

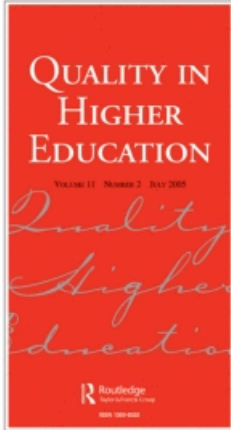
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Quality in Higher Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713443244>

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To cite this Article Gibbs, Paul(1998) 'Competence or Trust: the academic offering', Quality in Higher Education, 4: 1, 7 – 15

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/1353832980040102

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1353832980040102>

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Competence or Trust: the academic offering

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ABSTRACT *One of higher education's characteristics is assisting in the development of its student's self-trust. This might best be developed through empathetic trusting relations. This paper questions the nature of higher education's distinctiveness at a time of commercial change, which is likely to neglect empathetic trust in favour of a form of competence in trust.*

Introduction

Marketing of undergraduate education has concentrated on the tangible assets of the university or its ability to offer accreditation of explicit achievements in the context of post-modern performativity (Lyotard, 1994). Symes (1996, p. 137) has shown that through the iconography and slogans used in its marketing, the university sector in Australia 'rarely pays heed to university as a place of moral development at the heart of the humanist project but emphasises instead institutional virtues of a more instrumental and pragmatic kind, that position the university against the perceived inadequacies of other institutions'.

The higher education offering for consumption seems to be its various forms of credentials, protected by social and political sanction and enforced through external assessment. These awards have become ends in themselves and are perceived as the universities' unassailable core business. But are they? This is questioned and it is suggested that higher education's distinguishing feature is its function of revealing to students their responsibility for their own trustworthiness to make decisions regarding what to accept and what to prefer (Lehrer, 1997). Supported by the findings of the recent United Kingdom report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing, 1997, p. 79), one of higher education's epistemological and moral missions should be to develop morally accountable self-trust. This is achieved through the pedagogical philosophy that underpins the structure of its academic and vocational programmes. Given the risk to self in revealing its vulnerability in both the social and political sense in learning situations, it is proposed that higher education has a moral obligation to create a trusting environment to avoid exploiting vulnerability.

In the UK the old 'bargain' (Robertson, 1997) between universities and the state was that the state would allow academic autonomy without interference in exchange for the maintenance of an élite cadre of graduates to support civil and commercial infrastructures. This has effectively broken down due to massification (Trow, 1981). This bargain, struck on tacit common goals, has been replaced by more direct control through external accountability and performativity. The danger is that the morality of trust collapses under this new bargain, whose basis has shifted to that of the expediency of managerial contractualism (Bridges & McLaughlin, 1994), sanctioned by external and instrumental

quality control. The consequences of this affect the nature of higher education's reputation and have contributed to its apparent loss of political influence. Robertson's (1997, p. 83) reflections are illuminating, 'public investment is giving way to private cash; public accountability is replacing professional trust'. Unless trust can be re-established in the social exchange between UK's higher education institutions and their stakeholders, institutions may be tempted to sacrifice their normative purposes related to citizenship. This could lead to a post-modern repositioning of higher education, which will threaten its very survival as a distinct provider and facilitator of education and citizenship. The following analysis is based on three forms of trust; self, empathetic and competence, and each is first defined and then used to discuss the higher education experience.

Self-trustworthiness: a Necessary Condition for Empathetic Trust?

Self-trustworthiness goes beyond the provision of pedagogical and research skills, in that it ought to allow students to verify for themselves their own trust-worthiness and that they are being treated with respect and honesty. It requires confidence in reflection and in the personal decision on what to accept as worthy of trust and respect. Self-trustworthiness is the basis of independently knowing one's world and being in that world. Lehrer (1996, p. 5) encapsulates this as being able to 'consider myself worthy of trust in what I accept and prefer'.

Reflection, evaluation and monitoring are acts of autonomous thinkers of the type that liberal education, and indeed industry, claim to want. These reflective practices also contribute to self-belief, knowledge and truth, which differentiates the self from others. To trust in one's own ability to make decisions on one's own preference is central to liberal ideals of autonomous action. To be able to accept the responsibility, which this infers, of constituting a reasoned world reality facilitates the ontological integration of self. It encourages creativity, confidence and community through the negotiation of shared realities.

