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Trust in the Classroom¹

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Abstract

Paolo Freire argued that trust is essential to what he called the “problem-posing” model of education. This chapter builds on that insight and explores different ways that trust plays out in the classroom, focusing on three different types. The first type of trust is from teacher to student – trusting that students will show up prepared and ready to do the work together. The second type of trust is from student to teacher – trusting that the method and design of the course (from the assignment structure to story arc of the topics and texts) will be coherent and worthwhile. The final type of trust is that which emerges holistically, in which what Freire called the teacher-student and student-teachers build a trustful epistemic community together.

Keywords

Trust; Vulnerability; Freire; Pedagogy of the Oppressed; Liberation

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In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*², Paulo Freire argued that trust is essential to good teaching. Indeed, it is partly constitutive of what he called the “problem-posing” model of education, which we should embrace, rather than the “banking model”, which we should reject. I have come to believe that he is right – deeply so – and that trust is operative at just about every level of good teaching. In this chapter I will briefly review Freire’s view before exploring three different ways that trust takes shape, why it is so important, and how it can be cultivated practically. Although what it will take to build such trust will vary in different contexts (affected by things like classroom size, student population, and political climate) it is my hope that this account will prove useful to a wide range of learning environments.

1. Liberatory Education

Freire was concerned with the way that education can be a method of liberation from oppression, both in that it could help students to challenge oppressive social structures, and in so far as education is itself a method of liberation. One outcome of oppression is that people are dehumanized, reduced to tools that can be used to maintain exploitative social arrangements. This is due not only to the ways that exploitative ideologies can constrain someone’s understanding of the world, but also of their own place in it, leading to what Sandra Bartky called “psychological oppression”³ which involves what she called “internalized intimations of inferiority”⁴ in which someone buys in to the story that the world has told about them as “less than”.

Bartky’s work helps me to understand that, for Freire, the aim of education was no less than to help students to become more fully human.⁵ I take him to mean that the aim of education should be to help students to become more complete people – more able to exercise agency, to think critically, and to be better equipped to self-determine and indeed to self-create. The liberatory potential of education thus plays out both in the lives of individual students who would come to throw off such oppressive, internalized narratives, and could lead to a liberated group consciousness as well. In that way, true education is a project of worldmaking (or remaking).

Such goals can only be accomplished in community with others and must themselves be non-hierarchical; the type of learning community for which Freire advocated was not one where the teacher saved the students from their own internalized oppression or false beliefs. “Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated.”⁶ Instead, the teacher should treat their students like *people*, as having agency, who are able to exercise reason, and who can choose for themselves (at least partly) who they will be and what projects they will pursue.

The way that the liberatory, rehumanizing project plays out is by rejecting what Freire called the “banking” model of education in which the teacher understands their task to be to “fill” students with the contents of their lectures. “Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the

² Freire, Paulo. 2012. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.

³ Bartky, Sandra Lee. 1990. “On Psychological Oppression,” in *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York: Routledge: 22-32.

⁴ Bartky 1990, 22.

⁵ Freire 2012, 44.

⁶ Freire 2012, 65.

better of a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are. Education thus becomes an act of depositing ... In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.”⁷

The alternative is what Freire called the “problem-posing” model of education which rejects vertical hierarchy in the classroom and embraces a type of collaborative solidarity among everyone involved – students and teachers alike. The result is a mixed identity: “Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow ... The students – no longer docile listeners – are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher.”⁸

Approaching students this way recognizes that people can grow and change, both over the course of their lives and within the course of a semester. “Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality.”⁹ The alternative, to treat students as things – as static and unchanging, whose identities are fixed and determined – certainly serves to make them more compliant workers, less likely to fight for their own rights and the rights of others, but is not the liberatory aim of the ethical (much less revolutionary) teacher.

Instead, Freire argued that the revolutionary educator’s “efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power,”¹⁰ that, “it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason,”¹¹ and that falling short of such trust will be a type of superficial, slogan-style activism that doesn’t actually do any real liberatory work. Indeed, “trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change.”¹² As I understand what Freire meant there are at least three different forms that such trust takes.

2. Trusting My Students

The first type of trust is from teacher to student – trusting that my students will show up prepared and ready to do good work together, trusting that our collaborative efforts will bear fruit, and trusting that they have something to say about the difficult topics with which we will collectively grapple.

