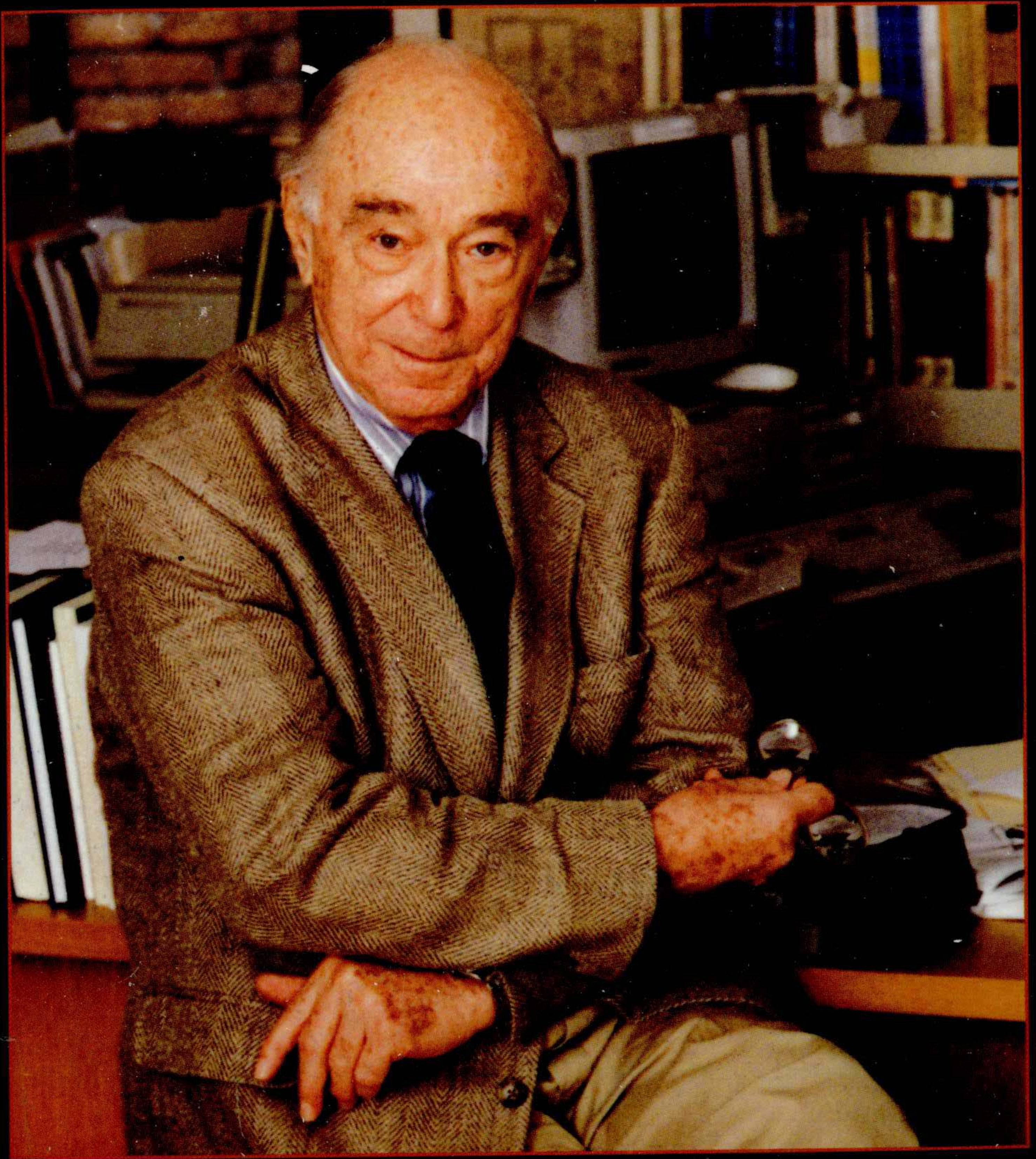


THE CULTURE OF EDUCATION



JEROME BRUNER

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, Massachusetts

London, England

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Printed in the United States of America
Sixth printing, 2001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bruner, Jerome S. (Jerome Seymour)

The culture of education / Jerome Bruner.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-17952-8 (cloth)

ISBN 0-674-17953-6 (pbk.)

1. Educational psychology. 2. Social psychology. 3. Educational anthropology. 4. Education—Philosophy. 5. Discourse analysis, Narrative. I. Title.

