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BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Teaching, learning, literacy in our high-risk high-tech world: A framework for becoming human*

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Teaching, learning, literacy in our high-risk high-tech world: A framework for becoming human

Gee, J. P.

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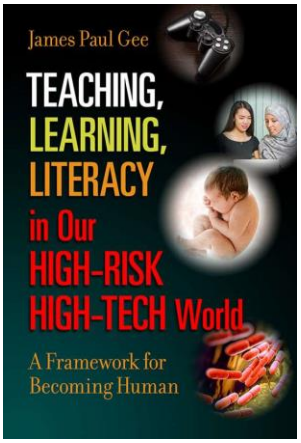

Gee's *Teaching, learning, literacy in our high-risk high-tech world: A framework for becoming human* is first and foremost a book that cares deeply about humanity and the human spirit. As Gee says in the conclusion, "This is not a book about educational policy. It is about human development" (p. 157), and it is readily apparent that Gee writes with a passion for impacting the lives of students in all manners and forms. Making the child count, matter, and belong, as well as keeping "the long battle for human dignity going" (p. 161) is central to Gee's view of teaching in this book, and he manages to be critical while still remaining fundamentally hopeful for the state of education today. Gee casts his eye toward a wide variety of issues, simultaneously pulling from research in disparate fields to present a broad overview outside a singular restrictive silo of scholarship, and providing remarkable insight into human development and learning. The book flows seamlessly as Gee draws examples from biology and neurobiology, psychology, linguistics, discourse analysis, and cognitive science, as well as farming, video games, and religion, offering the reader a multitude of entry points to engage with the book's central topics. Additionally, the writing style is informative yet approachable, allowing for an ease of access compared to sometimes-obfuscating academic prose, and making the book well-suited for audiences of all kinds: academics and non-academics alike, parents, policy-makers, educators, and students.

In terms of structure, the book is divided into 14 chapters totaling just under 200 pages. Gee lays out the thematic organization of the book in Chapter 1, *Introduction*, focusing on how we move from knowing to becoming and then to being, and discusses the processes behind the complex systems of our embodied experiences. Furthermore, Gee describes the educational differences between the past and current state of the world and between individual and collective human experiences, as well as the ways they polarize and divide us. In this way, the work is pertinent and timely for not only our professional lives, but also the way we interact in the world as a whole. The introduction closes on his goals for the book: to present his perspective as it concerns learning and development—stressing that he is not writing for conversion, but "mutual mulling" to "escape narrow academic silos" and to "reach a wide range of readers" (p. 6). Largely, Gee succeeds in these goals.

Though Gee never explicitly groups chapters together, the related ideas of certain chapters can easily be thematically tied together and seen as sections of the work overall. Chapter 2, *Experiences and perspectives*;

Chapter 3, *Memory and imagination*; Chapter 4, *Play and talk*; and Chapter 5, *Talk and language development*, form Section 1, revolving around experiences, imagination, and talk. Chapter 2 defines two key terms that he returns to throughout the book, starting with +*experiences*: experiences where learners have an action, emotionally care about the outcome in a way which is meaningful to them, and have been helped by someone to pay attention to the most relevant pieces of the experience to learn from it. Gee argues that "most deep human learning is rooted…in +experiences" (p. 14). The other term Gee defines is *committed testers*, or "people who respect evidence, seek ways to falsify their own beliefs, and engage in civil critical discussions with others who not (sic.) share their beliefs or values" (p. 15). Here Gee posits that the education of our students should focus on creating more committed testers, that the long haul "to truth and peace is contingent on our being able to engage in critical discussions where we compare, contrast, connect, and debate different perspectives … on important issues and problems, and perhaps adapt and change some of our own" (p. 16). The chapter closes by addressing his view that the practicality of this claim depends on what the end goal is for human development, stating his own goal that early development and education should prepare us to be *resilient* and *insightful*, as well as helping us to become *proactive agents*, *deliberate learners*, and *good choosers* (for definitions, see p. 17). Chapter 3 draws from cognitive science to explore memory. Gee argues that +experiences are the key to learning and are stored in an "experience resource base" (p. 24), allowing people to recognize and make decisions based off of patterns they find there. He warns of confirmation bias, though, calling on evidence that highly educated people are just as prone to it (Kida, 2006) to support his belief that the current educational system is not producing the committed testers he advocates for. He presents a view of "memory as future focused"—similar to imagination—which can be more important to a child's success than "memory as accurate historical record" (p. 29), as good choices are made by imagining different options and what results they lead to, based on past memories. Chapter 4 expands on this idea of memory as imagination and +experiences by adding play (with its benefits of freeing us from the fear of failure, and being a place where we can test assumptions and take risks), nurturing experiential talk (i.e., talk that is topically sustained), and the importance of playful horizontal learning (i.e., learning from activities without worrying about climbing a skill tree) over vertical learning. With this foundation set for how we experience, engage, and learn, Gee connects to literacy and how our experiences in the world and the vicarious experiences we acquire through talk, texts, and media merge to create a well-integrated resource base where the parts enrich one another. Boosting this resource base is the sustained talk of adults, ultimately aiding in literacy development. This transitions into Chapter 5, as Gee focuses on language acquisition, discussing vernacular varieties and implicit and explicit language. Gee promotes the use of extended explicit talk for the enhancement of a child's development, which prepares the child for the type of talk often used in schools. Without this, children may find communication by explicit talk strange, and teachers who are not aware of the different types of talk may misread this struggle. Feelings of exclusion can occur as a result, sometimes compounded with different cultural beliefs regarding explicit talk. The closing of Chapter 5 segues from this concern directly into identity, the focus of the next section of the book.