In building this reasoned network of preference and acceptances of 'truth', in the Heideggerian sense of everyday-ness of action, the student reveals her or himself both as a self-trusting and as a trustworthy person. To reach that position the students must be able to distinguish between their justified confidence in their competence in certain arenas, whether propositional or of capacity, and where they are incompetent. Students are likely only to retain their self-trustworthiness while that which they hold as trustworthy maintains its social validity; they are able to argue rationally for what they hold to be true or to assimilate into what their community holds as truth.

This perspective offers education a primordial role in the reconstitution of self as autonomous in the sense of functioning independently as a knowing agent within a social context. In this liberal role, higher education encourages self-trust through reasoned argument and debate, which is risky in the sense of exposing one's vulnerability. To be prepared to risk the socially constructed self to a process of authentic discovery of truth needs mutual trust. Students need to trust that if they stray too far from the commonality of experience they will not be expelled or vilified as eccentrics or charlatans. This leads to empathy and, in the educational context, it manifests itself in the *praxis* of critical being (Hawey & Knight, 1996; Barnett, 1997). The recognition of the existence of the potential for such mutuality is held in the collective goodwill of all stakeholders of the institution and is explored below.

Empathetic Trust

The credence nature of liberal education, and the ideal of emancipation through rational autonomy, leads to its delivery being evolving, enduring and empathetic (Jonathan 1997, p. 7). Liberal education is also dependent on a trusting relationship between the owner of the educational process and the recipient. In this sense, trust in the hegemony of education is to believe that it will not be used to exploit and manipulate the recipient. A relationship of this nature, engaged in without enduring evidence of trust, is like that of authority: it is cynically received because it appears to grant power, coercion and control to the party in whom trust has been vested. This may be manifest in forms of persuasion, manipulation of behaviour, or psychological compulsion. It is a relationship where the more powerful party can change the notion of the relationship from one of trust towards one of reliance and fails Baier's test of moral trust (1995, p. 120). The risk is inherent in any form of centrally controlled curriculum and where the structure of an institution alienates the tutor from the critical dialectic of education.

Mutual trust need not be morally dependent on reciprocity and it is not always rational or conscious. In its various forms it may be context-bound, power-ascribed or enduring (Misztal, 1996; Fukuyama, 1986). It is embedded in the contractualism of the social contract. It can have a short or long duration, for the length of the formal or tacit contract or have its duration shortened by a failure to comply. Its intensity can be plotted as a continuum of checks and balances over time (Gundlach & Murphy, 1993) but is instrumental by nature unless it seeks to be moral mutual trust. Then a different teleological set of criteria need to be considered. Moral mutual trust requires more than merely relying on others. It implies, according to Baier (1986, p. 235), that 'one leaves others the opportunity to harm one ... and also shows one's confidence that they will not take it. Reasonable trust will require good grounds for such confidence in another's goodwill'. If moral trust is missing, contemplating even a small risk to an expected outcome—specifically in relation to a highly cherished aim—may prove intolerable. This form of mutual moral trust often involves offering up one's vulnerability to others on very limited information, based on the belief that the relationship will not be exploited. It is an empathetic form of trust, derived from the Kantian maxim of treating individuals as ends in themselves, and others as we would ourselves wish to be treated. It is central to the premise that one of the ethical responsibilities of higher education is its role in revealing, for and with students the nature of their desires[1] for themselves and for the society in which they will contribute. For the purposes of the analysis this mutual moral trust will be termed 'empathetic trust'.

Empathetic trust allows the socialised self to face the risk to its authentic self posed by the integration of others within a social context. Ordinarily, this comportment towards others is based on common experience of being-in-the-world. It is not ruled by the explicit embedding of specific durations but is shown through a belief in the worth of others through trusting relationships. Empathetic trusting relationships endure the changing notion of the self-ness and contribute to its revelation. Trusting in self or others is the essence of our autonomous everyday-ness and is central to a liberal educational ideal (Morgan, 1996). Those who betray this trust are socially vilified and the abuse of this trust in education to support academic hegemony or political expediency would seem morally indefensible. The loss of this trust amounts to betrayal, not disappointment.

Empathetic trust thus involves both the competence to undertake that which is entrusted by another party, the willingness to care for rather than harm that which is entrusted and an acceptance of one's own self-trustworthiness. This definition can be shown to satisfy

Baier's moral test of a trust relationship because it assumes benevolent motives as a necessary condition for mutual empathy. It also has a resonance with the popular meaning of an empathetic emotional understanding between individuals and is a more specific case of general respect as proposed by Williams (1973). It is more than the mere parade of trustworthiness (Baier, 1995).

