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SoTL in Process

Building Trust in the Classroom: A Conceptual Model for Teachers, Scholars, and Academic Developers in Higher Education

ABSTRACT

The quality of student-teacher classroom interactions is important to learning, belonging, and success, particularly for students from groups that have been historically excluded from or marginalized in higher education. The literature commonly asserts that one necessary part of high-quality educational interactions (whether in person or online) is trust, but several scholars note that trust has not been systematically explored by scholars of higher education teaching and learning. In this paper, we propose a conceptual framework for identifying and describing teacher-initiated "trust moves" in the classroom, based on both the literature and interviews with teaching faculty in varied contexts. In doing this, we hope to provide a practical resource for teachers to reflect on possible approaches for building trust with students in their own classrooms—and for scholars and academic developers who wish to study or support these efforts.

KEYWORDS

trust, university teaching, conceptual model

INTRODUCTION

Trust in the higher education classroom

Student-teacher and student-student interactions are among the most significant factors contributing to student learning, motivation, identity development, wellbeing, graduation rates, and post-graduation career and civic outcomes in higher education (Mayhew et al. 2016). The effects of student-teacher classroom interactions are particularly strong for students from historically marginalized backgrounds and identities (Kezar and Maxey 2014). Not all student-teacher interactions are the same, of course; constructive interactions (whether in physical or virtual classrooms) tend to have positive results for student learning, motivation, and well-being, while negative interactions or the absence of interactions contribute to negative outcomes (Felten and Lambert 2020).

Trust is a key element for the development and sustenance of these meaningful interactions. The literature on higher education teaching and learning is replete with claims about the importance of trust in both student-teacher and student-student interactions. For instance, Pedersen, Kubátová, and Simmons (2022) recently wrote in this journal that in their US classrooms "students reported that it was the ability to form close relationships based on personal authenticity and feelings of psychological safety and trust that provided the best scaffolding for success in a challenging STEM

environment" (1). This is significant and confirms findings from earlier research in other contexts. Writing from Hong Kong a decade ago, Carless (2012) made the case for trust as a foundational component of effective feedback in higher education classrooms, and a rich literature exists about building trust among students to enable effective group work (e.g. Eddy et al. 2015).

Despite the relative consensus among scholars and practitioners about trust's importance in classroom interactions, Tierney (2006) explains that the nature of "trust has been relatively overlooked in higher education" and there is a "paucity of conceptual or empirical work" on this topic (42). Similarly, Macfarlane (2009) contends that "the importance of trust to 'good' teaching in higher education is comparatively neglected compared to work focused on the use of techniques to develop active learning and reflective processes" (221). Hagenaur and Volet (2014) echo this claim, emphasizing that student-teacher classroom trust in higher education has not been systematically explored. More recently, further research on trust in higher education has been published (Gibbs 2018; Simon and Pleschová 2021; Tormey 2021; West and Bloomquist 2015). Yet empirical work on trust inside the higher education classroom, particularly trust between teachers and students, remains sparse and tends to be based in a single course (e.g. Cavanagh et al. 2018) or a single institutional context. Indeed, in their literature review of trust in inquiry-based learning higher education contexts, Beltrano, Archer-Kuhn, and MacKinnon (2021) conclude that they did not find the "gold" they were seeking (directly relevant literature), but that several "nuggets" they uncovered suggest that this is an important topic for future scholarly mining (10). Similarly, Payne, Stone, and Bennett (2022) close their conceptual paper by stating: "We view the construct of trust within higher education as an area full of research potential. . . . [including] the under-studied concept of trust within the student-instructor dyad" (11). In this paper we aim to make a conceptual contribution to this scholarly discourse by introducing a framework for understanding, enacting, and studying the actions higher education classroom teachers make to try to establish and build trust with their students—what we call teacher "trust moves."

We recognize that trust is relational so both teachers and students contribute to the development of (or the loss of) trust in the classroom. Our paper looks at one important factor, but we do not offer a holistic view of all of the trust moves students and teachers might make. Our aim is to offer a framework for teacher trust moves in the hope that this will be of value on its own, and that this might spark further research about other aspects of student-teacher trust.

