What's politics got to do with it?
'Power' as a 'threshold' concept for undergraduate business students

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Politics courses embedded in business and commerce degree programs have soared in number in recent years. Yet how business students, often compulsorily enrolled in politics courses, learn key politics concepts is an under-researched area. The purpose of this article is to determine where the teaching and learning of political science and business intersects. This research reviews the place of the "threshold concept" in student learning, with particular reference to "power" as a political concept. This article advances three arguments: that the study of political institutions involves a series of "threshold" concepts that students must pass over before moving onto a higher plane of understanding; that the teaching of political institutions should span the three key areas of knowledge, attitudes and skills; and that a real understanding of political institutions allows students to regard business figures, in pursuing self-interest, as "political" actors like any other.

Keywords: *Politics, power, business, threshold concept*

Introduction

The social sciences have featured heavily in higher education since the early 20th century, with political science enjoying a particularly rapid explosion in teaching in the post-war period. This is due largely to the West's conscious intent to highlight democratic institutions and the liberal tradition as a way to reconcile the horrors of European fascism and a threat of an international communism (Ward, 1992: 23-42). This focus has extended even further in the past 30 years to the teaching and learning of business and commerce studies, particularly in the wake of economic rationalism in the 1980s (Pusey, 1992), the Asian currency crisis of the late 1990s, and especially after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. As government policy has drifted toward increased globalization as indemnity against both economic malaise and anti-democratic post 9/11 forces, higher education providers have responded by offering programs tailored to the new economic and security global order.

This article is a study of the knowledge, skills and attitudes of a small group of adult undergraduate university students. Yet while its context – higher education experiences of five participants – is comparatively narrow, it is intuitive that wider implications can be drawn for all adult learners. For higher education, one reality remains: many students will find themselves compulsorily, and therefore probably reluctantly, enrolled in subject areas outside their primary area of interest. In terms of business and commerce students' experiences, the critical question for teachers is how to make politics meaningful. Three research questions immediately emerge: how do business and commerce students "learn" core politics concepts? How do they value the study of politics as part of their wider business training? How do students use acquired concepts to prepare coursework assignments?

The article advances three arguments: first, the study of political institutions involves a series of "threshold" concepts that students must pass over before moving onto a higher plane of understanding to become truly transformed learners; second, the teaching of political institutions should span *knowledge*, *attitudes* and *skills*; third, a real understanding of power allows students to regard business figures as "political" actors in the exercise of power and in the pursuit of self-interest. The article acknowledges innumerable definitions of "politics" and "power" but, for the purposes of this study, it employs commonly cited definitions, as outlined below, by Heywood (2002) and Lasswell (1936). These include the notion that all politics involves power, conflict and decision-making in the distribution of limited resources, with the corollary being that political relationships, both formal and informal, are ubiquitous. Ultimately, it is argued that a broadened understanding of politics will allow students to take full advantage of commercial opportunities in the "real" corporate world.

Various learning taxonomies support this notion in arguing that students must pass through lower knowledge and skill levels before proceeding to higher planes of cognition. Bloom's taxonomy ([1956] 1984) argues that higher planes such as "Synthesis" and "Evaluation" are hallmarks of student development. Similarly, Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) taxonomy schedules "remembering" and "understanding" at the base, with "evaluating" and "creating" at the apex. In short, this paper argues that the passing over of key "threshold" concepts facilitates students' upward spiral through these planes.

Literature Review

There is an abundance of literature describing adult learners and their negotiation of "difficult" concepts. Jarvis's *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning* (1983; 2010) argues that adult learners are individuals and it is the "*person* as learner" (emphasis added) that should inform any approach to adult teaching and learning (2010: 1; 106). Invoking Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of human needs, Jarvis argues that people learn about themselves before learning to become members of a civic society – a key conclusion for the purposes of this

study. Mezirow (1997) adds the further dimension of "transformative learning" that he describes as a

> process of effecting change in a *frame of reference*. Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience – associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses – frames of reference that define their life world. Frames of reference are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set our 'line of action'.