Competence of Trust

Competence of trust is based on the utilitarian premise of enlightened self-interest. It shares some of the outcomes of some acts of empathetic trust but only where benefit, immediate or deferred, accrues to the initiator of the act. Its value in fostering relationships is that it stands superficially in the place of empathetic trust and is only shown to be amoral when issues of personal benefit are confronted by acts of generosity to others. For example, to be considered as trust-competent one would be able to fulfil an entrusted task such as giving the correct travel instructions to a stranger. We need to believe that generally there is no maliciousness of intent when the instructions are given and that, if the directions prove wrong, the giver of the instructions was merely incompetent and not morally deceitful. But consider the example where one student entrusts another to do an essay. If the result achieves the dual objectives of acquiring the desired mark and maintaining the necessary level of security to prevent disclosure, has the transaction been morally trustworthy or has it been an act of trust competence? The same may apply to a tutor securing a level of examination success for a student cohort by structuring lectures in such a way that students are informed of the examination questions in advance. In both these cases those engaged in the contract were satisfied and the trustee's trust proved justified. The morality of the actions may, however, seem indefensible on teleological grounds.

If we take the case of the tutor who achieves success for his or her students, the acceptance of the success by the academy and others is founded not on the tutors ability to circumvent examination procedures but on a more general trust in the virtues of the tutor's teaching ability. The tutor is placed in a position of trust not to teach deceit but to do the right thing by caring for the students, in the wider sense, as educator. This reliance on others to fulfil their stated obligation assumes a more general, moral trust-worthiness. It is on the basis of this ethical trust that the results of his achievement are judged. If the underlying trust is questioned, the term 'trust' loses its meaning; it becomes depleted. As Pettit (1995) observes, our reliance on the competence of trust is based on belief in the ultimately trustworthy disposition of the person in which we trust. Should any erosion of the foundations upon which we build our assumptions of trust (for Pettit, loyalty, virtue and prudence) be missing, what settles for competence is trust will dilute any value attached to it. Pettit terms this trust deceit as 'the cunning of trust'.

Competence of trust is thus amoral and any argument made to express the relationship between student and academia in terms of competence leads it to be based on an economic exchange (McMurtry, 1991). Starkey (1989) concludes that this leads to the calculative expediency of performativity rather than the discharge of a moral responsibility. This changes higher education from a mode of revealing through trust based on unspecified obligation, to one where the economic exchange holds sway. The contractual model, at its core, redefines education not as the fusion of subject and object but in forms of instrumental competence, which may deprive education of any teleological characteristics. From this position the trust offer to higher education by its stakeholders is called into question and more authoritarian controls are applied as trust in institutions is diluted (Alderman, 1996).

Trusting Teacher?

Eraut's 'ideal type' concept of the expert labourer as one dealing with 'several inter-connected sets of power relations: with users, with managers of the service-providing organisations, with government, with a range of special interest groups and with other professions' (Eraut, 1994, p. 5) might well be applied to today's academic. Academics find themselves in at least three interlocking roles where trusting relationships could be conceptualised, such as respect for authority, and require empathy to avoid manipulation and exploitation of themselves and their students. In particular, teachers are party to authority relationships.

1. With their institution of higher education;
2. with their students;
3. with their academic discipline.

In relation to the institution, they may be more susceptible to the power of the other precisely because they trust it to understand and promote their joint best interests. But this trust relationship in the UK is currently in crisis[2] and must adversely affect the nature of the other two relationships if it moves from empathy to expediency. In relation to the students, academics are the authority figure and, in order to act in a professional sense, must not abuse the ascribed power. In relation to the discipline, the academics' personal integrity as scholars is tested through the counting of quality publications that pass for academic achievement. In all three professional relationships academics will need to be trust-competent in at least two sense. First, they must be in possession of sufficient knowledge of the rules, procedures and consequences, which are relevant to all those who have an interest in their professional relationships. Second, they must be comprehensive and up-to-date in evaluating the full range of options before their students.

All three relationships also demand that there must be a moral trustworthiness that stands behind the competent behaviour, giving motive and purpose to the role of the educator. In relation to the institution they are a duty of obligation to be trusted not to defame the reputation of the institution. Indeed, more positively, they are trusted to enhance it. In return the institution ought to be trusted to treat them with respect. Given this mutual, empathetic trust, both parties are able to show goodwill to themselves and to the third party of this trust relationship, the student. However, a form of organisational trust more akin to reliance may develop, which can coexist with 'contrived and perpetuated inequality' (Baier, 1995, p. 131). In such a climate, claims of jointly held goals as the basis of mutual trust need to be treated with suspicion to avoid insidious betrayals cloaked in the guise of long-term obligations or the immediacy of shared threat.

