

Making Sense of Gee and Identity in (Language) Teaching

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Abstract

This perspective article discusses Gee's (2000) four-pronged framework of identity in the context of (language) teaching. To better make sense of Gee and his framework, I first present a scenario from my teaching context, which contains all the components of Gee's framework. I then mention some identity questions that encapsulate the scenario and pave the way for discussing the framework. Next, Gee's conceptualization is presented with a focus on its four dimensions, as followed by a critical discussion of the framework with reference to layers of the scenario. Finally, I conclude with a conceptualization of identity that complements Gee's framework in better making sense of identity in (language) educational work.

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The scenario

Before presenting the scenario, I must note that the point of sharing this narrative is my daily experience and presenting a storyline that helps make better sense of Gee's conceptualization.

At the time of writing this paper, I was teaching two courses to undergraduate students, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The courses focused on how effective communication could be established in workplaces through employing personal competencies and interpersonal transactions that aim for enhancing institutional accountability and growth. The courses entailed how students could develop their personal and interpersonal skills by drawing on verbal and non-verbal abilities for the purposes of institutional development. Speaking of personal characteristics, I should mention that I am a tall person who often receives compliments from people in the street or subway system, and honestly this makes me feel positive about myself, although I have never seen it as a point of superiority or

else. It is what just, by any chance, has happened to me and is bound to culture in this context. But I feel that people, including my students, generally like it, but I am not sure of it.

There were up to 15 students in each class and students came from different disciplines like hotel management, civil engineering, biology, etc. The courses, thus, acted like supplementary contents that fostered better communication skills in students for use in their (future) workplaces. The students were all from Hong Kong, with parents, as I have realized, who are partly from the mainland and partly consider themselves Hong Kongers. Students were rather reticent but I persistently attempted to engage them in talk because of two major reasons. First, I was told that a significant share of the students' final marks comes from classroom participation and, thus, I had to report something at the end of the term. Second, I believe that knowledge and interaction are interlocked in constantly (re)shaping each other. So, I tried to engage each of the students in dialogue or ask them to work in groups to share their ideas. This group work was also what I was told to do because students liked to pair and share their ideas. The students attempted to connect with peers who had shared understandings, had similar hobbies, were classmates, and generally were similar in some respects.

In the class, I attempted, due to the nature of the courses being focused on communication, to link the classroom contents to the real life of students by asking questions about history, culture, traditions, generational changes, Hong Kong specifics, etc. as well as sharing information about Iran, in order to make the students familiar with cultural similarities and differences. So, this question-and-answer chain was a key dimension of the class and most of my learning was shaped by this chain. Of course, I adopted this instructional strategy because the course also demanded such a pedagogy. That is, the course syllabus and materials had been designed and selected in a way that moved me toward a clear focus on interaction in the class. Up to the moment that I was writing this essay, I was quite happy with the classes, thanks to the unwavering help of my colleagues, as I was partly moving the students toward opening their mental boxes, I was establishing a friendly atmosphere in the class, the students were collaborating effectively, we were moving forward based on curricular demands, and we were learning about life and culture through sharing experiences and engaging in effective communication.

Some Identity Questions

The scenario, like any other piece of text, carries a number of questions about the identities that circulate throughout the text. I should parenthetically note that I do not raise questions about authorial identity or the identity that unfolds in the process of

writing because it is beyond the present discussion. Rather, the identity I am referring to here is in relation to ways of constructing the self and other forms of meaning-making processes that underlie educational delivery. And such a process here happens in relation to teaching in general and language teaching and communication in particular. Thus, some questions that matter in understanding identity, in relation to the above scenario, can be: 1. Who am I as an educator (of the course) and who I want and think students think I am? 2. Who are students as participants of the course? 3. How does content play a role in how I understand myself and students? 4. How does the nature of the course make me adopt a certain persona of myself and understand students? 5. How do curricular demands make me be and act in certain ways in this course? 6. How does the interaction between me and students shape who we are and who we construct of ourselves? 7. (How) does my tallness and students being from Hong Kong matter in what we are, do, and say? 8. What is the relevance of sharing cultural points to how we feel about each other and engage in classroom talk? 9. What is the importance of students having groups of fellows in who they are and how they do in the class? 10. Why should I and students (attempt to) be part of this course and how does this influence our being, talking, and doing in the class and in our career?

