Blink: *The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*

Based on *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell, Little Brown and Co., NY and Boston, 2005
A Different and Better World

• **Blink** is concerned with the content and origin of the instantaneous impressions and conclusions that spontaneously arise when we make decisions under stress.

• It is about understanding ourselves and our world.

• Too much attention is paid to the grand themes and too little to the fleeting moments.

• Instead of scanning the horizon with our binoculars, if we examine our own decision making and behaviour through the most powerful of microscopes, we can change our world for the better.

• **There is as much value in a blink of an eye as in months of rational analysis.**
Three messages of the Blink

1. Decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately
2. To know when should we trust our instincts and when should we be wary of them
3. Our snap judgements and first impressions can be educated and controlled
The Statue That Didn’t Look Right

- The J. Paul Getty Museum in California acquired a *kouros* – a perfectly preserved marble sculpture of a nude male youth dating from the 6th century.
- It took Getty 14 months to investigate the authenticity of the *kouros* and costs them just under US$10 million.
- However, a number of art experts in the first two seconds of looking at the statue – in a single glance – felt an “intuitive repulsion” and proved that it was a forgery.
- **Blink is about those first two seconds**
How Our Mind Works (1)

- When the stakes were high, where things were moving quickly, and where people had to make sense of a lot of new and confusing information in a very short time, our brain uses two very different strategies to make sense of the situation.

- The **first** is the conscious strategy, which is logical and definitive; we think about what we have learned and we eventually come up with an answer; it is slow and needs a lot of information.
How Our Mind Works (2)

- The *second* operates below the surface of consciousness.
- Our brain reaches conclusions without immediately telling us that it’s reaching conclusion;
- Operates more quickly and has drawbacks;
- Do not weigh every conceivable strand of evidence and considers what could be gathered in a glance;
- Felt something, adopts “fast and frugal” thinking;
- Do not know why you knew, but you *knew*
Adaptive unconscious decision-making

- Which leads us to leap to conclusions is one of the most important new fields of psychology
- Like a giant internal computer which quickly and quietly process a lot of data and enable us to make quick judgements
- Whenever we meet someone for the first time, whenever we react to a new idea, whenever we are faced with making a decision quickly and under stress we use adaptive unconscious side of our brain
- Recognizing someone’s face is a classic example of unconscious cognition
The First Two Seconds

- A person watching a silent two-second video clip of a teacher she or he never met could reach similar conclusions about how good the teacher is, to those of a student who sat in the teacher’s class for an entire semester – *this is the power of adaptive unconscious*
- You may have done the same thing without realizing it when you pick up a book; in a short space of time the thoughts and images and preconceptions will fundamentally shaped the way you read it
- The power of knowing in the first two seconds is not a gift given to a fortunate few but an ability that all of us can cultivate for ourselves
Rapid Cognition

• We are innately suspicious of it
• We assume that the quality of a decision is directly related to the time and effort that went into making it
• We were told “Hast makes waste”; “Look before you leap”; “Stop and think”; “Don’t judge a book by its cover”
Thin-slicing

- A critical part of rapid cognition
- The ability of our unconsciousness to find patterns in situations and behaviours based on very narrow slices of experiences
- Makes the unconscious so dazzling, and at the same time makes it most problematic
- When we leap to a decision or have a hunch, our unconscious sifts through the situation throwing out that is irrelevant and zero in on what really matters
- Provides a better answer than more deliberative and exhaustive ways of thinking
- Not an exotic gift but a central part of what it means to be human
• We thin slice whenever we meet a new person or have to make a sense of something quickly or encounter a novel situation
• We thin slice because we have to
• We are old hands at thin slicing
An Example of Thin Slicing

- **Judging people’s personalities** – asking close friends of 80 students to complete a multi-item questionnaire across five dimensions (“thick slicing”) or using total strangers to look into the dorm rooms of the students for 15 minutes and ask them to answer very basic questions about the occupants (thin slicing) – *on balance the strangers did a better job*
The catch with rapid cognition

- You just know but cannot figure out how you know
- Snap judgements are rely on the thinnest slices of experiences, but they are also unconscious
- Snap judgements and rapid cognition tale place behind a locked door
- We need to accept the mysterious nature of snap judgements – it is possible to know without knowing why you know and accept that – sometimes - we are better off that way
- Sometimes we are better off if the mind behind the locked door makes our decisions for us
Gift of reading deeply into the narrowest slivers of experience

