

This video is part of the online seminar on **Designing Courses**, which is developed by the Reinert Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning at Saint Louis University.

[slide] I'm Debra Rudder Lohe, Ph.D., director of the Center, and I'll be facilitating **Part 1: Understanding the Teaching Situation**.

[slide] In this video we will **explore the elements of context crucial to designing courses**.

[slide] After this video, you should be able to **identify key questions you need to answer about context before developing a course**.

[slide] Ultimately, the **purpose** of this video is to uncover the various layers of **any** teaching situation and to consider how these layers inform the course design process.

Let's begin.

[slide] Teaching is a situated act.

[slide] It occurs in a particular context with particular teacher(s) and learner(s) within particular disciplines, programs, institutions, and cultures.

[slide] The specific elements of the teaching situation shape the kinds of learning **experiences** you create.

[slide] To better understand the layers of context inherent in any teaching situation, let's take a look at the so-called Communication Triangle.

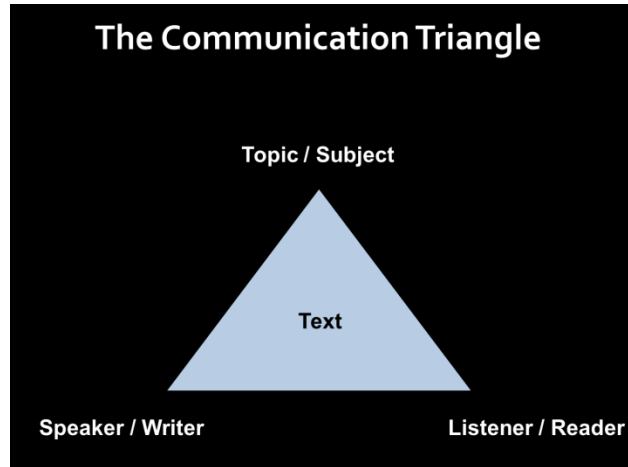
The diagram that follows is often used to represent the layers and relationships in any act of communication. It is based on Aristotle's conception of rhetorical situation and serves as a useful lens for understanding the teaching situation.

[slide] **The Communication Triangle**

The Communication Triangle is simply a visual representation of the elements of any situation where one person strives to communicate with another (or many others) about a particular topic. Ultimately, it identifies the three most basic aspects of context that can shape the way a message is communicated.

In this rendering, we have the speaker or writer on the bottom left point of the triangle, the listener or reader on the bottom right point of the triangle, and the topic or subject of the communication at the apex of the triangle. The speaker or writer and the listener or reader – and the relationship between them – anchor the triangle. But the topic or subject of the

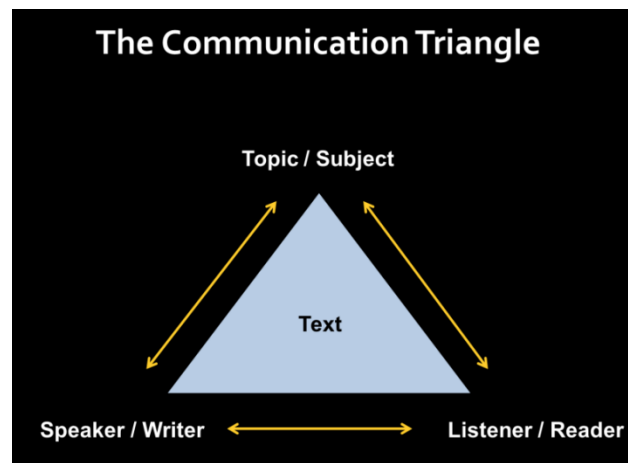
communication is equally important. This is why the triangle is equilateral (meaning: all three sides are of equal length); the equilateral triangle is meant to suggest that all three points are equally significant in an act of communication.



Together these three elements of context, and the relationships between them, determine what the “text” looks like – that is, the vehicle for the message. The speaker or writer makes **decisions** about how to **shape** the “text” intentionally so that it is most effective for the topic or subject and for the listener or reader.

