

# RENDEZ-VOUS DES IDÉES: STATE OF COLLECTIVE DELIBERATION

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## CONTEXT

Following the success of the *Rêver Mieux* laboratory of ideas at the 2016 AQPC Symposium, whose purpose was to bring together creative educators to think collectively about what we could do better or differently in the college system (Carle, Héту, and Ménard, 2016), in 2017 we followed up with a revised formula. This time, the discussions focused on a selection of themes from which the participants could choose depending on what they wanted to dream about. Once again, the exercise proved very stimulating. At the request of the participants, we present in this article some of the material used at the event, as well as a synopsis of the collective reflections produced during this *Rendez-vous des idées*. Like many of the participants, we believe that these results can contribute to ongoing pedagogical reflection taking place in the wider college network.

## THE LABORATORY OF IDEAS

We planned the activity to provide a forum for reflection, an opportunity to take the time to reflect, as well as to provide a platform to discuss and talk about education on a neutral playing field, without being judged or even criticized. At the 2016 Symposium, we felt that 75 minutes seemed to be insufficient to expand on the reflections and to share the various points of view in a large group, so in 2017 we proposed a double workshop (a *Rendez-vous*<sup>1</sup>) that were frequented by some sixty participants. Following a brainstorming session, we asked the teams to select one or two particularly promising or inspiring ideas and to focus on the elements to be considered in order to develop them into concrete, actionable steps that could be carried out in the short or medium term in colleges and classes. To accomplish this, participants were invited to fill out an “idea sheet” to record: the potential of this idea, its strengths, its implied difficulties and constraints, the objective it pursues, the people it involves, the material resources needed and the

first steps to take to make it a reality. Time was set aside for a plenary exchange to share the outcome of the discussions.

## THEMES OF THE DISCUSSIONS

Based on the many sets of ideas that emerged during the 2016 workshop (see Carle, Héту, and Ménard, 2016), we selected eight discussion themes to lead the discussions of this new edition of the laboratory of ideas. We explained each theme with excerpts from articles published in *Pédagogie collégiale*. At the end of the workshop, several participants told us of their intention to organize a similar collaborative ideation meeting in their college or faculty. For them and for other readers who would like to build upon these themes to promote local discussion, we present them to you now, with questions that were used to begin the reflection process.

### → Increasing students' pleasure in learning

“The latest developments in Neuroscience suggest that when information is emotionally charged, it is more easily stored in memory. The affective component in class could therefore have implications for learning by acting not only on self-esteem and perception of one's ability to succeed, but more directly on strengthening the memorization process.” (Bélanger, 2010, p. 3)

*How can we bring a positive affect or vibe to the classroom and introduce a favourable atmosphere that fosters creativity and learning?*

*What could we do to reduce student anxiety linked to performance or competition? How might we promote intrinsic motivation among students?*

*How can we increase their feelings of competency and their views of the utility of their courses? What could we think about to support learning among all students?*

<sup>1</sup> These were workshop numbers 603 and 703 presented during the 60<sup>th</sup> AQPC Symposium, held in Montréal in 2017



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### → Considering all the attributes of our diverse students

“Today’s student population is extremely diverse. To promote inclusion in all aspects of education, so that each individual can develop to his or her full potential and participate fully in society, it is vital that teaching and learning structures, as well as the courses they offer, adapt to this diversity.” (Barile et al., 2012, p. 3)

*What could we think about to develop a feeling of students’ personal effectiveness and self-confidence as a learner?*

*In order to promote student learning and well-being, how do we take into account their personality, needs, interests, school/professional/personal objectives, fears, concerns, learning difficulties, visible or invisible handicap, etc.?*

### → Maximizing ICTs to promote teaching and learning

“[Many researchers] agree today that pedagogical principles, the learning environment and, most of all, the teacher themselves will always take precedence over ICTs, which, it should be remembered, are simply tools. Thus, their effect on success is not inherent: it is only to the extent to which they promote certain determinants, such as active learning, interest, feedback and metacognition, that ICTs are likely to succeed.” (Cabot and Lévesque, 2014, p. 18, free translation)

*Where and when can ICTs be used advantageously to support student learning?*

*How can we improve teaching practices through the use of ICTs while still considering these elements and determinants of motivation?*

### → Design a learning assessment as a means to learn

“For students to progress in their learning, they need feedback about the work they do, and this feedback generally comes during assessments, whether formative or summative. Thus, assessment only has meaning from an educational standpoint if the teacher’s judgment is focused on giving students feedback that is intended to help them develop their capacity for self-assessment. This is because it is only when students deploy a critical eye on their own learning and achievements that they can begin to independently make the necessary adjustments and thereby improve. (Bélec, 2017, p. 3)

*What could be done so that an assessment does not just include assigning a grade or establishing the value of a performance, but actually promotes learning?*

