Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking
By Malcolm Gladwell
Little, Brown, 2005, $25.95; 288 pages.

Think: Why Crucial Decisions Can’t Be Made in the Blink of an Eye
By Michael R. LeGault
Threshold Editions, 2006, $24.95; 386 pages.

Blank: The Power of Not Actually Thinking at All
By Noah Tall
Harper, 2006, $11.95; 96 pages.

As reviewed by Diane Ravitch

I wish I had a dollar for every time I have heard or read a paean to the importance of critical thinking skills. (Just for fun, I Googled the phrase and came up with over one million hits.) Often, the pedagogues who champion critical thinking skills insist that such skills are of far greater value to children than “mere knowledge,” “mere facts,” or what they derisively refer to as “content.” In other words, if students learn how to think, then it matters not at all if they never read great literature or study history.

Now along comes celebrated author Malcolm Gladwell to tell us in his bestselling Blink that intuition is far superior to the critical thinking skills that so many educators prize. Reflection and deep thought are out, it seems, and judgments made on the fly are in.

Not only was Blink a huge, long-running bestseller, but it boosted Mr. Gladwell into the ranks of megastars on the lecture circuit, where he is now paid $40,000 or so to dispense his theories to corporate executives. Gladwell’s ideas refute the schools’ labored efforts to teach critical thinking, which usually refers to gathering facts, reflecting on their meaning, and analyzing available evidence to reach a judgment. Instead, Gladwell celebrates instinct, first impressions, decisions made “at a glance,” the power of the unconscious. If the schools were to take his advice to heart, they would soon be teaching neither knowledge nor critical thinking skills, and we could treat them as daycare centers rather than academic institutions.

Gladwell is surely a talented writer, as one would expect of a regular contributor to the New Yorker. He skillfully relates a series of tales intended to show the power of snap judgments. His first example involves a decision by the Getty Museum to buy a remarkably intact Greek sculpture from the 6th century B.C. for nearly $10 million. Since this investment demanded a high degree of caution, the museum hired scientists to investigate the age of the piece. The scientists probed and analyzed and concluded that the sculpture was genuine.

When the museum invited several art experts to look at the statue, they immediately and correctly called it a fake, based on their instincts about what was real and what was not. But in this tale, as in most of the others that Gladwell cites, the person who makes the alleged snap judgment is someone who has spent years accumulating the knowledge to make a fast and accurate decision. It was not as if the Getty called in a dozen Joe Six-Packs from the street; no, it listened with anguish to people who had spent their professional lives learning to tell the difference between real and fake.

Gladwell’s argument simply doesn’t hold water. Blink decisions are only worthwhile when they are made by people with years of experience. Even then, as he readily acknowledges, blink decisions are often wrong. Sometimes they are simply prejudice. Other times, they are wrong because acting on instinct can lead to wrong judgments.

The notorious killing of African immigrant Amadou Diallo in 1999 by four members of the New York City Police Department was a blink decision. The police saw Diallo late at night standing in front of an apartment building in a poor neighborhood in the Bronx. They called to him and he didn’t answer. They shouted, and he reached into his pocket for his wallet. They made a snap decision that he was reaching for a gun; they drilled 41 shots into him. They were wrong, and he was dead.

Michael R. LeGault apparently had a book in the works about the decline of American culture and society and his publisher was looking for a title to hold the thing together. When Gladwell’s work became a big bestseller, it seemed like good marketing sense to call LeGault’s book Think, as if it were written in response to Gladwell. Think contains no primary research, no fresh insights. Mostly it is an unremitting complaint about the degradation of American life by purveyors of pop culture, pop psychology, feel-good experts, and marketing gurus.

In his book Blank, Noah Tall (a pseudonym) gives an excellent reason to read Malcolm Gladwell’s Blink: you can’t understand the brilliant humor of Blank until you have read Blink. Tall offers an ironic version of each of Gladwell’s case histories to show how ridiculous the blink judgment actually is. He, too, finds psychologists working on exotic theories of human behavior. For example, there is the TAVICAI syndrome, which means The Average Voter
Is A Complete Idiot. “By a coincidence that can only be called extraordinary,” he writes, “it was discovered by Dr. Gaetano Taviaci of Vesuvio University & Pizzeria in Naples.” Even Abraham Lincoln, “an ambitious gay activist from Illinois, failed to impress voters until he started wearing a hat taller than anyone else’s.” That distinction enabled him to capture the entire idiot vote, which was enough to get him elected.

Then there is Dr. Ian Plegg, who mapped out “the third hemisphere” of the brain. Plegg, the first man ever to receive a doctorate in Scientology, discovered the “little-known lower sub-basement hemisphere, or the LSBH.” He would have won a Nobel Prize for his work, “but some of his more envious colleagues pointed out that ‘hemi’ comes from the Greek meaning ‘half’, and that technically you can’t have a third half.”

As for the Greek sculpture that fooled the Getty Museum, Blank transports it to the Oprah Winfrey Museum of Fine Art in Cicero, Illinois. The curator brings in the scientists, who confirm its antiquity; along comes a postal worker eating a limburger sandwich who says the statue doesn’t smell right. Then a bevy of art experts declares it a fake. The curator takes it to the ultimate experts at the television program Antiques Roadshow, who declare it to be definitely 19th century. Having paid $9.7 million for the phony statue, the dejected curator auctions it on eBay for $2,750. (When the statue turns out to be genuine, the curator shoots himself.)

The bottom line, I surmise, is that it takes years and years of deep study to become truly expert so that you are then qualified to make snap decisions.

Diane Ravitch is research professor of education, New York University, and a member of the Koret Task Force at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.