SEE-I Critical Thinking Framework: Expository Writing in Middle Schools

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Cover Page Footnote

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In classrooms across the country and across content areas, students are expected to be effective writers and be able to communicate comprehension of subject matter through their writing. Student writing is a way of understanding students' thinking processes, their knowledge or understanding of a specific topic, and a way of engaging students in higher order thinking practices. A multiplicity of teaching strategies and process approach methods have been implemented as a means of improving student writing across the country. Despite efforts to improve student writing, specifically in secondary education, it has been reported that 70% of students in grades (4-12) are weak writers and additional studies indicate that one third of high school graduates are not prepared for college-level writing courses (Graham & Perin, 2007; Persky, Daane, & Ying. 2003). Also, according to the Nation's Report Card (2017), student writing was assessed at both the 8th and 12th grades levels with 27% of students scoring at or above proficient writing skills and surprisingly only 3% at both grade levels scored at advanced levels of writing. The data over the years has not indicated that students are becoming better writers, but rather declining over time.

Theoretical Framework

Writing is one of the major contexts for engagement in critical thinking discourse about a particular issue or topic. For writing to serve in this capacity, writing activities or writing processes must be structured in a manner that support and value the role of exploration and inquiry as a tool towards critical thinking (Newell, Koukis, & Boster, 2007). Writing for purposes of constructing meaning across content areas is a powerful tool for learning and

understanding a subject on a deeper level. The act of thinking or reflecting on a topic provides a platform for understanding and awareness of one's own beliefs, ideals, perspectives, new ideas, and counter perspectives. The act of writing shapes one's thinking as it develops the metacognitive processes supporting deeper understanding and higher order thinking. According to Langer and Applebee (2007) writing shapes thinking in two different ways; first, it establishes an environment for writing to learn, and second, it shapes the development of critical thinking.

Writing to learn and engagement in critical thinking are the basis for problem-solving strategies embedded in the writing process. SEE-I (state, elaborate, exemplify, illustrate) framework establishes and facilitates the premise for problem-solving and critical thinking strategies situated in the writing process (Appendix A). Flower and Hayes (1977) stress the importance of looking beyond the act of writing as the arrangement of a problem, but rather treating writing as a thinking problem within the act of composing. Successful writing includes active and self-regulation of one's engagement in the writing process (Hayes & Flowers, 1986; Langer & Applebee, 2007). Self-regulation is the ability to monitor one's comprehension when writing as well as applying explicit strategies to complete a writing task. Explicit and guided strategy instruction in writing that provides students opportunities to employ strategies to develop their writing is key to improving writing instruction. The following paper will establish the theoretical framework and premise for SEE-I, description of a pilot study, consultant and teacher narrative responses, and concluding thoughts.

Premise for SEE-I

According to Nosich and *The Foundation for Critical Thinking* website, "critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by,

observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action." In addition to being essential in reading and problem solving, critical thinking is the cornerstone of good writing. Writers must gather and synthesize information in such a manner to ensure each point at the sentence, paragraph, and essay levels are clear, accurate, and relevant. Crafting writing in this manner not only results in cohesive writing, but in writing that incorporates "intellectual standards (ex. clarity, accuracy, and relevance) which must be applied to thinking whenever one is interested in checking the quality of reasoning about a problem, issue, or situation" (Paul & Elder, 2010). By employing critical thinking in writing, students can "reason out for themselves—construct their own learning" (Nosich, 2005, p.62).

Furthermore, students can implement SEE-I, "to begin any critical thinking process… by *clarifying*, by making things clearer" (Nosich, 2009). In Paul and Elder's critical thinking framework, clarity is the "gateway standard," which SEE-I can support by offering four concrete steps in a process used toward this end at any level for both analysis and writing.

In terms of utilizing SEE-I to improve both the quality of students' thinking and writing, analyzing each step in the process is essential. The *S* in SEE-I represents a statement and can be a "good definition," or in the case of paragraph development, a reason that supports a thesis. As explained by Nosich (2009), "to state something is essentially, to say it briefly, clearly and as precisely as possible." Students create a statement after thinking through their prompt and generating reasons to support their thesis. For example, students writing about teamwork might state that "working in teams can be positive because team members can learn from each other" or that "working in teams can be negative because team members can distract one another." Students select one of the reasons to serve as their statement in a body paragraph. The statement then is simply a clear and concise reason.

