

produces results that are of little use for decision-making purposes. Furthermore, McLean's discussion of the ethical considerations in action research consist primarily of the recommendations to "do no harm" and, if action research is contemplated in large school systems, to check to see if formal permission is required. Little or no attention was given to the issues of informed consent, confidentiality, or dissemination of results.

In summary, the author appears to have based the book on several assumptions:

- Problem solving is a straightforward, sequential process;
- All important knowledge can be quantified;
- There is no major collaborative role for students and parents in action research;
- There is little room for action research to draw upon what is known about ethnography, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, or narrative inquiry;
- Statistical comparisons of small samples can be made legitimately; and,
- Educators should rely upon MYSTAT, or at least a similar software program, when conducting statistical analyses of data.

Near the end of the book the author states that "action research is the most valid process for determining what works best in a particular situation" (p. 65). Even if readers are to assume that this statement is true, and it clearly begs clarification and qualification, this book presents action research in a narrow, overly rigid manner. Unfortunately, the book is not one that should be recommended to readers interested in expanding their understanding of action research.

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Wertsch, J.V., del Rio, P., & Alvarez, A. (Eds.). (1995). *Sociocultural studies of mind*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 252 pp., softcover.

Edited collections of conference presentations are often frustratingly heterogeneous and, at first sight, the present volume is no exception. Originating in papers presented at the First International Conference for Sociocultural Research, held in Madrid in 1992, the nine chapters that,

together with the editors' introduction, make up this volume have a more than usual diversity of subject matter, ranging from the complex history of intellectual politics in Soviet psychology to cross-cultural differences in the brain's "automatic switching mechanism" when responding to sounds of different kinds, and from the historical origins of writing and its relationship to speech, to the Fifth Dimension, an after-school programme of activities for underprivileged children in California. However, having reflected on the whole collection in the light of the editors' introduction, one realizes that this diversity not only represents the wide range of disciplinary interests for those who have embraced a sociocultural approach, but that it also constitutes a necessary first step in creating the cross-disciplinary dialogue that, it is hoped, will enable the human sciences to play a more useful role in addressing the major social issues that confront us.

As the title of the volume suggests, it is on *mind* that the cross-disciplinary dialogue in this volume is focused or, more precisely, on *mind in action*. For, as the editors explain in the introductory chapter, "the goal of a sociocultural approach is to explicate the relationships between human action, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical situations in which this action occurs, on the other" (p. 11). In this nexus of relationships, mind plays a pivotal role, both shaping, and being shaped by, the historically situated, tool-mediated cultural activities in which individuals engage together. Viewed in this light, the various chapters can be seen as contributing to an understanding of mind in action, each from its own disciplinary perspective, but in relation to one or more of the four main themes in terms of which the collection is organized.

The first theme concerns the choice of the unit of analysis for sociocultural research. Following the lead of Vygotsky and Leont'ev, who focus on joint activity as the site of the dialectical relationship between mental processes and sociocultural setting, Wertsch, in chapter two, proposes that the optimal unit of analysis is "individual-operating-with-mediational-means," or mediated action (p. 64). The advantage of this unit is that it avoids such false dichotomies as those between individual and social or between internal and external, treating them instead as complementary perspectives, or moments in the temporal trajectory of action. Furthermore, since the means, both artifacts and practices, by which action is mediated are specific to particular times and places, the choice of this unit counters the universalist conception of mind, which sees Western scientific rationalism as the end point of cognitive development, both for the individual as well as for the species.

Nevertheless, if all action is mediated, what is needed to give this concept explanatory power is differentiated examples of the ways in which specific culturally created artifacts enter into and, over time, transform the modes of action that they mediate. This constitutes the second theme of this volume, to which many of the chapters contribute. However, although each of the examples presented is convincing when considered individually, the differences between them with respect to the scales of space and time on which they operate – for example, the change from bamboo to fibreglass poles in Olympic pole-vaulting as compared with the change in the architecture of consciousness brought about by religious traditions such as medieval monasticism – make it clear that the concept of mediation is still in need of principled differentiation.

The third theme, addressed by several authors, is the mutually constitutive relationship between the individual and the social, and the formation of diverse identities within the continuity of a culture. Common to the proposals put forward here is the need to adopt multiple perspectives, recognizing that, whatever the focus of a particular analysis, development is simultaneously a personal, an interpersonal, and a community process, and that change takes place through the interaction of processes that operate simultaneously on the four temporal levels of phylogeny, cultural history, ontogeny, and microgenesis. It is against this background that intersubjectivity, considered as key to the means whereby intermental processes give rise to intramental ones in the formation of the individual subject, can be seen to be, like the dialogue through which it is enacted, “polyphonic nonharmonious concert characterized by synchronic movements, as well as by distinct, conflicting, and dissonant voices” (p. 183).

The final theme addresses the relationship between explanation and intervention in sociocultural research. As the editors emphasize, those who adopt a sociocultural approach do so, in part, because they are committed to helping to resolve contemporary social problems as well as to constructing cross-disciplinary theoretical frameworks of explanation. However, despite this avowed commitment, for most of the authors in this volume, explanation still takes precedence over intervention. Yet, as Cole's account of work in the Fifth Dimension illustrates, it is also possible to achieve these dual aims simultaneously, through interventions that seek both to create a cultural environment that will promote the development of those who participate, and to investigate the changes that occur in the mediating artifacts and practices as well as in the participants.

This latter approach to research, with its dual emphasis on improving action and increasing understanding, is of particular significance to educators, for it offers a way of bridging the divide between theory and practice, researchers and teachers, that has for too long bedevilled the field of education. However, this collection of papers is not addressed only to those involved in formal education, but to all who seek a more coherent and integrated theoretical framework as a means of making sense of and addressing the problems of our rapidly changing world. For those who are prepared to make their own connections between the disciplines represented, this volume provides an excellent tool for thinking with.

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Duffy, D.K. & Wright Jones, J. (1995). *Teaching within the rhythms of the semester*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 238 pp., hardcover.

*Teaching Within the Rhythms of the Semester* represents teaching as a composition of pragmatic and artistic components. Donna Killian Duffy and Janet Wright Jones present teachers with a score of strategies designed to enhance teaching and learning in postsecondary settings. More than one hundred specific suggestions for successful teaching are arranged by Duffy and Wright Jones, as they draw from relevant educational theory and insights gained in their "Activating Learning in the Classroom (ALC)" action research project. The authors provide sound advice for teachers to start a semester, sustain interest in the interim, and carry-through for a favorable finale. Although *Teaching Within the Rhythms of the Semester* takes its place among many other practical guides for educators, it does possess a particularly unique musical quality. Duffy and Wright Jones suggest that teachers attend to the individual elements of rhythm occurring within a semester and in the interest of successful teaching, alter accents, meters, and tempos.

The first several chapters in the book accent the importance of the pre-semester preparations in which teachers engage. According to the authors, getting a semester off to a good start is a worthwhile enterprise and has much to do with teachers anticipating successful outcomes and planning.