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Problem solving beyond the logic of things: contextual effects on understanding and solving word problems

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Abstract. Arguments are put forward in this paper that classroom word problem solving is more – and also less – than the urgent analysis of a factual structure, in the sense that it is essentially a species of a social-cognitive activity. Word- or story-problems, presented in classroom contexts, represent textual and pragmatic patterns of a certain grammaticality. To present a problem verbally to a student means to organize a fact in some way for the attention of a problem solver. There is not only the structure of the problem text itself by which situations are denoted, but there is also the stimulative nature of the social-pragmatic context which shapes the student's textbook-problem solving behavior over a long period of time.

The present paper discusses the results of several studies showing, for example, that subject matter related attitudes towards a problem frequently do not play an important part in the problem solving efforts; that students often solve problems correctly without understanding them; and that false contextual expectations can lead to abstruse errors of understanding and to peculiar solution attempts.

The studies indicate that students can become sensitive and skilful in perceiving and capitalizing on subtle textual and contextual signs pointing to the solution and anticipating its pattern. It seems that usual textbook problems let students get accustomed to certain courses of processing where a simple fact, like whether an equation works out evenly or does not, can stop the process or push it further. It is argued that the deeper reason for the observed textual and contextual influences on understanding and problem solving lies in a fundamental weakness of the student's epistemic control behavior. The psychological and instructional significance of the studies is discussed.

Introduction

Children learn to deal with text-problems as soon as they enter the highly structured setting of formal schooling in the classroom.[1] It is very likely that over many years the kinds and types of problem texts used in school, as well as the pragmatic-situative environment of their solving, shape the student's concept and style of problem solving. Nevertheless, the structure of commonly used problem texts, as well as of problem presentation contexts, are barely recognized as a topic in the psychological and educational literature of text-, word- or story-problem solving.

Problem solving is widely seen by psychologists and teachers as a process of analyzing a task situation by following its internal, factual "logic of things" (Holt, 1964), or as Wertheimer (1945, p. 33) put it, "the inner requirements of the situation". The tradition of "insightful" problem solving first arose with gestalt psychologists such as Duncker (1935) and Wertheimer (1945), and it has come to life again in cognitive science with the emphasis on the role of knowledge and understanding in problem solving. While for many decades psychologists discounted the phenomena of insight, planning and understanding, cognitive psychologists nowadays have adopted a quite different attitude towards thinking and problem solving. This attitude comes quite close to the views that Selz (1922), Duncker and Wertheimer had, or at least had anticipated, decades ago. Building adequate problem representations, goal-directed planning, inferencing and elaborating by using one's world knowledge, testing hypotheses, applying heuristics and comprehension monitoring are seen as basic operational building blocks of problem solving, as well as of the teaching of thinking skills (cf. e.g. Chipman, Segal and Glaser, 1985; Nickerson, Perkins and Smith, 1985). This paper will not argue against this view of problem solving at all. Instead, the perspective that I am going to illustrate is intended to complement a view of problem solving that may have been over-idealized.

Clark (1984) points out for language users in general: "Whether talking or writing, each narrator has certain intentions in selecting the content, presentational structure, and linguistic devices he does" (p. 58). To present a problem to a student in a classroom or an examination setting means to pose a factual or fictional situation for the attention of a problem solver. First, there is the wording, the specific content structure and linguistic form of the problem text itself in which situations, processes, actions or number relations are implicitly or explicitly expressed, questioned, commented upon, (not) excluded and finally, anticipated. Problem texts are grammatical in the many subtle ways they signal paths and goals pointing to the solution pattern and putting the student on the right track. Second, there is the presentational structure or setting, the tacit structure of the pragmatic or situational context that can provide quite significant hints to the solution of a specific task, and that also shapes the student's textbook-problem solving behavior. An important piece of this "context-knowledge" of even very young students concerning textbook math problems is that the problems must always make sense, that they are always solvable, that they work out neatly, that they usually do not contain irrelevant numerical information (i.e., everything that is numerical is relevant), that everything that is relevant is mentioned in the task, and that the explicit problem question which always accompanies the task is a reliable guideline in imposing a mathematical perspective on the task or in anticipating (Selz, 1922) the "operation gestalt" of the solution.

The present paper outlines and discusses the results of experimental and thinking aloud studies that show how linguistic and extra-linguistic or situational factors facilitate or impede the comprehensibility and solvability of problems. It will be shown how:

- strategies following "the logic of things", or factual attitudes towards a problem frequently do not play an important part in the problem solving efforts;
- students often solve problems correctly without understanding them;

- directionality and the goals of too many problem solving processes are so strongly anticipated by means of various textual and contextual cues that one can hardly speak of the solution any longer as a genuine achievement of the problem solver;
- ill-defined or false contextual expectations can lead to abstruse errors of understanding and to peculiar solution attempts.

Text and context related difficulty misjudgement

The problem text is just one aspect of the input in problem solving, as well as being just one of the guiding forces. Whoever observes students in classroom and homework situations can find again and again how few common textbook problems force students to do an in-depth semantic analysis, how many students are striving to orient their problem solving in response to a multitude of indicators in the context of the factual problem structure – and how they succeed. The experiment that we are going to report isolates the factor of "estimated or assumed task difficulty". This was done on the basis of observations indicating that students, often before or in place of a thorough analysis of the real content of a task, use context information to assess the direction and difficulty of a solution. The single task we employed in this experiment allowed us to manipulate the factor of "estimated task difficulty" in two ways: as a text factor and as a context factor.

Method

Four different settings of a problem I shall call the cyclist task were presented to ninth graders and to college students.

Table 1a shows the simple (S) and the more complicated (C) text version of the cyclist task. Both problem texts were accompanied by the sketch in Figure 1 and the basic distance-time formula. The formula was provided so that the high school students would not fail merely because they could not reproduce the formula from memory. Distance-time tasks like the one we employed belong to the basic math curriculum of junior high school. The task invites error because it often puts people off the scent by letting them simply average the three partial speeds. This temptation, which we found by presenting the task to a few subjects, seems to be greater or lesser according to how the velocities in the task are expressed. The two textual versions take these observations into account. While S, a suspiciously simple-looking version, might warn the average problem solver to be cautious with regard to a $(v_1+v_2+v_3)/3$ solution ("What's the difficulty here?"), the reassuringly complex version C induces the subject to expect rather the opposite: the problem solver finds at least one "difficulty" in the calculation of the partial speeds v_2 and v_3, and since, moreover, the following calculation $(v_1+v_2+v_3)/3$

works out evenly, he may think the problem is solved. Further, two co-textual additions were constructed with the function of explicitly inducing an expectation of either high (IDH) or low (IDL) task difficulty (Table 1b). The difficulty induction was made by associating the task to school-specific types of examinations. Different additions had to be developed for both the high school and the college subjects. However, the relation between IDH and IDL is assumed to be the same for both groups.

Four task settings resulted from the combination of the text versions with the co-text additions:

S(IDL) : induced low difficulty and the simple text version support each other. Quite a large number of $(v_1+v_2+v_3)/3$ solutions are to be expected.

C(IDL) : In contrast to S(IDL), v_2 and v_3 cannot be directly read off from the problem text but have to be worked out before the main calculation. This "element of difficulty", in combination with the IDL-addition, will probably make many subjects rather careless. Even more errors are to be expected than with the first setting – presumably the most errors of all settings.

S(IDH) : This version can be viewed as the complement to C(IDL). In the face of the high difficulty context, only a few subjects ought to accept a $(v_1+v_2+v_3)/3$ solution. Therefore, in this condition, the most correct solutions are expected.

C(IDH) : Since for many high school students, the preliminary calculations of v_2 and v_3 are expected to be of significant difficulty, it can be assumed that, for many of them, this difficulty is sufficiently taken into account by the IDH context. Others – and presumably most of the college students – will look for an additional difficulty and do some deeper semantic processing. Altogether we still expect a fairly large number of erroneous solutions, but significantly fewer than under the conditions C(IDL) and S(IDH).