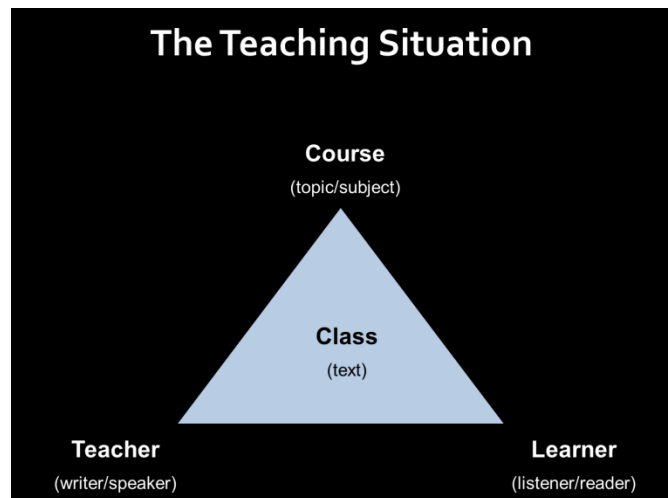
While there are many other aspects to the communication situation, these are the essential elements needed for understanding how context shapes the way we communicate with one another.

The triangle offers a nice, balanced way to represent the *relational* act of communication— what a text or a message looks or sounds like ultimately is the result of a series of **relationships**, between writers or speakers and their audiences, between writers or speakers and their subject matter, and between audiences and the subject matter.



Originally conceived as way to represent the context or situation of **oral communication**, the Communication Triangle also offers a nice model for understanding the **teaching** situation, as well, as you can see here.

[slide] **The Teaching Situation**



In this rendering, the teacher and the learner anchor the triangle, while the course material is at the apex. As before, the equilateral triangle is meant to suggest that all three points are equally significant in the act of designing learning experiences.

As with written or spoken communication, teaching also is a *relational* act. The *relationships* between teachers and learners, between teachers and course content, and between *learners* and course content, determine what the class looks and feels like.

This might be a good time to explain that, in this image, the **class** is the learning **environment** and the specific learning **experiences** you create for your students.

Each point on the triangle is balanced by and connected to the others, and each has something to do with the kinds of learning experiences the teacher designs.

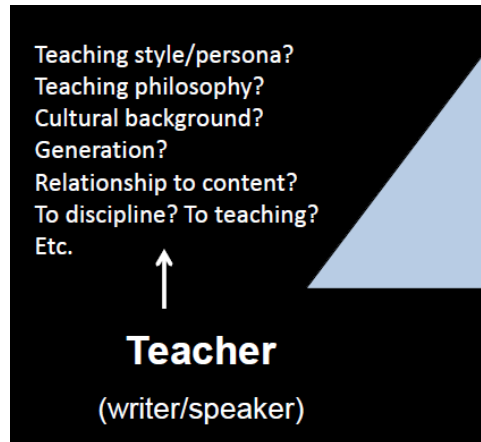
For example, if the learners in a given course are novices in a discipline, and the course is an introduction to that discipline, the dominant learning experiences might involve more **lecture**, focusing more on content- or information-**delivery**. But if your course were, say, a **graduate**-level course, where the learners and the teacher function more like peers or colleagues, the learning experience might be more **seminar**-like.

[slide] **The Teaching Situation: Seeing the Layers**

As you can see, each element of the triangle also has multiple layers.

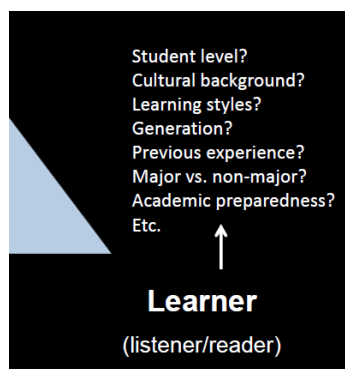
For each point on the triangle, some basic questions will help to uncover these layers.

For example:



- What is the teacher's preferred teaching style or persona?
- What is her philosophy of teaching?
- What is her cultural background?
- Generation?
- What is his relationship to the course content?
- To the discipline?
- To **teaching**?

