How often do we make seemingly well-reasoned choices and discover that our choices make little sense after the fact? Dan Ariely, author of a series of wonderful books on our predictably irrational decisions, would argue that this condition happens more often than we “rational adults” are willing to admit. But my recent summer reading program proved the exception to Ariely’s “rule.”

In retrospect, without a lot of research or deep analysis on the books offered by the Teaching Center, I chose two and helped organize a reading group for each. In summers past, I have enjoyed books offered by the Teaching Center, I chose two and helped organize a reading group for each. In summers past, I have enjoyed these collective learning opportunities as much for the discussion that emerges from a group of diverse colleagues as for the shared dissection of the contents of the book being appraised.

And so it was again this summer which began for me with Thinking, Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman who offers a persuasive, provocative and extensive case for what he sees as our two “thinking” forms labeled “System 1” and “System 2”, the “fast” and “slow” of his title.

Kahneman states that “System 1 operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control” while “System 2 allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations. The operations of System 2 are often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice and concentration.”

So how did my decision to read this book come about? Was my choice inspired by some “grand logic” involving “effortful mental activities” by my System 2 or, as I now suspect, was it the product of my automatic “System 1” and its abundant heuristics and biases, the devices that allow for rapid responses to stimuli, especially familiar ones?

Was it the familiarity of the subject represented by the title that attracted me as a psychologist and an educator interested in the mysteries of perception, interpretation, response decisions and learning? I began to wonder about my other reading choice – The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement by David Brooks.

The familiarity of this book’s title and sub-title topics clearly activated my System 1 predispositions, but in this case, my System 2 was involved in making the decision. Years ago, my first textbook in social psychology was Elliott Aronson’s The Social Animal. It still sits on my office bookshelf, now accompanied by the 11th Edition of this insightful and delightful work. Applying logic and sound, experienced-based reasoning, I opted for Brooks’ book in expectation that it would provide a useful comparison to Aronson’s most recent edition.

Well, as I have long asserted, we are both the beneficiaries and victims of our own experience. Brooks’ The Social Animal, while addressing many concepts familiar to social psychologists, proved a better companion to Thinking, Fast and Slow then a contrast to Aronson. As Brooks asks, “Are we really rational utility-maximizing individuals?” My choice was made for one purpose and ended up serving a very different “utility.”

While Brooks and Kahneman approach their shared core subject very differently, each addresses the “two minds” issue. Brooks employs a parallel to Kahneman’s two Systems with his Level 1 and Level 2, the unconscious and the conscious. Both authors seem to view these two “processes” or “processors” as somewhat antagonistic, yet mostly complementary.

Brooks offers a challenge to what he refers to as the “central humanistic truth” that the conscious mind can influence the unconscious mind. Kahneman cites “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk” early on as an explanation for our “intuitive preferences that consistently violate the rules of rational choice.” In this idea, we might hear echoes of Ariely. Our intuitions repeatedly strive to demolish our confident assumptions of self-control, rational analysis, considered experienced, based judgments, and demand we rethink these and maybe also our assumptions about what and how we teach and learn.

And it is this persuasive perspective common to these three proponents of behavioral economics that has produced my dilemma.

I finished my summer reading schedule with the newest edition of David Myer’s introductory psychology text and discovered a number of references to a “two mind” hypothesis, but no direct reference to the System 1 / System 2 terminology. Other than brief discussions of the unconscious as a “state of mind” and a focus on Freudian psychoanalysis, plus a brief application of “unconscious patronization” in regards to evaluation, Myer’s text does not explore the System 1 / Level 1 construct and its hypothesized relations to such core processes as perception, motivation, decision-making, relationship building, learning, social norms, influence, power, or any of the other areas of human behavior addressed so vividly by Ariely, Kahneman and Brooks. This is particularly surprising since all three authors support their assertions with the multiple products of behavioral and social science empirical research.

I teach classes in introductory and developmental psychology, leadership and group dynamics, human resource management, project management, organizational change and learning organizations. Each is anchored in the assumptions of human rationality and “trainability,” adaptability and resilience, structured discovery and application of well-reasoned principles.

So how do I incorporate the power of the unconscious as defined by System 1 and Level 1 into my teaching? How do we as
Six years ago, on a beautiful October morning, the peace and tranquility of a small Pennsylvania community was shattered by tragedy. A disturbed gunman burst into an Amish schoolhouse and took 10 young girls prisoner, killing five of them and wounding the others before turning the gun on himself. The event garnered global attention, not only because of its horrific nature, but also because the crime was perpetrated against members of the Old Order Amish sect. The acts of violence against these simple, peaceful, and faithful people shocked the local community, the nation, and the world.

