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The ambiguity of trust in higher education

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Abstract

A key assumption made in the literature is that trust in education is positive. This assumption underpins the work of notable scholars of education, such as Freire (1970) and hooks (1994), and is reiterated in Magadla's (2023) remarks in 'Trust as a condition for radical entanglement'. While I agree with them that it is essential for trust to exist in a healthy and humanising learning environment, I am also mindful of calls for caution, such as those offered by Rice (2006) and Kovač and Kristiansen (2010), which provide reasons to believe that excessive trust can have negative effects on learning and the environments and relationships within which learning takes place. Given calls for and against the promotion of trust in education spaces and drawing on my experiences co-creating and co-facilitating a student-led and student-centred course in ethics, I suggest the need to recognise the ambiguity of trust in higher education.

Keywords: ambiguity; critical pedagogy; humanising pedagogy; student-led pedagogy; trust

Introduction

South African academics engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning recently called for reflections on our understanding of what higher education is for, how we relate to our students, community, and each other, and how we build and disseminate knowledge that contributes to the public good (HECU 11, 2024). These calls '[raise] considerations about how higher education can nurture ethical ways of being' (ibid.) and pose pressing questions about the role of trust in doing so.

Trying to understand how higher education can nurture ethical ways of being has been central to the work of the Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics (AGCLE) since its inception in 2013 and has guided the design and facilitation of its flagship student-led and student-centred course in ethics – IiNtetho zoBomi: Conversations About Life (IZ) – over the last decade.

Our experiences[1] have shown that these concerns are intimately related. The *purpose* of higher education – including furthering the knowledge project and nurturing ethical ways of being – can either be promoted or undermined by the ways in which we relate to one another in the academy. Given the foundational importance of these relationships, questions concerning trust come to the fore, such as: What is the role of trust in higher education? How would trusting relationships serve the ends of higher education?

A key assumption made in the scholarship of teaching and learning is that trust in higher education is positive.[2] It is commonly held that:

> In a world where many of our interactions with students are based on mistrust … trust is more necessary than ever. … In a trustworthy ecosystem, staff and students thrive, knowledge flourishes, and society benefits. (HECU 11, 2024)

Indeed, this assumption underpins Magadla's (2023) hopeful remarks in her online think piece, 'Trust as a Condition for Radical Entanglement'.[3] I am moved by these calls and indeed agree, following Freire (1970), hooks (1994), and others, *both* that trust is essential in a healthy learning environment *and* that it is partly the teacher's responsibility to create the kinds of learning environments in which trust can be present or cultivated. However, I am also mindful of calls for caution, such as those offered by Rice (2006) and Kovač and Kristiansen (2010), which provide good reasons to believe that excessive trust in an educational setting can have negative effects – not only on learning, but on the environments and relationships within which learning takes place.

This paper is structured as follows: I begin by elucidating what I mean by trust as well as the concerns of both calls for and against excessive trust in higher education. I argue that bearing

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[1] The collective 'our' refers to the teaching team working at the AGCLE over the past decade. I will switch from 'I' to 'our' when I speak for myself and when I speak for the collective.

[2] See, for instance, Freire (1970) and hooks (1994) for exemplars of this position.

[3] Drawing on the philosophy of Jones (2022) and West (2004), Magadla (2023) urges us to consider how trust – born of a recognition both of our 'life-death inter-dependency' or 'radical entanglement' and the 'tragicomic hope' we need to respond to it – could help us deal with the various crises we find ourselves in. Trust, she argues, is only possible if we "use this moment to illuminate the extent of the crisis and to have the courage to think about what is required to save the planet. All disciplines have this moral obligation. All life depends on this."