Definitions of trust

In higher education teaching and learning literature, many definitions of trust come from psychology or management scholarship, where trust is studied extensively. For instance, Chew and Cerbin (2021) define undergraduates' classroom trust as "students' willingness to take risks based on their judgment that the teacher is committed to student success" (23). In a paper exploring individual graduate student-supervisor relationships, Simon and Pleschová (2021) define trust as "a psychological state of an actor (the trustor) who is willing to accept vulnerability to another individual (the trustee) on the basis of positive expectations regarding the intentions and the behavior of the trustee" (3). And in a paper looking at US undergraduate perceptions of their teachers in large introductory STEM classes, Cavanagh et al. (2018) emphasize the salience of care and identity, defining student trust as a "perception that the instructor understands the challenges facing students as they progress through the course, accepts students for who they are, and cares about the educational welfare of students" (2).

Elements of trust

To study and act on definitions like these, scholars draw on psychological or management frameworks that articulate the core elements of trust in various contexts. Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) proposed an influential framework for describing trust in an organisational context, which has three components: ability, integrity, and benevolence. Each of these elements is context-specific, so that a person might be trusted in one aspect of their role because of their competence in that area, or because their colleagues have confidence that their actions will be ethical and humane. High performance in all three elements is likely to lead to high trust between colleagues, according to the model. McKnight and Chervany's (2001) meta-analysis of trust definitions in organizational literature added a fourth element to the Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman framework: competence, integrity, benevolence, and predictability. This addition underscores the importance of consistency as a factor in building and maintaining trust.

Another highly cited model of trust in organisational contexts is outlined by Jones and George (1998), focusing on the development of trust and its importance fostering cooperative behaviour. In many ways this model has considerable overlap with Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman's 1995 framework; however, Jones and George make a significant contribution by suggesting that teams move from conditional trust, based on cognitive-, affective-, and moral- judgements of each other's contribution to team activities, to unconditional trust, which allows for colleagues and groups to develop stable expectations and routines of working. In higher education literature, Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) is the predominant framework for characterizing trust, but recently Payne and colleagues (2022) adapt the Jones and George (1998) model to discuss the importance of cognitive- and affective-based (in their article they do not consider moral-based) trust in the engagement and achievement of historically under-served students undertaking online courses. Payne et al. (2022) propose that higher education institutions focus on the "measures and strategies that facilitate the building and maintaining of trust and understanding in instructor-student interactions" (12).

OUR RESEARCH ON TRUST

As part of the Elon Center for Engaged Learning research seminar on (Re)Examining Conditions for Meaningful Learning Experiences, our research team explores what teachers can do to build trust in their higher education classrooms. We focus on the specific "moves" (actions or behaviours) teachers use to try to build trust with and among their students (we are adapting the concept of "moves" from the scholarly work on rhetorical moves in writing studies; e.g. Graff, Birkenstein, and Maxwell [2014]). We are not trying to demonstrate whether these moves are effective, nor are we considering student trust moves. For now, we are concentrating on teachers' goals and actions. What moves do teachers make in the classroom related to trust?

We intend to uncover what higher education teachers believe they do that establishes or maintains trust with or among students. We designed our research using an appreciative inquiry approach (Cooperrider 2017; Ludema, Cooperrider, and Barrett 2006), meaning that we look for instances of what those teachers think are effective practices, rather than focusing primarily on mistrust. Fundamentally, we aim to uncover what teachers do in the classroom, either explicitly or tacitly, to create a trusting environment and trustful interactions. To encourage teachers to talk about this topic, we designed semi-structured interview prompts (Appendix 1).

We are conducting interviews with higher education teachers in four institutions and countries (Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, and the US). These institutions represent a convenience

sample, as we had access to teachers there and the potential to design future interventions in these contexts. We are interviewing academics who teach large enrolment courses (recognizing that "large" varies by context from a few dozen to nearly 1,000 students), with particular attention to STEM and other quantitative fields, as class size and disciplinary factors may have a negative effect on student outcomes (Kara, Tonin, and Vlassopoulos 2021). We also interviewed teachers with at least five years of classroom experience, as they were more likely than more novice teachers to have had time to reflect on and develop their approaches to teaching. We aim to use these interviews to identify key elements of trust-building and propose ways to encourage it by providing usable resources for academic staff.

