

Understanding Pedagogical Innovation: Beyond an End Goal, a Means to Energize Environments

Catherine Bélec

To say that the world is changing is to state the obvious. But we have to admit that life today often gives us the impression that everything is changing so fast that we can't keep up. In the face of these fast-paced transformations, anxiety can paralyze us and trap us in a feeling of powerlessness. I think it's important to remember that change has another face: that of creativity, the enthusiasm of discovery, adventure and learning. In my mind, there is no more powerful tool than these to confront the complexity of our world and to give us back the feeling

that *we can act*, and that if the world can force us to change, *we too* can transform the world. It's from this rejection of powerlessness, I think, that comes my interest in pedagogical innovation (PI), which in my eyes is, in an educational context, the embodiment of the creative enthusiasm mentioned earlier. It's what led me to get involved in PI projects, first as a teacher, and then as a researcher. It's also what prompted me to reflect on it as part of my professional doctorate at the Université de Sherbrooke.

In a previous article published in *Pédagogie collégiale*, I proposed a reflection on PI.¹ I argued that PI, which tends to be considered as an object in pedagogical circles (we speak of "a pedagogical innovation") and evaluated according to its end goal (the impacts of a given PI), would benefit from being considered as a professional act whose end goal alone could not evaluate its quality. Among the aspects to be considered, I suggested the importance of respecting the intention of PI, i.e. the construction of meaning for the stakeholders. At the end of this reflection, based on a comparison of numerous PI approaches, the following definition was proposed:

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 (Bélec, 2024).

¹ This reflection stemmed from a literature review and a reflective process based on my own experiences of PI carried out as part of my research and professional projects. This reflective process constituted one of the two parts of my doctoral essay. Interested readers can refer to the article "Understanding Pedagogical Innovation : Beyond an End Goal, a Professional Act," published in Winter 2024.



This perspective—that PI can in fact be considered as a family of professional situations—naturally leads to the following question: What, in this case, structures competent action in a PI context? What are the competencies that allow such an approach to be successfully implemented? This is the question I set out to answer in the second part of my doctoral essay—and the subject of this article.

What competencies are mobilized in a PI context?

Using an approach inspired by ontogenic research (Van Der Maren, 2003), an analysis of several PI approaches² has shown that a wide variety of key actions structure PI processes. These key actions, depending on the reason for their implementation or their outcome, can be categorized into four major "competency families."

Each of these competency families can be seen as a different role to be assumed during the proper implementation of a PI approach. It turns out that these "roles" imply different objectives, postures and considerations in terms of action, as well as the mobilization of distinct competencies and resources (Table 1). In fact, the diversity of these roles is such that visualizing, metaphorically speaking, each of them as being assumed by distinct individuals can contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of PI processes. It is in this way, as "metaphorical figures," that each of the established competency families will be presented. For each one, two examples of application will be presented: the first will present

examples that can be applied to a teacher carrying out a PI process in their classroom; the second, an example that can be applied to other contexts or professional settings where PI processes are likely to be carried out.³

Table 1

Summary of the different roles involved in a PI situation

<i>The sage or observer</i>	<i>The leader or salesperson</i>
<p>Role: Take ownership of and understand the parameters of the situation</p> <p>Posture: Rational and critical</p> <p>Type of interaction: Neutral relationship with individuals and groups</p> <p>Benefits: Provides the information needed to exercise judgment in PI situations.</p>	<p>Role: Support the implementation of the action</p> <p>Posture: Relational and strategic (to make action happen)</p> <p>Type of interaction: Collaboration with various stakeholders</p> <p>Contribution: Provides access to the resources needed to implement the PI and engage people in action.</p>
<i>The designer or creative team</i>	<i>The guide or companion</i>
<p>Role: Create or adapt the pedagogical object</p> <p>Posture: Rational and critical</p> <p>Type of interaction: Collaboration with various stakeholders</p> <p>Contribution: Helps to improve the PI (by adapting and evaluating it) so that it solves the problem that justified its implementation in the best possible way.</p>	<p>Role: To support the creation of meaning</p> <p>Posture: Relational and strategic (to bring out meaning)</p> <p>Type of interaction: Helping individuals and groups</p> <p>Benefit: Ensures that the PI experience is profitable, regardless of the resolution of the problem that justified its implementation.</p>

² For more information on the methodology that led to the content of this article, read the doctoral essay Bélec, 2022.