Magadla suggests that in our current socio-political climate – one she aptly describes as being characterised by crisis – academics need to reflect on the questions and moral obligations arising from our context and work towards building trust in one another. Given her discussion of student protest movements at South African higher education institutions (such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall), it seems that she is speaking about a trust that students want to place in academics to hear, respond, and attend to calls for social and epistemic justice and for transformation – including the transformation of ourselves and the academy, of the curriculum and 'hidden curriculum', and of how we think about and relate to our students and communities.

both in mind must lead us to recognise and attend to the ambiguity of trust in our pedagogical approaches and practices. Next, I turn to my experience of co-designing and co-facilitating IZ – a course that invites and, in many respects, depends on relationships of trust to bring this ambiguity to life. Here, I explore the role played by trust between students and academics in the co-facilitation of IZ as a student-led and student-centred course.[4] Ultimately, on the basis of interpreting these experiences through the theoretical lens provided below, I suggest that if we want trust in higher education to fulfill the potential described by Magadla (2023), Freire (1970), hooks (1994), and others, we need to actively attend to the ambiguity of trust in our pedagogical practices and spaces.

Methodologically, this paper adopts a philosophical approach grounded in conceptual analysis, interpretive reflection, and situated pedagogical experience. Rather than employing a formal empirical method, I develop my argument through engaging with literature in the scholarship of teaching and learning, feminist and critical pedagogy, and social epistemology. The use of first-person narrative and vignettes from the course, drawn from my experience co-facilitating IZ, serves a dual function. The vignettes are not presented as empirical data, but as philosophically generative moments; they are lived instances that illuminate the ambiguity of trust and invite us to reflect on epistemic agency, relational vulnerability, and the ethical dimensions of higher education. In this way, the paper enacts a mode of philosophical inquiry that takes seriously the epistemic value of lived experience and the interpretive power of narrative in philosophical argument.

Trust in the higher education classroom context

Given my interest in the role played by trust between academics and students in the learning environment, I take trust, for the purposes of this paper, to be *an attitude* that disposes us towards certain ways of feeling and acting in relation to one another. Referring to interpersonal trust in particular, the Stanford Online Encyclopedia of Philosophy's entry states:

> Trust is an attitude we have towards people whom we hope will be trustworthy, where trustworthiness is a property not an attitude. Trust and trustworthiness are therefore distinct although, ideally, those whom we trust will be trustworthy, and those who are trustworthy will be trusted. … Trusting requires that we can, (1) be vulnerable to others – vulnerable to betrayal in particular; (2) rely on others to be competent to do what we wish to trust them to do; and (3) rely on them to be willing to do it. (SEAP, 2020)[5]

[4] I want to focus on trust between teachers and students in higher education, and particularly on interpersonal relationships of trust between the two since this relationship is relatively under-studied in the literature on trust in higher education. See, for instance, Felten, Forsyth and Sutherland (2023).

[5] Trust in this regard, differs from "mere reliance." While we can be disappointed by those we rely on, we typically don't feel *betrayed* by them when they fail to be reliable in the way we do when someone breaks our trust.

In this picture, there is an important relationship between trust and autonomy. The entry further states:

> Autonomy is another good that flows from trust insofar as people acquire or exercise autonomy only in social environments where they can trust people (or institutions, etc.) to support their autonomy. (SEAP, 2020)[6]

In the scholarly literature that explores interpersonal trust between academics and students in higher education, the focus is typically on the student's trust in the academic, with some educators recommending that academics use what they call 'trust moves' (Felten et al. 2023: 2) to enhance student trust in the classroom. Of course, this is not to say that all the literature focuses here. Indeed, as Felten, et al. note 'trust is relational so both teachers and students contribute to the development of (or the loss of) trust in the classroom' (2023: 2). Macfarlane (2009) speaks of an academic's perceived trustworthiness in terms of their competence, predictability, integrity, and benevolence.[7] These so-called 'categories' of trust, which studies urge us to measure empirically, map nicely onto the philosophical picture of interpersonal trust given above, as it involves hope, vulnerability, and a reliance on both the goodwill and ability of others. That is, in trusting another, we take an attitude towards them that expresses a hope that they are both able and willing to do what we trust them to do; it is a hope in their competence, predictability, integrity, and benevolence which makes us vulnerable to betrayal. Students, then, are tacitly positioned in the scholarship of teaching and learning as vulnerable to betrayal by academics who are either unable or unwilling to do what they are trusted to do.