We began our study with purposive sampling, inviting teachers who had a reputation for developing meaningful classroom relationships with their students (teaching award winners, for example, or academics whose teaching we have observed in our capacity as academic developers). Following the initial interviews, we then used snowball sampling to ask the teachers we had interviewed if they were aware of colleagues who also developed trustful classroom relationships.

The research was approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee [Ref no: 0000030085] and by Elon University's Institutional Review Board.

OUR EMERGING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To test the validity of our research design, we did some preliminary analysis after completing five interviews at two universities, one in Europe and one in North America. We used the Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) and Jones and George (1998) models as starting points for our coding. This gave us two sets of possible codes: ability, integrity, and benevolence (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman), or cognitive-, affective-, and moral-based (Jones and George).

As we attempted to code our teacher interviews, we found that neither framework completely captured the diversity or purposes of trust moves teachers described making. We were attracted to the Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) model, both because it is the foundation of much of the writing on trust in higher education teaching (e.g. Chew and Cerbin 2021) and because it resonates with our appreciative approach to the interviews. However, we found limitations in using this framework to analyse our interviews. Several of the trust moves in the interviews fit fairly well within the "ability" category, and some could be squeezed into the "integrity" element (typically with quite a bit of inference from us). However, "benevolence" was not a code we could apply to any of the trust moves, although part of benevolence involves caring, a topic which came up in some interviews. Additionally, a significant proportion of the trust moves in the interviews simply did not fit in any of these three categories.

The Jones and George inspired codes proved to be more effective for our coding. Cognitive- and affective-based trust moves more-or-less jumped off the transcript pages. For instance, we coded this comment as a cognition-based trust move because it illustrates the teacher's attempts to display their disciplinary and pedagogical expertise:

> When I was starting out as a faculty member, being a younger Black male of African descent with a unique name, it was definitely at the forefront of my mind that I needed to make sure that I didn't lose control of the classroom. . . . That awareness also made me think that I really needed to know my stuff as a teacher, to be super prepared and organized. . . I worried that some students wouldn't trust me if I wasn't organized and if I didn't know my stuff.

We also could have coded that quotation (following Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman) as "ability" if we had stayed within that scheme.

From the same interviewee, this is an example of an affect-based trust move that aims to show students the teacher cares about their learning, well-being, and identities:

> Something I try to do is learn names as fast as I can. On the first day of class, I give students note cards where they write their names and I'll ask for some random facts, could be favourite song. And then at the beginning of each class I'll play one student's favourite song. I also try to learn something about their passions outside of class, and as we're taking a break, I try to ask them about those things. And I think that's something that builds trust with them, knowing that I care about them, and it really helps in the classroom.

Again, this might be interpreted to fit within Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman's (1995) "benevolence" category, but we felt that "affect" was a closer match to the caring intention here—and also better described the language used by the teacher we interviewed. In other words, the teacher explained that playing these songs is a move designed to show affective care, not an act of benevolence on the teacher's part.

To adapt the Jones and George framework with our cultural contexts, and with the language we heard from teachers, we changed the term "moral-based" to "values-based," which we believe retains the core of their model while better matching the discourse in higher education settings. "Values-based" trust moves could include actions designed to demonstrate the teacher's integrity and fairness, or they could enact educational, professional, or cultural values that are relevant in the classroom. For example, again from the same interview with the kinesiology teacher:

> I always try to build a class environment of mutual respect. In one of my classes, we do some more invasive type of assessment; for example, they'll have to exercise on a treadmill at a very high speed while they are wearing tight clothes or their shirt is off because they have electrodes on them. I will demo what it should really look like in terms of how you, first of all, ask permission to touch a patient, explaining what you're going to be doing specifically, and then explaining what landmarks you'll use, we tell them to aim for bony landmarks. . . . and just emphasize how to do it in a professional manner in regard to confidentiality.