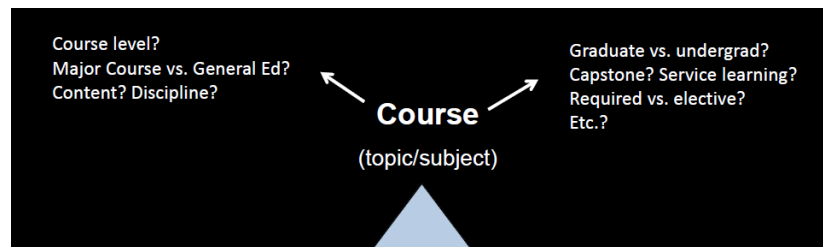
Similarly, numerous questions arise about the learners in a given teaching situation.



- Who are the learners in a course you're designing?
- What level of students are they (first-year students? Seniors? A mix?)?
- What cultural backgrounds are represented by the students in your class?
- What are your students' preferred learning styles?
- What generation are they?

- What is their previous experience with the topic?
- Are they majors? Non-majors? Both?
- Are they prepared for the particular academic challenges you will build into your class? How will you know? How might you find out about some of these factors of context prior to finalizing your course design?

Finally, there are numerous questions to consider about the **course** you're designing.



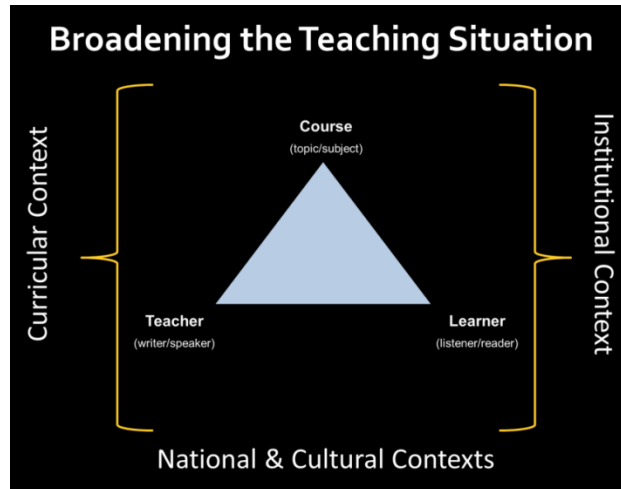
- What level will the course be offered at? Are there expectations with that course level? (In some disciplines, 100-level courses are all broad surveys, whereas 400-level courses are deep explorations of a specialty area within the discipline.)
- Is the course part of your department's major? Is it a General Education or a Core Curriculum course?
- What's the course's primary content? What discipline is it in? (And what disciplinary expectations does that come with? Or is it, perhaps, an interdisciplinary course?)
- Is it part of a graduate curriculum or an undergraduate one?
- Is it a capstone course? A service-learning course?
- Is it required or elective?

As you can see from these questions, there are many layers of context. Some you'll be able to identify in advance, and some you won't – the important thing is to understand as much as you can about these layers **as you're designing** your course. All the decisions you make about how to structure learning and how to create learning *experiences* for your students will be informed by these layers.

[slide] While this visual representation of the Teaching Situation may be helpful – it can't adequately capture all of the possible layers. For instance, it doesn't really capture the important set of relationships *between learners* that you'll want to consider.

[slide] Broadening the Teaching Situation

And, of course, surrounding this triangle are other layers of context we haven't even touched on here: curricular context, institutional context, and national/cultural context. Just to name a few.



[slide] Conclusion

Ultimately, all of the choices you make in designing courses, whether you are aware of it or not, are influenced by a variety of contextual factors.

Being aware of the layers of context can help you design courses that are appropriate for your Teaching Situation.

[slide] After all ... Teaching is a situated act.

[slide] This concludes Part 1 of the Online Seminar, Designing Courses.

Please go back to the online seminar and complete any exercises associated with Part 1: Understanding the Teaching Situation.

Credits