

Teaching, learning, literacy in our high-risk high-tech world: A framework for becoming human, 2017. By J. P. Gee. Teachers College Press. 184 pages. ISBN 978-0-8077-5860-1

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Introduction

In this book Gee draws on years of study in literacy, learning, and gaming culture to reconceptualize a future for education that confronts current global issues of peace, sustainability, and the battle for human dignity. Gee takes a deeper dive into how human development impacts teaching, learning, and literacy in today's complex, tech infused world. This book offers insights in light of current global pandemic contexts. Gee suggests that teaching, learning, literacy, and the use of technology should start from a place of goodwill, while acknowledging that education spans within, across, and beyond the boundaries of home and/or school-based contexts.

Potential Audience

The intention of this book is to reach an audience passionate about teaching and learning in current, contemporary global contexts. Academics can find conceptualizations of literacy, learning, and human interactions. Teachers and parents can relate to the real-life experiences of learning and schooling. Educational activists will find fodder for their push toward change in teaching and learning. Policy makers will survey the future-forward thinking for insights and trends. This book is positioned for K-12 and higher education contexts but provides insights for those outside the education sector.

Scope of Book

Gee builds a premise that human development, particularly his conception of our human need for action and identity (BE – DO – KNOW), is bolstered when integrating technology into teaching, learning, and literacy development. He states most “deep human learning is rooted (is founded, originates) in +experiences” (p, 14). These +experiences help embed learning into long term memory through mindful and focused events. This learning results from actions, caring, and well-managed attention. This book explores the role these +*experiences* play in shaping our

perspectives, cognition, and identities. Gee pleads against segregation and isolation, or siloed teaching and learning spaces, in order to build educational structures to fulfill our human primordial need to BE-long, BE-known, and BE-needed. This book argues that the “key goal of schooling and human development is the creation of people who are committed testers, people who respect evidence, seek ways to falsify their own beliefs, and engage in civil critical discussions with others” (p. 15). This is an important contribution to discussions in light of pandemic and post-pandemic educational planning.

Content and Organization

Gee begins by mapping out the story he is about to share, within a framework of being, knowing, and becoming. In each successive chapter, he explores the importance of +experience, memory, play, talk, identity, relationships, and frameworks for teaching and learning, within today’s complex, politicized, divisive, and digitally connected landscapes. Gee posits that deep human learning doesn’t fit in current schooling environments so, “thanks to new technologies and new forms of participation, new ways of teaching and learning are proliferating” (p. 157).

Gee fluidly integrates personal anecdotes into each chapter to build meaningful understanding between ideas, frameworks, and theories. Gee shares his notion of affinity spaces, which he described as forms of social organization that are “geographically distributed, technologically mediated, and fluidly populated social groupings” (p. 119). He positions himself in affinity spaces from gamer culture to being Catholic, from goat farming to defining sausages, in order to share characteristics of these social collaborations enhanced by digital technologies. He suggests that tech enabled, socially structured, learning spaces require a new type of architect. These architects of learning are “experts on how people feel in and move through spaces, and act and interact in spaces” (p. 128) that are physical, virtual, and blended. In light of pandemic requirements for remote and online learning, Gee provides insight for educators and leaders.

In this book Gee explores the wisdom of the crowd and shares the Pareto principle, described as the 80/20 power rule whereby 20% of the people involved in an activity are the “generators of ideas, inventions, products and knowledge” (p. 81). This is contrasted to the value of collectively intelligent teams, the power of smart groups, and cross-functional and interdisciplinary teams. Technology, as Gee suggests, is changing the nature of expertise and suggests that activity-based identity can combat the well-established constraints of relational identities. Gee focuses less on specific technological advancements and more on the limitations, affordances, and potential that technologies enable in relationship to human cognition, social interaction, and the development of human frameworks for teaching and learning. He expounds on the idea of humans becoming committed testers, truth seekers through civil discourse (small d), engaging in communities of Discourse (capital D), and sense makers to confirm and combat confirmation bias and brain bugs, described as the unconscious tendencies of our brains to think poorly.

