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## Lesson 1.4

# ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT



Ceramic figurine from Haywood County, North Carolina, ca. AD 200.

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**Subjects:** science, social studies, language arts.

**Skills:** knowledge, comprehension, application, synthesis, evaluation.

**Strategies:** game, discussion, problem solving, writing.

**Duration:** 30 to 60 minutes.

**Class Size:** any; groups of 5 to 6.

## Objective

In their study of context, students will use a game and a discussion to demonstrate the importance of artifacts in context for learning about past people.

## Materials

Index cards; “Context” activity sheet for each student or team.

## Vocabulary

*Artifact:* any object made, modified, or used by humans; usually this term refers to a portable item.

*Context:* the relationship artifacts have to one another and the situation in which they are found.

## Background

The things people own can tell something about them. The objects each person has chosen to have can indicate the person’s age, gender, and interests. For example, a baseball bat and a football helmet in someone’s bedroom suggests that the owner likes sports. Posters of pets and a collection of stuffed animals could mean that the person is an animal lover. The objects (artifacts) can only tell a complete story if they are found together, where their owners left them (in *context*).

Archaeologists rely on the objects that people made (artifacts) and where they left them (context) to learn the story of past people. Think of a 10,000-year-old stone spear point (which many people mistakenly call an arrowhead); its finely chipped surface is beautifully made. This spear point has a very different meaning if it is found incomplete at a stone quarry in Morrow Mountain State Park than if it is found broken near animal remains. Its meaning changes further if the point is found in a riverbed washed far away from where it was once used or is found in someone’s living room. In these last two situations, the spear point has lost its original context and all connection with the people who made and used it. It has become only a thing, no longer a messenger from the past.

Archaeologists preserve the context of artifacts they recover from sites by recording the location of everything they find. The artifact and its context provide more information to the archaeologist than could the artifact alone. When context is lost, information is lost.

## Setting the Stage

1. Ask the students: If I had never met you and walked into your bedroom, what would I know about you from the things you have there? Would I know if you were a boy or a girl? Would I know what your interests are? Would I know if you share your room?

2. Think of something in your bedroom that is very special to you. How does that object tell something about you, along with everything else in your room? Everything together tells about you because it is in context. You have selected certain things to have, and these things tell about you when they are all found together.

3. Now imagine that your special object has been taken from you and is found in the city park. How does this change what could be known about you? When it is removed from your room, the object alone tells nothing, and your room is now missing an important piece of information about you. Context has been disturbed, and information about you is now lost.

## Procedure

The importance of context in archaeology can be demonstrated by *The Game of Context*:

1. Tell the students they are going to play a game requiring that they think like archaeologists. Divide the class into groups of 5 to 6 students, and assign each group a different number. Give each student an index card and a pencil. As a group, they are to choose a room or type of building, such as a hospital operating room, a kitchen, or a hardware store. They decide what objects (artifacts) in the room make it distinctive; then each student writes one clue on his or her card, for a total of 5 to 6 clues per group. Each card also has the group number written on its back.

2. The stack of cards from each group is passed to the next group, until every group has seen every stack and tried to infer the function of each place. Be sure the other groups do not hear the correct answers. Each time, before the cards are passed, have a student remove one card and place it off to the side so it does not get mixed up with the other sets of cards.

3. The teacher reviews each group's stack, asking how many groups correctly guessed the rooms' functions.

4. Ask: Is it possible to know the function of the room now? Is one object taken out of context (like a card removed at random) able to give as accurate a picture as are all of the objects in their place of origin? This demonstrates that removing artifacts from a site removes them from their context and makes it very difficult to get a complete understanding of past people.

## Closure

Artifacts in context are the basis for all understanding about the people who were living in North Carolina before Europeans arrived; archaeology is a science of context. Imagine that an archaeologist finds your classroom thousands of years from now. Make a statement about how artifacts in the context of your classroom will enable the archaeologist to learn about your class.

## Evaluation

Have the students complete the "Context" activity sheet.

## Links

Lesson 2.1: "Gridding a Site."

Lesson 2.2: "Stratigraphy and Cross-Dating."

## Sources

- Smith, Shelley J., Jeanne M. Moe, Kelly A. Letts, and Danielle M. Paterson. 1993. *Intrigue of the Past: A Teacher's Activity Guide for Fourth through Seventh Grades*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Department of the Interior. [This lesson is adapted from "Context" on pp. 19–21, courtesy of the Bureau of Land Management.]
- Ward, H. Trawick, and R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr. 1999. *Time Before History: The Archaeology of North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. [The image in this lesson's main heading is taken from Figure 5.7.]
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### **"Context" Activity Sheet Answers:**

1. The list could include items such as ruffled curtains, posters, collection of dolls or model cars, certain types of clothing, photographs, other art work, the colors of furnishings, number of beds and dressers, and souvenirs.
2. The listed items could indicate the student's gender, age, interests, places they have visited, their dreams and hopes, hobbies, amount of allowance, habits, and whether or not they share their room.
3. Because these things are out of context, they tell nothing about their owner. In fact, it cannot be established if the artifacts once belonged together, so the story of their owner cannot be learned.
4. Artifacts and their context provide the evidence archaeologists need to learn about the past. If clues are removed or moved, information about the past is lost forever.

## **Context**

**Name:**

1. List ten things in your bedroom that would tell about you. Imagine the things on your list to be clues for an archaeologist.

2. Imagine an archaeologist finds your ten items. What might he/she know about you?

3. All of the things in your bedroom are in context. What could be learned about you if the things in your bedroom were scattered all over town?

4. Why is it important to leave artifacts in place at archaeological sites?