68 Bernese junior high school students (median age 15) and 51 college students (median age 19) participated in the experiment, which was run in groups by two experimenters during normal class hours.

Hypotheses

Three main predictions underlie the experiment:

H 1 : For both text versions, a higher frequency of correct solutions is expected for the condition of an induced high-difficulty context than for the low-difficulty context.

$$[f+]\ S(IDH) + C(IDH) > [f+]\ S(IDL) + C(IDL) \Rightarrow [\ IDH > IDL\ ]$$

H 2 : In case of the induction of an equal difficulty, a higher frequency of correct solutions is expected under the S- than under the C-condition.

$$[f+]\ S(IDH + IDL) > C(IDH + IDL) \Rightarrow [\ S > C\ ]$$

Table 1a. Simpler (S) and complicated (C) version of the cyclist task

S: A cyclist is going over a hill. His uphill speed is 9 km/h (v_1), his downhill speed is 48 km/h (v_2), and on the succeeding flat part he is riding 18 km/h (v_3). All three parts are of equal length, namely 10 km each (d). What is the average speed of the cyclist for the whole trip?
[Reminder: speed (v) = distance (d) / time (t)]

C: A cyclist is going over a hill. His uphill speed is 9 km/h (v_1). His downhill speed (v_2) is by 6 km/h less than six times the speed of the uphill ride. The speed for the succeeding flat part (v_3) is by 10.5 km/h less than the arithmetical mean of the first two speeds (v_1, v_2). All three parts are of equal length, namely 10 km each (d). What is the average speed of the cyclist for the whole trip?
[Reminder: speed (v) = distance (d) / time (t)]

Table 1b. The additional co-text, including either low (IDL) or high (IDH) task difficulty

IDL: (induced difficulty low)
(both age groups)
The following mathematical task was presented in 1979 at a junior high school entrance examination in the Canton of Zurich. The task should hardly be difficult for you since at that time almost 70% of the candidates solved it correctly.

IDH: (induced difficulty high)
(high school students)
The following mathematical task is not that simple. It was presented last year at the college entrance examination in the Canton of Solothurn, where only one third of the candidates solved it correctly.

(college students)
The following mathematical task is not that simple. It was presented last year in the canton of Solothurn at the final math examination of College, where only one third of the candidates solved it correctly.

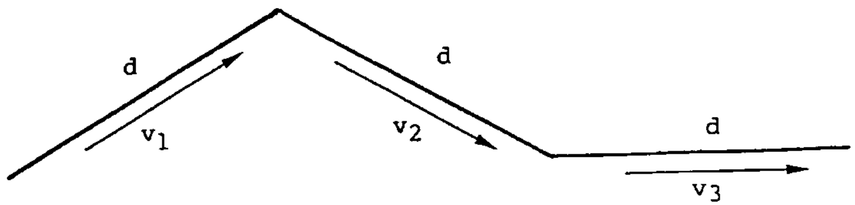

Figure 1. Sketch accompanying the cyclist task

H 3 : The highest frequency of correct solutions is expected for the condition S(IDH), the lowest for C(IDL).

[f+] S(IDH) > C(IDL) ;

[f+] S(IDH) max ; [f+] C(IDL) min.

Results

The written solution protocols (Figure 4 shows some examples) were first assigned to two restrictively defined categories:

Correct solutions

Subjects were assigned to this category if they first calculated the times for each of the three distance-segments, summed up the times and then put the sum as the denominator into the basic formula (c.f. example A in Figure 2).

$$v_{average} = \frac{3s}{\underbrace{\frac{s}{v_1}}_{t_1} + \underbrace{\frac{s}{v_2}}_{t_2} + \underbrace{\frac{s}{v_3}}_{t_3}} = \frac{30}{\frac{10}{9} + \frac{10}{48} + \frac{10}{18}} = 16 \text{ km/hour}$$

Incorrect solutions

Incorrect solutions corresponding to the pattern "average the partial speeds" (aps-pattern; c.f. example B in Figure 2):

$$v_{average} = \frac{v_1 + v_2 + v_3}{3} = \frac{9 + 48 + 18}{3} = 25 \text{ km/hour}$$

This analysis turned out to be too rigorous, especially for the high school subjects, where only 10% solved the problem completely correctly. Moreover, 30% of the protocols could not be classified because of all sorts of errors. Therefore, three raters analyzed the protocols again along the following lines: any student whose solution attempt clearly showed the calculation of the partial times t_i – even if this was done by the wrong formula (v/s instead of s/v ; c.f. examples C in Figure 2) – was assigned to the correct solution category. Due to the very specific structure of the task, virtually all subjects could be classified either as solvers, according to the above (weaker) criterion, or as non-solvers of the average-partial-speed kind. The frequency data for the disjoint categories of the correct (+) and the incorrect aps-solution (-) attempts of both subject groups are shown in Table 2 and Figure 3. I shall now discuss each of the three hypotheses (cf. Figure 4).

