

The ‘renovation’ of Machiavellian innovation: A return to a celebration of ‘the good’.

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Introduction

In the time between the writing of *The Prince* and latterly *Discourses*, Machiavelli’s stance on the source and meaning of innovation in leadership and power develops and changes significantly. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli represents the notion of innovation as development in government or the law, implemented by a new ‘prince’ in order to bring about change and maintain power. Later, in *The Discourses*, a shift in the representation of innovation occurs, innovation comes to be presented as a return to original founding principles of kingdoms and empires that have become corrupted over time. Machiavelli turns to Rome as an example of a great republic and argues for a ‘restoration’ of the proven and successful. In contrast to the interpretation presented by Machiavelli, the term ‘innovation’ in educational nomenclature has come to mean a continual creative and revolutionary approach to teaching, where anything seen to fall short of arbitrary measures of excellence is frequently devalued and labelled inadequate or insufficient. A Machiavellian interpretation of innovation, as a founding principle based on the great work of predecessors, provides us with an opportunity to return to a celebration of ‘the good’ and value consistency and quality. As Machiavelli himself asserts, ‘a wise man ought always to follow the paths beaten by great men and to imitate those that have been supreme’ (Machiavelli, 1961). This is however, not to say that there is no place for creativity, design and experimentation within further education, quite the contrary, in fact I can think of no better place for such endeavors.

It is not that long ago that I sat in a meeting room in (what will remain) an anonymous further education college in the United Kingdom. The discussion was heated and had been going for some time. The basic assertion by the chief protagonist was that “we (the college) need to measure innovation, we need to assess the innovation of staff and record it in the annual review process”. When my initial shock and anger had subsided enough for me to trust my mouth not to say what I was actually thinking, I managed to stutter something about it being a ridiculous plan. I tried in vain to convince the assembled senior executive staff that it was in fact not just a bad idea, but in the international rankings of bad ideas it was seeded. I gave up, I gave up protesting (perhaps smugly) safe in the knowledge that it just wasn’t realistically possible, and in all likelihood, would fizzle out at first contact with the poor individual who would eventually have to try and implement it – which of course it did. However, this set me thinking about the language, behaviours and practices in college environments and the seemingly widening divide between the acts of teaching and learning and the strategic positioning, and often cited, neoliberal management of colleges.

It could be argued that Machiavelli was the original neoliberal, or first at least, to write a manual for its associated practices. However, Machiavelli has been much lauded but equally (and probably wrongly) maligned in the centuries since his treatises on leadership were written. A student of history, Machiavelli was able to paint a colourful and detailed picture of his theories and ideas, drawing on the experiences of those he admired and also of those he openly did not. Given the many interpretations and philosophical analyses of Machiavelli’s work, it is in some ways very easy to understand how his name has become associated with negative connotations and aspects of the didactic and unfeeling, soulless seizing and wielding of power. However, if read as perhaps satire or a polemic interpretation of the actions of his peers and forefathers, Machiavelli’s work takes on a different and more nuanced perspective. A commentary provided to secure his own position and future whilst barely disguising his

distaste perhaps. Although I am certain that such a portrait does not exist, I cannot help but imagine Machiavelli being represented in the finest oils of his time with his tongue pressed firmly in his cheek.

Literal translation of the depicted actions of despots and descriptions of heartless and self-serving princes serves to perhaps, in many ways, shield the reader from the underlying subtleties of language and nuance evident in both of Machiavelli's prominent works. Even when openly critiquing poor decisions, and offering warning or encouragement in repeating the actions of the more despicable characters portrayed (Pope Julius, Cesare Borgia and Alexander the Great to name but a few), it is possible to detect an admiration coming through in the language and style of the descriptions. In his writing Machiavelli only just manages to thinly veil the frustrations so ardently evident to him, as they must have been as a high ranking official in the weakened state of Florence, whilst those around him, such as Cesare Borgia, carved out new states with a brash and forceful boldness that only having an army at your back could produce. The methods of leadership depicted in *The Prince* are often distasteful to modern sensibilities, but such were the times that often the actions taken by the successful leaders of the day were bold, risky, decisive, imaginative and in the literal sense of the word (which I will come back to later in this chapter), innovative. Although Machiavelli concentrated his attention and analysis on the upper echelons of the military and ruling classes, it would be naïve to assume that his work wasn't also meant to serve as a series of allegories intended to inform many different types and situations of leadership (a friend recently confided that she had read *The Prince* in preparation for parenthood!).

