

CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT SEMINAR:

What kind of education enables us to cope with an interconnected world?

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Keynote Presentation
“But is that so new?”
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Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

As I was watching the video about ‘education in the interconnected world’, I found myself thinking “**but is that so new?**”...

...and indeed, when reflecting on today’s presentation, I happened to find myself in a Parisian café that is very close to a place where my office was located some years ago, in an area we call “Latin Quarter”. And I was thinking about the names of the streets around: rue des Irlandais, rue des Ecosais, namely the streets of the Irish or of the Scottish students who studied in Paris in the medieval Period. I could also mention the *German Nation* at Paris University itself (*Germanorum Natio*), with its *Tribus Insularum* which gathered Scotland, England and Hibernia. Wasn’t **that** an interconnected world, back in the XVth century already? Students came from everywhere, had a common language, shared a common knowledge, and already evolved in many common markets, including job markets.

On one hand, I would say that “**yes, it was an interconnected world!**”, to the point of wondering if the world of those times was not more global than today’s society, which looks more like a mosaic of separated States, still influenced by the Romanticist ideology of modern Nations. But on the other hand, we also immediately feel that we are speaking, today, of something that is largely different; a difference not only in degrees, but in nature as well. I am referring to the unbelievable strength of technology and the changes it introduced in knowledge itself and in the questions to be asked to Educational systems:

- **Firstly, the extremely fast pace of** communication creates a world of plastic knowledge when we used to have more rigid and immobile forms of knowledge in the past;
- **Secondly, decentralisation** of communication to individuals creates a world of personal and private knowledge when we had a more public one before;
- **Thirdly, liberalism** in communication creates a world of free knowledge when we had a more controlled one before;
- **Fourthly, easiness** in communication creates a world of linked and shared knowledge when we used to have a world of more disciplinarian knowledge.

In the face of such changes, which are really new in their nature but even more so in their scale, one might be tempted to resort to philosophical arguments. I have in mind Michel Serres’s speech about this very subject to the French academies about a week ago. He said “*I see our institutions (referring in particular to schools) shine from a spark similar to that of constellations that astronomers taught us had been long extinguished*”. However, as

educators and watchmaker engineers of educational systems, we cannot stand aside and watch. We have to act, even if only in the light of such stars. And we know we have to answer these three questions:

1. *How shall we envision educational systems for a world in which knowledge is no longer static, no more public to some extent, no longer controlled and no more disciplinarian?*
2. *What do we expect from any Educational system?"*
3. and as we know, as experts in various countries, the risks that are always reappearing with the implementation of most Educational policies: *how can we be sure that the schools we construct for these times of interconnectedness will be better than the previous ones?*

And I would simply like to express **four serious concerns**:

1. **Firstly, about interconnection and equity.** Will the new Educational systems for this interconnected world build schools that are going to be better from **the point of view of equity**? On one hand, any “interconnected” network seems in a better position to foster equity than the old hierarchical access to knowledge that has, in traditional school systems, so easily been reserved to some castes or so-called elites. But on the other hand, let us bear in mind that an interconnected school system can easily become very restrictive and inequitable for people who, for economical, technical, linguistic or other reasons, are not going to be able to connect or benefit from the connection. What is more, there is no reason why the content of Education, unless we see it through, **should automatically become more fair, more relevant to the variety of students and more inclusive** because of interconnectedness;
2. **Secondly, about interconnection and free thinking.** Will the new Educational systems for such interconnected world build schools that are going to produce **citizens who will feel more free**, and more conscious of the necessity to protect individual as well as collective freedom against all the forces that try to limit or reduce it? There can be an addiction to the interconnected world, because of its unbelievable power, and because the interconnected world, although decentralised and liberal, is not yet a democratic world. That is why we, as educators, have to encourage our students’ freedom, and to foster their autonomous thinking. Including when necessary by telling them: **please disconnect! Be yourself! Think for yourself!** We should not forget that.
3. **Thirdly, about interconnection and identity.** Will the new Educational systems for the interconnected world manage to find a better balance **between the standardisation of knowledge** that is one consequence of globalisation and the necessity of protecting **the diversity of cultures, ways of living and languages**, that are available throughout the world and that are the indispensable roots for people to live from? Our need for being connected in this world is not to be opposed **to our need for identity**: to be connected, I need, first of all, to be, and there is a **risk**, unless we see it through, for interconnection to artificially erase differences between people and groups, to forget the past in some dangerous

4. **Fourthly, about interconnection and responsible knowledge.** Will the new Educational systems for this interconnected world manage to find a **better balance between what has to be “learnt” at school**, as it has long been the case, I would say as a “declarative knowledge” and **the competences through which students can learn how to act in various contexts**, thus resorting to knowledge as a resource? Students well understand nowadays that strictly defined school knowledge is less important now than it used to be. For two reasons: the first is the growing difficulty to justify, among all scientific available knowledge, what has to be taught and what should not; the second is the permanent availability of knowledge outside schools and mainly through interconnected tools. But on the other hand, let us not oppose knowledge to competences. Because competences do not reject knowledge, they call for a new definition of it; they call for what I called a more *responsible knowledge*, helping our students to **act responsibly**, but to **think consciously** as well, with the appropriate thinking tools.

So, to summarise, I would say that because of the interconnected world, all educational systems have to be seriously put under review and largely reinvented: neither **the old tradition of school knowledge** nor **the old conception of national knowledge** seem satisfactory anymore. And that is new. However, as Education is an old story, we have to not be totally naïve in the face of these changes, and to remember that anyway, **unless we see it through**, the school system of this interconnected world will not, **all by itself**, make schools that will promote **equity, freedom of thinking, personal identity**, and **responsible knowledge**.

I started from the unbelievable strength of technology and the changes it introduced in knowledge: **I am concluding with this idea that technology has no real meaning outside the one men give it through politics. Educational policies are at such a crossroad.**