

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning

Season 9, Episode 2: Trust Moves in the Classroom with Peter Felten, Rachel Forsyth, and Kath Sutherland

Center for Teaching and Learning

[00:00:00] **Amanda Irvin:** Hello and welcome to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning, a higher education podcast from the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia University. I'm Amanda Irvin, the center's new Executive Director. Catherine Ross has passed the baton to me, and I'm excited to be your host. In this podcast series.

[00:00:25] We explore dead ideas in teaching and learning or beliefs that despite being untrue, continue to shape educational systems and practices, these outdated notions, as Diane Pike described, perpetuate the “tyranny of dead ideas.” Join us as we challenge these misconceptions and explore innovative approaches to higher education.

[00:00:50] Welcome everyone. I'm speaking today with Peter Felton, Rachel Forsyth, and Kath Sutherland. Peter Felton is Professor of History, Executive Director of the Center for Engaged Learning, and Assistant Provost for Teaching and Learning at Elon University in the U.S. He works with colleagues on institutional and individual change to enable learning and well-being.

[00:01:13] His research and writing over the last few years have focused on how relationships shape student experiences in and beyond the classroom in higher education. Rachel Forsyth is Senior Educational Developer at Lund University in Sweden. With Peter and Kath, she's currently researching how trust is built in the classroom situation.

[00:01:35] Trust is really important in her other areas of interest, assessment, which currently involves a lot of thinking about generative AI. Her recent book, *Confident Assessment in Higher Education*, is a practical guide for anyone working in higher education to understand and improve assessment. And Kathryn “Kath” Sutherland, is celebrating a quarter of a century as an academic developer in the Center for Academic Development at Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand.

[00:02:08] Kathryn's work has three main areas of focus: working lives, holistic academic development, and partnering with university students and teachers to

improve teaching and learning. She aims through her research and practice to make higher education institutions more joyous and caring places to work and learn.

[00:02:29] Welcome to our Dead Ideas Podcast, Rachel, Peter, and Kath. We are so happy you're with us today.

[00:02:37] **Kathryn Sutherland:** It's really great to be here. Thank you for inviting us, Amanda.

[00:02:41] **Peter Felten:** Thanks, Amanda.

[00:02:42] **Rachel Forsyth:** Yeah, thanks. Great to be here.

[00:02:45] **Amanda Irvin:** We are going to take just a little minute to set the stage and offer some reminders to our listeners about this season of Dead Ideas, in which we are exploring the ways instructors can build community, a sense of belonging, and trust with students.

[00:03:01] Confronting the dead idea that the world, quote unquote, outside of the classroom doesn't or shouldn't influence the world inside the classroom. That students are exclusively intellectual beings when they enter the classroom space. And so I'm so delighted to chat with you, uh, all, because I recently read two articles of yours that explore trust in the classroom.

[00:03:23] And for our listeners at home, the first one was "Building Trust in the Classroom: a Conceptual Model for Teachers, Scholars, and Academic Developers in Higher Education." And the second, which is hot off the presses, is "Expressions of Trust, How University STEM Teachers Describe the Role of Trust in Their Teaching."

[00:03:43] I was so struck by your discussion of trust, especially your discussion of trust moves, which we'll get to in a minute. But, I was really looking forward to having you on because trust seems so deeply connected to engaging with students as they bring themselves into the classroom and as we navigate all of these identities.

[00:04:00] So without further ado, I'm going to dive in and ask our first question. So as we begin our conversation today, would you please give our listeners a quick overview of your articles? What drew you to exploring the process of building trust in higher education classrooms? And Kath, I think we'll start with you.

[00:04:23] **Kathryn Sutherland:** Well, thank you, Amanda. And first of all, thank you for trusting the three of us with our three different accents from three different countries, in fact, three different continents around the globe for inviting us on to talk with you today. It's a real pleasure to be here and we're looking forward to this conversation.