Many studies of social science education exist, with a substantial proportion dedicated to the teaching of business studies, but with two major limitations. First, US studies are over-represented, and narrow themes such as business ethics dominate the discourse. Useful examples, however, include McDonald's (2004) study of integrating ethics studies, Burton's (2004) work on teaching the "Golden Rule", Morrell's (2004) exploration of ethics and 'Socratic Dialogue', and Lampe's (1997) research into ethics teaching. Other studies more specifically target the pedagogy of business and commerce studies, such as McFarlane's (2000) "Inside the Corporate Classroom", and Mercado's investigation of classroom 'role-play' as a component of "pre-managerial" business education (2000). There is also research on the teaching of public administration and civics. Examples include Davis and Wanna's (1997) "Does the Teaching of Public Administration have a Future?", Chandler's (2002) study of economic deregulation and the decline in public administration teaching, and Weinstein's (2004) analysis of civics education as "learning about the other". In addition, Hill (2003) explores a novel approach to the teaching of civics by linking the physical sciences to politics. Yet it is the literature covering the teaching of more "traditional" political science, such as institutions, that is this article's focus. Critical examples include Belanger's (2004) work on teaching comparative politics, Linser et al's (1999) exploration of web-based "simulations" when teaching politics, and Kehl's (2002) more specific excursion into "indicators" of political science scholarship on the discipline's teaching.

The literature focusing on *interdisciplinary* approaches is arguably the most useful one in terms of exploring students' experiences in courses outside learners' primary discipline. By linking new conceptual material in one curriculum field to previously acquired concepts in a more familiar area, teachers can assist students "jump" cavernous gaps in curriculum, and to move from mere "surface" to "deep" learning (Jacobs, 1989; Hall and Weaver, 2001; Warburton 2003). Johnson (1998) applies this by linking politics to history, while Sherman and Waismel-Manor (2002) explore writing as a strategy to teach political science. Yet there is scant literature dedicated specifically to the teaching of political science to business or commerce students. This paper's secondary purpose is therefore to bridge this gap and offer concrete data on business and commerce students' learning experiences.

Perhaps the most utilitarian model in understanding how students negotiate new concepts is that of the "threshold", a term popularized by Meyer and Land (2003, 2005, 2006) who differentiate "between core learning outcomes that represent 'seeing things in a new way' and those that do not" (2003: 1). Often referred to colloquially as "core concepts", Meyer and Land elaborate the threshold concept as

> a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress (2003:1).

Further described as a "conceptual 'building block' that progresses understanding of the subject", the threshold concept can be equated to Perkins's "troublesome concepts...those things that are "conceptually difficult, counter-intuitive or 'alien'" (cited in Meyer and Land, 2003: 1). The 'threshold' concept is therefore the inverse of "ritual" knowledge – such as historical names and dates – that students invariably find "routine and rather meaningless", and "inert" knowledge that "sits in the mind's attic, unpacked only when specifically called for by a quiz" (Perkins, cited in Meyer and Land, 2003: 6). It is also important to note the "threshold concept" transcend disciplines.

Meyer and Land (2003: 4-5) identify five characteristics within any "threshold concept". First, it will be "transformative", with its effect on student learning "occasion[ing] a significant shift in the perception of the subject". Second, students' "learning behaviours" should be "irreversible" – that is, *permanently* transformed. Third, it will be "integrative", with students ultimately able to "expose the previously hidden interrelatedness of something". Fourth, it will be "bounded" in that the "conceptual space will have terminal frontiers". Last, the threshold concept will often be "troublesome". Importantly, Meyer and Land argue the threshold model is not confined to concepts but can be extended to "ways of [student] thinking and practising" (2003: 9). Examples of threshold concepts include undergraduate law students' grappling with "precedent", accounting students' encounter with "depreciation", the "central limit theorem" in statistics, "entropy" in physics, "irony" in literature, and notions of "pain" and "caring" in medical students' understanding of patient care.

