For a More Assertive Transition to the Workforce

The Development of College Students' Professional Identity

Hélène Labbé

The labour market is a complex ecosystem in constant flux. On the one hand, it offers jobs for which the similarities between certain professions are striking—particularly in the field of human relations, my field of expertise—and, on the other hand, there is a multiplication of education opportunities: college diploma, attestation of college studies, university programs, recognition of acquired competencies, continuing education, etc. How then can a specific field of professional practices that are otherwise complementary be clearly delineated? What difference is there, in terms of the student's exit profile, between the different types of education? It goes without saying that the shifting nature of these two realities forces teachers to adjust and equip themselves to teach college students effectively and allow them to project themselves more clearly into a professional environment that is often quite opaque to them.

Within this context, the issue of college students' professional identity (PI) development deserves special attention from teachers in their pedagogical practice. Research results confirm that teachers are already developing their students' PI, but to what extent are they aware of it? What pedagogical choices can be made to develop students' PI and ensure that it is consistent with the specific professional reality that will be theirs and for which their type of education prepares them? From a pedagogical perspective, in which way is a better representation of PI by teachers essential in a study program? These are some of the questions I have been working on during my Master's degree in College Teaching.[1] My experiences over the past 21 years in the health and social services network as well as my teaching practice since 2007 have led me to a better understanding of the different facets of PI. This article provides context for the action research I conducted, an overview of the PI reference framework at the college level, and concrete courses of action for teachers wishing to better understand and integrate PI into their teaching.

Action research context

In the context of my master's essay, I chose an approach that is at the heart of teachers' daily lives, namely action research. It aimed to understand how PI develops in students throughout their education, but more importantly, the role that teachers play in its development. Five teachers[2] in Social Service Technology (SST) at the Cégep de Sainte-Foy participated in this research study, which took place over one session.

The study was conducted in an iterative manner and involved going back and forth between the participants and the researcher in order to develop a common and shared understanding of the concept of PI. Through individual and group activities (questionnaires, journals, focus groups, group meeting debriefs, text collections), the participants and the researcher were able to take the time

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[1] Interested readers may wish to consult the master's essay *Développement de l'identité professionnelle en Techniques de travail social : regard du personnel enseignant,* published by Hélène Labbé in 2019.

[2] All five teachers who participated in the research study were women.

to express their different points of view and perceptions of PI among SST students.

The results of this research suggest that college programs can further enhance the development of PI in students. Focusing on teaching this concept in a college program offers added value to the student, because if teachers are able to recognize and understand the importance of this concept throughout the college program, they will be better equipped to make informed choices regarding their teaching. This is an advantage for the student, but more importantly for the population, the clientele, or the service for which they have been trained, because the student will be more competent to fully assume the roles and tasks entrusted to them and to pursue the development of their PI on the labour market or in their career projects.

To better understand the concept of PI development

Knowing how to recognize and understand the concepts related to the development of PI is an essential first step toward its development. Bélisle and Tardif explain that PI has three dimensions and define the professionalization of an individual as a learning process that prepares a person for the practice of a profession by contributing to the development of professional skills, the appropriation of professional culture, and the construction of a PI through meaningful experiences in situations similar to those of professional practice and allowing for the exercise of roles that characterize the profession (2013, p. 236).

Three pivotal dimensions...

The very first dimension, entitled the development of professional competencies, includes all the competencies available in the ministerial devis. It is fairly easy to identify the knowledge, skills and attitudes expected in each college program of study. Teachers use competencies and their elements, performance criteria, outcomes and objectives listed in the ministerial devis to develop the content, learning activities and evaluation measures for their course. Competencies are therefore prescriptive. It is in their choice of content and pedagogical activities that teachers decide what is essential to teach.

The second dimension concerns the appropriation of professional culture. Teachers base their teaching on the norms, professional values, expected professional attitudes and symbols recognized by the profession. This dimension requires referring to sources recognized by the profession. For example, in SST, there is a deontological code as well as rules that are prescribed by a code of ethics developed in various practice settings. Moreover, belonging to a professional culture is developed, among other things, through membership in a group, an association or a professional order, which is not possible for all professions taught at the college level.

