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What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy

Gee, J. P. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 240pp, ISBN-13: 978-1403961693

In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* (2003), James Paul Gee explores the relationships among video games, cognition, and learning electronically. After reading his work, we can understand how he examines specific simulation and narrative-based interactive video games with multiple players online and also examines how games are played. The book integrates video games with semiotics, identity, situated meaning and learning, narratives, culture, and society. Eventually, Gee also provides 36 learning principles that he considers an important foundation for learning.

Generally speaking, people would think that playing a video game is waste of time; they would not think it is helpful for learning different contents. However, first, Gee explains that people are learning a “new literacy” when they play video games (p. 13). Moreover, this literacy is not merely reading and writing in print, but it includes diverse semiotic domains such as images, symbols, graphs, or visual signs, all used to convey particular meanings in different domains.

There is also a “situated meaning” under the domains. People might not understand the meaning of words or images if the particular semiotic domain is not provided. When game-players are interacting with affinity groups online, they develop an attitude toward critical learning. Gee argues that human learning is not just a matter of what goes on inside people’s heads but is fully embedded in a material, social, and cultural world. For example, children have to search for helpful tips to deconstruct the embedded meaning of contexts when they face tasks or changes during the game. Finally, he clarifies that playing video games is not a waste of time because learners can learn to share experiences with others in a new way and learn how to collaborate with others in a

new world and how to use different types of semiotics to socialize with people, developing problem-solving skills that they can apply in the future (p. 45-46).

Second, Gee states that “all learning in all semiotic domains requires identity work” (p. 51). Players have to take on new identities for characters they create (e.g., in the game *Arcanum*, players must construct their characters). Gee discusses three types of identity: *virtual identity*, one’s identity as a virtual character in the virtual world; *real-world identity*, the identity of players; and *projective identity*, the beliefs or values that the player projects onto a virtual character or wants that character to become as it develops (p. 54-55). He further states that if schools can integrate identity work into learning, it will be more successful because it develops students’ active learning and critical thinking skills. For example, when students take on virtual identity in a science classroom, they are expected to act, interact, and behave like scientists. When students take on real-world identity, they are encouraged to try and learn. Once they have created a new, valued identity, they are given power to learn in the classroom. When they take on projective identity, they imbue their “character” with their own values, beliefs, and desires about how they want to act. When students take on these different types of identity, they can interact with peers and engage more opportunities to learn.

Third, Gee discusses how human beings use their previous experience to reason things and solve problems. He considers the game *Deus Ex*, which takes place from a first-person perspective, playing from a character’s view in a three-dimensional environment. Players have to make connections among video games, situated meaning, and learning between the written texts and background knowledge to make sense of the virtual world. Players even need to read the manual to search for strategies to complete

different tasks. This reflects that many students are frustrated with a text or a textbook without the prior knowledge to allow them to situate the meaning between world and text. Gee suggests that “learning is a cycle of probing the world” (p. 107), which encourages learners to use multiple means to gain critical thinking skills useful in the world. Students have experiences and save these experiences in their minds; however, it is more important for them to make connections or associations between learning and past experiences in order to continue learning.

The last concept Gee discusses is cultural models in video games. Many people think that video games do not have any content; however, Gee argues that video games do have content and children will learn content from games, even violent ones. From his examination of many video games, he concludes not only that children take on different identities when they create characters but also that they have to use cultural models to make sense and solve problems in the games. Students come to school with different cultural models. In order to help students effectively, the content and lessons should be taught so that students can think reflectively about their cultural models.

Although Gee’s book is oriented more toward K-12 audiences, his principles are also applicable to learners in higher education. While he does not suggest that video games replace standard classroom instruction, Gee compares how a player navigates a game with how a learner solves a problem in the classroom. Video games simulate identities, experiences, contexts, and social relationships in virtual spaces. Players have to construct avatar identities, undergo many trials, and solve problems. This is similar to how students take on different learning identity types in the classroom. The book is a valuable resource to suggest how to integrate educational technology or gaming into the

classroom to motivate teachers and students instead of using rote memorization and passive “skill and drill” learning. This will result in students not only learning the game that they are playing but also developing different types of literacy skills.