Part of trusting my students (and adopting the problem-posing model) means giving up control over how each class will go. Static lecturing (as recommended by the banking model) is appealing because if I go in to class with a thoroughly scripted talk to deliver, in which I convey information which my students write down, memorize, and will be tested on, then I already know much of how the semester will go before it has even begun, since I have left no room for variation. Of course, students might do better or worse at memorizing but that’s the only real surprise that could emerge from a tightly orchestrated, top-down pedagogy.

⁷ Freire 2012, 71-72.

⁸ Freire 2012, 80-81.

⁹ Freire 2012, 84.

¹⁰ Freire 2012, 75.

¹¹ Freire 2012, 66.

¹² Freire 2012, 60.

That doesn't mean that there's no place for lecture in a liberatory classroom; different levels and types of classes might call for different pedagogical strategies. What I mean to emphasize is that part of what can sometimes make lecturing compelling to a teacher is that it allows them to retain control and avoid the risk that comes from trusting their students to join them in the act of building the class together. Most of the time for me that means leading seminar-style discussions in which I have particular topics, questions, or concepts I want to be sure to explore, but the route by which we get there remains mostly unmapped. I'll often start class with a few minutes to "free write", asking students simply to reflect on the text (what did they find helpful or frustrating, with what did they agree or disagree, about what do they have questions or want further clarity) and to share what they thought. We then have a free-flowing conversation, engaging dynamically with the things that I had on my list, along with lots of things that I didn't. All of that can be scary! Open conversations can sometimes go off the rails and head in unanticipated directions that are at best unproductive and a waste of time, or worse, that can be harmful (by causing offense and undermining the community I was trying to build). Giving up control means accepting vulnerability to the risk that things won't go well. Moreover, if things don't go well they might require correction or repair in future class meetings as we grapple as a community with where things went awry and work to get back on track (or on track for the first time!) together.

Part of what enables such community is the attitudinal orientation I bear towards my students. I do my best to view them as minds in the room - as active, critical thinkers who are able to grapple with and understand difficult concepts and to form their own views in response. There are many different ways of doing this but for me that means regarding them as being engaged in the same project that I am as a professional philosopher and that the differences between us are mainly that I've been doing it longer and with a more demanding audience. In other words, I simply think of them *as* philosophers from the very first day. They might not initially be especially good philosophers (though many are), but that's ok, it often takes time to become good at something and philosophy is no different. They might not take other philosophy classes, but that's ok, too, since I take many of the questions that we ask to be essential to human life, and so they'll have the chance to continue practicing philosophy in lots of ways, even outside the classroom. They might not love philosophy the way I do (they might even dislike it or hate it!), but that's also ok, since you don't have to like the thing that you do in order to be good at it (and, as it turns out, I rarely have students who would say that they hate philosophy by the end of the semester, a fact that I think is at least partly born from having treated them as if they were themselves capable of doing good philosophy).

The point throughout is that being oriented towards my students as if they are capable of good work assumes that I am expecting them to do that work in the first place; I am trusting that they are up to the challenge, that they will put in the effort and time to meet that challenge, and that when they try to develop their own view they will be able to do so. It also means expecting that I will learn from my students - that they have something to say that I have never thought of, that even a well-trod point or argumentative move will find new meaning for me in light of a personal anecdote they share, or that their own way of combining concepts will bring new life to an old argument. In short, I aim to be the teacher-student and to help them to be the student-teachers that Freire calls on us all to be. Note the loss of control and the trust that such collaborative transformation requires. It is much less predictable (and so manageable) to be open to what my students might teach me than to assume that I am there to pour out wisdom but not to receive any myself.

