"If I don't trust my teachers, how can I learn then?" – why LTH students trust teachers, and what we can do to increase their trust

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Abstract—Most teachers would agree that it is desirable that their students trust them. And many teachers reflect already on what they can do to actively build trust with their students. Based on interviews with teachers, Felten et al. (2023) developed a model for teacher-initiated "trust moves", for example teachers displaying their expertise in their disciplines, building personal, caring relationships, being authentic in their interactions, and share their values and how they are acting on them. But to our knowledge what makes students trust teachers hasn't been explored yet, and if what teachers employ as "trust moves" actually is perceived as something that students are likely to base trust on.

We attempt to fill this gap by interviewing students in higher education from several engineering programmes about what trust means to them relating to their learning experiences at the Faculty of Engineering LTH, Lund University, what they feel makes them trust or distrust a teacher, and what would make a teacher more trustworthy to them. We interpret the student responses of the semi-structured interview based on the Felten et al. (2023) model. We end by suggesting "trust moves" that teachers can initiate based on the interviews, and open up for a discussion of what this might mean for learning and teaching.

Index Terms—Trust, Belonging, Higher Education

I. Introduction

THE importance of relationships to effective teaching and learning is commonly stated and has been identified as a key factor in student success (Felten et al. 2023; Felten & Lambert 2020; Fjelkner Pihl 2022). Effective relationships need trust, but creation and maintenance of trust between teachers and students in higher education is under-researched (Hagenauer & Volet 2014). Felten et al. (2023) have interviewed teachers about the ways in which they build trust in the classroom, categorizing the techniques used into:

- Cognition
- Affect
- Values
- Identity

Further analysis (Forsyth et al. 2023) has shown that teachers think that they tend to use the Cognition approach more than the others. Trust-building techniques based on

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on cognition encourage students to trust teachers based on their expertise, experience, and authority.

This focus on cognition is interesting in the light of more recent discussions about the importance of affect, identity, and values in developing inclusive teaching practices (Nieminen 2022; Wang 2021). Inclusive teaching practices, including broadening recruitment and working with disabled students, are a key part of Lund University's future planning. The data presented by Forsyth et al. (2023) suggests that a teacher who expresses trust in terms of affect, identity, or values seems more likely to put more pressure on themselves: for instance, being available to students based on a shared identity, or staying after class to enable students to ask questions if they did not feel comfortable to do so in class.

As academic developers, we look for ways to improve teaching which do not result in additional work for teachers. If trust-building is important (Archer-Kuhn & MacKinnon 2020; Cook-Sather et al. 2021; Little & Green 2022; Simon & Pleschová 2021), then we should be able to integrate it into regular course-planning, and not expect trust-building to happen through additional activities such as staying behind after class to answer extra questions, or by sharing more about their identities than they feel comfortable with. It may be that some of these activities are worth the effort, but we need a really clear idea of what kinds of trust-building activities work for students. In this paper, we report on a preliminary study to extend Felten et al. (2023)'s work to explore student perceptions and expectations of trust-building, and to find out if they are similar to those of teachers.

II. Methods

We conducted interviews with students using a convenience sample. Interviewees are sourced from LTH, starting with experienced students that the authors knew, and then asking them for suggestions of other students who might potentially be interested in speaking with us about the topic of trust. Our semi-structured interview prompts are modified from the prompts that Felten et al. (2023) used in their interviews with teachers, to capture what role student think trust plays in the classroom, and what students notice teachers do that builds trust, either between students and teacher, or among students. Four interviews were conducted in English, one in Swedish.

The study is registered in Lund University's research portal: Trust in higher education teaching and learning, the student perspective [1].

III. RESULTS

A. What teachers do that make students trust them

Two interviewees began with a strong focus on teacher competence, but during the interview, one of these students shifted their focus to the effect the teacher had on them. Two others started with: did they explain how they are qualified, why topics are being taught (related to what students will do with affect: both highlighted being able to ask questions without fear of ridicule of judgement. These students, and the fifth, all said that trust is built if the teacher shows that they want to do a good job of teaching them, even if they are not actually that good at teaching.

