

## #01

## Making change happen!

Rethinking the school system through the pandemic: **our mental modes.****The illuminative power of lockdown...****→ Marie-Claude Sawerschel:**

School shutdowns due to the pandemic in many parts of the world have had a revealing effect on various aspect of education, and above all on the role and value we give to the assessment system in normal times and certification processes at the end of schooling.

Let's take for example what is happening in France, and the decision to cancel the baccalaureate exams this year. The baccalaureate, or "bachot", in France, is an institution to say the least. It's a powerful rite of passage, one that has put high school students and their families on edge for months and for generations, leading "Elle" magazine to write: *"The baccalaureate as we know it is over. The coronavirus has killed this French fetish"*.

In both Belgium and Switzerland, some education officials have argued for the cancellation of final examinations to ensure "equality (or fairness) of treatment". And something quite striking happens, in my opinion: while the formality of exams was until now considered

inevitable (and a source of value as much as of stress), we are being told that *"everything is under control, we have already done ¾ of the year, so we can perfectly well dispense with final exams because we know that our students have 'skills'"* (our leaders think that this should reassure us, but this would be an entire other topic!) That's like saying: *"Standardisation through certification is very important, that's why we've done it in the past but in fact, at the moment, it's not important at all"*

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*because we can already give all the guarantees regarding our students' skills, but we will hasten to return to this formality as soon as the pandemic is over"*.

The impression one gets from all this rhetorical vagueness is that evaluation and certification are important in the eyes of society, like Noah Yuval Harari's "imagin-

ary dogmas", but obviously not only to measure the students' performance. So, what are they for?

**→ Chantal Vander Vorst:** To answer this, we need to see into the heart of the human being, because the meaning of assessment and certification depends on the lenses we choose.

**Mental modes**

This journey to the heart of the human being will allow us to understand how our brain functions, and if necessary... to put the pieces back in the right order, or even to build the school system back up the way it should be! According to the NeuroCognitive and Behavioural Approach developed by the *Institut de Médecine Environnementale* in Paris, we all have two ways of approaching situations, which are underpinned by different brain structures:

■ **The first approach, automatic,** is well suited for simple and known routine situations, such as: getting dressed, taking a shower, performing a usual task, etc. It contains a lot of information, which it classifies and har-

monises. It will therefore analyse situations by making binary comparisons.

■ **The other approach, adaptive or pre-frontal**, is perfect for dealing with difficult, complex and unknown situations, such as: managing a new project, dealing with change, having a global view of a problem... It questions, seeks and proposes answers, without trying to standardise.

Our hypothesis is that the Automatic Mental Mode often, too often, takes over because it is faster and “louder” than the Adaptive Mental Mode. In concrete terms, this means that we tend to cling first to what we know, to what is familiar to us, to our library of experiences.

We could illustrate this with the following analogy: we have two chairs in our brain. Basically, one is for the Automatic pilot, and the other for Adaptive pilot. But... the Automatic pilot tends to sit on both chairs, to refer immediately to known and simple standards and patterns. For example, the school curriculum is very often “automated”, in the sense that the subjects, the teaching methods and the layout of the space are almost always the same as those seen more than 50 years ago, while the world is constantly changing. The school thus seems out of step and not suited to our current reality.

### Success and failure

Assessment and certification, as seen by the Automatic Mental Mode, serve to “standardise” and categorize, and thus give rise to “good students”, “less good students”, “bad students”, and notions of success and failure.

This same assessment / certification system, when seen through the Adaptive Mental Mode, can serve to question, to move forward, to bring to light. Is this really the vision that is currently present in our school systems? Far too little in my opinion.

The cancellation of assessments and certification processes at the present time, in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, seems to be the response of the Automatic Mental Mode, which temporarily lets go of what it can no longer control anyway.

→ **MCS:** If I understand you correctly, these mental modes, automatic and adaptive, are at work both in the brains of individuals and in the collective mind. This differentiation accounts fairly well, I think, for the sort of haste and the astonishing trivialization that we see at work as measures to simplify and abolish assessments are announced, which is in stark contrast to the collective ceremonial that usually presides over promotion to a higher level of

education. I bet a lot of decision-makers, underneath the words that are meant to be soothing, feel the delicate nature of this pass. They have to play the role of illusionists who make a scarf disappear and turn into a rabbit, in front of an audience eager to know the trick! And to make the manoeuvre more acceptable, like the magician’s “*abracadabra*”, meant to distract the spectator’s vigilance, they repeatedly use the adjective “pragmatic” to justify the *ad hoc* solutions found for the exceptional situation, to highlight their innovative and earthy character, to give them, despite their unique character, a certain “normality”, and thus normalise the “lack” caused by the cancellation of exams. Going back to the differentiation you made: since we can no longer be in automatic mode, then, for a brief moment, we go into adaptive mode while retaining the vocabulary of automatic mode: *“It’s fine like this... It will do for this one time... It’s not a big deal to miss a few weeks of a curriculum... We already know for certain that our students have the required skills, etc.”*

### Assure or reassure

That said, could we really have expected anything else in a crisis situation? The Departments of Education, Training, whatever they may be called, are institutions whose merit lies largely in the



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stability they provide. They also reassure us, therefore, as if the automatic mode of the institutions could calm our worries. There is something a bit childish about our relationship with the institution, seen from this angle.

Don't you think that, because we have just collectively experienced this kind of desacralization of assessments (I'm leaving aside for the moment the rite of passage dimension associated with final exams), we know today that it is perhaps possible to do things differently or, at least, to question the rationale for assessments as devices intended to identify students by giving them a certain value? And, necessarily, if we

question the idea of grades, we question the school system itself. Since we have had a glimpse of what could be, since we have been forced into the adaptive mode, are we not going to have a look in that direction?

→ **CVV:** Yes indeed, I think that many people have started on a path of reflection, deep inside. This path raises the question of meaning and purpose, the purpose of education, and by extension, the meaning that we wish to give to our lives.

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### **The mechanics of change**

This situation also raises the question of change. What is change, and how can it be achieved? How do we change, how do we get moving? The automatic part of the brain is, among other things, extremely sensitive to social image: what will people think of me if I do this or

that? At the heart of this system is a visceral fear of being excluded from the group.

And change is possible when some people change their habits, and others follow suit by imitation. An individual movement can become collective when the Automatic Mental Mode feels neither threatened nor judged.

It would be a pity to stop there, and it is certainly more than time to question this system fundamentally in order to return to the primary purpose of all forms of education: to help students thrive and reveal their talents.

It's time for the Adaptive Mental Mode to take the lead, let's hear what it has to say!

#### **→ Foliosophy**

**Marie-Claude Sawerschel**

[blogs.letemps.ch/  
marie-claude-sawerschel/  
www.foliosophy.com  
mc@foliosophy.com](https://blogs.letemps.ch/marie-claude-sawerschel/)

#### **→ Detox&Grow!**

**Chantal Vander Vorst**

[www.detoxandgrow.com](https://www.detoxandgrow.com)  
[chantalvdv@detoxandgrow.com](mailto:chantalvdv@detoxandgrow.com)