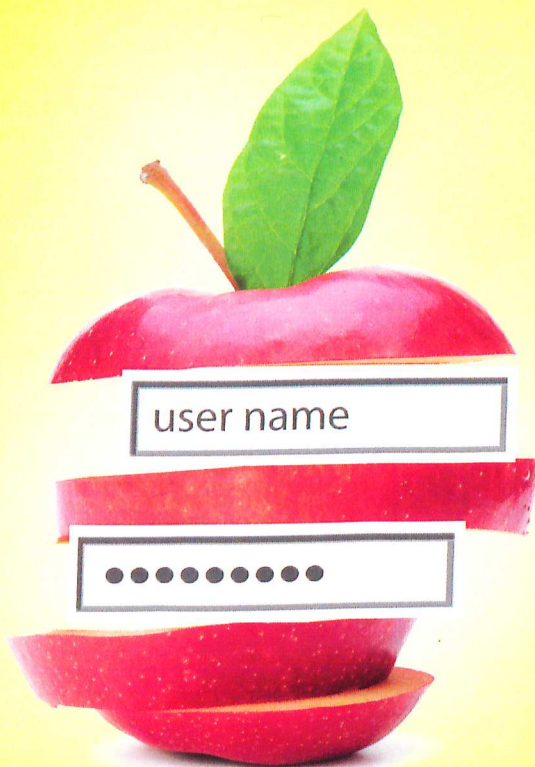


THE ANTI-EDUCATION ERA



Creating Smarter Students through
Digital Learning

JAMES PAUL GEE

Lack of Agency

HUMANS, LIKE ALL ANIMALS, ARE DRIVEN BY NEEDS.

They have basic needs for food, procreation, and safety. When these are not filled, humans will focus on them intently. For many people in the developed world, these needs are filled, though not for all, and not for many in other parts of the world. When these needs are basically taken care of, another set of needs takes the foreground for humans. These are needs for control, belonging, respect, meaning, and agency. All humans have these needs, seek to fill them, and suffer when they are not filled, though if a person is starving, food tends to take first place.

We saw in an earlier chapter than when humans feel no sense of control, they can become quite sick, physically and mentally. They feel trapped. We also saw that humans seek solidarity with others, a sense of belonging and being accepted. They also seek status in terms of respect from others. We have seen, as well, throughout this book so far that humans desperately want to find meaning in the world and that they cling to mental comfort stories.

This leaves us in this chapter with the human need for agency. By this I mean that people want to feel they are effective actors in the world, not just spectators of other people's actions. They want to feel that their actions have their intended consequences and will lead to success in accomplishing their goals (this is a large part of what feeling a sense of control is about).

In a small hunting and gathering group everyone had to pull together and act in ways that were effective for the survival of all. They could not pay

others to do things for them and they could not easily opt out of tasks they didn't like. Furthermore, each person got plenty of mentoring and practice in mastering the tasks that had to be accomplished for survival and flourishing as a group. Everybody needed everybody else. The same is true for soldiers at war.

By and large, none of this is true any longer in modern cities and countries. Many people feel that their voice (as in voting) and their actions count for little in the face of so many people and so many formal institutions and so much complexity. They feel that some people count much more than others because of their wealth, influence, power, or good luck.

At the same time, modern media bring us all sorts of powerful, beautiful, and famous people strutting across the stage of life where it seems everything they say and do, no matter how trivial, counts and bears rabid attention. We come to feel like watchers of life, rather than livers of it. Our lives seem small, common, and mundane. For some reason, there are no klieg lights shining on our deeds.

Part of the problem here is caused by the "winner-take-all" nature of our modern global world. Before high fidelity recording, every town had its own local best singers. But with masterful recordings, all people everywhere had ready access to the world's best singers, and the locals came to seem minor. Even if you want to see performers in person, with modern transportation you can easily and often hear the best on tour.

We can buy the best coffee from around the world, shipped in a day to wherever we are. No need for the local stuff. The same goes for our food, clothes, and a myriad of other products. We do not even need local friends, since we can interact with others wherever they are via digital media and fast transportation. Many people do not even need local jobs for they can telecommute to work from anywhere to anywhere.

In any area of life today, there are a small number of winners (the best singers, designers, coffee makers, actors, financial advisors, and renowned surgeons) who take most of the rewards. Then there is the vast "everyone

else” competing for the remnants. If I am stuck with the local surgeons in my county hospital for non-routine surgery and cannot make my way to the elite surgeons at a major clinic or hospital, perhaps far from home, I’m in trouble. Pity the poor kids stuck at home in their local college with its minor professors when they could have gone across country to attend Yale or Princeton, if they had just had the “smarts” or the money.

Of course, this change is still in progress. Imagine the day when we record (as we are already beginning to do) the best lectures and digitize the best instruction and assessment in every area of education and make them readily available to everyone. We will not need well-paid teachers and professors locally, only aides to help people access “the best” from wherever it comes.