In relation to the students, academics have a dependency relationship with their students, which requires empathetic trust to avoid the potential for exploitation of the students' vulnerability[3]. In relation to the discipline, academics are trusted by their peers to share common goals, which include: responsible conduct in research and authorship practices; lack of any forms of harassment; and the avoidance of conflict of interest, which erodes the fabric of trust on which worthwhile social interactions rely. A test of a profession's trust may be exposed when one of its number contravenes these principles. Is sanction dependent on incompetence assuming moral good intent, or is it based on the competence of deceit being caught?

Given the competitive free market in which academic professionals are ever more frequently having to operate, it is difficult to see how empathetic trust in the sense of moral obligation could be allowed to predominate if it is not seen as a core ethical, as well as

scholarly, competency. It only seems to be realisable in a profession with an ethic of service, which is not corrupted by an overwhelming pressure to compete in the current market place, and is not an expression of power achieved by altering the cost and benefit options confronting the stakeholders. It cannot be developed, as Usher and Edwards (1994) point out, 'by a regime of surveillance and examination through which the academic community exerts its power over the student'.

What is more, the instrumental discourse of performance criteria serves only to reveal education in the language of utility. In using the blunt instrument of performance criteria it goes about deconstructing any trust relationship into a sequence of discrete, manageable, rational decision opportunities. The educational benefits of this are not at all clear. Hyland (1994, p. 334), for instance, has commented that the philosophy of competence-based education is 'a paradigm case of "non-learning" and, consequently, has little place in HE theory and practice'. Any dependency by higher education upon this form of competence-based learning models and the acceptance of external accountability are powerful conveyors of the ideologies of performativity and Foucault's concept of governmentality (Edwards & Knight, 1995, p. 18). Trust competence alone is a necessary but insufficient condition and, if treated as such, leads to a contracted output model of higher education rather than one of professional competence based on moral obligation.

Eraut's expert labourer model is also helpful in giving an insight to the complex roles that academics are expected to play within this power-charged cocoon, but the simple solution of a code of professional conduct for academic professionals may not be appropriate. The development of empathetic trust is invoked in everyday contexts that commonly fall outside the rule-governed jurisdiction of codes of conduct. For example, the personal vulnerability involved in exposing what one does not know necessarily causes a state of uncertainty only resolvable through self-trust. To nurture this goes beyond the professional competence of, say, the lawyer or the doctor whose function is to reduce personal uncertainty. Credentials alone are not sufficient to establish the basis for empathetic trust to flourish. As McNamee (1997, p. 70) states, 'There are no rules to trust: it is almost a matter of volitional necessity'. Professional conduct in the sense of rule-following will not increase the reputation of the higher educational professional: what will is a trusting disposition, and an atmosphere of trust in which it can thrive.

Trust at the Foundations of Higher Education

Trust, thus far, has been considered mainly as a virtue of 'good' higher education between student, tutor and institution. It will now be proposed that trust can act as a frame of reference, which may be used to model the relationships of the higher education sector inclusive of the perspective of it as a social institution. Within it the questions as to the importance of self and empathetic trust may be settled by the purpose of higher education. Certainly, in an educational framework, where the self has to expose its vulnerability to another, anything other than a moral duty of trusting care would make the offer of education potentially loaded and exploitative.

Competency alone would treat the student as a means to the end of instrumental skills suited to employment. Indeed, this could further reduce the goodwill held towards the institution, since actually securing jobs is beyond its own competence. If higher education is to be more than this, it must find time to empathise with the student in the academic community of the university. To fail to do this would not warrant either personal or political trust in its special role in the provision of morally aware citizens (Figure 1).

The interacting relationships between state, university and student have been shown as

