

# Over the wall ...

**Alan Maley**  
considers the not  
so obvious.

All the books I am reviewing here challenge, in one way or another, ideas and opinions we normally take to be self-evidently true. If 'critical thinking' is now all the rage in education (though it would spell the doom of any government that actually succeeded in implementing it in schools!), then these titles are a good example of it in action.

## **The Black Swan**

UK Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was once asked what the greatest challenge was for a statesman. He famously replied, 'Events, my dear boy, events.' This is the main theme of Nassim Nicholas Taleb's book *The Black Swan*: that catastrophic events are unpredictable and have incalculable consequences. This flies in the face of the premise on which much of modern society is based: that planning, rules and predictable outcomes are the norm. The book is a pugnacious, brash, iconoclastic diatribe against the blind faith, especially by academic economists, to comprehend the randomness and unpredictability of large-scale events. Taleb's style may be too uncomfortably self-promotional and loud-mouthed for some, but his arguments are as sharp as vinegar on a cut. What do the *Titanic*, the Berlin Wall, 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the stock market crashes of 1987

and 1998-8 (I omit 2008-9 as the book was published in 2007 - yet it is uncannily close to the bone!), and the invention of computers, the internet and lasers have in common? They were all unexpected, unpredictable, had large-scale consequences and were only 'explicable' in retrospect. Taleb contrasts the world of 'Mediocristan', where adding one more instance to a sample makes almost no difference, with 'Extremistan', where one instance changes the whole picture. We assume we are in Mediocristan most of the time but, in fact, Extremistan is far more influential. Along the way, he attacks the 'Narrative fallacy' - imposing *post hoc* interpretations or causes on events; the 'Ludic fallacy' - extrapolating from models to real life; and the Platonic categorisation of the world, which blinds us to the 'fuzzy' nature of reality. There is much in the book for teachers to think about: the issue of how to deal with the unpredictability of classrooms and learning, the futility of complex curricular frameworks, the need to beware of quantitative research based on a Gaussian bell-curve concept - and more.

## **A Perfect Mess**

*A Perfect Mess* by Eric Abrahamson and David H Freedman overlaps to a certain extent with *The Black Swan* in that it deals with the randomness exemplified

by mess. 'A system is messy if its elements are scattered, mixed up, or varied due to some degree of randomness, or if ... it appears random from someone else's view.' The main argument of the book is that '... moderately disorganized people, institutions, and systems frequently turn out to be more efficient, more resilient, more creative and generally more effective than highly organized ones'.

They also cost less! The authors have assembled a mass of data to support this contention, ranging over everything from desks, lawns, noisy telephone lines and strategic plans, ('... companies that did a lot of strategic planning performed, on average, no better than companies that did less ...') to chapters on Messy People, Messy Homes, Mess and Organizations, Messy Leadership, Messy Thinking, and the Aesthetics of Mess. There are many points with resonance for teachers, in particular the description of a school without a fixed curriculum: '*The Little Red Wagon's* disordered, curriculumless approach seems especially risky when states have rushed into standardized testing ... leading to more sharply-defined, rigid curricula, as early as kindergarten. But Leftin (the researcher) has tracked Little Red Wagon School graduates and found they generally score well above average

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▶▶▶ on standardized testing ... the school's messy approach to education instils an intellectual robustness that holds up in any classroom or testing situation.' The chapter on Messy Thinking also has powerful implications. 'People tend to imagine that they are getting the most out of their brains when their thoughts are well-organized and focused, when they are able to clearly spell out their goals and intentions, and when the world around them has been sorted out according to a distinct scheme. But actually, the mind is built around disorder ... and sometimes when we insist on thinking in neat, orderly ways, we're really holding back our minds from doing what they do best.' The book also has interesting insights into the creative process in relation to mess.

