Situated Language and Learning
A critique of traditional schooling

James Paul Gee

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SITUATED LANGUAGE AND LEARNING

“In this major new work, James Paul Gee brings an insightful and original perspective to issues of literate identities, language and power, situated cognition and the provision of meaningful learning opportunities… An important and challenging book that raises fundamental questions and demands to be read by all those committed to ensuring that curricula and pedagogy meet the complex and diverse needs of learners in the twenty-first century.”

Jackie Marsh, University of Sheffield, UK

Why do poor and minority students under-perform in school? Do computer games help or hinder learning? What can new research in psychology teach our educational policy-makers? In this major new book, Gee tackles the “big ideas” about language, literacy and learning, putting forward an integrated theory that crosses disciplinary boundaries, and applying it to some of the very real problems that face educationalists today.

Situated Language and Learning looks at the specialist academic varieties of language that are used in disciplines such as mathematics and the sciences. It argues that the language acquisition process needed to learn these forms of language is not given enough attention by schools and that this places unfair demands on poor and minority students.

The book compares this with learning as a process outside the classroom, applying this idea to computer and video games and exploring the particular processes of learning which take place as a child interacts with others and with technology to learn and play. In doing so, Gee examines what video games can teach us about how to improve learning in schools and engages with current debates on subjects such as “communities of practice” and “digital literacies.”

Bringing together the latest research from a number of disciplines, Situated Language and Learning is a bold and controversial book by a leading figure in the field, and is essential reading for anyone interested in education and language.

James Paul Gee is the Tashia Morgridge Professor of Reading at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, USA. His previous publications include Social Linguistics and Literacies (Taylor & Francis 1996, 2nd edition), An Introduction to Discourse Analysis (Routledge 1999), and What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy (2003).
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INTRODUCTION

I am a linguist whose interests have changed over the years. Today I am interested in the role language plays in learning. However, earlier in my career I spent my time studying things like “naked infinitives.” This is, of course, a topic that sounds a lot sexier than it is. Naked infinitives are grammatical constructions like the verb “leave” in “I saw Mary leave.” In this sentence, “leave” is an “infinitive” (a verb not marked for “tense,” that is not marked as “present” or “past”). In English, infinitives are usually preceded by a “to,” as in “I wanted Mary to leave.” Since the “to” is missing in “I saw Mary leave,” “leave” is said to be “naked.” I also studied “headless relatives,” another topic that sounds more exciting than it is. Headless relatives are grammatical constructions like “who I want to marry” in “I will marry who I want to marry.” “Who I want to marry” is a relative clause. Such clauses are normally preceded by a noun phrase called their “head,” as in “I will marry the person I want to marry,” where “the person” is the head of the relative clause. Thus, since there is no head in front of “who I want to marry” in “I will marry who I want to marry,” it is called a “headless relative clause.”

This book has nothing to do with naked infinitives or headless relatives. It does, however, have something to do with why the last paragraph, my first in the book, will not be very inviting to many readers. You don’t really want to hear a lot more technical information about naked infinitives and headless relatives, do you? You lost a lot of your interest when you found out naked infinitives had nothing to do with naked bodies and headless relatives had nothing to do with decapitating people. If you didn’t like school, the first paragraph reminded you a lot of school, except that school didn’t even try to titillate you with nakedness and decapitation.

For some people the first paragraph was alienating, for others it wasn’t. Some feared I would continue, perhaps to do something like tell them what parasitic gaps are. Some few might have hoped I would continue—too few to sell enough copies of this book to keep me alive. People who found the first paragraph alienating feared they were about to fall into the black hole of “jargon” and “academic language”—language they don’t particularly like or care about. It’s a black hole they experienced too often in school. On the other hand, people who can’t wait for the parasitic gap discussion have, for one reason or another, made a larger peace with academic ways with words.

In the not too distant past people who had made peace with school-based academic jargon and ways with words could be pretty much assured, all things being equal, of success in modern developed countries. But the times they are a-changin and things are more problematic now. Today, to hedge your bets, you probably want to make some sort of peace with academic learning—with school-based learning. But there are new ways with words, and new ways of learning, afoot in the world—ways not necessarily connected to academics or schools. These ways are, in their own fashion, just as special, technical, and complex as academic and school ways. But they are motivating for many
people for whom school wasn’t. At the same time, they may be alienating for many people for whom school ways were motivating. These new ways, though, are just as important—maybe more important—for success in the modern world as school ways. These new ways are the ways with words (and their concomitant ways of thinking) connected to contemporary digital technologies and the myriad of popular culture and specialist practices to which they have given rise.

We face, then, a new challenge: how to get all children—rich and poor—to be successful in school, but to ensure also that all children—rich and poor—are able to learn, think, and act in new ways fit for our new high-tech global world. We have barely begun on the first task only to have the second become more pressing by the day.

Most of you will be glad to know that I don’t do theoretical linguistics any more. I have for the last number of years been an educational linguist, interested in how language and learning work at school and in society at large. But, alas, some of you will find that I still write in “jargon” and academic language. Others will find my writing a bit too “folksy”—not academic enough for rigorous reputeability. It all depends on the sorts of peace you have or have not made with certain ways with words. I have tried to be as clear as I can while still using the language tools I need to get my job done—and that is part of the point of this book: that there are different ways with words because we need different tools to get different sorts of jobs done. More generally, this book is about the tension that we readers, former students all, feel about academic and school-based forms of language and thinking, that some people find alienating and others find liberating. It is about facing that tension at a time when these academic and school-based ways are challenged by new ways with words and new ways of thinking and learning.