The question of how teachers can assist students to pass over conceptual "thresholds" is central. Ellsworth (cited in Meyer and Land, 2005: 378) suggests a "counter-narrative" that she labels "thinking otherwise", while Halden (cited in Meyer and Land, 2005: 382) suggests teachers must pose for students 'real-world' problems to facilitate conceptual breakthroughs. If teachers ask only the usual 'textbook' questions, they "risk getting responses that mirror verbatim learning only" (Halden, cited in Meyer and Land, 2005: 382). Clouder (2005: 512-14) concurs when she argues that thresholds will be passed over when students are "touched personally by events so that students connect", a process that might also require students being "immersed" in the concept and / or experience. Clouder might also be stating the obvious when she suggests students will pass over thresholds via "discussion" and "knowledge gathering", but it is her context that is important: threshold knowledge can be "gathered" from peers as well as teachers (2005: 512). An equally critical question is how teachers know when students have successfully passed over conceptual thresholds. Meyer and Land suggest threshold concepts are not just part of students' "understanding" but also part of students' "expression" (2005: 380). Like other meaningful instruments of formative assessment, students passing successfully

over a 'threshold' will be capable of *expressing a demonstrated shift in thinking, skills and attitudes*. This article now applies the 'threshold' theory to the author's study of business students' encounter with 'power' as a core politics concept.

Strengths and limitations of the 'threshold' model

There are clear advantages in employing the "threshold" model in course design. Cousin (2006) reminds us, for example, that academic teachers have a tendency

> to stuff the curriculum with content, burdening themselves with the task of transmitting vast amounts of knowledge bulk and their students of absorbing and reproducing this bulk. In contrast, a focus on threshold concepts enables teachers to make refined decisions about what is fundamental to a grasp of the subject they are teaching. It is a 'less is more' approach to curriculum design.

For Cousin, a "threshold" approach offers students an ontological experience of understanding, and even of changed "being", simply because the passing over a conceptual threshold is transformative in how learners identify themselves (Cousin 2006: 4). But the model's limitations must also be acknowledged. As Bowbottom (2007: 267-68) argues, there is a probability of any given threshold being "agent-relative" – lacking uniformity across scholarly disciplines and learning contexts. It is, Rowbottom (2007: 267-68) argues, possible to "play football without understanding all the rules".

Context of this study

As outlined above, many political science courses are delivered within the wider context of business and commerce degree programs, with many political science staff located within business schools, and with students often compulsorily enrolled in "gate-keeper" politics courses in their first year of university study. Moreover, these usually young students will boast several common characteristics: they will often have little working knowledge of political institutions; they will have a negative perception of those institutions; they will probably have low expectations of such courses in terms of personal fulfillment;

and they will usually eschew formal political participation outside the school or university (Carr, 1991; Frazer, 2000; Galston, 2001; Henn, Weinstein and Forrest, 2005). Indeed, many compulsorily-enrolled students have invariably asked: "what politics had to do with business?" (McDonald, 2004: 372). Given this context, the adoption of the "threshold concept" as a research frame is appropriate.

A small sample of five undergraduate business and commerce students, compulsorily enrolled in an introductory "business and government" course at an Australian university, was self-selected to participate in one-on-one interviews with the author. Each student was in his or her first year, and second semester, of undergraduate study. It is acknowledged that self-selection can skew results in favour of engaged, higher achieving students; however, random sampling was rejected owing to very small enrolments. Satisfactorily, there was among volunteers a representative range of age, sex and skill level, with male and female participants ranging in age from late teens to mid 40s, and from 'average' to 'high' scholarly ability. The University granted ethical clearance for the conduct of face-to-face interviews of between 30 and 45 minutes' duration. Questions were initially narrowly framed and discussions were free-ranging thereafter. To maintain anonymity, only students' initials appear in this article. For two reasons, the interviews were conducted in the last quarter of their course: to give students ample lecture topics on which to reflect, and to give students an opportunity to evaluate the role of "power" as a concept in the preparation of a major assignment which required students to research and write an advocacy report, reflecting the "real" commercial world, that either supported or opposed current government policy. Students were therefore required not only to gather facts but also argue a case via their analysis of the likely political and economic impact of their policy position on both government and the community. In short, students were required to think not just "economically" and "scientifically" but also "politically".

