

# A Leap of Faith: The Role of Trust in Higher Education Teaching

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<Abstract>

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. This paper applies concepts from the management and marketing literature to identify why students entering higher education must do so largely on the basis of trust or a ‘leap of faith’. It also presents a set of 25 actions that can result in the erosion of student trust in university teachers based on McKnight and Chervany’s (2001) meta-categories - benevolence, integrity, competence and predictability. While the paper rejects an over-simplified analogy between higher education and other service industries, it is contended that identifying and closing expectation ‘gaps’ between students and tutors is an important means of retaining or regaining trust. It is concluded that trust is critical in understanding the meaning of ‘good’ teaching and that loss of trust has negative economic as well as social and ethical implications for the university.

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## 1. Introduction

There is now a substantial literature on teaching and learning in higher

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education much of it focused on the importance of understanding student learning styles, techniques for promoting active learning, reflective practice and other innovative practices, such as the use of new technologies (eg Ramsden, 1992; Biggs, 1999; Brockbank and McGill, 1998). The authors of this literature tend to be committed to a social constructivist perspective which implies that learning is an active process through which individuals construct their own meanings about the world. The emphasis on learning theory also means that the role of the higher education teacher is defined in relation to the psychology of education rather than drawing on literature and resources from the philosophy, sociology and history of education. This bias has shaped both the current research agenda connected with higher education pedagogy and formal programmes of staff and educational development (Macfarlane, 2004a). Within this context, less attention has centered on the ethical aspects of teaching relationships with students beyond a general focus on broad socio-political commitments, such as equality of opportunity and widening participation (Macfarlane and Otewill, 2005).

One of the areas of comparative neglect connected with the ethics of higher education teaching is the importance of trust in relationships with students. This article will reflect on the implications of concepts derived from service management and marketing in relation to teaching in higher education. It will also apply four meta-categories of trust - benevolence, integrity, competence and predictability (McKnight and Chervany, 2001) - to identify 25 actions that erode trust in university teachers. It will be argued that trust is critical in understanding the meaning of 'good' teaching and that loss of trust has negative economic as well as social and ethical implications for the university.

## **2. A Leap of Faith**

Trust is widely recognized as critical in forming successful personal and business relationships (Berry, 1980, Lovelock, 1983). While crude analogies between higher education as a public good and other 'service industries' should be eschewed there are useful concepts from the service man-

agement literature that can be applied. Students are not exactly customers inasmuch that they themselves are evaluated by their 'service providers' but they are individuals in receipt of a service nonetheless. Education is an intangible service (Lovelock, 1983). It is not a simple product that you can evaluate before purchasing it, such as fruit from a market stall through touch or smell. Moreover, as a professional service, the outcome of a higher education is not necessarily predictable. Deciding to start a university course is a decision made on trust. This is shaped by the reputation of the institution and demands a leap of faith on the part of the student that they will benefit. As Gibbs (2004) argues, 'trust is demanded when consumers feel vulnerable and ignorant' (p 66) and students need this in abundance because university education is 'at the frontier of what is knowable' (p 66). Hence, they must take it on trust that they will benefit from going to university. The outcome is unpredictable.

When the nature of the professional service requires a judgement-based, customized solution, as in a professional service, it is not always clear to either the customer or the professional what the outcome will be (Lovelock, 1983, 16)

Part of this leap of faith is that despite the popularity of student evaluation questionnaires, it is difficult for anyone to evaluate a complex professional service, such as a higher education, whilst they are experiencing it. It is often only after some time has elapsed that someone can judge the success of a professional service. The motorist will learn how well their car has been serviced by their mechanic in the months that follow the completion of the service, depending on whether the vehicle breaks down. The heart operation can only be judged a success well after the completion of the surgery through the recovery and survival of the patient in the short and longer term. In selecting a professional service, word of mouth recommendations and any past service experiences are important in shaping customer decision-making given the absence of other more 'concrete' evidence for evaluation. Customers must trust the mechanic, the heart surgeon or the higher education professor.

A higher education student may only be able to truly understand, and evaluate, the quality of their university degree years after graduation in terms of its impact on their life and working career. As a result, alumni, rather than current students, are perhaps best equipped to evaluate the quality of their higher education experience (Coates and Koerner, 1996). Many of the ways in which people judge the quality of a service are relevant to the conduct of teaching. While ‘tangibles’, such as the appearance and facilities of a university, are important most of the other ‘service quality’ factors, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Berry, 1980), are closely linked to the personal relationship between the student and the teacher.