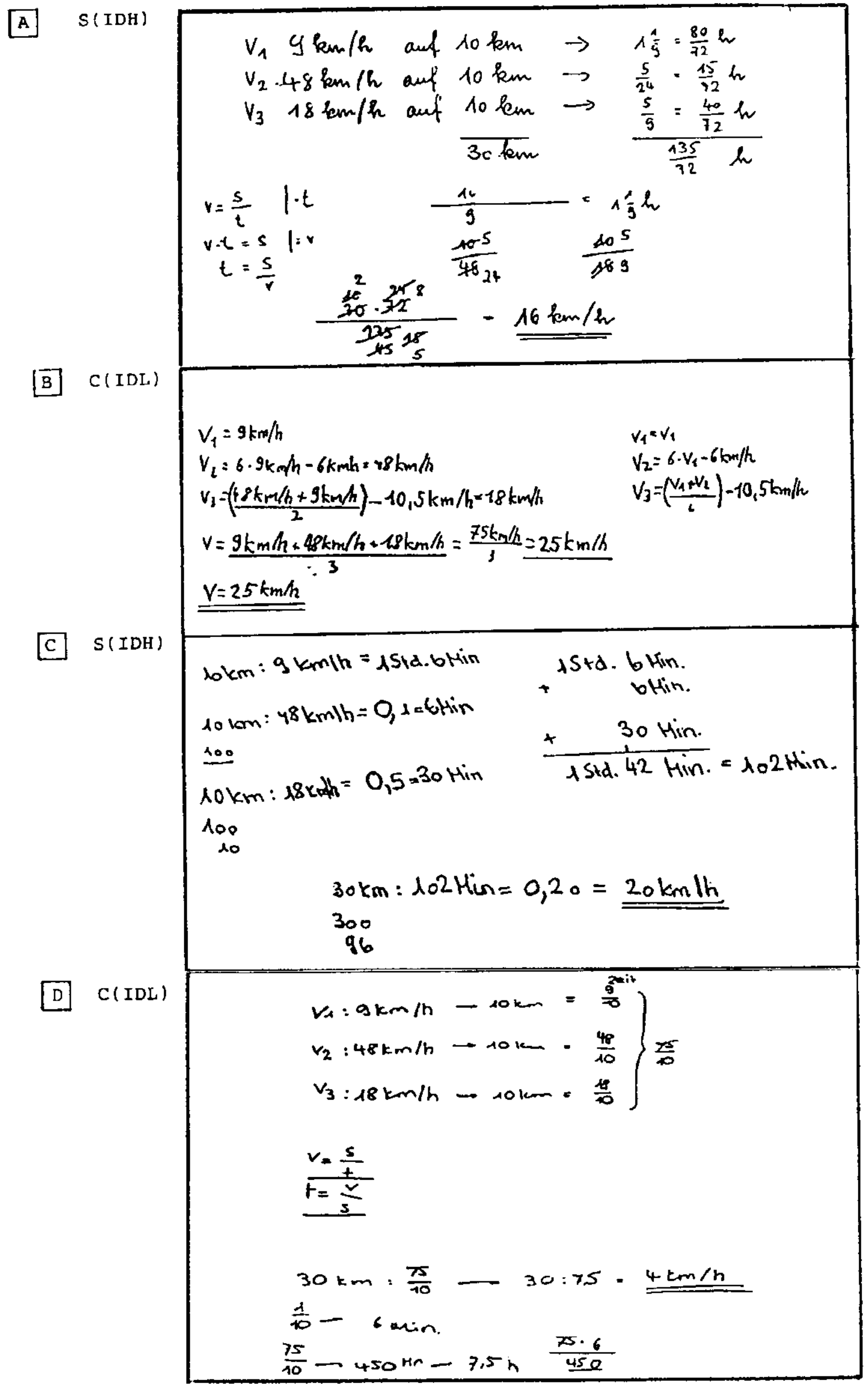

Figure 2. Solution protocols from the cyclist task

Table 2. Frequency of correct solution of Junior High School (JHS) and College students (Coll) in the cyclist task

		Difficulty induction					
		IDH		IDL		IDH & IDL	
Task version	Group	f	f %	f	f %	f	f %
S	JHS	8	45	3	21	11	34
	Coll	13	100	10	77	23	88
C	JHS	6	32	1	6	7	19
	Coll	10	83	9	69	19	76
S & C	JHS	14	38	4	13		
	Coll	23	92	19	73		

S: "simple" version; C : "complicated" version
IDH: Induced-difficulty-high condition; IDL: Induced-difficulty-low condition

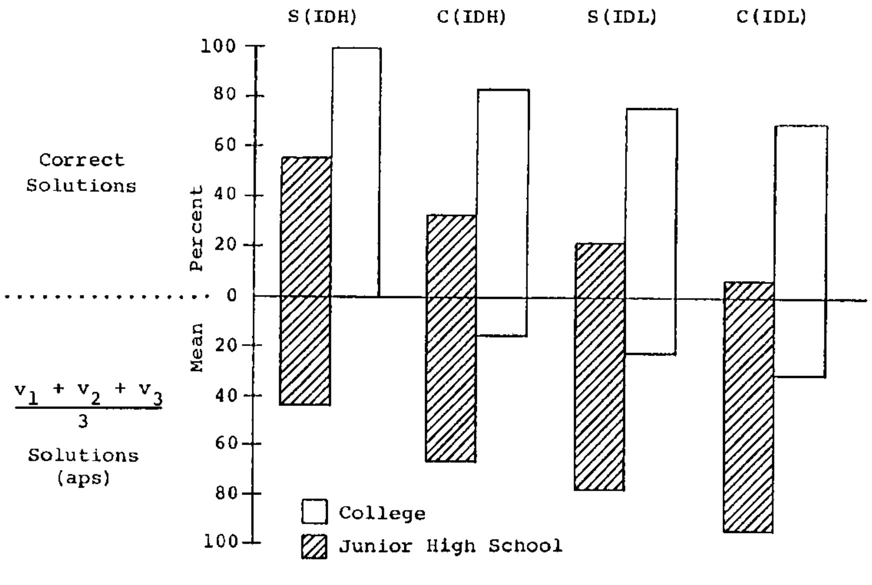

Figure 3. Solution frequencies in the cyclist task under the two types of difficulty induction (IDH, IDL) and the two task formulations (S, C). Notice the complete disjunction between the correct solutions (+) and the erroneous average-the-partial-speeds solution (-).

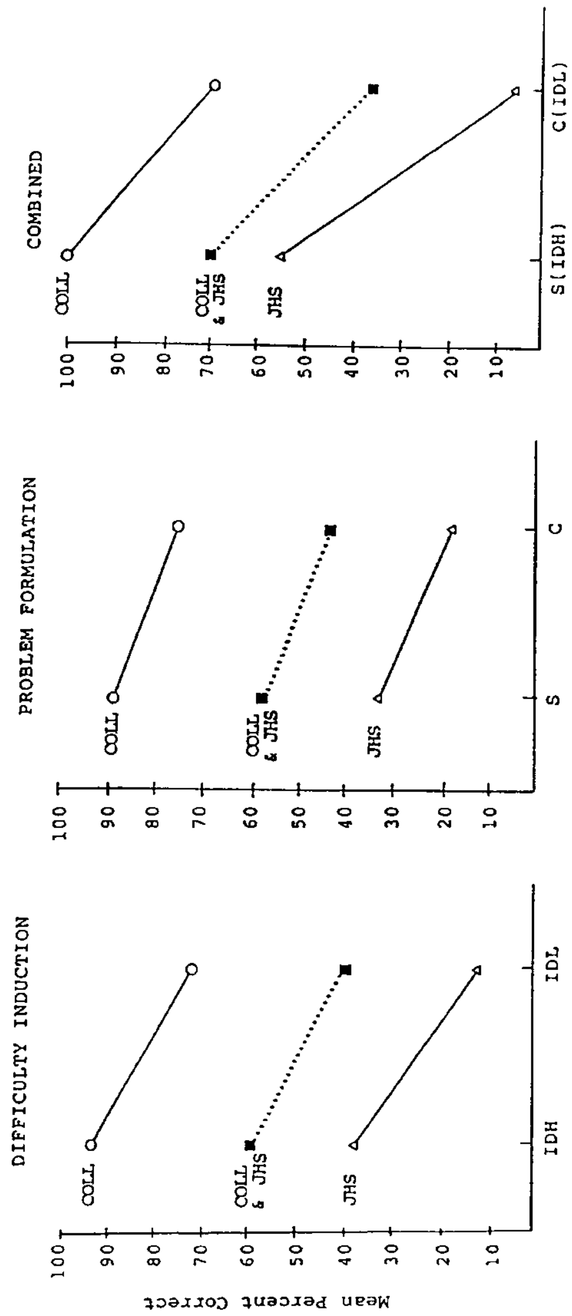

Figure 4a. Effects on solution frequency in the cyclist task of difficulty induction, problem formulation, and the combination of both (Maximum-Minimum-Frequency hypothesis H3). Open circles are College students, open triangles are Junior High School students.

Effects of difficulty induction [H 1 : f(IDH) f(IDL)]

The reader will have noticed that the high school students produced relatively few correct solutions (floor effect) whereas the college students showed only a few aps-solutions (ceiling effect), a fact which weakens the statistical analysis. But this was the price we had to pay for using the same task at two very different school levels. The frequency data confirm our first hypothesis that there are more correct solution attempts under the IDH- than under the IDL-condition (High school: $\chi^2(1) = 4.18, p < .02$; College: $\chi^2(1) = 3.43, p < .03$). There were no differences in solution times between IDH and IDL.

Effects of problem formulation [H 2 : f(S) > f(C)]

The direction of the S/C-comparison for both groups is consistent with the previous prediction, but only the combination of the groups shows a statistically reliable difference ($\chi^2(1) = 3.04, p < .05$). We later tested 50 more college students, comparing only S(IDL) with C(IDL), and found a reliable difference in the expected direction ($\chi^2(1) = 3.65, p < .025$). So, even an expert-like group, for which simple algebraic transformations were by no means a source of difficulty, was sensitive to the induction of a low-difficulty context. What was highly affected by the problem formulation were the solution times of the junior high school students, but not of the college students, which makes sense: even if the algebraic transformations in C were not an obstacle for solving the problem, high school students took a lot of time to do them, while the more expert students – due to their much better subroutine skills – showed no difference. Further, both groups needed more time to come up with the correct solution than with an incorrect one.

