

Biases of a Seasoned Teacher: A Confession

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Abstract

*The inspiration for this article comes from several sources: Daniel Kahneman's book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Rolf Dobelli's *The art of thinking clearly*, and, to some extent, Harry Frankfurt's *On Bullshit*. In a way, all three books are about cognitive errors we make in our day-to-day thinking. By knowing what they are and how to spot them, we can avoid them and make better choices/decisions – when dealing with a personal problem or being involved in a business negotiation, or when learning and teaching. In education, we often speak about the importance of academic success. Seeking knowledge and acquiring new skills seem to be the purpose of education in general. I would go a step forward and say, that it is understanding that counts. As Einstein said: »Any fool can know, the point is to understand.« In other words, it is making the right decisions, by not blindly accepting what one hears and reads, asking questions, doing your own thinking and being critical that is important.*

This article is about a number of cognitive biases and faulty heuristics—the shortcuts and rules of thumb by which we make judgments and predictions. Wikipedia's "List of cognitive biases" contains almost 200 entries, but we will only focus on those that we believe are the most harmful in the context of learning and teaching: optimism bias, availability bias, bandwagon effect, confirmation bias, stereotyping, false consensus effect, to name but a few. Both students and teachers are prone to a number of biases, as a general "law of least effort" applies to teachers as much as to other human beings. As we navigate our lives, we normally allow ourselves to be guided by impressions and feelings, and the confidence we have in our intuitive beliefs and preferences is often, but not always, justified. Our research proved that it is easy to believe that both teachers and education policy makers are prone to employing System 1 (which is fast, automatic, frequent, emotional, stereotypic and subconscious) when System 2 (which is slow, effortful, infrequent, calculating and conscious) should be employed.

Our brains play tricks on us, thus writing about systematic errors in the thinking of normal people is a tricky job indeed. What can we do about biases? How can we improve judgments and decisions, both our own and those of the institutions? The short answer is that little can be achieved without a considerable investment of effort. On the other hand, there are no "seven steps to a cognitive error-free life". So, what we need seem to be the

following: less irrationality, less intellectual laziness, stupidity, or underdeveloped ideas, and, last but not least, clear language for the complicated world around. Teachers should focus more on teaching disciplined thinking, decision-making skills, principles of probability, choice theory and statistics and help students learn how to approach problems methodically and avoid jumping to conclusions.

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