Following on from these initial thoughts, the students gave us many examples of how they develop trust in their teachers. All of them commented on the importance of teachers' willingness to teach and to plan and organize the course to support the students. Organization and competence were considered very important: not just subject expertise, but knowing how to organize the course to optimize student learning. Two of the students said that they found humor very engaging and motivating. Associated with this willingness, it was appreciated when teachers made themselves available for relationship building, such by participating in exercise sessions, not just lectures, make sure students build relationships by expecting group work, and creating a safe atmosphere for study.

It was also highly appreciated when teachers talked about how the course had gone previously, and what they had done to develop it in response to student feedback. That made students feel like their feedback would be heard.

Trust can be created by respecting students' time: "That everything is stated and everything is clear from the beginning and then there's respect to the students".

B. What teachers do to make students distrust them

Trust was also defined by several students by its absence: students seemed to find it easier to explain why they had not trusted a teacher. Teacher enthusiasm was considered very motivating, and its absence was detrimental: "You notice as a student. 'Oh, they don't want to teach. They **have** to teach'. Like they want to do their research, and then some higher-up told them 'Oh, you need to have one course.'".

Three students mentioned explicitly their need to be able to ask questions without being belittled or ridiculed "Feeling that there is room to ask hard or easy questions without feeling stupid" (translated from Swedish), suggesting that they had had experience of feeling this or seeing it happen in class. A teacher who began the course by telling the group how many students would fail it was mentioned as having a particularly demotivating effect on one of our participants.

C. Indirect influences on trust

Three students mentioned the faculty's reputation, which meant that they trusted the teachers because they (the students) trusted the faculty to do what was best for them.

The strong influence and trust within cohorts was also mentioned by all the students. The faculty's introduction week, where they spend an intensive time in social interactions with their cohort, was considered very important. These activities are organized by more senior students, who were also mentioned as an important influence on students' opinions of individual teachers and courses.

IV. DISCUSSION

The "trust moves" that teachers can employ that we identified in the interviews can be readily mapped on the Felten et al. (2023) model, and often are similar to what is generally suggested as good teaching practice. Teachers can, for example, demonstrate:

- knowledge, skills, and competences by being prepared and organized, and explaining why plans have to change if they do. [Cognition]
- interpersonal care and concern by respecting students' time and planning and caring about the impact of their actions on students. (see e.g., Felten & Lambert, 2020). [Affect]
- sensitivity to their own and/or others' identities by introducing themselves carefully, sharing information they are comfortable with (professional or personal) and showing that they understand students' lives. [Identity]
- that they are acting on principle, by situating their teaching within their professional lives and those of their students, explaining the reasons for certain decisions, and showing that they trust students [Values].

While we set out to investigate student perception of trust in the classroom, it became apparent that trust is not just about what a teacher does in contact with students. Teachers at LTH generally start out with a little extra trust put in them just because they are teaching at LTH and LTH has a really good reputation. This initial, pre-contact, level of trust is, for good or bad, modified by what reputation a teacher has in older student cohorts (and this might be not easy to change quickly).

V. CONCLUSIONS

Students report that trusting their teachers is the foundation for their learning. The good news is that interviews with students at LTH show that students generally trust their teachers at LTH. Trust is placed in teachers not only because of direct contact that students have with them, but also because students trust LTH and its reputation, and trust is also transferred between students before any contact with teachers has been made.

All the students we interviewed reported examples of situations where trust had been absent or broken by teacher actions. As teachers ourselves, we can imagine that these actions were certainly not intended to have this effect, and a better knowledge of the impact of such actions would make them easy to avoid.

Some key recommendations we have, which aligns with established knowledge, but which may be useful to see in once place:

• Introduction to yourself, the course, and how it fits in the whole programme and why it is important. Situate yourself in terms of your expertise (cognition), identity (professional, and if you feel like it, personal), values (your desire for student success) and affect (how you want them to feel in your classroom).

• Explain what you will do to help the students to

succeed

• Explain how and when questions can be asked and be very clear that you welcome questions and will not be dismissive or sarcastic in answering them

• Explain what to do if something goes wrong in the class, or if the student has particular challenges

• Talk about why you do things in a particular way, and if possible, how that has been influenced by previous students you have taught.

Most of these "trust moves" are actually what is recommended as good teaching practice anyway, and should not require any extra effort on the teacher's part. But viewing these aspects in terms of building students' trust might be an additional motivation for teachers to make sure to pay attention to them while designing and conducting teaching.

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