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The Anti-Education Era: Creating Smarter Students Through Digital Learning.

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Review

Gee, J.P. (2013). *The Anti-Education Era: Creating Smarter Students Through Digital Learning*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan
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James Paul Gee is a skilled scholar, rhetorician, and storyteller. Reading his work seems a bit like having a conversation with a neighbor, yet there is a method to his madness: “People need to get ‘situated meanings’ from actual images and experiences that render their words...” From this perspective, his latest collection of words, *The Anti-Education Era: Creating Smarter Students Through Digital Learning* is well-rendered.

“How can smart people- like you and me- be so dumb?” What kind of education is required to “save ourselves from our own stupidity?” What kind of education will make us agents rather than “victims in a world full of ideology, risk, fear, and uncertainty?” (p. XII).

The first two-thirds of Gee’s book, is a provocative rant about how we and James Paul Gee can be so stupid. How can we allow trillions of U.S. dollars to be spent on unwinnable wars while denying our poorest neighbors basic necessities? How can we allow ourselves to be victims of deregulated banking institutions and then allow the perpetrators huge monetary rewards rather than regulation? How can we ignore the empirical science behind global warming even as crops wither and oceans rise? (pp. VI, VII).

Gee offers a psychological explanation, which he calls *comfort stories*. These are Orwellian-like myths that simplify the uncomfortable, overwhelming complexities of the world. “In the act, we come to believe in connections and generalizations that are not true” (p. 33). These comfort stories offer irrational rationales for our shortcomings and transgressions. For example:

- *Our problems are President Obama’s fault because he is a Muslim who was born in Africa.*
- *Jesus said that he wants us to accumulate great riches, and poor people are poor because they are lazy.*
- *Standing in line all night to buy a new i-Phone will make us happy. Pure stupidity.*

Gee muses that the survival of our ancestral hunters and gatherers depended upon traveling light in mind and body, but now we weight ourselves down with splendid possessions that make us richly comfortable (p.138). However, we still prefer light, unburdened minds. We refrain from thinking about hefty problems, which Gee concludes is quite stupid in a world that increasingly requires complex, uncomfortable solutions.

Just when he has us convinced that we are hopelessly broken, Gee informs us in the final chapters that we have a whole toolkit full of tools at our disposal that if used correctly, can build smart Minds (with a capital ‘M’), and smart Minds yield sound bodies, healthy environments, and just societies (p. 155).

Previously, Gee has used the ‘toolkit’ metaphor to differentiate ordinary *discourse* from *Discourse* (with a capital ‘D’). In order to be recognized as a member of a particular Discourse, such as the Discourse of a particular profession or the Discourse of a working class tavern, one needs to use the correct “tools”. One such tool would be the correct way of talking, another would be ways to act and dress, another would be the correct way to think, and so on. Now, Gee offers a distinction between *minds* and *Minds*: “What if human minds are not meant to think for themselves, but, rather, to integrate

with tools and other people's minds to make a Mind of minds?" (p. 153). Communities of ideas, expertise and talents can rise in concert to create a Mind of minds, capable of solving highly complex dilemmas.

The creation of such Minds requires an educational paradigm shift (p. 205). The old days of admonishing students to do their own work and keep their eyes on their own papers must shift to teaching students how to identify and solve problems by tapping into the minds of those who exhibit critical knowledge and skills. This is achievable through face-to-face, real-time interactions as well as through engagement in digitalized simulations and Internet *affinity sites*, which Gee defines as virtual spaces where "multiple tools, different types of people, and diverse skill sets are networked in ways that make everyone smarter and make a space itself a form of emergent intelligence" (p. 174). Gee envisions that this process of *distributed cognition* (p. 122) is absolutely necessary if we are to avert an otherwise catastrophic fate.

He makes a compelling argument, with little room for comfort.

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