

Literacy Pioneer: Seminal Works of James Paul Gee

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Abstract

*James Paul Gee's seminal works have led to recommendations that support changes in current pedagogical approaches to learning. Gee's (1999) seminal work *An introduction to Discourse Analysis Theory and Method* describes the multiple factors, tools of inquiry, necessary for analyzing discourse: language-in-use with context, situated meanings, and cultural models. Gee has transferred his theory and method for discourse analysis to the field of video games, visual media, language, and learning. Gee's (2003) *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* explains on how well designed video games can enhance learning through effective learning principles. *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling* (2004a) includes video games in the sociocultural and sociolinguistic theory of learning and literacy as well as ways to reform school curriculum.*

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James Paul Gee's seminal works have led to recommendations that support changes in current pedagogical approaches to learning. The journey to Gee's current instructional recommendations begins with his seminal work *An introduction to Discourse Analysis Theory and Method* (1999). The book describes the multiple

factors and tools of inquiry necessary for analyzing discourse: language-in-use with context, situated meanings, and cultural models. Table 1 identifies the continuum of multiple factors Gee designates for qualitative discourse analysis.

Language analysis isn't a new research topic. It has been addressed by researchers focusing on language and literacy development for decades: Vygotsky, Piaget, Chomsky, Goodman, Brown, Bloom, Halliday and many more. So, why consider Gee's work as a relevant contribution to analyzing and understanding language development and discourse? The introduction of technology has altered culture models and therefore situational meanings. As Gee writes, "It can be problematic whether a Discourse today is or is not the same as one in the past...New Discourses emerge and old ones die all the time." (Gee, 1999, p. 21).

Twenty-first century technology and video media has brought a change in theorizing how language is constructed, the development of knowledge and learning, knowledge-making processes including communication media, social engagement, and grammar. Gee recognizes such changes with a second sociolinguistic discourse analysis key publication, *How to do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit* (2010). This book adds clarity to ana-

lyzing discourse based on the theoretical premise explained in *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method* (1999, 2005). For example, in *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method* (1999, 2005) Gee defined context as "... everything in the material, mental, personal, interactional, social, institutional, cultural, and historical situation" (p. 54). Gee clarifies the term 'context' in *How to do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit* as: "[T]he physical setting in which the communication takes place and everything in it; the basics, eye gaze, gestures and movements of those present; what has previously been said and done by those involved in the communication; any shared knowledge those involved have, including shared cultural knowledge" (p. 12).

How to do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit presents a set of "how-to" instructions including integrating principles from applied linguistics, education, anthropology, psychology, and communication. Emphasis is on how language is organized for integrating individuals' actions in social, cultural and political situational contexts. The tools for analyzing discourse include social languages, discourses, intertextuality, and conversations. Table 2 describes four categories and 27 tools used to analyze discourse data. \

Once again, as described in *An introduction to Discourse Analysis Theory and Method*, a valid discourse analysis is administered under four essential analysis elements, see table 3. The essential analysis elements contain 17 questions. The questions are connected to the six language tasks – semiotics, word building, activity building, social-cultural situations, political cues and clues, and connection building.

As stated previously, Gee's seminal works are part of his sociolinguistic theory as well as a catalyst for his influence on the field of

discourse analysis in the age of technological media. Gee's theory and method in the field of discourse includes, but is not limited to, language of gaming, literacy gaming, game analysis, digital fiction, characteristic of virtual worlds (community, identity, spatiality), video games, and relevant factors in computing systems (self-representation, player engagement, thinking, designing, and play).

So, how does Gee's theory in discourse analysis apply to literacy development within the field of education? From a sociolinguistic standpoint, Gee's research stimulates the sociolinguist debate between traditional schooling and alternatives to current educational practices. Sociolinguistics involves technology, visual media and video games in the twenty-first century. It exemplifies ways learners participate in social and cultural groups for social, cultural and mental achievement. In other words, access to technology has increased social and mental activity organized through culturally based constructs. This sociolinguistic premise in the twenty-first century brings to mind Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development through language development and play.