Hundreds of questions could easily come up upon careful reflection on this and any other scenario. If we are to consider identity as “who am I?”, who-ness then relates to where I have come from, where I (am to) go, what I will be, what I (can) do, how I feel, how I influence context, how context influences me, when I am this and that, why I am this and that, and many more questions. It is from the perspective of these interwoven questions that identity is a grand concept relating to and embracing other neighboring concepts like agency, autonomy, emotion, efficacy, backgrounds, motivation, etc. From a merely personal dimension of identity, beliefs about one’s abilities (i.e., efficacy) shape who one is; so, efficacy is identity-laden. Similarly, how one feels about themselves and context (i.e., positive or negative emotions) shapes who they perceive themselves; so, emotion is also identity-laden. Or, how one acts upon the world to change or resist something (i.e., agency) shapes how one views themselves; so, agency is also identity-laden. In a sense, any attribute or characteristic of human beings is linked in a way or another to identity, operating in a dynamic synergy of being. Thus, anything and any thing is in a way or another identity.

Gee’s Framework

I chose to organize this discussion around Gee’s conceptualization because it is one of the most rigorous frameworks of identity, especially in education, one that could bear helpful implications for (language) teachers’ work. Gee views identity as being a

certain kind of person and being a certain kind of person means how one is recognized, as constructed based on four interrelated dimensions.

The first dimension is *Nature* or N-identities, which is the state one is in, not what one has done or accomplished. Examples like being Black, identical twin (Gee's example), blood type, and having curly hair are natural attributes over which one has no control. Gee emphasizes that "natural identities can only become identities because they are *recognized*, by myself or others, as meaningful in the sense that they constitute (at least in part) the "kind of person" I am" as done "through the work of institutions, discourse and dialogue, or affinity groups" (p. 102, original emphasis). Thus, that one has curly hair can only become a working of identity once it is recognized by others as beautiful or unbeautiful through dialogue or social engagements; otherwise, it is just a personal attribute. The second dimension is *Institution* or I-identities, much like what is known as role identity from a professional perspective, as a process through which one is authored to be recognized as a certain kind of person fulfilling or being in a position. Gee speaks of I-identities as a continuum defined by calling or imposition. As he suggests, a university professor has been called by the university divisions to apply for a job and have it. Conversely, sometimes one is imposed to be in a certain position, and Gee refers to prisoners for this type of I-identities. The key point here is the official institutions that define one's identity as I-identities.

The third dimension is *Discourse* or D-identities, which constitutes most of Gee's discussion, probably due to his line of thinking and research. D-identities are the ways one is recognized as a certain kind of person through discourse and discursive practices. Gee speaks of a friend of his who is recognized as charismatic, and such charisma is not something that the friend is born with, nor what an institution has given her, but "because other people treat, talk about, and interact with my friend as a charismatic person that she is one" (p. 103). Gee also views D-identities as an ascription or achievement. While the former involves how others view one as having a certain characteristic (like being recognized as charismatic), the latter includes how one attempts to facilitate being recognized in certain ways (like, in the same example, talking about aspects of charisma). The fourth dimension is *Affinity* or A-identities or the groups with which people share concerns. As Gee observes, "what people in the group share, and must share to constitute an affinity group, is *allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices* that provide each of the group's members the requisite experiences" (p. 105, original emphasis). Thus, having common practices, engaging in group activities, and being in contact with groupmates are essential in forming A-identities.