This book will constantly move back and forth between ways with words, deeds, and thoughts in school and out of school. Predominant among the out-of-school things I talk about will be computer and video games (I will in this book just use the term “video games” to mean both computer and video games). Some of my most academic readers will now themselves fear a black hole, in this case a place where they haven’t been and don’t want to be. I hope I can convince such readers that this is a mistake. For many people in our modern world—not all of them particularly young—video games are not a black hole, but a liberating entrée to new worlds—worlds more compelling than either the worlds they see or have seen at school or read about in academic books. But, then, the core argument of this book will be that people learn new ways with words, in or out of school, only when they find the worlds to which these words apply compelling.

This book is actually one argument, broken into pieces, that can be summarized fairly concisely. So here is a quick overview of what is to come:

1 What’s hard about school is not learning to read, which has received the lion’s share of attention from educators and policy-makers, but learning to read and learn in academic content areas like mathematics, social studies, and science (students can’t get out of a good high school, let alone get out of any decent college, if they can’t handle their content-area textbooks in biology or algebra). Unfortunately, a good many students, at all levels of schooling, hate the types of language associated with academic content areas. Indeed, many people in the public don’t very much like us academics and our “ways with words.”

2 What’s hard about learning in academic content areas is that each area is tied to academic specialist varieties of language (and other special symbol systems) that are
complex, technical, and initially alienating to many learners (just open a high-school biology or algebra textbook). These varieties of language are significantly different from people’s “everyday” varieties of language, sometimes called their “vernacular” varieties.

3 Such academic varieties of language are integrally connected (actually “married”) to complex and technical ways of thinking. They are the tools through which certain types of content (e.g. biology or social studies) are thought about and acted on.

4 Privileged children (children from well-off, educated homes) often get an important head start before school at home on the acquisition of such academic varieties of language; less privileged children (poor children or children from some minority groups) often do not. The privileged children continue to receive support outside of school on their academic language acquisition process throughout their school years, support that less privileged children do not receive.

5 Schools do a very poor job at teaching children academic varieties of language. Indeed, many schools are barely aware they exist, that they have to be learned, and that the acquisition process must start early. At best they believe you can teach children to think (e.g. about science or mathematics) without worrying too much about the tools children do or do not have with which to do that thinking. Indeed, schools create more alienation over academic varieties of language and thinking than they do understanding.

6 All children, privileged and not, can readily learn specialist varieties of language and their concomitant ways of thinking as part and parcel of their “popular culture.” These specialist language varieties are, in their own ways, as complex as academic varieties of language. The examples I use in the book involve Pokémon and video games. (If you don’t think things like Pokémon involve specialist language and ways of thinking connected to it, go get some Pokémon or Digimon cards.) There are many more such examples. While confronting specialist academic languages and thinking in school is alienating, confronting non-academic specialist languages and thinking outside school often is not.

7 The human mind works best when it can build and run simulations of experiences its owner has had (much like playing a video game in the mind) in order to understand new things and get ready for action in the world. Think about an employee role-playing a coming confrontation with a boss, a young person role-playing an imminent encounter with someone he or she wants to invite out on a date, or a soldier role-playing his or her part in a looming battle. Such role-playing in our minds helps us to think about what we are about to do and usually helps us to do it better. Think about how poorly such things go when you have had no prior experiences with which to build such role-playing simulations and you have to go in completely “cold.” Furthermore, a lecture on employee-employer relations, dating, or war won’t help anywhere near as much as some rich experiences with which you can build and run different simulations to get ready for different eventualities.

8 People learn (academic or non-academic) specialist languages and their concomitant ways of thinking best when they can tie the words and structures of those languages to experiences they have had—experiences with which they can build simulations to prepare themselves for action in the domains in which the specialist language is used (e.g. biology or video games).
9 Because video games (which are often long, complex, and difficult) are simulations of experience and new worlds, and thus not unlike a favored form of human thinking, and because their makers would go broke if no one could learn to play them, they constitute an area where we have lots to learn about learning. Better yet, they are a domain where young people of all races and classes readily learn specialist varieties of language and ways of thinking without alienation. Thus it is useful to think about what they can teach us about how to make the learning of specialist varieties of language and thinking in school more equitable, less alienating, and more motivating.

10 In the midst of our new high-tech global economy, people are learning in new ways for new purposes. One important way is via specially designed spaces (physical and virtual) constructed to resource people tied together, not primarily via shared culture, gender, race, or class, but by a shared interest or endeavor. Schools are way behind in the construction of such spaces. Once again, popular culture is ahead here.

11 More and more in the modern world, if people are to be successful, they must become “shape-shifting portfolio people”: that is, people who gain many diverse experiences that they can then use to transform and adapt themselves for fast-changing circumstances throughout their lives.

12 Learning academic varieties of language and thinking in school is now “old.” It is (for most people) important, but not sufficient for success in modern society. People must be ready to learn new specialist varieties of language and thinking outside of school, not necessarily connected to academic disciplines, throughout their lives. Children are having more and more learning experiences outside of school that are more important for their futures than is much of the learning they do at school.

Well, let’s jump in. I hope it’s not a black hole for any of you.