



Thank you for taking time to talk about your book “The Anti Education Era.”

Can you tell us a little about yourself?

(Some background especially how you are related to the topic in the book.)

I am a linguist by training. I worked in the first part of my career on syntax, semantics, and the philosophy of language. My dissertation was on “naked infinitives”, though I also wrote about “headless relatives” and the *de re/de dicto* distinction. At the time I could not have heard that sentence as odd. By the accidents of life I came to work on how language and literacy work in education and society. More recently, but even then now ten years ago, I came to work on video games and learning, inspired by my then six-year-old son Sam (now a college freshman).

After writing a good deal on language, learning, technology, and society I have become deeply concerned about the sorry state of the world and humanity. Environmental degradation, global inequality, toxic food, and casino capitalism (where the rich risk other people’s money and lives) are interacting to endanger all life. 85 people in the world now own more than half the human race put together. The *Anti-Education Era* is call in the wilderness to stop talking about trivia in education while the world burns and our children’s futures are imperiled. If we do not do something soon, the best school reform in lower Manhattan, for example, will not be better algebra, but training with snorkels.

Can you give us a 10,000 ft view of the book?

Human beings left to themselves are stupid. The price for stupidity is way too high now in our high-tech, high-risk, wildly-endangered world. We better start worrying about how to get people

smart in the right way for the world we actually live in. While we Americans celebrate rugged individualism, the Greek word for people who go it alone is the word “idiot”.

Your book takes aim at what education is now, compared to what it should be. Do you have a pessimistic view of the future of education?

I have a pessimistic view of the future of life on our planet, though I think a good many insects and cockroaches will do ok. Our society has very little respect for evidence. Evidence is just what the world says back to you when you act in and on it. A lack of respect for evidence—believing what you hope is true or what will make you rich or powerful—is a lack of respect for the world. Camus said that the universe was “benignly indifferent” to us humans. But that is true only when we treat the world with respect (it is the best we can expect). When we do not, the world bites back and strongly.

The subtitle of your book is “Creating Smarter Students Through Digital Learning.” What do you mean when you say “Digital Learning” and what aren’t we doing now to create smarter students?

First we have to say what smart should mean. To do that we need to study how and why humans are stupid and that is what the first part of the book does. When we have a good list of the ways in which we are stupid—and the list is long—we just to have reverse it to have a theory of what school and society should be doing if we want our children to have children. That is what the second part of the book is about.

Much literature in sociobiology and behavioral economic argues that humans are stupid because they have minds formed when we were hunter gatherers. These minds cannot cope with our

modern complex conditions. My book argues another point of view. I agree that humans, as individuals without tools and other people, are idiots (in the Greek sense). Humans are meant to be “plug-and-play devices”. They become smart when they are networked in the right ways with the right people to engage in collective intelligence. Of course, when they are networked in the wrong way they can become both smart and very dangerous. Ethics matters here.

Digital media can allow schools just to do what they already do but faster (i.e., abetting human stupidity in the service of the rich) or they can become smart tools to engender ever new forms of powerful collective and ethical intelligence. [By the way, some people have said I am “anti-capitalist” and against free markets. In fact, I would love to see the U.S. have free markets. We have monopolies, price fixing, social welfare for the rich, and massive schemes to redistribute wealth upwards from the poor to the rich. No free markets though].

How do we change the momentum of always doing what we have done and move towards a “smarter” use of technology in education?

Today the agendas for our schools and society are set by the wealthy and the politicians who, by and large, represent them and represent them well. Respecting facts about the world, our history, the results of our policies, and our judicial system (where the poor go to jail and the rich get a raise for crimes) would be toxic to the interests of the wealthy. But the wealthy are a small percentage of our population, so they need the majority of us to be idiots (again, in the Greek sense). A good way to accomplish that goal is to demonize teachers and make schools an intellectual wasteland.

