IN THIS ISSUE

The individuality of thought and action that distinguishes Kappans is part of Covid-19. Our Chapter co-president, John Myers, a prodigious reader and thinker, intensified this feat during Covid-19. We are the lucky beneficiaries of his cogitation. Taking the time to read and assimilate John's insights are a catalyst and a motivation to read, to ponder, to sift and sort the bombardment of information inundating us daily.
Newsletter Committee

Buzz Around The Bee

Links between our PDK Chapter & Spelling Bee of Canada Continue.

If you are interested in bringing this educational jewel to your area, contact Hermione Shou hermione.shou@spellingbeeofcanada.ca

Co-President's Message
The "Illusion of Reality" Links among Books in the Readathon

John Myers

"In an age of heritage plaques, Wikipedia, smartphones and QR codes, remembering has never been easier but knowing what to do with that memory has never been harder."
 Richard Longley a former president of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario. *Now Magazine*. November 9, 2017.

Twenty years earlier with the rise of the internet, Richard Saul Wurman in 1997 described the gap between what we understand and what we think we should understand as "*information anxiety*' in a book by the same name. The concern with truth, especially using numbers, was illustrated in <u>How to Lie with Statistics</u> written in 1954 by Dan Huff to introduce statistics to non-mathematicians.

The above were just three of the influences that inspired me to link my reading to issues surrounding the challenges of sound thinking in schools and beyond. After I made my reading decisions Covid-19 stormed into our world. During this time we witnessed the death of George Floyd and its global aftermath. Other global events also force their way into our consciousness whether we want them or not.

So how can we make sense of the information swamp we live in so that we might better prepare ourselves, politically, economically, socially and psychologically for the unpredictable? How can we shape what and how we teach to meet such challenging goals?

My readings deal with these and other questions using complementary lenses. The cross-referencing are just examples of many possibilities. The last decade or so has resulted in major findings about how our minds operate. As you read my summaries and examples, including the use of terms featured in these books, think about examples from current events such as Covid-19. At the conclusion of what is shaping as an essay, I shall make suggestions for curriculum changes, some of which are hinted at by the last book on my reading. I make some references to online work but the bulk of my time has been actual reading of hard copy files we used to call "books". Why this antiquated medium? See references to system 2 thinking below.

A Big Curriculum (and Life) Picture

I begin with Howard Gardner's (of Multiple Intelligences fame) <u>Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed</u>: <u>Educating for the Virtues in the Age of Truthiness and Twitter (</u>New York: Basic Books 2011).

Navigating the quicksand of falsehoods in the information swamp is tricky and not achieved overnight, as the Covid-19 period has shown us, but we can start by recognizing some of the challenges we face in making sense of our world.

Among the features I like in this book are:

- the categorization of all learning into quests to discern "truth", "beauty" and "goodness": each with its many complexities

- the importance of reflection on causes, actions and consequences when decisions are made in history, science, math, literature, and beyond

- the identification of the complex criteria for judging the truth, beauty or goodness in any phenomenon and

- the recognition that while adolescents often challenge what we adults say they may also readily accept the "truths" claimed by their peers both online and on social media.
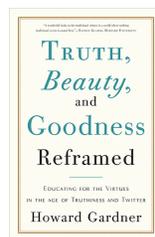
Challenges to Being Thoughtful
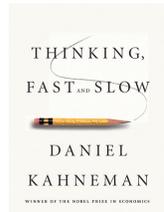
Thinking Fast and Slow (Daniel Kahneman, Doubleday Canada, Toronto, 2011) describes two systems of processing and dealing with information we receive These two systems of thinking have developed over the history of human evolution. **System 1 is experiential and intuitive-our gut feelings**. Such thinking seems to come automatically as a result of well learned behaviours; we are not even conscious of our thinking.

For example, if you take a long drive along the Trans-Canada Highway across the prairies in areas with little traffic, few off-road distractions, and relatively few crossing roads, you have conversations with passengers or even daydream. A contrasting example happens when you are a pedestrian crossing a street and you see oncoming traffic. You react automatically without thinking. **Thinking in system 1 is fast.** Think about your "taken for granted" behaviours when dealing with personal hygiene BEFORE Covid-19.

On the other hand, if your drive across Canada and approach a city with more traffic, more people, more off road distractions including traffic crossing intersections with signs or traffic lights, a different thinking system kicks in **called system 2. It is more conscious and slower.** In addition to "thinking your way" through city traffic you will use this system when you encounter an unusual challenge for which answers are not automatic or obvious. Slow thinking happens when you have to evaluate a complex argument, search your memory for a word in a crossword puzzle, or look for a familiar face in a crowded room. Think about how you deal with issues of personal hygiene now.

