Book Review


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“It’s not easy for me to think of ways to improve myself because I’m already pretty much one of the best people I know,” admitted Greg Heffley, narrator of the *Diary of A Wimpy Kid: The Last Straw* (Kinney, 2009, p. 1). In light of his lofty self image, Heffley volunteers to help other people—especially his parents—find ways to improve themselves. Helping adults change, he laments, is no easy task.

Although this is not a book review of the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, I quote Heffley because his sardonic musings in collaboration with students of all ages amplify the complicated emotional, rational, and situational variables involved in fostering change. As illustrated in Hefley’s conceit, change can be hard for everyone—including adults. Although this is not news to andragogical professionals, it does prompt practitioners such as myself to seek additional perspectives and insights.

In my search for insights into fostering meaningful change, I was drawn to Chip and Dan Heath’s (2010) *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*. And I was not disappointed. Moved by the instructiveness of the Heath brothers’ funny and carefully researched chapters, I recommend the book to colleagues who seek to advance their insights into fostering change—especially when change is hard.

Chip Heath—a business professor at Stanford—and Dan Heath—a senior social entrepreneurship fellow at Duke—begin by framing their understandings of change in the psychological—yet nontechnical—language of the brain’s often-competing emotional and rational systems. The emotional system, they report, is sensitive to instinct, pain, and pleasure. The rational side is, in contrast, inclined to reflect, analyze, and deliberate. Borrowing a metaphor from Haidt (2006), the Heaths refer to one’s emotional side as an elephant and one’s rational side as its rider. Whereas the emotional elephant is drawn to the energy of short-term gratification, the rational rider prefers long-term objectives. To change things, explain the Heath brothers, one must appeal to both the elephant and the rider. In other words, change is likely to follow when learning resonates viscerally, intellectually, simultaneously.

Having identified the emotional, rational, and situational factors that make change hard, the Heaths then share dozens of case studies that reveal patterns in how successful
switches are made. From this research, they suggest the following framework for enabling change: (a) direct the rider, (b) motivate the elephant, and (c) shape the path. In short, “point to the destination, find the feeling, and change the environment” (p. 259).

If this sequenced approach to creating change seems prescriptive, it probably is. Yet as a reader who finds both credibility in cognitive neuroscientific constructivism and a general distaste for the often reductivist and hegemonic consequences of behaviorism, I appreciate the Heath brothers’ concisely communicated prescription for change.

Moreover, I perceive important applications for the Heath brothers’ switch sequence within the larger framework of Mezirow’s (1978) transformative learning cycle, which Herber (1998) distilled into (a) disorienting dilemmas/trigger events, (b) critical reflection, (c) rational dialogue, and (d) committed action. In each of these stages of the transformative learning cycle, learners (part elephant, part rider) must experience powerful emotional reason and productive instability to continue on transformative journeys. When such journeys are triggered by emotionally competent stimuli but decoupled from rational reflection, ensuing changes tend to result in conformity. Conversely, in the absence of emotionally moving trigger events, learners tend to feel little impetus to reexamine their own underlying (and often inaccurate) assumptions—thus perpetuating problematic rationalization.

For these reasons, I value *Switch*, as it is rich with insights into facilitating—at times transformative—change through emotional vigor, rational power, and modeling clear examples of ways to facilitate the complex dynamics of meaningful change from less desired to more desired ways of being in the world. Informed by its lessons to direct the rider, motivate the elephant, and shape the path, I look forward to switching my approach to changing the hard things in myself, my adult education curriculum, and my campus community.

And so I am delighted to share *Switch*—not only with my colleagues in adult education but also with characters such as Heffley who, in time, would be well served by transformative adult education. It seems like only a matter of time before he is ours, and the difficult but meaningful changes will be his to keep and then teach.

For the hard change work that *Switch* promises to enable, I am grateful and energized. Helping adults grow and change is powerful and purposeful work.

References