When applying a relatively light analysis of much of the practice of management and leadership within current further education contexts across the United Kingdom, it is easy to draw both metaphorical and tangible parallels with Machiavelli's work. Much of what is

described in *The Prince* offers easy and relatively simple metaphor for the current and continued policy drive towards regionalisation and merger, quality driven accountability, performance indicator based review and the more hegemonic practices from business and industry increasingly prevalent in senior management suites. I am sure that given the opportunity to review much current practice, Machiavelli would find nothing surprising, new or particularly shocking that he would not recognise, advocate (albeit perhaps wryly) or be able to describe and situate in the context of the history he knew so well. However, I believe there is one distinct difference in practice that would add a raised eyebrow to the already distorted imaginary portrait of Machiavelli described previously, language. The language, or perhaps more accurately, the changing subtext, nuance and consequently related actions and expectations associated with many common phrases in further education.

Undoubtedly and understandably over time as various translators have made successful and successive attempts at modernising the original scripts and teasing out the nuance of Machiavelli's work, they must have been keenly aware of the author's original disposition towards delivering content without frills, a simple approach to clarity and direct language. Machiavelli's work *is* so important because he was an ardent student of the classic era and he communicated these stories directly and clearly linked them without the need for subtlety or intrigue. A rich and vibrant history forms the backdrop to *The Prince* in which Machiavelli is able to weave in a depth of understanding where he draws on examples and experiences that beautifully illustrated his words of guidance. All of this is precisely, concisely and accurately conveyed, a manner of which I am sure (albeit five centuries later) Orwell himself would approve (indeed, similarities between INGSOC in 1984 and *The Prince* are common literary fodder). There are occasions when interpreting policy documents, reading college strategic plans and attending various meeting rooms in further education that you would be forgiven for believing that you had fallen into some sort of Orwellian 1984-esque nightmare where all

present comrades are communicating in Newspeak. Abbreviations and acronyms abound and you would be forgiven for thinking that almost everything is ‘synergistic’ or ‘pump-primed’. In many respects the use of language has become watered down, where sentences are often needlessly extended with words that express little and add even less. More has become less and as a sector further education is increasingly the poorer for it. Although a persistent irritant, it is however not the most troubling factor, it is the underlying beliefs and related actions that these new forms of language are trying to express. Performativity in accountability and quantification as a driver for pedagogy and the narrowing of what ‘education’, in its most independent and true form, actually may be.

You do not have to spend a lot of time on the internet perusing the websites of colleges before you are able to amass a fine collection of mission, vision and value statements. On close inspection very few stand out as different or meaningful as they largely say the same things. The words: ‘excellence’, ‘collaboration’, ‘enterprising’, and ‘innovative’ all appear regularly with barely a single statement being completed without at least one of these featuring prominently. The sentiment and desire to deliver these public promises is more often than not very evident, however, regularly these statements descend into little more than rhetoric. What do they actually mean? A question impossible to answer on such a broad cross-section of education, but taking ‘excellence’ as an example, it can mean so many things (excellent teaching, excellent buildings, excellent students, *ad infinitum*) and is very contextually nuanced. In short, it means many things but is often used to express an idea or give the impression of considered action.