### 3. Expectation ‘gaps’

Institutions of higher education are marketing their services in an increasingly competitive national and international environment. At the same time, they are faced with meeting financial obligations and these constraints have led to a worsening staff-student ratio, a falling proportion of full-time teaching faculty and delays in improving facilities and infrastructure (Ghosh et al, 2001). This means that students can discover a mismatch or a ‘gap’ between their expectations of a university education and their perception of the reality. This is the one of five service quality ‘gaps’ derived from the marketing literature (Parasuraman et al, 1985) and refers to the difference between the service delivered and external communication about the service with customers. This is usually associated with a service provider making promises about the level of service that exceed what they can deliver in practice. This analysis, while derived from the marketing management field, may clearly be applied to a higher education context (Tan and Kek 2004).

Another gap identified in the ‘servqual’ (service quality) model (Parasuraman et al, 1985) is the difference between customers’ expected service and ‘management’s’ perceptions of customers’ expectations. This gap means that management may not correctly understand customer expectations. In a higher education context this may be ‘translated’ as

meaning that what students expect from the university is not what academic managers or, indeed, faculty believe they want. In higher education, the faculty member is the principal actor who forms teaching and learning relationships with students although other administrative and support staff may play a key role. At the same time that student trust in a university is tested by whether they receive the 'service' they expect, teaching faculty bring their expectations into relationships with students. The transition from school to university is often described in terms of a shift from dependence to independence as a learner (Mutch, 2005). However, while university teachers expect students to adopt an independent approach to their learning research has shown that students coming into higher education, especially from colleges of further education<sup>1)</sup>, are accustomed to a more supportive environment with greater access to tutorial advice (Christie et al, 2006). The massification of higher education means that high expectations of tutorial support from academic staff are largely unrealistic. Furthermore, the university teacher is also likely to be a researcher and may not regard teaching as their principal or preferred occupation (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Bruhn (2008) argues that there is a close connection between value dissonance and ethics failure in academia. Here, role conflict, and probably role overload, may be related to this problem.

For the student, the so-called 'moment of truth' can occur when she first meets her teacher as this individual is, in effect, the personification of the university and its brand imaging. This may be a positive or a negative experience for the student as one of the intractable problems with any service is variability (or heterogeneity) meaning a lack of consistency in the way that it is delivered (Berry, 1980). This implies that the standard or quality of a service can vary according to the personnel involved in delivering it from one occasion to the next. Generally, service quality is not as easy to control as a manufactured product since there is a dependence on individuals with varying behavioural standards. This is a problem dealt with in most organizations through training and sometimes 'scripting' of service personnel, such as in fast food restaurants. By contrast, in a higher education context variability in teaching styles is sometimes claimed to be

a positive rather than a negative feature. In a UK context most novice lecturers are now expected to undertake a postgraduate level qualification in teaching although this is not a statutory requirement. Possession of a research degree, notably a PhD, is still seen in many national contexts as the only qualification needed for university teaching. Hence, variability is considerable.

Arguably there are particular conditions that pertain to higher education that demand greater trust from students, and other stakeholders, than in compulsory education. The dual teaching and assessment role performed by university teachers differs from the role of counterparts in compulsory education systems who, despite the growth of continuous assessment, do not normally set and grade their own examinations. Moreover, while parents may be making a considerable financial contribution to their child's higher education through the payment of tuition fees or other subsistence costs, they are generally excluded from consultation about student progress as university students tend to be classified as adults. These conditions, it will be argued, have implications for issues of trust.

#### **4. Characteristics of Trust**

The meaning of 'trust' has spawned many articles and books across academic disciplines including psychology, management and communication, sociology, political science and economics. From the management field, a typical example is the work of Reina and Reina (Reina and Reina, 1999) who suggest three key categories: contractual trust (connected with the keeping of promises and the meeting of obligations and other contractual requirements); competence trust (in someone's capacity and knowledge to perform a given role); and communication trust (in being clear, open and truthful including admitting mistakes). Curiously, perhaps, the importance of trust has received comparatively less attention in education than in some disciplines, notably management and psychology, although there have been studies involving trust between teachers (Hargreaves, 2002), trust in higher education institutions (Ghosh et al, 2001)

and, from a philosophical perspective, in the university (Gibbs, 2004). Yet, these analyses do not tend to focus at a practical or operational level in considering relationships between students and teaching faculty.