Maximum- and minimum-frequency [H 3 : S(IDH)max ; C(IDL)min]

The presentation of the very simple task associated with a high-difficulty context showed the most correct solutions, the association of the enriched task with an induced low-difficulty context the fewest. H 3 can be confirmed for both groups (High school: $\chi^2(1) = 4.94, p < .025$; College: Fisher, $p < .05$).

Table 3. Percent correct conversions of v_2 and v_3, and percent correct solutions under condition C(IDH) versus C(IDL) for Junior High School (JHS) and College students (Coll).

	Correct conversions of v_2 and v_3	Solution frequency
IDH		
JHS	79	32
Coll	92	83
IDL		
JHS	88	6
Coll	100	69

Discussion

Three out of four high school students and one out of five college students were wrong in their solution of the bicycle task, succumbing, as it were, to its appealing and co-textual features. The results support our view that a contextual orientation ought to be seen as a constitutive factor of comprehension in word problem solving. Students of very different levels of expertise interact with a problem text not only in a fact- or subject matter-related way, but also orient themselves – as in the present experiment – towards a co-textual context. The most striking difference in the data is that between the conditions S(IDH) and C(IDL). Is this difference due to a direct effect of the differences in the formulation of the task, or is it to be explained as an indirect effect due to an interaction of the textual characteristics with the difficulty-induction characteristics? We can clarify this issue by analyzing the C-version solution protocols with respect to the question of how well the conversions of v_2 and v_3 were done under the conditions IDH and IDL.

Table 3 shows that a simple and direct impact of the conversions of v_2 and v_3 on the solution process – under both IDH and IDL – can be excluded: neither are there ID-related differences in correct conversions within both subject groups, nor is there a significant difference between high school and college students. The observed difference between the groups would be even smaller if one did not take into account the mere calculation mistakes of the high school students in the course of working out v_3. Because there is a difference between C(IDH) and C (IDL), in any case, we have to conclude that there is an indirect effect of a (per se) very simple conversion operation required by the C-version of the task.

We can think of this effect as follows: the induced difficulty causes students to expect complications. A high school student under IDL hardly expects any serious difficulty. Nevertheless, the conversion of v_2 and v_3 provides at least a minor difficulty, but there is no reason to seek further complications. There is also the (disarming) fact that the incorrect solution works out evenly, and therefore most high school students – and also 31% of the college students – become careless and stop without any further epistemic control. The situation is very different when a IDH context is given: the student expects a rather complicated situation. He is probably more observant, and "eingestellt" (Luchins, 1942) on a task with a certain number of complications. At least some of these expectations are fulfilled – probably a little bit more for the high school than for the college students: the conversions have to be done without any mistakes, which takes some time (at least for the high school students), but does not provide a significant difficulty for them. Thus, there remains an unfulfilled expectation; there must be a further difficulty: the student carefully recalls the problem situation again, and in some cases succeeds in finding the crucial point. The student may be even more unsatisfied under the condition S(IDH). The task elicits high expectations of complications which may never be fulfilled. The expectations are not met by any conversions or the required preparatory operations. The contradiction between the activated level of expected task difficulty and the initial representation of the problem or the first problem model is maximum, and therefore challenges the student to process the problem more deeply, with the result that under S(IDH) the most correct solutions are found. Thus, the additional calculations in the C-versions impede the solution process not by imposing any substantial difficulty on the task, but by inducing, as a moderating variable, in-depth processing.

Therefore, the problem solver proves himself to be not only one who is driven by "the desire... to go on from an unclear, inadequate relation to a clear, transparent, direct confrontation – straight from the heart of the thinker to the heart of his object, of his problem" (Wertheimer, 1945, p. 236), but also one who, after having built an initial problem model by using all available textual and contextual clues, allocates the amount of resources in processing time and energy he expects to use. One could put it this way: a problem solver, after or while reading a specific task, allocates resources to be used in a solution attempt, or opens, so to speak, a sort of "cognitive processing energy account", against which all steps of processing get recorded. If there is nothing to "debit" the account – given a high "energy credit" – as under S(IDH), the problem solver will seek to work himself deeper into the material as if, as under C(IDL), his expectations were more or less fulfilled. In this view, to gain a deeper level of comprehension also means to activate or to strengthen the control functions. There were quite a few subjects under IDH who first worked out $(v_1+v_2+v_3)/3$, but later discarded this solution.

The classroom context of problem solving

How a problem is understood and solved, and how difficult it is, depends in the first place on its wording as a task. However, as the following examples will show, even the situational context within which a problem solving process takes place may have a significant influence on the understanding and solving of a problem.

How the solving of a problem can become a joke

One can study the context- or situation-dependence of problem solving processes by looking at what impact the negation of the situation has. Suppose a college student is given the following task during an oral examination in physics:

> *Show how one can measure the height of a skyscraper with the help of a barometer.*

Suppose further that the student answers correctly: "One can determine the height of the building by reading off from the barometer the air pressure difference between road and roof. Air pressure decreases by 1 Torr (= 1 mm Hg) approximately every 30 feet."

It could easily happen that the candidate does not know the answer. This would probably result in a bad grade.

Sensitized by my interest in context phenomena in problem solving, I came across a short text, reporting how a candidate answered this question in a completely different way.[2] He produced not only one but a whole series of answers – not to the pleasure of the examiner – according to the report:

(a) You take the barometer with you to the top of the roof, tie it to a long rope and lower it to the road. Then you pull it back up and measure the length of the rope. This length corresponds to the height of the skyscraper.

(b) ...or you take the barometer outside on a sunny day, put it on the ground and measure its height and the length of the shadow. Then you determine the shadow of the skyscraper and calculate the height of the building with a simple proportional equation.

(c) You take the barometer with you going up the stairs of the building. In the course of this you mark the wall in "barometer-units". The only thing you have to do afterwards in order to get the height of the building, is to count the "barometer-units". This is, of course, a very clear but rather crude method.

(d) You take the barometer to the top of the building. Then you lean out over the edge of the roof. You drop the barometer and measure the falling time with a stopwatch. Then you determine the height of the building by the law of falling bodies: $d = \frac{1}{2}gt^2$.

(e) If you were interested in a more subtle method, tie the barometer to a rope and let it swing as a pendulum. You determine the value of g (gravitational force in the formula $T = 2\,(1/g)^{1/2}$ on street and on roof level. Then you can work out the height of the building from the difference between g_1 and g_2.

(f) Finally, if you do not want me to commit myself to a physics solution, then there still are many more possibilities. For example, you could take the barometer and knock on the caretaker's door. If he answers the door, then you speak as follows: "Dear caretaker, I have here an exciting barometer. If you tell me the height of the building, then it's yours".

What remains to be added is that, of course, the candidate also knew the "correct" solution. What happened? Obviously, a problem solving process suddenly became a sort of a funny joke. I hope that everyone will feel sympathy for the refreshing originality of the candidate. The little story sheds light on the examination context as a familiar problem solving setting, and it illuminates very nicely what can happen if its more general and task-specific constraints are disregarded by the candidate. One can look at what happened from the point of view of "functional fixedness", a phenomenon that was discussed first by Duncker (1935) and many others after him who studied the effects of "Einstellung" (Luchins, 1942; cf. Greeno and Simon, 1984). From the functional fixedness point of view, quite a few of the candidate's solutions would have to be seen as very difficult to retrieve, because they abstract, with regard to the functional character of the object barometer, rather remote and unusual features. A barometer is an instrument for measuring air pressure. This is its primary function value. It would probably be very hard to come up with application-contexts where the barometer is used as a pendulum, a shadow-producing object, or a bribe for caretakers. Anyone who is able to see a barometer under such a variety of only faintly moulding features demonstrates creative behavior, though it presupposes a context in which the behavior is also perceived as original or creative. The typical examination context is not such a context, and so there was much argument about the value of the candidate's proposed solutions in our little story. And one must almost certainly assume that many examiners, were they exposed to similar situations, would feel insulted, provoked, or made a fool of. But why, really? I am first going to attempt a more general answer and then explore two guesses, which follow from it.