Imagine the day when surgeons direct surgery via digital media and tools that scan and operate on the body. Much surgery (e.g., laparoscopic surgery) is already carried out on screens. We will not need well-paid local doctors, just helpers to monitor the process and change the patients’ bedpans and sheets. Of course, some people will always have to settle for what is available locally, but this will more and more become the sign of either poverty or resistance to the modern world.

In “olden days,” peoples’ accomplishments were, by and large, known locally. People sought respect locally or regionally. Twenty-four-hour cable TV channels did not exist to broadcast fame far and wide, even fame for trivial things like good looks or accidental sex tapes. It is harder now for people to feel they can get recognized for being good at something if these efforts stay local. I live in a small town (Sedona, Arizona) sometimes called the “New Age Capital of the World.” It has lots of New Age gurus. I have coffee every afternoon in a coffee store where the local gurus gather, a sorry lot compared to the gurus with bestselling books or national tours. In the long-ago past, the local shaman was a really big deal, but today the local guru is hard pressed to get any attention at all.

There is, in our modern digital global world, a principle that captures well the winner-take-all phenomenon. It is called the Pareto principle.

According to the Pareto principle, in any modern group endeavor (whether this be scientific research, inventing, investing, photo sharing on an Internet site, or designing virtual clothes for *The Sims*), 10 to 20 percent of the participants produce 80 to 90 percent of the results (e.g., research papers, inventions, investments, photos, virtual clothes) and 80 to 90 percent of the people produce 10 to 20 percent of the results.

This is also how wealth tends to work in developed capitalist countries if forces are not in place to stop it. As of 2007, the top 1 percent of households owned 34.6 percent of all privately held wealth. The next 19 percent had 50.5 percent. This means that 20 percent of the people owned 85 percent of the wealth, and 15 percent of the wealth was left for the bottom 80 percent of the people. This is also the way markets work. The first companies on the market with a new product take the lion's share of the profits; indeed, the first takes most.

In most activities in developed countries today, a small number of people, through talent, practice, or luck, come to dominate. The rest of us are part of a long tail composed of "minor" contributions that garner us little fame and fortune, save among our families, friends, and the "locals" if we still know any.

Now it is tempting to believe that this dominance by the few is the result of a sort of social Darwinism in which the "best" have survived through hard work and struggle, a sure sign of their talent or merit. However, research has clearly shown that this is, in fact, not true. The winners tend to win because they were in the right place at the right time to gain the experience, practice, and the leg up required for success. They may, of course, have had talent, but many equally or more talented people were not there at the right time and place. Success is a product of effort, some talent, and circumstances, as well as pure luck.

There is an interesting theory of success called "the kick theory." According to the kick theory, small initial advantages ramify into large later advantages. One person gets into a better college than another person based only

on a very small difference in grades or based on where they live (they receive a small kick forward). But then that person has added one extra advantage (another kick) for getting into a better graduate school. That kick gives the person a better advantage to get a good job, and that job leads to more opportunities to publish, and, thus, a better chance to get tenure, promotion to full professor, a high salary, and, eventually, some fame and fortune.

Two people who looked close at the beginning are far apart at the end, one working at a prestigious university or think tank and the other laboring at a local campus of the state college. This theory can apply in nearly any area. It has been used to explain why women do less well in science careers than men (gender discrimination is an initial small disadvantage but through the further kicks men get based on that initial discrimination, it grows into a major disadvantage).

You may feel important at the end and slap yourself on the back for your talent, but initially you might have had a small—and even arbitrary—advantage over others. Nonetheless, thanks to your success, you feel a greater sense of agency (importance as an actor in the world whose actions “count”) than does the person who in the beginning was so close to you. Perhaps they even feel like a failure.

There is a fascinating phenomenon in public health called the “status syndrome.” In any country, if you line up people, one after the other, from first to last, in terms of status, this status hierarchy correlates very well with their health. People higher in the line are healthier than people lower in the line; people lower in the line are less healthy than people higher in the line. And the really interesting thing is this: it really does not matter how you define status. You could define status in terms of income, job status, education, or even the size of one’s house.

The status syndrome appears in all countries but is worse in some than in others. It is fairly weak in Japan and quite strong in the United States. Why should one’s status make one, all things being equal, healthier than people who are lower in status? The answer is not just access to better medical care,

since people relatively high in the hierarchy still have less good health, on average, than those above them, though all have adequate access to health care in terms of income.

The answer, it has been argued, is that the higher your status in a society, the more you believe that your actions count and that you are participating in and contributing to the society. The lower your status, the less you feel that you and your actions count and contribute. Feeling that you matter is good for your health. Feeling that you don't (or don't much, or not as much as others) is bad for your health. People have a need for agency, for mattering as actors. In highly hierarchically stratified societies (like the United States and many other countries to different degrees) and in a winner-take-all world, many people do not feel a sense of agency, or, at least, not a very robust one. And, of course, if you are poor and just trying to survive, things are worse, since you are still trying to fill your basic needs and are, by definition, at the bottom of the status hierarchy.

