Hare, W.
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Hare, W., The concept of innovation in education, Educational theory. 1978, pp.68-74, Blackwell. ©

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Course of Study: EDU2002 - Global Innovations in Education
Title: The concept of innovation in education, Educational theory
Author: Hare, W.
Publisher: Blackwell

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The Concept of Innovation in Education

By William Hare

All things flow by, thought Heraclitus, but many educational thinkers wish that schooling practices flowed by somewhat faster. The cry for change has now joined the familiar chorus which demands relevance and openness. It is not easy for the practicing teacher to raise a lone query about the implications of this demand, but it is both natural and necessary for philosophers of education to do so. Natural, because the question is essentially philosophical, as a demand to know what is meant, and why it is thought to be a good thing; and necessary, if educational policies are to be based on rational and critical inquiry. Fortunately, philosophers of education have already entered this area, and thus my comments should be seen as a contribution to a debate underway.

I. CHANGE AND INNOVATION

It has been persuasively argued by Pratte that change is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of innovation. He suggests as a further necessary condition that the change be the result of human purposing rather than an accident or a case of natural development. Pratte does not, however, describe this necessary condition in unambiguous terms, for "the degree of human purposing displayed in the situation" covers both 1) the case in which X acts intentionally and produces a change, though he was unaware of the novelty in his production, and 2) the case in which X acts intentionally to change something. I suspect that Pratte has sense 2) in mind, though it may be that he purposely left the description ambiguous. In any case, it is worth noting that we would not exclude 1) from the concept of innovation. If X, who is ignorant of the history of art, intentionally produces a painting (of great originality), it cannot be the case that he had intended to change accepted form, style, and so on (for he had no knowledge of these), and yet his work would properly be called innovative.

Finally, Pratte suggests that it is further necessary that the change be judged "sufficiently different" before we can speak of an innovation. Not every change will be regarded as a sufficiently significant departure from what went before to warrant calling it an innovation. This makes the ascription of the term "innovative" essentially a comparative activity, undertaken in a certain context. The claim that the ascription "innovative" involves a judgment should not be confused with the claim that it involves a value judgment, for we can say that X is significantly different from Y without saying that it is better or worse than Y. The non-value judgment presupposes familiarity with, and understanding of, the area in which the judgment is made.

It is important to bear in mind the kind of judgment which is involved here, because Pratte wishes to hold that a value judgment is not necessarily implied by the term "innovation." It is probably more accurate to summarize Pratte's view by saying that he holds that the concept of innovation is not necessarily value-laden, rather than by saying that it is for him necessarily value-neutral. He does, after all, admit that sometimes the concept does imply alteration for the better.

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1. For example, one encounters articles in educational theory with titles such as, "Continuing Change Is Needed." For this paper by Allan Glathom see, Controversies In Education, ed. Dwight W. Allen and Jeffrey C. Hecht (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1974), pp. 103-9.


3. Ibid., p. 363.

4. Ibid. The painting is not an accident, and thus this case is not the same as Pratte's example of the French chef who goes.


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Certainly it is true that, etymologically, there is no necessary link with a value-judgment; and in historical usage no such conceptual connection has existed. It was Burke, I believe, who insisted that to innovate was not necessarily to reform. Still, the fact that such a comment needed to be made should give us cause to ponder, for it may indicate a refusal to sanction a conceptual revision which was occurring. Such a revision has occurred when a term comes to be used in new or altered manner, although there remains a significant overlap with former usage. It seems to me that we now use the term "innovation" in accordance with the three criteria outlined by Pratte (i.e., 1) a purposeful, (2) change, (3) of some significance) but with the further implication that the change is a change which we value to some extent. It is now essentially a value-laden term, the use of which necessarily involves a judgment of positive worth. We do not use it for a significant change which we regard as a regression.

Pratte does, however, present one apparent counterexample, and it is on the basis of this case that he concludes that "innovation" sometimes expresses disapproval. Asking what comes to mind when the term "educational innovation" is used, Pratte suggests one possible response might be: "Oh, you mean those damn 'mini-courses' they are putting into the high school, I'm sure glad my daughter is out of that place." On the face of it, this does suggest disapproval, but I think the counterexample can be accommodated in the following manner. Surely, this is an example of what has come to be termed "external, descriptive" or even "inverted commas" usage, where the person is really saying something like "This is the sort of thing some educational theorists call innovation, but I don't!"—where the "scare quotes" show that he is not using the term in its usual way. It is, I think, not far removed from that kind of sarcasm in which a term is deliberately employed when it is believed to be inappropriate.