LB1051.B736 1996

370.15—dc20 95-46844

For David Olson

PREFACE



This is a book of essays about education. But it is by no means limited to education in the usual sense of classrooms and schools. For it is surely the case that schooling is only one small part of how a culture inducts the young into its canonical ways. Indeed, schooling may even be at odds with a culture's other ways of inducting the young into the requirements of communal living. Our changing times are marked by deep conjectures about what schools should be expected to "do" for those who choose to or are compelled to attend them—or for that matter, what schools *can* do, given the force of other circumstances. Should schools aim simply to reproduce the culture, to "assimilate" (to use a word now considered odious) the young into the ways of being little Americans or little Japanese? Yet assimilation was the unexamined faith even as recently as the beginning of this century. Or would schools, given the revolutionary changes through which we are living, do better to dedicate themselves to the equally risky, perhaps equally quixotic ideal of preparing students to cope with the changing world in which they will be living? And how shall we decide what that changing world will be and what it will demand of them? These are no longer abstract issues: we live with them daily, and they form the substance of the educational debates that reverberate everywhere in the world.

What has become increasingly clear in these debates is that education is not *just* about conventional school matters like curriculum or standards or testing. What we resolve to do in school only makes sense when considered in the broader context of what the society intends to accomplish through its educational investment in the young. How

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one conceives of education, we have finally come to recognize, is a function of how one conceives of the culture and its aims, professed and otherwise. This has been plain in the cascade of reports on the “state” of education that began with *A Nation at Risk* and seems to go on unceasingly.

The essays that constitute this book not surprisingly range over a wider terrain than usually encountered in a book about “education,” though they all have their origin there. Some of them, indeed, reflect my own stances in the educational debates of the last years. But they are not “debate essays.” The very first one, Chapter 1, is the antithesis of debating. Written after all the others, it is my attempt to reflect on the underlying implications of the decade’s debates, to search out the foundational presuppositions inherent in them.

It is altogether appropriate that this book bears the title *The Culture of Education*. For its central thesis is that culture shapes mind, that it provides us with the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conceptions of our selves and our powers. Ideally, perhaps, the book might have included a much broader examination of education in different cultures. But to take a cultural view of education does not really require constant cultural comparison. Rather, it requires that one consider education and school learning in their situated, cultural context, and that is what I have tried to do.

When Angela von der Lippe, my friend and my editor at Harvard University Press, proposed that I do this book, I was at first somewhat resistant. My ideas were in metamorphosis, for I was among those who were preoccupied with formulating a new “cultural psychology.” What finally convinced me was recognizing how closely linked were the problems of education and the questions that loomed large in creating such a cultural psychology—questions about the making and negotiating of meanings, about the constructing of self and a sense of agency, about the acquisition of symbolic skills, and especially about the cultural “situatedness” of all mental activity. For you cannot understand mental activity unless you take into account the cultural setting and its resources, the very things that give mind its shape and

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scope. Learning, remembering, talking, imagining: all of them are made possible by participating in a culture.

Once I got started, it became increasingly clear to me that education was indeed the right “test frame” for budding ideas in a cultural psychology. Let me explain. The test frames we choose for clarifying our ideas tell volumes about our presuppositions. La Mettrie of the notorious *L’Homme Machine*, for example, used as his test frame the water-driven mobile statuary that Louis XIV had installed at Versailles: how do you get from such robots to intelligent creatures—by equipping them with senses? B. F. Skinner’s test frame was a pecking pigeon in the isolated world of a Skinner box. Sir Frederic Bartlett seemed to be trying out his ideas about thinking against how a clever cricketer might behave on a cricket pitch, while Max Wertheimer tested his on a thinly disguised version of the young Einstein going about his work. The test frame of educational praxis is strikingly different from all of these and fits a cultural psychology uniquely well.

It presupposes that human mental activity is neither solo nor conducted unassisted, even when it goes on “inside the head.” We are the only species that *teaches* in any significant way. Mental life is lived with others, is shaped to be communicated, and unfolds with the aid of cultural codes, traditions, and the like. But this extends beyond school. Education does not only occur in classrooms, but around the dinner table when family members try to make joint sense of what happened that day, or when kids try to help each other make sense of the adult world, or when a master and apprentice interact on the job. So there is nothing more appropriate than educational practice for testing a cultural psychology.

