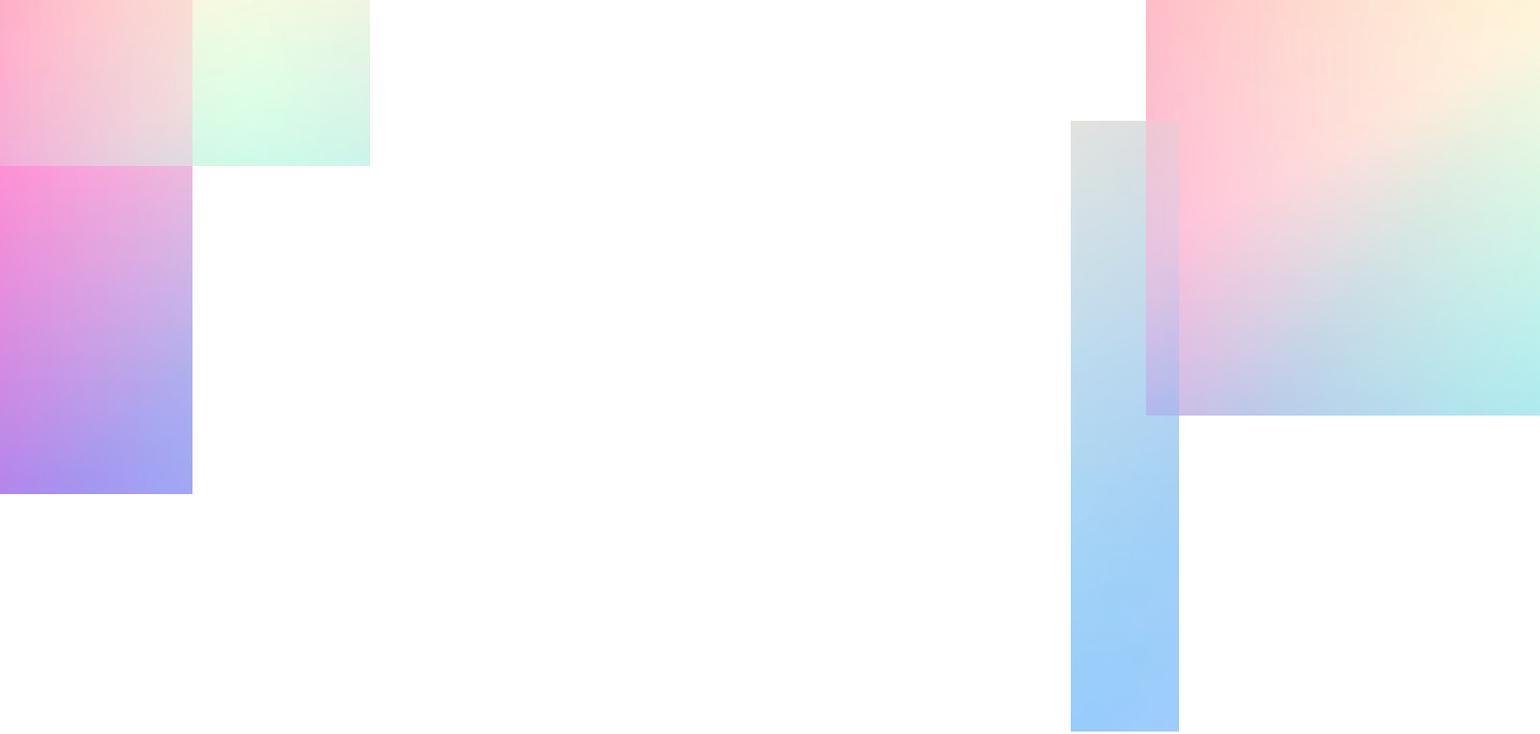


# Understanding Pedagogical Innovation: Beyond an End Goal, a Professional Act

Catherine Bélec



Since the beginning of the modern era, the notion of *innovation* has been continually evoked in a multitude of contexts. In these contexts, innovation is equated with positive change, with improvement. However, this view is challenged by a number of critics who point out the questionable nature of this assimilation and warn against "change for change's sake." In the educational context, the same tension can be observed when discussing the concept of pedagogical innovation (PI). In the field, three positions can generally be observed: those who advocate PI and see it as a potential solution to the many challenges faced in the educational environment; those who are wary of it and feel that it is often nothing more than an approach that costs a great deal of energy for the main stakeholders with no guarantee of a return on investment; and finally, the position of those "to be convinced" who, without being closed to change, demand proof of effectiveness or evidence-based data before