An important point about Gee's conceptualization is that he well-acknowledges the role of power in being recognized as a certain kind of person in that in N-identities, the "source of this state – the "power" that determines it or to which I am "subject" – is a *force*" (p. 101, original emphasis); in I-identities, the source is "[ditto] a set of *authorities*" (p. 102, original emphasis); in D-identities, the source is "[ditto] the *discourse or dialogue* of other people" (p. 103, original emphasis"; and in A-identities, the source is "[ditto] a set of distinctive *practices*" (p. 105, original emphasis). This four-dimensional manifestation of force, authority, discourse, and practice collectively shapes Gee's conceptualization of identity as a combination in that the dimensions overlap and define other dimensions. Gee views such a combination as key to being recognized as a certain kind of person or what he phrases as Discourse (with a capital D). It is from this perspective that power is present throughout Gee's argument, what he clarifies from the outset in how one is recognized than identity as internal states, in that in the light of those four dimensions, individuals (can) produce and reproduce power, either for themselves or others, knowingly or unknowingly, and this power shapes their Discourses or ways of being recognized as a certain kind of person.

Discourse of Being a (Language) Teacher

In this section, I present a critical account of Gee's framework based on the above scenario and some analytical comments. To start, I tease out the four dimensions separately and then integratively, the latter being highly significant in Gee's conceptualization. The N-identities in the scenario include being tall in my case and being from Hong Kong in the case of students. That is, we did not have any control over these and they have happened to us by the force of growth and residency, respectively. The I-identities are my being the course instructor, my being faced with institutional and instructional demands, and students educating in content areas. The D-identities are the way students and I engage in dialogue, as triggered by course materials, to make better sense of the contents, use the dialogue to practicalize the contents, and develop cultural understandings. And A-identities happen when students group together based on their discipline (i.e., a set of interpersonal practices) and engage in classroom discussions with peers based on that affinity. As a combination, I can develop my I-identities of university work by engaging in D-identities that focus on sense-making of the Hong Kong N-identities and further develop A-identities that facilitate my socio-educational life in this context. Similarly, students can engage in D-identities of asking me about my N-identity of tallness (if I have any further explanation) in order to form A-identities with certain social groups or develop their I-identities by becoming recruited in a, say, Grow Taller company. Each of these could also be replaced by countless examples, which shows the rigor of Gee's framework. Thus, my Discourse (i.e., being a certain kind of person) is defined by what I teach, who I define myself as the course instructor, how my appearance

could influence students, and how I attempt to develop my content and cultural understanding. Students' Discourse is defined by having to attend the course, engaging in classroom talk, and getting an acceptable final mark.

In applying this framework to understanding identity in (language) teaching, issues become relatively complicated. According to Gee, the core of N-identities is that one is recognized as a certain kind of person through the work of institutions or dialogues. But to consider the example of tallness, how could one claim that my N-identity could not influence students in a positive or negative way, irrespective of whether they engage in dialogue or other identity workings? To see it with Gee, that I, for example, have a health problem, only becomes a locus of N-identity once that problem complicates my teaching in the class; otherwise, it does not become meaningful to me or others and it remains just a personal issue. It seems that the boundary between what is and is not an N-identity is not clear in Gee's conceptualization unless the addressee's appraisal of that N-identity is sought. That is, inasmuch as any N-identity depends on my sense-making of myself, it also depends on others' sense-making of me. Just in the example of tallness, how could I know this N-identity influences students or not, even when they do not disclose anything about it? But what is it that clarifies and defines these boundaries? This is blurred in Gee's conceptualization. To be recognized as a certain kind of person as an N-identity, what Gee emphatically notes, could be tied to individuals' appraisals beyond the power of force. Of course, that Gee views identity from a post-structural perspective can effectively justify his conceptualization, but considering that a post-structural perspective does not rule out individual sense-making could be a point that is missing in his conceptualization of N-identities. Nonetheless, to speak through Gee's parlance, such an appraisal could become a working of power once combined with D-identities, but its dormant presence necessitates its importance and recognition within a conceptualization of N-identities. Therefore, individual appraisal could be a key dimension of integrating with N-identities and changing into I-, D-, and A-identities, without necessarily being a part of them.