So, what are academics entrusted *as*? And what are they entrusted *with* or *to do*? There is a plethora of ways to answer these questions, but, perhaps most obviously and basically, academics are trusted as epistemic authorities – as those who are knowledgeable, have gained, and can introduce our students to the knowledge and research methods in particular disciplines. Just as the doctor or surgeon is an epistemic authority when we go to a hospital, one we need

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[6] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that, for this reason, 'managerialism that diminishes autonomy also diminishes trust and vice versa'. I wholeheartedly agree.

[7] These categories are drawn from the work of McKnight and Chervany (2001). See for instance, Macfarlane (2009). Interestingly, Macfarlane suggests that innovative teaching styles can disrupt trust in a learning environment because they are often experienced, even tacitly, as unpredictable. He supports this suggestion by citing research which found that students prefer conventional teaching styles over innovative teaching styles. While I will not go into this much further here, it certainly warrants further reflection since the conventional styles he refers to include those we reject when we endorse active, self-directed learning, including what Freire (1970: 72) called 'the banking approach' to education. Moreover, IZ is designed to encourage active learning on the part of students and adopts a number of innovative, unconventional, teaching styles and practices in an explicit move to transform the way ethics is taught (as well as how students think about their education). Macfarlane's suggestion that innovative teaching styles and practices undermine trust between students and academics could have a direct bearing on the nature and level of students' trust in us and IZ. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to say more about this note.

to trust if they are to treat or operate on us, so too is the academic an epistemic authority when we go to university, one we need to trust if they are to guide and teach us. As such, academics are entrusted as those with knowledge of particular disciplines in the academy to introduce and guide students into disciplinary communities, exposing them to conversations in these disciplines, and developing their knowledge and understanding of the disciplines. Insofar as this is the case, academics are entrusted with the development or refinement of students' epistemic agency.

In this framing, it is easy to see how trust is typically seen in a positive light in higher education. Indeed, in the words of Kovač and Kristiansen, 'virtually all the literature in the field of education perceives trust as a virtue' (2010: 281), or, at the very least, a crucial ingredient of a healthy learning environment.[8] Rice, too, claims that 'to become educated, we need the help of others; to receive that help, we must trust' (2006: 73)[9] and elucidates that 'trust is one of the conditions that must be present for truly open and honest conversation' (2006: 75) and, thereby, for learning and knowledge construction.[10] However, she also points to the inevitable fact of our vulnerability in the face of trusting others, given the fact that in trusting we '[give] another a certain degree of "discretionary responsibility" in deciding how to care for what has been entrusted' (2006: 72) and, in so doing, open ourselves to harm or damage. Following Baier (1986), whose philosophy on trust informs her work,[11] Rice believes that we can have warranted or morally good trust and its opposite, and argues that:

> The creation and maintenance of educational relations in which trust is warranted and morally good will, no doubt, require attention to an entire complex of conditions, not only personal or psychological, but also social, political, and economic. (2006: 78)

It is because we are vulnerable to those we trust, including, in this case, our teachers, that Rice calls for 'teachers to exercise special care and discretion in their efforts to meet students' trust' (2006: 76). Indeed, she warns us that:

> While an utter lack of trust may make a student resistant to genuinely helpful instruction, an overabundance of trust is at odds with such long-standing and well-defended

[8] Again, this picture is at the heart of Freire's (1970) seminal work on critical pedagogy, where humility and respect play a central role in building trust and, thereby, a healthy learning environment. See for instance, Rugut and Osman (2013).