*What assessment practices would allow us to move in this direction?*

### → Decompartmentalizing programs, disciplines and services to promote learning

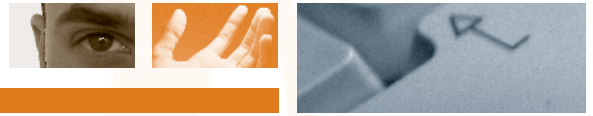
“College education is structured by course: a course, a teacher, a competency. Despite a program-based approach, everything is fragmented, as is learning. And what if we abolished the courses to immerse students in major projects that would be spread over a session, during which they would learn in real-life situations, accompanied by a group of teachers with a variety of expertise? (Bellemare, in Carle, Héту and Ménard, 2016, p. 43, free translation)

“By fostering a continuous dialogue among the teachers, we can overcome departmental insularities and fight mutual misunderstandings that often lead to disciplinary isolation; ideally, unnecessary repetition of learning objects can be avoided as well as overlapping or inconsistencies.” (Simard, 1999, p. 23, free translation)

*What could we think of to remove the barriers and obstacles (administrative, economic or psychological) that hinder or prevent communication among the various individuals who work to ensure the success of the same students?*

*What could be done to foster collaboration among teachers, educational advisors, pedagogical counsellors, student services and management?*

*Where are the junction points that would allow multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity?*



## → Gradually easing pathways and trajectories

“Even since the introduction of the competency-based approach, logic remains focused on the structure of the system and not on the students or learning objectives. In addition to the duration of programs, there is the duration of sessions and courses. The system works when students transition seamlessly from one full session to another full session, when they graduate smoothly from one course to another. [...] We still choose to lock ourselves into short rather than long periods and focus on results rather than development. This seems to indicate a logic of performance, productivity and profitability that raises the questions concerning what are the educational values that determine our idea of success. (Carle, 2017, pp. 36-37, free translation)

*What could be done to escape this system, to design school progression in a manner other than according to a linear schematic?*

*What could we introduce to allow students to make more choices, in order to meet their needs and interests?*

## → Promoting professional development in education

“A teacher does not become competent [...] unless they are attentive and question what they do and the effects their actions have on students, their learning (knowledge) and their development (habits and values). [...] But] it is not enough to question one’s practice and whether it generates anything, one must also know how to act, sometimes without being certain of oneself or the expected results.” (Lessard, 2001, p. 26, free translation)

*As soon as new teachers are hired, what could be done to encourage contact with a teaching model based on recognized foundations, on the adoption of tried-and-tested methods and on the implementation of best practices?*

*What could be done to equip teachers with the theoretical foundations that would help them to go beyond “common sense, intuition, the implicit tradition of the milieu or prevailing social prejudices (non-scientific psychology, opinions of colleagues and the community, disciplinary culture, etc.),” (Lessard, 2001, p. 5, free translation) and to encourage them not to duplicate the teaching strategies they were introduced to as students, when they were recognized as being not very effective?*

*How can we get teachers to fully appreciate the importance of their role as teachers?*

## → Considering research results as a means to improve practice

“We need to intensify the dialogue already underway between practice and research in education, since it is unthinkable to try to improve educational practices or introduce new ones that are not based on knowledge acquired through research.” (Proulx, 2006, p. 9)

*What could we think of to foster the appropriation of research results by practitioners, with the goal of targeting the improvement of educational practices and the success of a larger number of students?*

*What could we do so that the profession of college-level teaching relies on a higher level of knowledge based on research?*

## ▮ SUMMARY OF IDEAS

Regardless of whether participants reflected on one theme or another, we found that the elements emerging from the discussions turned out to be rather transversal: the possibilities for action and the obstacles facing their implementation turned out to be essentially the same, regardless of the theme being discussed. In some cases, discussions revolved around guiding principles that can guide actions or steer the idea in a whole new direction. In particular, these principles make it possible to reinforce the practices that are part of the movement or to advance the topic, questions and the points of view.

Below is a summary of the suggestions presented in a plenary discussion during the workshop. At the heart of this collective reflection focusing on the concerns of the college network today, the reader will find several inspirational approaches, and notice that most of the proposed actions have already been proposed elsewhere or are already in place here and there. How is it that the ideas that are voiced to rethink college education are already part of known frameworks? Do they all materialize on a daily basis over a cross-section of contexts? Is there a lag between discussions and practices, so that the



common desire is firmly planted in the ownership and large-scale implementation of these ideas, rather than in the ideation of new perspectives? Moreover, what seems obvious to some is perhaps less so for others. Personal experience, disciplinary epistemology, departmental culture, institutional vision... these all form part of the variables that modulate concepts and practices, thus diversifying opinions. We hope that the reader will find herein enough material to nourish their own thoughts and pedagogical discussions.