In a meta-analysis of 65 articles, McKnight and Chervany (2001) identified four high level categories of trust that occur in over 90 per cent of definitions. These four categories are benevolence, integrity, competence and predictability. Benevolence refers to caring and acting in the interests of others. Integrity, in this context, is about honesty and truthfulness and the keeping of promises. Competence means possessing the power or the ability to perform a role. Finally, predictability is where the actions of the trusted party are consistent enough to be predictable (McKnight and Chervany, 2001). The meta categories identified by McKnight and Chervany are relevantly similar to the three most influential ‘antecedents’ of trust - sincerity, expertise and congeniality - suggested by Ghosh and his colleagues (Ghosh et al, 2001) in a study focused on college teaching. Sincerity is closely related to integrity while expertise and congeniality are virtual proxies for competence and benevolence respectively. Thus, it appears appropriate to deploy McKnight and Chervany’s meta categories in the next section of this paper to reflect on the role of trust in teaching relationships within a higher education context. This will draw on a list of 25 examples of trust eroding actions (see figure 1). The discussion which follows seeks to integrate these examples in relation to each of McKnight and Chervany’s four trust categories.

**Table1**  
**Actions by university teachers that might potentially erode student trust (by category)**

	B	I	C	P
1. Cancelling or re-scheduling classes or lectures without good reason	✓			
2. Failing to demonstrate a command of subject knowledge			✓	
3. Granting assignment extensions to students on an inconsistent basis		✓		✓
4. Changing a course assignment or assessment criteria mid-course				✓

5. Criticizing a student in the presence of other students or teachers		✓		
6. Being an overly harsh or overly lenient assessor				
7. Losing or mislaying student assignments	✓			✓
8. Allowing a few students to dominate class discussion or other activities		✓	✓	
9. Providing additional tutorial support to some students without explanation		✓		
10. Being generally unavailable or unprepared to give tutorial support	✓			
11. Loss of temper or making disrespectful remarks		✓		✓
12. Refusing to mediate in disputes between students arising from group projects	✓			
13. Not teaching or 'covering' the curriculum as promised		✓		✓
14. Teaching uninformed by personal scholarly activities			✓	
15. Inconsistency in the start or end time of classes				✓
16. Failing to grade and return assignments within a reasonable time	✓			
17. Imposing penalties/criticizing lack of referencing in student work while failing to model this behaviour in presenting lecturing and other teaching materials		✓		
18. Changing established seating patterns				✓
19. Sharing information or opinions about student progress with third parties, such as employers or parents, without student consent		✓		
20. Insufficient planning of teaching				✓
21. Not up-dating teaching materials	✓		✓	
22. Providing unclear or insufficient feedback on assignments	✓		✓	
23. Telling students that research is more important than teaching them	✓			



24. Providing insufficient guidance on use of independent learning time	✓		✓	
25. Demonstrating indifference to student evaluation of teaching	✓			

Key: B=1benevolence; I=integrity; C=competence; P=predictability

## 5. The Erosion of Trust

Trust may occasionally be lost as a result of a dramatic incident, such as a teacher criticizing or possibly even humiliating a student in class (5) or otherwise losing their temper (11). However, while such serious incidents can occur in a teaching context leading to an instant disintegration of trust, these types of events are probably far less common than more ‘fine-grained’ occurrences. This phrase refers to less dramatically powerful but more commonly occurring actions that accumulatively can undermine trust in a teacher.

### 5.1 Benevolence

A number of writers and researchers have emphasized the importance of lecturers caring or showing ‘love’ for their students (eg Ballantyne et al, 1991; Rowland, 2000). However, many lecturers, at least in a Western context where the age of majority is usually 18, commonly assert that students should be ‘independent learners’ and that, as adults, they do not regard themselves as responsible for their welfare. Such an attitude can be misunderstood or interpreted as a lack of caring or benevolence. Trust may be damaged by actions such as cancelling or re-scheduling classes without good reason (1), being unavailable to give any tutorial support outside of formal class contact time (10) or refusing to mediate in disputes between students arising from group projects (12). Moreover, if little or no guidance is given to students on how they can use time allocated for ‘independent learning’ (24) this can also be taken as a signal of a lack of caring.

