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Don Lamberton – master academic craftsman: providing the necessary contradiction

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Don Lamberton's enthusiasm for the study of information economics has played an influential role in many academic careers. This paper searches for those attributes that distinguish Don Lamberton as an influential academic. Lamberton's influence was not solely grounded in the ideas that he promoted; it was also evident in the way he practiced his scholarly craft. The idea of the academic as a master craftsman is developed to explore this important yet often neglected aspect of Don Lamberton's working life. He was a master craftsman who invited and encouraged followers to join with him in a quest to appreciate and understand the role of information in the economy.

Introduction

> In lodgings and in taverns ideas were born and nursed. They were vague and impractical ideas that a man of the world would not entertain for a moment: yet thousands of students discovered that the rest of their lives was filled by a growing and nurturing of these ideas and the very subjects taught matured in this atmosphere. (Ashby, 1946, quoted in Forsyth, 2014, p.1)

Don Lamberton was a man of many dimensions: economist, educator, researcher, academic, author and editor, to name but a few of the scholarly roles he pursued. Above all, he was a man who nurtured ideas. Even this broad range of labels does not capture the essence of the man in terms of his influence on others. Lamberton's influence was considerable. He was someone you could learn from. His published work and tireless efforts in advancing ideas in information economics would be enough to explain why he was influential. However, what is often overlooked is that, in addition to his published books and papers, underpinning his work was a craftsmanship that guided how he conducted his professional work as an economist. This paper searches for the essence of this craft. There are no easy or simple answers to this search. To my knowledge, there was no 'how to' guide published by Lamberton. Understanding his craft must be built up from personal reflection and scraps of evidence that might be available. The search starts with the assertion that Don Lamberton played a significant and influential role in my professional development and subsequent academic work.

The impact of Don Lamberton's ideas is reflected in the lives of the many students he taught. For the most part, this impact remains as unwritten stories, recollections

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and memories. While this special issue of *Prometheus* redresses that somewhat, it is nevertheless important to explore whether some more general observations can be made about this impact. I argue here that some insight might be gained from reflecting on how Lamberton carried out his day-to-day work as an academic. Nowadays, the modern university pays only lip service to many of the traditional academic values that guided his life. Lamberton spent many years in universities, experiencing the academy as student, teacher, professor and department head, and in adjunct and visiting roles. This did not mean that he was always enamoured with the way universities were run, or indeed with some of the attitudes espoused by those in power. There were many frustrations. He was no stranger to controversy and often was left with little option other than to adopt a dissenting stance.

Dictionary definitions of the word 'influence' reflect on power and an ability to effect change. For example, the *Cambridge Online Dictionary* (2016) highlights the following: 'the power to have an effect on people or things, or a person or thing that is able to do this'; and 'to affect or change how someone or something develops, behaves, or thinks'. What is often not explored is the fact that the ability of a person to influence another depends on the willingness and openness of the subject of that influence to accept it. Complementarity is important for information sharing to occur (Lamberton, 1999a).

This paper is in two parts. The first part is a reflection on Lamberton's influence on my career and how I came to be receptive to his ideas. In the second part of the paper, I argue that the way Lamberton conducted his daily work as an academic had much in common with a master craftsman.

How one thing led to another

The title of this section reflects a book chapter by Don Lamberton with a similar title (Lamberton, 2003). In this chapter, Lamberton is recollecting the significance of the work of the economist Fritz Machlup on his own academic development, using an evolutionary framework to explain the connections. When seen with the benefit of hindsight, seemingly unconnected events show a level of 'connectedness' that explains how one thing can lead to another. 'Each link is plausible, but the beginning and the end are so unlike each other that no one could have foreseen this evolution' (Machlup, quoted in Lamberton, 2003, p.186). In reflecting on evolutionary processes, it is important to keep in mind 'what we have inherited is what we have selected, which means that we have not chose to disregard' (Finer, cited Raadschelders, 2000, p.499).

