

DAVID BROOKS

Teaching The Elephant

Human beings have divided selves. Some philosophers emphasize that people have a cool, rational side and an unruly, passionate side. Some theologians emphasize that people have a loving, virtuous side and a selfish, sinful side. Freudians used to emphasize the divisions between the ego, the superego and the id. But lately some brain researchers have another way to conceptualize the divided self. They distinguish between the conscious, intentional parts of the mind and the backstage automatic parts.

The best metaphor for this last division comes from Jonathan Haidt's wise book "The Happiness Hypothesis." Imagine, he writes, a boy riding an elephant. The boy is the conscious mind, the prefrontal cortex and such. The boy can plan ahead. The elephant is the unconscious part of the brain, the amygdala and other regions. It produces emotions and visceral reactions. It processes information and forms intuitions.

These days, scientists are spending a lot of time trying to understand the elephant, and journalists are popularizing their results. In "Blink," Malcolm Gladwell describes how the elephant can pick up and process information, and even draw instant conclusions before the boy is aware of what he is seeing. In "Social Intelligence," Daniel Goleman describes how elephants talk to each other while scarcely letting the boys in on the conversation. Fear, laughter and other emotions can sweep through crowds before the individuals in the crowds understand what's going on.

The elephant is the repository of tacit knowledge. As Robert Sternberg of Yale notes, tacit knowledge is procedural. It's knowing how, not knowing what. It's knowing how to listen, how to see and organize what you see.

A child born into a home where people use a lot of words develops a sophisticated ability to use language, without even having to sit down and consciously develop this skill. A child born into a home where actions have predictable consequences learns to

restrain impulses and practice self-control.

The elephant doesn't acquire its knowledge from self-conscious study. The elephant absorbs information from the environment. The neural architecture of the brain is shaped by experiences and habits, often during the sensitive periods early in life.

This way of dividing the self is beginning to have a powerful influence on education policy and urban policy, and across a whole range of other practical spheres.

For example, last Sunday Paul Tough had an outstanding article in *The Times Magazine* about how to improve urban schools. In one scene, Tough was standing in front of a music class at a KIPP Academy. The teacher was explaining Tough's presence to the class, when he suddenly pointed to Tough and asked, "Do you notice what he's doing right now?"

The class called out, "Nodding!"

The teacher was using Tough's unconscious nodding to reinforce a lesson: that when you listen to a person you should look at the person, and you should actively listen. Later in the class the teacher told the students to adopt the "normal school" pose. The kids slouched low in their chairs and gazed off into space. Then the kids snapped back to the KIPP-approved posture: upright, every head swiveling toward whoever was speaking.

In short, KIPP is taking skills that middle-class kids pick up unconsciously and it is rigorously drilling them into students from less fortunate backgrounds. KIPP Academies, like many of the best schools these days, don't just cram information into brains. They educate the elephant. They surround students with a total environment, a holistic set of habits and messages, and they dominate students' lives for many hours a day.

A generation ago, the gods of education fashion ordained that children should be liberated from desks-in-a-row pedagogy to follow their "natural" inclinations. In those days, human beings were commonly divided between their natural selves, assumed to be free and wonderful, and their socially constructed selves, assumed to be inhibited and repressed.

But now, thanks to bitter experience and scientific research, we know that the best environments don't liberate students. We know, or have rediscovered, that the most nurturing environments are highly structured. Children flourish in homes that are organized, in families where attachments are stable, among people who plan for the future and within cultures that celebrate work.

Many of today's most effective antipoverty institutions are incredibly intrusive, even authoritarian. Up to a point, elephants seem to like it that way. □