



The Anti-Education Era: Creating Smarter Students through Digital Learning

James Paul Gee

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One of the first champions of the positive effects of gaming reveals the dark side of today's digital and social media

Today's schools are eager to use the latest technology in the classroom, but rather than improving learning, the new e-media can just as easily narrow students' horizons. Education innovator James Paul Gee first documented the educational benefits of gaming a decade ago in his classic *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Now, with digital and social media at the center of modern life, he issues an important warning that groundbreaking new technologies, far from revolutionizing schooling, can stymie the next generation's ability to resolve deep global challenges. The solution-and perhaps our children's future-lies in what Gee calls synchronized intelligence, a way of organizing people and their digital tools to solve problems, produce knowledge, and allow people to count and contribute. Gee explores important strategies and tools for today's parents, educators, and policy makers, including virtual worlds, artificial tutors, and ways to create collective intelligence where everyday people can solve hard problems. By harnessing the power of human creativity with interactional and technological sophistication we can finally overcome the limitations of today's failing educational system and solve problems in our high-risk global world. *The Anti-Education Era* is a powerful and important call to reshape digital learning, engage children in a meaningful educational experience, and bridge inequality.

The Anti-Education Era: Creating Smarter Students through Digital Learning Details

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Margot says

Didn't finish. I tried forcing myself to read more, but it just made me angry. Although I may agree with Gee's conclusions, and want to read about his ideas, the style of his writing is extremely off-putting. It assumes an absolute agreement with all of his claims, and he employs a flippant style that belies any claims he may state--why should I agree with anything he says when he doesn't mention any evidence, only anecdotes to illustrate his ideas? Of course he includes the obligatory references at the end, but he makes no mention of them in his narrative! His arguments skitter about without any real coherence, the result of which is that I'm not retaining any of his points anyway.

I wanted to read this because I heard about Gee as a noted games researcher in the context of a class I took about games in education. I'm going to give him one more try, and I just ordered another book through interlibrary loan. One more chance.

Oh, yeah, and he really likes to use the word "stupid." A lot.

A taste:

"You have taken away what I, as a human being, am potentially good at. In turn, you have made me stupid... In the next chapter we turn to how treating memory as a fixed fact rather than an actively changing story can make us stupid and even dangerous." (19)

"This may very well be your image of how human memory works. Nonetheless, this is not how human memory works." (22)

Sue Lyle says

I am biased because I love Gee's work and agree with him.

John Hill says

I've been reading most of Professor Gee's more academic works on linguistics, discourse, multi-modality and the link between video games and reading, so this was a nice change of pace.

While still firmly in Gee's work on discourse and discourse analysis, Anti-Education Era is a much less academic book aimed at those outside of the ivory tower. Despite this, the points that Gee makes still hold quite a bit of water and tie back into his work in academia.

In this book, Gee does a good job at outlining some of the deeper issues that are responsible for the climate of mass ignorance that technology and the shrinking of the global village has created. The book is split into two parts: what is wrong and what we can do about it.

It is telling that the first part of the book is quite a bit longer than the second. The issues are far more complex than the solution, yet because the solution is built upon the issue the first requires more explanation than the second.

I will say that the title is a bit misleading. I found this to be more about the cures for society at large than just students. There is little here that is specific on instruction of students. This is a largely theoretical book that points to ways to solve many of our issues both in and out of the classroom. It is not a book aimed at guiding the actual practice of educators.

However if you are interested in how discourse and literacy played a part in creating the world we live in today, and how those same issues can guide the way to a better tomorrow in an easy to read format, this is a great book for you.

Jachin says

Some excellent points here - preparedness for democratic participation, agency and reflection.

There was no research to back up the first part of the book which was disappointing. And I am not as sceptical as to what one can bring spiritually in their virtual school bag.

Lisa says

Some interesting thoughts but overall I'm not a fan of his writing style and views. He starts out the book with a throwaway line saying people who believe in astrology are deceiving themselves - not only judgmental (on a topic he probably has little expertise in) but totally unnecessary to his main arguments. The book keeps this judgmental tone throughout.

Amber says

For the first two-thirds of this book, I actively disliked it. I did not dislike the ideas, I hated the way they were presented. The ideas about how humans are mentally lazy are not new. However, the way Gee wrote about them made him sound depressingly misanthropic. My other issue was that he, who espouses the benefits of empiricism and is a trained linguist, presented no research to back his original arguments in the how humans are "stupid" section. I would have had a much easier time with this section had he framed it differently.