However, (and to my focus) the use of the word ‘innovation’ has become increasingly pervasive and embedded in further education, to the point where (albeit anecdotally) few policy documents seem to appear without it. Few ideas are presented without the addition of

being innovative or generating innovation or supporting ‘innovative synergies’, in this sense, innovation has seemingly become the ubiquitous measure of everything. I have seen statements calling for innovative teaching, innovative learning, innovative enterprise and innovative business practice (I have certainly seen innovative accounting but I am quite sure that is not what was meant!), but what are they asking for, and more importantly, what consequences are related to these behaviours and actions? As Silver (1999) highlights, ‘to stimulate innovation’ means asking not only ‘what kind of innovation’, but also ‘whose innovation and in whose interests’. These considerations are sadly and frequently lost within the rhetoric and discourse.

Innovation in teaching and professional practice is now so universally lauded, expected and demanded that it has almost come to mean something entirely different. Many statements appear requiring innovation in practice where simply transplanting ‘good’ or ‘imaginative’ would undoubtedly yield far better results. Innovation has become measured and has caused a shift in both expectation and experience. Related language has also become somehow downgraded and treated differently in the process of elevating innovation. A simplistic but interesting comparison is provided by considering the subtlety and meaning of the word ‘satisfactory’. In general every day discourse ‘satisfactory’ has come to mean something less than good or not as good as it could be. How would being described as a satisfactory parent or lover make you feel? The point here is that although education and (in this case specifically) further education may not be the cause of language value shifts, they are victims of it.

Extending and escalating the previous example using ‘satisfactory’, consider table 1 below:

(table 1 to be inserted here)

The expectation that teaching and learning will be good has now been supplanted in the language of public facing documents, policy and (supposedly) shared values statements, by the use of innovation. The problem with this approach is not so much related to the idea that innovation is bad, but rather that being good (at teaching, support, admin....insert anything you like here) is no longer good enough. The expectation that practice must somehow be eternally changing, re-inventing, re-positioning and indeed innovating, is not sustainable. This position is exhausting and adds to the lie that somehow innovation is quantifiable and related to performance. This is also interestingly where we return once more to Machiavelli, who although did not use the word innovation (*innovazione* or indeed, *innovatio*) but certainly had a significant shift in thinking and comment on invention, re-invention, change and the measure of political acts of ‘innovative’ leadership.

Godin (2014) highlights how Machiavelli’s views changed over the years between *The Prince* and *The Discourses* and how he came to view innovation (political and military manoeuvring and wisdom in leadership) not as the pursuit of the new and continuously untested, but as the ability to continue to adapt the successful practice of others into a new arena; a creativity in adaption and not necessarily creation. Although Machiavelli was seemingly an admirer of innovation he did not see it as a constant process of renewal or endlessly seeking new ways of achieving the same end, I am sure he would have seen that as wasteful, inefficient and an unnecessary expenditure of time and resource. Instead, drawing on the valuable, proven and evidently successful (if not always savoury) practices of ancient Rome, contemporary Italy and the wider arena of Europe; Machiavelli was able to demonstrate that innovation laid more in the adaption of the good and successful, than the wasteful and potentially inefficient endless process of insisting on reinvention. A slightly more modern example that illustrates this point perfectly comes from Henry Ford who famously quipped, “I see no advantage in these new clocks. They run no faster than the ones made 100 years ago.”

This has very interesting parallels with the current discourse in further education. If assessed, measured and inspected educators stopped trying to create new and ‘innovative’ methods to replace tried and tested practice, they may start to focus on refinement, detail, and depth. A focus on high quality, well planned, knowledge-based problem solving and robust teaching, instead of a drive for constant innovating where the vehicle of delivery becomes more important than the subject matter itself, that is to say, all form and no substance. In summary then, Machiavelli perhaps teaches us more about language and clarity of expression than leadership (certainly and hopefully within the context of further education) and management practices.

My reservations however are not to be misunderstood, I am not saying that there is anything wrong with innovative teaching practice, far from it, it is to be commended, applauded, shared and celebrated; but measured, expected, demanded and inspected? Probably not, well (and to be more Machiavellian), definitely not.

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