This comment emphasises values of confidentiality and respect that are crucial for building trust in this, literally, hands-on classroom environment, as well as in the professional settings that this course is preparing students to enter. These values will be context-dependent, and explaining and demonstrating them may be a crucial part of trust-building in the classroom and the profession more widely.
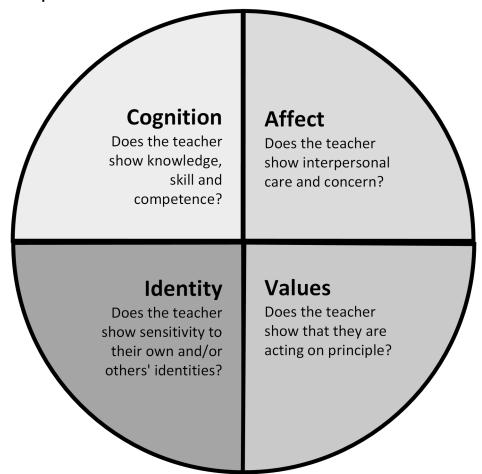
The Jones and George (1998) framework had been developed to describe business organizations more than two decades ago; even with our slight revisions, the Jones and George framework effectively captured most of what teachers described in our interviews, although one significant gap persisted. Drawing on our interviews and on contemporary literature about higher education, we decided to add a fourth element: identity-based trust moves. Identity appears at least implicitly in many of the trust moves teachers describe, including the cognition-based example above, where the teacher reflects on how his own identities might influence students' trust of him.

To further illustrate the ways identities emerged in our interview, this example centers identity-based trust building even more directly:

> I do think that some students have probably felt more comfortable reaching out to me or stay[ing] after class to chat for a little bit or talking more outside of class because of our shared identities. Though it hasn't been drastically different, I think it's been similar with a lot of the ethnicities, because of the trust and caring that's been established in the classroom.

The four trust aspects—cognition-based, affect-based, identity-based, and values-based—are represented in Figure 1. From our interviews so far, they seem to encompass the variety of moves higher education teachers make to build trust with and among students in their classrooms. Although clear lines separate the four in this figure, we assume there might be movement between and overlap among the dimensions in actual teaching practice.

Figure 1: A conceptual model for teacher-initiated trust moves

The model does not presume all teachers should act in all four areas, but rather it maps the diversity of possible trust moves a teacher might employ. We anticipate the relative balance of trust moves made by faculty with different identities and in different contexts likely will (and perhaps should) vary.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THIS CONCEPTUAL MODEL

We propose this model in order to encourage discussion about the role of trust in the higher education classroom, and particularly the deliberate actions academic teachers take to try to build trust with or among their students. We believe this model can serve as a heuristic for planning, teaching, and reflecting on courses, prompting analysis of the ways a teacher could (or does) attempt to generate trusting classroom interactions. We also believe the model has utility for SoTL scholars and academic developers who are inquiring into and helping colleagues build trust in the classroom. Given the importance of trust and the relative scarcity of research on higher education classroom-based trust, we believe the time is ripe for additional scholarship, development, and reflection.

Our next steps in this work are to analyse more of the data we have collected through interviews with teachers and to use this to further test the framework. Then, we will consider how we can use it to support teaching, SoTL scholarship, and academic development. We hope colleagues in other contexts (including cultural, disciplinary, and class-size) will adapt and evaluate this model in their own work, adding to our collective understanding of the ways academic teachers build trust with and among their students and also exploring the ways students actively contribute to classroom trust.

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APPENDIX
Semi-structured interview questions

1. Please tell me about your higher education teaching experience. What do you typically teach? How many students in each section? What level of students? In what format (online, hybrid, on campus)?
2. How would you describe your teaching philosophy?
3. What role, if any, do you think trust plays in higher education teaching and learning? What do you mean by trust?
4. In general terms, whose responsibility is it to build trust in university classrooms? (e.g., faculty, student, both, someone else?) Can you expand on this a little, thinking about what those responsible can or should do to build trust?
5. How important is trust in the classroom to you, personally? What impact do you think trust-building has on students in your classroom?
6. Can you provide me with an example/s of a way you try to develop trust with your students? In other words, what 'trust-building moves' have you incorporated into your classes? (Ask for elaboration and other examples.)
7. Do you do anything to build trust *among* your students? (i.e., not faculty-student but student-student trust)
8. Does class size influence how you think about trust? If yes, then: In what ways do you build trust in large classes? Is that different from how you build trust in small classes?
9. Does class format (online, hybrid, on campus) influence how you think about trust? If yes, then: In what ways do you build trust in classes that have different formats?
10. In what ways do you build trust with students from backgrounds different from your own?
11. How have your own prior experiences of learning affected the way that you build trust in your own classrooms?
12. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me – or anything that you haven't had the chance to discuss that you'd like to address?