

CHILDREN'S LEARNING IN LABORATORY AND CLASSROOM CONTEXTS

Essays in Honor of Ann Brown

Edited by

Joseph Campione

Kathleen Metz

Annemarie Sullivan Palincsar



Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Taylor & Francis Group

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Sustaining Model Systems of Educational Activity: Designing for the Long Haul

Michael Cole

University of California, San Diego

Once upon a time, in a far away ivory tower by the East River, my colleagues and I were engaged in what, at the time, was considered a peculiar enterprise. We had come to distrust the power of experimental psychology, as we had learned it at our mentors' elbows, for illuminating important aspects of cognitive development in a manner that could be validly generalized beyond their artificially produced conditions of existence. This distrust had arisen from our experience conducting research in markedly different societies, especially societies whose cultures did not include heavy dependence on modern technologies of transportation, communication, and industrial production, regular practice in the arts of reading and writing, or experience in such institutions as formal schooling or government bureaucracies.

Briefly summarized, standard, experimental, cross-cultural research invited the conclusion that without the benefits of literacy, numeracy, and extensive schooling, mental development is stunted. This retardation could be regularly illustrated by the use of standardized tests or standardized experimental procedures that measure speed and complexity of learning under a variety of well defined, and highly controlled, widely used experimental conditions (Cole, Gay, Glick, & Sharp, 1971). However, this conclusion was suspect because individuals who appeared retarded when administered even carefully crafted tasks using indigenous materials appeared to display the presumably absent cognitive processes when task procedures were radically changed. The general strategy in such changes was to approximate learning situations which were closer to their everyday lives. Suspicion was also aroused when tasks that Liberian farmers found relatively easy were re-imported to the U.S. where their presumably superior American counterparts were now cast in an unflattering comparative light.

After we had been engaged in such work for some time, work that involved us in ethnographic and linguistic analyses of local settings and materials as a means for redesigning experiments we reached the now-obvious conclusion that the standard tasks of experimental psychology have their historical origins in the institution of schooling in modern Europe and the United States. Consequently, there is an incestuous and distorting relationship between traditional psychological experimental procedures and historically recent social practices involved in schooling that are frequent in our own society.