³ All four competency families must be called upon almost systematically in PI research projects, which means that the research community is undoubtedly concerned by all the points made in this article. However, for the purposes of this professional text, the choice has been made not to present any research-related examples—which in no way diminishes the great importance of these considerations for those wishing to engage in PI research.

The sage or observer

The *sage* or observer wishes to understand with finesse the environment in which the PI must take place. Their objective is to have the information that will allow the other three roles to exercise a situated judgment; it is this "sage" who regulates the choices of action as complex situations arise throughout the PI process. The sage must adopt a rational and critical stance, necessary for rigorous intellectual action based on observations, facts and conceptual frameworks. The sage therefore seeks to adopt as objective a view of the situation as possible, regardless of their own opinions or the objective of the PI. They see the environment in which the PI is to take place as a system and, in order to understand it properly, interact alternately with individuals within it as well as with groups. They consider the political, economic, normative (legal, administrative, cultural), material and social dimensions of the system, from the macro (network, institution, program) to the micro (course, learning activity, individuals).

The main competencies they deploy consist in collecting data and extracting networks of meaning from them. Among the data to be collected, they consider in particular those relating to the stakeholders of the education system (ministers, directors, departments/groups, teachers or professionals, students), which can be broken down into various dimensions:

- Representations of roles, personal, professional or disciplinary missions/goals/objectives (conceptual dimension) ;
- People's resources (real or perceived) and constraints/latitudes (real or perceived) (pragmatic dimension) ;
- *Habitus* and practices (praxeological dimension) ;
- Values, interests, motivations (axiological dimension) ;
- Feelings of pleasure or frustration, desire for action/resistance (affective dimension) ;
- Relational dynamics of people in this system (social dimension).

As educational contexts are first and foremost "human" environments, it is imperative that the components mentioned above be considered as essential variables in this context.

In the embodiment of this figure, then, we can imagine the researcher considering the concerns or representations of the teachers they ask to implement a PI, of course, but also the teacher trying to capture these same elements in their students. It was mentioned that the sage collects data; let's be clear: these collections are not necessarily as formal in nature as, say, a validated survey. The teacher can collect data simply by giving students opportunities to express themselves about their perceptions or objectives;



these "collections" can be implemented through many small gestures that will invite students not only to express themselves rather than remain silent, but also to believe that what they say will be heard and considered with seriousness and respect. In this sense, it's important that the teacher also takes the time to "process" the data collected. This step is not easy in practice;

it requires a little time, reflection and the implementation of mechanisms to remain relatively "objective" in a situation where subjectivity is fully involved. This is one of the reasons why teachers can benefit from experimenting with a PI in a situation with which they are already familiar, both in terms of the subject matter and the characteristics of the student population.

Applied examples of the *sage's posture*

The teacher in the classroom

Ming, a nursing teacher, is enthusiastic about problem-based learning (PBL). She plans to integrate it into one of her courses to better prepare students for their future professional tasks. Before implementing this project, she wants to assess the students' opinions. In class, she introduces the concept of PBL and organizes a guided mini-exercise to ensure that learners fully understand the principles of the activity. She then asks the teams to discuss the benefits and challenges they would see in this approach if it were used more consistently in a course. Some students emphasize that they appreciate the "applied" aspect of PBL, but are concerned that they would have to learn by reading rather than through a lecture, a technique that many also find to be a more time-efficient way of learning. Adult students express hesitation about teamwork, fearing that they will be penalized if the other students in their group are not sufficiently motivated. Ming takes note of the comments, aware that she will have to adapt her project to take into account her students' representations, fears and needs.