I use the idea of 'selection' as a structure to review my 40 years of involvement in the area of science and technology studies (STS) since starting as an undergraduate student in physics in 1975. The three elements which exhibit a degree of persistence (meaning they were not discarded) are: being engaged in networks that complement my work and interests; sharing a belief that conventional wisdom needs to be challenged if progress is to be made; and having a willingness to learn and adopt an eclectic approach to research problems and policy issues. The context for Lamberton's influence is my professional work, divided between the research/teaching/administration role of an academic, and policy role of a public servant. I have experienced the policy system (however imperfectly) from both the inside and the outside, so to speak. The subject matter has included some of the so-called 'wicked problems' – complex policy problems to which there are no easy solutions (Australian Public Service Commission, 2012). As it turned out, my research

interests would, over time, encompass the following policy areas: technology, information, knowledge, information technology, telecommunications and electronic commerce. Lamberton also applied his economic thinking to policy. Shared interest created the possibility that a deeper understanding of his work on my part might evolve over time. The common ground and the persistence of certain themes are important since they highlight not so much the nuts and bolts of how and why Lamberton was influential, but the values that underpinned this influence (Block, 2003). With hindsight, my mix of interests seemed to fit well, not so much with Lamberton's more erudite research interests in information economics, but certainly with the many cognate areas that he also found interesting and relevant.

Prometheus was launched in 1983 and I cannot underestimate the value of the journal in maintaining the networks that have sustained me over several decades. Getting a paper published in the journal was a logical first step for a nascent researcher. *Prometheus* welcomed new ideas in eclectic fields of study (which suited me as I had made a transition from physics into social science quite early, without the prejudice of a disciplinary training in any major social science field). The involvement deepened and by the mid-1990s I was a book review editor with much closer contact with Lamberton in his role as general editor. In 2003 I worked closely with Lamberton as a guest editor of the 20th anniversary issue of the journal. Although I never co-authored with Lamberton, I have long had a working relationship with his colleagues Stuart Macdonald and Tom Mandeville. In short, Lamberton's enthusiasm for his field, which in turn created an intellectual *milieu*, allowed me to benefit through timing, good fortune and shared interests. Ideas and shared interests, though, are not enough; supporting networks, and (as it turned out) a supporting journal, were critical to nurturing my invisible college. It is interesting that this invisible college proved to be one of the most nurturing aspects of my academic career. In the various university departments I worked, I often found little interest in interdisciplinary research. At times, there was outright hostility. Lamberton, and the group loosely assembled around him, offered a safe haven where ideas mattered most. One could work in this context free from many of the stresses generated by universities and the disciplinary and egotistical prejudices they foster.

Turning to the themes that have not been discarded over the years, I wish to emphasise Lamberton's presence in each. First, being engaged in networks that complement my work and interests was a vital element. Over time, those networks and personal connections shaped and gave meaning to what I would personally identify as my own Lamberton-valued scholarly networks. He knew who was worth talking to and worth reading. He had an avid interest in following up on the latest research, and he was always keen to suggest a list of further reading. In short, Lamberton nurtured an 'invisible college', and it was to this network that I was introduced as a young graduate student. The network connections grew over time, but I suspect they grew because I benefited much from them, and they also required a degree of commitment and contribution on my part. Important academics during this formative time were Ann Moyal,[1] Stuart Macdonald[2] and Ron Johnston[3] – all of whom were connected through various networks to Lamberton. As my interests moved away from policy practice towards university teaching and research, in the mid-1980s, I was drawn rather obliquely into Lamberton's orbit. Lamberton was one of my PhD examiners. The focus of my thesis was high technology and symbolic politics (Joseph, 1987), cognate areas for his interests in information economics.[4]

A second theme not discarded is the belief that conventional wisdom needs to be challenged if progress is to be made. I suspect that from an early age, this willingness to question was a central part of Lamberton's make-up (Lodewijks, 2007). Lamberton (2000) makes this point when writing in the *Australian Financial Review* about the risks associated with organisational obsolescence and lock-in:

> If the bottom line is paramount and we live in the 'new' knowledge-based economy, why is there so little recognition of the big contribution subversion can make? The people I have in mind are not the machine-breaking Luddites, dobbers or whistle-blowers, but the thinking person who persists in asking 'Why?' and challenges orthodoxy, whether it is in the boardroom, on the factory floor, in interdepartmental committee meetings or in the community at large.