Vygotsky's (1978) theory emphasizes the role of social interaction on cognitive development which also involves problem solving and play. Learners acquire knowledge through contacts, interactions, and experiences with others as the first step (interpsychological plane). Learners assimilate and internalize acquired knowledge adding his/her personal value to it (intrapsychological plane). This transition is a transformation of what has been learned through interaction, into personal values. Such transitions require active engagement in

his/her world through the use of tools. The use of tools alleviate learners' dependence on others teaching him/her what to do, how to do it, and what not to do. Vygotsky's theory correlates with Gee's premise for discourse analysis and the use of video games.

Gee interpretation of the use of video games augments, extends and provides a clearer understanding of the nature of learning and literacy that may be missing from the current classroom environments. His connection between theory, method and educational practices are found in the following publications: *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning* (2003), *Literacy Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling* (2004), and *Game-Like Situated Learning: An Example of Situated Learning and Implications for Opportunity to Learn A Report to the Spencer Foundation* (2004).

Gee encourages a multi-literacy pedagogical approach that engages learners as designers of meaning and the use of a broad range of learning processes because of technology availability and the learners use of technological media (Gee, 2003; Gee, 2004a; Gee, 2004b; Gee, 2005; Gee, 2006). *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003) identifies 36 learning principles incorporated in good games that correspond with research in the cognitive sciences. Emphasis is on empowering learners to direct their own learning. Game designs are challenging yet do-able and players customize the game to their own levels, abilities and adjust the game as their competence develops. Table 4 lists 16 of the 36 learning principles within three categories for learning.

Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling (2004) references students' learning to read and learning academic

content such as mathematics, science and social studies. Language in content areas is written in a "specialist variety of language and symbols" which is markedly different from the everyday (or vernacular) language used by children" (p. 15-17). Therefore, the use of video games such as Pokémon is a way in which the "human mind works best when it can build and run simulations of experiences its owner has had – like playing a video game in the mindSince learning to read and learning content can never really be separated" (p. 35).

In *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling* (2004a) Gee explains that games can "exemplify good learning principles in particularly striking ways" (p. 52). Video games provide (1) learners continued voluntary engagement; (2) language and content in schools become "more equitable, less alienating and more motivating" (p. 4); and, (3) affinity spaces designed to "resource people who are tied together not primarily via shared culture, gender, race or class, but by shared interest or endeavor" (p. 83-84). This is evident in Gee's explanation of video games, such as 'Rise of Nations'. Learners construct mental simulations from the simulation of experiences within new worlds.

Gee's (2015) application for discourse analysis of video games is in *Unified discourse analysis: Language, reality, virtual worlds and video*. Gee explains connections between the video game world of avatars and their role in the game and player's everyday role in society. There is a common thread and integrated reference between the mono-modal analysis of discourse and the study of video game text. Gee specifies differences between reading print media and playing a game. Dis-

course analysis involves linguistic syntax and grammar analysis without the context of video games, transitioning to syntax or grammar of games from a visual viewpoint i.e. multimodal discourse analysis. A connection between linguistic syntax and grammar with and without video games reinforces the situated meaning aspect of discourse analysis. The last chapters of *Unified discourse analysis: Language, reality, virtual worlds and video* exemplify the framework for discourse analysis, examples including classroom interactions, and two-sample analysis.

Where does that leave us as educators? We know that literacy, especially emergent literacy, begins in the home. Pre-reading activities must connect with the early reading instruction that occurs in school, formally and informally. We cannot ignore learners' access or lack of access to technology that extends literacy beyond decoding to literacy comprehension, reading for understanding. Gee (2004a) recognizes that cognition is situational and contextual. Situated meanings are established in the organization of patterns of experience, action and subjective interests. Therefore, there needs to be an integrative approach between school and out-of-school learning experiences including familiar and unfamiliar text including video games. Motivating spaces, such as Pokémon or other video games, appear to facilitate learning opportunities for learners to quickly master complex systems without instruction by a teacher (Gee, 2004a; Gee, 2004b). This is how learners learn and we need to access this aspect of learning within the classroom.

