




## What can (lack of) equilibrium tell us about modern schooling?

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### ABSTRACT

What started as a review of John Ralston Saul's *On equilibrium*, turned into a reflection on the changing nature of modern schooling, where lack of equilibrium provides a guiding idea of what is wrong with school—an instance of a more widespread malaise—and where restoring equilibrium provides a hope for improvement.

### KEYWORDS

sociology of school; school as an institution of management.

This commentary started life as a book review, but its deeper roots lie in my desire, as a school teacher, to make sense of my changing working life, a changing institutional life. This is, perhaps, too personal a statement. I wish to make sense of the *changing nature* of the public school system of Queensland, within which I have worked for the past 17 years. Most of life's big changes occur in small increments. For this reason, they go largely unnoticed. Every day we go to work in the same workplace, just as every day we look at the same face in the mirror. Only when we look at photographs do we *see* the change. And only when we reflect on our past working life do we *feel* the change. Alongside this feeling is also a desire, a need, to make sense of change. This commentary is one small attempt to understand the changing face of public school education in Queensland, to make sense of my experience as a classroom teacher working in a high school. Since making sense of experience requires a framework of understanding, I have chosen John Ralston Saul's concept of human *equilibrium* to do this (Saul, 2001).

Isn't a work that is 20 years old out of date? About 20 years ago I recall a scholar of 'technology' told me her subject was so vibrant her work was already out of date before it was published. I thought she had booked that fact on the wrong side of the ledger—imagining a shortcoming to be a mark of value. The value of scholarship should be judged by its lifetime, not by its time-stamp. Euclid's geometry is still taught in secondary schools. Seneca's Letters are still read today. They say as much about the world of Putin and Trump as they do about the world of Nero.

What then of the problems we face in public schools? Immature thought (hypothesising) is a necessary step to mature thought (knowing), but when hypothesis is made into certainty, its uncritical and enthusiastic adoption in schools leads to *fads*. Here are some *candidate* fads in school education: Independent Public Schools (IPS), all school pedagogy models, direct instruction, new basics, multiple intelligences, positive education, Growth Mindset, resilience, classroom

differentiation, data walls, junior assessment moderation, performance appraisal, education software 'solutions', Naplan, ... .

Doubtless every teacher has their own list, but please note the word *candidate*. I do not say these ideas are mistaken. I do say there is nothing *inherently improving* about them, nothing inherently improving about *innovation* per se. This should be obvious. It is, after all, depressingly easy to think of high profile examples of disastrous innovation—student loans in the private VET sector and Centrelink's computerised 'debt' recovery system are glaring recent examples. The critical point here is that *successful innovation* requires consultation, discussion, study, scrutiny, criticism, evaluation, judgment and review. And chiefly there must be room *allowed* for questioning and doubt. This is where Ralston Saul comes in. His book, *On Equilibrium*, helps us to understand why this does not happen, why modern institutions, specifically modern schools, are dominated by *uncritical innovation*.

Ralston Saul's central thesis is that human life is a complex interplay of six qualities: common sense, ethics, imagination, intuition, memory and reason, and none of these can be properly *understood* in isolation. In fact, 'If you try to define these qualities each by themselves you will end up in ... a nonsense world of ... black and white certainties [where] ethics will become unethical, reason irrational' (Saul, 2001, p. 13). When a single quality is privileged above the rest the result is *ideology*. Balance, *equilibrium*, is our only protection against ideology. The six qualities derive their true meaning by a 'push and pull tension that holds them together' (Saul, 2001, p. 18); each deriving meaning as a reflection of the others.

It can be seen from this briefest summary that *On Equilibrium* has a wide purview. I want to focus in this commentary on Ralston Saul's analysis of how the privileging and distortion of *reason* has led to the institutional prevalence of *uncritical innovation*. He writes,

Reason is thought. Argument is an adjunct of thought. Both are unrelated to certainty and instrumentalism. This least utilitarian of qualities [reason] is waiting to be rescued from those who have kidnapped it as a cover for their directionless obsession with form, methodology, technology and managerialism. (Saul, 2001, p. 267)

How far is a modern school a locus of *managerialism*? Think of the language used by schools today: 'executive principal', 'associate principal', 'line manager', lessons as 'content delivery', children as 'stakeholders', the leadership team, the all school pedagogy model, the mission statement (to *teach children!*), the management information system, the performance review, the data wall, the triennial audit, endless policies, systems, and accountabilities. Unbridled reason has become an absolute monarch, yet,

The more absolute [a thing is] the more strengths turn into weaknesses. ... To declare yourself against ... is to marginalise yourself, to turn yourself into an oddity, to become the one who does not believe what must be believed in order to be normal. ... in order to conform. (Saul, 2001, p. 268)

How far is a modern school a locus of *conformity*? A place where questioning is discouraged, especially public questioning, in spite of this being an essential part of the *proper* use of reason! 'What makes instrumental reason so profoundly irrational is its devotion to mechanistic solutions conceived in a limited time and space, as if the matter at hand were free-standing' (Saul, 2001, p. 272).