Chapter 6, *Identity and activity*; Chapter 7, *Identities*; Chapter 8, *The Pareto principle and identities*; and Chapter 9, *Relational identities* dig into identity from a variety of angles. Chapter 6 focuses on actions, using language to design "how you want your audience to see you" (i.e., speaker or writer design), how the audience should respond to identities you have taken on (i.e., recipient design) and "carry out an action" (i.e., action design), as well as how listeners can be compliant or resistant to these designs (pp. 59–60). These actions together create an *activity ecology* (p. 64), which people use as part of a wider identity system. There is a difference, however, between *doing*, *knowing*, and *being*. Chapter 7 addresses the idea that schools often fail here by pushing for doing without a judgment system to guide people on what, why and how to do something—without the real people (real mimes, musicians, physicists, etc.) who are being these things as mentors and guides. Gee's proposed fix is the distributed learning system model, where there is not only one mentor or teacher, but a system with different places to go and different sorts of tools (linked by and through technology) that bring students to multiple people who serve as mentors (p. 78). Supporting this, in Chapter 8, is the Pareto principle, the concepts of collective intelligence (Levy, 1999), and wisdom of the crowd (Surowiecki, 2004). Using examples from video games like World of Warcraft, Gee shows

how groups comprised of people with diverse backgrounds, skills, and +experiences work and learn together around a specific activity. He also demonstrates how individuals in these groups can be masters, adept, or lay people, with varying levels of identity affiliation and knowledge about the judgement systems and values of the group. Schools often confuse having a job in an activity with *being* something. Chapter 9 explores identity relationships further, introducing *relational identities* (i.e., identities imposed on people) and whether or not people accept the label, do not care about it, reject it, or are conflicted about it. Gee claims these relational identities efface diversity within groups and their "myriad real differences," efface individuality, and efface history (p. 99). Gee argues that only focusing on relational identities is not what makes collective intelligence work and advocates for diversity in collective intelligence groups by asking us to consider "that they are X is important (because it affords and constrains the experiences they have); *how* they are X is even more important" (p. 103, emphasis added).

The next section encompasses Chapters 10 and 11, which discuss affinity spaces in both the real and the digital world. Chapter 10 walks us through Gee's journey to become a gamer and other journeys in physical *affinity spaces*, "spaces through which people with a shared interest or passion can move back and forth to develop into and be a certain kind of person" (p. 110). We share these affinity spaces with *affines*, or others who enter that space, as well as fellow travelers who overlap in subspaces and home bases (key places) of the larger affinity space. In Chapter 11, *New affinity spaces*, Gee reframes the discussion toward spaces that are "a physical and virtual meld" (p. 117). The chapter centers around the example of a fan fiction writer on the internet and examines the various ways technology mediates the affinity spaces she inhabits and the skills she acquired there (to varying degrees of mastery). The chapter culminates by posing the question, "how do we meld good physical spaces and good virtual spaces in the name of learning and transformation?" (p. 128). Gee asserts today's world is full of these melded systems, and the journeys between and through them are what enable development.

Lastly, Chapter 12, *Who are we?*, and Chapter 13, *Frameworks and reflective discussions*, form the final group of chapters and shift the viewpoint toward a macro perspective, tying together concepts from the previous 11 chapters. In Chapter 12, Gee calls again for collective intelligence and committed testers to learn in school to think well and engage in a team sport toward the betterment of human kind and to learn to have critical discussions where the point is not trying to convert others. Chapter 13 explicates further how we need to understand the fact that humans need to belong, to count and contribute, and we must first learn how to listen to the core beliefs of a person—their *frameworks*—and then engage in reflective discussion. The chapter ends with an example of what happens when these frameworks clash, and how, in these moments, we need to bring goodwill into these discussions. Gee admits to not knowing how exactly to bring goodwill into the highly unequal societies we often find in the world, but is certain "the place to start is good teachers and good teaching in and out of school" (p. 156).

Chapter 14 is the *Conclusion*, a 4-page coda to the work that contributes a practical ending to the book. It attempts to answer the question *What can I do?* with an extensive bulleted list of 20 short summaries of the topics covered as well as advice on how to implement them in our lives. The list provides an excellent resource which the reader can return to, and serves as an easy way to briefly re-familiarize readers with the core tenants of the work long after the first read.

While the breadth is a strength of the book overall, it is an understandable consequence that what suffers some is a lack of depth on select topics. Though high-tech is mentioned in the title, readers may find the examination of the technology-related aspects to be less prominent than in Gee's other works. While he introduces personal stories about his experiences with games, those looking for more about gamification or other aspects of technology in education may be best served to supplement this book with Gee's longer book on video games and literacy (2007). Furthermore, Gee's anecdotal style may lead some academic readers to search for additional articles with more empirical research mindsets. However, it bears repeating the extensive range in this work is remarkable and one of its many positive attributes.

In conclusion, I would offer three ways *Teaching, learning, literacy in our high-risk high-tech world* could be used in higher education. One would be implementing the book over multiple weeks in an undergraduate

class (particularly for pedagogically-focused classes), as the length of the chapters creates easy-to-digest chunks that can be split up into smaller sections and serve as guiding curricular themes with additional assignments to flesh out the concepts. Another use may be as an introductory reading for a graduate-level course on any of the various topics mentioned in the book, giving a birds-eye view of the topic outside of one academic silo before delving deeper into the scholarship relating to the specifics of the chosen field. Lastly, and more generally, the book is an incredible tool for any reader wishing to step back and recontextualize, to reexamine, and to incorporate other silos of thought and discover new connections when examining the broader issues of human development. Gee gives a view from the mountaintop in this work, and for this opportunity, the book is a welcomed and exciting contribution to the field.

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