

The Chains We Impose on Ourselves

Catherine Bélec

Innovating is difficult. That's normal, because innovating is learning and often, unlearning. When you try a new teaching method, it's a bit like trying to drive right next to a track worn deep in the ground. It's easy to slip back into. As soon as a rock appears on the road, we want to get back into our safe track that's already well-trodden (and which also has its rocks, but well, we know where they are, so it feels safer). Maybe the new track isn't always better than the old one; maybe the old one, in the end, is better than the new one. Still, innovation is crucial to education,

and not necessarily because it actually improves student learning situations—although that happens at times, of course! No, innovation is fundamental for other, much more profound and determining reasons. Innovation brings about a movement, a dynamic that is characteristic of all hopeful actions. It is a source of learning for educators. It is the creative action that counters the helplessness that many teachers feel at some point in their careers. And hope is an essential fuel in a profession such as teaching. An "impossible" profession.

What is an impossible profession? It is a profession in which, however excellent the training, there is no guarantee of high and regular success rates in professional practices. It is a profession in which failure is a constituent part: failure of the students, but also and perhaps above all, of the educational endeavour itself. In a technical profession, skills do not exclude either error or failure, but both are the exception. In professions that involve supporting people, success is never assured; on the contrary, one must accept an important part of small or serious failures (Perrenoud, 1993).

In the face of an impossible profession, we must nurture hope, cherish it, protect it and, in my opinion, encourage as much as possible all the practices that result from it.

Since the beginning of my career, like so many other teachers, I have tried to find ways to motivate my students and better support them in their learning. I have redesigned my evaluation grids to be clearer and fairer in my assessment; I have created fun, trans-disciplinary and authentic learning activities to enhance my students' motivation; I have changed my course reading lists and how I approach them; I have taught outside, at the museum, at the theatre—anything that seemed likely to provide solutions to the many problems I encountered daily in the classroom. Five years ago, when I became a researcher, I had the chance to get to know teachers from different disciplines across the college network; teachers who, like me, were scrambling to improve their teaching in the hope of doing better.

However, this experience forces me to note that, in the field, many constraints hinder innovative practices. Many of these constraints are beyond our control: work overload, lack of time, ministerial devis, etc. As we know, the teacher is a small cog in a system over which they have very little control. Ministers, their councils, and administrators decide on a host of parameters (material, logistical, political) and we, the teachers, try our best to "make do."

And yet... in the course of my accumulated experience, I keep noticing that among all the constraints on innovation that we face, some of the most decisive ones are imposed on us... by ourselves. Whether it be throughout my professional or research projects in the various CEGEPs in the network, or even in the context of informal conversations with teachers I have met at events or conferences, one of the most frequent objections I have heard to innovative ideas concerns the constraints imposed locally by departments and programs.

"I would love to do that; I think it would help students, but my department doesn't allow it."

"It's a good idea, but according to the general course outline, I can't do that."

"I'm trying to find a way to put something in place, but it's quite a headache due to the rules we have in our program."

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I don't deny the importance of a program or department setting common operating rules to facilitate everyone's work. I understand the desire to find common ground in order to ensure consistency between teachers and courses. I also welcome the concern that motivates some of these rules, such as ensuring greater equity between various course sections, or even setting up guidelines to ensure a minimum quality of teaching for students. Far be it from me to advocate anarchy!

Then again, I wonder about the way we are trying to achieve this. Does setting specific standards, such as a common correction grid for summative evaluations or the number or type of evaluations for a given course, really ensure equity and quality of teaching? And what are the consequences of standards that may be experienced as constraints by some teachers and departments?

