given hundreds of presentations to universities, community colleges, K-12 schools, and businesses in the United States and Europe. Her books *Contextual Teaching and Learning* (Corwin Press, 2002), *The Dismantling of Public Education and How to Stop It* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), and *Literature for Life and Work* (McGraw Hill, 1997), a series of co-authored literature textbooks for grades 9-12, have significantly increased awareness of the influence of context on the brain. Johnson's books and classroom experience demonstrate that students succeed when they connect the content of academic lessons with the context of their own experience.

Elaine lives with her husband, Tom, in Portland, Oregon, where she recently completed a book entitled *Banking and Betrayal*, a study of one bank's failure in the early 1920s, and where she teaches as an adjunct English professor at Marylhurst University.