Academic dean wishing to improve student success in a program

David, a newly appointed academic dean at a college where he taught general education for several years, is tasked with analyzing student success issues in a technical program. Although he has some knowledge of the field, he recognized his lack of familiarity with the program. David set up meetings, first with the program's pedagogical counsellor (PC) to understand the situation and the program's history, and then with the PC in charge of student success to identify the specific problems identified and the possible involvement of teachers in the communities of practice established at the college. In meeting with the program coordinator, David asks him about his vision of the situation, perceived problems, needs and projects that teachers would like to implement. These exchanges reveal discrepancies between David's initial perception and those of the program's teachers and PC. In an effort to assess the situation objectively, he moves away from his initial vision to analyze all the data collected about the situation, and seeks to identify positive common ground to guide future action.

The leader or salesperson



The goal of the *leader* figure is to make the PI's action happen and progress. Unlike the sage, who must adopt a rational and critical stance, the leader must adopt a relational and strategic stance in order to mobilize the resources that make action possible. They must therefore be skilled in planning and regulating PI projects, as well as in finding the material, financial and human resources needed to carry them out. Since these resources are at the heart of PI processes, it is above all on the basis of them that the leader must be able to adapt the action to the constraints and unforeseen events that inevitably arise in the field. In this sense, they must also have collaboration and facilitation skills.

The leader knows the quality criteria for obtaining financial resources. For example, in the case of a research project, they will highlight the methodological rigour of the project, the coherence between the problem, the objectives and the data collection tools, and demonstrate intellectual rigour

in the definition of concepts and the selection of sources (recent, validated). In the case of a professional project, they will find out about the issues that concern local stakeholders and that would motivate their commitment, the budgets from which they could draw resources, the strategic objectives of the organizations, the history of the projects that have been carried out there, and the values or leadership styles of the decision-makers. The way in which the leader presents the project is directly related to this information; they must "sell their projects" and, to this end, their communication skills allow them to persuade others to join them. In addition to communication skills, the leader needs a number of attitudes to encourage others to work together. These include boldness to inspire action, organizational skills to reassure people, and interpersonal skills to put people at ease. However, the ability to inspire trust is perhaps the most critical. Transparency certainly plays a role, but so do rigour and efficiency. Trust is more easily granted when the person *has proven* that they

are capable of taking concrete action to move a project forward. In this sense, the leader thinks carefully about what they can really do before promising anything and, once the action to be taken has been determined, acts quickly.⁴ The leader's competencies are therefore largely rooted in people's perceptions of them, their past experiences and their competencies.

⁴ The description of a leader evokes in part the functions associated with a manager; that said, it is equally applicable to a teacher wishing to carry out PI in the classroom. In a PI context, students benefit from being seen as collaborators rather than subjects of a PI. Let's not forget that, although the project is for them... it should be carried out with them.

In this sense, the leader depends on how they are perceived by the stakeholders in the system, on the status they assume in relation to them (professional, researcher, doctoral student, colleague...) and on the social validation they receive in the situation. A PC or a manager, whatever their competencies as a leader, will not be perceived in the same way as a fellow teacher or a researcher—and depending on the context, this may help or hinder them. A good leader, therefore, is also one who, when necessary, seeks the support of other leaders who are better placed than them to move the action forward in the specific situation.

Applied examples of the leader's posture

The teacher in the classroom

Amine wants to integrate learning activities related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into his second-year pure science biology course. Anticipating his students' lack of engagement with the topic, he decides to organize hands-on activities in real-life contexts. He believes that field experience would motivate them and raise their awareness of the issue. He designs an activity that takes place in a hydroponic farm. This activity requires official approval and money for travel. Amine knows the academic dean well, with whom he regularly discusses pedagogy. At first, he thinks of contacting him, but then changes his mind because he knows that the associate academic dean (AAD) is sensitive to respect for hierarchy. Anxious to make him an ally, since there are more situations in which he will have to interact with him, Amine meets with the AAD to explain his project and his needs. He points out that some of the money could be taken from the college's greening budget. The AAD is enthusiastic and assures him of his support. When Amine presents the project to his students, his enthusiasm is contagious. What's more, he has taken great care to detail his pedagogical intentions; the students can clearly see the steps of the project, and the well-structured organization of the activity reassures them that it will run smoothly.