[9] She goes on to suggest that '[i]f children do not trust the basic soundness of the values and skills (or techniques) that others seek to impart, surely they will be unlikely to adopt them as their own' (2006: 74).

[10] Indeed, for this reason she suggests that: 'The need for trust may be especially great in cases where students are asked to consider and discuss topics or ideas that are bound to generate serious contention' (2006: 75). This, again, is relevant to IZ as an engaged course in ethics and deserves further attention elsewhere.

[11] In 'Trust and Anti-Trust', Baier (1986) claims that in some circumstances trust can be bad or even morally objectionable.

> educational aims as critical thinking. If the Aristotelians are correct, our goal educationally should be to help students to learn to trust and distrust well and finely. (2006: 77)

Let's explore these thoughts further. Why might an overabundance of trust stand at odds with critical thinking? And how do trusting relationships with our teachers open us to harm or damage? How can we be harmed? And what might be damaged?

Recent literature in social epistemology on epistemic justice and injustice has argued that we can be harmed in our capacities as knowers or epistemic agents (see, for instance, Miranda Fricker [2007]). Our epistemic agency and, in turn, our sense of self can be damaged, for instance, by misrecognition of our normative status as knowers and the responsibilities that accompany this (see, for instance, Congdon [2018]). In the context of higher education research, Luckett, et al. (2019) explore students' vulnerability to misrecognition in their work on reimagining the contemporary South African university and, in so doing, point to the central role of interpersonal relationships of warranted trust in the development of epistemic agency. They argue that:

> [W]ithout social affirmation and sufficient intersubjectivity between teacher and learner, the conditions for learning will not obtain – students will not access curriculum knowledge, find a voice to participate in meaning-making and become epistemic agents. … All persons need to develop a sense of self and a voice through our relationships with others; until this occurs, we cannot become social actors or knowers. … If students and academics are not enabled to develop a "sense of self" in a learning environment, they will feel excluded and alienated; leading to demotivation, demoralisation and loss of the "will to learn". When this happens, we suggest that it is here – in these (failed or absent) interpersonal relationships, where there is a lack of intersubjectivity between lecturers and students – that the micro-practices of misrecognition and exclusion occur … fueling anxiety, mistrust and fear. (2019: 36–37)

Here, Luckett et al. (2019) speak directly to the damage or harm done to students as knowers stemming from misrecognition and clearly endorse trust in higher education as playing a central role in constituting interpersonal relationships of recognition that foster the development of epistemic agency, meaning-making, and learning.

Let us return, then, to Rice's (2006) warning and promotion of an Aristotelian approach to help our students trust and distrust 'well and finely' (2006: 77). Again, why might excessive trust stand at odds with learning? And, ergo, how might a certain amount of distrust serve the ends of learning?

Kovač and Kristiansen, while agreeing that 'trust plays an important role in the general process of communication, which is central to all teaching situations' (2010: 279), argue that excessive trust damages thinking and learning in terms of the development of higher-order cognitive functioning, the exercise of critical thinking, and the creation of socially exclusionary

learning environments that '[amplify] the existing uneven distribution of power between students and teaching staff' (2010: 277).

Excessive trust, they argue, can lead to complacency or overreliance on the teacher and the subsequent tendency to take what they say as truth, foregoing the need to critically examine what is presented. Kovač and Kristiansen speak of this in terms of students grabbing the opportunity to '[lower their] cognitive load' (2010: 279), allowing them to take critical shortcuts that decrease their opportunities for developing critical thinking or higher-order cognitive functioning and negatively impact their ability to engage in autonomous thinking. As they put it:

> The blind belief in the trustworthiness of the knowledge source might subsequently 'lock' the cognitive capacities of the students and tempt them into using excessive heuristic processing. (2010: 280)

They also argue, insightfully, that excessive trust can create a cohesive group identity in a learning environment that can become hostile to difference. It is worth quoting them at some length:

> Excessive trust also tends to promote cohesion of particular social groups in terms of belonging, where the mode of not only thinking alike, but also feeling alike, is prevalent. Although satisfaction with the teaching environment is certainly not negative per se, the problem with a contented learning atmosphere is that alternative modes of thinking, ideas, suggestions or perspectives might be experienced as disturbing, demanding and a hindrance which decelerate the flow of information absorbed by students. … the creation of group identity which is based on mutual trust often automatically creates potentially 'deviant' individuals who wish to challenge the established group norms. It follows that students who would like to challenge the ideas in the curriculum run a risk of being excluded by the teacher if he/she [sic] is not aware of this process. These students also run a risk of being excluded by other members of the group who unquestioningly follow the teacher's instructions. (2010: 282)

If Kovač and Kristiansen are correct, we can see why Rice recommends that we teach our students to trust and distrust 'well and finely' (2006: 77), or, put differently, that we actively attend to the ambiguity of trust in higher education.

Trust in 'IiNtetho zoBomi: Conversations About Life'

To bring the ambiguity of trust to life, I now turn to experiences co-facilitating IZ, a student-led and student-centred course in ethics, in which students engage in weekly student-led lectures, peer-to-peer dialogues, service-learning in the form of mentoring local primary school learners, and iterative reflective writing that is continuously assessed (by their peers and the academic

team) over the semester or year that the student takes IZ.[12] As already mentioned, trust plays a central role in our pedagogical approach to IZ – from meeting our students where they are epistemically and trusting them to co-construct and co-facilitate the course's content in lectures with us, to providing them with opportunities to lead, manage, and monitor their own and one another's learning in peer assessment activities, small peer-to-peer dialogues, and one-on-one mentoring sessions with younger learners in our community. As we ask students to take responsibility for and ownership of their learning (and the development of their mentor-mentee relationships), we place our trust in them, and in guiding their journey, we ask them to place their trust in us. Building, and indeed *earning*, this trust is central to the student-led and student-centred nature of the course. Of course, our hope is that the trust built between ourselves and our students is reciprocally warranted and morally good – that we can trust them and they can trust us – and has a positive effect on their learning and engagement in IZ and their education more broadly.

However, our experiences also lend support to the idea that trust can play an ambiguous role in the classroom. Indeed, our experiences seem to bring to life both the need for trust in the classroom, defended by critical and humanising pedagogues like Freire (1970) and hooks (1994), and the dangers of excessive trust, which the likes of Rice (2006) and Kovač and Kristiansen (2010) warn us about. Consider the following two scenarios:

1. In a lecture, we ask the class whether they have any questions about the concepts we are exploring – the topic is totalitarianism and its impact on our personal freedom, explored with reference to Orwell's '1984'. Our students indicate that they have no questions. During the class, I take this to mean that they understand the concepts and their relationship to one another and are ready to bring them to bear both on their service-learning engagements that week with their mentees and on their reflections on their context and personal freedom within this context in their reflective writing. Later that week, our students complain bitterly to their tutors, who, in turn, complain to us, that they are confused, that they do not understand the concepts or the relevance to their lives of the ideas captured in a novel written in 1949 by a now long-dead white Englishman, and do not know how to connect them to their context, experiences, or personal freedom. When it came to engaging with their reflective writing on the topic, I saw the fruits of our failed pedagogical labours. Rather than spending time with the extract prescribed to them – and the wonderfully stimulating ideas of 'newspeak', 'double-think', and 'crime-stop' described in the extract – our students simply googled totalitarianism and failing to see its immediate relevance in the South African context or their lives, turned to a general and brief engagement with what they took to be a relevant type of political regime in history. In short, their reflections on the content were uninspired and entirely missed the point of our

[12] For further information on the aims and design of the course as well as the place and role of service learning in the course, see Kelland, et al. (2024).

introducing them to this content, and we ended up assessing a lot of meaningless waffle – or worse, AI-generated text – on totalitarianism.