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Table 1. Tools of Inquiry

Areas of Reality	Situated Meaning	Culture Models	Language Tasks	Discourse Analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reciprocal process • Meaning and value • Activities • Situated identities • Relationships • Semiotics • Connections • “D” Discourse vs. discourse • Cultural context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acquisition • Pattern connections • Word meaning • Social context • Specific situation • Author-receiver • Point-of-view • Reasonable meanings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model conflict • Model inconsistency • Socio-cultural specific • Thinking • Acting • Talking • Pattern recognition • Social mind • Context – intertextual, historical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semiotics - Sign systems & knowledge • Word building • Activity building • Social – cultural situations • Politics – social groups • Connection building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convergence • Agreement • Coverage • Linguistic details

Table 2. Analysis of Categories and Tools

Social Languages - Language and Context	Discourses - Saying, Doing, and Designing	Intertextuality - Building Things in the World – context that shapes language	Conversations Theoretical Tools
<p>Tool 1: The Deixis - Deictic expressions, speech and writing to context.</p> <p>Tool 2: The Fill-in - Knowledge, assumptions and inferences brought to communication.</p> <p>Tool 3: The Making Strange -Listeners/ readers act as if they were outsiders.</p> <p>Tool 4: The Subject - Choice in what speakers/ writers choose to say</p> <p>Tool 5: The Intonation - Contributions to the meaning of an utterance.</p> <p>Tool 6: The Frame Problem - Allows for all aspects of context as relevant to the meaning of the data.</p>	<p>Tool 7: The Doing and Not Just Saying - What speakers/writers say and what they try to do.</p> <p>Tool 8: The Vocabulary - Words used in content, function, informal and formal words in contexts.</p> <p>Tool 9: Why This Way and Not That Way - design of messages in certain ways and not in others.</p> <p>Tool 10: The Integration - integrated words or sentences.</p> <p>Tool 11: Topic and Themes - Topic and theme is in a sentence (usual or unusual).</p> <p>Tool 12: Stanza - Groups of idea units clustered into larger chunks of information.</p>	<p>Tool 13: Context is Reflexive - content either consciously or unconsciously.</p> <p>Tool 14: Significance Building - Lexical and grammatical devices strength or significance</p> <p>Tool 15: Activities Building – activities for communication in social groups, institutions or cultures support and set norms</p> <p>Tool 16: Identities Building - Socially recognizable identity/identities the speaker/ writer tries to get others to recognize</p> <p>Tool 17: Relationship Building – Use of lexical and grammatical nuances building to sustain relationships</p> <p>Tool 18: Politics Building – Use of lexical and grammatical devices that build social goods and how social goods are distributed in society.</p> <p>Tool 19: Connection Building – Use of words and grammar to connect or disconnect things or ignore connections between things.</p> <p>Tool 20: Cohesion - How cohesion in text connect to pieces of information and in what ways.</p> <p>Tool 21: Sign Systems and Knowledge Building - Ways in which words and grammar honor or degrade specific sign systems.</p> <p>Tool 22: Topic Flow or Topic Changes – How the topics of main clauses are chained or switched.</p>	<p>Tool 23: Situation Meaning - Shared experiences and background knowledge to specific meanings in context and how the context is constructed.</p> <p>Tool 24: Social Languages - Grammatical structures that signal and enact a given various forms of social language.</p> <p>Tool 25: Intertextuality – Use of lexical and grammatical items reference to other "texts" or other styles of language.</p> <p>Tool 26: Figured Worlds – Use of assumed unconscious and taken-for-granted pictures, words or phrases of listeners & readers.</p> <p>Tool 27: Big “D” Discourse – Use of speaker/ listener manipulation of language and ways of acting, interacting, thinking, believing, valuing, feeling, dressing and using various objects, tools and technologies.</p>

Table 3. Essential Analysis Elements

Convergence	Agreement	Coverage	Linguistic Details
Analysis offers answers to many or all of the questions arising from the set of the 27 tools.	Discourses implicated in the data should agree with the social language analysis.	Analysis applicable to related sorts of data.	Analysis connected to details of linguistic structure.

Table 4. Gee's 16 out of 36 Learning Principles for Good Games

Empowered Learners	Problem-based Learning	Deep Understanding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity – on-screen character • Interaction – communication • Cross-functional teams – multiplayer environment • Customized - learner experience • Agency – environmental control • Pleasantly frustrating – ability to overcome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk taking • Well-ordered problems to develop and master • Challenge and consideration • Just in time or on demand – information as needed • Explore, Think Laterally, Rethink Goals • Production - completing a level • Smart tools (in game tools) & distributed knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situated meanings – vocabulary by experience • Systems thinking – think big picture • Performance before Competence – actions required to learn

Author's Biography

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