After writing the statement, students move to the first *E*, which represents the action of elaborating, elongating, or explaining that statement. This sentence provides more detail and serves to clarify the students' thinking about their topic to themselves and the reader "so the reader gets more of the fullness of what is meant" (Nosich, 2009). Based on Dr. Nosich's (2005) recommendations, students are provided sentence stems to prompt deeper and more detailed thinking. Stems included phrases such as ***in other words, to clarify, this means***, and ***put another way***. Therefore, during this stage in the process, students tease out their thinking to demonstrate that they understand what they are attempting to communicate. For instance, to build on the statement that teamwork can be positive because members can learn from one another, a student might write, "Put another way, when groups of students work together, they bring different ideas and knowledge that others on the team might not know. Sharing these ideas or bits of information can teach the rest of the group new things."

The second *E* is for example. Nosich (2009) emphasized "the goal is to give a good example – not just any example, but a well-chosen one, one that will clarify" the writer's intended meaning. Furthermore, an effective example is one that is "original" and "fit[s] well with [the] statement and elaboration" (Nosich, 2009). Therefore, when students generate original and relevant examples, they demonstrate to readers that they can "think things through" because they provide concrete, relevant evidence to support their statement. Again, students are given stems such as ***for example, for instance***, or ***one time***. Building on the teamwork topic, a student might add an example such as the following: "One time I read about some townspeople who had to work as a team to rescue a two-year-old who fell into a deep well. Some members knew how to prepare the rescue ropes, but they didn't know how to calm the little girl. After

saving her, they realized that they learned from each other things that could be useful in the future."

Finally, the *I* stands for illustration. This component gives the students an opportunity to show and stretch their thinking by painting a picture and "capturing vividly" what they mean for the reader by providing an analogy, metaphor, simile or comparison which further clarifies the writers' points (Nosich, 2005). A student might create an illustration by incorporating sensory language and/or poetic devices, pushing students' thinking beyond what they know to explore other creative but relevant ways of looking at their ideas. For this portion, students are given the option to use the stem *it's like* or *to illustrate*. A student illustration of the teamwork topic might look like the following: "To illustrate, working with a team is like reading an extraordinary book made not from sheets of paper but from unique human minds you can learn from."

Description of Pilot Study

The study focused on 7th grade students, specifically in the area of writing, at four middle schools as part of a National Writing Project Grant combined with a local state grant in Texas. In the state of Texas, 7th graders must take the state-mandated STAAR test in writing. The majority of the population (90%) at four targeted middle schools was first language Spanish speakers, with limited vocabulary and limited literacy-rich environments in English, typically the student's second language. This presented challenges concerning students passing the state exam. Students needed a structured way to approach writing, rather than a formula, which may lead to stilted writing. The SEE-I framework helped struggling, "bubble" and even accomplished students improve their writing. It provided an opportunity to tap into the skills that second language learners brought to the classroom by engaging them in critical thinking practices. SEE-I was adapted to fit the needs of the 7th grade students in these schools. Rather than a formula, SEE-I

provided a framework that could be used to improve expository writing, a component in the state-mandated exam. Since some of the teachers struggled with delivering concrete writing instruction, they agreed to fully develop and implement the modified SEE-I in their classes. For expository essays, students were instructed by their teachers to provide two to three reasons to explain their position on an assigned topic. Many students struggled to arrive at these reasons, and once they did, they experienced trouble rounding out the paragraph with a solid explanation of their reasons. These struggles gave teachers an opportunity to utilize SEE-I as a tool for body paragraph development that facilitated "thinking things through," building on ideas and communicating clearly. As a result, SEE-I was implemented as a problem-solving strategy within the writing process so that students could more easily demonstrate to others that they understood their topic.