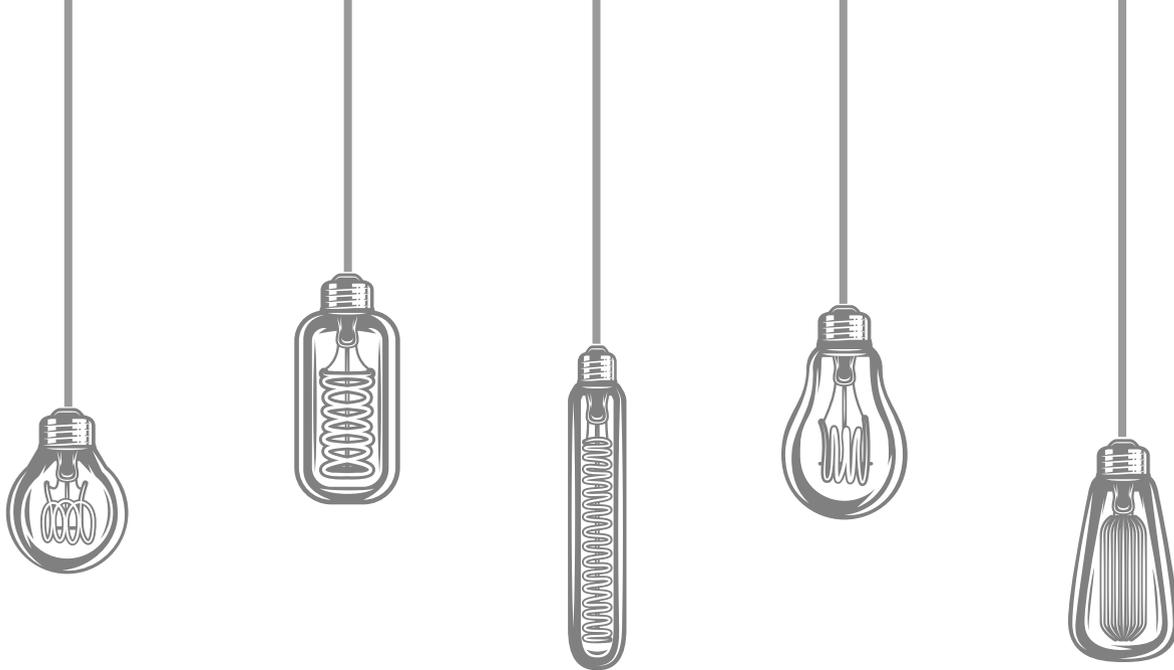
Concern for equity... or the appearance of equity?

Let's start with the concept of equity. One might think that having all students receive the same evaluations and evaluation grids, for example, would ensure equitable treatment. Is this really the case, if we make the effort of thinking about it more closely? In my opinion, we must distinguish between equality and equity. While the former is an absolute concept, the latter has a fundamentally relativistic character. It is mathematical: equality is what is absolutely equivalent. Equity is based more on a notion of justice: it is what drives the decision to give access to an automatic spelling checker to a student with dyslexia, for example. Their treatment is not the same as that offered to other students, so it is not equal. However, it is fair because, since the student does not experience a writing situation in the same fashion as other students, it is consistent with the idea that it is necessary to adjust the constraints to offer them the same opportunities.

Let's take an example that is common in programs or departments, namely cases where departmental guidelines determine the types of evaluations to be given and their summative weight (for example: Exam: 30%; Oral presentation: 5-15%; Simulation: 20%; Miscellaneous: 0-10%; Final evaluation: 35%). This example leaves the teacher some latitude. However, it can be assumed that just because all course sections have an exam totaling 30% of the final grade, it does not mean that the exam is of the same difficulty from one teacher to another. One may ask memorization questions, the other may ask essay

questions involving analysis. Some allow the use of course notes, while others prepare formative exams. One exam may have more material to study than another. One teacher's grading criteria may be stricter or more specific than another's. Certainly, students will have an illusion of equity when they talk to their classmates because, on paper, the evaluations they have throughout the semester will appear equivalent... but that is only because their critical thinking about learning is not sufficiently sharp, and they do not grasp the complexity of what teaching involves. That's normal; it's not their job. But isn't it ours?

Let's now consider a situation where the normative requirements are pushed further, for example when the evaluations from one teacher to another must be identical with regard to the questions asked or the vocabulary used in shared evaluation grids. Is there automatically a level playing field? To be sure, it would be necessary to ensure that all teachers have covered the same subject matter in equivalent proportions and with the same mastery level. This equity is actually erased by the teacher who is more comfortable with a module and teaches it with more enthusiasm, as well as by the teacher who uses different pedagogical methods that might better prepare learners for a specific part of the evaluation. We won't blame them, of course, but it is a fact that unless we have complete control over what happens in the classroom, it is utopian to believe that we can assure students of equity on identical evaluations if they have had two different teachers. In fact, even with the same teacher, disparities can



occur: depending on the day and time of the class, the energy of the teacher, the class atmosphere, or the section (its dynamics, its strengths), we know that a teacher may be forced to slow down their teaching or to adapt it to certain circumstances. This is one of the reasons why judgement is so fundamental in teaching: a good teacher must be able to adapt to a variety of situations that will arise in the classroom. To what extent do evaluations that have to conform to very specific prescriptive standards allow for the very adaptations intended to ensure that students are evaluated equitably based on the instruction they have received?