Pratte does not sufficiently distinguish 1) the judgment that X is better than Y and 2) the judgment that X is of some value. He says that the term "educational innovation" is "sometimes mixed, serving both to describe and evaluate" and further that it is only sometimes the case that the term implies an improvement. It seems to me that whereas the latter claim is true, the former is false. Certainly, a new and ingenious surgical procedure could be called an innovation, even if it were no better than some existing procedure. But if a change is either of no value or judged to be of disvalue, we would not speak of an innovation. Thus it is not the case that the concept of "innovation" is sometimes mixed, for it is always the case that descriptive and evaluative claims are involved, though not necessarily the evaluative claim that it constitutes an improvement.

We have found it useful to employ a term which, unlike the value-neutral word "change," suggests that the change is valuable. Of course, the judgment of value expressed in the word "innovation" does not guarantee that the new practice will live up to our expectations. It expresses our belief in the positive value of the change, but it is always possible that this belief is ill-founded. This further confuses the descriptive-evaluative issue, for X, which is justifiably called an innovation, may turn out to be without value or even disastrous. But this does not offset the claim that when X is deemed to be an innovation, it is thought to be a desirable or valuable change. In much the same way, claims to knowledge are often defeated.

6. An instance, if you like, of innovation in the conceptual realm.
9. Sometimes the actual employment of scare-quotes is not needed. Thus Sidney Hook can write: "But there are very few careers that can be adequately prepared for by bull-sessions and innovative courses uncontrollable by competent faculty supervision." See, The Philosophy of Curriculum, ed. Sidney Hook, Paul Kurtz and Milo Todorovich (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1975), p. xii. But the reader is left in no doubt as to Hook's assessment of what are called "innovative" courses.
It is not implied by the term that the practice is quite original in the way that a first-time scientific discovery is. We need to recall that the term is used in a comparative way. Thus, it was innovative in the recent history of schooling when teachers and students started moving outside the classroom into the community, although this had been done before in other contexts. But it can be judged here as sufficiently different from a pattern of instruction which had become entrenched. Acupuncture, when approved, will be an innovation in Western medical practice, though it is an ancient art. This point is not well recognized. A recent book states: "Forty innovations are treated here. Some of them might more properly be called revivals rather than innovations." This falsely suggests that the two concepts are mutually exclusive.

II. THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

1. Change for Its Own Sake

Armed with the distinction between "change" and "innovation" outlined above, it is clearly important to be critical of educational theorists who treat the terms synonymously or who blur the distinction. It is a conceptual truth that an innovation is of value and a commonplace that change is not always in a desirable direction. A patient's condition changes when it worsens as well as when it improves. We normally need to know a good deal more about the situation, in addition to the fact that it constitutes a change, before we can say whether it is desirable or not. We do not think there is a presumption in favor of change, as there might be, say, in favor of freedom; or a presumption against change, as there might be against indoctrination. It just seems to be neutral, possibly good or possibly bad depending upon the circumstances. Hence we are properly skeptical of banners and slogans which assert that "Continuing change is needed."

Before leaving this point, however, it is well to recognize cases in which "change for its own sake" is reasonable and understandable, in order to be clear about the limits of these. There seem to be at least two sorts of cases in which a person could reasonably desire change, period: 1) it is just a change that he wants to break the monotony of some activity or life-style; 2) any change is welcome, not because it is different, but being different it will in fact improve the condition of his life. Consider this second case. It is possible to regard a state of affairs as being so terrible that any change would be better than none at all. This is, of course, in general a dangerous principle to adopt, because it may be that our limited imagination prevents us from conceiving how the state of affairs might be worse, or that we have failed to notice, or have forgotten, the valuable features of the present state. We would have to be quite certain that the situation could not be any worse, before any change would be welcome whatever it is. This is not really a case of change for the sake of change, but a case in which any change will do because it is believed that it will in fact improve the situation. It will not improve it because it is different, but is bound to improve it because the present condition is the worst possible. This seems to me to be a principle of desperation and one which could scarcely have relevance to the educational context. The onus is quite certainly on those who would appeal to it to show that the educational situation could not be worse. Until such a case is forthcoming, the principle can be laid aside. And moreover, if per impossibile such a situation were to arise, alternative courses of action could still be rationally discussed. We do not have to opt for any change at all.

The first case mentioned above has some marginal relevance for the educational context. We sometimes do things "just for a change," as we say, and value the difference because it relieves the boredom we were experiencing. Without this con-

11. Many practices which we take to be very modern, e.g. work outside a classroom, discovery learning, discussion methods, are clearly exemplified in the teaching of Socrates.
13. See Glattthorn, "Continuing Change," in Controversies, p. 103. It is interesting to note, however, that at one point he speaks of "so-called innovations."