Oral examination situations are behavior settings (Barker, 1968) with a defined structure. The external course of events is mostly fixed, similar to a script (Schank, 1977). The actors in the situation play roles with well-defined expectations. They are, as it were, partners who have entered a temporary limited speech act contract. "For interaction to succeed, (both) participants must agree in their social situation definition" (Leodolter and Leodolter, 1976; cited from Forgas, 1985, p. 19). This "social contract" (c.f., Mead, 1934) includes, for the candidate and the examiner, specific speech act obligations and rights. Greatly simplified:

- The examiner is entitled and obliged:
  - to question the candidate on a previously defined topic and to present problems to be worked out by the candidate, and
  - to judge the candidate's responses using criteria related to the subject-matter.
- The candidate is entitled and obliged:
  - to prepare himself/herself to be examined about topics previously defined or agreed upon, and
  - to obediently take the posed questions and to answer them after a short period of thinking.

It is not my intention to elaborate on this oral examination context, even if this were possible. It is only important here to see that such a context exists, and that we can assume that the candidate, the examiner and the reader of the story know it very well. It is this examination context, whose inherent obligations are

systematically and intelligently ignored by the candidate above. Not that the candidate would not live up to the expectations of the external examination script. On the contrary, it can be assumed that the candidate:

- was very polite,
- gave the examiner, while articulating his responses, a well-meaning and zealous impression, and
- did not miss any questions.

Basically, there is only a single behavior expectation that is systematically and consciously negated by the candidate: the expectation to cooperate with the examiner (Grice, 1975) and to understand and answer the question in a situationally defined way. This means that a solution is only acceptable if:

- it can be regarded as, in a certain sense, intellectually demanding,
- it is founded on knowledge of the physics topics previously agreed upon, and
- the barometer is regarded in its central function value as an instrument for measuring air pressure.

Because of the lack of explicitness of these expectations, the candidate does not neglect the letter but the spirit of the examination context. He irritates the examiner in the same way that he amuses the reader of the story. With his solutions, none of which is based on the barometer's central function, but on remote functional and dispositional features (extension, weight, exchange value) of the object, the candidate reduces the examination to absurdity.

Not infrequently, exam questions require, like many text problems, a certain sensitivity or cleverness in "reading off" the intentions, anticipations and expectations from the text and the context of a problem. Whoever has this sensitivity for context, together with intelligence and knowledge,but deliberately does not take it into account, can subvert a problem situation until it develops into the purely comical.

The authority of contexts and its impact on comprehensibility

The Swiss writer Peter Bichsel in his third Frankfurt Poetics lecture (1982, p. 49) remarked about his reading of Goethe's "Joseph":

> Maybe I would have broken off my reading if the author had been unknown to me. For example, I could have stopped reading because I could have assumed that the book was sort of sanctimonious, or, if you want, simply a book for people and not a book for literature. You may well interpret that as snobbery. But my literary judgement is dependent on the context: I read that book in the context of Goethe and in the context of German literature.

A student confronted with a problem in a classroom expects something comprehensible and solvable. And he knows that he is expected to produce an answer, even when there may be none. From the standpoint of divergent fantasy, one might call the sense-seeking behavior of students creative when dealing with nonsensical material or unsolvable problems, and sometimes there really are some such solutions. But this is not the rule. Most of the time one encounters rather questionable or even ugly ways in which students try to understand and solve a problem at all costs, because of the characteristic-moulding factor of context and its dubious impact. I would like to call that questionable impact *the lack of intrinsic cognitive processing*. Here are four examples:

Example 1

> I asked the class: "Are you sure that this result is really correct?" Most of the pupils were plainly dumbfounded by the question, surprised that it should be asked. Their attitude was clearly: "How can you expect us to question the solution you have given us?" The question was strange to them, it touched the very essentials of what school, teaching, learning meant to them. No answer. The class was silent (Wertheimer, 1945, p. 26).

Before Wertheimer asked the students this, he showed them how one can work out the area of a parallelogram using a very troublesome, unpleasant and senseless method, but one that would lead to a correct result. Wertheimer comments further:

> Let the reader consider whether he has not often learned things in school that way. Is not it the way in which perhaps you have learned differential and integral calculus? Even theorems of plane and solid geometry? Of course you had good reason to feel that the teacher was teaching sensible, serious things you had to learn. But did you have the possibility of another kind of learning, of really grasping? Could you do anything but put up with and submit to the teacher's demonstration, step by step, when you were unable to see why he did just this, then that? Could you help just following obediently as the steps dropped out of the blue? (p. 26)

While following an explanation or a demonstration, students often do not get really challenged enough to understand what is presented to them and to evaluate it by means of their own criteria of consistency and comprehension quality. Such criteria might not yet be available, but what does teaching do to help these develop?

The following examples may shed some more light on what is happening here.

Example 2: How old is the captain? [3]

97 first and second graders were given the following task:

> "There are 26 sheep and 10 goats on a ship. How old is the captain?"

76 students "solved" the problem using the numbers in the task. Here is a similar task and a verbal protocol:

> "There are 125 sheep and 5 dogs in a flock. How old is the shepherd?"

Protocol: ...125 + 5 = 130 ...this is too big, and 125 – 5 = 120 is still too big ...while ...125 / 5 = 25 ...that works ...I think the shepherd is 25 years old.

Example 3: Boats in the port

> "Yesterday 33 boats sailed into the port and 54 boats left it. Yesterday at noon there were 40 boats in the port. How many boats were still in the port yesterday evening?"

We gave this task to 101 fourth- and fifth-graders with the result that:

- 100 children produced a numerical solution; only one fifth grader rejected the task by writing that it was ill-defined and unsolvable,
- only 28 children doubted their result when they were asked afterwards to judge their certainty of having solved the problem correctly; 5 of the 28 children said that their solution was wrong; and
- only 5 children out of the 101 called the formulation of the problem into question by saying the task was somehow difficult or strange, and this, after being asked to comment on it.

Example 4: The dispensoric theory of education

> What distinguishes thinking people from others are their critical abilities. Cultures emerge and decline. This is a law of all biological life. You can actually find an overall structural dialectic between innovation and stagnation. The Greek philosophers, above all of them Euklyptos, have long since pointed out this fact. It is even true for the climate and the change of seasons. Human society resembles a garden, in which the most beautiful plants occur besides ugly weeds. In order to acquire a refrigerator, a worker in England has to work ten hours, in Argentina about ten times that much. On the other hand there is hardly a village in Africa, where you could not find a transistor radio. Education in Africa is different from education in the United States or in Europe. The validity of a mathematical formula is not restricted by the borders of continents. The subject of the natural sciences is nature. If natural science is everything, then everything is an object of natural science. Therefore, landscapes, forests and transistor radios build a unit together. What counts in boxing is to knock somebody out. The stronger wins against the weaker. Beauty as a category of nature does not play any role in boxing. The phenomena of this world have to be described and ordered before you can put them into a theory. Nothing else is the basis of dispensoric theory, which claims to capture the

phenomena of the world in a certain totality. Trying to apply the theory to education, means to found a comprehensive theory of education which ultimately gets its final confirmation from practice, where practice simply has to be understood as individual and societal behavior. The dispensoric theory of education therefore is not merely an epistemological principle but above all it provides an orientation for changing and improving the individual and societal conditions of life, which eventually will be capable of abolishing cultural and societal differences (From: W. Reyem, Dispensoric Theory and critical society, Oldenburg, 1980, p. 33).