So where does that leave equity? Of course, it is crucial, and we must strive for it; that is not what I am questioning, but rather the fact that normative general course outlines are able to ensure genuine equity. It seems to me that this is an oversimplification of the complexity of learning situations. In fact, if we can convince ourselves that compliance with these standards is a guarantee

of equity, it seems to me that we run the risk of becoming negligent in this regard. Indeed, our course-related reflections would no longer concern equity, but compliance with the general course outline, which, moreover, is sometimes quite dated and does not take new realities into account.

Giving yourself the opportunity to innovate...

Along with this question of equity, what happens as teachers plan their courses? Adherence to a standard is usually synonymous with achieving a certain level of quality. Does referring to a standard to reflect on their evaluations or course encourage reflexivity on the part of teachers? Does it lead them to question themselves, to analyze the coherence of their learning or evaluation activities? Or does it not rather give them the implicit message that if they respect the standards, they must be doing their job well? What would be the most beneficial use of their time? Respecting

the constraints set by their colleagues or reflecting on the coherence of their course?

And what about others who might want to change elements of their course to improve it? I have seen so many teachers struggle with restrictive guidelines as if they were dead weight, trying to meet them even though they were frustrating. Is it right that a teacher who wants to try to improve their teaching should be forced to give up their ambitions for improvement in order not to deviate from the standards imposed by their peers? Moreover, in many cases, these standards are based more on tradition (how teachers usually work; how they learned as students themselves) than on real pedagogical reflection.

For an institution or group, standards are most often an administrative means of protecting against potential litigation, but I'm not sure that in setting these standards, we think about the consequences they may have elsewhere. Standards slow down innovation and

change, and while they may prevent harmful modifications, they also limit improvements. They have an absolute character that does not take into account the relativity of learning situations. What is adequate in one context may not be in another. I am not convinced that standardization of teaching is a judicious way to ensure quality learning for students in an equitable manner. At the same time, setting standards in a department is also a way to entrench a dominant view of teaching and learning... which also diminishes the potential for innovation, since change that goes against the grain of a culture is almost always, in my experience, subject to more resistance than change that simply opposes individual practices.

... To give yourself the opportunity to improve

I said earlier that I don't believe in anarchy. I believe in collaboration within a department or program. I know the value of coherence for student learning. I am convinced of the importance of seeking to ensure quality education for students and equity for all. I just don't think that the reliance on standardization of practices or evaluations, which seems to me to be increasingly common in colleges and can be seen in the prescriptive markers of some programs or departments, is the best way to achieve these ends.

The weighting of the number of hours of work required of students seems to me to be important to respect. Similarly, "What competencies or learning should students have mastered by the end of this course?" is certainly a question on which members of a department or program must agree, as well as the

criteria by which this achievement can be judged. But is it necessary to prescribe how to get there and what form the evaluation will take? I would have nothing against the idea of establishing a "frame of reference" of pedagogical and evaluative practices for teachers. It is certainly useful to have an idea of the majority practices in a department, but could this framework not be more guiding rather than prescriptive?

When teachers talk about validating their course plan, I hear almost only complaints about what they see as an administrative and unhelpful task. And the fact is that verifying whether standards are respected is, indeed, an administrative task. Wouldn't it be more useful to propose pedagogical and ethical questions and validate these?

- Will my evaluations and evaluation criteria allow me to adequately assess the achievement of the competency and of the criteria that we determined in the department?
- Do the learning activities I set up adequately prepare students for evaluations?

- Is the workload I ask of students consistent with the time they are expected to invest in my course?
- How will my pedagogical choices enhance my students' learning?
- How do my pedagogical choices ensure equitable (not equal!) treatment of my students?

Most teachers are already asking themselves these questions. Why not highlight these ethical and pedagogical reflections, which are much richer and more constructive, rather than asking them to carry out an administrative task that does not require any reflection or professional judgement? These pedagogical questions, combined with more general guidelines, could make the administrative obligation to verify general course outlines a more concrete and useful opportunity for reflective practice for teachers.

I firmly believe in the great competence of the teaching staff in the college system. I observe it every day while meeting teachers within the context of my research and innovation projects.

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I think that departments and programs, as entities, need to have more faith in the competence and pedagogical judgement of their members. And if there are doubts, isn't it all the more important to impose reflective practice exercises in order to identify possible needs and to direct the individuals concerned to the appropriate resources (pedagogical counsellor, colleague, article, etc.)? If local standards are to be adopted, why not move towards reflective standards, which will promote the development of judgement and likely enrich exchanges

between colleagues? Why introduce prescriptive standards, which, on the contrary, run the risk of turning pedagogical reflection into a simple checklist, and even of limiting the teachers' capacity to improve their teaching?

Faced with an impossible profession, shouldn't we pave the way to our best extent for people who want to improve things and make the impossible... possible? ─

Reference

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