Sadly, humans move forward usually only when disaster actually strikes. For example, the Plague was the best thing that ever happened to peasants. It made them in short supply and turned them either into corpses or into workers who had to be freed and paid. We are today trying to recreate serfs as we attack wages, unions, and benefits. We are poisoning people across the world with fracking, pollution, and toxic food. We are creating germs resistant to all antibiotics. We are already facing the first dire effects of climate change while our powerbrokers still deny “global warming” every time it snows (a great example of just massive breathtaking stupidity). I hope we change because a great ethical wave spreads across our country and the world. Otherwise, the Grim Reaper will do “his” thing and we will start teaching real science in our schools as we seek to rediscover science (again) in the aftermath.

You use the term “synchronized intelligence” in your book. What is that and why is it important?

Effective, innovative, and ethical collective intelligence requires each person in a network to respect and be able to “dance” with all the tools, things, and other people in the network. We each have to be able to coordinate with (get in synch with) and learn to be coordinated by other people, things, and tools for a common good. This is basically all from Bruno Latour. We each have to bring important skills to the table, but ensure that they are coordinated with other people, things, and tools to create a higher-order intelligence than any one of us idiots (again the Greek sense) can bring to the table unaided. Any chef that does not know how to dance with shellfish and does not respect that shellfish make demands and bring things to the table when you cook them poisons his or her customers. Humans are not the only important thing in the world. Things, tools, and all living beings need to be respected and made valuable parts of the “team”.

Otherwise, all we have are idiots (again in the Greek sense). Congress would be a good example. There are a great many others.

What do you envision the classroom of 2034 to look like?

There may be none, either because we have entered a new Dark Ages or because learning will become pervasive across age, time, and institutions and part and parcel of ethical and collectively intelligent networks, groups, communities, and nations living fruitful lives. Both are good for knowledge production. A new Dark Ages would allow for rediscovery and perhaps a new humility towards and respect for the world. On the other hand, if we were to see teaching and learning as a constant in life—indeed the ultimate nourishment of life—that would be good, too.

What do you hope to accomplish by writing this?

I wanted to start a new discussion about schools and society based on the question “What type of people do we want to create”? I have come to feel that academic writing has had very little impact on the world. We academics are part of the problem. We undervalue what we don’t know, overvalue what we think we know, and we look down on communicating with the hoi polloi. Thus, we leave communication to what Plato called “speech writers”. Speech writers (who included politicians, Sophists, and poor old Homer) sought, in their writing and speeches, to forestall questioning altogether, since their primary interest was to persuade through language that claimed to be complete and self-sufficient, standing in no need of supplement or rethinking, authoritative in its own right. They were not interested in mutually discovering the truth in dialogue, but in power.

Where did you get your inspiration from to write this?

Despair. I have always liked other animals better than human animals, so I hope to convince humans to let other things live, including poor people.

Your book is now a year old. I always like to ask “Who is listening to your message?”

Nobody. What do you expect when a stupid person writes a book for stupid people? It’s a dilemma.

My book on video games sold well over 30,000 copies and ten years later still sells well. This book has the problem that I did not get to choose the title (the publisher thought “On Human Stupidity” was a downer) and people want me give them a curriculum-guide for digital media. The book offers a clear solution that no one has paid attention to: just reverse each condition for human stupidity and that is what school should be about, indeed, what learning throughout life and society should be about. If we did that, it would be a Black Plague for the rich. If we do not, it will be a Black Plague for all of us, rich and poor alike.

Looking back, is there anything you wish you had written but didn’t?

I wished I had been able to use the title I wanted. I wished I had been less nice in the book. I wished I had written it better. I wished I was younger. But at least Plato would say, with praise, “at least it ain’t poetry”.

Do you have a website or some way for readers to contact you or get more information?

I have a website (jamespaulgee.com) that I post to quite irregularly. I also have a website devoted to my poetry (jamespaulgee.wordpress.com) as well (this is embarrassing, given my last response). Three connected little books of my poetry (*Blowing Out the Candles* Vols. 1-3) have just been published. Search for them in Amazon under the name "Jim Gee". Do not read them if you are prone to depression or fear death, but buy them anyway.