Categorising Lamberton as a dissenter is not straightforward, given his diverse career and interests. From the perspective of intellectual content and theory, Lamberton was a champion of his own approach to information economics. In adopting this stance, Lamberton defined himself as a dissenter. He opposed narrow thinking in economics. He drew from the writings of Marx and Engels, Schumpeter, Machlup and the evolutionary thinker Kenneth Boulding to support his ideas about information economics (Lamberton, 2005). A couple of examples make this clear. Lamberton was fond of quoting Boulding's opinion of Machlup's 1962 book *The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States*, which was that it contains 'enough dynamite to blast traditional economics into orbit' (Boulding, cited Lamberton, 2003, p.184). In another example, Lamberton again quotes Boulding: 'The plain fact is that knowledge or something equivalent to it in the form of improbable structures is the only thing that can grow or evolve, and the concept is quite crucial to any evolutionary theory' (Boulding, cited Lamberton, 2003, p.191). Philip Mirowski (1994), a historian and philosopher of economic thought (and on Lamberton's recommended reading list), writes provocatively about scholarship, categorising scholars into two groups: those who believe every question has been answered, and those who do not. Given his theoretical disposition, Lamberton identifies clearly with the latter group at the intellectual level. This applied also to his writing on policy-oriented themes. However, in terms of scholarly practice, the nuance is more subtle. Head (2015) provides a more tailored grouping in the context of how academics contribute to policy advice. These are paraphrased below:

- Mainstream academics who provide broad commentary on policies, but have little engagement with practitioners. The impact of these academics is long term, falling into the category of educational influence.
- Academics who are more polemical and specialise in providing evidence-informed critiques of government policy in a chosen policy sector. These academics are often ignored by decision-makers and are generally overlooked by public servants because of dissonance with government policy settings. In the long run, these academics might be seen as precursors to emerging new paradigms.
- A small group that provides research consultancy services.
- A smaller group again, seconded into the public service to become, for a time, insiders.

Where Lamberton sits in this spectrum will be open to debate, but from my perspective, and in Lamberton's own words, 'The effectiveness of the subversive's message depends not only on its content, but also on the state of readiness of the recipient' (Lamberton, 2000, p.32). Lamberton's brand of dissent and questioning may not have been evident to me as a young public servant in Canberra in the early 1980s. What was evident, however, was that new and challenging ideas were not readily accepted within the bureaucracy. The public service gatekeepers with whom I came in contact were adept at filtering out ideas that might be challenging or threatening to conventional wisdom. The Canberra mindset resisted new and interesting possibilities (Pusey, 1991). This sat uncomfortably with me. As a consequence, my interests shifted away from the public service to what work was available in universities. In the early 1990s, this meant policy issues in information and information technology rather than STS in the broader sense. My developing interest in information and information technology policy encouraged an eclectic and inter-disciplinary approach to research. Complementing this was a growing awareness of Lamberton's theoretical approach, which encompassed an infectious enthusiasm for the cognate disciplines that informed his brand of information economics and his approach to political economy.

The third area of persistence is the willingness to learn and adopt an eclectic approach to research problems and policy issues. Lamberton's influence here can be identified in my published work, where it is evident that my ideas have developed from his enthusiasms. Examples include knowledge and lock-in, especially in organisations and in education (Joseph, 2002), telecommunications and development (Joseph, 2001), the economics of language, specifically the rhetoric of economics (Joseph, 1999), and my reflections on the evolutionary thinking of Boulding (Joseph, 2003). Likewise, Lamberton's interest in knowledge and work helped shape exploration of the idea of the knowledge worker (Joseph, 2004, 2005). These were areas of interest shared, but never sufficiently enmeshed to warrant co-authorship. However, there was a sort of co-production: one has only to think of *Prometheus*. A number of years as editor of the journal's book review section and, indeed, as the author of many book reviews (a good few referred to me by Lamberton himself) were spent in a form of co-production. In short, Lamberton's research ideas were interesting, challenging and paradigmatic. Exposure to these ideas inevitably led to their further investigation as one thing led to another.

Lamberton: a master craftsman

The notion of craft in public service has a long history and is now experiencing a resurgence in the light of fears about the quality of advice being provided by the public servants (Tiernan, 2015). Given the corrosive nature of managerialism in the modern university and its negative impact on what universities traditionally do, the idea of reappraising the contemporary skills of the academic is gaining attention (Debowski, 2012). However, a prescient Don Lamberton, writing some 15 years ago, already sensed the need for a return to traditional craft skills and values in the academy:

> The universities have begun redefining their role and, instead of specialising in either the transfer of information or accreditation, they might (before it is too late) contemplate coalitions building on their traditional asset base: stocks of information;

> information-producing capabilities, skilled staff who can cross borders, the scarce resource called curiosity, and that other kind of capital, tradition. Such an alliance of this very old institution with the latest of knowledge-based capabilities has the potential to be the confidant of business, the community and government, and could excel in knowledge management by realising the productivity of subversion (Lamberton, 2000, p.32).