That being said, I really enjoyed the becoming smart section as both a parent of a pre-preschooler and as a teacher of high school students. I liked the ideas of creating affinity groups, where students can focus on things that they enjoy and explore problem-solving in a venue that matters to them. Gee argued in the "stupid" section that one of the greatest losses of our generation is the loss of the close-knit community and community ties. In criminology, that is certainly one of the hypotheses for high crime in individualistic societies. Gee states that by gaining access to online same-interest communities, people are able to expand their knowledge base through trial-and-error, mentorship, and mere exposure. I agree that online communities are great for that. Growing up, I was part of a very tightly knit online group of fellow readers-

some of whom I maintain contact. As an educator, it is much easier to gain buy-in from students on topics that they find interesting or personally useful. As a psychology teacher, I get spoiled because it's easier to gain such buy-in in my subject.

Additionally, I liked Gee's commentary on narrowing the equality gap. I have read several books on the equality gap in education. While Gee doesn't offer solutions that are feasible in this life time (while I'm politically quite liberal, Gee makes me look like a reactionary Republican), he does comment on the importance of early childhood education. As I search for preschools for my son, it's befuddling. How can something so important and vital to later educations so out of reach financially? It really speaks to the disappearing middle class. The thought that a year's worth of PRESCHOOL could cost as much as a year of my college tuition is ludicrous. Yet, that is what we have to deal with. It is so important for parents and the whole community to be involved in kids' early education, that technology that is readily accessible at libraries is beyond important. While technology cannot replace true human interaction, it can supplement it until we have better solutions. Educating the next generation is important, but won't be easy. The world has sped up, now we must catch up.

Paul Signorelli says

We won't find the terms personal learning networks (PLNs) or connected learning anywhere in James Paul Gee's wonderfully stimulating book "The Anti-Education Era." But his plea for greater collaboration, the use of what he calls "affinity spaces," and recognition that the combination of "human + tool" is a winning equation suggests that trainer-teacher-learners (and many others) are on the right track by developing those dynamic combinations of people and resources that help us cope with a world where formal and informal learning never stops. Gee, in providing a no-nonsense and often critical view of the state of our early twenty-first-century learning landscape throughout his engaging preface to the book, sets the stage for an exploration of our "human + tool" predilections regardless of whether we call our communities of learning "personal learning networks," "affinity spaces," or "communities of practice," "personal learning environments." His work fits right in with what so many of us are currently pursuing as trainer-teacher-learners: collaborations that help us better acquire the skills and knowledge needed to make positive improvements in the local, national, and global communities that our use of contemporary technology fosters. Throughout his consistently intriguing book-length exploration of "how we can all get smarter together," he leads us toward a question that again supports the development and maintenance of affinity spaces and, by extension, personal learning networks: "...what if human minds are not meant to think for themselves by themselves, but, rather, to integrate with tools and other people's minds to make a mind of minds?" (p. 153). There is much more to explore in Gee's work. We can certainly continue those explorations on our own. Or, as the author suggests, we can pursue them together. Using the tools available to us. Including our personal learning networks and the wealth of resources they provide.

Scott says

"How to be Stupid" and "How to Get Smart Before it's Too Late" - they sound like titles of tough-love self-help books, but are in reality two halves of a very thoughtful book on what is wrong with ourselves, our education, our "democracy" etc, and how to make it all better (nice and tidy in 215 pages, no less). From one of my favorite scholars I first read in graduate school, James Paul Gee, this holds no panacea for the educational crisis that faces us, yet holds some questions and answers designed to start a conversation about

it. If the education field doesn't engage in this conversation soon, we're all going to hell in a hand-basket (probably an exaggeration, but why not light a fire?). Pardon the disjointedness of this review, but this book has numerous applications that provoked thoughts on more than simply how to improve schools (indeed, it hardly touches on this), but extends to civilization-wide and cognitive questions.

As an educator, certain elements of this book rang like a bell when I encountered them, and much of it came in the first two-thirds of the book; "How to be Stupid" is not necessarily a litany of problems, but a foundation and explication of the challenges that face us when we try to DO things in this world (having a sincere and thoughtful response to Gee's query - "What do YOU think WE should do?" - is crucial to being a citizen of the world). However, Gee tends to overstate his case when it comes to video games; even though his thoughts on affinity spaces and his *What Video Games have to teach us about Learning and Literacy* (2003) is a powerful and provocative treatise on their benefits and limitations, his extended examples on "The Sims" are distracting in the context of this book and could have been more closely tied to suggestions to how to clearly apply video games beyond commercial gaming.