Given our evolutionary history which of these systems of thinking do we use most of the time? Why do you think so? Can you think of other examples, perhaps from your own experience, where these two systems of thinking were used? Each system has its uses and its limits and they can combine to work well in some situations.

     System 1 errs on the side of simplicity when dealing with the world.
     System 2 makes reality complex requiring time to "work things out".

Thinking Fast and Slow focuses on economics since Kahneman was a Nobel Laureate. He provides examples of fallacies and logical errors we make when we interpret statistics such as "average" and overestimate or underestimate probability. When it comes to other forms of understanding think of the power of a headline, or a story that grips you emotionally, or the habit of hindsight, or the confirmation bias we have or the WYSIATI (What You See Is All There Is) bias ignoring the whole picture or just missing the context of an event or observation. This video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_SsccRkLLzU offers a short but powerful take on this bias. **Reading for meaning is a system 2 action.** What system kicks in when you watch the YouTube video above? What can we do as teachers and learners to maximize the benefits of both systems?

Getting to Truth
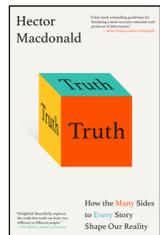
Hector Macdonald is a communications consultant with a variety of businesses as well as being a novelist. In 1918 he wrote *Truth: How the Many Sides to Every Story Shape Our Reality* provides ideas for working through this.
First of all he recognizes the WYSIATI (What You See Is All There Is) bias Kahneman explored.

Secondly, he distinguishes among:

- ADVOCATES who select competing truths that create a reasonably accurate impression of reality to achieve a constructive goal:
- MISINFORMERS who promote competing truths that distort reality unintentionally,
- MISLEADERS who deliberately use competing truths to promote a version of reality they know is not true.

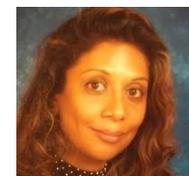**Co-President**
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Third, Macdonald has a nice way to classifying competing truths. He also notes the value of comparing competing truths to achieve constructive goals:

- PARTIAL truths are true as far as they go but do not tell the whole story. The daily briefings on the corona virus are examples.
- SUBJECTIVE truths are statements that describe something desirable or good morally or are valuable economically. These can be changed. For example, supporting a political party or group you identify with so that "If my group believes "x", then "x" must be true.
- ARTIFICIAL truths use jargon or slogans to gain support. Many of these are social constructs such as "race". Pick an advertisement that has jumped out to you and try to identify which of the above forms of truth were in play.   UNKNOWN truths may come from pundits or "experts" often in the form of predictions. Are those with expertise in specialized fields of knowledge automatically able to predict the future?

More on this below involving chimpanzees. Each chapter offers ideas for working through these competing truths though it is not easy (think System 2). There are two Appendices- one offers a checklist for checking out suspicious claims and the second links you to a number of fact-checking organizations, some of which you might know.

Lies
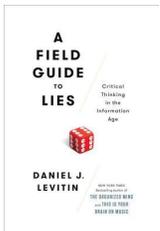
Psychologist Dan Levitin's *A Field Guide to Lies: Critical Thinking in the Information Age* (2016, Penguin Random House) looks at many of the issues in other books but here are some of his (IMHO) insights. One is the organization of chapters devoted to help us evaluate NUMBERS, WORDS, and the WORLD. The critical questions we need to ask when seeing numbers mirrors other books but he plays with different ways how numbers can be used to distort reality; for example, the complexities of the numerical "average".

This is also applied to the use and misuse of words. Even **in the case of "experts" we need to distinguish when they synthesize and summarize based on evidence in their own specialities and offering broader opinions that may or may not be in their specific domain of expertise.**
In the section on evaluating ideas from the world we explore what science is and is not, as well as some of the logical fallacies we make when we get information about the world in which we live; for example, all the info about Covid-19 - what represents reality? Levitin also notes the proliferation of information in the amount available and the speed of transmission. Information that used to take weeks to collect (system 2?) takes seconds to download (systems 1 and 2 combined?). Can the time saved by pointing and clicking be used to ferret out truth? Should I wear a mask? If so, when and what kind?

Numbers Again
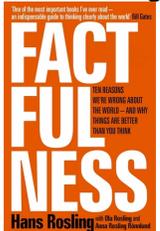
Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World - and Why Things Are Better Than You Think
I first saw in Sweden and in Swedish but it now is in English published in 2018. The chief author was Hans Rosling who sadly passed away so his family made the final edits. Hans was a medical doctor, professor of international global health and adviser to the World Health Organization so were he alive today he would be in the news about Covid-19 events.
The book begins by inviting you to take a test you can take on www.gapminder.org.