Lecturers will frequently argue that group projects are intended to reflect the ‘real world’ of work where individuals with different abilities

and personalities must co-operate and perform together. This rationale is often used as a justification for telling students to sort out their own problems. Students at university though are peers and project teams in the workplace are normally hierarchically structured providing a basis for controlling and motivating group members. Where assessment is purely group-based this can leave students worried that their grades will suffer. There is plenty of evidence from student 'blogs' that attest to their concerns in this respect. Lecturers who refuse to recognize concerns that group grades are unfair can risk losing student trust (see Kagan, 1995; Kagan, 1996).

There are other ways that lecturers can demonstrate a lack of benevolence. Many lecturers have reservations about the veracity and accuracy of student feedback. However, expressing a disregard for perceptions about the quality of one's own teaching (25) demonstrates a disrespectful attitude. While it might be rare for an academic to explicitly express the view that their research was more important to them than teaching their students (23), this attitude might be inferred from an apparently 'uncaring' attitude.

## 5.2 Integrity

Integrity is interpreted by McKnight and Chervany (2001) as about honesty and truthfulness and the keeping of promises. Teachers in higher education provide such promises both explicitly and implicitly in their everyday practice. Explicitly, they might promise to return assignments to students by a particular date but then fail to do so (16). Implicitly, students would expect faculty to behave in a manner that was both truthful and fair in classroom situations by promoting a 'neutral and open forum for debate' (Barnett, 1990:8) and 'interactional fairness' (Rodabaugh, 1996).

Retaining the trust of students is related to fairness as a virtue, particularly in relation to the power of assessment (Macfarlane, 2004a). Seven of the trust eroding behaviours suggested in figure 1 are related to the assessment role (3,4,5,6,16,17 and 22). The dual role of higher education lecturers as both teachers and assessors places them in an especially responsible position (Macfarlane and Ottewill, 2005). While poor teaching is

something a student can overcome through their own efforts, they cannot 'escape the effects of poor assessment' (Boud, 1985:35). Here, being perceived as a harsh or lenient marker (6) or failing to handle requests for assignment extensions in a fair manner (3) are actions that will erode trust. In a study of 4,200 undergraduates at 14 US colleges and universities, Braxton and Mann (2004) found that 5 per cent of students believed that teachers had showed favoritism in their grading practice and a further 5 per cent felt that teachers had shown a condescending attitude toward them.

In most higher education systems, students are considered adults although legally they may not all have reached the age of majority in some national contexts. The age of majority is 19 in several Canadian provinces, 20 in Japan, and 21 in Singapore and the US states of Mississippi and New York. The norm elsewhere is 18 and this means that university teachers do not usually share information or opinions about their progress with third parties, such as parents (19) even though they may be continuing to support their children financially whilst in higher education. However, many university students are also part-time employees who may be sponsored by their business organization to pursue a further qualification, such as a Masters in Business Administration. The continued support for such students, and even their promotion prospects, can depend on their successful progress. This can result in a further pressure on university teachers to share information (Macfarlane, 2000). Sometimes, where there is concern for a student's mental or physical welfare rather than their academic progress a conflict can occur between a well-meaning attempt on the part of a teacher to be benevolent and maintaining the confidentiality and integrity of the teaching relationship in higher education. This mirrors the centrality of confidentiality in the doctor-patient relationship.

Some potentially integrity eroding actions may be too complex to represent in figure 1. One controversial area concerns the extent to which professors should reveal their political or ideological commitments to students. While some would contend that this is essential to academic freedom and being authentic, others have argued that an over-strident assertion of personal stances can have a negative effect on student aca-

demic freedom (Weber, 1919). The key point is that by teachers revealing their personal opinions this should not result in students self-censoring expression of their own viewpoint (Macfarlane et al, 2004b). It is essential that the student feels that they can trust their teacher not to discriminate against them if they express a view which opposes that of their professor.

### 5.3 Competence

Perhaps the biggest fear of the novice teacher is that their lack of knowledge will be exposed by their students (2) such as through being asked a question to which they do not know the answer. However, while a solid knowledge base is critical to credibility loss of trust is just as likely, if not more so, to result from a failure related to one of the other trust categories. There are also other aspects to competence than academic knowledge.