## Risk: The Science and Politics of Fear

Dan Gardner's main argument in *Risk: The Science and Politics of Fear* is that we have been persuaded into thinking that we live in a more dangerous world than in fact we do. Gardner argues that by focusing on the unusual and the spectacular, the media, the security services, politicians and big business manufacture unjustified fear (as does religion, too) to serve their own interests. Basically, they 'raise fear in the public ... then offer to protect the public against that which they fear'. He analyses in detail some of the bogeymen we are exposed to: cancer and other diseases, terrorism, crime, nuclear power, asbestos, etc, and shows that the spectres raised by the media in particular have no basis in fact. We would be better advised to occupy ourselves with more statistically significant but less spectacular issues; for example, by spending money on the eradication of measles and malaria rather than wasting

it on ineffectual and unnecessary security systems. Why do we fall for these scare stories? Partly because 'gut' overrules 'head'. Partly because of the herd instinct. Partly because we are not good at calculating risk. Partly because of the political and consumerist culture we have been acculturated to accept. The message is summarised in Roosevelt's words: '... the only thing we have to fear is fear itself'. Good advice for nervous teachers, too!

## The Wisdom of Crowds

Most people would consider the behaviour of crowds as irrational and unreliable. In *The Wisdom of Crowds*, James Surowiecki argues the contrary view and shows, through a multitude of examples, that given the right circumstances large groups of people tend to come to better decisions than individuals or small groups of experts. In Part I, he examines how this works, emphasising the importance of diversity within the crowd. This has interesting classroom implications, too: 'a group made up of some smart agents and some not-so-smart agents ... did better than a group made up just of smart agents'. Groups lacking this essential diversity and independence tend to make poor decisions, and tend towards herding and uncritical 'cascades'. In Part II, he looks at a number of case studies on traffic flow, collaborative scientific research, companies, etc. The effectiveness of 'distributed decision-making' emerges most strongly: another lesson both for schools and classes, perhaps.

## Everything Bad is Good for You

*Everything Bad is Good for You* argues against the widely-accepted view that modern culture has dumbed us all down. In Part I, Steven Johnson analyses developments in computer games, TV, the internet and film and concludes that 'popular culture has ... grown more complex and intellectually challenging'. Though he produces quite convincing evidence that popular culture does make greater demands on our cognitive capacity and can account at least in part for an increase in IQ across the board, there are some worrying aspects to all this. The emphasis is on the mental exercise modern cultural instruments offer: 'training the cognitive muscles of the brain', as he puts it, rather than on

the quality of the content. This leads to statements like 'even the crap has improved'. Surely it is insufficient to develop better thinking tools without considering what they are used to think about? The cultural artefacts he discusses also all encourage vicarious rather than direct experience. Living in *Second Life* may be good for the brain, but is it also good for living in real life? Despite these reservations, the book provokes us to look more critically at these much-maligned cultural activities.



Of course, in the ELT world we should be familiar with approaches which appear to fly in the face of accepted wisdom. The 'designer methods' of the 70s and 80s are a case in point. The Silent Way, Community Language Learning, Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response, Psychodrama – all flouted one or more of the accepted methodological principles of the time. There are even some, such as John Fanselow in his book *Breaking Rules*, who urge us to 'do the opposite', if only to see what happens! After all, if we never try flouting received wisdom, we will never find out. Perhaps one of the most significant points emerging from this clutch of titles is that books are not sterile containers for facts – but, rather, ways to spark off our own ideas. (37)

Abrahamson, E and Freedman, D H *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder* Phoenix/Orion 2006

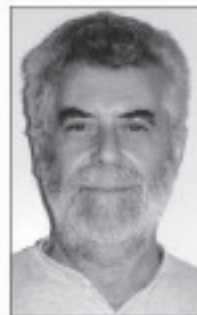
Fanselow, J *Breaking Rules* Longman 1987

Gardner, D *Risk: The Science and Politics of Fear* Virgin Books 2009

Johnson, S *Everything Bad is Good for You* Riverhead Books/Penguin 2005

Surowiecki, J *The Wisdom of Crowds* Abacus/Little Brown 2004

Taleb, N N *The Black Swan* Allen Lane/Penguin 2007



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