Finally, the third dimension is called the construction of identity for one-self and for others. This is developed from the baggage with which the student arrives. They have their own history, personality, experience, values and many other characteristics that will help them build their identity. When they enroll in a technical college program, students integrate a set of competencies that are strongly influenced by role models (teachers, guest speakers, supervisors, etc.) with whom they can identify throughout their training. This allows them to internalize what is important or significant for them in order to actualize it during their years of study. The combination of general education and disciplinary competencies prescribed and taught within a program-based approach promotes meaningful learning so that students can reflect on and develop their IP during their college career.

... and the addition of an equally important fourth dimension

The results of the action research conducted have made it possible to raise a significant aspect concerning college students' identities. We have therefore added a fourth dimension to those proposed by Bélisle and Tardif (2013), namely the identity construction linked to the stage of development, which we have called the personal and social identity of the college student. We consider that the college student, who arrives at CEGEP around the age of 17 or 18, is in the midst of a personal and social identity construction linked to their stage of psychological development. We know that the passage to adulthood has its share of challenges. As Gaudet states, the entry into adulthood represents a particularly important life transition characterized by a quest for autonomy and identity exploration (2005, 2001, in Government of Canada, 2007, p. 3).

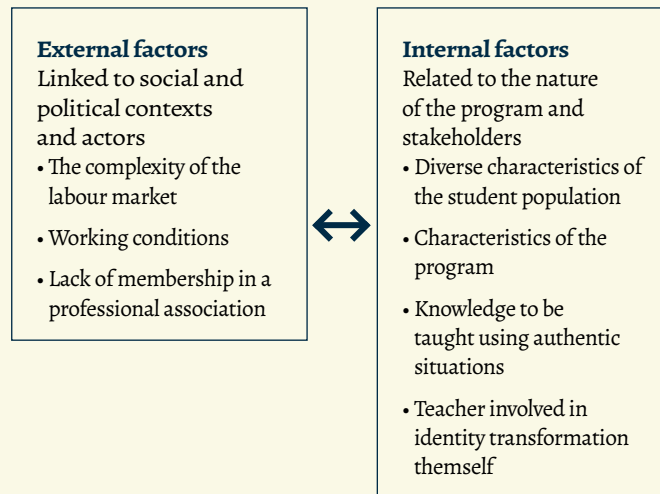Therefore, it seems obvious to us that the development of this fourth

dimension in the student occurs in conjunction with those described by Bélisle and Tardif (2013). We can thus affirm that the development of college students' PI is built through a dynamic, systemic, interdependent, and constantly evolving process of professionalization. We believe that the teacher who becomes aware of the importance of these four dimensions will be able to take them into account in support of their students' learning.

Factors of influence

During the course of the action research activities, participants repeatedly raised the question: What influences the development of students' PI? The results of the research highlighted some of the factors that influence the development of PI. Two categories of factors were identified: external factors (factors related to social and political contexts and actors) and internal factors (factors related to the nature of the program and stakeholders) (Labbé, 2019). These categories of factors are interdependent (see **Figure 1**) and favorably or unfavorably influence the development of students' PI.

Figure 1

Factors influencing the development of PI

External factors
Linked to social and political contexts and actors
- The complexity of the labour market
- Working conditions
- Lack of membership in a professional association

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Internal factors
Related to the nature of the program and stakeholders
- Diverse characteristics of the student population
- Characteristics of the program
- Knowledge to be taught using authentic situations
- Teacher involved in identity transformation themself

As far as external factors are concerned, we are talking about changes in the labour market, legislative changes, or organizational and administrative decisions related to the labour market over which, as teachers, we have less power, at least individually through our teaching.

The importance of the choices the teacher makes with respect to internal factors is also worth considering. For example, the teacher has power over the knowledge to be taught, the guest speakers to be welcomed in class or the authentic situations to be used in the course. These models, to which they give access through their choices, allow the students to project themselves in the profession while favorably developing their PI. What is said, what is presented and what is experienced by the students in the classroom render the profession more concrete and allow the students to see themselves as future practitioners in the field. Many of the choices related to teaching and learning can contribute to the development of the students' PI, or at least influence it favorably or unfavorably.

How to develop student PI?

The courses of action proposed here are the result of the outcomes and implications of a coaching process with teachers, either in the context of this research or in the context of training workshops offered in some CEGEPs. They can serve as a starting point for anyone who wishes to better understand and integrate PI into their teaching, regardless of the discipline concerned.