Students were assisted over the "politics is power" threshold via a core reading: "What is Politics?" – an introductory chapter to Heywood's *Politics* (2002). After exploring Aristotle's famous quote that "man is, by nature, a political animal", Heywood 2002 canvases four classical

roles of politics: Politics as the "art" of governance; politics as "public affairs" and, most germane to the needs of [this course] – politics as "compromise and consensus" and politics as "power" (2002: 5-12). It is these last two definitions that business students were especially encouraged to deconstruct, with the desired conclusion being that politics ultimately hinges on the relationships – formal or informal – between institutions, between institutions and individuals, and between individuals. Students' were then exposed to Harold Lasswell's famous quote that politics is about "who gets what, when, and how" (1936). It was here that students met their first "threshold" as they grappled with the idea that politics, at its most primal, is based on power and the distribution of resources. Most critically as a "troublesome" concept, politics, under this definition, encompasses virtually every human relationship.

Relatively early in the semester, the lecturer evaluated where each student was located in terms of the "politics as power" threshold. From a list of broadly varying human activities – including business lobbying, the seeking of legal permission for a demonstration, the interaction between a salesperson and a customer, the negotiation between a teacher and a student over assessment requirements, and a friendship group deciding where to dine – students were required to identify which were "political" and which were not. Clearly, those students already equipped to pass over the threshold defined all activities as "political" as they correctly concluded that each involved decision-making, compromise and consensus, and each resulted in "winners" and "losers". Most students, however, were incredulous that all scenarios could be deemed "political". Yet this resistance offered a critical teaching pivot-point at which student understanding could take a productive turn, and where a carefully selected sequence of teacher-led questions lead learners over this conceptual threshold. These questions included: "Are journalists 'political' for attempting to set media and public agendas? If so, are business people 'political' for attempting to do the same?" Group discussions resulted in students broadening their definition of politics.

Research framework & method

This article's research is framed around the need for teachers to determine how their adult students negotiate "threshold" concepts in disciplines outside their primary scholarly discipline. It is also framed around the student "voice" as an example of localized research that assumes (usually young) students

> have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling; that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults; and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education (Cook-Sather, 2006: 359-60).

The paper's method employs a broader phenomenological approach where researchers "seek our participants' point of view of their experience" (Seidman, 2012: 17). A phenomenological method was selected because, as Moustakas (1994: 46-47) argues, "the investigator abstains from making suppositions [and] focuses on a specific topic freshly and naively". Given that researchers, who are also practising educators, will often be familiar with participants, there is risk of subjectivity, and even "projection", where the interviewer "falsely attribut[es]…thoughts to others" (Drapeau, 2002). A phenomenological approach was therefore chosen to consciously counter this risk.

Yet limits to phenomenological approaches must also be acknowledged. First, as Seidman (2012: 17) asserts, researchers "must be modest about our expectations" because "it is never possible to understand another [person] perfectly". At best, researchers can expect a "reconstruction" of participants' past experiences (Seidman, 2012: 17-18). In addition, Beck (1994: 254) argues that findings can be compromised if the researcher imposes "past knowledge" on the current study. Notwithstanding these potential shortcomings, the phenomenological method – via the "intentional gaze" of in-depth interviewing – was selected for its capacity to "search for the true essence, the real 'is' of another's experience" (Seidman, 2012: 17-18).

Data analysis and discussion

This section presents students' responses and analyses them in context. To reflect this article's research questions, students' responses are divided into three streams: *Knowledge*, *Attitudes*, and *Skills*.

Knowledge

Students were first asked to define politics and power, and to provide examples of each. Students were then asked how they had crossed the "politics as power" threshold, and how they knew they had done so.