[00:04:45] So the three of us started this work as part of an engaged learning research seminar through Elon University in the United States. And if anybody has the opportunity to get involved in a research seminar through Elon, I would strongly encourage them to do so. Our seminars' focus was on conditions for meaningful learning experiences.

[00:05:10] And we showed up with a fourth team member in our group, Stacey MacKinnon from Canada. And We were tasked with looking into meaningful relationships in classrooms and in learning situations. And starting from Peter's work with his colleagues on relationship-rich education, and then some work that Stacey had done on trust in inquiry-based learning with some colleagues in Canada, we started to think about how trust is implicit as a key element for the development and sustenance of positive educational relationships.

[00:05:47] And so we went looking in the literature and we really didn't find much empirical research that was investigating trust in higher education classrooms. And we were really curious about the student-teacher relationship and the student-student trust relationship. A lot of the research that was in the literature was about trust in an academic integrity sense, and we didn't really want to go there.

[00:06:12] We didn't think that that was necessarily focused on fostering positive educational relationships. There's great research in academic integrity, don't get me wrong. But we wanted to know more about what were teachers doing that might build trust in higher education classrooms and what did they think trust was?

[00:06:32] And so we started to investigate that with teachers, particularly in STEM subjects, science, technology, engineering, medicine, and math because our experience of working with teachers in those areas showed that they were often working in large classes with big groups of students, often in high content and high stress courses, and where relationships might be difficult to get going.

[00:06:58] So we interviewed 29 high enrollment STEM teachers in four different countries, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, and the US. And after we conducted those interviews, we started to code them using common definitions

of trust from the literature and found that we needed to adapt what was in the psychological and business and education literature currently.

[00:07:22] And so we developed a conceptual model of four general areas of importance for trust in higher education classrooms. And those areas are cognition, effect, values, and identity. And then the second article looked at how teachers expressed what they believe trust to be. But I think we'll talk a little bit more about that shortly.

[00:07:44] **Amanda Irvin:** We definitely will. Thank you so much. Peter, did you have anything that you wanted to add on to Kath's intro?

[00:07:52] **Peter Felten:** Just one thing to add to go a little more deeply into our four-part conceptual model so folks understand what we mean. And in this model, we're not saying faculty or academic teachers need to use all four of these areas for trust moves, but that we can think about them as a set of possibilities.

[00:08:10] And one is around cognition, like Kath said, which is really about does the teacher show knowledge, skills, competence to students? The second one is about affect. So does the teacher show interpersonal care and concern? Does the teacher help students develop a sense of care and concern among the class for each other?

[00:08:31] Third of these trust moves is around values, which is about does the teacher show that they're acting on principle? And that could be professional principles. It could be cultural principles, which seems particularly important in our interviews in New Zealand. We'll talk about that more. And then the fourth area is about identity.

[00:08:49] Does the teacher show sensitivity to their own and to others identities? And we found by looking at these four areas, we could describe all of the trust moves the 29 STEM faculty we interviewed described using in their diverse classes.

[00:09:10] **Amanda Irvin:** That's fascinating. And I can't wait to hear all of you talk more about this work.

[00:09:15] Trust seems so important to the learning process, like when I think about my own work as a student and as an instructor, trust seemed to be at the center of everything that we were doing.

[00:09:27] **Peter Felten:** I just wanted to build on that. One of the things that we see in the U.S. literature that's really quite troubling is it's differentials in trust.

[00:09:36] So first generation students, students of color in American higher education are much less likely to trust higher education institutions or people who teach in those institutions than their peers are. So as we think about trust, you know, I might say to my (student), say, I'm a trustworthy person, I'm a friendly teacher, I'm a supportive teacher. Of course, all my students are going to trust me, and we need to recognize that that may not be true.

[00:10:05] **Amanda Irvin:** Yeah, I think you're absolutely right. I was a first-generation student. And without going too deeply into my personal experiences, we'll talk about this a little bit later today, but I can remember the first time a professor said to me, like, you can trust me, like, I'm here to help you.

