Understanding the context of a problem

Meet the people in your group for today. Find out their names (and pronunciation) and something about where they come from (country, state, college, neighborhood, major).

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"Statistics is never context-free." [An idea expressed by Speed, Cobb, Moore and others.] How do you understand this quote? Do you agree? Those with "heart" cards (or a volunteer, if you have no heart), be ready to stand up and give a 30sec summary of your thoughts.

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To get at the context of a problem, we need to ask good questions. A good question is open-ended and provides the client a chance to tell their story freely. For example, a good question might be "Tell me about how you decided which dogs would get which treatments?" A bad question might be "You did randomize, right?" Brainstorm some general good questions you might ask a client. Those with "diamond" cards, be ready to stand up and share one question.

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We're going to start a case study which we'll continue for the next several class periods. I'll pose as the client, and you'll ask me questions. Here's how it will work. 1. A volunteer from the next group asks me a question. 2. I answer it. 3. One person in each group (taking turns) summarizes my answer and asks the others "did I understand correctly?" 4. Group discusses answer and what question they might want to ask next.

We'll continue with as many questions as we have time for, and pick up next time as needed. The goal will be to understand the background well enough to write 3–5 sentences describing the background, so take good notes!

Here's the initial email you got. What questions do you have? "I'm a veterinary student studying coagulation abnormalities in dogs with septic peritonitis. Could we meet to discuss what kind of statistical analyses I should be doing? Thanks."

Name: _____

Why is understanding the context of a problem important?

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Please leave this sheet, your nametag, and your playing card on the tables by the door when you leave. The other sheet is for you to keep; this sheet will not be returned except by request.