



Race, Diversity, and Experience

James Paul Gee
Mary Lou Fulton Presidential Professor of Literacy Studies
Regents' Professor
Arizona State University

An educational scholar, who happens to be African-American, once said to me: “When people say a classroom is diverse they mean it has African-American kids in it; when they say it is very diverse they mean it is all African-American kids”.

Since the 1960s, many educators have foregrounded race—primarily black and white—in their fight against inequity in society and in their struggles to address unequal outcomes at school. In this process African Americans have often also been taken as a model for poverty and not just racial, thereby confounding race and class. Not only educators, but many others, have also taken African-Americans as the “model minority” and assumed that the changing demographics of the United States—where a variety of different “minority groups” will be become the new majority—will benefit the Democrats since other minority groups will vote primarily Democratic as African-Americans do. This would, indeed, be bad news for the Republicans (and they seem to be tempting their own demise in the way they treat immigrants and minorities), but it is an assumption that is now being questioned (<http://www.nationaljournal.com/magazine/the-emerging-republican-advantage-20150130>).

Much of how we talk about race and culture in Education is a product of the world in which the Baby-Boomers (like me) grew up. But the world has changed. In the 1960s we had a massive

middle class, an under-class locked out of it, and a fairly invisible over-class. Today we have an ever diminishing middle class and an over-class that has engaged in the largest upwards redistribution of wealth in our history (Stiglitz 2013). We still have an under-class, but with many more people joining it or in danger of joining it, people of all different colors.

We are returning to, and in some respects surpassing, the levels of inequality and degradation of work, wages, and unions last seen in the Age of the Robber Barons in the 1890s. Segregation is as bad or worse today than it was in the 1960s. The literacy gap between black and white kids has not come close to closing, but for the first time in American history the literacy gap in terms of class has surpassed the one in terms of race

[\(http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/08/when-class-became-more-important-to-a-childs-education-than-race/279064/\)](http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/08/when-class-became-more-important-to-a-childs-education-than-race/279064/). Obama's presidency has shown the still virulent racism in the United States. Ironically, our world today is different from the world in which the Baby Boomers grew up because, in some respects, it is moving backwards and becoming so much like the world before the Baby Boom came on the scene, the world before Roosevelt's New Deal, albeit with a new cast of minorities, immigrants, and downwardly mobile, formerly middle-class people (Fraser 2015).

Under the guise of being "critical", educators have sometimes tended to see people as "liberated" when and only when they talk, value, and feel like the critical theorist. Consciousness raising has often meant (sometimes uncritically) adopting the critical theorist's language and consciousness. Such critical work effaces diversity (albeit in the name of social justice) when it attempts to privilege the voice and language of the theorist as the litmus test of correctness.

White privilege has sometimes been foregrounded without much nuance for the fact that white people losing their homes and their futures in our current casino capitalism don't much feel their privilege amidst their woes, however much they may have it. It does not seem a good coalition building strategy to harp on the perfectly true fact that even at the bottom of society there are haves (whites) and have not's (blacks). And, often too, these perspectives are pushed by privileged tenured academics safe from sharing the fate of their black or white comrades' race to the bottom.

It does not seem that our long-running educational theories of race, class, culture, and multiculturalism—however true and well-intentioned they may be—have impacted the world all that much. As we in Education have (correctly) damned deficit theories and white privilege, more and more people of all races, groups, and classes have been impoverished, drowned in debt, and left with little sense of control and active participation in society.

Today, the United States is made up of a myriad of groups of all shades of brown, black, and white, speaking 60 different languages. Not all brown and black people are poor, not all white ones are rich. A Black-White binary lens on today's world—even if used merely as a “model”—may not be as helpful for any of us as it seemed in the 1960s.

Perhaps, it is time to change approaches. I would argue that we need new theories of culture and diversity, ones that do not “fix” “black” people as the definition of “diversity”. We need theories that see “black”, “brown”, and “white” diversity not just in terms of “culture”, but in terms of human interests, passions, experiences, and coalitions. We need to start actually honoring

diversity.