Modern schools operate according to the following managerial template,

Here is a problem X

Here is a solution Y

Therefore, we must all do Y (no discussion or question)

Substitution instances of this 'argument' are (X: school management; Y: Independent Public School); (X: school performance; Y: all school pedagogy model or school audit or Naplan); (X: differential student need; Y: Individual Curriculum Plans); ... .

*Modern reason* does not allow a state of affairs to be viewed as a whole.

Reason now makes it impossible for us to stand back in order to look upon the shape and meaning of the whole. Instead we are trapped into a building block view of the world ... . Most of us are limited to participating in a single block. At that level ... we may pass for specialists and even have an opinion. Particularly if it is for internal use ... . This is our 'human capital' ... . Human is the adjective, capital is the noun. What is meant as a strength is actually an insult. (Saul, 2001, p. 292)

How far is a modern school a locus of *powerlessness*? Teachers are forced into the abstract, even child-like, Lego block world of the anonymous policymaker, where, let us say, the complex, real world problem of education disadvantage and resource scarcity is '*solved*' by: a more 'school ready' program for trainee teachers, or a one-day in-service course for current teachers (the latest research), or classroom differentiation strategies, or data walls, or some other innovation. The focus is always *exclusively* on the teacher as the single most important *school-based* factor in education—and this is presented as breakthrough research! Irrespective of whatever the current Lego block solution happens to be, always '*research based*' and so impeccably rational, lie the real, underlying and unyielding causes of education disadvantage, growing levels of poverty and wealth inequality, growing employment and housing insecurity, and long-term inequitable funding of private and public schools. About these things teachers, acting *professionally* as teachers, must remain silent, lest they become '*unprofessional*', step outside their 'code of conduct'—another Lego block designed for the behaviour management of the school teacher.

There is also the modern obsession with method, process, technology, accounting and *outcomes*.

Instrumentalism drags [reason] down to process, to shop floor techniques such as efficiency. ... [Instrumental reason is a] logic which proclaims the supreme virtue of technical innovation, as if this were the true meaning of progress. ... . You might think that all of this ... is new ... Not at all. ... One of the first breakthroughs [in computing] was the IBM Hollerith punch-card machine. ... At Auschwitz, prisoners ... had their forearms tattooed with [these] machine numbers. Neither technology nor instrumentalism has ... a rational relationship to ethics. ... . Mockery turns into grotesque if you attempt to link the Greek idea of reason and virtue to technological change. ... We see [with the IBM machines] today's highly modern concepts of managerialism and efficiency already hard at work sixty years ago. Management. Technical professionalism. ... The primacy of intellectual property over freedom of speech. The employment contract as a ... mechanism for control over the employee's use of their expertise and their thoughts. (Saul, 2001, pp. 297-300)

[If you recoil from this reference to the computer as a tool of industrial murder, the same point—the ethical neutrality of the computer—is embodied by the Federal Court's recent judgment against the Australian Government's pursuit of thousands of citizens using a computer system to calculate *non-existent* debt.]

How far is a modern school a locus of technical *instrumentality*? Concealment of events for reason of due process, confidentiality and privacy. Discouragement of open discussion. Unquestioned adoption of computerisation. The transfer of education cost from government to families. The encroachment into schools of private software vendors. The loss of autonomy in classroom practice. Learning by multiple-choice. Endless computer-based testing.

For me, Ralston Saul's ideas have proved a fertile and deep source of ideas about human life and society, not least, about life in a modern school. In this commentary I have tried to suggest a certain relevance to understanding contemporary problems of modern schooling. It has helped me to make some sense of the gradual and imperceptible changes that have occurred over a span of 17 years and more. If the picture I have painted is bleak, it is because I have focused on specifically negative aspects. It is important to remember that *equilibrium* is the key idea. To focus on a single

aspect of who we are (the corruption of our capacity for reason) is necessarily to *distort* who we are. If Ralston Saul's ideas provide a useful framework for understanding the problems of modern schooling, they also provide the framework for their remediation.

It is *imagination* which allows us to drag our intellect out of its self-referential tendencies, just as it is *ethics* which helps us to stay away from logical truths which are profoundly destructive. And it is the shared knowledge of *common sense* which protects us against intellectual nonsense. And ... *memory* which can help to steer away from the ideological certainty which convinces us to cut free ... These qualities drag our *reason* onto fertile ground and keep it away from the delusions of purity and instrumentalism. (Saul, 2001, p. 284)

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## Notes on contributor

**Doug Goldson** graduated from Leeds University (UK) in 1983 with a BA (Hons) in history and philosophy and later from London University (UK) in 1990 with a PhD in computer science. He spent 15 years as an academic computer scientist in London, New Zealand and Australia. For the last 17 years he has worked as a high school teacher of maths, science and English in the Queensland Department of Education, Australia. His interests include the philosophy, sociology and politics of school education.

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