What I especially like about this book is Gee's analysis of what humans do badly, the needs we all have, the inconsistencies we deny awareness of in our individual and social lives, and what perceptions we need to change about our minds (and, thus, how to improve learning). In short, we generally ask the wrong sorts of questions, believe the wrong sorts of answers, clump together in ridiculous social and political factions that exacerbate inequalities and enhance stereotypes, and struggle with a meaning/truth dichotomy (we naturally search for meaning yet evade truth). How to work with and around these problems? For starters, Gee comes up with an elegant "Circuit of Human Reflective Action" that gets to the core of educational needs, but also the needs of true civic engagement, public health, international cooperation, etc. This "circuit" implies that there are optimal conditions for successful learning/action, and these include 1) initial mentorship; 2) prior experience; 3) clear goals; 4) things at stake; and 5) opportunity to act. As a framework for learning, there is hardly a more elegant distillation of how it works best. We should replicate this wherever we can. Even though application of this circuit to education seems not be his direct goal, as a conversation starter it is excellent.

A crucial tool humans have is our brain, but beyond that any tool that we use is a product of that brain (it is fitting that I have just finished Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for tools are obviously - in literature and in life - a part of what makes humans humans) and we should remind ourselves that we should really start to think of ourselves as inseparable from our tools. In my school next year, students will all be equipped with iPads, and it should be interesting to see how the task we've given ourselves (educating students) will or will not be altered by this new tool. If we do not alter our goals, expectations, and targeted learning outcomes these devices will be a distraction and a hindrance to learning - indeed, reworking our understanding of what learning or education really might be is crucial to assessing how successful this experiment turns out.

That said, one problem with tools is that they obfuscate how much of education needs to target our brain and how much of it targets facility with our brains working in tandem with us. True learning is certainly not storage of facts in memory - nor is it alacrity in retrieval of them - for we are not computers, Gee reminds us. If we can access any facts we wish through digital technology, emphasis on "knowing" things will unavoidably diminish the quality of conversations over the dinner table, for one thing, but also make ourselves *less* than ourselves. Will a family require digital technology to be a family? Will neighbors require it to arrange potlucks? Will civil engineers require it to design and build energy efficient and livable cities? Will we - in short - evolve to need tools for everything? Like all things, moderation is important and education should (in my humble opinion) target the brain first so that some element of self-sufficiency can be fomented. The Dude, a cherished font of wisdom from *The Big Lebowski*, captures this conflict seedily, reminding us the wave of the future does not eradicate the need for "old fashioned ways" (ok, a little too

seedy, I'll admit). What happens when we attempt - or are forced - to disconnect, which may well be the case considering the nexus of environmental and energy crises that literally have changed our world? It is a bit of a stretch to make the connection between an iPad and degradation of natural resources, but think about the energy requirements that will exist if everyone used these things and required the resources to make, charge, and replace the batteries for them? These are hardly renewable resources....

The internet and digital technology are clearly civilizational game-changers and marvels, but do they help us learn? In my mind it is access to the internet that drives many educators' decisions in this matter, and the internet is a jumbled, incoherent world. Can we rely on it as a repository for human knowledge, or a repository of the complexities inherent in human nature? Is learning simply going to be learning how to sift through that information or manipulating a tool to provide responses to stimuli, or is it - as Gee seemed to begin to argue with his circuit of reflective action - based on our own actions? Perhaps it is metaphorical human learning in its very nature, with truth elusive and meaning derived by the seeker.... In this, Gee is somewhat unhelpful, but perhaps I need to begin to be more articulate about the extent of the dangers - and open myself up to the usefulness - of technology; yet I cannot with surety say that in schools the usefulness is there without changing what a school is. Tools should be useful, but if an iPad is a useful recording device, game and video player, how can that help educate the user?

There are few answers in this book, but much fodder for thought. Gee and other writers' reevaluation of how to assess learning based on human peculiarities and tendencies is well meant, but I would like to have seen more ideas for schools and methods to enhance civic activism.

Ilib4kids says

371.33 GEE

1984 by George Orwell

My comment: I think book title does not match the content of book, which address all sort of pitfalls which could make us stupid. Part 1: How to be stupid. Part 2: How to get smart before it's too late.