The person involved in updating a program

Julie, a young psychology teacher in the Humanities program, is involved in updating the program. For her, this process is an opportunity to revise the program to better address issues of equity, an issue that is close to her heart. She believes that critical pedagogy can be used to implement meaningful and relevant actions to address this issue. However, she feels that her young age is detrimental to her credibility when speaking to the group. The teachers with whom she has discussed equity don't seem ready to change their practices. Julie decides to present her ideas to the PC in charge of updating the program. In discussion, they both realize that the evaluation methods Julie is proposing to promote equity can also address concerns about plagiarism, a major concern in the program. At the same time, Julie realizes that critical pedagogy offers perspectives that also address the development of critical thinking skills, an issue that concerns many of the program's more experienced colleagues. So Julie goes to meet with them. These colleagues express great interest in Julie's suggestions, which they see as a solution to a problem in current education.

The designer or creative team

The *designer's* goal is to adapt the pedagogical object to solve the identified educational problem. The designer's work requires a rational, critical attitude in order to evaluate the pedagogical object as objectively as possible: Does it allow solving the problem? If not, why not? What adjustments need to be made to make it work? In this rational and critical posture, the designer benefits from collaborating with the system (students, teachers, etc.) to get as much feedback and perspective as possible on the object to be adapted. For this reason, this figure should be seen as part of a creative team, rather than as an isolated designer.

Creativity is partly about making connections between elements or knowledge. The more knowledge an individual has, the greater the potential

for making connections. So, while pedagogical knowledge is relevant to a PI process, other knowledge, from a variety of fields, could be as well. In this sense, the designer benefits from being interested in and informed about the ways in which learning or teaching is approached in different disciplines, at different levels of education or in different contexts. Making connections, however, depends not only on the quantity of knowledge, but also on the ability to perceive the "metastructures" of that knowledge in order to *decontextualize* it. It is this decontextualization that most often allows us to see the transferability potential of an object or a method. Faced with a pedagogical method that doesn't seem to apply to the context the PI is targeting, the designer makes an effort to *convince* themselves *that transfer is possible*, and racks their brain to imagine what form it might take.

Stepping back also plays an essential role. For example, it's important to be aware of one's own preferences, interests and representations of the situation in order to distance oneself from them. These elements are like "lenses" that can limit the exploration of the problem and possible solutions. Faced with possible blockages, the designer must be able to mobilize complex thinking in order to modify their vision of the situation by approaching it in a more global or focused way, or from a different perspective—but always with a constructive attitude (even if forced) that consists in believing that a solution *necessarily* exists. The designer is thus an incurable enthusiast who can be stubborn in their search for a solution. In the face of this creative enthusiasm, it is regularly necessary to take a step back in order to adopt an attitude that allows the PI to be critically regulated:

have the adjustments and adaptations made, as imposed by the realities of the field, led the pedagogical object to deviate from the targeted problem?

Remember that PI does not mean systematically creating something new, but rather bringing a

pedagogical object into an educational environment where this object is perceived as new. Thus, when PI is aimed more at implementing an existing pedagogical object in an environment, the designer may only need to draw on their skills for minor adaptations.