considering its possible implementation. The fact is, anyone who regularly works in a PI context will recognize that each of these three clans has good reasons for adopting such positions, be they political, scientific, historical or pragmatic. In all these positions, one constant can be observed: PI is associated with its end goal, which is itself generally associated with improved learning or success. The first position hopes for it, the second doubts whether it can be achieved, and the last wants to see whether the goal can be reached before committing itself. This article proposes to look at PI from a different angle: that of a professional act. A professional act cannot be summed up by its end goal: it takes place in complex professional situations, interwoven with constraints, opportunities and limits, where individuals must succeed in deploying "competent action" in order to achieve their goals, but also to respect certain processes and intentions.

Considering PI from the angle of the professional act therefore changes perspectives from the outset. Firstly, if we assume that PI involves the mobilization of "competent action," this presupposes the existence of a family of situations with specific characteristics; yet, to determine these characteristics, we inevitably end up having to define exactly what we mean by "PI." Secondly, this forces us to move from thinking about a specific object with a specific end goal (a pedagogical innovation, which may or may not work) to thinking about a process rooted in a professional framework, the nature of which needs to be defined. These are the elements I propose to reflect on in this article. It should be noted that this reflection stems from my professional doctorate at the Université de Sherbrooke, during which I had the opportunity, on the one hand, to observe and implement various PI interventions, and, on the other, to carry out a review of professional and scientific literature on the subject.

## What exactly is PI?

Surprisingly, when scrutinizing the literature on PI, it appears that very few texts attempt to formally define it. What probably emerges most often is the idea that PI brings about a rupture with what was previously in place in a given educational environment. It's worth noting that the term *rupture* connotes an intensity that is more nuanced in the term *change*. This notion of rupture is probably not unrelated to the resistance many people feel toward PI, as it seems to imply a drastic change in practices. This vision inevitably gives rise to concerns—both about what we currently value and would have to give up,

and about the scale of the changes to be made. However, on closer examination of PI, we come to understand that the rupture so often evoked is not in fact about practices, but rather about perspectives. In practical terms, the changes in pedagogical practices brought about by PI may be minor. The rupture lies elsewhere, in the perspectives that guide our actions, in our perceptions of reality and the goals we pursue.

But let's take a step-by-step approach. First of all, if the scientific literature doesn't really define PI, what does it tell us about it? The PI approaches—the "methodologies" that enable its implementation—are undoubtedly the easiest to pinpoint in the literature. In educational research contexts, there are references to action research

(Catroux, 2020) as well as research and development (Van der Maren, 2004); in professional contexts, we come across pedagogical engineering approaches (Basque, 2017; Russ-Eft *et al.*, 2013) or processes such as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) (Kreber, 2007). In all these cases, we can identify the recurrence of four main steps, all linked to a problem-solving logic.

**Step 1:** Analyzing (a situation, problem, or needs)

**Step 2:** Developing a solution (including selecting, refining and planning a course of action)

**Step 3:** Testing the solution/action

**Step 4:** Evaluating the solution/action<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A number of additional, sometimes implicit, steps add variation to PI processes: data collection, acquisition of new knowledge, theoretical conception of an idea, development of a prototype, dissemination... These steps are linked to related (and sometimes implicit) PI objectives, such as professional development and the production of new knowledge or educational objects.

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These steps are generally presented as iterative, because of the constant adjustments that need to be made in the course of action. The accounts of these steps also lead to the observation that PI varies in form according to three main factors:

- The scope of the educational object<sup>2</sup> and the educational environment<sup>3</sup> involved, which may be narrower or broader.
- The extent of modifications (minor or major) to be made to the object or environment.
- The point(s) in the process on which the project focuses (solution development or testing).