The text is syntactically correct, made up in a pseudo-scientific or scholarly way, and it even roughly follows a grammatical text pattern: general philosophical introduction, relatively concrete and diverse pieces of evidence, claim, scope and practical relevance of the theory – there is even a complete reference. But the text is, as intended by its author (Meyer, 1981), complete nonsense, put together from general and empty phrases, and inconsistent on every (macro) level of deeper understanding. Nevertheless, college students, teachers and university students were so much taken up with this text that they spent hours trying to interpret it.

Meyer gave the text to his undergraduates in education shortly before graduation, saying that the text represented the newest educational theory, with the following result::

> "In a two-hour class there was discussion about the goals of dispensoric theory, its anthropological, philosophical and metatheoretic foundation, its method. None of the future graduate students uncovered the text as rubbish. The homework was done bravely…"

We presented the same text to 11 former teachers who were graduate students in education at the university (in two groups of 7 and 4 participants), asking them for a structured statement. The students did not know that this was to be an experiment. They were in class with me, and they knew me well. The students received written instructions and some questions about the text:

> Here are the instructions:
>
> (a) You have about 10 minutes to think about the enclosed text.
>
> (b) Study the text carefully. Do you understand what its basic meaning is?
>
> (c) What does the text mean to you?
>
> (d) After you have gone through the above questions, please answer the following questions.

The multiple choice questions (all assuming, of course, that the text made sense) were concerned with the (in)compatibility of four principles in educational theory with the text, and with the judgment of the adequacy of several titles given to the text. Furthermore, the students were asked to write a concise one-sentence summary of the text. After finishing, every student got an additional sheet:

> You have worked for some time on a text which you probably had not read before. Were you able to express your impression concerning content and comprehensibility of the text on your answer sheet?
>
> If you want to add something, please do it here.
>
> - I have nothing to add : ...
> - I asked myself / I'd like to add the following thing:...

The results of this particular experiment were as follows:

- None of the subjects broke out of the context of trying to do a good job: nobody walked out or protested by not working on the task or by writing nasty comments. All students obediently handed in their almost completely filled in sheets;
- 5 out of 11 used the additional sheet in order to express their doubts or their displeasure about the style and the content of the text ("additively composed", "shallow text", "very bad style");
- 8 students wrote a one-sentence summary; and
- all students judged the difficulty of the text as being high.

Conversations with the students after the experiment showed clear signs of the social pressure created by the situation:

- As a university student I was not able to do anything but assume that the text was okay and the difficulties of comprehension were solely mine.
- I said to myself: Okay, I have to understand that; and then I read the text over and over until I thought I understood it.
- First, I just did not know at all any more. But the experimenter, at the university, you know, had an effect on me like an authority. That made me perceive the text as sensible.
- Was I really so stupid? I was frustrated when the others – after exchanging some helpless glances – all started to write. I simply had to make the text mean something to me.
- This experience reminds me of the Milgram experiment.
- I'm shocked about my trust in authority.

The students who raised clear doubts about the content of the text suppressed them or adopted the context until the additional sheet quasi-opened a valve to express them.

The authority of contexts: discussion

These examples show that there are factors in the whole classroom setting which can heavily impair the quality of comprehension in problem solving. The studies and observations highlight the difficulties that students of all ages have in both rejecting an ambiguous or apparently senseless or unsolvable task and in simply admitting that one is unable to come up with a sensible solution. Classroom contexts seem to be authoritarian in the way that they maintain a leitmotif of sense expectation similar to what Hoermann (1976) called "sense constance" (Sinnkonstanz). A student who is given a textbook problem or any kind of text-related task assumes it to be basically sensible, unambiguous and solvable. And he feels strongly that he is required to produce a solution, to "assimilate" the sense, even where there is none. There are at least two interpretations to what seems to be an "always-answering-schema": first, it may reflect the pressure to answer sensibly, created by an authoritarian social context. Classroom problem solving, particularly the extreme case of solving a problem on the blackboard while talking aloud, has always had an aspect of self-presentation and competition, which may even include a moral component. Second, always responding to a question may simply reflect the cognitive failure to understand what a question really means. As Langeveld (1984) from a developmental psychological viewpoint said, early understanding of questions by children is not yet strongly related to its content, but rather has a rule-like communicative feature of always eliciting an answer. While the first interpretation probably fits examples (3) and (4) quite well, the second interpretation may be adequate in explaining the number crunching and adventurous guessing behavior of (2), perhaps also partly of (3).

Problem solving situations are role-defined social-cognitive and epistemic behavior settings, embedded in and legitimized by the broader institutional authority of schools. Problem presentation contexts anticipate in many ways the structure of the legitimate solution space. To question the setting or parts of it as a fundamental restructuring of a problem situation model, seems to be extremely difficult, not only because of the courage needed to leave the field (Lewin and Dembo, 1931), but also because it is normally quite hard to see why a situation is opaque, ambiguous or unsolvable. Also, students get almost no experience in solving ill-defined or unsolvable textbook problems. Almost every systematic dealing with ambiguity and unsolvability is factually excluded from textbooks, from curricula, and from the school setting where it even seems alien.

Sometimes it is easier to solve a problem than to understand it

Problem texts contain a variety of signs pointing to or anticipating the solution (Reusser, 1984). There are railings along which one can feel one's way on a

solution path about which one may be not quite certain, but which is far from being completely dark. The way text problems are formulated and how they work out can provide subtle hints to the problem solver which may let him accept a solution even if he does not understand it. To come up with a correct solution and be quite sure about it may not always mean that one understands it, even if the solution was inferred by several steps. The discrepancy between the acceptance of a solution and its understanding by the problem solver may even go so far that the problem solver is neither willing nor able to see the discrepancy at all. This may have something to do with some questionable preconceptions of teachers – and psychologists – about how students solve text problems. The last two examples will illustrate this facet of our story.

How the phrasing of the problem may fail its deeper understanding

The designing and the results of a first study can be briefly summarized. 56 fifth to eighth graders were given the following problem in class with one of the problem questions.

> 30 students in a class were asked if they read or play an instrument in their spare time: 16 students read, 13 students play an instrument, and 5 students have neither of these hobbies.
>
> (a) How many students enjoy both hobbies in their spare time?
>
> (b) How many students who play an instrument, do not read?
>
> (c) How many students who read, do not play an instrument?

We found out two things: first, there happened to be no false solutions in the group which got question a; all students correctly responded with "4". Second, as could be expected on the basis of cognitive complexity (two-step reasoning chain), in the groups with either question b or c, the rate of correct solutions dropped from 100% to 25% for (b) and 29% for (c), respectively, but with the error "4" strongly dominating for the false solutions (66.5% in b, 62.5% in c). In addition, we collected a number of thinking aloud protocols. These protocols show very clearly that the students who had first produced the correct answer "4" to version a, could rarely solve version b or c. There were several cases where the child, even if he/she had solved version a before, again came up with the same answer "4" to b or c. However, several children who solved both versions of the problem and responded with the most frequent solution "4" showed considerable signs of doubt or hesitation in their protocols about the correctness of their answer and about the quality of their understanding or analysis of the problem.

Obviously, most students in the experiment who determine "4" as the correct answer in version a, do not make use of an adequate problem model, e.g., a correct set- or Venn-diagram where the answers to all versions of the problem can be read off. The fact that the answer "4" is the most frequent response independent of the explicit problem question indicates that the solution "4" does not necessarily indicate an understanding of the problem. What then is the source of this error? Consider the phrasing of the grammatical form of the problem:

WS = 30 : 16 = R, 13 = PI, 5 = NONE . How many [...] ?