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trust, that which constitutes "the change" might have been singularly unattractive. It is sometimes the routinely boring character of one's life which is the problem, and what is needed is something different, at least for a while. In itself, that which constitutes "the change" may not be any better or more attractive than one's routine, but the very change will improve one's lot. In the life of the school, as with life elsewhere, some variety of this kind may be desirable, but two comments must be made: 1) It is not just any change which will be welcomed, for we will often prefer to continue to be bored than to be affected in some new and undesirable way. (It is only as a joke that a person would say of a spell in a hospital with a serious illness: "Well, at least it was a change!"") 2) The consideration of variety is subordinate to other principles which govern educational decisions. Does the change serve to promote valuable learning? Does it endanger the central task of an educational institution? Change to offset boredom invokes a psychological consideration with respect to interest and motivation, a consideration of some importance in teaching, but one which must serve more fundamental moral and educational principles. There is some danger of this truth being lost sight of by those who place paramount importance on felt-interest and entertainment in schooling. Boredom is clearly not a good in itself, but there may not be any way of removing certain boring aspects of worthwhile learning.

2. Sources of Dispute

It is, then, logically possible to be in favor of change for its own sake in the educational context, but it is only on rare occasions that this principle could be appealed to with justification. A quite different matter arises, however, when we speak of innovation, for by definition this is a change of some value. Logically, a person cannot fail to value what he accepts as an innovation, because in regarding it as an innovation he reveals that he does value it. Clearly, however, a person may wish to dispute the view that a proposal is an innovation and may well come out against "so-called innovations." The point is that despite the conceptual claim that innovation is value-laden, there remains of necessity the substantive question: Is it an innovation? Sophistical verbal juggling will not answer this, nor prevent it from arising. My purpose in this section is two-fold: 1) to sketch the complexities involved in making the judgment that X is an innovation and to reveal the numerous sources of dispute; 2) to suggest, as a result of this, that it is naive and misleading to denounce others as being "against innovation." It is naive, because it provides a simple blanket explanation for what may well be a whole variety of objections. And it is misleading because it seeks to condemn one's opponents out of hand as somehow being, rather foolishly, opposed to what is obviously valuable. We cannot have it both ways: If we use "innovation" in a value-laden way, we must allow the claim to enter the public forum in which value judgments are assessed.

It is commonly the case that what one person is prepared to call an educational innovation, someone else will dismiss as nonsense. To some, Illich is the most innovative of educational theorists, but to others his views appear, in an engaging paradox, as "smart-silly." Our earlier analysis suggests how such argument arises, but here I wish to bring out the different sorts of issues which such disputes may involve.

A) There is, in the first place, the assertion that no significant change has taken place. It will readily be admitted that, superficially, things seem to have changed radically, but the appearances are deceptive. Notice that the disputants here could agree that the changes are, as far as they go, of some value, but some hold that the
changes are not central enough to warrant the term "innovative." The following is a very clear example. The author lists a number of features of traditional schooling and then comments: "These characteristics also apply to supposedly innovative schools; for if we are honest about it, the innovations of the past decade have resulted in at best minimal changes."17 It does not follow that the author believes that "team-teaching," "modular-scheduling," etc. are of no value; rather he thinks that they do not get to the heart of the problems with traditional schooling.

Such disputes are sometimes conducted in language which suggests that the issue resolves around some plain matter of fact; e.g., "things have not really changed." "Yes, they have." An impasse which suggests that observation may settle the matter. Now observation is always relevant to such disputes, and sometimes the dispute is entirely factual, though scarcely ever is it a "plain matter of fact." But certainly the sophisticated observer may detect a change which the layman will miss.18 If the issue is a factual one, then more careful observation is the appropriate way to tackle it. Often, however, talk of "real change" is a disguised judgment masquerading as a plain matter of fact. "Real" is made to do the work of "significant." We must first of all then learn to avoid being bullied into accepting a view because it is presented as an "obviously true" factual remark, when in fact it is actually a controversial assessment or interpretation. Consider here John Holt's recent statement that "Most schools have changed very little."19 The change is not that few changes have occurred, but rather that the changes which have occurred have not made a significant difference, because "the spirit, on the whole, is what it always was." Holt merely offers this judgment and does not attempt to back it up. It is, however, clearly of a controversial nature. What is meant here by "spirit"? What sorts of observations would be relevant in support of this assertion? Why are the changes which have occurred irrelevant to the spirit of the school? Is the central consideration, in any case, the spirit of the institution or something else, such as the aims or the methods?

The tools of analytical philosophy are invaluable in facing such disputes. One part of this enterprise is to ask which features or aspects are central to a practice, institution, or concept. If progress can be made in this direction, then it may be possible to argue that a certain change does not seriously affect anything central to the institution, for example, but rather affects peripheral and insignificant matters. Clearly, those who differ in their analyses may be led to dispute whether or not a certain change should be regarded as an innovation.