Lamberton's academic craft skills are manifest in his published work. However, it is the craft as practised in the daily (largely tacit) routine of academic work that is of interest here. According to Goodsell (1992), craft has four elements:

- Mastery: The mastery of a difficult and specialised task is at the core of craftsmanship.
- Identity: Achieving master status creates a sense of group distinctiveness.
- Responsibility: Craftsmen accept responsibility for their work.
- Practical learning: Traditional craft knowledge is not codified and written down.

There is no need to explore all aspects of Lamberton's craft work to make the point that he was a master academic craftsman. For example, Lamberton's mastery of his field is without question, supported by his ability to define a whole research agenda (Lamberton, 1999b; Macdonald and Nightingale, 1999). This identity is also manifest in the successful science and technology for economic progress (STEP) seminar/workshop programme for postgraduates, which ran for years under Lamberton's guidance and mentorship. Many doctoral students benefitted from the week-long intensive format, exposing students and mentors to new ways of thinking. In typical Lamberton style (which reflected his approach to his craft), the STEP workshops relied on the goodwill of a supporting university. This goodwill became harder to find as universities shunned the value of this approach in the face of budget constraints and an instrumental approach to student supervision. But it is in the area of responsibility and practical learning that my personal interaction with Lamberton really underlines his craft.

Responsibility

Lamberton took personal responsibility for this work in many ways. His published work was always of the highest quality and he did not shirk responsibility when providing dissenting comment to government enquiries. Likewise, Lamberton's responsibility for sound academic practice was manifest in the way he undertook the role of general editor of *Prometheus*, and the importance he placed on the book review section. For example, *Prometheus* editors were expected to help authors to publish. In the case of book reviews, care was taken to ensure books were not placed with reviewers that might hold a prejudiced view against the content or the author. However, it is in PhD supervision and examination that the sort of responsibility Lamberton took is most evident. He approached a PhD thesis with an eye for the future as well as making sure ideas were fully developed and explored. Drawing on his examiner's report on my own PhD thesis (Joseph, 1987), I have extracted and paraphrased key phrases which show how he approached the task. After providing a general overview of the argument of the thesis and giving a favourable judgement,

Lamberton's wording both encourages a future programme of research and probes certain deficiencies in content and approach. The key phrases (my italics) are below:

> There are *matters of significance* that the candidate may wish to deal with *in the further development of his work.*
>
> Some *literature that might have been helpful* appears to have been overlooked.
>
> I must express some surprise at *the lack of attention to both the longer term historical context and the international dimensions* … for example, the consequences of asymmetric information when well-informed multi-nationals confront Australian decision-makers enmeshed in political myth and ritual.
>
> Attention is given to the *problem of defining* high technology but *technology itself* escapes such scrutiny.
>
> One is left with some doubt about the myth of the post-industrial society … a good case can be made that economic systems are undergoing rather important changes. It is not necessary to argue that manufacturing will have no role nor that all changes are sure to bring net benefits. *One must not confuse the label with the reality*.

The phrases are typical of Lamberton's day-to-day approach. They show how he took personal responsibility for maintaining academic standards as he understood them, and for nurturing future research and novice researchers.

Practical learning

Practical learning as an element of craft is traditional knowledge which is not codified and written down. At one time, the opportunistic way in which some university staff, and indeed departments, approached supervision was of concern to both Lamberton and me (see Schiff and Ryan, 1996). Practices differed across disciplines and in some cases research supervision seemed to be driven by the funding model prevailing at the time. For example, if the model favoured enrolments over completions, the candidates were enrolled but then left to sink or swim on their own merits with minimal supervisor support. Conversely, if the model favoured completions, then lengthy candidatures were discouraged with sometimes sub-standard theses being submitted for examination (just before the expiry of the candidate's enrolment). What was a supervisor to do?