The first interviewee, AL, offered his definition of politics:

> Politics is the grease that keeps the engine going. It's the interaction between government and business. All my life I've only looked at things from the business side of things. I've never looked at it from the politics side. [This course] has been good to give me a balanced look at things...

AL's use of the term "grease" indicates an understanding of politics as a "process" rather than an object in itself, and suggests he had genuinely reached a higher plane of understanding. The response also suggests AL understood the nature of "relationships" in defining politics and power – a key step in the cognitive process. Indeed, AL appeared to pass over the threshold easily:

> The first part of the course was like a penny dropping, once I understood how federalism works, I guess. The lobby groups [topic] really weren't of interest to me, but another penny dropping moment was the media part, once I worked out how the Australian parliamentary monster worked. It all ties in with not just how politics works but how it affects the world. The stories you told us about Japan helped me remember that information.

AL's unsolicited use of the phrase "penny dropping" is perhaps the most concrete example of student language demonstrating a student's successful negotiation of a threshold concept. Indeed, its use is so appropriate that perhaps yet another synonym for "threshold concept" might be the "penny drop concept" (see Hays, 2008).

AL expanded upon how he came to understand that politics is also about power:

> I've learnt that power is the game played between politicians at state and federal level, the blame game. Local government blames states, states blame federal. One of the things that opened my eyes is the media and the impact it has. That makes me realise power is everywhere...

Moreover, in likening political relationships to a "game" not unlike the "game theory" of mathematics and economics, AL has concluded that political relationships produce "winners" and "losers". But AL's qualification that the "game" is confined to "politicians", and his lack of reference to people like himself, suggests he does not yet fully comprehend some of the dimensions of "politics as power". But AL's final statement – his acknowledgement that "power is everywhere" – is strong evidence of something of a crossed threshold.

LE was more economical in response. When questioned on how her understanding of power had changed over the semester, LE responded:

> At the start of the course I thought of power as a business concept. I still do, which probably sounds a bit back to front. But I now know that business and politics and power intertwine and work much the same way. I have done industrial relations subjects and it's there we see power plays between people. I've reflected back on things in this course when doing those other subjects.

Like AL, LE's response that she thought of power only in business terms initially suggests a failed attempt to cross a threshold. But her additional comment that "business and politics and power intertwine" does suggest some, albeit limited, acceptance of a broadened definition of "politics as power". Satisfyingly, LE spoke of "reflection" as she independently linked subject matter in one discipline to that in another. This, too, suggests an intellectual transformation not unlike students' passing into "Synthesis", as defined by Bloom (1984).

AD also demonstrated the passing of a threshold:

> Politics is about people; politics is all around us. I now see power as anyone who can say or do something that affects another person. Business has power if they band together, and consumers have power if they band together.

As with other respondents, AD saw politics as universal and involving actors other than politicians. But it is AD's following remarks that were most telling:

> I can see parallels in my [pest control] business. Everything has been lining up between what's happening in my business and what's been taught in the course.

Like LE, AD indicates a link between the theoretical and the "real" world, a step he appears to have taken independently. In short, it appears AD, too, has been "transformed" by his ability to draw conceptual links and, thus, jump across the "power as politics" threshold.

EJ also drew interdisciplinary links:

> I found [the course] particularly useful for my industrial relations course. It links the two areas together and [this course] takes things a lot further. Politics is touching everything, not just what happens in parliament and at election times. Same with power. Power has to do with everything you do. I've learnt that decisions in the High Court have affected my life but before I didn't know how. Understanding pressure groups was also a big one for me.

Satisfyingly, EJ demonstrated an understanding of the politics involved in everyday life, one indicated by the linking of "politics" to "power". Moreover, EJ's reference to the High Court as a site of *political* power, and especially the High Court's *political* role as one impacting on everyday life, indicated a crossed conceptual threshold.