- In basketball it is having a “court sense”
- In the military, brilliant generals possess “coup d'oeil” meaning “power of the glance”
The Naked Face

• The face is an enormously rich source of information about emotion
• Information on our face is not just a signal of what is going on inside our minds
• In a certain sense, it is what is going on inside our mind
• We think of the face as the residue of emotion, but emotion can also start on the face
• This has enormous implications for the act of mind-reading
• There is enough information on the face to make mind-reading possible and hence thin slice
The dark side of thin slicing

- Thin slicing can be very powerful but there is the danger of reaching a snap judgement without ever getting below the surface
- There are circumstances when rapid cognition leads us astray
- Do not prejudge people
- Take rapid cognition seriously – acknowledging the power for good and ill, that first impressions play in our lives
- Take active steps to manage and control first impressions
• When we make snap judgements, i.e., a split-second decision, we are vulnerable to being guided by our stereotypes and prejudices, even those we may not necessarily endorse or believe
• Slowing the process down helps
Improvisation Comedy

• A wonderful example of the kind of thinking that Blink is about
• People make very sophisticated decisions on the spur of the moment without the benefit of any kind of script or plot
• Spontaneity isn’t random; conditions must be created for successful spontaneity
• How good people’s decision are under the fast moving, high stress conditions of rapid cognition is a function of training and rules and rehearsal
Insight Puzzle

• Getting the answer only if it comes to you suddenly in the blink of an eye
• Unlike a math or logic problem you cannot work it out systematically with pen and paper
• Insight is not a light bulb that goes off inside our heads; it is a flickering candle that can be easily snuffed out
An example

- A man and his son are in a serious accident.
- The father is killed and the son is rushed to the emergency room.
- Upon arrival, the attending doctor looks at the child and gasps, “This child is my child!”
- Who is the doctor?

The doctor is the boy’s mother
Another One

- A giant steel inverted pyramid is perfectly balanced on its point.
- Any movement of the pyramid will cause it to topple over.
- Underneath the pyramid is a $100 bill.
- How do you remove the bill without disturbing the pyramid?

Destroy the bill by burning it.
Insight operates by different rules

- When you write down your thoughts, your chances of having insights you need to solve the problem is significantly impaired – “paralysis by analysis”
- When you start becoming reflective about the process, your ability is undermined, you lose your flow
Successful Decision Making

- A balance between deliberate and instinctive thinking
- **Frugality matters** – even the most complicated of relationships and problems have an identifiable underlying pattern
- When we thin slice, and make snap judgements, we do the process “editing” information unconsciously
When Less is More

• It is taken for granted that the more information decision-makers have the better off they are
• But all the extra information might not an advantage
• In fact we need to know very little to understand a complex phenomenon
• For e.g., we only need ECG, blood pressure, fluid in the lungs and unstable angina to detect fatal heart attacks
Listen with Your Eyes

- Musical auditions are classic thin-slicing moments
- Trained classical musicians say that they can tell whether a player is good or not almost instantaneously
- Over the past few decades, the classical music world has undergone a revolution – the audition process was formalized and screens were used between the committee and the auditioner, orchestras were hiring more women
- The classical music world realized that what they thought was a pure and powerful first impression – listening to someone play without a screen - was in fact hopelessly corrupt
Lesson in classical music’s revolution

• Why for so many years, were conductors so oblivious to the corruption of their snap judgements?
• Because we are often careless with our powers of rapid cognition
• We don’t know where our first impressions come from or precisely what they mean, so we don’t always appreciate their fragility
• Taking our powers of rapid cognition seriously means we have to acknowledge the subtle influences that can alter or undermine or bias the products of our unconscious
The second lesson

- When orchestras when confronted with their prejudice, they solved the problem without resigning to what happens in the blink of an eye.
- By controlling the environment in which rapid cognition takes place, we can control it.
- By fixing the first impression at the heart of the audition, using a screen – by judging purely on the basis of ability, orchestras now hire better musicians, and better musicians mean better music.
- We get better music by paying attention to the tiniest detail, the first two seconds of the audition.
- The screen created a pure Blink moment, a small miracle when we take charge of the first two seconds.