Educate by presenting the PI framework

Research has shown that each teacher, through their teaching, is already contributing to the development of PI. Thus, why not bring together the expertise of teachers who are interested in this concept? This would make it possible to work together to further develop the content, pedagogical choices and strategies used by them. Group training or professional development can also allow for the development of common knowledge on the concept of PI and promote exchanges and discussions by bringing out the different points of view and expertise. For example, over the past two years, the Regroupement des enseignantes et enseignants des collèges en travail social du Québec (REECETSQ) has encouraged its members to discuss the PI concept. A group training session is offered to all those who are interested in the issue. In addition, a workshop on this topic is offered at the annual conference where the sharing of experiences and expertise is encouraged to help everyone develop a common understanding of this concept.

Unpack the vocabulary and skills evoked in the labour market

As part of the departmental revision of the SST program, to which I contributed as a specialist in the teaching of the profession, particular attention was paid to the terms used to draft competencies. Since the ministerial approach is based on an analysis of the profession, workforce representatives specify the tasks and responsibilities expected of social service technicians with regard to the needs of the labour market. In addition, the editorial team identified a number of job postings that describe the duties expected of SSTs. It referred to the organizational and governmental changes that, in recent years, have required a better definition and recognition of the SST program. The terms used to write the competencies and their elements, the performance criteria, the outcomes and the objectives are therefore consistent with this analysis. The vocabulary used reflects the profession. Over the next two years, the new SST program will be updated by all CEGEPs offering this program of study.

Choose PI-related terms and vocabulary

The terms used by the teacher to describe the profession to the students announce a representation of the profession and will influence their conception and definition of themselves in relation to it. Each teacher in the program who is interested in developing students' PI can reflect on and revise, as needed, the vocabulary they use to talk about the profession. For example, when referring to the social service technician, one might use the term caseworker, professional, or community worker, or a job title commonly used in the labour market, "social worker." Although the latter is a job title reserved for a professional association, some people (students, people receiving services or sometimes even teachers) will use this term to refer to the profession. In order to limit confusion and share a common language for the benefit of students, it may be worthwhile for the department and the program committee to agree on a common vocabulary for referring to the profession.

Integrate PI development more consciously into learning and evaluation activities

While the choice of terms and vocabulary used to describe the profession is critical, a further step in the right direction is to apply them explicitly to learning and evaluation activities. There are a number of strategies to support the importance of the concept of PI development in the classroom. The following are some of the strategies that have emerged from action research and training activities in SST. When writing an authentic situation, one teacher makes sure to define the professional activity in a context that is consistent with the jobs offered to SSTs. In addition, they change the term caseworker to SST. Another teacher chooses, as part of the Introduction to Social Work course, to present images of different professions and to highlight what explicitly defines the SST profession. The activity allows students to internalize the professional culture by trying to discover not only the norms and values, but especially the symbols that define the profession and that foster a sense of belonging. Finally, another teacher, who coordinates practicums, says that they are now aware of the choice of words they use to talk about the profession with the practicum site staff. Being aware of the importance of developing students' PI allows them to bring out what is specific to the profession in these exchanges. These are just a few examples of pedagogical choices that already existed but were enhanced with a level of teacher awareness that supports student PI development.
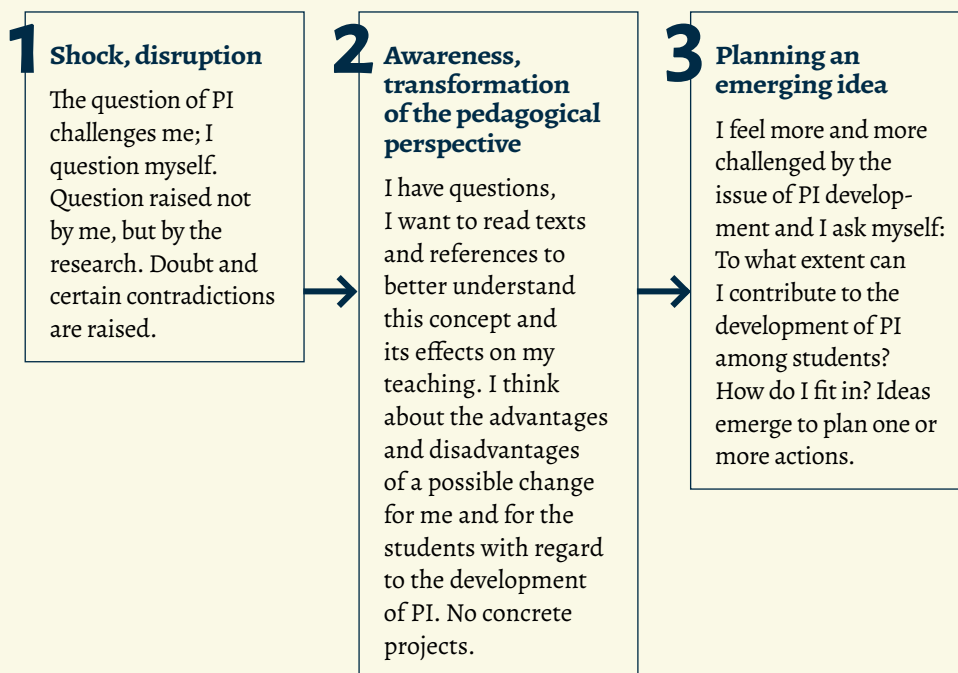