Have you ever played a game, like a board game, with someone who does not care about the game or feels they cannot possibly win? They do not take the actions seriously or think much about them. They look stupid or silly. When people don't believe their actions will make a difference or when they don't know how to act, they appear stupid. They do not make good team members. When games are set up so that there is only one winner or a very few out of a great many players—and when winning begins to feel like a long-shot lottery—lots of the players give up or don't put in much effort or they never get in the game.

Formal schooling is often like this. People are placed in hierarchies where small differences often translate eventually into big ones. There are a few winners and lots of losers in the middle and at the end of the hierarchy. Many students do not think their actions really matter or do not understand how to act so as to make them matter. So they put in less effort, sometimes even give up, and we tell them it's their fault, that they just weren't smart enough or did not work hard enough. In reality, different forms of

organization for learning might well have had different outcomes. Currently, school creates a situation in which many people feel a loss of agency, and thus school performance may not be a very good indicator of their potential for agency in other realms.

To be agents, people need both opportunities to be an agent and models of effective action. They need to see that taking action can really matter, and they need to see what successful action looks like. For this, they need two additional things. First, they need to trust that the system is not rigged or unfair. They need to believe that their effective actions can have successful outcomes and that the outcomes of the game are not already predetermined by the actions of a select few. Second, they need to be members of a community or social group that models for them what counts as an effective action and that demonstrates to them that the actions of the community or group can be effective and will not be undermined by others with special privileges or access.

For many people such conditions are not met. Modern media readily show them that the outcomes of actions are often the products of caprice, power, ideology, or money untethered to truth, evidence, practicality, or argumentation. Perhaps it was always so, but it is far easier today to see it and to be rendered immobile.

There is another important force that diminishes people's sense of agency. In the first half of my life, people thought that companies were meant to make profit, churches were meant to ameliorate society spiritually, and universities were meant to improve society by promoting knowledge. Churches and universities were not, at least in theory, up against the market, judged by the bottom line of profit. Furthermore, business was, in theory at least, meant to achieve long-term success, not just short-term profit, by serving its stakeholders well. Stakeholders were all those people on whom the business impinged, not just its stockholders, but also its employees, customers, and the people who lived in the community where the business resided.

None of this is true today in our global, high-tech "new capitalism." Today all institutions, such as churches and universities, not just businesses,

are up against the market. They must focus on making money and competing with others to succeed. States will no longer, for example, substantively subsidize public universities. Businesses can no longer focus on long-term goals and success, since they are now judged on how well their stock price does each quarter. If the stock price goes down, or does not meet expectations, mutual funds sell the stock and punish the company. Furthermore, companies are not judged by the quality of what they produce or do, but by the track record of their stock price, with an emphasis on the latest figures. Finally, corporations are now viewed as having moral and financial obligations only to their stockholders, even if this means harming employees, customers, or communities.

Today, wealth is pooling into fewer and fewer hands. Inequality in wealth in the United States is as bad today as it was in the 1890s, the age of the robber barons. Only one-fifth of the jobs in a highly developed economy reward people well, usually for producing new ideas, products, and services. Another one-fifth of the jobs involve technical skills, but pay less well, though they may have bonuses and something approaching a living wage. The remainder are mainly in the service and manufacturing sectors or involve manual labor (Wal-Mart, a company famous for paying its employees poorly, is the largest employer in the United States). With the significant diminishment of unions and benefits, these jobs have low wages and often involve little sense of agency and control.

In such a world, it is impossible for most people to get a sense of dignity, mattering, belonging, and agency “on market” from their job. Yet our society tends to judge people by their jobs and wealth, that is, in terms of success “on market.” A society in which close to three-fifths of the people feel no real sense of dignity, agency, or participation is not a “civic society” of involved citizens.

More and more, people must—and, thanks to digital media and technology, can—seek dignity and agency outside markets in often virtual communities on the Internet that share and produce knowledge and designs around

a myriad of interests or passions, whether these be health, cats, citizen science, video-game design, fan fiction, political activism, or a great many other things. They engage in these spaces usually not for money, but for a sense of belonging and contributing as effective knowers and actors. They seek dignity “off market,” outside their jobs or the market-based (and often class-based) judgments of a capitalist society driven by short-term goals and profit seeking detached from values beyond stock prices.

For those who cannot find dignity “off market,” there can be a sense of a loss of one’s full humanity in the face of a world where the rich get ever richer based more on bets and speculation than on real work or long-term investment in high-quality goods and services that actually make people’s lives better. Many people who don’t seek refuge “off-market” simply watch TV when they come home, become stupidified, and generate a massive “cognitive surplus” of possible human energy and agency that sits unused, wasted, and atrophying.

For a long time formal institutions have been a great force for unleashing human agency and collaboration. They have, however, too often crimped agency and led to dysfunctional human interactions instead. Institutions are particularly dangerous when they freeze thinking and fail to face new realities. Today they are being challenged by everyday people as producers and collaborators.