Do not quite agree with author's view which too much focus on practice, especially personal practice and experience.

e.g p46 ... Some will say: If you can just read, surely you can understand.... You do not need to have had any special experience here or know about nay specific context. All you need is to be able to read.

I do not totally agree with author. With our current computer technology, we could make a lot of simulation programs and make a lot of computer aided DVDs ,provides us almost too close to personal experience. Thus, in this sense, "Reading" could be a very efficient way to obtain knowledge, "Reading" become a more broad meaning, include above computer. simulated programs and DVDs watching.

And besides knowledge is a accumulated process, it is impossible to understand and understand deeply at the first time, ??????????, after reading 100 books you will understand.

Chap7 Pitfalls along our search for status and Solidarity

p66 The English word "idiot" is derived from the Greek word *idiotes* meaning "individual", itself derived from *idios* (private, one's own). It's interesting that our English word for stupid comes from the Greek word for a person viewed just as an individual apart from the social body. It is the push and pull of status and

solidarity that make people "public", visible, and what they "are".

Chap8 Words gone awry

p68 I myself have talked about teachers as "resources" for students' active and collaborative problem-solving experience and compared teachers to video-games designers.

Chap 9 Lack of Agency

pareto principle

the kick theory: small initial advantages ramify into large later advantage.

Chap15 Evading knowledge

"mental bush consciousness p138

You do not carry stuff you are not going to use and use soon.....Scollon argued that this principle applied not just to physical stuff, but to mental stuff as well. Such people did not value learning things that were not going to use. They did not value storing knowledge that would not help out in the bush or in the other activities necessary to their survival. That is to say, they did not value storing knowledge just because it was knowledge. Why burden your mind with useless information any more than you would burden your back with useless supplies? The bush required that you packed just the right stuff physically and mentally.

P200 TTK mentoring (talk, text, and knowledge mentoring. Where "talk" means interactive, sustained, elaborated talk)

p203. ...Engage with books and digital media in what I called a "higher-end, value-added" way.

p204. Helping young people find a passion or trajectory of related passions is often a crucial requirement for twenty-first-century education in or out of school.

p205 I have pointed out that our education system, from beginning to end, should not be defined in terms of job skills and employment, though that is, alas, the direction in which we are moving fast. A focus on jobs means we are using our education system primarily to train people for service work or for higher-status jobs that, in the fast-changing modern world, often do not even exist at the time a young person is in school or, if they do, will not last anywhere nearly as long as the student's career after school.

Education must focus on giving every member of society a valued life and the ability to contribute, to learn how to learn, to adapt to changing times. It has to create a sense of equability at the level not of status or jobs per se, but at the level of participation in knowledge, innovation, and national and global citizenship for a smarter, safer, better world.

p205 **Content** is the body of facts, information, and formulas to which activities of science of other knowledge-building enterprises have given rise. School and colleges often stress this content rather than activities that give rise to it. However, digital media now allow us to store, search, access, and represent this content in many different ways.

p206 This content, though we have often assumed that storing it in heads and writing it down on test is the goal of education, was never really worth much when separated from the activities and thinking and problem-solving skills that gave rise to it. **It is worth even less now when it is so readily available.** Today, thanks to technology and the massive growth of complexity, science and other knowledge-building enterprises focus on what can call "hard problems".

Hard problems are deep problems that are often not centered in only one academic discipline or in any academic discipline.....Hard problems have "legs" in the sense that attacking them leads to wealth of connected knowledge and skills. Hard problems require us to learn lots of "content"(facts, information, and formulas), not just to memorize, but to use to think with, solve problems with, and offer explanations with.

p207 In the digital age, we need to **stop defining "courses" in terms of bodies of facts called "content".**

We need to define them in terms of hard problems that recruit facts as tools for problem solving.

p212 Digital tools can, in many different ways, serve as external storage devices for humans....The internet

and other tools store information for us. This information only becomes knowledge when we have the **good taste** to know what to pick up and how to put it to good use.

p214. This is what the Liberal Arts at their best were always about: multiple vision, from art and science, of a better, fairer, sustainable world.

references books I may like to read more.