[00:10:23] And, and I want to help you. And that was so transformative for me. So given the important role that trust plays in education, in the articles you introduced more than a few times, the idea that trust is an essential piece of high-quality education, but it's also so understudied, that it's not systematically explored by scholars of higher ed teaching and learning.

[00:10:51] And I know that this is a complex question with a complex answer, but I'm going to ask it anyway. Why do you think that's the case? Why do you think that trust is so underexplored and understudied? Rachel, do you want to kick us off?

[00:11:08] **Rachel Forsyth:** Yeah, sure. And, and I think. Obviously, we don't know for sure. It's hard to know why something isn't, isn't there that we expect to find now with the lens that we have looking at it now.

[00:11:20] But I think you touched on this at the beginning, saying that maybe we've assumed in the past that students and teachers bring only their intellect to the classroom. So in our model, the cognition part, if you like. So perhaps it's been implicit or considered to be a given, particularly in traditional higher education environments, that universities and teachers just had trust because they existed, just, just by being, they had trust. And I think what we've learned in the last few years with the Black Lives Matter movement, and there was COVID, if we should have known before, maybe more explicitly. But that isn't really the case. Lots of students don't trust systems, and we need to find out more about that.

[00:12:06] But also, I think, you know, maybe it wasn't considered important in those environments. You know, you're here to learn, that's what you touched on at the beginning. You're here to learn, we don't need a relationship, or, we all understand each other already, we know these conventions, we don't need to build a relationship to make this work.

[00:12:22] And I think as we've diversified engagement in higher education, the importance of relationships has become more obvious to us as a way to support learning. And something we've talked about a lot is context, and that comes out a little bit with the affect, the values and the identity that we talk about, the discipline, the country, the level of the course.

[00:12:46] So all of those things are relevant. So trust is culturally-grounded. So what it looks like to trust or to build trust or to be trusted, be trustworthy, depend on that context. I don't know if you want to add something to that, Kath.

[00:13:00] **Kathryn Sutherland:** Yeah, I think it's also that trust is interactional. It's between the teacher and the student. The student and other students and the teacher and all the students. And it's, it's dynamic. So we might trust each other today. But that might change in our minds tomorrow because of the behavior of someone around us or how we're treated or something that happens in the classroom. So trust is quite difficult to research and we decided just to take one slice initially to look at higher education teachers' understandings of trust.

[00:13:43] So we haven't looked yet at whether what these teachers are doing actually does build trust. We've just asked them what they think they do that builds trust, and I think that's going to be quite an exciting next step for this research area. Not necessarily that we'll be doing that, but hopefully the baton might be taken up somewhere that we're, we're going to move into looking at student perspectives on trust next. And there's quite a lot now starting to happen in other places. So we're quite excited. to find out more about this very complex question issue. Yeah.

[00:14:26] **Amanda Irvin:** Thank you so much. And I speak on behalf of all of our listeners. Thank you for starting with that first slice, right? The only way in is one slice at a time, especially for something so complex, and ever-shifting and changing is trust. So I want to talk a little bit more, and I hope you're willing, about the framework for understanding and enacting the ways instructors build trust in higher education classrooms.

[00:14:52] And you, in your first article, you referred to these ways as trust moves. And so my understanding is that it seems like trust moves hinge on acknowledging who learners and instructors are as people, how they navigate the world inside and outside of the classroom, and how important it is to value those experiences that we all bring to bear in order to establish trust.

[00:15:17] But admittedly getting a little ahead of myself, could you tell us, what are trust moves? And I thought it would be sort of fun if after an initial introduction, you could each share an example of a trust move that has stayed with you through your research so that listeners could get a sense of what these trust moves look like in practice.

[00:15:39] Peter, did you want to kick us off with an intro?

[00:15:42] **Peter Felten:** Sure, Amanda. So we adapt the idea of moves from scholars in rhetoric and learning studies. And what we mean by trust moves are the actions, the behaviors that teachers use to try to build trust with and among their students.

