

The Social Mind: A reflection on society

What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy
Chapter 7: The Social Mind: How do you get your corpse back after you died?
5 October 2005

In Gee's social analysis of communities in the online gaming world, he describes a scenario in which exceptionally powerful learning takes place in a group. Not only do these gamers excel at the game *EverQuest*, they also excel at tinkering with the coded heart of program and changing the system when needed for the survival of members of the group.

This group achieves remarkable success as a group. Specialized knowledge is easily accessible, teamwork is paramount, and together they can achieve what none could do alone. Gee, as gamers seem obligated to do, reflects what a better place the world would be if only schools followed this model of learning. He sees this model as similar to the workplace model enjoyed by knowledge workers, and at least in my case, I have little reason to disagree.

But Gee's challenge to the American educational establishment leads to a question that would have to be asked if we wished to use his model of social learning in public schools: What would this model look like if we were to try to implement it in schools.

Imagine a collection of public school students, say tenth graders, given a problem to solve, say design a new school (http://www.edutopia.org/php/article.php?id=Art_909). Assessment of learning is based on evaluation by architects, who are also available to be experts.

Mountlake Terrace High School north of Seattle did this, but the slick-looking video reporting on results fails to describe just who these students are. The web site does say, however, that project-based learning has been introduced into some classrooms at that school.

And just which classrooms are those? Hard to tell, but the video shows students of diverse races and abilities. But the census results for Mountlake Terrace suggests socio-economic conditions that could pre-dispose students to succeed. This town of 20,000 people has a medium family income \$5,300 higher than the national average. Racial diversity is not extensive: the town is 77.7% white, 10.9% Asian, and 5.7 % Latino. Over 65% of residents over 25 have some college, compared to just over 50% nationally. This program clearly is not targeted to lower achieving kids.

Gee ignores this issue in his example. The problem with making Gee's vision operational is the same problem that educators face daily: what to do with students from lower socio-economic strata and from homes that do not value education? Too many of

these students are in school because it is demanded by law – not because they want to be there, not because they are preparing for college, but because they are forced to be there.

By contrast, nobody is in Adrian's *EverQuest* team because of a state mandate. The difference between a self-selected group like Adrian's and a class of public school students is critical. Social learning is indeed a powerful tool, but until some solution is found for the social issues that daily widens the gap between rich and poor, it will remain restricted to pilot projects, advanced classes, and elite students.