Source: Anthony Tyrrell/Unsplash

The importance of supporting teachers

Supporting teachers in the process of integrating the PI concept is crucial. The action research carried out has led to a decisive realization: talking about the development of PI in students undeniably leads the teacher to talk about their own PI. The personal reflection around this concept induces a reflective, even introspective posture. Without being forced or even suggested, this seems to be an obligatory step that requires a certain degree of support.

It seems, moreover, that this introspection leads the teacher to a paradigm shift and a possible change of posture. In fact, the teacher enters the education and college teaching environment as a specialist in their profession and with their own representation of it, linked mainly to their professional experiences. They usually have a university education and draw on a wealth of professional and practical experience in their teaching. They transmit values, beliefs, theoretical and practical knowledge in which they strongly believe. In preparing their course, the teacher is in a position that forces them to question themself and they must make informed choices regarding the content and learning activities related to the skills to be taught in their program of study: What should I teach? How do I teach it? Am I comfortable teaching this content? This is often done through trial and error, and each session brings its share of questions, doubts and uncertainties related to the development of one's own identity as a teacher in the making and that of the students to be trained. Could one influence the other? This is a hypothesis that we raise and that

Figure 2   **Support approach for teachers in the face of change**

1 Shock, disruption

The question of PI challenges me; I question myself. Question raised not by me, but by the research. Doubt and certain contradictions are raised.

2 Awareness, transformation of the pedagogical perspective

I have questions, I want to read texts and references to better understand this concept and its effects on my teaching. I think about the advantages and disadvantages of a possible change for me and for the students with regard to the development of PI. No concrete projects.

3 Planning an emerging idea

I feel more and more challenged by the issue of PI development and I ask myself: To what extent can I contribute to the development of PI among students? How do I fit in? Ideas emerge to plan one or more actions.
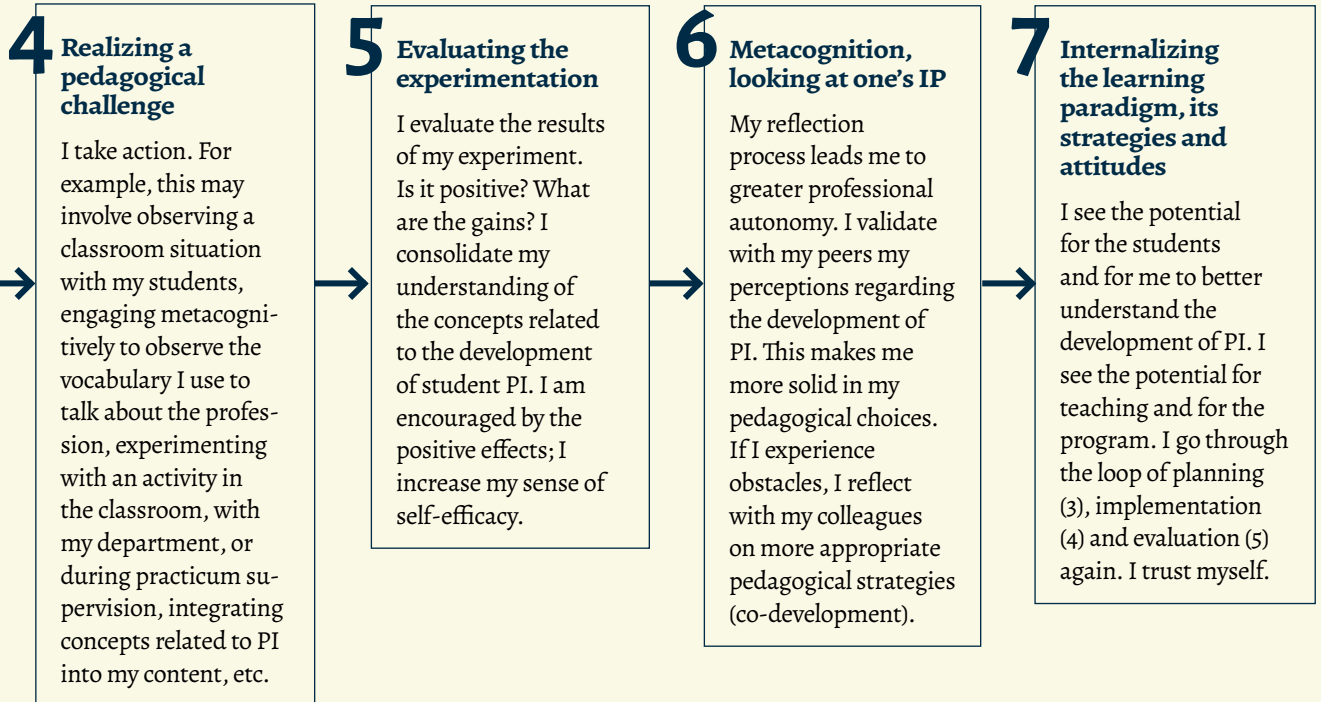
Source: Inspired by St-Germain (2008) and adapted by Labbé (2019)