In light of these observations, the specific features of the PI family of situations seem to be linked less to the educational object or environment—which can be of varying nature and scope—than to the action and the aims of this action. In all cases, the processes put in place are similar to those of problem-solving in teaching

and learning. Moreover, the nature of the actions implemented seems to be essentially adaptive, although this adaptation takes a different form depending on the context. Indeed, if the PI process focuses on the design of the educational object, or if it has to be modified (adapted) in depth, adaptation takes a creative form. If, on the other hand, the process focuses on the implementation phase, or if the environment is asked to make in-depth changes to its practices, adaptation would seem to require action of the order of change management.<sup>4</sup>

The characteristics of the PI family of situations are thus established: it involves a pedagogical object, an educational environment, problem-solving related to teaching and learning, and adaptive action that calls on both creativity and change management. In order to propose a more complete and structured definition, it seems fitting to consider these elements from a professional perspective.

## Considering PI as a professional act

When examining a professional competency, it is important to consider that it cannot be reduced to the achievement of the objective it pursues. For example, just because a repair person cannot fix a computer on which coffee has been spilled doesn't mean that they are not competent; just because a psychologist cannot bring an individual out of a state of depression doesn't mean they are incompetent. Competency has a goal, but it is also guided by an intention. An intention is defined as a mental state, an inner movement by which a person proposes, to various degrees of consciousness and commitment, to achieve or try to achieve a specific goal, regardless of whether it will be achieved, which may be uncertain (CNRTL). In this vein, Guillemette and colleagues (2019) point out that there is a difference between the objective of an activity, linked to its content, and the intention, linked to the meaning of the intervention. The question

<sup>2</sup> An *educational object* is a means, tool, device or system for teaching and learning. The scope of this object can be narrow (lesson plan, evaluation grid) or broad (training program, pedagogical approach adopted by an institution or department).

<sup>3</sup> The *educational environment* refers to the system (managers, teachers, professionals, students) dedicated to teaching and learning. It can be narrow (individual, small group) or broad (college, network).

<sup>4</sup> For example, pedagogical engineering tends to be perceived as focused on solution design, whereas action research is seen more as focused on implementation.



then arises: if problem-solving is the objective of PI... what is its intention?

In everyday life, we are continually faced with problems... yet we don't systematically and actively attempt to solve them. What, then, motivates an individual to engage in problem-solving? Let's put forward a few hypotheses. Irritation, brought to breaking point, can lead to action. It's easy to imagine that moment when the kitchen cupboard door that hasn't been closing properly for years and that you've been struggling with every morning almost without realizing it, suddenly becomes a problem that cannot remain ignored for another day. We can also picture that moment when enlightenment hits us; we get used to "dealing with" a problem we don't know how to solve... until the idea comes along that finally frees us from our shackles. Yet, in the educational context, there are people who, even when irritation with a teaching and learning problem reaches its peak, don't engage in PI—just as there are people who engage in it even when they don't immediately have a solution to propose. In fact, any individual who embarks on a PI approach knows that, regardless of their will or belief in the solution, it is possible that the approach will not achieve the objective. Then, if solving the problem is never guaranteed, why does an individual decide to embark on this course of action? How can we formulate an intention that would encompass all these cases and explain this commitment?

Cocton (2019) proposes that PI benefits from being seen less as a means of solving a difficulty than as a way of constructing meaning in the educational experience:

*The evaluation of an innovative practice is a process of gathering relevant information, examining the degree of mismatch between predetermined goal intentions and achievements, while giving meaning and/or restoring meaning to teaching and learning.*

These comments echo numerous studies (Fullan, 2001; Coburn, 2006; Louis *et al.*, 2009; Dulude & Spillane, 2013) that emphasize the decisive role of meaning-building mechanisms

in PI implementation processes. The meaning perceived by educational stakeholders—including students—may have a decisive influence on the chances of this action being integrated in a sustainable way, with varying degrees of resistance, as well as on the chances of success of this action in terms of what it aims to achieve. This hypothesis is coherent if we consider that educational environments and the problems associated with teaching and learning involve, first and foremost, human beings, and that human learning is essentially a process of constructing meaning. This construction of meaning is at the heart of every human being's representation of the world, of their place in it, and of



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the place of the learning they achieve; meaning is at the heart of their motivation and engagement, of their action and reflection. From this perspective, it seems coherent to believe that what lies behind the desire to solve teaching or learning problems is an intention to give or restore meaning to a situation where it seems to be lacking, or to rectify a situation where the meaning we give to it comes up against the limits of reality.