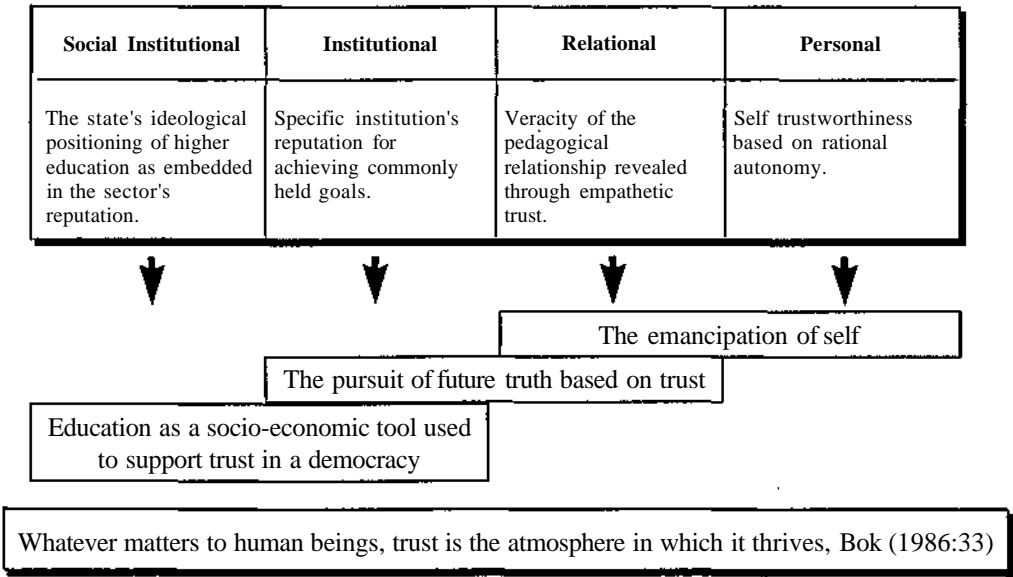


FIG. 1. A model of higher education's trust relationships.

sequential. While the model is simplistic it captures the overlapping roles. It illustrates how the nature of empathetic trust and self—trust can emerge at the level of both the social institution and the individual. This relationship is fragile and can be easily disrupted by deliberate ambiguity about the trustworthiness of the system. If trust is lost by the state in its relationships with higher education, then the role of higher education in creatively questioning, and thus shaping, the nature of the state is in danger of being lost (Escobar *et al.*, 1994). The dialogue between higher education and state then becomes a one-way monologue of ideology given the force of the financial rather than the intellectual. The more explicit move to external accountability and a reduction of internal self-determination of higher education has been described by Trow (1996, p. 12) as 'a kind of mass degradation ceremony, involving the transformation of academic staff ... into employees, mere organisational personnel'. This exchanges the acceptance of professional skills and reflective practice for a simpler control through the mechanism of competence-based models, favoured for their ease of audit and comparability. In the terms of this paper it places competence of trust too far away from that which gives it meaning: empathetic trust.

The response from higher education cannot be whether to co-operate with the state's changes but how to do so. The dilemma in such co-operation is how to retain its reputation for academic autonomy and excellence for its students and also negotiate a stronger reputation with the state to secure future funding. Gambetta's (1988, p. 229) analysis is penetrating on this point. He would acknowledge that an unwilling co-operation between higher education and the state will lead to the loss of trust between the parties but goes further, asserting that any knowledge of the coercion will reduce the trust that others have in this forced co-operation. This 'introduces an asymmetry which disposes of mutual trust and promotes instead power and resentment'. As Baier (1986, p. 241) observes, 'Trust is much easier to maintain than it is to get started and is never hard to destroy'. Bok's (1978, p. 33) analysis of the relationship between personal and institutional is illuminating on this

point. She states, 'Trust in some degree of veracity functions as a foundation of relationships among human beings: when this trust shatters or wears away, institutions collapse'.

Concluding Remarks

The most important question for the future of higher education seems to be, 'can we trust those who control it to deliver anything other than competencies aimed at securing employment, thus placing education in the hands of the industrialist, or is there a role for the professional educationalist?'. To hold someone accountable for their use of state-sponsored education in the sense of value (of money, citizenship, morality) requires a clear statement of the expected responsibility and output. A competence model of education has benefits for those who feel attracted to this economic expediency model. However, the appropriateness of such business comparisons are debatable and, even if valid, change not only the process of becoming, but also the very nature of, the autonomous individual. It is proposed that the notion of accountability in education through a cost benefit analysis in its various forms where measured outcomes, assessed and accredited for others (industry and commerce), takes the place of the trust which is at the core of liberal and anarchical notions of the educated person. It replaces moral trust with the unsupported notion of competence of trust, which ultimately dilutes the moral dimension of higher education. The issue has to be addressed through the assessment of quality in higher education: quite simply, in what can we trust?

Notes

- [1] It is assumed here that the student has informed desires in the sense used by White (1990).
- [2] Evidence for this is in the headlines in the *Guardian Higher Education Section* (5.10.96) such as 'Dissent is set to escalate as compulsory redundancies clobber academics'.
- [3] Indeed this very vulnerability in any non-genuine trusting relationship—subordinate/manager, client/agency—lays bare the risk of exploitation.

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