[00:15:56] So this could be things they say. It could be how they organize their course, you know, so things in the syllabus and things in their assessments. It could be implicit things, but that they're intentionally doing to try to help students recognize that either I as a teacher am trustworthy or I trust you as students or you should trust each other.

[00:16:19] And in our paper on expressions of trust, we dig into the specific words these academic teachers say they use, like, I'm not going to trick you or I believe in you. Things like this. But trust moves can be a lot more than that. And so let me give you an example of trust move that I, I really found compelling in one of the interviews we conducted.

[00:16:43] This was with a professor in Canada and she teaches very large enrollment introductory biology courses. She's been very active in STEM education reform, so lots of active learning in all the sorts of stuff for years. And she said she was really concerned over the years about how some students would engage and succeed with that act of learning, and some students she could just see being on the verge.

[00:17:10] And when COVID happened, and she saw student disengagement be so apparent, she decided she needed to do something differently. And so she changed her language in a really powerful way. She said she used to talk about

student peers and student study groups and all this. And she said, starting with COVID, but now, going forward, she talks about friendship.

[00:17:33] And she tells her students on the first day of class that it's important that they make friends in this class because friends will make studying more effective and more fun. These students are in introductory courses that feed into other courses in their program of study. One day, they're going to see these students throughout their time at university, they may be professionally going to see each other, so it makes sense to make friends. She says, in this very large enrollment course, I don't expect you to be friends with everyone, but one of my goals is that you make at least one friend in this course, and to reinforce that she's not just saying that.

[00:18:06] On the course syllabus, there are a list of learning objectives. One of her learning objectives is that every student will make a friend in the course. And she tells her students, because it's a learning objective, I'm going to assess it. So every exam has a one point question. Have you made a friend in this course so far?

[00:18:24] And you don't get a point for saying yes. You get a point for answering. But if you answer yes, there's a space for you to write the name of your new friend's hymn. So she's reinforcing in those ways. She also says every time she has her students get in groups for active learning work, she says, get with your smart friends.

[00:18:45] And she says in the interview that she doesn't have hard data about how this has changed everything, but she points to two things that changed the connections, the trust among students in the class. One, as she said, after a couple of weeks, it's hard to begin class because so many students are talking.

[00:19:03] When she walks into the room. That's great, right? Students are really engaging. And she also says that when students come to see her outside of class or before or after class, they almost always now come with somebody else. And they almost always introduce themselves as friends. And she said that never happened in the past.

[00:19:20] Even if students came together to see her, they would just show up. Now they're saying, this is my friend Amanda. We have a question for you. So, it's an example, I think, of an affective trust move, really trying to build that sort of interpersonal caring connection in the classroom.

[00:19:36] **Amanda Irvin:** Thank you, Peter. I love that so much.

[00:19:38] Kath, do you have a favorite trust move that you want to share with us?

[00:19:42] **Kathryn Sutherland:** Yeah, thank you, Amanda, and thanks for that, that story, Peter. It just resonates so much with, with what we hope people are trying to do in their classrooms. So, my example focuses in on the two of the other quadrants in our trust framework, and that's the values quadrant and the identity quadrant.

[00:20:05] And it's an example from an amazing colleague who teaches in the sciences at my university. We'll call her Anahera, which is the Māori name for angel. And she starts all of her teaching with connection. So, in the Māori culture in, in New Zealand, there's a value, uh, that we call whanaungatanga. And the root word of that is whānau, which means extended family or a collective sense of belonging.

[00:20:39] And the idea of whanaungatanga, if we adapt it into a higher education context, is to that we would like students to feel that they belong and that the acts and moves that we make as teachers won't alienate our students, but will help them to feel connected with us and with each other.

[00:21:01] And so this teacher, she creates whanaungatanga in her classrooms, in all of her classrooms, whether she's a guest lecturer or she's got the students for 12 weeks by putting up photos in her first class. So if it's just a guest lecture, she does a short version of it, but if she has the students for a longer time, she goes into a bit more depth, but I'll share with you her example of what she does in, in a guest lecture. So she will put up three photographs. The first will be of a really well-known landmark down south in the South Island. The second is of a street in Auckland. And the third is of the South coast in Wellington, which is where our university is in Wellington.

