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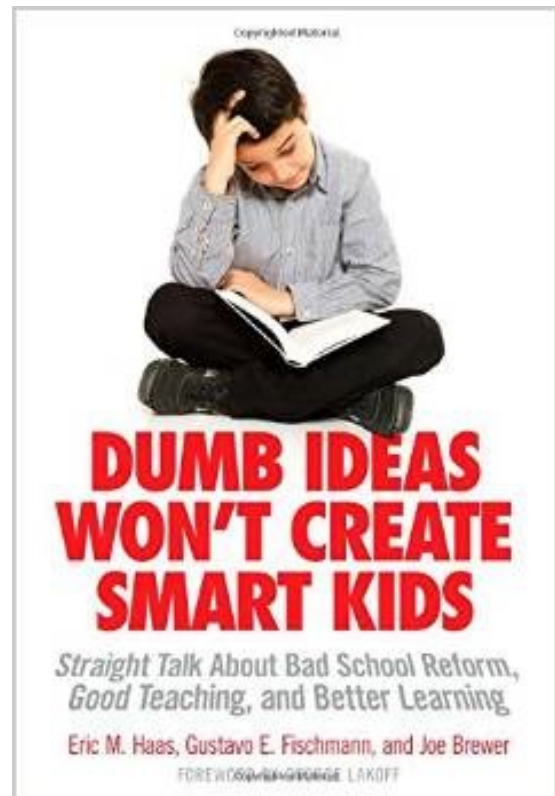
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In *Dumb Ideas Won't Create Smart Kids*, Eric M. Haas, Gustavo E. Fischman and Joe Brewer, take up the age old debate between John Dewey and E. L. Thorndike over the nature of teaching and schooling, but with a new twist. They want the reader to understand why Thorndike's ideas won, and why Dewey's lost, and how we might refight this battle on new ground. This new ground includes new knowledge about how our brains work and the power of prototypes and metaphors. Drawing heavily on the work of Daniel Kahneman and George Lakoff (who authored the Foreword), they set out to provide educators with tools for understanding how "dumb" policies gain prominence, and how this state of affairs might be turned around.

Co-author, Eric Haas, has worked with Lakoff's short-lived Rockridge Institute. This book can be seen as an attempt to revisit Lakoff's popular book *Don't Think of an Elephant*, but one geared more for educators and education policy advocates (scholars?). As the title indicates, this short book is an attempt to reach beyond the conventional academic audience, an attempt that is only partially successful, as I will discuss later.



The authors' intent is framed by Kahneman's (2011) notion of fast and slow thinking. Kahneman suggested that in most situations we tend to follow our gut reaction (fast thinking) rather than a reasoned examination of evidence (slow-thinking). Much like Herbert Simon's concept of "satisficing," the authors acknowledge that while fast thinking too often results in dumb ideas, we seldom have the luxury of slowing down and taking the time to collect sufficient evidence to make a sound reflective decision.

Therefore, the authors conclude:

It seems that we must somehow find a smarter way to harness both our automatic fast thinking reactions and our deliberate slow thinking examination of evidence in identifying, promoting, and implementing education reforms. That is the intent of this book (p. 4).

The authors begin with a compelling example of two reforms – one that is strongly promoted by reformers (The Common Core Standards) and the other largely neglected (National Board Certification for Teachers). They provide evidence that demonstrates the relative success of National Board Certification in raising student achievement and the lack of evidence that raising standards does so. Their approach resonates with a general sense among education researchers that most current reformers either ignore research evidence or cherry pick evidence to justify reforms that are mostly the result of ideological and political interests (Ginsberg & Gorostiaga, 2001; Payne, 2008). The authors acknowledge that the reasons reformers and the general public so often gravitate toward "dumb" reforms are complex. One major reason is that these reforms are compelling because they respond to certain prototypes and metaphors that represent deep frames through which we interpret the world (Lakoff, 2006).

These deep frames, according to the authors, restrict our fast thinking about education to *empty vessel* and *conduit* metaphors. We tend to believe that knowledge is communicated directly from brain to brain, rather than constructed, and that the goal of teaching is to fill empty brains with knowledge that can be assessed quantitatively by standardized tests. This frame, they argue, resonates with our own

experiences of formal education and is reinforced by movies like *Dangerous Minds* and *Stand and Deliver*.

Haas, Fischman and Brewer believe these frames are so powerful that they prevail even in the face of contrary evidence. For instance, they point out that Michelle Rhee's advocacy organization, *Students First*, released a report card that ranked states according to their education policies. It turned out that those states that had policies Rhee promoted had the lowest scores on the national NAEP exam. In spite of this embarrassing inconsistency, she continued to embrace the same policies in the following year's report cards. While they acknowledge that there may be other reasons Rhee held to her policies, the authors are attempting to illustrate the fact that contrary evidence alone will seldom convince people to change their prototypes and frames. As one wag once said, facts are negotiable, but opinions are rock solid.

To demonstrate how we might develop greater balance between our fast and slow thinking, the authors use brain theory and the development of expertise as a model for how learning actually takes place. Drawing heavily on the experiential learning theory of John Dewey and Jean Piaget's constructivism – remarkably, neither of them is ever mentioned in the book – the authors discuss the importance of real-world experience in the development of expert learners who achieve over time an improvement in the accuracy and depth of their fast thinking processes.