Some years after I first became actively engaged with education, I set down what seemed to me some reasonable conclusions in *The Process of Education*. It now seems to me in retrospect, some three decades later, that I was then much too preoccupied with solo, intrapsychic processes of knowing and how these might be assisted by appropriate pedagogies. I’ll summarize the main points of that initial effort. Educational encounters, to begin with, should result in understanding, not mere performance. Understanding consists in grasping

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the place of an idea or fact in some more general structure of knowledge. When we understand something, we understand it as an exemplar of a broader conceptual principle or theory. Knowledge itself, moreover, is organized in such a way that the grasp of its conceptual structure renders its particulars more self-evident, even as redundant. Acquired knowledge is most useful to a learner, moreover, when it is “discovered” through the learner’s own cognitive efforts, for it is then related to and used in reference to what one has known before. Such acts of discovery are enormously facilitated by the structure of knowledge itself, for however complicated any domain of knowledge may be, it can be represented in ways that make it accessible through less complex elaborated processes. It was this conclusion that led me to propose that any subject could be taught to any child at any age in some form that was honest—although “honest” was left undefined and has haunted me ever since!

This line of reasoning in turn implied that the object of instruction was not *coverage* but *depth*: to teach or instantiate general principles that rendered self-evident as many particulars as possible. It was a short step from there to the idea that the shape of a curriculum be conceived as a spiral, beginning with an intuitive depiction of a domain of knowledge, circling back to represent the domain more powerfully or formally as needed. The teacher, in this version of pedagogy, is a guide to understanding, someone who helps you discover on your own.

It was, of course, the ongoing cognitive revolution in psychology that inspired my initial approach to the process of education—a Revolution that began in the relatively affluent, rather complacent late 1950s and early 1960s. At least the times seemed so to many of us then. Besides, there was one “outside” disturbance that took precedence over any internal concerns. It was the Cold War. Not only was it ideological and military; it was a “technical” war as well. There were “knowledge gaps,” and our schools were under accusation for creating them. Could our schools keep America technologically ahead of the Soviet Union in the endless Cold War? It is not surprising that the principal focus of the educational reform move-

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ment of the day was on science and mathematics. And those were the subjects that lent themselves best to the principles of the new cognitive psychology. Guided by these new principles, science and mathematics curricula flourished. Almost everything else was taken for granted. The reformers assumed, for example, that kids in school were just as interested in mastering the improved curriculum as they had been in constructing it. And it was also taken for granted that students lived in some sort of educational vacuum, untroubled by the ills and problems of the culture at large.

It was the “discovery of poverty” and the civil rights movement in America that woke most of us from our unthinking complacency about reforming education—specifically, the discovery of the impact of poverty, racism, and alienation on the mental life and growth of the child victims of these blights. A theory of education that was to serve all could no longer take for granted the supporting assistance of a benign, even a neutral culture. Something more was needed to compensate for what many of us then thought of as the “deficit” created by “cultural deprivation.” And the remedies proposed for overcoming such deprivation were eventually converted into Head Start and similar programs.

In the years following, I found myself increasingly preoccupied with how *culture* affected the way in which children went about their school learning. My own research drove me deeper and deeper into the problem—laboratory research on infancy as well as field work on mental development and schooling in Africa. I was not alone in this. My students and post-docs, my colleagues, were equally involved; even my travels conspired to involve me. I recall particularly visits with Alexander Luria, that enthusiastic exponent of Lev Vygotsky’s “cultural historical” theories of development. His ebullient espousal of the role of language and culture in the functioning of mind soon undermined my confidence in the more self-contained, formalistic theories of the towering Jean Piaget, theories that had very little room for the enabling role of culture in mental development. While I am hardly a Vygotskian in any strict sense of the term, I found this new work enormously helpful in thinking about education. But a concern

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with “culture in mind” does not rest on adherence to any “school” of psychology. Indeed, it goes beyond psychology altogether and relies today on the work of primatologists, anthropologists, linguists, sociologists in the great lineage of Emile Durkheim, even on the work of historians of the *Annales* school preoccupied with how peoples form their distinctive *mentalités*. Indeed, in the last decade there has been a veritable renaissance of interest in the culture of education—not only in theory but in the guidance of classroom practice. Since I will discuss some of this work in later chapters, I need say no more about it here.

This book was written in the midst of a collaborative research project with my wife and colleague, Carol Fleisher Feldman, a project principally concerned with *narrative* as both a mode of thought and an expression of a culture’s world view. It is through our own narratives that we principally construct a version of ourselves in the world, and it is through its narrative that a culture provides models of identity and agency to its members. Appreciation of the centrality of narrative comes not from any single discipline, but from a confluence of many: literary, socio-anthropological, linguistic, historical, psychological, even computational. And I have come to take this confluence as a fact of life, not only in our own narrative studies but in educational studies generally.

Given all this new work, given the surge of effort since the cognitive revolution, are we any better able to improve the education of children suffering the blight of poverty, discrimination, alienation? Have we developed any promising leads about how to organize the culture of school in ways to help children toward a fresh start? What does it take to create a nurturing school culture that empowers the young effectively to use the resources and opportunities of the broader culture?