[00:21:48] And she says to the class, does anybody recognize the, the picture on the South Island and a few people might put their hand up and, and she says, that's where my genealogical connections are made to. So that's where I come from. Those are where my people are. Um, and then she says, what about this, the street in the middle? Do people recognize this? And actually the street has a really well-known name that's common in a cartoon in New Zealand. And so it has resonance for the students, whether or not they know the street. And she says to them, that's where I grew up. And then she says, and what about this last picture? You must all recognize this. And of course they all do. So everybody's got their hand up.

[00:22:32] And then she says to them, what resonates with you about any of these pictures? And one or two students might put up the hand and say, well, I grew up in, in near that street, or I've been to that landmark or I know the picture that third picture because my house is two blocks from there, you know, and she starts to make connections with them that are really low-key.

[00:22:58] There's no pressure on the students There's no expectation. She's not asking them to reveal things about themselves to other people that they might want other people not to know so early in the, in the term or in the class. And she just gets them talking with her and with each other and making connections.

[00:23:18] And she said to me in the interview, and I think I'll find the, the actual quote, cause it's really lovely. She says: "I think it makes the room feel like we all know each other a little better. And it's a Māori process. I say to them. The purpose of this is to feel connected and get to know each other better. And these connections can happen in many different ways. So you might have referenced a place where I've never been, but maybe I've got a close friend who was born there, and when you mention that place, it makes me feel a bit warm inside. That is whanaungatanga. And it might be that I visited the place that you went to school. And so I think about that. So that's a Māori process. And I think that's also a trust building process that anybody can do."

[00:24:13] And I thought that that was really beautiful. Just sharing three simple photographs and asking people to try to connect with her and with each other.

[00:24:24] **Amanda Irvin:** Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing that with us.

[00:24:26] That's, that's really beautiful. And I'm struck by how much trust hinges on connection between people. Okay, Rachel, do you have a——I don't want to say favorite trust move, but a trust move that stayed with you.

[00:24:40] **Rachel Forsyth:** Yes. So going back to cognition. So maybe something that we more traditionally think about as a move that teachers might make, but I've got a couple of really short examples.

[00:24:51] So someone we interviewed who is a woman who's worked in a male dominated industry of computing. And she said: "I always start by telling them that I was a programmer in industry. This is important to gain their trust. They are going there and I've been there." And we saw that was a really nice way of just connecting students with why they're there or what their future plans might be.

[00:25:18] And another female interviewee we had said, "You have to know your subject because the students learn very fast if you know your subject and they can trust your knowledge or not."

[00:25:29] So those things are still important to teachers, even though we've brought in some other aspects that we think are important too.

[00:25:38] **Amanda Irvin:** Yeah, absolutely. There's so much trust that's built in. I love what, what this interviewee said, like, I've, I've been where you're going. There's some, some guidance there.

[00:25:49] Okay. I can't believe that it's, it's already time for our final question, but here we go to close us out. One thing, one other thing, I suppose, that I was really struck by in your writing is this finding regarding connections between instructor expressions of care for students and the process of building trust.

[00:26:14] So I'm going to read a selection so that listeners can hear this, just a brief quote. "It seems that while many teachers care deeply for their students in terms of the and their well-being. Not all," this is, not all instructors, "took the deliberate step of ensuring that students know about this care and concern or expressing the desire for mutual care and respect."

[00:26:41] That's the end of the quote. So I was struck by this because I think you're exactly right. Most instructors I know and work with care deeply about their students and they want them to succeed and they think about them when they go home, but they might not consider sharing that care as a pedagogical move.

[00:27:00] But it seems like what you're saying, the sharing of this care, seeing your students as whole people who you want to succeed, can work to build trust and enhance the learning process. And we should share that with our students. Did I draw the right conclusions there? Rachel, did you have a quick response?

