



Language and the Common Core

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The Common Core Standards are fine. Indeed, they are more focused on reasoning, argumentation, and collaboration than were the old standards. The problem with standards is not standards as such, but standards getting trapped in a system of testing that advantages publishers and politicians more than children and families. Aside from this problem, though, there is another deep problem that bears on the very nature of language and on the important notion of “equal opportunity to learn” (Moss, Pullin, Gee, & Haertel 2007).

In a sense all school learning is language learning (Gee 2004; Halliday 1993). All students—native English speakers and ELLs—have to learn the special varieties of language that represent and give access to “content”. They have to learn the varieties of language connected to mathematics, science, literature, art, and technology. They need to be prepared to be able to learn further sorts of specialist languages outside of school whether this be the language of “modding” video games or the language of citizen science or an activist cause in which they may want to engage. All learning is about learning to walk the walk and talk the talk and the two cannot be separated. The special varieties of language which I have been talking about here are often called “academic language” (academic varieties of language), but, since the language of *Yu-Gi-Oh* is as technical as any academic form of language a child hears or reads

early in school, I just call them all specialist varieties of language” (or “specialist social languages” or “specialist registers” would be other terms we could use, see Gee 2014).

Current theories of the mind centered around “embodied cognition”—now well supported (Bergen 2012; Gee 2004)—argue that what gives meaning to language are goal-based, contextually-sensitive mental simulations based on actual experiences we have had.

Furthermore, the experiences we need to have had in order to think, reason, and comprehend well need to have been edited (foregrounded and backgrounded in certain ways) so that they are useful for getting ready for action and problem solving in the future. Mentors with lots of previous experience need to help newcomers know what to focus on and help them to see, as well, how words match up with experience and help order it. Words get situated meanings (the only really useful type of meaning) from experience, but language, in turn, regiments and orders experience (Gee 1992/2014). Experience and language dance together or fall apart into meaninglessness. Minus all this, learners are not well prepared to understand new forms of talk and texts. They can only achieve relatively superficial verbal (definition-like) meanings.

Children who have not had anywhere near the amount of experience with the sorts of experiences in the world words are about—the experiences that given them situated meanings—and of the words as they are used to organize these experiences are at a great disadvantage in learning to talk and write, listen and read new forms of language, whether this be the language of physics or the language of *Yu-Gi-Oh*. They have not had anything like the same opportunity to learn even if they have been handed the same texts. They cannot learn

content well because they cannot marry language and experience in the cause of “language development”. Demanding that a pole-vaulter to hit a higher standard without a pole is a meaningless—if not pernicious—standard, not matter how good it sounds.

Without a standard for equity based on experience, it does not really matter what other standards we have. We will just keep producing gaps and controversy without creating the vaunted equal opportunity America claims as a core value.

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