First, a (whole) set is introduced. It gets connected to its succeeding information by colon. Then, separated by semicolons, three quantity propositions occur, followed finally by a question. What could make more sense and what could be more reasonable than to assume that the three quantity propositions after the colon are the breakdown of the first mentioned quantity, which itself is interpreted as the whole set that gets broken down? Thus, from this analysis and from the thinking aloud protocols, it becomes quite clear what the subjects do: they add the three subset quantities (16 + 13 + 5) and relate the sum to the whole set. For a subject who does this mainly for "syntactic" reasons (stimulated by how the numbers are outlined and connected in the problem text), and not because he/she fully understands what the addition and the comparison (subtraction) operation mean, it is a very small step to take the result of the comparison operation (34 - 30 = 4) for the correct answer of the problem or – by default – for the most reasonable guess. When the problem structure is not really understood, this default strategy works, whatever the problem question may be. Moreover, the present task lends itself – because of the magical arrangement of the numbers – to being processed not only blindly but also in a consistently wrong way.

The problem solver in the classroom context is accustomed to calculating numbers even if he has only a vague and probably insufficient understanding of the problem. That this strategy is successful in a very broad range of classroom problem solving should make us think not only about the invariance of problem presentation contexts, but also about the characteristics of problem texts we commonly employ in textbooks.

To work out (un)evenly – a reliable hint for being on the right (wrong) track

Our last example deals with a rather unusual, but we think interesting, and hardly explored phenomenon. I have observed more than once how embarrassed students get if they feel themselves caught using thinking processes which are considered to be inelegant; how they seem to be subject to a certain censorship which they do not realize or perhaps not want to admit. The out-loud thinker in the classroom, the blackboard problem solver seems to be sometimes more factually oriented, more reflexive and deductive than the "private" thinker, possibly because of the didactic context which highly values deductive, insightful problem solving steps and ignores its darker side – the diverse processes of restructuring and generating new hypotheses. A typical and unfortunately quite reliable sign that one is on the solution path is the observation that the intermediate and/or final calculations for a

problem work out evenly. Since this type of guiding forces or clues are not considered to be the sort of inferences students should rely on while solving math problems, it should not surprise anyone that such clues are not reported by the students (in examination contexts, on the blackboard). Maybe students are not even aware of using this kind of internal feedback, or they may suppress it after the fact, and therefore sometimes report verbalizations to the teacher or experimenter that are rather idealized, cleaned-up versions of what they actually did (see Schoenfeld, 1983, for related observations).

The following protocol is due to a rather accidental constellation, where we were not looking at this kind of phenomena at all. We gave the following task to a former elementary school teacher:

1175 Swiss francs are to be shared amongst three siblings, inversely proportionally to their age. A is 12 years old, B 18 years and C 21 years.

Here is the slightly shortened protocol:

"...inversely proportional, i.e., the youngest gets most, the oldest least... (10") ...well, instead of 12 : 18 : 21 inversely, i.e. 21 : 18 : 12 ...one can cancel that down to 7 : 6 : 4 ...(30") ...altogether there are 1175 francs to distribute ...as a unit one would probably best use 1/17th , because 7 + 6 + 4 = 17 ...okay, I am going to divide the amount by 17 and then do the conversion (on a piece of paper)

1175 ÷ 17 = 69.1
 155
  20
   3

[1] (after 2'): There is a flaw in my reasoning! The proportion has to be different, of course... 1/4: 1/6 : 1/7... it has to be reciprocal... that gives me another unit... 4 x 6 x 7 = 1/168th... i.e. 1/84th works also... okay, now I am getting things straight... (works on paper)

$\frac{1}{4} : \frac{1}{6} : \frac{1}{7} : \frac{21}{84} : \frac{14}{84} : \frac{12}{84}$: ...that turns out to be for the unit

1175 ÷ 84 = 13.9 ⇒ 14 ...now convert that...

$$\begin{array}{r} 21 \times 14 = 294 \\ 14 \times 14 = 196 \\ 12 \times 14 = 168 \\ \hline 658 \end{array}$$

[2]:(after 2'): (calculates) 1175 ÷ 47 = 25 ...⇒ Ah! I see, of course, you must not divide by 84 ...this is not the correct unit... you can ignore that and work only with the numerator... 21 + 14 + 12 = 47 . The inverse proportion is 21 : 14 : 12, this corresponds to the task: The youngest should get the most and the oldest the least ... okay, now...

(calculates on paper)

A→ 21 x 25 = 525.-
B → 14 x 25 = 350.-
C → 12 x 25 = 300.-

[3] 1175.- "Okay, now it's correct."

There are three crucial places in the protocol where the subject significantly changes her problem model and comments on her changes:

- At [1], it is most likely that the division does not work out evenly, which leads to a restructuring or at least makes the subject re-evaluate whether she had been wrong up to that point.
- At [2], the solving process was driven one step further because not all the money could be distributed.
- At [3], everything works out evenly, which induced the subject to accept the solution.

It is interesting that in a later conversation R. firmly believed that her thinking process was only guided by insightful inferential steps. From how she recalled her solution process, it was obvious that she did not notice the places [1], [2], and [3] to be of any significance for the guiding of her thinking or the final acceptance of the solution. On the contrary, my attempt to show the subject how she had (most likely) also followed very pragmatic control decisions while solving the problem, at first elicited quite strong defense mechanisms, probably based on a very strong ethos of insightful, pure subject-matter-related thinking that the former teacher possessed. It required a careful reconstruction using the tape that finally let her agree with my interpretation of her solution.

Discussion

The moral of our story is that classroom word problem solving is more – and also less – than the urgent analysis of a factual structure, in the sense that it is essentially and constitutively a species of *social-cognitive* activity. As a process of making sense of a problem text it is inherently tuned to its presentational context, to the classroom as a "behavior setting" (Barker, 1968). Word problem solving, as well as other types of language uses, is inextricably tied to its surrounding social psychological environment and to the processes or strategies that regulate this context, or are derived from it (Clark, 1984; Forgas, 1985; Smith, 1983; Van Dijk, 1983; Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). A full understanding of our findings requires not only study of the failures or strengths in individual concepts, skills or procedures – as has been focused on in most research in problem solving – but also requires the understanding of the "social contract negotiated in the classroom between teachers and students" (Kilpatrick, 1985, p. 12). The problem solvers in our studies did far more than build up a problem representation or a problem model by deriving it from the "text base" (Kintsch, 1974) and their domain-specific knowledge. As language users do in general, the problem solvers relied on contextual as well as textual strategies (Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983) in order to capitalize on the problem-posing context as a diverse informational source. Problem solvers build more or less adequate situation models (Johnson-Laird, 1983; Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983) which are both textually and contextually based constructions including the representation of:

- the *factual or "real" task structure* which is often cued (c.f. Nesher and Teubal, 1975) to a high degree by linguistic form features of salience and focus, and by all sorts of directional hints in the didactically worked-up problem text, anticipating the course and goal-pattern of the solution (Reusser, 1984);
- the *general characteristics of textbook problems*: well-defined with one solution which the teacher already knows; the solution is obtainable with one's own resources; calculations working out evenly indicate being on the right track; confinement to relevance and non-ambiguity: everything that is relevant to the solution is stated in the text, and everything that is stated is relevant; the explicit problem question is always present and highly informative; all problems are solvable;
- the *classroom as a "format"* (Bruner, 1985), as a *"social-cognitive and meta-cognitive matrix"* (Schoenfeld, 1983, p. 330), or as a behavior setting with its "social grammar" (Ervin-Tripp, 1972): It consists of norms and expectations regarding attitudes and strategies subjects ought to adopt (or avoid) while working on a problem, such as trying hard, being successful, always producing an answer, applying recently acquired knowledge and skills, focusing on the explicit problem question, etc.

Summary and conclusions

I think the studies highlight aspects and strategies of "understanding" in text-related problem solving which go beyond the mastery of concepts and discrete skills. For the most part, those aspects and strategies have been neglected in the literature. They are also probably largely ignored by students, teachers and textbook designers.