Interestingly, EQ's response went beyond EJ's:

> I've really come to understand how much business really depends on government, how closely business and government are tied. When in business you have to have good relations with government. [This course] relates that to us, and what you're

going to experience once you leave university. Some core subjects are horrible and you think 'what the hell has that got to do with anything?' whereas politics is in everyday life. It has more to with life than any other subject I've done. This course has brought other subjects, like economics and industrial relations, into real life.

Importantly, EQ not only cites the general relevance of politics and its inherent interdisciplinary nature but she also drew a link often problematic for students: to connect current coursework with "what [one is] going to experience once [one] leave[s] university".

Attitudes

Interviewees were also asked their attitude towards their students' compulsory enrolment in politics subjects. The responses ranged from pragmatic to altruistic. LE, for example, was among the more practical:

I decided I would just have to do [this course]. I didn't look at it like a politics course. I looked at it like a business course. But I found it really relevant. I had some but not enough knowledge of politics and I needed something to help me. It's information every Australian citizen should have.

LE's approach to what is, for many students, an "alien" course replete with "troublesome" concepts offers teachers of politics unique insight. It may well prove advantageous for instructors to market their politics courses not as discrete political science subjects but as attendant business units. Clearly, encouraging students to cross seamlessly between business and politics not only diminishes anxiety among first year students but allows students to draw links between the political and commercial worlds – a universally desired if problematic teaching objective. LE's response was also noteworthy in that she expanded the value of studying politics beyond self-interest to the community at large. This objective of civic education – in keeping with the democratic principles introduced in this article – is another goal of teachers of political science (Galston, 2001).

AD is another who adopted a pragmatic attitude early in the course:

> I looked at politics as something I needed to learn about. I went into [this course] with an open mind, nothing 'hard core' one way or another. The course did confirm some of my beliefs but the new information I've learnt will also come in useful.

Clearly, AD enjoys a perspective not always shared with peers. In commencing her course with "an open mind", AD was able to look beyond those learning experiences that merely "confirmed" existing "beliefs" toward a bigger picture. AD's comment raises new questions not only of the importance of students keeping an "open mind" when beginning any study but, also, the importance of teaching students how to do so.

EJ's response might be less worldly but it remains consistent with LE's pragmatism:

> I wasn't sure politics would be relevant. I want to be an accountant, but I thought 'I've got to do it and I might learn something from it'. I found out that [this course] is very relevant. I debate with my parents a lot more and have conversations about politics a lot more. I can relate to it and my Dad loves it.

EJ's development of a positive attitude to the study of politics also demonstrates her finding a rightful place for politics in her everyday world. In identifying with family members' interests, EJ – and students like her – enjoyed a genuine cultural and cognitive shift in her value of political knowledge. For EJ, the study of politics has brought not just functional benefits but also a sense of personal fulfillment. This, too, is consistent with civic education goals, and indicates, as Meyer and Land (2003: 4-5) and Cousin (2006: 4) argue, student whose "being" has been genuinely "transformed".

The final two respondents shared an enthusiasm for undertaking a politics course that suggests business and commerce students' antipathy towards political science can be overstated. AL, for example, echoed EJ's sense of personal enrichment:

> I was quite happy to do a course on Australian politics. I'm from New Zealand and the politics [there] are quite different. I had a rough understanding of Australian politics so I wasn't too

worried about doing a compulsory politics course. I think studying politics makes people feel less powerless. People should be better informed by the end of this course.

AL – in his use of the phrases "less powerless" and "better informed" – demonstrated an understanding of "politics as power" and "civic value" respectively. Importantly, they appear to be 'thresholds' AL crossed easily and enthusiastically, strongly suggesting a positive correlation between student attitude and student success.

EQ revealed an equally positive attitude at course's commencement:

I felt good about doing a politics course. I was quite happy to do it. I've always been a bit interested in politics. But the course is better than I expected. Originally I wanted to do a marketing degree. But politics would have been more fun.

Critically, AL and EQ each offers strong evidence that a student's prior experiences and knowledge of a subject, no matter how rudimentary, will shape that student's attitude and, in turn, that student's ability to smoothly bridge concept thresholds.

