

Why James Paul Gee Tells You Not to Trust His Own Ideas

The first reason that you shouldn't trust Gee is that you probably only remembered the parts of his book that you really liked or found exciting. If you categorize yourself as someone who "just isn't good at math", you probably still don't understand the word problem at the beginning of Chapter 14 or the logic problems at the start of Chapter 5. This is because our memory is not a chronological record of our lives but rather a heavily edited complex web of ideas and emotions (Chapter 3, para. 6). "[Human memory] is poor for things we do not care about and strong for what we do care about" (para. 28). So even though the main thrust of Gee's argument may have been something you completely disagreed with, you could still come away from his book only remembering the sections that you liked.

The second reason that you shouldn't trust Gee's book is that you can't fully understand his argument. Gee uses a diverse variety of examples to illustrate the often complex ideas addressed throughout the book, but he circles back multiple times to similar topics and gives anecdotes specific to his generation.¹ But in Chapter 6 Gee explains how sharing different experiences can lead to conflict or miscommunication (para. 29). So people with less experience in the areas that Gee refers to often (or those like me from a younger generation) may not be able to access or fully understand Gee's ideas. Even worse, we may THINK that we understand him, but due to our different life experiences we may be quite far off the mark from what he was actually trying to argue.

However I think that Gee does a fabulous job addressing my first two points. He provides a range of examples and stories from just about every discipline there is in order to craft a theory that will stick in anyone's memory and convey a similar meaning no matter your life experience. What I am most worried about is that Gee's explanation of why humans are stupid could be boiled down to a Pseudo Empirical Story. Pseudo Empirical Stories, according to Gee in Chapter 11, "sound fact based, but all they do is sound good to those who want to believe them anyway" (para. 3). Gee's argument could be called the story of the Computer-Illiterate Caveman. Since writing was only invented 5200 years ago, it stands to reason that modern man has more in common with his caveman ancestors than we would like to admit and is ill-equipped in numerous ways for modern life. If we were to phrase this story as a question, it would be something like "could a caveman use modern technology?".² To know if Gee is appropriately referencing the research you would need to be an expert in neuroscience, evolution, or anthropology. I don't know enough to discern whether or not his book is merely pop culture dressed up as intellectualism or a strong theory that can withstand close scrutiny.

¹ I noted numerous references to current politics, Christianity, and the environment.

² Which, barring the discovery of [Encino Man](#) or a time machine like that in [Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure](#), we will never be able to answer.

Despite these misgivings I feel strongly that Gee's argument is one worth listening to. He may not have all the answers, but that's what a theory is, a best guess. A theory, according to Gee, is when you combine answers to smaller question in order to answer a "big question" (Chapter 8, para. 23). Since "our understanding of such [complex] systems is never complete and always vulnerable" (Chapter 15, para. 3), Gee presents his ideas with humility. He couldn't be clearer about this point: "I am not claiming I have any better access to "reality" than anyone else" (Chapter 16, para. 20). Yes, perhaps John Paul Gee's book falls prey to the same pitfalls he outlines as I mention above. But I think it's much more likely that he is the type of generalist needed to provide a big-picture view of the challenges facing our current constantly-changing times.

References

Gee, J.P. (2013). *The anti-education era: Creating smarter students through digital learning*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.