What we need above all are new types of textbook problems which more naturally enforce that kind of understanding that gestalt psychologists like Wertheimer and Duncker were concerned with and have described so beautifully. "The stereotyped nature of school word problems" (Nesher, 1980) employed in classroom problem solving, maintain a set of "grammatical features" or invariant properties which make them susceptible to the generation of task-specific biases and to all kinds of *artifactual solution strategies*. Students can become sensitive to and even very skilful in perceiving and capitalizing on very subtle but powerful cues pointing to the solution and anticipating its pattern. For example, by letting most elementary arithmetic and algebra word problems work out evenly, one imposes an aesthetic feature on a supposed real world context that does not really exist outside the textbook world. The unfortunate effect is that students start relying on this aesthetic feature by using it successfully as a means of checking whether they are on the right track while solving a problem and determining whether the solution they have reached is adequate.

Other important properties of didactically worked up problems include consistently used key words, the presence of informative questions, and the restriction that only relevant information is used (Reusser, 1984). Moreover, many textbook math problems are not intellectually challenging because they are formulated as *semantically poor, disguised equations* instead of as *thinking stories* (Willoughby, Bereiter, Hilton and Rubinstein, 1981) or *situation problems* (Reusser, 1985), which do not allow students to *bypass* a thorough semantic analysis in order to solve them. Math situation problems, for example, are seen as verbal descriptions of mathematical actions and episodes which contain an important goal, or which are structurally unsatisfactory: fragmentary, contradictory, or containing a gap. Situation problems provide *comprehension starting points* rather than being "locked up" and well-cued tasks. As such they can be used by teachers to initiate and foster processes of text comprehension and of mathematization by their students.

The major result observed in most of our studies is the extent to which textbook problem solving contexts can impair the quality of comprehension. Most problems do not ensure that the student has to "feel the difficulty in a situation" (Dewey, 1910) in order to generate a sensible question which could be seen as an intrinsic or semantic function of the problem situation (Reusser, 1989, in press). Students are also normally not urged to control their solutions in a way that they can relate the answer back to the raised question and to some metacognitive criteria of comprehension quality. This leads to the next conclusion.

I think the deeper reason for the situational and contextual influences on understanding and solving of our problems lies in a fundamental weakness of the student's epistemic control behavior. Most of our subjects showed very weak schemata or epistemological standards of comprehension quality, of truth, and of coherence. These factors have not been studied well enough yet, but they do have an important educational impact. We should keep Kerschensteiner's (1931) postulate in mind that students not only how to solve a problem, but also should learn how to *control* – while working on their own – the adequacy of a solution in some

demanding, intersubjective way. Our subjects showed very strong tendencies in their understanding to rely on textual and contextual properties non-intrinsic or alien to the task structure, rather than to monitor the course of their ongoing comprehension and to evaluate the final state of comprehension by their own domain-related or topic-intrinsic epistemologies (Reusser, 1984). There is currently a growing body of research recognizing the importance of comprehension monitoring, epistemological standards and belief systems (Baker, 1985; Kitchener, 1983; Markman, 1977; Ryan, 1984; Schoenfeld, 1983; Wood, 1983). Many major questions are still open: how do epistemological standards of comprehension quality emerge in cognitive development? How can they be described properly, and how can they be taught or strengthened in order to establish them as dominant guiding forces in comprehension, as intrinsic components of the process of comprehension in "self-directed men" (Riesman, 1950).

An even more fundamental question arises from the previous reflections. It can be illustrated by a widely neglected characteristic in Wertheimer's (1945) monograph about "productive thinking". The issue is ultimately an ethical one. It is the question of the personality of the problem solver, of his/her overall style of problem solving and attitude toward objects and problem situations which reflects the "sincerity of his attitude toward truth" (p. 235).

> I want to remark that the feature of straightness, honesty, sincerity, does not seem peripheral in such a process. Generally speaking, it is an artificial and narrow view which conceives of thinking as only an intellectual operation, and separates it entirely from questions of human attitude, feeling and emotion (p. 179).

Wertheimer made a sharp distinction between processes which he called "structurally blind", "arbitrary", "ugly" and "foolish", and processes he vividly described as "honest", "sincere", "positive and reasonable". This distinction was ultimately based on the didactic philosophy of Wertheimer that clearly emphasizes the important role the social-cognitive setting plays in problem solving, especially as it shapes the metacognitive or epistemological mentality of the personality of the problem solver.

> Thus problems of personality and personality structure, structural features of the interaction between the individual and his field are basically involved. In connection with the latter we have also to realize the structure of the social situation, the social atmosphere one is in, the "philosophy of life" developed in the behavior of the child or person in his surroundings; the attitude toward objects and problem-situations eminently depends upon these factors (p. 64).

In my judgment, Wertheimer's view has some problematic aspects when he looks at problem solving from a largely ahistoric and idealistic viewpoint. In his dualistic picture of productivity in thinking there is basically little theoretical room for the unrestricted play of fantasy in finding a solution, and for the gradual improvement and development of epistemological – or ultimately ethical – standards. The way Wertheimer describes many phenomena may even reinforce the tendency among teachers and students to suppress socially unacceptable problem solving strategies in the classroom, to sweep them under the rug, so to speak. I can easily agree with a description of an ethos of honesty and sincerity in thinking which mirrors the Cartesian ideal of clarity, transparency and logical consistency – of rationality. It seems to me, however, that Wertheimer seems to normatively reward this kind of thinking, and denigrate other forms, and thus contributes to the tabooization of associative, tentatively scanning, disjointed and trial-and-error-like thinking ("tâtonnement", Claparède, 1934), which is by no means only driven by "the desire ... to go on ... straight from the heart of the thinker to the heart of his object, of his problem" (p. 237), but which is nevertheless a constitutive and essential part of even expert problem solving (cf. Selz, 1922; Koestler, 1966).

In light of Wertheimer's analysis, and with respect to the development of epistemological standards, it seems useful to look at two issues separately: the issue of on-line monitoring of comprehension or progress toward solution, and the issue of comprehension per se, the acceptance of a solution after having checked it carefully. In other words, there are two contexts. There is the context of hypothesis generation or solution finding, i.e., how the fruitful hypothesis actually gets cued. And there is the context of its testing and evaluation, i.e., how the solution stands up to close examination. While in the first context even expert problem solvers – and certainly every problem solver in real life – will capitalize on every available and remote clue, novice problem solvers have to learn that there is this second context of careful testing of one's solution (hypotheses) against intersubjective structural standards. To rely on contextual and situational factors in the on-line guidance of problem solving and comprehension is not inherently bad. Ultimately, context is not "beyond" the intrinsic logic of things, it is an essential and constitutive part of a larger picture of problem solving. Where most of our subjects really fail is in the evaluation of their solutions. After they have found them, they do not evaluate or test them seriously. The main problem to be addressed is two-fold: making teachers, students and designers of textbooks aware of the diversity of processes and strategies that can play a role in finding, reporting and justifying a "rational" solution to even a simple text problem; and studying how students can be taught to test their solutions against increasingly demanding epistemological standards of clarity and consistency, of proof and explanation.

If and how a solution to a text problem is successfully found depends on many factors we do not all manipulate consciously and insightfully. Classroom problem solving has a tendency not to take into consideration, or even to suppress, non-intrinsic factors that maintain no inner relations to, or are not derived from, the content of the problem. But these factors exist in the different manifestations of trial and error behavior, of guidance by surface features of problem texts and of reliance on social-cognitive cues from the context. Whoever denies this, overemphasizes the well-orderedness, the pure fact-relatedness, even the rationality, of thinking. This observation does not mean, however, that teachers should not continue to uphold the standards of insight and comprehension in problem solving.

Footnotes

1. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at AERA 1986 in San Francisco.

2. A. Calandra (1964) Die Barometer Geschichte. Schweizer Schule, 18, 1980.

3. The example stems from a French source: "Grand N No 19: Dans nos classes. Quel est l'Ége du capitaine, par l'équipe "élémentaire" de L'IREM de Grenoble, 1980.

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