Skills

Respondents were also asked to reflect upon the value of the "politics as power" concept in the preparation of their business submission assignment.

AL reported its value enthusiastically:

Understanding power did play a big part in how I structured my assignment because you can impact people on both sides. How business can use power to get things done – using leverage to make an impact.

AL's use of such phrases as "getting things done" and "using leverage" suggests his crossing of the threshold allowed him to identify business advantage and, therefore, to think "politically" when compiling a business submission.

Three additional respondents reported the value of the "politics as power" conceptualization in assignment preparation. EJ, for example, acknowledged the importance of pluralism as a core political science concept, but she appeared less sure the concept taught her to think 'politically':

> It helped me somewhat. I'm a lot more aware that different groups have different interests and influences. I also now see a lot of biased information. This course has taught me to be a lot more discriminating. I now try to find the facts as opposed to opinions.

However, EJ's last statement – to have learnt the skill of discriminating between research qualities – meets a key learning objective in itself, and further indicates EJ's progression through Bloom's learning taxonomy from mere "knowledge" and "comprehension" to "analysis" and "synthesis", and even "evaluation".

AD also makes reference to pluralism as a learned concept:

> I think a different look at politics as power did help my assignment. It made me realize there are always three main powers involved – industry, government and consumers. Business tries to have power over the other two. Government is a regulator and tries to have power over the other two.

AD's neglect to cite consumers' power via their own not insubstantial lobby groups – despite mentioning consumers – is curious, but hardly detracts from the AD's essential realization of business acting 'politically' in the same vein as any other actor.

EQ, while suggesting the "politics as power" threshold did assist in the preparation of her assignment, is less forthright as to *how* that assistance was rendered:

> What we learnt in the course gave me ideas and things to think about. It helped me do the assignment because I worked out that life is about power and relationships.

EQ's limited response casts doubt on whether she genuinely found the 'threshold' concept of use in assignment preparation.

LE is another unconvinced of the value of the 'threshold' concept as an aid to assignment research:

> I didn't really focus on power plays, but I did look at influential people. I didn't go into it thinking about power.

If discouraging for teachers, LE's answer is at least consistent with her *knowledge* response that indicated a limited efficacy in passing over the "politics as power" threshold. It is therefore intuitive that any student with limited success in negotiating threshold concepts would be reluctant to cite those same thresholds as useful in assignment preparation.

Conclusion

Educators in a multidisciplinary world increasingly find themselves teaching students compulsorily, and probably reluctantly, enrolled in subjects outside the student's primary area of interest. Becoming aware of how those students – whose knowledge and enthusiasm will likely be low or non-existent – negotiate new and potentially difficult "threshold" concepts is therefore critical for teachers in any educational setting. Questions of how business and commerce students learn core politics concepts, how they value the study of politics as part of their business training, and how they use those concepts to prepare assignments are therefore critical to understanding how any adult student "transforms" as a life-long learner. This article's study of the learning experiences of five adult university students – enrolled in business and commerce degree programs and compelled to undertake a first year politics course – has revealed varied levels of ability among students to cross the key conceptual threshold of "politics as power". While some students had wholly retooled their notion of politics and now defined the term as one where any individual participates in the decision-making over the distribution of resources, others continued to confine their definition narrowly to more orthodox actors. Yet the fact that all students revealed some broadening of their understanding of power as a component of politics, and that business actors do behave "politically", indicates the entire sample passed over a conceptual

threshold. This finding strongly supports this article's theses that the study of political institutions involves a series of "threshold" concepts, that teaching of political institutions should span knowledge, attitudes and skills, and that any real understanding of power allows students to regard business and other figures as genuinely "political" actors. The corollary to this conclusion is that the "politics as power" threshold approach successfully allowed students to develop more positive attitudes to politics, with each appearing to have become genuinely transformed learners committed to participating in a robust democracy.

Acknowledgement

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