Disagreement about whether or not a certain change has gone far enough may hinge on our calculations of how much the development will in fact alter the educational context, and we may well vary in our estimates of such consequences. And there is an irreducible element of uncertainty here, because the consequences will partly depend upon how seriously teachers respond to the proposed "innovations"; persuading them to view it as an innovation may be causally responsible for making it produce more than minimal changes. Thus "innovation" is sometimes used in an hortative manner. This is particularly the case when the new proposal has yet to be tried and tested.

This dispute also rests at times on differing assessments of how far the schools should go in a certain direction. (There can clearly be disagreements here, even between people who share the view that to do such and such would be to violate the concept altogether.) Hence, if X has in mind an ultimate development which is much less radical than Y's, he may well regard a proposal as a good step on the way to his goal, whereas Y views it as a purely token concession or development. A strategy which knocks a second off a mile race is not judged in the same way as one which takes a second off the Boston marathon record. And this is because of different estimates of how far we can go in the two cases.


18. Or conversely, detect a continuity where change had been alleged. I am reminded here of the reported phenomenon of desks, bookcases, and other items of furniture serving to substitute for walls in open-plan schools.

Second, there is the dispute as to whether or not the change is of value, and such a dispute need not involve any of the disputes discussed under A) above, for all parties may agree on the observable facts and concur that the change is "sufficiently different." Other factual issues may arise, however, for X may dispute Y’s contention that the proposal will lead to desirable outcomes, e.g., he may believe that the introduction of discussion periods may in fact lead to teachers failing to prepare adequately. On the other hand, he may have objections on principle to certain proposals, e.g., to restrict hiring to candidates who are citizens of the country in question. The objections here may range from the charge that the proposal is an outright affront to basic moral and educational principles to the view that it is just not very valuable.

Disagreements then can arise in many ways: 1) people may differ on the empirical data; 2) they may not agree on analytic questions; 3) they may fail to reach a common judgment as to whether or not the change is sufficiently different because (i) they disagree on how much it will in fact change things, or (ii) they have different ultimate goals; and 4) they place a different evaluation on the change because (i) they disagree whether it will produce valuable changes or not, or (ii) they disagree on certain matters of principle. Any disagreement might involve all of these aspects or some combination of them. I do not pretend to have compiled an exhaustive list of the sources of dispute in this area, but these seem to be some of the more important. It is not an easy matter, then, to determine what precisely a person is objecting to when he denounces an "innovation." It is surely dubious to draw the generalization that "the climate in support of the innovation ethic is not as hospitable as it might be." Even if every proposed innovation has been rejected, we cannot infer that those who raise objections wish to preserve things as they are, nor that they are opposed to desirable changes. Perhaps they are opposed to any changes whatsoever, but this would have to be established independently.

3. On Guiding and Leading

A) Earlier, I have referred to the Educational Innovator's Guide, and to the recent Registry of Innovative Practices in Education, established by the Educational Research Institute of British Columbia. It is crucial to remember that guides, registers, directories, and other lists are compiled for different purposes. One may simply find a list of all the restaurants in town without any comment as to their quality from the telephone directory. A list of the members of a university department does not attempt to say who might be worth talking to or studying with. A guide to the university campus tells you where different groups in the community are located but does not advise where to go. Of course, we can reasonably assume that those listed have met some standard of achievement. The National Medical Register only lists people who are professionally qualified and remain in good standing. Some standard has been attained and maintained by those who are listed. Still, such a book does not go on to say that Dr. X is better than Dr. Y, though some guides do this. Restaurants, hotels, movies may be comparatively rated. We needed to ask then: Does the Guide to (or Registry of) Innovative Practices in Education list all practices and proposals which some have claimed to be valuable, or does it merely include those which the authors or directors personally hold to be valuable? If all new proposals are being listed without evaluation, then it is misleading to use the term "innovation." If evaluation has occurred, then the reader should realize that he is viewing a selected list, that it constitutes an assessment which he may choose to reject, and that he is entitled to ask how the evaluation was reached. Before we can intelligently consult a guide, we need to know what task it has tried to fulfill. Sometimes the authors of such guides seem not to be clear on this themselves, for they will claim that 1) their work is based on "valuable suggestions" and 2) that some of the arguments may be "totally indefensible."
B) Finally, we need to resist the suggestion that educational leadership is to be identified with those who seek innovation. This move is fostered by the false view that attention to educational needs necessarily involves making up present deficiencies. It has been amply demonstrated that the concept of need also applies to certain things which we already possess. Children need to have access to a good library, even if the school has a good library. Educational leadership can equally be displayed by those who seek to preserve what is valuable when it is in danger of being abandoned.