Teachers at the designated campuses decided to focus on body paragraphs using the SEE-I framework. The study took place throughout three years. Participating teachers included 6th and 7th grade writing teachers and 7th grade content area teachers. Beginning in the fall semester, groups of four to eight teachers attended professional development workshops. These workshops focused on SEE-I instruction and implementation. SEE-I instruction was supplemented with workshops on each part of SEE-I. For example, teachers were provided with material for teaching introductions, brainstorming, writing strong examples, strengthening voice, and creating illustrations. Depending on administration and campus request, workshops were full-day, half-day or 1-2 hours in length. When new teachers were hired, previously trained teachers instructed them in SEE-I, or writing consultants worked with them in a one-on-one setting to explain and/or model the framework. In addition to workshops, consultants modeled SEE-I instruction in the classroom as well as observed and provided feedback for teachers when they led the instruction.

Additionally, consultants worked with students on a one-on-one basis in the classroom or with groups of five to ten in weekly or bi-weekly pull-out sessions. These sessions normally commenced in the spring semester, but sometimes began as early as December. Each session lasted approximately one hour. In these sessions, students typically had a prompt to work on, and consultants guided them through the SEE-I process. Other times, they brought completed essays, and consultants worked with them to improve the essay, or strengthen certain portions of it, using SEE-I. Depending on the student's level and rate of improvement, they received guidance throughout the semester or as little as one or two sessions.

Although four middle school campuses were originally designated, the majority of the work focused on a campus which had a very low pass rate for the 7th grade STAAR writing exam. The teachers, administration, and students were receptive to ideas and willing to try something new. In addition to providing professional workshops for teachers and tutoring for students, the administration invited consultants to help score Campus-Based Assessments (CBA) and analyze essays and scores from benchmark exams. With this, it was evident that students using SEE-I, or in some cases, simply attempting SEE-I, scored better than their counterparts who did not employ the framework. These results gave teachers more incentive to work within the SEE-I framework. At the end of these three years, this one campus raised their pass rate for the 7th grade STAAR writing exam approximately twenty percentage points.

Consultant Narratives

While feedback and results were promising, in terms of initial introduction to SEE-I, modifications were needed along the way based on students' collective responses. For one, students tended to go off topic within their paragraph or between paragraphs. Some of their ideas were, therefore, not relevant to the topic, which meant students were not thinking critically about

their writing. Secondly, repetition within the paragraph was rampant. In order to mitigate these challenges, the consultants decided to work with students on understanding the prompt. Students identified and circled key words in the prompt as a part of the problem-solving strategies. The circle, consultants told students, was like a wedding ring. Once they circled the words, they were "married" to them. They could not cheat on them in the rest of the essay. In other words, students must stand by those words or ideas throughout the remainder of the essay (to avoid going off topic and to keep their ideas relevant to the topic). Next, students generated a list of synonyms for each key word. The goal of this strategy was to cut down on the repetition and encourage students to think through their writing as they figured out how to address the topic.

Students typically did not encounter issues writing a thesis statement as the prompt provided strong direction; however, they did struggle to generate reasons to support their thesis. Despite teacher instruction in brainstorming, some students simply could not think of reasons that would provide support for their paper. Using icons, consultants created a reason-generating worksheet to help solve this issue (Appendix B). A picture of a doctor indicated health, the dollar sign for money or finances, a clock for time, books for school or education, a globe for the environment, a circle of people for family and friends, and a mirror for self. When students were given a prompt such as "explain the importance of having a good friend," they now had a concrete way to produce reasons. Flower and Hayes (1977) refer to this as transitioning students from what is abstract to concrete as a problem-solving mechanism. Teachers then prompted them by asking if their health could be affected by having a good friend, if their finances could be affected by having a good friend, if their education could be affected by having a good friend, etc. Also, some expository prompts asked students to choose a side (explain whether it is better to work in a group or alone). In this case, students listed the positives and negatives for each of

the appropriate icons. This way the reason-generating worksheet helped them choose their thesis statement as they engaged in these problem-solving strategies.

