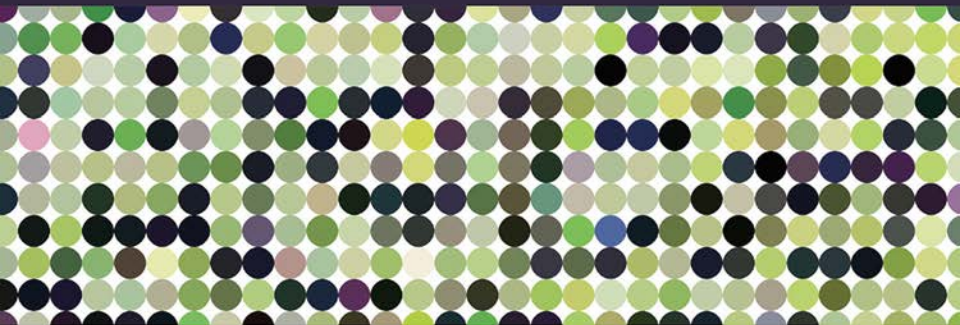


Literacy and Education



James Paul
Gee

Routledge Key Ideas in Education



LITERACY

AND EDUCATION

Literacy and Education tells the story of how literacy—starting in the early 1980s—came to be seen not as a mental phenomenon, but as a social and cultural one. In this accessible introductory volume, acclaimed scholar James Paul Gee shows readers how literacy “left the mind and wandered out into the world.” He traces the ways a sociocultural view of literacy melded with a social view of the mind and speaks to learning in and out of school in new and powerful ways. Gee concludes by showing how the very idea of “literacy” has broadened into new literacies with words, signs, and deeds in contexts enhanced, augmented, and transformed by new technologies.

James Paul Gee is Mary Lou Fulton Presidential Professor of Literacy Studies at Arizona State University, USA. He is author of a number of books, including *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, fourth edition, *Language and Learning in the Digital Age* and is co-editor of *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*.

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AND EDUCATION

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SERIES EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

This series introduces key people and topics and discusses their particular implications for the field of education. Written by the most prominent thinkers in the field, these “key ideas” are read through the series’ authors’ past and present work, with particular attention given to the ways these ideas can, do, and might impact theory, research, practice, and policy in education.

More specifically, these texts offer particular conversations with prominent authors, whose work has resonated across education and related fields. Books in this series read as conversations with authorities, whose thinking has helped constitute these ideas and their role in the field of education—yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Much more than introductions alone, these short, virtuosic volumes look to shape ongoing discussions in the field of education by putting the field’s contemporary luminaries in dialogue with its foundational figures and critical topics. From new students to senior scholars, these volumes will spark the imaginations of a range of readers thinking through key ideas and education.

PREFACE

This is a book about literacy as more than the mental ability to write and read. The book argues that literacy is social because the mind itself is social.

This is also a book about the connections among literacy, oral language, learning, technology, human experience, and social forces as they all work together. Literacy is inseparable from its “playmates.” It needs to be studied that way, not in isolation.

This book is, for me, a retrospective work in that it brings together ideas that I have developed over a long time. Does this mean the book is about me? No, because any talk about “my ideas” is shorthand for all those fellow scholars with whom I worked and played. Our ideas infected each other like viruses. And, for all of us our viruses were caught from others earlier on the scene, before we ourselves mutated them and passed them on. In turn, we hope that our viruses will be mutated and transformed by others who come later.

This book is but one perspective on literacy. It is a perspective located in but one patch of a much larger field (“language and literacy”). While I certainly think some patches of the

larger field are barren, I also think many others bear tasty fruit and merit a visit with some other guide.

From the perspective of this book, literacy is not a minor or isolated topic. In fact, it is too big for one discipline. It must be studied by a team effort equipped with different disciplines, skills, insights, and methods. The team does not always have to see eye-to-eye, but they are in the same boat together.

The book deals with schools—and competing forms of literacy and learning outside of school—because in societies like ours we see school as literacy’s most cherished home. We have great expectations for schools and for the types of literacy they sponsor. Unfortunately, too often our expectations are dashed. And, further, today schools face a myriad of challenges in the name of “21st century skills” fit for our modern, high-risk, high-tech global world, skills that are not on offer in too many of our schools.

Our modern world cannot but help to be a background in any book about literacy as an active force in the world. We live in a world with massive inequality and facing many serious dangers from complex interacting systems like the environment, global warming, the global economy, civilizational and religious conflicts, broken politics, and high-tech forms of surveillance and warfare. I do not discuss my political views on these serious issues in this book much (see my book *The Anti-Education Era*, New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2013). Rather, I argue that the perspective this book takes on literacy is one important prerequisite for thinking about, coping with, and changing our imperiled world.

The first chapter is background, overview, and motivation for continuing. The second chapter is about literacy. The third is about literacy’s close companions: the mind, the body,

human experience, and learning. The final chapter is about digital media and new forms of learning they have helped to inspire, two of literacy's newer companions.

At times, this book reprises, revises, and recombines ideas from a number of past books of mine that in each case offer more detail and further references. These books are:

Social Linguistics and Literacies. London: Routledge. First Edition, 1990. Fifth Edition, 2015.

The Social Mind. New York: Bergin & Garvey. 1992. Reprinted Edition: Champaign-Urbana: Common Ground

An Introduction to Discourse Analysis. London: Routledge. 1999. Fourth Edition, 2014.