Preface

This Will Make You Smarter: New Scientific Concepts to Improve Your Thinking by John Brockman

Chap 14 On gaming and learning

Women and Gaming: The Sims and 21st Century Learning by James Paul Gee

Language and Learning in the Digital Age by James Paul Gee (may not very need to read)

A Theory of Fun for Game Design by Raph Koster (A like it, maybe I need to take a look)

Noam chomsky Sometimes described as the "father of modern linguistics"

the protein folding video game

<http://fold.it/portal/>

EteRNA is a browser based game, developed by scientists at Carnegie Mellon University and Stanford University, that engages users to solve puzzles related to the folding of RNA molecules.

<http://eterna.cmu.edu/web/>

Amanda says

The language is blunt and the point is reinforced again and again. This straight-forward book critiquing humanity and all of our social pitfalls also offers some saving graces, which makes this book an interesting venture for people who don't mind the bluntness of his, very often repeated, point.

Sara says

I'd really had high expectations and thought there was more echoing here. Perhaps I'm just too close to those who are doing this work?

Jonie says

awesome

Pete Welter says

I chose James Paul Gee's book because I hadn't read anything by him before, although I was familiar with his important influences on the field of video games and learning.

Given the subtitle "Creating Smarter Students through Digital Learning," I was expecting a more conventional elaboration on his earlier books on video games and learning. However, in this book Gee waxes more philosophical, speaking on knowledge of learning in the very broad context of our entire culture and society. If you are thinking big picture on education, then The Anti-Education Era is worth checking out.

Unlike many books of this style that introduce the core of their concepts or arguments up front and spend the rest of the book elaborating, the first two-thirds of this book is spent on arguments setting up the last few chapters. There's a good reason that Part I of his book called "How to be Stupid" and Part II "How to Get Smart Before it's Too Late."

Depending on your perspective, you may end off a bit turned off by the first parts of the book. If you are relatively optimistic, Gee's rather downer look at the current state of society not be appealing, and if you are not a liberal, Gee's unapologetic progressive bias may not be your cup of tea. However, my advice is to work your way past either of those. First, because the end of book is more hopeful, and second, because Gee doesn't expect you to accept his point of view without question - in fact that evidence-based reasoning is a core point of the book.

In my opinion, this all pays off with final few chapters, when he discusses ways of learning and knowing that truly address his myriad criticisms. Those chapters sparkle with examples, ideas, and vision that will fascinate anyone interested in how we will learn in the future. You may not agree with Gee's vision, but it is a sharp contrast to our existing societal system and expectations of learning. And he ends up talking about major questions:

* How do we as a society learn enough to address the really hard questions? That is, questions that really have no "right answer" and that will require collaboration of large numbers of people with different perspectives to even start to solve.

* How can we debate issues on a more factual basis? As Gee admits, given diverse perspectives, even "facts" will have a slant, but his point is that we can do a much better job of disciplining ourselves to make evidence-based arguments.

* How do we use more of our societal brainpower, overcoming inequality and engaging a larger part of our populations in active problem solving and creation?

* And finally, what does learning and teaching look like when the above are the goals?

I felt that Gee was successful in giving his perspective on answer those questions.

Despite my agreement with Gee that we learn and teach more effectively when engaged in areas that we are either interested in or passionate about, I have misgivings about how that functions economically. It's wonderful to have groups of people with like interests collorating, sharing and creating. However, at some point in time this needs to result in some economic gain, for the individuals and society. To be fair, Gee poses this as one of his "hard questions."

For that reason, I remain intrigued by the possibility of entrepreneurship being a core part of such a learning culture. It meets many of Gee's goals, while still incorporating the core economic goal of creating products and services that others are willing to pay for.

The other economic issue he doesn't address is the cost of higher education, which has increased at a pace far

outstripping inflation, and even health care. It's not really a focus of the book (or it might be implicit given his suggested changes), but economics needs to be considered when we talk about reforming higher education. Being exposed to a variety of disciplines might be important, but college students skew towards job-centered majors because of the price they are paying for tuition. It's their only hope of staying ahead of the debt incurred for their education.

Overall though, a number of his arguments made me question my assumptions and think through my personal learning style, and I would recommend this book to anyone wanting to deeply challenge the current way we think and learn.

David says

I quite enjoyed James Paul Gee's book, especially the many analogies and examples he used to illustrate his points. I agree with his take on institutions...and how difficult it would be to "unfreeze" entrenched methodologies and ways of thinking.

It's always a delight to read fresh points of view in a world of increasingly dumbing down by the media and by viral social popularity efforts.

Misty Morin says

Needs words stronger than "stupid" to describe human tragedy.