[00:27:16] **Rachel Forsyth:** Yeah, yeah, I'll try, I'll try to be quick, but this is such a big issue because the issue of affect has turned out to be really important for both teachers and students. Teachers didn't usually lead with that issue when they talked about trust, but as they thought about it more, they all started to talk about it.

[00:27:35] And we've mentioned briefly that we've started doing some work with students, and that we interviewed some teachers where I work, um, as part of the project and they were so interested in this that they wanted to get

involved. And then, so two of them started interviewing students with me and we had a little survey.

[00:27:51] And just to briefly say that affect is super important to students. They talk a lot about how people make them feel bad and good. And so it sounds really obvious when we talk about it. But it isn't happening everywhere according to both teachers and students that we've interviewed. And teachers particularly focus slightly more on their competence and scientific knowledge, the cognitive aspects on the model we have.

[00:28:18] So I don't know if, Peter, if you want to add something to that.

[00:28:23] **Peter Felten:** I'm on Kath first.

[00:28:25] **Kathryn Sutherland:** Well, I just wanted to say that it's actually something really quite simple that teachers could be doing, given that Rachel with her colleagues has found that students are clamoring for more affect in the classroom. It's most of the teachers that we know care about students, but few teachers are actually saying that out loud to their students.

[00:28:54] And so it's just the simple act of saying, I care about you and about your success. I think that that could make a big difference. Peter has a little word of caution to share, I think.

[00:29:09] **Peter Felten:** Before I share my word of caution, I just want to underscore one point that my modest colleague, Rachel, wouldn't claim for herself.

[00:29:19] She said they did this little survey. They surveyed 450 or so engineering undergraduates at Lund University in Sweden. So, you know, this is not a global survey of all students, but we're talking about hundreds of engineering students in a very rigorous program. This In Sweden, and their response when they're thinking about care, and while they're thinking about trust, is both positive expressions of care and their experiences with negative expressions of care in the classroom.

[00:29:50] So this clearly is really, really important. That said, we want to emphasize that, of course, what care looks like, what trust looks like in the classroom is very contextual. And so we don't believe the research we're doing, or the research we hope other people will be doing, Two, we'll create some sort of simple generic recipe, like, this is how you build trust in the classroom.

[00:30:16] Because trust is too complicated for that, it's too contextual for that. So who I am, what I'm teaching, to hold, when and where, all of those things matter. But what we're hoping is our research will help us, maybe help others, you know, sort of challenge some of the assumptions we have about whether trust exists or how we can build it.

[00:30:39] In the classroom and with whom. Perhaps we can provoke some reflection and get us thinking differently about how we teach and how our students learn. I know the stories that I've heard in these interviews. Kath's story about her colleague and location or the story I shared about friendship and talking with students about making friends with each other.

[00:31:06] I think those are powerful, simple things that I can do. That I am going to do, when I start teaching very soon, to help my students more than to trust each other. And that maybe we have things in common, even if we seem to be quite different.

[00:31:23] **Amanda Irvin:** That's really fantastic. Thank you. Thank you so much. Trust is so complex and clearly so essential to the learning process. And I am just so grateful that the three of you are taking little slices out of this complex web of connection and that you were willing to join us today and share some of your thoughts. Thank you. Thank you so much for being with us and we are so grateful for you and your participation in our ninth season of Dead Ideas.

[00:32:00] **Kathryn Sutherland:** Thanks, Amanda. It's been a real privilege to be on today.

[00:32:03] **Rachel Forsyth:** Yeah, thank you. And as you can tell, we love talking about this.

[00:32:07] **Peter Felten:** Thank you so much.

[00:32:11] **Amanda Irvin:** If you've enjoyed this podcast, please review our website where you can find any resources mentioned in this episode, ctl.columbia.edu/podcast. Please like us, rate us, and review us on Apple podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. Dead Ideas is produced by Stephanie Ogden, Laura Nicholas, Michael Brown, and Sarah Carswell.

[00:32:37] Our theme music is *In the Lab* by Immersive Music.