Obviously there are no sure-fire answers. But there are certainly enough promising hints to encourage serious efforts. One of the most promising involves experiments in schools that have established “mutual learning cultures.” Such classroom cultures are organized to model how the broader culture should work if it were operating at

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its best and liveliest and if it were concentrating on the task of education. There is mutual sharing of knowledge and ideas, mutual aid in mastering material, division of labor and exchange of roles, opportunity to reflect on the group's activities. That, in any case, is one possible version of "culture at its best." School, in such a dispensation, is conceived of both as an exercise in consciousness raising about the possibilities of communal mental activity, and as a means for acquiring knowledge and skill. The teacher is the enabler, *primus inter pares*. This is only one of the successful experiments being tried, and there are others.

But is all this "realistic"? Given the pressures under which schools operate, can ideals such as mutual communities really be achieved? Is this more educational utopia? Utopia is hardly the issue. Nobody doubts that there are powerful constraints on what schools can do. They are never free even to try out all the things they think would help, but neither are they knee-jerk agents of the status quo. We systematically underestimate the impact of educational innovations. Even the relatively feeble and much-criticized efforts of Head Start produced some stunning results, as we shall see presently. Besides, we already know more than we have put to use—including the fact that kids in classrooms organized as mutual communities do well on intellectual performance and get their sights raised. And there are many other lessons to be learned from bringing cultural psychology to bear on education. I hope I can be convincing when I say that we are not at the end of the road where education is concerned. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that we may just be starting out on a new one.

Let me say a few words about the plan of the book. While each chapter can be read on its own, together they form parts of a broader point of view. That point of view is set forth and elaborated in the opening chapter in the form of "tenets" about the nature of individual human minds operating in an enabling culture. The chapters following elaborate further on those tenets. The "educational" topics covered are many and varied—ranging from the influence of folk conceptions of pedagogy on education to the inherent anomalies of

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educational policy, from the uses of narrative to primate pedagogy, from “reading” other people’s minds to the question of how we represent the world to each other. Coverage, to pick up an old theme, is not the issue. Nor are there many confrontations with the hot issues of educational politics. I am convinced that such issues cannot be resolved without our first achieving some deeper understanding of the culture of education. And that is what this book is about.

I must express a special debt of gratitude to those who have made this work possible: to the Spencer Foundation, which has generously supported my research; to the Department of Psychology at New York University, which has provided a place to work and facilities for doing so; and particularly to the Law School of New York University, in whose intellectual life I have participated with profit and where I have had the continuing privilege of teaching a seminar on the theory of interpretation in law, literature, and the human sciences with my friends and colleagues Tony Amsterdam, Peggy Davis, and David Richards—a seminar whose echoes are audible in every chapter of this book.

I have dedicated *The Culture of Education* to David Olson—former post-doc, longtime friend, buoyant co-conspirator, always available interlocutor whether in collaboration or in debate. There are too many others to whom I owe a debt of gratitude to list in a preface. I shall have occasion to mention them in context later.

Reenogreena
Glandore, County Cork
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September 1995

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1



CULTURE, MIND, AND EDUCATION

The essays in this volume are all products of the 1990s, expressions of the fundamental changes that have been altering conceptions about the nature of the human mind in the decades since the cognitive revolution. These changes, it now seems clear in retrospect, grew out of two strikingly divergent conceptions about how mind works. The first of these was the hypothesis that mind could be conceived as a computational device. This was not a new idea, but it had been powerfully reconceived in the newly advanced computational sciences. The other was the proposal that mind is both constituted by and realized in the use of human culture. The two views led to very different conceptions of the nature of mind itself, and of how mind should be cultivated. Each led its adherents to follow distinctively different strategies of inquiry about how mind functions and about how it might be improved through “education.”

The first or *computational* view is concerned with *information processing*: how finite, coded, unambiguous information about the world is inscribed, sorted, stored, collated, retrieved, and generally managed by a computational device. It takes information as its given, as some-

thing already settled in relation to some preexisting, rule-bound code that maps onto states of the world.¹ This so-called “well-formedness” is both its strength and its shortcoming, as we shall see. For the process of knowing is often messier, more fraught with ambiguity than such a view allows.