Amish Grace, a book by Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, tells the story of the events of that morning, and interprets the Amish response that puzzled so many observers. The Amish rely on the Bible and their Christian faith at all times, in all things. They truly live as they believe the Bible directs. The Lord’s Prayer is their guide through every day of their lives, and the words “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” are taken literally. The understanding they have of these words is not that we forgive others because God forgives us; rather, that God forgives us when we follow Jesus’ teaching to forgive others, and because we do so. Forgiveness is not offered under duress, out of fear, or out of duty. Amish people try to live as Jesus lived, and do as He did. The concept of forgiving others so that their own sins may be forgiven is central to the conduct of their relationships, with one another and with those from the outside world.

After the tragedy, the Amish people spoke of forgiving the gunman, and praying for his family. In fact, a number of Amish people visited the gunman’s widow and children, to tell them personally that they forgave the man, and did not hold his actions against his family. It was this notion of forgiveness that so surprised, confused, and even angered some observers. People wondered how the Amish could forgive so easily, so quickly, so unfeelingly. Did they not care deeply about the lives that were lost? Did they not grieve? Were they just saying they forgave, but not meaning it? Did they forgive and forget? Of course not! People neglected to take into consideration that one can forgive, even unfeelingly. Did they not care deeply about the lives that were lost? Did they not grieve? Were they just saying they forgave, but not meaning it? Did they forgive and forget? Of course not! People neglected to take into consideration that one can forgive, even unfeelingly.

The act of forgiving does not erase the pain or the memories; it does not mean that the matter can be forgotten or put away easily or quickly. And it does not mean that forgiveness is “once and done.” The Amish who were interviewed for the book talked about how difficult it was to forgive, and how they knew they would have to do it over and over again, each time the painful memories or the anger at the gunman surfaced. But even as they talked about that expectation, they were confident that, when the time came, God would give them the strength to forgive once again.

The Amish have lived alongside their “English” neighbors in this rural area of southeastern Pennsylvania for over 200 years. While tourists still find them quaint, even strange, the local residents know them as good neighbors, hard workers, and faithful people who pursue a lifestyle of simplicity, trusting in God to guide and provide. I grew up about eight miles from Nickel Mines, the location of the shooting. My next door neighbors were Amish. As a child, I spent countless hours with them, fascinated by the ways in which they accomplished everyday tasks such as washing (a wringer washer run by compressed air), ironing (using flat irons heated on the gas stove), and cooking (there was no end of simple, tasty dishes made from produce they grew themselves; my favorite was homemade applesauce). The family included three teen-aged girls and, as I had no sisters, I enjoyed their company. They let me tag along with them many days, especially during long pleasant summers, taking me along on evening buggy rides, or out to the garden to pick vegetables. I enjoyed watching as they hung clothes on the wash line, then, using a pulley system, pushed the line until the clothes were way out at the top of a tall metal structure resembling a windmill. Sometimes we would just sit on the porch in the evening and shell lima beans. Oddly enough, I understood at a young age that the Amish lived a more simple life than my family did, and I appreciated that about them. As an adult, I’ve often wished I could retreat to those happy times when life was much less complicated.

The “English” people of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania feel a great kinship with their Amish neighbors and are very protective of their way of life. In the hours and days following the tragedy, they gathered around, offering what comfort they could, and shielding the Amish from the attention of outsiders. The Pennsylvania State Police were exceptional in their handling of the crime and its aftermath, and in the respectful way they kept order and decorum during the funerals of the young girls. The rest of the world waited to see whether a rift would develop between the Amish and non-Amish in the area, but what they witnessed was the opposite; the tragedy brought the community closer together. As one Amish man put it, “We were all Amish this week.” Support came from all over the world, not just from locals or Pennsylvania residents. A committee of both Amish and non-Amish people was set up to handle the outpouring of gifts, which reached a total of $4 million within a few months. While the Amish did not seek aid, they gratefully accepted it, and plans were made for the use of these contributions for medical expenses, transportation needs, counseling, and ongoing medical care for the survivors.

So what is “Amish Grace”? The book’s title is somewhat of a misnomer. The Amish do not claim to possess any special means to grace, or to God’s goodness. Rather, they know that everything they have comes from God. They know that it is God who gives us the grace to forgive; we cannot do it on our own. Months after the shooting, I spoke with someone who learned that I was from the area where it had happened. He asked if I had read the book, and offered the opinion that “if forgiveness is required, then it’s not grace.” I believe that he completely missed the point. Forgiveness is required, and because God requires it, He gives us the power, the motivation, yes, the grace, to do it.