3. Earning My Students' Trust

The second type of trust is from student to teacher – trusting that the method and design of the course (from the assignment structure to story arc of the topics and texts) will be meaningful and worthwhile. If I ask students to read difficult texts and to grapple with challenging topics (both in terms of technical difficulty and emotional vulnerability) it had better be worth their time and effort, or I'll lose them. If they don't see the point they won't in fact do what I'm expecting them to do. If their assignments are busywork, if they are pointlessly tedious or if they can't recognize the underlying meaning and value behind those assignments, then my students won't see the point in doing it and will devote time and resources to other projects (both academic and non-academic) that *do* have such meaning and value. And, it turns out that's exactly what I should want! Choosing not to devote time and energy to a project in which they don't recognize the value is an appropriate response from people who aren't simply doing what they're told, who aren't simply cogs in a machine who follow orders without reflecting on them. Indeed, I follow Freire in thinking that part of the role of education is to help students to question why they are being asked to do what they are being asked to do so that they can then choose whether to do it. That means being careful in my syllabus design and revision to make sure that our topics and texts are worthwhile – and listening to my students (via course evaluations, their papers, and our in-class conversations) to help make sure I'm hitting the mark. That also means trusting my students to be honest with me, to be thoughtful in their reflection, and to be genuine in dispensing advice, so that I can revise the course appropriately. And, it means being transparent and communicative about all of this, helping them to know that the reason I'm asking for such feedback is that I genuinely value what they think and their experience of the class.

4. Trusting Together

The third type of trust is that which emerges holistically, for the class as a whole, when we work to build what I call a trustful epistemic community together. It's not just that I need to trust my students, and it's not just that they need to trust me, but that we all need to trust each other as we enter in to ongoing conversation together. I do this by asking students what makes for good discussions and how we should conduct ourselves to be sure to be able to work well together over the course of the semester. Although their answers usually include some constants (be active listeners, be respectful of each other, come in having done the reading) the form that those answers take are often specific to particular a class. So, what does it mean *for us* to be respectful of each other? What does it mean *for us* to be active listeners? And, even if the answers *are* the same as those I've gotten in other classes, even other classes with the same students, it is still important to come up with those rules together again at the start of each new semester. Doing so says, "We are all of us engaged in a shared project to which we will dedicate time and energy for the next 15 weeks. Here is how we will pursue that project, together." Then, about one third of the way in to the semester I give out an informal and anonymous course evaluation, asking questions like whether students are learning and finding the course to be valuable, whether they feel like they can contribute, what they would like me to do differently, and what they would like each other to do differently. We then work through those answers and adjust course together in light of that insight. Again, note the loss of control and the importance of trust: instead of telling students how it will be I ask them to help decide together how we will collaborate (how we will co-labor). This creates not only motivation but space for students to be the minds in the room that I trust them to be, and

to manifest some of the person-making traits which Freire argued can emerge from liberatory education.

5. Making a Wager

What about students who aren't interested in the problem-posing model of education but who seem to prefer the banking model? I'm thinking here of students who come to office hours to ask what they need to do to earn a good grade and who don't show much interest in the class material. It's tempting to dismiss such students and become frustrated with them for focusing on the wrong things – for only caring about their GPA and not caring about learning, much less becoming more complete people. Even though such conversations can be disheartening, I think it's a mistake to judge students too harshly in light of them. After all, most students in the United States today have been raised in a culture that portrays the value of education as simply a method of credentialing – checking boxes that allow you to access different types of jobs and different levels of income. That valuation is enforced and incentivized by standardized testing that determines whether students can advance to the next grade or get in to college. It is understandable to me, then, when students express initial confusion (and sometimes frustration) at being asked to deviate from the banking model – to think for themselves and not just memorize and recite what they have been told.

Despite encountering students who express an initial preference for the banking model, I still think it's crucial that I regard them in the ways I have described throughout: as people who have agency and who can think for themselves; as minds in the room who are capable of grappling with and understanding hard concepts; as philosophers. That sometimes feels like a bit of a wager; I'm betting that if I expect such things from my students they will meet or exceed that expectation. It's not a bet that always wins – sometimes I am disappointed – but most of the time I have found that students get on board by the end of the semester. One of the ways I know that's the case is that they tell me so. On the last day in all of my classes I attempt to get some closure on the semester. I ask my students what topics they liked or disliked, what they changed their mind about or which starting beliefs had deepened over the course of the semester. Most importantly I ask them to share the ways that others' comments had affected them (to give each other shout outs for their helpful contributions to discussion). On many occasions during this closure exercise students have volunteered that ours was the first class they had ever taken where they had been asked to think for themselves, often accompanied by head nods from others in the room. I have always felt quite ambivalent about that comment. On one hand, it is heartbreaking that they could have taken so many classes and never felt like they had the opportunity to argue for their own view. On the other, it's a profound honor for me to get to be a part of creating the opportunity for them to do so. Either way, I will continue to make the wager that my students want to be treated as people, and I will trust that when given the opportunity to think for themselves and to be a part of a community where we can all do good work together, they will take it.