His work over the decades at first discouraged him about what even "experts" knew about how the world is and he paralleled his test with chimpanzees making random selections based on multiple choice questions. He claims that the western world suffers from an overdramatic worldview that leans on being more negative than facts suggest. You might read recent work by the psychologist Steven Pinker who supports this perspective. The rest of the book explores this through examples from his classrooms and from his work in remote parts of developing countries.

He argues that we have 10 "instincts" that stress us out and prevent us from seeing the world as it is. Here is a list, including characteristics and directions to become "factful". See p 4 for the chart
A point about numbers he makes frequently is that numbers are necessary to understand reality but they are not sufficient? Can you relate this idea to your own understanding of the world?

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INSTINCT	a CHARACTERISTIC	one useful DIRECTION
Gap	making simple divisions that distort complexity	beware comparisons of "averages" or "extremes" but look for the majority
Negativity	in media "if it bleeds, it leads"	expect news in media to be bad
Straight Line	assuming trends are straight lines of prediction	recognize that prediction is far from certain since lines often bend or are jagged
Fear	we are hard-wired for sensing danger; c.f., "system 1"	need to determine actual risk using system 2 thinking
Size	big numbers are often considered more important than they are	note the role of proportion and be aware that some small numbers are BIG
Generalization	categories may be misleading	look for differences within groups
Destiny	we sometimes think that certain characteristics (people, countries, groups, weather, etc.) are innate and never change	slow change is still change
One Perspective	a single perspective may limit possibilities and lead you astray; c.f., Macdonald's *Truth*	seek alternative explanations
Blame	easy to look for villains and heroes	look for causes and solutions
Urgency	"now or never"	take a breath and check for risks and consequences of actions
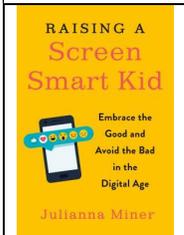
Julianna Miner, a public health professional for several decades writes from those experiences and well as her experiences as child, teenager, and mother to offer guidance for us today in her 1918 _Raising a Screen Smart Kid: Embrace the Good and Avoid the Bad in the Digital Age._ Chapters begin with personal stories to raise issues and challenges to be explored and conclude with "takeaways". In the old days social media in class consisted of passing notes. Now the challenges in raising small humans seem so different.

Many personal stories of the complexities of parenting: complexities as our children begin to assert independence. With the abundance of info come online and F2F sources she adds two concepts for us to consider more carefully, since the online world has pushed these into our conscious and subconscious levels (systems 2 and 1).
 One of these intrusions into our minds is FOMO: fear of missing out. This is not just a challenge for children and teenagers as many of us of all ages have been scouring media for info, new, ideas concerning Covid-19 or the aftermath of George Floyd. Adolescents in particular searching for their place while moving towards adulthood are challenged by the online audience. Can we be "cool" to thousands or more? Why do people online seem cool and successful while I am barely keeping afloat? Social comparisons bombard us as we snapchat, instagram, tweet, and selfie bomb ourselves and our "friends" or "followers".

Beginning with personal stories and ending with takeaways, topics such as "online addiction, video games, digital dating, digital dangers, and the relationship the online world has with depression and anxiety", are explored. In many ways as Rostig points out, as well as psychologists such as Stephen Pinker, the world is a safer place, though we all find that hard to believe. Covid-19 24/7? So, are we doomed?

Julianna's final chapter, Hoping for the Best and Avoiding the Worst, concludes that since it is impossible to monitor everything we are best to "mentor" and set good examples of behaviour and honest communication. Among the specifics of how to do the right thing, she offers parental "truths" such as all kids are different, everyone makes mistakes, communication is key when we listen more and talk less, give kids opportunities to prove they are ready for their next step, and finally "Your job is to make sure that someday your kids won't need you." She realizes that some of the suggestions she makes are not easy and were not easy for her. Appendices offer ideas on designing a cell phone contract or agreement with your kid as well as resources for teens dealing with sexuality.

Readathon

Pledge forms can be downloaded from our website www.pdk-ut.ca. Please send cheques made out to PDK-UT and mailed to Pauline Quan at 181 Olive Ave, North York, M2N 4P3. For further information contact the "Read-a-thon Challenge" Co-Chairs: PaulineQuan - pauline.shou@gmail.com Zenobia Omarali. - zenomarali@gmail.com