Content Review

Strengths

One of the strengths of this book is the focus on human elements relevant in teaching and learning not the infinite technology applications that dominate current perspectives. Particularly

notable in current pandemic-driven teaching and learning environments, Gee places importance on face-to-face interactions as primordial and foundational. Technology is a means to this end, when distance and barriers interrupt the human need to “belong, count, and contribute” (p. 145). Gee’s emphasis on reciprocity echoes his plea for reflective discussions while thinking about truth as a journey toward gradual convergence among peoples, to “form a better life with one another” (p. 146). Gee champions the human superpower of pattern seeking in order to ensure that each individual, in formal or informal education spaces, achieves a “vital sense of counting and mattering as valued knowers and doers” (p. 18). Words to heed as the world pivots to online and remote teaching and learning resulting from pandemic constraints.

Another strength of this book is the focus on identities and relationships as key factors in how technology impacts teaching and learning. For example, Gee explores how mentoring shifts learning from knowing to doing and being within judgement systems where mentors “set the standards, norms, values, and ways of proceeding in the domain to be learned” (p. 72). Gee suggests that these mentoring relationships within current educational settings require dramatic paradigm shifts, yet can be leveraged using technology to provide authentic, distributed teaching and learning systems focused on passions, interests, and deliberate practice.

Criticisms

In the field of education, current definitions and terminology confound our understanding of literacy. Using the term literacy within the book title is a teaser, without a clear connection to the socio-cultural paradigm from which Gee views literacy. Nor does Gee provide a clear delineation on how literacy is positioned within teaching and learning. Gee does little in this book to specifically explore conceptualizations of literacy, expand on writing he has done on this topic (Gee, 2015), or position this work within the taxonomies of literacy suggested by Stordy (2015).

At times Gee questions formalized educational structures, schools, and traditional forms of teaching. Many who problematize formal education as standing in the way of more progressive visions of teaching and learning with technology (Kohn, 2008) may see Gee as a voice to further their arguments. Gee hints at the potential for learning found in affinity spaces as an alternative for in-school teaching. In this text, Gee briefly explores affinity spaces, as a means of engaging and learning with others through technology mediation, but a fuller examination of this topic can be found elsewhere [see *Literacy in Education* (2015a) and Gee’s seminal work, *Semiotic Social Spaces and Affinity Spaces: From The Age of Mythology to today’s schools* (2005)]. While he may recognize the current clash between educational frameworks, Gee lays out some lofty goals for education – resiliency, agency, self-directed, insightful, and decision making (p. 17). Gee suggests and shares hope that school transformations will expand opportunities for brain and identity development to flourish within social groups that share judgement systems.

Gee misses an opportunity to investigate the issues of technology and algorithms in the pursuit of ‘respectful attention’ in teaching and learning, which he describes as respectfully listening, reflecting fairly, acting with goodwill, and consulting with people different from ourselves who challenge our beliefs and values. Gee suggests that how we react to what the world ‘tells us’ through technology enabled conversations, particularly if done from a place of goodwill, may lead us collectively to a better world. However, Gee neglects to probe into issues and high risks found within the power dynamics of algorithms, data analytics, surveillance

cultures, and artificial intelligence. Gee avoids mention or consideration of algorithmic powers and barriers that maintain virtual silos and echo chambers within academia or social networks. These algorithmic barriers can dictate and determine human discourse, particularly when using the internet becomes self-fulfilling, re-emphasizing confirmation biases, and preaching to the choir. Gee overlooks an opportunity to push for deeper discussions about the risks currently found within technology enabled teaching and learning spaces, where algorithmic choice making, click counting, or eye gazing are considered as valid measures of student engagement and learning.

Summary

This book explores little new territory in the field of teaching, learning, and literacy and Gee does little to critically analyze the high-risk world of technology in terms of privacy, security, safety, equity, data breaches, or analytics. Yet, in this book Gee presents a critical, human development perspective to the use of technology in education. This book comes from Gee's deeply rooted research background and his '+experiences' in how humans learn, become literate, seek affirmation, develop identity, and share judgement systems. His call to action in this book is for truth seekers and truth testers, within and outside formal educational settings, who create new knowledge within networked, collectively intelligent teams, as a response to the complex, global problems humanity is currently facing. Gee cautions against siloed and narrow expertise, and beware those who try to sell the perfect solution to today's educational problems. Among his suggestions for educational revitalization, he begins by connecting and integrating the acts of knowing, doing, and being so that every child and every teacher "authentically counts, matters, and belongs" (p. 159). For those struggling to conduct teaching and learning within pandemic driven shifts from physical face-to-face spaces to digitally supported educational endeavours, there is much in this book that provides hope for the future. For those who have an interest in the future of teaching, learning, and literacy, this book is a call to humanity.

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