Through a discussion of how athletes acquire high levels of competence, the authors demonstrate how through years of practice, the accuracy and depth of fast thinking can be improved. The point here is to undermine the conduit, empty vessel metaphor in order to set up the authors' support for the learning as growth metaphor in the following chapter. But the thread is sometimes hard to follow, in part because headings as advance organizers are rare. Ultimately, the authors call for replacing the conduit metaphor for the growth metaphor when we talk about education.

An issue that the authors fail to raise is one that emerged in the 1980s in response to attempts to replace a transmission metaphor of teaching and learning with a growth or "garden" metaphor. There was some success in advancing Deweyan approaches

in the 1970s and 80s, but scholars such as Lisa Delpit raised legitimate objections to using methods that worked well for middle class children with “other people’s children.” One must not neglect the need for certain kinds of scaffolding that more privileged children may not need. Many scholars of color felt that neither the Deweyian nor the Thorndikian approach was effective for low-income children and children of color. While it can be argued that growth metaphors are compatible with culturally responsive approaches to teaching and schooling, this issue is not really taken up in the book.

The main contribution of the book – and it is an important one – is the authors’ ability to bring together Lakoff’s work on prototypes and framing with Kahneman’s work on fast and slow thinking and to apply it to the practice and reform of schooling. These authors are so well positioned to do this that I regret that they did not choose to write a more serious academic book. Given our concern with expanding our audience, it may make sense for academics to do what they often do with research studies – write different articles for academic and practitioner journals geared to the appropriate audience. This would mean writing two books, one for people like me, who craved a more nuanced and in depth treatment of the issues, and another for a broader audience that may lack the background or interest in the more arcane aspects of the argument. I used this book for my graduate class in education policy; and the reviews of my students, while generally positive, found its attempt at academic populism somewhat distracting.

The Writing Challenge

As scholars are seeking ways to move their work beyond the rather insulated world of Academe, some are using open access journals, social media, blogs, and other more popular forms of dissemination. Mass-market books about education are more likely to be published by unaffiliated writers and journalists like Jonathan Kozol, Alfie Kohn, or Paul Tough than education scholars. Many books on education written by journalists have had impressive distribution runs. These books are usually written in an engaging style and provide a narrative account of investigative research done by the author. Some are well-written and translate complex ideas through powerful narratives meant to inform. Others are more

sensational books that simplify complex issues in an attempt either to sell books or promote a particular ideology.

Unfortunately, we academics have been trained in a very different style of writing from the journalists, and we find it difficult to shift registers. When we try to write a popular book, what results is too often a hybrid style that comes off as neither an academic book nor good journalism. Such books – and there is an increasing number of them – tend to be around 100 pages and tend to eschew academic jargon and citations and have titles geared to a particular imagined public who will buy the book.

An early practitioner of this style was bell hooks. She rather successfully made the transition from academic to public intellectual. Henry Giroux, Kevin Kumashiro, and Diane Ravitch are more recent examples. Haas, Fischman and Brewer have done a reasonably good job of gearing the book to a broader audience, although there are occasional lapses into a more academic style. The authors are also dealing with complex ideas that are difficult to squeeze into a short book without a certain loss.

I confess I found it frustrating to read about ideas that should have been referenced to Piaget or Dewey, and at times the authors tended to resort to popular economic arguments for raising achievement as well as “21st century learning” jargon. This was unfortunate because the book has many insights that were diminished by what seems like an attempt to appeal to a reader who might be put off by a more radical analysis. I wondered who the intended reader was, and if it was worth the compromises it takes to reach a more mainstream audience. I support the notion of expanding our audiences and hope the book finds a large audience. However, I believe we need to think carefully about the concessions we make as we replace a skeptical academic tone and nuanced of analysis with a more upbeat, promotional tone geared toward a broader audience.

For instance, in attempting to defend National Board Certification or attack Rhee’s report cards, the authors’ primary evidence is based on NEAP scores or other similar achievement data. As Lakoff (2006), himself, might argue, the authors are playing ball by the opponents’ rules. To the extent that we legitimate scores of standardized assessments like PISA, NAEP, and other narrow measures of learning, to that extent

we reinforce the conduit metaphor, ultimately making a shift to a growth metaphor of learning more difficult. The authors show some awareness of this dilemma. But how might we frame alternative arguments in defense of a growth metaphor, without appealing to the very assessments that make such a metaphor more difficult to defend?

Defending the growth metaphor is, I believe, also intimately linked to the notions of freedom the authors discuss. They distinguish between a view of freedom as the removal of constraints and one in which freedom is viewed the result of providing support. I wished the authors had made their brief discussion of freedom more central to their argument, since school reforms are a complex set of removal of constraints for some (charter schools, edubusinesses, alternative certification, and the like) and the application of greater constraints, particularly on public school professionals. Freedom as support would mean greater attention to those out of school factors that constrain opportunities for low-income students (Berliner, 2009).

Finally, although both Kahneman and Lakoff provide ways of helping people identify their wrong thinking, I would have liked more discussion of actively wrong thinkers. There is a very significant amount of actively wrong thinking that produces policies that are self-interested from an ideological and economic standpoint. Many think tanks pay good money to those who can promote actively wrong thinking, and they are creating a new common sense about educational reform. These “advocacy researchers” have done close readings of Lakoff and Kahneman, and learned to put them to use. The quandary for advocates of the growth metaphor is how to promote this agenda in such a way that our evidence and our cognitive and discursive strategies are congruent. Otherwise, we may end up as the mirror image of Michelle Rhee.

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