Once students were armed with their thesis statements and reasons, they began the body paragraphs using the SEE-I framework. The **S** (statement) was simply a concise sentence stating one of their reasons. After students wrote this sentence, they circled their key words. Then, they checked the prompt to make sure they weren't "cheating" on it. The key words or ideas in the prompt had to match those in the statement. Students could refer to their synonym list if necessary. For the first *E*, students explained their statement. Again, they used their synonym list to avoid repetition. Once they explained, elaborated on, or elongated their statement, they circled the key words, checking how they expressed their thinking against their statement and prompt. Students were instructed that they could also use a "not" statement to help clarify their point for this portion. A concept can be further explained by saying what it is not. For example, a sample prompt asks students to explain the importance of a good friend. For the statement, students might write, "A good friend will always be there for you." Using a not statement, the student might complete the elaboration sentence by saying, "She will not turn her back on you or let you down for any reason." For the second *E*, students provided an example. Students used a book, a movie, a historical event, a current event, or a personal anecdote among other things. Here, two issues arose. One, students were quite vague, and two, they often went off topic or began writing a narrative. To help alleviate the setback, consultants asked students to do several things. Students had to be sure they answered the questions how, what, when, why, who, and when in their example as a means of applying the intellectual standard of clarity in the process of developing their critical thinking skills. In addition, they had to keep their example to 2-3 sentences, and finally, they had to once again circle their key words, checking them against the

prompt, their statement and their elaboration for relevance. When working with students through these problem-solving strategies, one consultant noted that they "seemed to understand what corrections needed to be made and why" and that "the strategy seemed to help students structure their essay more easily."

The *I* stands for illustration. Students create an analogy, comparison, simile or metaphor to create a picture for the reader. Dr. Nosich (2009) stated that "to clarify something, it helps to give readers something they can picture in their minds" (p.35). Some students had no trouble and did this quite well. For example, using the prompt "explain the importance of having a good friend," students wrote "A good friend is like a shield," or "A good friend is like gum stuck to the bottom of your shoe." For others, however, it did not come so easily. To help remedy this, consultants led the students in a "making the abstract concrete" lesson inspired by poet Marian Hadad. Students were provided a table with abstract concepts such as fear, justice, and frustration listed in the first column, and concrete items or features such as colors, kitchen appliances, and types of weather were listed in the second column. Students participated in guided practice by selecting an abstract concept and assigning it a concrete item or feature. For example, what color would fear be? What kitchen appliance might frustration be? Consultants also shared with them quotes from established writers that used physical traits to make the abstract concrete, such as Isabel Allende's line describing terror, "it was a claw sunk in his throat." After students practiced this strategy independently, they were instructed to once again try the illustration portion of their writing. Some students felt a little more confident and attempted doing so. If students still struggled to find a way to illustrate their thinking, usually the SEE portion of the paragraph was strong enough without an analogy, comparison, simile or

metaphor. If they had time left at the end of the essay, and they thought of an illustration, it could be used as a conclusion.

Once students mastered SEE-I, they added voice to their essay. Generally, this would increase a student's rubric score on the state test. Of course, teaching voice was not an easy task. Consultants wanted to stay within the SEE-I framework while encouraging students to inject their personality in their writing. To accomplish this, students were encouraged to use different stems. Instead of using "in other words," students might write "in case you didn't know," or "as I was discussing with my family the other day." Students added voice to their writing simply by changing the sentence stem to reflect their personalities.

Furthermore, students used cultural capital to create voice. The students who participated in this study come from predominately Hispanic backgrounds, and they use Spanish words when appropriate or refer to their "abuela" or "tio". For example, in his or her statement, a student whose position is that it is better to work alone, wrote, "My abuela always says it is better to have a lot of people help you. Well, I'm sorry to say, my abuela is wrong. Working alone is better because it can save you time." This statement demonstrated development of thought and reveals the writer's voice. Although the statement was expanded to two sentences, it gave the writer a better opportunity to show voice while maintaining the clarity of the SEE-I statement. This strategy was particularly helpful to more confident writers, and the consultant felt that "students were receptive and participatory".

The collective efforts of the consultants' experiences in implementing this approach varied, and they managed to redirect when needed and experienced challenges and successes along the way.   SEE-I framework assisted struggling; "bubble" and even accomplished students improve their writing and provided an opportunity to tap into the funds of knowledge skills that

second language learners brought to the classroom by engaging them in critical thinking practices.