I am not, by any means, intending to efface the politics of race. All language and all texts are political in the sense that we cannot speak or write without accepting and communicating (overtly or tacitly) what we take to be normal, appropriate, right, good, fair, or not. In a society like ours, with ever higher levels of inequality, all groups and institutions are warped, as are their relationships with each other. Indeed, there is evidence that when people feel they do not count as respected participants in society, they get sick in mind and body (and health care costs rise dramatically). There is evidence, as well, that even the rich in highly unequal societies have less good health than the well off in more equal societies. We are all sick and getting sicker; inequality is a disease that weakens us all (Pickett & Wilkinson 2011).

Both liberals and conservatives tend to use race in a totalizing way. Race becomes a macro-level category that defines non-white (prototypically black) people and effaces all other aspects of their lived experience and diversity. This is for me precisely the great sin of racism: to efface any person's wealth of lived complexity in the name of a category, label, or stereotype. We cannot combat racism by engaging in the same removal of personhood and personality from other people as racists do. So I want to start not with race, but with *lived experience* and move from there to race, class, and gender (the unholy trinity).

I want to start from experience because there has been an important revolution in how we think about the human mind. We used to think that human minds worked like digital computers, that is, they worked by calculation, rules, and abstractions. But more modern work argues that

humans learn and think bottom-up and (at least initially) concretely from their embodied experiences in the world (Gee 2013, 2015). Humans store all the experiences they have had and care about in their long-term memories. Over time, as they have more and more experiences, they find patterns and sub-patterns in their experiences. They use their previous experiences when they have to think about and plan for action and problem solving in the future. Human long-term memory is as much or more about the future (how to think, plan, and act) than the past (accuracy about what happened) (Marcus 2008).

Experiences we have had in the past are good for future learning and problem solving when we can use them well to simulate scenarios in our minds that allow us to think before we act and to form good hypotheses about possible courses of action. But an experience is only good fodder for future learning and action if we have paid attention to the “right” elements in the experience and not been overwhelmed by the myriad of details that any experience contains. Only then is the experience stored in our minds in a way that is effective for future planning and action. This is to say that we must know how to *appreciate* or *value* the elements in an experience in terms of which elements are relevant and important for future thinking, goals, and accomplishments.

How do we learn how to appreciate or value the elements in an experience? We learn this not just by trial and error (or, on good Darwinian terms, most of us would be gone by now). We learn it through the groups into whose ways with words, deeds, and values we are socialized as children and later throughout our lives as we journey through the geography of social space. These groups can be families, churches, communities, peer groups, interest-driven groups (e.g., gamers, birders, gangs, gardeners, green activists), affinity spaces, and institutions of all sorts.

These groups are meso-level groups. They lay between the individual and macro-level categories like race, class, gender, and big “cultures”. These groups make our minds *social* because they help determine, by teaching and mentoring, how we edit, store, and use our experiences to learn, achieve, and become.

There is in human beings no real divide between the individual and the social. Each human being’s experience is uniquely individual—because we each have our own “spin” on things—and because each human takes a different trajectory through the myriad of social groups that constitute social space. And, yet, too, every experience a human has and stores in mind has been mentored in some way by some social group. Thus, on good Bakhtinian terms, our groups form us and we reform them. Every person’s mind and body has been formed and is continually reformed by many different groups, of all different types and sizes, not just big one. Each person brings all this previous experience to each new group he or she enters, brings each new group potentially new information and new possibilities for change, reform, and progress.

Crucially, we are each of us “members” or “affiliates” of many different groups and throughout our lives enter and leave a goodly number of social spaces, staying shorter and longer times in different ones. Finally, all of our various socially-situated identities—formed through embodied socialized experience—interact with each other in a great many ways because they are all trapped in the same cage, namely inside us; there they are all conflicting, competing, cooperating, and mutating with each other. We are each of us the soup in which the social and its reform is incubated.

There are important equity issues concerned with experience (Gee 2015): First, people have only had *equal opportunity to learn* when they have had—not the same texts—but equally rich previous relevant experiences that were well mentored and well guided. Thus, equal opportunity for science learning, for example, means having had equally rich prior experiences relevant to the activities (the talk, tools, and practices) of science, not just having had equal access to texts (words). Language and texts give categories to the world of experience, but experience gives situationally appropriate meanings to words and texts without which there is no real understanding and no real capacity to solve problems in context.