Computational science makes interesting general claims about the conduct of education,² though it is still unclear what specific lessons it has to teach the educator. There is a widespread and not unreasonable belief that we *should* be able to discover something about how to teach human beings more effectively from knowing how to program computers effectively. One can scarcely doubt, for example, that computers provide a learner with powerful aids in mastering bodies of knowledge, particularly if the knowledge in question is well defined. A well-programmed computer is especially useful for taking over tasks that, at last, can be declared “unfit for human production.” For computers are faster, more orderly, less fitful in remembering, and do not get bored. And of course, it is revealing of our own minds and our human situation to ask what things we do better or worse than our servant computer.

It is considerably more uncertain whether, in any deep sense, the tasks of a teacher can be “handed over” to a computer, even the most “responsive” one that can be theoretically envisioned. Which is not to say that a suitably programmed computer cannot lighten a teacher’s load by taking over some of the routines that clutter the process of instruction. But that is not the issue. After all, books came to serve such a function after Gutenberg’s discovery made them widely available.³

The issue, rather, is whether the computational view of mind itself offers an adequate enough view about how mind works to guide our efforts in trying to “educate” it. It is a subtle question. For in certain respects, “how the mind works” is itself dependent on the tools at its disposal. “How the *hand* works,” for example, cannot be fully appreciated unless one also takes into account whether it is equipped with a screwdriver, a pair of scissors, or a laser-beam gun. And by the same token, the systematic historian’s “mind” works differently from the

mind of the classic “teller of tales” with his stock of combinable myth-like modules. So, in a sense, the mere existence of computational devices (and a theory of computation about their mode of operating) can (and doubtless will) change our minds about how “mind” works, just as the book did.⁴

This brings us directly to the second approach to the nature of mind—call it *culturalism*. It takes its inspiration from the evolutionary fact that mind could not exist save for culture. For the evolution of the hominid mind is linked to the development of a way of life where “reality” is represented by a symbolism shared by members of a cultural community in which a technical-social way of life is both organized and construed in terms of that symbolism. This symbolic mode is not only shared by a community, but conserved, elaborated, and passed on to succeeding generations who, by virtue of this transmission, continue to maintain the culture’s identity and way of life.

Culture in this sense is *superorganic*.⁵ But it shapes the minds of individuals as well. Its individual expression inheres in *meaning making*, assigning meanings to things in different settings on particular occasions. Meaning making involves situating encounters with the world in their appropriate cultural contexts in order to know “what they are about.” Although meanings are “in the mind,” they have their origins and their significance in the culture in which they are created. It is this cultural situatedness of meanings that assures their negotiability and, ultimately, their communicability. Whether “private meanings” exist is not the point; what is important is that meanings provide a basis for cultural exchange. On this view, knowing and communicating are in their nature highly interdependent, indeed virtually inseparable. For however much the individual may seem to operate on his or her own in carrying out the quest for meanings, nobody can do it unaided by the culture’s symbolic systems. It is culture that provides the tools for organizing and understanding our worlds in communicable ways. The distinctive feature of human evolution is that mind evolved in a fashion that enables human beings to utilize the tools of culture. Without those tools, whether symbolic or material, man is not a “naked ape” but an empty abstraction.

Culture, then, though itself man-made, both forms and makes possible the workings of a distinctively human mind. On this view, learning and thinking are always *situated* in a cultural setting and always dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources.⁶ Even individual variation in the nature and use of mind can be attributed to the varied opportunities that different cultural settings provide, though these are not the only source of variation in mental functioning.

Like its computational cousin, culturalism seeks to bring together insights from psychology, anthropology, linguistics, and the human sciences generally, in order to reformulate a model of mind. But the two do so for radically different purposes. Computationalism, to its great credit, is interested in any and all ways in which information is organized and used—information in the well-formed and finite sense mentioned earlier, regardless of the guise in which information processing is realized. In this broad sense, it recognizes no disciplinary boundaries, not even the boundary between human and non-human functioning. Culturalism, on the other hand, concentrates exclusively on how human beings in cultural communities create and transform meanings.

I want to set forth in this opening chapter some principal motifs of the cultural approach and explore how these relate to education. But before turning to that formidable task, I need first to dispel the shibboleth of a necessary contradiction between culturalism and computationalism. For I think the apparent contradiction is based on a misunderstanding, one that leads to gross and needless over-dramatization. Obviously the approaches are very different, and their ideological overspill may indeed overwhelm us if we do not take care to distinguish them clearly. For it surely matters ideologically what kind of “model” of the human mind one embraces.⁷ Indeed, the model of mind to which one adheres even shapes the “folk pedagogy” of schoolroom practice, as we shall see in the following chapter. Mind as equated to the power of association and habit formation privileges “drill” as the true pedagogy, while mind taken as the capacity for reflection and discourse on the nature of necessary truths favors the