The Amish community has moved on. The schoolhouse where the shooting took place was razed within 10 days of the event, and the location is now an open field. A new school was built at another spot and nothing visible remains to remind the children of that terrifying day. Three of the five injured girls have recovered completely. One still suffers from damage to a gunshot wound in her shoulder, and the most severely injured little girl is in a wheelchair and does not walk or talk. The mother of the gunman visits this child every week to read to her and spend time with her. Amish grace? Perhaps not, but God’s grace truly abounds.
**AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD: A GEOGRAPHY OF FAITH, by Barbara Brown Taylor (HarperOne, 2010)**

Kristine LaLonde, Associate Professor of Honors and Coordinator of Leadership Studies

How can the simple happenings of our everyday lives—such as walking, eating, working, even getting lost—help us to create “An Altar in the World”? Four groups of 23 faculty members probed that question, as they gathered this spring in conversation about the Barbara Brown Taylor book, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. The book reveals the way the sacred is revealed to us in the mundane details, if we pay attention to them. The faculty discussed the ways in which their own practices of mindfulness, gratitude, or intention shape us as teachers and colleagues.

Group member and computer science professor Bill Hooper stated: “This was a wonderful book to read in a group. Each practice the Rev. Taylor described evoked a similar memory in one or more of my group members. Bringing all those experiences to the table helped us see the altars we have planted in the world, and encouraged me to be more intentional in my own practices.”

The book’s twelve chapters explore particular practices and connect them to theological ideas or words that evoke the sacred. So “The Practice of Wearing Skin,” which explores the flesh and its experiences, is also titled “Incarnation.”

The chapter on “The Practice of Living with Purpose,” which explores how and why we work, is also titled “Vocation.”

The vocation of teaching was central to many discussions, as participants explored how to manifest these principles in classrooms or in encounters with students. Group members also considered ways in which we could share or model these practices for students.

At the beginning of her book, Taylor says her hope is that, by reading about these practices, we will “recognize some of the altars in this world—ordinary-looking places where human beings have met and may continue to meet up with the divine. More that they sometimes call God.” Participant and social work professor Julie Hunt responded to that invitation and recalls:

I was honored to sit around the table with eight women from various parts of campus for early morning reflections on the beautifully written, *An Altar in the World*, by Barbara Brown Taylor. We considered what it looks like to really pay attention, to practice wearing skin, and even contemplated the value of getting lost and feeling pain. Through the personal readings and group discussions, we were challenged to seek the sacred amid the ordinary.

**THE SHALLOWS: WHAT THE INTERNET IS DOING TO OUR BRAINS, by Nicholas Carr (W. W. Norton and Company, 2010)**

Daniel Biles, Professor, Department of Mathematics

Nicholas Carr’s book, *The Shallows*, addresses three important questions:

1) Is the internet changing the way we think?
2) If so, how deep and lasting are these changes?
3) If the internet is changing the way we think, is it for better or worse?

Few people would deny that the internet is changing the way we think. As a result of internet use, we probably are better able to multi-task and think more quickly, maintain a broader knowledge base, possess increased visual-spatial skills, and have a better connection with the world as a whole, including more knowledge of the world outside our immediate one. Rather than look up things in an encyclopedia or read a book, we’re much more likely to do a Google search or consult Wikipedia. Also, we possibly have shorter attention spans, fewer areas in which we have a deep knowledge, poorer memories, and decreased reading skills. Ideas and information have become more “provisional” as a result of easily edited web pages.

Carr not only believes that the internet has changed our way of thinking, but he believes it has caused physiological changes in our brains and the way our brains process and access information. Carr maintains that “With the exception of the alphabets and number systems, the Net may well be the single most powerful mind-altering technology that has ever come into general use.” He quotes and discusses a great deal of literature to justify his contention that the brain is malleable and is actually changed by the way in which it is used. For example, he reports a 2008 study by Gary Small and colleagues at UCLA that compared the brain activity of frequent internet users to those of computer novices, and found that unlike the beginners, the experienced internet surfers “used a specific network in the left front part of the brain, known as the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex.” Carr writes, “Sometimes our tools do what we tell them to. Other times, we adapt ourselves to our tools’ requirements.”