Applied examples of the *designer's posture*

The teacher in the classroom

Fatima, a Prehospital Care teacher, wants to use explicit teaching to develop students' autonomy during different interventions. She consults her program's PC, who suggests that she model her thinking in order to identify the resources relevant to the different interventions she wants to teach. Fatima enlists the help of a colleague. In discussion, the two women realize that they are having difficulty clarifying the attitudes and communicative modalities needed to intervene appropriately. So Fatima meets with a teacher in Youth and Adult Correctional Intervention, who has been working with the concept of attitudes for years. She also meets with her institution's Repfran [resource person in charge of the use and quality of the French language, Ed.], who helps her identify the resources she needs for the different communicative situations she is targeting. During the implementation, Fatima makes regular notes of her impressions. In the middle of the session, she collects feedback from the students. At the end of the session, she cross-references her notes with the academic results obtained and the comments left by her students in the course evaluation. She notices an improvement in communication skills, but a stagnation in attitudes and autonomy. Looking at her notes, she notices that she expressed discomfort when addressing attitudes. In turn, several students expressed anxiety about working autonomously. Fatima uses these observations to adjust her practice.

The person in charge of designing and evaluating a success support measure

Pierre-Luc, in charge of developing a success support measure for first-session students in his technical program, is considering introductory workshops (CEGEP tour, methodology). Wanting to know more about the issue of transition to college, he studies the literature on the subject. He also meets with the registrar's office and interviews second-year students about their transition experiences. He concludes that many of the major challenges faced by students in the program are beyond the scope of his intervention as a teacher. Yet he persists. He assembles a team that includes colleagues from Adapted Services and Student Life, as well as members of the second-year student body to brainstorm. Eventually, he devises a support measure that involves first-year students as assistants on a third-year project. The mentoring relationship thus created strengthens the sense of belonging of the program's new students. Pierre-Luc also proposes changes to the means of communication used with new students, in collaboration with Adapted Services and Student Life. The support plan and the new communication methods are approved by the students as being clearer and more effective. Pierre-Luc plans a further evaluation by the first cohort to benefit from the support measure at the end of the next session.

The *guide* or companion



The term *guide* should be taken figuratively, meaning "a person who leads others, who supports them [...], inspires them" (CNRTL, translated from French), rather than in the literal sense of "a person who leads." The term *companion* is also appropriate up to a certain extent, in the sense that the guide, in a PI context, does not impose their path, but rather tries to construct it *with* the people with whom they interact. Still, there are certain actions that are more "directive" in the role of the guide than in the strict role generally associated with the companion. The goal of the guide is to support the creation of meaning in order to facilitate the adaptation of the environment targeted by the PI. Thus, they lack the neutrality of a companion. Nevertheless, it's a good idea to link the figure of the guide with that of the companion, to emphasize the fact that the guide is at the service of others, and that their goal is to help others move forward as much as possible... and not beyond what they are willing or able to do. This type of guide is also one who seeks to find the most appropriate path for the individual, rather than forcing them to take the path they have explored. It's within these limits that the figure of the companion adequately nuances the possible direction we might be

tempted to apply to the figure of the guide. In this sense, the guide benefits from possessing three skills in a PI context:

- Ability to provoke questioning and decrystallization of *habitus*;
- Ability to contribute to the thinking and knowledge of stakeholders in the innovation context;
- Ability to provide emotional, cognitive and social support to those involved in the innovation.

This involves a relational and strategic posture whose goal is to support individuals cognitively, affectively and socially in creating meaning for themselves through their participation in the PI process—and to do so in a benevolent manner. This posture may occasionally come into conflict with that of the leader, whose posture is also strategic, but whose goal is to move the action forward. Negotiations between these two roles are inevitable, but the leader must always defer to the guide's judgment, as it is essential not to push the project's stakeholders beyond what makes sense for them—since this, ultimately, can only harm the project's action and the positive perception of the leader.

There are several ways in which individuals can be supported in constructing the meaning of their PI experience:

- Their relationship to the profession and their discipline;
- Their professional development or self-efficacy;
- Their change management;
- Their mental health at work (well-being and psychological distress);
- Their reflexivity in relation to their *habitus*, their conceptions of learning, and their roles and objectives (professional and personal).

Knowledge of facilitation as well as levels of appropriation of new practices are relevant resources for individuals who wish to act on this construction of meaning. In addition, certain skills are also useful in this role, including:

- Ability to separate ends (perceived and real) from means in discourse;
- Ability to analyze motivations and root causes of dissatisfaction;
- Descriptive and interpretive note-taking techniques to put observations into perspective;

- Ability to conduct objectivation meetings;⁵
- Ability to pay attention to nonverbal language and identify possible tensions, inconsistencies or contradictions in discourse or practices (or between individuals).

