

# Theoretical Foundations of Learning Environments

*Edited by*

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## Socially Shared Cognition: System Design and the Organization of Collaborative Research

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### INTRODUCTION

The concept of socially shared cognition plays an important role in our efforts to create and sustain model systems of educational activity. In this chapter, our discussion of socially shared cognition focuses on our ongoing attempts to design, implement, and sustain educational activities in community institutions during the after-school hours. We use the notion of socially shared cognition to discuss two aspects of our work: (a) the organization of learning within educational play worlds called Fifth Dimensions and (b) the organization of collaboration among a team of scholars conducting research on the Fifth Dimension.

Sharing is a Janus-headed concept (Cole, 1991). On the one hand it refers to receiving, using, and experiencing in common with others. On the other hand, sharing also means to divide or distribute something between oneself and others. Both of these aspects of sharing with respect to socially shared cognition are relevant to our research.

First, in the design of the system of activities themselves, we are acting from our assumption that cognition is distributed among such important elements as the participants, the artifacts they use, and the social institutions within which they are housed. Second, as a research collective we share some beliefs and practices, such as an intellectual affinity for the ideas of John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, and George Herbert Mead, and an agreement to incorporate qualitative and quantitative methodologies into the work of the collective. At the same time we divide up the work between and among members who are on implementation or evaluation teams, or both, located at institutions of higher learning that have different populations, priorities, missions, and locations.

In the joint activities of the research team and in the education and play world of the Fifth Dimension, both senses of sharing are simultaneously