POINTS FOR DEBATE

Should higher education curriculum develop political acumen among students?

Tracy Fortune*

La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia

Around 20 years ago, I was afforded a wonderful opportunity to create, within my own master of science degree, a module of study on any subject that I could demonstrate had some relevance to my overall major of study. That major was occupational therapy, and the module I chose to create saw me enrolling across a number of subjects spanning cultural origins and biological anthropology. I proposed that by studying ‘humans’ in terms of biological and cultural origins, I could add to the body of knowledge about humans as ‘occupational beings’.

I recollect this almost forgotten cross-discipline journey due to a current concern I have about the preparation of graduates for strategic and effective employment and, more specifically, the role that political acumen plays in surviving what Barnett (2011) refers to as the ‘supercomplex’ world of professional practice. The point I wish to make in this piece relates to how graduate attributes can really speak to the heart of the social and political landscape that graduates find themselves in today. It’s a landscape akin to a minefield. As workers in universities, we surely know what the consequences of stepping on mines can look like – for example, failure to gain promotion, ill health, limited autonomy over the balance of research and teaching and pressure to deliver better, more quality experiences for our students in a context of limited resources.

One of the most interesting ideas I was exposed to during my anthropological sojourn was the notion of ‘Machiavellian intelligence’ put forward in Byrne and Whiten’s (1988) classic Machiavellian intelligence: Social expertise and the evolution of intellect in monkeys, apes and humans. The text drew together a range of contributions all geared toward exploring how highly social animals, in particular primates, engaged in sophisticated tactics involving deception, cooperation and competition in order to secure needed resources. The thesis is that intelligence may have evolved as an adaptation to living in socially complex environments. Of particular interest was a chapter drawn from Franz de Waal’s (1982) Chimpanzee politics, which outlines a fascinating and compelling set of observational notes, one of which is entitled ‘Luit’s new policy’. The notes detail how one adult male (Luit) in the colony challenges another dominant male, Yeroen. While Yeroen initially has the support of many of the females in the colony, Luit has the support of another male, Nikkie. As Yeroen’s support from the females reduces over time due to increasing punishments from Yeroen’s rivals, Luit becomes the alpha male. Not only was Luit’s physical appearance

*Email: t.fortune@latrobe.edu.au
and stance new, he appeared to have a new policy (described as a consistent social behaviour acted out with a view to achieving a certain aim). It involved protecting females and other ‘lesser’ males from attack. In essence, Luit had set himself up as a champion of the peace to prevent conflicts from escalating through a policy of supporting the losers. Building strong ties with the females in the group together with other males helped to build a support base for when his position was threatened. Yeroen’s initial fall from power appeared to relate to his inability to protect the powerless or, in this case, protect the females from Luit and his supporters. Luit quickly learnt, however, that he needed a different policy once he was in power: one supported by the minions rather than merely power supported by other power brokers.

De Waal (1982) observes that the political manoeuvrings of chimpanzees are familiar enough in the human world. It seems that both chimps and humans alike need a sophisticated level of social astuteness (ability to read the social landscape) and an ability to ‘act’ (or deploy a range of apparently sincere social behaviours) in order to gain access to what is required, and then some, to keep it. De Waal draws a parallel between the politics of chimpanzees and the power of leaders that Niccolo Machiavelli, the Florentine diplomat who served in the republic between 1498–1512, wrote about in The prince (Skinner & Price, 1988):

He who attains the principality with the aid of the nobility maintains it with more difficulty than he who becomes prince with the assistance of the common people, for he finds himself a prince amidst many who feel themselves to be his equals, and because of this he can neither govern nor manage them as he might wish. (as cited in De Waal, 1982, p. 153)

Reference to Machiavelli seems to be associated with the more undesirable aspects of political skill, most notoriously deceit and cunning. While I am mindful not to advance the idea that we should promote learning that encourages students to act with deception in order to win access to what is desired in the world of work, we cannot ignore the likelihood that politically adept individuals may have greater capacity to effect change for their organisations, for themselves and, as has been observed (e.g. Harvey, Harris, Harris, & Wheeler, 2007; Perrewe et al., 2005), are less likely to experience social stress in the workplace.

This discussion obviously raises questions as to whether political skill or acumen can be readily learnt and/or taught. And, if there is potential for its considered development, where best to focus on developing these capabilities — in higher education or in work? Perrewe and Nelson (2004) argue that political skill is partly inherent in a person but can also be developed or shaped given exposure to proper environmental stimuli. By logical extension, if political skill is social skill applied to organisational environments, developing capabilities for politically adept practice before our students graduate requires us to consider the kinds of learning experiences to which they should be exposed. Arguably, the most authentic approximations will be work-integrated learning set around interdisciplinary projects sponsored by real organisations, although, as Perrewe (2006, n.p.) states, ‘political skill can also be taught’.

With respect to the importance of political skill among graduates, I will borrow the phrase ‘capabilities that count’ (Oliver, Whelan, Hunt, & Hammer, 2011, p. 5) and posit that, given the criticality of political skill to effective work performance, there is a need to prepare students in many vocationally oriented programs with this kind of capability before they graduate. Given the need for graduates to be responsive to the complex
socio-political environment in which they will work, and that this kind of capacity goes beyond what is usually captured in graduate attributes, a closer examination of this graduate capability is warranted.

Acknowledgements
Thanks to key academic staff from the University of East London from 1993–1995, Susan Ryan (Health Science) and Chris Knight (Anthropology).

References