Facilitating various learning activities or professional development is also a valuable skill. The following are examples of these activities that help to construct meaning and distance *habitus*:

- Narrating or writing about a challenging professional situation;
- Activities that involve teachers as active learners;
- Diverse teamwork (multiexpertise or multidisciplinary);
- Professional co-development group or learning community.

The advantage of all these activities is that, if they are carried out properly, they simultaneously mobilize the three competencies of the guide mentioned above, in particular because they lead individuals to put their experiences and representations into perspective, to confront them with other perspectives, to learn and to reflect—all actions that contribute to the construction of individual and collective meaning.

Applied examples of the *guide's* posture

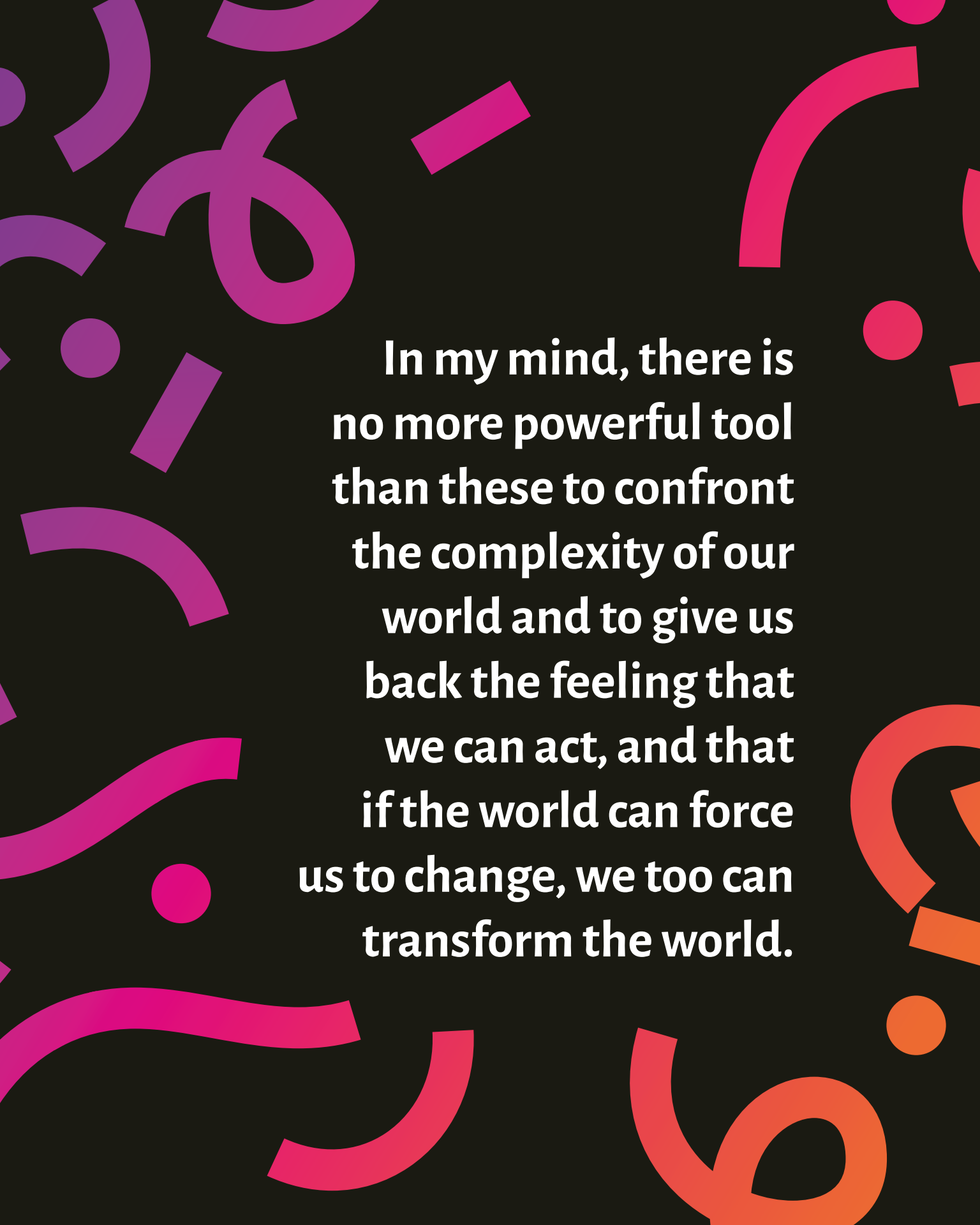
The teacher in the classroom

Gabriel, a philosophy teacher with over 10 years of experience, incorporates deliberative discourse into his teaching activities, sometimes in the form of dialogue, drama or role-playing. While many students appreciate the originality of these activities, others react less favorably. Rather than ignore these concerns, Gabriel tries to understand their point of view. Discussions with students have revealed points of resistance, such as a fear of evaluation in an unfamiliar genre, or a perception that a philosophy course should focus on content delivery rather than discussion. Gabriel adapts his methods to take these resistances into account, further modulating pedagogical activities as necessary. He uses examples to reassure students unfamiliar with deliberative debates, and even, to the amusement of some, organizes debates on the relevance... of deliberative debates—allowing learners to express their reservations. In this way, he offers students the opportunity to question their perceptions and gradually develop their representations, while himself remaining open to the resistance of certain students, to whom he offers accommodations if necessary.

The PC in charge of supporting a community of practice

Ruth, a pedagogical counsellor, has set up a community of practice around the pedagogical use of AI. In this context, she encourages teachers to follow their own path. However, two participants seem to lose interest as the session progresses. In individual interviews, Ruth discovers that the first teacher has lost confidence in herself after an unsuccessful experiment with AI. She reassures her and encourages her to train in AI, even suggesting that she create a guide for teachers less familiar with it. Reassured, the teacher enthusiastically sets about