The fundamentally human dimension of the educational problems associated with the PI family of situations leads us to consider one final point: interventions designed to facilitate learning and student success are implemented by individuals (teachers or professionals) *for the benefit of* other individuals (students), bringing the PI family of situations closer to professions linked to caring for others. In the latter, the professional

is bound to come up against the limits of the influence of one subject on *another*, of one social actor on *another* (Perrenoud, 1993), regardless of their competencies. This reinforces the idea that, in a PI context, achieving a result cannot be the only yardstick for judging the competency of the person implementing a PI approach.



## Defining PI as a family of situations

The elements considered make it possible to propose this definition of PI:

PI involves a process of coadaptation of an educational object and an educational environment, both of which can be narrower or broader in scope. PI approaches aim to resolve a situation that is perceived as problematic or that could be improved from an educational point of view, but the overall intention behind the implementation of PI is above all linked to a desire to give or restore meaning to the teaching and learning experience. Depending on what is at the heart of the PI approach (adaptation of the object or the environment), creative competencies or competencies related to change management are mobilized. Since human complexity is also at the heart of PI, negotiations about meaning and action are also central.

These postulates force us to rethink the way we approach PI, whether in a professional or research context.

For example, let's imagine a research project presenting an educational object that seems to have a fantastic impact on student learning; a department or program, realizing this, tries to integrate this object into its practices. A year later, the results are disappointing: the teachers haven't seen the hoped-for benefits at all, they're disappointed to have expended so much effort in vain; some have appreciated the exercise but conclude that the educational object is difficult to integrate into everyday practice. The result is a judgment on educational research and pedagogical innovations (the word *cloud shoveller* may even be uttered), a possible devaluation of the

latter and, potentially, a reinforcement of traditional practices. However, if we consider the proposed definition of the PI family of situations, an observation and a question arise. First, that there is not one, but *two PI approaches in this situation*: the research approach and the department approach. Second, it forces us to consider that the problem may stem from one or both of these two approaches. Did the researcher take into account the human dimension of the PI, did they properly analyze the (multiple) needs and constraints of the environment—or did they concentrate solely on creating their educational object? Did they put in place mechanisms to facilitate the appropriate transfer of their research results? Did the department take on the task of co-adapting the PI? How was the adaptation of the object supported? How was the environment supported in this process? In fact, the definition of PI underscores the complexity of the process, which arises when the educational object is *created*, but also when it is *transferred* to a new context. This complexity is sometimes underestimated, both by the original creators of the PI and by the environments wishing to integrate these creations. This complexity stems from the fact that PI involves issues linked to change management (operational management, but also human management), learning (integrating new knowledge into one's actions) and professional development (perception of one's role, learning, etc.). Faced with this complexity, the competencies of the individuals involved in PI and the mechanisms designed to support them undoubtedly play a fundamental role in the eventual success of the approach.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article was to offer a reflection on PI, and to propose that people and institutions consider it from the angle of the professional act. With this in mind, a definition of PI as a family of professional situations was developed and, I hope, opened up new perspectives.

However, I have to admit that this step was only the first one in my thought process; from the moment PI is seen as a professional act, one question seems imperative to me: what are the competencies that need to be mobilized in a PI context? If the professional act cannot be summed up as the end goal of this action, what is the profile of a person who would be competent in this field? What resources, concrete actions or postures enable the mobilization of competent action in a PI context? This question, which I set out to answer in my doctoral dissertation, will be the subject of another article in the *When Everything Transforms* thematic issue of *Pédagogie collégiale*, to be published in Spring-Summer 2024. —

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