Assuming that one agrees with the positions in the paragraphs above, to me the real question is this one: are these changes helpful or harmful to individuals and society as a whole? It seems that the skills and traits necessary for successful careers in the 21st century might very well be those that require individuals who have been shaped and nurtured by the internet and its culture. Also, quick access by nearly everyone to information is generally empowering – no longer is information the property of a few. But, like Carr, I believe there is a price to be paid. Carr writes, “The strip mining of ‘relevant content’ replaces the slow excavation of meaning.” Possibly, the deep thinking required for obtaining real knowledge and understanding is hindered. Close, interpersonal, one-on-one relationships with real people might be sacrificed. Our true connection to nature, actually spending time in contemplation with nature itself, might be lost. Generally, could our increasing reliance on computers and what they do for us reduce our very humanness? Might it even dampen important human qualities such as empathy and compassion? As Carr writes, “We shouldn’t allow the glories of technology to blind our inner watchdog to the possibility that we’ve numbed an essential part of our self.” My overall conclusion is that there is a lot of truth in the saying “there is no such thing as a free lunch,” and when we invent or discover a powerful and useful tool such as the internet, we need to consider whether or not we’re willing to possibly sacrifice some things that are dear to us, or find ways to preserve them.
How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching

by David Maddox, Assistant Professor of Music Business

How Learning Works was chosen by the Belmont University Teaching Center for a faculty reading group subject in the summer of 2012. As I led one group in discussion on the book, its ideas resonated with me because I had had no formal academic training in teaching. Many times, I have felt that lack of training acutely. The title intrigued me, and I found the book to be relatively straightforward to read and understand.

The authors are veteran college or university professors. Most are associated with the Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence at Carnegie Mellon (one, a 1997 doctorate graduate of Social Psychology of Carnegie Mellon, is director of faculty development at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center). Their teaching backgrounds range across academic subjects and include history, statistics, social psychology, psychology and anthropology.

Their seven principles for smart teaching are:

1. Student’s prior learning can help or hinder learning.
2. How students organize knowledge influences how they learn and apply what they know.
3. Student’s motivation determines, directs and sustains what they do to learn.
4. To develop mastery, students must acquire component skills, practice integrating them and know when to apply what they have learned.
5. Goal-directed practice coupled with targeted feedback enhances the quality of students’ learning.
6. Students’ current level of development interacts with social, emotional and intellectual climate of the course to impact learning.
7. To become self-directed learners, students must learn to monitor and adjust their approaches to learning.

The book is organized by chapters in the same sequence as the principles listed above; however, the authors assert that chapters can be read in any order, and that the principles are valuable to instructors at any level. The goal of the book is summed up in the following line: “these principles can enable faculty members to better support student learning without having to rely on outside experts.” The book is enhanced by a number of illustrations and tables. One credible claim in the book is that it offers ideas characterized as “Domain independent, Experience independent and Cross-culturally relevant.”

Each chapter begins with two teaching problem scenarios which are based on anonymous, composite situations. The scenarios are then analyzed to identify “core problems or issues,” and the authors use the scenarios to introduce a learning principle relevant to such problems. Strategies are then offered to help instructors to “design instruction with that principle in mind.”

All analysis of the scenarios is based on research either done by the authors or done by recognized and published researchers in the field of student learning. The book is cross-referenced with many citations to research studies and complementary reading. The reader who wants to do more extensive study in this field can follow up in the suggested articles, studies and books.

The concluding chapter, entitled “Applying the Seven Principles to Ourselves,” attempts to tie all the principles together in a coherent form and encourages the reader to employ the principles in teaching experiences. In addition to the 23 pages of references, there are nine sections in the appendix which give further details in the use of Student Self-Assessment, Concept Mapping and the use of Rubrics among other subjects.

Others who have a different background than mine may have covered the same material offered in How Learning Works in prior academic education, but it was very provocative and helpful to me. Planning a course or parts of a course with the seven principles, or at least some of them, in mind will be helpful. In discussing the work with colleagues, I have heard some express a desire for more strategy techniques than were offered in the book. There is a citation to a website at the Eberly Teaching Center at Carnegie Mellon, but a cursory review of the website did not appear to offer much in the way of teaching strategies beyond what appears in the book. The site could be useful, however, based on the information available.

In conclusion, one of the most useful aspects of the book was a discussion of the concept of metacognition, which “refers to the process of reflecting and directing one’s own thinking.” (National Research Council, 2001, p. 78, How Learning Works, Ambrose, p. 190). This idea is similar to the opening concept in many critical thinking texts, where students are encouraged to reflect on the how of their thinking. For teachers, this same idea could be a very important part of helping students to learn and to approach courses differently for different types of material. Reading How Learning Works will certainly positively influence me in the way I approach teaching material in the future.

Author’s Note: All quotations are from How Learning Works unless otherwise noted.

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as educators explain the suggested power of chance over rational analysis or our susceptibility to biases and heuristics we are not aware of applying when we make choices? How do we justify our faith in structured learning and critical thinking, in the scientific method, and the power of fact-based judgment?

This dilemma is worth a lot more collective consideration. I’m in the process of pulling pieces of wisdom from each of these books. I hope they will provoke active dialogue among my students. But that’s only a start. Please read Ariely, Kahneman and Brooks, and let’s discover the how to make the best use of their insights and challenges.