reviewing online training courses on the subject. The second teacher, although successful with her AI activities, ends up expressing dissatisfaction: the activity has replaced a method that allowed her to establish rapport with the class. Seeing that this relationship with the class is important to her, Ruth invites her to keep the old activity and explore other contexts for using AI. This change of perspective piques the teacher's interest. Aware that each participant will draw different conclusions, Ruth wants to support all members of her community of practice in creating meaning from their engagement, with the ultimate goal that they can all benefit from it for reflection, development and connection.

⁵ An objectivation meeting consists in trying to gain a better understanding of the other's values and representations by inviting them to define the terms used. This technique allows the meaning networks behind the discourse to emerge.

The background is a solid black color, decorated with various abstract geometric shapes in shades of purple, magenta, pink, and orange. These shapes include thick curved lines, solid circles, and rectangular bars, scattered across the page. The text is centered in the middle of the page in a white, bold, sans-serif font.

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Conclusion

The aim of this article is to stimulate reflection on the skills required to implement PI processes. The various figures presented illustrate the diversity of resources and skills required, as well as the different postures to be adopted when faced with this type of action. These observations will enable people who want to engage in PI processes to consider the skills they will need and, if necessary, to see who

could judiciously join them to support them in their approach. Let's conclude by noting that all PI skills, whether in the role of sage, leader, designer or guide, are assets to an educational environment, even in a context where PI is not involved. Developing and harnessing the skills of these roles means first and foremost mobilizing communities, creating connections and collaborations, and bringing together people capable of exercising judgment, agency, creativity and

benevolence. In fact, I believe that PI should be seen not only as a way of addressing the educational challenges of members of the student community: it is also a way of revitalizing environments and developing the agency of the people who work, day after day, to support the learning and well-being of those learners. Things change, of course, but the beauty of this "changeability" is that it allows those who dare to act to participate in its constantly renewed creation. —

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