would eventually deserve to be tested, since these two aspects seem closely linked and interdependent.

In this context, it seems appropriate to offer support to teachers interested in the issue by proposing an internalization process. To this end, St-Germain (2008) presents the process that a teacher is called upon to go through when they are in the process of a paradigm shift. It is a "seven-step" change process, which takes place at the individual's own pace, and which also lends itself very well to the reflection and development of the students'

PI. This support could be offered through the program committee, by departmental teachers in the form of co-development, by teacher groups or associations, by CEGEP professional resources, or by any other professional resources interested in this issue.

Figure 2 presents the internalization model of the change process in seven successive phases, describing the teacher's awareness related to increasing their knowledge and understanding of the concepts concerning PI development.

4 Realizing a pedagogical challenge

I take action. For example, this may involve observing a classroom situation with my students, engaging metacognitively to observe the vocabulary I use to talk about the profession, experimenting with an activity in the classroom, with my department, or during practicum supervision, integrating concepts related to PI into my content, etc.

5 Evaluating the experimentation

I evaluate the results of my experiment. Is it positive? What are the gains? I consolidate my understanding of the concepts related to the development of student PI. I am encouraged by the positive effects; I increase my sense of self-efficacy.

6 Metacognition, looking at one's IP

My reflection process leads me to greater professional autonomy. I validate with my peers my perceptions regarding the development of PI. This makes me more solid in my pedagogical choices. If I experience obstacles, I reflect with my colleagues on more appropriate pedagogical strategies (co-development).

7 Internalizing the learning paradigm, its strategies and attitudes

I see the potential for the students and for me to better understand the development of PI. I see the potential for teaching and for the program. I go through the loop of planning (3), implementation (4) and evaluation (5) again. I trust myself.

Conclusion

Talking about the development of PI among college students is certainly a topic in its exploratory phase. The action research conducted as part of my Master's degree in College Teaching, along with my professional experience as a college teacher and fieldworker, has raised several questions on this subject and raised individual and collective awareness. Knowledge and understanding of the dimensions of PI in the college environment still need to be further developed. However, the outcomes observed to date clearly illustrate the interest that teachers have in integrating PI into their teaching.

This article is an invitation to teachers and other professionals in the network to continue thinking about the development of PI in college students. How can certain notions related to the development of PI be integrated into teaching and taken into account in the development of competencies in a discipline? How can a college program promote the development of PI more explicitly with students? This is a first step in a direction that will allow students, regardless of their program of study, to more accurately represent and understand their chosen professional environment in order to, hopefully, fully assume the development of their PI and make an informed, if not more assertive, transition to the workforce. ▬

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Source : Caroline Fournier

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