2. In a lecture exploring the existential concepts of 'the gaze' – the socially-constructed meanings projected onto our bodies by others/society – and 'double consciousness' – the experience of perceiving oneself through the (internalised) 'gaze' of the Other – a discussion ensues questioning whether white South Africans can experience double consciousness. A group of tutors with significant influence in the class (and members of the student movement of the time) defend the (reasonable) claim that white people cannot experience double consciousness by definition, given that the concept was coined to describe the experience of oppressed African-Americans in the 19th and 20th centuries. None of the students present contested or questioned this position in the lecture. Later, I am assessing a reflective journal from a young, white cisgender heterosexual man who was in the lecture and remained silent, but had many questions and concerns about the defence of this claim, which he brought to life in his reflective writing through his own experience of what he described as the silencing 'woke gaze' prevalent in the university at the time.

I want to suggest that it is possible to interpret both scenarios through the lens of trust, and that if we do, they lend support to the warnings issued by the likes of Rice (2006) and Kovač and Kristiansen (2010), or, as I have put it, to the need to attend to the ambiguity of trust in the classroom.

Let us turn, then, to the first scenario. On the face of it, we might think that what happened here is easily explicable in terms of a lack of trust – that is, our students failing to trust us or one another in the classroom setting enough to express their lack of understanding. Indeed, their comfort revealing their confusion in their peer-to-peer dialogues indicates that there was something missing in the larger setting that was present in the smaller, more intimate group settings, and trust seems an obvious candidate. Remember that on the account of trust provided above, trust involves making oneself vulnerable. Indeed, in their reflective writing, students often express a fear of 'looking stupid' or 'sounding stupid' to others when trying to express themselves or articulate their thoughts. If they did have questions that could have furthered their understanding of the content but remained silent out of fear, this could plausibly be interpreted as a lack of trust in us or one another in the face of this fear that stood in the way of their learning. In terms of us as their teachers, this lack of trust could be interpreted, by drawing on the perspectives in the literature above, as a lack of trust in our competence and perhaps benevolence – our competence to either assist them and further their understanding as epistemic authorities or to manage the class environment, or our benevolence to care enough to want to support their learning or the development of their epistemic agency as knowers. Relatedly, a lack of trust in our competence and benevolence could also be thought of in terms of our students doubting our desire or ability to recognise their epistemic agency or, in this case, to pursue the decolonisation of the curriculum in our teaching. Perhaps, drawing on George Orwell was

perceived as an imposition of colonial thought, reinforcing feelings of alienation from the curriculum and undermining trust in our commitment to the transformative agenda or, again, to the development and support of their epistemic agency. In terms of the community of inquiry as a whole, we might think of this lack of trust in Garrison's (2016) terms – as a failure on our part to foster 'social presence' in the class, where social presence refers to a sense of community committed to academic purpose and enables open communication and collaborative and constructive engagement. If we interpret this scenario as an indication of our students' lack of trust in us or the community of inquiry, we have a reason to think that a lack of trust is harmful in the classroom because it presents an obstacle to pursuing understanding and critical thinking.

However, perhaps more should be said about the assumption I make in this scenario; that is, that our students' indication that they didn't have any questions meant that they understood what we had been talking about. This assumption is especially noteworthy in retrospect, given our students' written reflections on fear just mentioned. Should my assumption also be interpreted through the lens of trust? Indeed, does my assumption indicate that I expect or take for granted that our students will trust us enough to be willing to make themselves vulnerable by admitting to a lack of understanding? Perhaps my assumption reveals a blindness on my part to the various reasons our students might have to choose to remain silent in class (including experiences of epistemic or linguistic marginalisation and alienation), regardless of whether or not they understand or have questions. If so, then, ironically, my assumption could betray an incompetence on my part that could undermine my students' trust in me.