#### *PLACE THE STUDENT AT THE CENTRE OF CONCERNS*

The main concern that transcends all others is that of actually placing students at the centre of educational and administrative decisions. But how can this be done? By involving them in the various processes concerning their development and their learning, by planning training in such a way as to stimulate their motivation and commitment, and by establishing a quality pedagogical relationship with them. The most ardent wish expressed by participants is to subordinate administrative considerations to pedagogical considerations that can promote quality learning and result in a rich college experience.

Viewed in more concrete terms, placing students at the centre of concerns involves giving them choices (pathways, courses, projects, content, forms of assessment, etc.) and therefore being flexible in order to adapt to the diversity of the specificities of each. This requires first and foremost knowledge of their characteristics, their needs and interests, in order to be able to offer students a variety of appropriate and equitable options, depending on the context. Several sources can be used to achieve this:

- Teachers' experiences;
- Discussions among colleagues;
- Dialogue within program committees;
- Surveys (program assessments, for example);
- Theory and research results (whether regarding learning strategies, learning disabilities, concepts of universal design for learning (UDL), etc.).

Based on these elements, notably the last one, it will be possible to establish the areas where students can be more involved and the options to offer them. Flexibility must be planned.

In a learning context, taking the time to focus on each student requires more organization on the part of teachers and colleges, but also more coaching. Indeed, it is not feasible to let students make all the choices: either they do not know all the

ins and outs of the options available to them or they do not always have the daring to push their limits. College is a time of discovery and exploration. To open up to new perspectives, students must sometimes find themselves in situations they did not choose or did not even know existed. Indeed, to learn and grow, we often have to leave our comfort zone to be confronted with new situations, to then tame them and adopt the means and tools to advance and perform. Learning consequently requires commitment and effort, and the student who must decide between two possibilities, as a last strategy, risks favouring the one that seems the simplest, the easiest, the least compromising. It then becomes a question of finding a balance between choosing for the students and letting them choose for themselves, between confronting and comforting them, in order to allow each student to broaden their horizons while having more power over their collegial progress and learning.

#### *GIVE MEANING AND RELEVANCE TO LEARNING*

Besides, placing students at the centre of concerns involves thinking about teaching from a perspective where pedagogical and didactic planning is specifically tailored to the learning to be accomplished, and not the content to be reviewed. The idea here is to give meaning and relevance to learning and to promote the transfer of knowledge, particularly by privileging authentic situations and by taking an interest in the difficulties that students face regarding certain concepts. All the steps taken in this direction should foster in students motivation, commitment and perseverance.

Workshop participants have often noted the need to account for the determinants of motivation in order to favour every student's academic and educational success. Several proposals have been drafted to move in this direction, most of which lean towards a more holistic approach to training, and to move away from disciplinary silos. Decompartmentalization, both physical and structural, appears to be an avenue to explore:

- Focus on interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary and transversality;
- Review program structures to favour a project-based approach and study groups;
- Promote mobility (locations, programs or structures);
- Redesign the learning environments, etc.

Whether it is within a program, an institution or the entire college network, the paths for action to improve ways of accomplishing things are primarily based on a more extensive collaboration with others, with a sharing of expertise.



## PROVIDE EDUCATORS TIME AND SUPPORT

Allowing students to make more choices in order to better meet their needs is desirable, as is fostering collaboration between teachers, but this requires an in-depth revision of the planning of programs or courses and the assessment of learning. Transforming structures and practices takes time. This involves taking certain risks or learning to deal with uncertainty and the unexpected. Teachers and pedagogical counsellors will need space and support to: reflect, train, adapt, respond to the multiple and diverse needs of students, reorganize a program, a course, an assessment, etc.

Many of the concepts presented here allow us to draw parallels with what we already do well in the college network.

In terms of an in-depth transformation of learning paths, there will, of course, be challenges, habits to modify, persistent myths to debunk and educational beliefs to transform. The idea here is that a shift in thinking must be made to leave behind more conventional approaches in favour of new, more flexible, more inclusive and proven approaches, by focusing on the development of the person rather than simply on performance. Much of this change is based on teachers' willingness to question themselves and to seek out theoretical bases that support these new practices. And another part is the mobilization of the college network to promote the transfer of knowledge and to facilitate access to basic quality information, taking into account the results of research to improve practices.

## CONCLUSION

Many of the ideas presented here allow us to draw parallels with what we already do well in the college network. Let us continue to focus on this, be proud of our accomplishments, and inspire each other. But let us also consider taking it a step further. If there are still obstacles to overcome to implement certain principles, the current playing field now allows us many opportunities for innovation thanks to a certain logistical boldness.

Although local initiatives can be set in motion immediately, some of the ideas proposed by participants at the *Rendez-vous des idées* are at a level that requires provincial or ministerial cooperation. To expand our dream, we must therefore gather our strength and increase our actions. ●

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