Teacher Narratives

In order to conduct full implementation of SEE-I, consultants provided various teacher workshops and feedback on student writing, modeled lessons to entire classes, worked directly with students in groups of five or ten, coached teachers, and met with both teachers and administrators to debrief on students' responses to the intervention. Consultants' follow-up reports indicate that students were, similar to the teachers who attended the SEE-I workshops, generally receptive and participatory during guided and independent practice of SEE-I lessons; students who received special education services, but were mainstreamed and recent immigrants benefited from one-on-one guidance in both the whole class or small group settings. In fact, the special education teacher who participated in the workshops and implemented SEE-I in her writing instruction informed the consultants that her students "finally" had something "concrete they [could] hold on to," follow step-by-step, and "see results" in their writing.

As previously mentioned, teachers and administrators were receptive to ideas and willing to try something new, including participation in consultant-led workshops on SEE-I implementation as well as skills-based lessons for each part of SEE-I. Before the series of workshops, teachers shared both their strategies for helping students respond to expository writing prompts and their concerns about students' misreading prompts and ability to brainstorm but not communicate ideas in a clear, cohesive manner. During pre-workshop sessions, consultants explained the rationale for following the SEE-I process, including the critical thinking component. Teachers noted this method seemed "a good fit" for addressing their

concerns and demonstrated a willingness to implement the strategy thus forming learning communities of writers collaborating.

After additional discussions with administrators and teachers, consultants provided sessions on SEE-I implementation as well as creating engaging introductions, generating reasons for or against an issue, making the abstract concrete, revising paragraphs, specifically through sentence combining, and varying sentence structure. All workshops involved hands-on, learner-centered activities, designed to encourage participation. During one workshop targeting the *E* or the explaining and elaborating aspect of paragraph development in SEE-I, teachers were somewhat competitive, and when given the opportunity to work in groups, they chose to work independently. However, during the Erasmus activity on sentence variety, teachers preferred to work in groups. When an administrator joined in, one teacher commented that the administrator "took over."

Nonetheless, all participants contributed, and one even said he got so "excited" while completing the task that he dropped his pen. He said students would certainly be engaged during this particular exercise. During another session, one administrator and two teachers said they liked the "hands-on component" to revising paragraphs and sentence combining because students would be actively engaged in learning. One veteran teacher said he could incorporate a modified version of the activity since he believed some struggling students might feel overwhelmed.

In addition to workshops, consultants also participated in essay scoring and calibrating sessions, which 7th grade teachers found helpful because they now had the "language of SEE-I" and the critical thinking framework to work with in their discussion of students' progress. These calibrating sessions led to planning "more focused" one-on-one teacher-student conferences. They further helped to assuage some of the sixth-grade teachers' fears and concerns about

teaching and scoring expository essays as they had indicated they were "nervous" about doing so. As a result, they were eager to have consultants model SEE-I lessons and "coach" them. The sixth-grade teachers were also particularly interested in sessions on making the abstract concrete because they believed this would help students "further develop ideas" when instructing students on how to explain and elaborate their statements. Administrators decided they too wanted to observe this lesson and indicated that they liked its "interdisciplinary nature." Overall, both teachers and administrators welcomed the consultant onto their campus and in their classrooms. Teachers reported to consultants that their students often asked, "Are the university ladies coming to our class?"

The implementations of SEE-I according to teacher responses were positive. The various approaches including workshops, modeling sessions, coaching, or student groups decided on by individual campuses, provided teacher support and were directed by teacher and administrator response. This was the unique nature of the support within these learning communities of writers

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on past and current national report findings, it is clear that students at the secondary level struggle with writing. While it is easy to assign writing, it is challenging to teach writing to novice writers and second language learners who are the challenges that teachers struggle with across the country. The act of writing shapes one's thinking as it requires practice in deeper understanding, problem-solving, and higher order thinking (Langer & Applebee, 2007; Flower, & Hayes 1977). Conversely, checking one's thinking using clarity as an intellectual standard can shape one's writing.

SEE-I builds on a critical thinking framework by providing students a concrete process they can use to structure their thinking about a topic as expressed in their writing, and the modifications we have made further help students create a stronger, well-thought-out expository essay. However, there are still challenges that need to be addressed. The elaboration is a key component of SEE-I, yet students struggle with it. They often repeat their statement using other words rather than explaining or elaborating. Teachers we worked with also had trouble teaching this concept. As instructors of writing, we need to find ways to make the elaboration section more concrete for both teachers and students.