Lamberton's approach to supervision came naturally. Although he never published on the subject, it is possible to get some sense of the values he brought to supervision. These were alluded to in an email that Lamberton copied to me in 1998 when he was providing some comments to an author of a book chapter about PhD supervision. The essence of this email (paraphrasing Lamberton's words) is below (with my italics):

> *Co-production* is a process that *begins before candidature* and continues long after.
>
> A supervisor's comments should address both the candidate's thinking and development of ideas as well as their writing efforts.

> *Written comments complement oral and it is the combined package that counts*. Sometimes the best advice is not that this writing is wrong and should be done differently but rather 'I'd like you to read …'. *It is so much better that they detect that link for themselves*.

> I find my primary concern is the thinking, although I like to have reassurance that they will be able to write well. So I encourage and facilitate conference paper and journal submissions. A hard part is *getting them to think of the examiners as the readers*, as an exercise in communication not with the supervisors but with experts who will start reading knowing nothing about the path with its trials and tribulations. They have to be disabused of the notion of writing 'the book' for popular consumption – that can come later. The writing and the talking are interwoven.

> No two [students] are alike. It is always a different mix of encouraging, pushing, restraining, guiding, hand-holding. Perhaps the best acknowledgement I ever received was simply that *I'd provided the necessary contradiction*.

> The consequence of the panel rather than a single supervisor and of changes of supervision deserve attention, as do cases, in some disciplines … where the candidate really serves an apprenticeship by carrying out a task selected and managed by the supervisor.

> *A supervisor's wish to or even willingness to publish jointly with the candidate has to me always seemed a danger signal.*

Lamberton's mastery of the craft is underpinned by foresight: he has an eye to the future and at the same time is conscious of nurturing the whole student. This approach is underlined by the notion of co-production, which I understand to be a way of nurturing a new researcher, almost as an equal. Likewise, he has a keen sense of the psychology of nurturing expertise – namely, that he wants to create conditions where students will see the links for themselves. He leads, but does not aspire to dominate the thinking of the student. Lamberton is satisfied with the simple and humble accolade of providing the 'necessary contradiction'. The final remark about not publishing with the candidate is interesting. The publication (with supervisor input, of course) must be something for which the candidate can take credit. See this in the light of the importance that Lamberton attached to co-production as the best way to nurture an independent researcher. Lamberton's approach to supervision was nuanced and deliberate – a true example of practical learning.

Conclusion

Lamberton had a significant influence on my academic career. This influence grew with my evolving receptiveness to what he had to say. Chance played a part too. It was not only his ideas that proved influential: Lamberton encouraged others to work alongside him. In no small part, *Prometheus* was a vital force in bringing these interests together. With hindsight, it is clear why Lamberton was influential: he was a master academic craftsman. While Don Lamberton is no longer with us, he has left a powerful legacy. The work he started and the questions he asked will influence the work of others for many years to come.

Notes

1. The historian Ann Moyal, AM, was for a time in the 1970s the director of the science policy research centre at Griffith University in Brisbane. She was an outspoken critic of narrow and chauvinistic thinking (Martin, 1986). Moyal was one of my teachers and contributed to the formation of *Prometheus*. Jarlath Ronayne was also at Griffith University during the first year of my undergraduate studies, and was influential in introducing me to the challenging questions posed by science policy.
2. It was through Ann Moyal that I was introduced to Stuart Macdonald, who would later become a co-supervisor of my PhD. Macdonald was a colleague of Lamberton's at the University of Queensland and they had worked together on joint publications and *Prometheus*. Macdonald's 'information perspective' was influential in my approach to thinking. Important examples include Lamberton *et al.* (1984) and Macdonald (1998).
3. Ron Johnston was the foundation professor of the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Wollongong, NSW. The department later changed its name to the Department of Science and Technology Studies. Johnston was a co-supervisor of my PhD thesis, together with Macdonald, and had a particularly important influence on the eclectic approach adopted in my PhD thesis. In the mid-1980s, he had brought together a vibrant team of researchers and students. He was also a co-director of the Centre for Technology and Social Change (TASC). Work with Johnston as a student introduced me to the rhetorical dimensions of economics in science and technology policy (Joseph and Johnston, 1985), a theme that would later overlap with the interests of Lamberton.
4. I recall Don Lamberton saying some years later that while I was never a student under his supervision, I had benefited from the contact with Stuart Macdonald, a PhD co-supervisor, which led to exposure to some of the ideas and research climate he [Lamberton] was trying to create at the University of Queensland in the 1980s.

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