The key to I-identity, as Gee suggests, is the authorization of a position by an official agent. He discusses his professorship as an I-identity and argues that this position "is not something that nature gave me or anything I could accomplish by myself" (p. 102). To return to the example of my being an instructor, it is the university that has given me this position, but under what circumstances? Why have they done it? It seems that two important components are missing here. On the one hand, Gee seems to neglect the issue of capital (economic, social, and cultural) and its obvious role in achieving positions (Bourdieu, 1986), including the professorship position that he has accomplished through his capitals or the job position for which I have migrated to

Hong Kong. His years of work and collecting capitals of different kinds have been significant factors in his ability to be even shortlisted for the job, especially when interpreted in light of the power that uses the capital for authorizing a position. On the other hand and related to capital, the issue of agency seems quite relevant in I-identities. In addition to, just as an example, my educational records and capitals, I have been able to use my agency, as induced by my capitals, to persuade the board of university to select me as the instructor, both in the postdoctoral fellowship interviews (i.e., my D-identities) and the agency that I have gained through my research record. This agency has defined my Discourse as a person who should be trusted by the university for the job. I understand that the force or power here is the one who authors the position to someone, but that process of authorization is in turn informed by one's ability to show eligibility for the position. And in his discussion of D-identities, Gee focuses on personal accomplishments (here capital and agency) but reduces them to discursive practices, whereas accomplishments need not be necessarily contingent upon discourse to be seen and recognized. One's Discourse as I-identity can be an amalgamation of different identities that draw on one's capital and agency to show eligibility for a position, even when being given by an agent in power. Therefore, capital and agency could serve as key factors in being authorized a position, beyond external evaluation of one as being a certain kind of person (here having the job).

To Gee, being a certain kind of person from a D-identity perspective means how one is recognized in dialogue and interaction. The argument, however, seems sterile in response to the question: what if the focus of discourse is not individuality but on a particular content, like what I had in my classes? I mean, my Discourse is not just a matter of my personal attributes but one that could unveil itself and my personal attributes through the proxy of focused dialogue. I must emphasize that Gee does not reject the importance of focus, but his (over)emphasis on external evaluations and power prevail opening enough room for the significance of focused dialogue in constructing D-identities, all the while these operate as key to the same power and evaluation. Further, Gee speaks of ascription (identities ascribed to a person by others) and achievement (identities one constructs for a purpose) in forming D-identities. In the case of my class, what if I do not know the content well and students make me feel incompetent in the subject matter through dialogic cues that make me aware of such incompetence? This is not to provide a straw-man argument of devaluing Gee to hypothetical examples. Rather, my point here is that discourse could have different foci, which may be more common than discussing individuals' traits in interpersonal exchanges. This is also partly linked to the intentionality of individuals. Gee speaks of his charismatic friend and that such charisma could be ascribed to her or she achieves it. What if the dialogue is between his friend and a jealous friend of hers who

intentionally attempts to undermine her self-confidence? Similarly, let's hypothesize that my students may learn to joke about my tallness and laugh at me the whole term, all the while this might bother me. In these hypothetical examples, being a certain kind of person is not only defined by the friend's envy or students' peeking laughter, but it could also manifest in their talk and agitate the discursively-constructed meaning of one's self. The main challenge in a D-identity can be the focus of dialogue in that the extent people are to describe each other's Discourse as individual traits is way less than the extent they use dialogue for addressing a focused content, especially in educational work. And this issue relates to the direction (and the corresponding extent) that discourses take in that while I may be talking about benefits of Hong Kong for 10 seconds, I may talk about Hong Kong culture for 20 minutes with the students, or vice versa. Therefore, the messiness of dialogue and context dependency of discourse do not seem to be adequately captured in recognition of individualities. Rather, the power induced by content and directionality of dialogues are important factors in discursive practices that shape individuals' D-identities.