Additionally, while SEE-I applies to all writing levels, we may need to make further adjustments for more advanced writers. Besides injecting voice into their writing and changing stems, more experienced writers can manipulate the components of SEE-I to better fit their writing style and demonstrate more complex or sophisticated thinking. For example, rather than concluding with an illustration (an analogy, comparison, simile or metaphor), teachers can challenge students to begin with one. Teachers can use real-world writing samples (see Appendix C) as mentor texts to show students how published authors often use this technique. Students who are familiar and comfortable with SEE-I recognize the four elements of the framework in the mentor texts; they can then emulate the author's craft, structuring their SEE-I paragraphs in such a way that not only makes their point or explains their ideas but does so rhetorically. An added benefit to this strategy is that it encourages reading analytically since students must use their powers of observation to uncover the contents of SEE-I in the samples and their writing. The overall work conducted and implemented at all four designated middle school campuses deemed positive. The designated campus that received extensive assistance and support (focus here in these findings) improved on their state exam passing rates impressively. The overall

findings at that designated campus were extremely positive as reported in both teacher and consultant narrative responses.

The recommendation is that teachers of writing should continue to explore strategies and methods on how to assist students in becoming effective writers and consider SEE-I as one approach to encourage students to think their way through their explanations, a key aspect of the expository writing process. SEE-I is one approach to engage students in problem-solving strategies within the learning communities of writers that work collaboratively.

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Appendix A

State the first reason that supports your thesis statement. Now circle your KEY word(s).

_____

_____

_____

Elaborate your reason by using **different words** or **synonyms** for the key words above to **explain** and clarify what your statement means. Start your sentence with:

In other words,   OR   This means   OR   Put another way,   OR

To build on this idea   OR   To clarify   OR   To extend on this idea

Be sure to include **synonyms** for the **KEY words** in your statement. Circle them!

_____

_____

_____

Exemplify your reason by creating a SPECIFIC example that is "married" to your KEY words above. Add details that help your reader "see" your reason by answering the questions:

Who?
What?
Why?
When?
How?

You may start your sentence with:

For example,
OR
For instance,
OR
One time,

Circle **key words/phrases**! Check to see that you're still "married" to your main reason.
_____
_____
_____

Illustrate your reason by thinking like a **genius**! Create an analogy (a comparison, simile, or metaphor) that helps your reader "see" your reason. Be sure to circle **key words/phrases**!
It's like...
_____
_____
_____

Appendix B
Generating Ideas using Icons

Help/Save

Hurt/Waste

Health

Finances/Money

Time
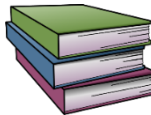
Education/Learning

Environment

Others/Society

Self

Appendix C
Real World Examples of SEE-I

Sample A

While bearing the weight of things and hoping for the future only speak of instances of love, the final aspect that defines love is its ability to endure. To be more explicit, love never dies. For instance, Daphne and Tony Aldridge of West Sussex, England, celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary in March 2012 with many of their eighty fostered children surrounding them. Fostering children for over 33 years, the Aldridges love for each other and children has allowed them to endure phone calls at 3:00AM, asking if they would take in a South African baby whose guardian was acting suspiciously at Gatwick airport. Fostering has also required the Aldridges to persevere through legal battles, especially when they decided to adopt one child they had cared for for many years… As seen here, love is a long-distance run, not a sprint to the finish. Of course, there are events that will require a sprint, but also times of rest. The proper pace is part of the art of love that keeps the long distant vision and dream of love alive.

Excerpted from *SEEI - World Religions: Sample Paper on the St. Petersburg College Libraries site*: https://spcollege.libguides.com/c.php?g=254460&p=1695626

Sample B

Many animals are born genetically preprogrammed or "hardwired" for certain instincts and behaviors. Genes guide the constructions of their bodies and brains in specific ways that define what they will be and how they'll behave. A fly's reflex to escape in the presence of a passing shadow; a robin's preprogrammed instinct to fly south in the winter; a bear's desire to hibernate; a dog's drive to protect its master: these are all examples of instincts and behaviors that are hardwired. Hardwiring allows these creatures to move as their parents do from birth, and in some cases to eat for themselves and survive independently.

-Dr. David Eagleman in *The Brain: The Story of You*