Allowing some students to dominate discussion (8) is, in part, a failure of trust in relation to integrity as part of the implicit contract of a higher education is that all will be encouraged to contribute in a free and open debate (Barnett, 1990). Yet, allowing such a situation to develop may also be an indicator of a lack of competence as a teacher. This is an example of the way that trust eroding actions may relate to more than one of the four categories identified by McKnight and Chervany (see figure 1). A lack of competence might further manifest itself as failing to up-date teaching materials (21), providing unclear or insufficient feedback on assignments (22) or guidance on the use of independent learning time (24) although such (in)actions may be perceived as a lack of caring or benevolence too. These examples are, to some extent, planning failures the significance of which are revealed in Braxton and Mann's (2004) study of US undergraduates. This revealed that almost 20 per cent of undergraduate students felt their teachers had not planned their teaching properly.

### 5.4 Predictability

Predictability is a key component of trust and can be eroded by inconsistent behaviour on the part of a teacher. Examples include changing an assignment or the way student work will be assessed mid-course (4) or

not completing coverage of the curriculum (13) raising levels of student anxiety as a result. Even what may appear to be relatively trivial considerations such as not starting and ending classes on time (15) or interfering with established seating patterns (18) that often reflect friendships makes the learning environment less 'safe' and predictable and may undermine this category of trust.

The importance of predictability can be overlooked in well-intentioned efforts to introduce innovative teaching and learning methods in higher education which can inadvertently damage the 'safety' or 'security' students find in conventional classroom environments where their role is relatively passive. A possible indicator of the importance of predictability is that despite attempts to introduce more interactive approaches to teaching and learning students still often express a preference for lecture formats (Ballantyne et al, 1999). Role-play is one of the least popular or preferred teaching methods among students in higher education. Studies report that students find it embarrassing and often feel it is ineffective as well (Stevenson and Sander, 2002). Despite this many educators in management and health-related fields believe that role play provides important benefits for student learning (Nestel and Tierney, 2007).

Student preferences for conventional methods of teaching can be a source of frustration to some educators and researchers committed to more innovative and active styles of learning. When asked, students tend to express preference for university teachers who are organized and communicate well using the lecture method (Hatvia and Birenbaum, 2000). This preference is probably related, at least in part, to the importance placed by students, and indeed any 'customer', on predictability. Students least like lecturers who expect them to adopt an independent and self-regulating approach to learning despite the fact that this is supported by constructivist learning theory (Hatvia and Birenbaum, 2000).

## 6. Conclusion

It is a truism that trust is hard to win but a lot easier to lose. Such a consideration applies as much in a teaching relationship as in any other

type of relationship. Moreover, trust is now seen as a key component in the modern strategic management of organizations working in a more competitive environment (Kramer and Tyler, 1996). The expansion of participation in higher education in many national contexts has also been accompanied by rising rates of non-completion. Much has been written about the importance of student integration and their acquiring the necessary social and cultural capital to adapt to university life as factors in determining whether students persist (eg Tinto, 1993). What is strangely absent from this debate is the impact of trust (and loss of trust) on such statistics even though it has been established that students are less likely to transfer away from the institution or drop out if conditions of trust are established (Ghosh et al, 2004). Forming teaching relationships based on trust though is more than a purely economic consideration. It is, above all, a moral one.

## Notes

1) A community or junior college in a North American or Japanese context

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*Weber on universities: The power of the state and the dignity of the academic calling in Imperial Germany*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 54-62.

# 「高等教育の信頼性」が意味するもの

ブルース・マクファーレン

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## 〈要 旨〉

高等教育機関が良質なティーチングを提供することの信頼性は、アクティブ・ラーニングや振り返りのプロセスを精緻化させる技法の開発ほどには注目されてこなかった。本稿では、大学新入生の教員に対する信頼度が学習活動にどのような影響を及ぼしているかを文献調査によって明らかにする。その際に、McKnight and Chervany (2001)によるメタ分類（思いやり、知的誠実さ、専門能力、予見能力）に基づいて、大学教員が学生の信頼を失うに至った25の事例を観察する。考察の結果、学生と指導教員の間に存在する「期待値のずれ」を少なくすることが、学生との信頼関係を維持あるいは学生からの信頼を取り戻す上で重要であることがわかった。良質のティーチングとは何かを理解する上で、学生との信頼関係は決定的に重要である。学生からの信頼を失うことは大学にとって社会的および倫理的な影響が大きだけでなく、経済的にも損失となる。

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