Regarding A-identities, Gee focuses on allegiance, access, and participation as key dimensions of one's Discourse or being recognized as a certain kind of person. The challenging point here is: what are the criteria for defining each of the allegiance, access, and especially participation? Let's assume that one of my highly-competent students does not attend the class (and hence his/her affinity group) for two weeks. Can we question his/her allegiance to the group? Can we say that the student has not attempted to access the group contents through his/her friends? Can we say that his/her quality participation in the class sessions in which s/he was present can be questioned due to absenteeism? Can we not envision a participation of the student that shapes his/her own future self-perceptions and my current and future self-perceptions based on one single session of quality contribution? Also, what if a student has been absent for five sessions but makes the class participation worthwhile when attending the class for the rest of the term? The answer to these questions demands a humanistic perspective that embraces individuality and collectivity at the same time, often from extreme post-modern perspectives about the elusiveness of interpretations and judgements in not swiftly excluding individuals from affinity groups or overlooking the possibility of human beings making mistakes. While I openly acknowledge Gee's conceptualization, it seems to easily exclude individuals from affinity groups based on their more or less affiliation. Additionally, it is not clear how the criteria for one's inclusion in and exclusion from affinity groups should be defined. That is, it seems that, to see it with Gee, quantity matters more than quality in each of allegiance, access, and participation components (for the counterargument see the above example of students' class participation). Therefore, being recognized as a certain kind of person (i.e., one's Discourse) is, to me, more compatible with one's

quality presence in affinity groups than stagnant presence that makes no meaningful contribution to the Discourse (here all of N-, I-, D, and A-identities) and community. Gee, for sure, also prefers such quality Discourse but his conceptualization does not lend itself well to the dynamics that underlie how power is continuously negotiated based on allegiance, access, and participation.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that while Gee inclusively captures identity from four dimensions, there are issues that, beyond being atomistic and monolithic, could complement his framework, especially in terms of personal appraisals, capital, agency, directionality of dialogue, discursive content, and quality of affiliation, in respect to N-, I-, D-, and A-identities. Collectively, these additional dimensions work dynamically or contrarily with force, authority, discourse, and practice in being, becoming, and doing as a certain kind of person. In the process of writing this essay, I was constantly asking myself: how and why do you think Gee has not been aware of these questions and additional dimensions? For sure, he has. In fact, the point is not the individual who talks and writes about identity. Rather, it is the identity itself that is so complex that you can never capture all of its dimensions. The moment you make the decision to talk and write about identity, you should already concede that you are limited and, in a sense, have lost the game to it. Here, since Gee's Discourse is oriented toward capturing identity as power, it naturally loses parts of identity when manifesting in practice, just like my own argument. Rationality lies in accepting identity as is and acknowledging that one can only devour a small portion of it.

It should also be mentioned that I presented a critical account of the four dimensions separately due to the endless forms that their combinations can take. As an example, the appraisal addition could also feature across I-, D-, and A-identities as well in (re)shaping one's N-identities. To bring these explanations together, identity can be defined as how discourse, culture, history, power, and context shape one's self-understanding(s) and how one projects, envisions, and (re)shapes their self-understanding(s) *for* and *by* both personal sense-making and beyond-personal meaning-making processes. This definition acknowledges Gee's Discourse while embracing how time plays out as significant in identity (re)construction. Therefore, in researching identity in education from personal, interactional, interpersonal, organizational, and sociocultural-political perspectives, the above additions could enable researchers to better depict how identity features across the N-, I-, D-, and A-identities. Such depiction could also be effectively studied in light of the aforementioned definition that includes how power sources (e.g., context, history, discourse, and culture) interact with personal sense-makings in temporal workings of

identity to shape understandings and interpersonal meaning-makings within the same or different communities.

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