How to Do Discourse Analysis. London: Routledge. 2010. Second Edition, 2014.

Situated Language and Learning. London: Routledge. 2004.

What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan. 2003. Second Edition, 2007.

Good Video Games and Good Learning. New York: Peter Lang. 2007. Second Edition, 2013.

Women as Gamers (with Elisabeth Hayes). New York: Palgrave/Macmillan. 2010.

Language and Learning in the Digital Age (with Elisabeth Hayes). London: Routledge. 2011.

Collected Essays on Learning and Assessment in the Digital Age. Champaign-Urbana: Common Ground. 2014.

A note, then, before we begin: I did not want to clutter a short book like this with references. The literature on literacy, even on literacy from a sociocultural perspective, is vast. To cite any

significant part of that literature would render the text unreadable and too long. So, I cite major accessible sources. Readers can follow up through these to gain many more things to read and ponder. The books cited above have ample bibliographies as well.

1

INTRODUCTION

A Story

Let me start with a story. I began my academic career forty years ago as a linguist studying the structure of language (“grammar”). At that time, thanks to the seminal work of Noam Chomsky, the fashionable thing to study was the basic design properties of language, the core grammatical properties that all human languages shared (Chomsky 1957, 1986). There was much less interest in meaning and in language in use. The study of language was then a pretty abstract affair.

Thanks to the “accidents” of life—mistakes made, lessons learned—years later I found myself employed in an applied linguistics program. The program happened to be in a School of Education. I knew absolutely nothing about education

then. Early in my time there the Dean of the School of Education came up to me and asked me to attend a meeting about applying for a grant to research adult literacy.

As a generative (Chomskian) linguist I believed that only oral language was real language. Literacy was only a derivative and relatively trivial “code.” After all, oral language arose in humans long ago (Pinker 1994). It is a good part of what separated humans from their primate relatives. On the other hand, literacy is a relatively recent cultural invention (Olson 1996). Writing has been invented independently only a few times in history. All human groups have had oral language, but not all cultures have had literacy and not all have it today. In the not too distant past, in fact, literacy was rare within societies and across the world.

When I attended the meeting, I was surprised to find out there were any adults in the United States who were “illiterate,” let alone the supposed millions I was told were so or close to it. Since everyone in the U.S. went to school, how could this have happened? I assumed schools gave everyone an equal chance and at least ensured that everyone learned to read and write.

When I attended the meeting, I was as naïve as I could be. I thought that surely literacy would be a simple, straightforward topic of little depth (I should have known better, since many languages in the world do not even have a word for “literacy”). Surely, literacy was just a practical matter of no theoretical interest. It was not something real academics would study.

As I studied literacy the whole topic seemed stranger and stranger. Simplicity turned to complexity. Paradoxes abounded.

The Story Continues

Because I had been “coerced” to work on literacy and was trying to get any help I could, I ended up meeting Sarah Michaels, then working at Harvard and now at Clark University. My colleague David Dickinson (now at Vanderbilt) introduced me to Sarah.

Sarah showed me data she and others had collected on first-grade “sharing-time” sessions in schools. Sharing time is something teachers of very young children tend to do to start off the school day. It is sometimes called “rug time” or “show and tell.” At the time I could not have imagined anything seemingly less important.

Sarah and her colleagues had found that some African-American children gave sharing-time turns that were different from those of the white children in the classrooms (Cazden 2001; Michaels 1981; Michaels & Cazden 1986; Michaels & Cook-Gumperz 1979; Michaels & Collins 1984). These African-American children told what Sarah called “topic-associating” stories, while the Anglo children (and some of the other African-American children) told “topic-centered” stories.

Topic-associating stories were ones that appeared to move from topic to topic with no overt theme. The unifying theme had to be supplied by the listener. Topic-centered stories were ones that focused on and developed one unitary explicit topic. These were usually, in fact, not really stories but reports, such as an “event cast” of a trip to a swimming pool, or procedures, such as the steps involved in making a candle.

The African-American children’s sharing-time turns were not well received by their teachers. The teachers thought the children were rambling on and not making sense. The teachers

in these classrooms had instituted a rule that each turn had to be about “one important thing” and felt the African-American children often violated this rule.

The teachers, it turns out, could seamlessly interrupt and interact with the white children and the African-American children who told topic-focused stories, though not with the topic-associating African-American children. In a sort of interactive dance the teachers helped the topic-focused children produce a piece of language that, while spoken, was explicit and topic-focused in the way we later expect school-based writing to be.

Sarah and her colleagues argued that these sharing-time sessions were early practice at literacy or literate language for children who could not yet read and write very well. This was not necessarily the teachers’ conscious plan, but it seemed to be the underlying goal in their practice.

When I looked at the sharing-time data, a number of the African-American stories stood out. They were long, robust, well-organized poetic stories. Unfortunately, the researchers had thrown these stories out of their data, concentrating on the shorter ones told by the African-American children. They did this in order “control for length,” since the white children’s sharing-time turns, in particular, were relatively short (because they were so concise).

It appeared to me that some of the shorter African-American turns were cases where children had been stopped by the teacher and told to sit down (for not talking about one important thing). Or they were cases where the child had started a story, but for one reason or another did not choose to finish it. The stories that were clearly finished seemed thematically based, but not loosely structured. While they were not like early versions of the sort of explicit, concise language we later