Second, when someone's perhaps rarer or different experiences are ignored as a basis for learning, *they* are cheated and so are *we* because pooling diversity (no, not just race) in experience (at the meso-individual/social level) is the heart and soul of *collective intelligence*. When we efface the myriad experiences a black or white person has had to foreground just race, we risk losing precious resources for collective intelligence in terms of all the other identities this person has. When we pretend the cage has only one animal in it—a black person, a brown, or a white one—we create a lonely zoo to be sure.

We all today face a world endangered by many interacting complex systems (such as global inequality, global warming, global casino capitalism, massive flows of global immigration, and continual global conflicts and wars) threatening to go out of control. These problems were caused by humans, but they are not solvable by older theories, siloed specialties, and business as usual. Only collective intelligence (connected intelligence, networked intelligence, the wisdom of the crowd, the Maker Movement, the Pro-Am movement where expertise does not require

formal credentials, groups smarter than the smartest person in them) can save us now (Gee 2013; Nielsen 2012).

The research on collective intelligence is clear: collective intelligence only works if group members have diverse sorts of information, do not hold what they know back, and do not defer and silence themselves because of other people's status or power (Surowiecki 2005). Often, in collective intelligence, a hard problem is solved because some person in the group had a rare but crucial piece of information that was key—with other contributions—to the solution of the hard problem.

The diversity crucial for collective intelligence is not as general as race. Rather, it is as specific as the unique trajectory through lived embodied socialized experiences each of us has had. All people—black, brown, or white—must offer *all* the relevant experiences, viewpoints, and crucial pieces of information they have garnered from their lived specialness and the various forms of insight and expertise they have developed anywhere and everywhere. If they set aside their commitments as *Yu-Gi-Oh* fanatics, music history buffs, *Moral Combat* champions, or citizen scientists then, from the point of view of collective intelligence, we are all diminished.

Of course, there are different ways of being black, brown, or white. And there are different ways in which being black, brown, or white intersects with one's other myriad of identities. But race does not really capture the full range of diversity here. Categories like race, class, and gender are too often used by the ill-intentioned and the well-intentioned as categorical impositions with

sharp boundaries. But they are not lived by many of us as so neatly bounded. They are lived as “squishy categories” and intersecting continua.

Without any doubt, many people—under the rubric of our society’s race, class, and gender impositions—are too often forced to background the diverse array of their feelings, talents, interests, and experiences to fly a single flag in solidarity with others in the fight for justice. But we must celebrate all their flags and they must be free to fly them all or we all lose in the fight for a new world where we can all survive.

Of course, I do not have the new theories we need for better impact on the world. I am only proposing that some young people begin to question old theories and think about the possibilities of new ones and new ways of writing them into the world. Let’s see our papers and talks populated with individual black, brown, and white people—and the many mixtures thereof—portrayed as many-dimensional diversity factories. Let’s demand that our media, schools, and societies oppose racism—and other isms—by doing the same thing. In our efforts to foreground race and gender we have sometimes left out the actual complex people that make up (socially constructed) races and genders and thus lost the very thing we should value most, that is, diverse expressions of being human rooted in our different journeys through the multiple experiences that compose our lives.

I am not remotely suggesting that we give up our rage against the machine. Much of my own career has been filled with both personal and professional rage against disdain. Real rage against

injustice is non-negotiable. But WE cannot win if we reduce humans (pitifully frail things, after all) to bloodless abstractions.

While I am not smart or strong enough as an old man to show the way forward, others have begun. Here is small reading list of books populated by diverse (racial, class-based, gendered, aged, and differentially abled) people with real blood and guts and multiple identities and talents flowing through their veins: Scott Barry Kaufman, *Ungifted: Intelligence redefined*, Basic Books, 2013; T. Cooper, *Real man adventures*, San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2012; Andrew Solomon, *Far from the tree: Parents, children, and the search for identity*, New York: Scribner, 2012; Joe Bagent, *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's class war*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007; Katherine Boo, *Behind the beautiful forevers: Life, death, and hope in a Mumbai undercity*, New York: Random House, 2012; Wes Moore, *The other Wes Moore: One name, two fates*, New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010; Jeff Hobbs, *The short and tragic life of Robert Peace: A brilliant young man who left Newark for the Ivy League*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014; and Roz Chast, *Can't we talk about something pleasant?* New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. And the grandparent of them all: J. Anthony Lukas, *Common ground: A turbulent decade in the lives of three American families*. New York, Knopf, 1985.

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