An additional question can be asked: Assuming they had explicitly professed to understand, why would I trust them? In reflecting on this question, I find myself wondering whether this kind of trust in my students isn't something that should be expected from me as a teacher (bearing in mind that it is difficult, if not impossible, to develop autonomy – particularly in terms of my students' autonomy as epistemic agents – in a situation where there is an absence of trust? If one of my responsibilities as a teacher is to foster my students' sense of themselves as competent and capable enquirers and tellers, then it seems as though I ought to trust them when they indicate that they understand, since dismissing them would shirk this responsibility. Following Luckett et al. (2019), part of what I am entrusted to do as a teacher is to enable my students to develop their sense of themselves as 'social actors and knowers' (2019: 36). In their conception, failing to trust my students when they profess to understand could amount to a lack of recognition or misrecognition that could, in turn, fuel mistrust in me on the part of my students.

Let us now turn to the second scenario, which can be seen to highlight both excessive trust, on the one hand, and a combination of distrust in the classroom setting and measured trust in us as academics, on the other.[13] In terms of the former, I want to suggest that a plausible interpretation of this vignette, considered through the theoretical and philosophical lenses discussed above, is that the majority of our students in this class placed an overabundance of trust in tutors as epistemic authorities in the space, leading them to exemplify the concerns of

[13] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to reflect on what I am here describing as 'measured' trust.

Kovač and Kristiansen (2010). That is, to use their terms, the trust placed in our tutors allowed most of our students to lower their cognitive load and take what the tutors were saying at face value, foregoing the enriching opportunity of stretching their moral imaginations and critically engaging with the question at hand based on their own and their peers' lived experiences in their particular context, something that would have allowed them to pursue an intersectional understanding of this concept in our fascinating context.[14] The young man who remained silent despite his disagreement with the defence of the tutors' 'by definition' position based on his own lived experience and his ability to enrich the discussion by speaking up and pursuing such an intersectional understanding, sadly distrusted those facilitating the space – the students who were lecturing and the academics present – to shield him from the 'woke gaze' that he feared would dismiss his opinion or perspective as unimportant or obviously distorted simply in virtue of his positionality in the South African context. Having engaged with numerous rich reflections from differently embodied and situated students on the topic of the gaze and its relationship with their personal freedom in our context – including those of this young man – I suspect that in this instance our students lost out on an opportunity to critically engage and exercise higher-order cognitive functioning as well as their moral imaginations because the class was perceived as closed to engaging with alternative thinking. Drawing again on Kovač and Kristiansen's (2010) terms, we might say that the class, in this instance, was perceived by this student as having a cohesive 'woke' identity that outlawed differing opinions and excluded students who were deemed to hold them. The combination of excessive trust on the part of the majority and distrust on the part of a student who perceived himself as a minority, deviant voice in the class, led to a missed opportunity for thinking and learning. That said, it is certainly worth noting that by reflecting on his experience in his reflective writing, he placed a measured amount of trust in the academic who would read and assess his writing to 'grapple with his position in a meaningful way'.[15]

Attending to the ambiguity of trust in pedagogical practices and spaces

I suggest that the (albeit brief) discussion above lends support to the suggestion that we need to foster trust in the classroom in order to enable open, constructive, collaborative communication (and, in so doing, learning), but that we also need to manage class dynamics when we see excessive trust building between teachers and students, which has the potential to undermine critical thinking and higher-order cognitive functioning and lead to the exclusion of difference and its perception as deviance. In short, we need to attend to the ambiguity of trust in our pedagogical practices and spaces if we hope to adequately support the development of our students' epistemic agency – we want trust, but not too much of it. Indeed, we need to create educational spaces in which, as Rice (2006) suggests, our students can learn to trust and distrust 'well and finely' (2006: 77).

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[14] This is especially noteworthy given the essential role of the moral imagination in democratic citizenship, as argued by Nussbaum (2010).

[15] Again, thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this oversight on my part.

Author Biography

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