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Confronting the dark matter of higher education: Building trust in pedagogical relationships

Anna Bloom-Christen[1], Lindsay Kelland[2] and Pedro Tabensky[2]#
[1]*University of St Gallen, Switzerland*
[2]*Rhodes University, South Africa*
#Corresponding Author: p.tabensky@ru.ac.za

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Abstract

This paper explores the structural and ideological constraints that militate against the trust required between teachers and students for effective teaching and learning in contemporary South African universities and beyond. The first part of the paper addresses how widespread commercialisation and precarity born of scarcity, in addition to other widely explored issues relating to the legacy of apartheid and colonisation in South Africa, foster distrust between teachers and students in the South African academy. The second part opens with an inquiry into the meaning and power of trust, before bringing this inquiry to bear on the higher education context and presenting recommendations for fostering trust and meaningful connections in academic settings based on our own experiences teaching a student-led course in ethics at Rhodes University in South Africa, named '*liNtetho zoBomi*' or 'Conversations About Life.'

Keywords: Conversations About Life; *liNtetho zoBomi*; pedagogical relationships; teaching and learning; trust; structural and ideological constraints

Introduction

> No school is an island. What goes on in the classroom is inevitably shaped by conditions in the ambient society. (Philipp Kitcher, *The Main Enterprise of the World: Rethinking Education,* 2022: 323)

Universities today are deeply embedded in broader social, economic, and political structures. This paper offers a picture of contemporary universities' structural constraints, which we argue militate against effective teaching and learning. We suggest that the constraints in question erode the atmosphere of trust required for universities to do their job properly, particularly the trust between teachers and students necessary for healthy pedagogical

relationships and central to how effective teaching and learning unfold. Many of the obstacles we face may appear insurmountable in our lifetimes. Yet, we continue to critically engage with the challenges before us, unwilling to accept the constraints imposed by history. In this way, we maintain a commitment to questioning and reimagining how things could be, acknowledging the complexity of the task without oversimplifying the struggle. We pay particular attention to contemporary South African universities, while recognising that many of our findings cannot be reduced to causes unique to South Africa. At the same time, the legacy of apartheid, colonial displacement, and economic inequality remains integral to our analysis. The scars of South Africa's history are present in the South African classroom in a myriad of ways that call upon teachers to remain attentive and never forget the spirit of our vocation—to help shape the future by inviting our students to reflect deeply about their lives in ways that impact intellect, affect, and action. However, understanding the dynamics of the South African classroom requires looking beyond decolonial concerns, as many of its structural conditions are shared globally.

The constraints we discuss below speak to John Dewey's critique of the dualism between thought and action, that is, the improper integration of the life of the mind and the life of action, which he traces as far back as both Hellenic and Judeo-Christian Antiquity traditions and their role in shaping the historical trajectory that established the elitist hierarchy between mental and manual labour and, more generally, between mental and embodied life (see Dewey, 2008 [1929]). Dewey (2012 [1916]) argued that our educative efforts should aim at dissolving the pernicious dichotomy that devalues lived experience and risks portraying intellectual work as either irrelevant to or an escape from life's problems. This dualism has reinforced the divide between mental work and everyday life, distancing manual labourers from the life of thought. It significantly contributes to the incomprehension between teachers, who tend to inhabit the life of the mind, and students, who are more immersed in the life of action. To be sure, the life of action involves thought, but the thought in question, when artificially separated from what we have described as the life of the mind, lacks the critical reflexivity necessary for genuinely transformative action. In the reactive-proactive continuum, the thinking that happens in the life of action, dichotomised from the life of the mind, errs on the side of reactivity.

Indeed, the design of the contemporary classroom is expressive of thought-action dualism. The classroom is a place where the body must sit still so that the mind can come to the task of thinking without bodily distractions. It is essential to quieten the body occasionally to focus the mind. However, the classroom institutes a permanent divorce between a commitment to thought and action. The central idea we defend here is that a commitment to both domains involves seeing them as integral parts of a single whole, namely, human life. Mindless action is blind, and disembodied thought is empty.

In addition to discussing the structural and ideological constraints in question, we offer a way forward based on our work at the Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics (AGCLE) at Rhodes University in South Africa, where we help facilitate an engaged, student-led course in ethics called *IiNtetho zoBomi*. Among other themes, we confront students with the ideological and structural constraints that shape their lives and invite them to interrogate them critically. The ultimate aim

is to show them the extent to which human freedom is an accomplishment and, closely related to this, the ideas of self-authorship and self-control, which demand the continual refinement of a thinking committed to transforming action. *liNtetho zoBomi*'s curriculum includes meditations on decolonial and intersectional concerns, but extends beyond them. For instance, we invite our students to think about the importance of reading and writing for thinking. We want students to recognise that an ongoing refinement of thought must include engaging not only with those around us but also with those who, through their writing, have shared their own engagement with refined traditions of thought. We want students to appreciate the written word's beauty and the intimate relationship between thought and natural languages. To succeed in these aims, we must cultivate a space of trust where all voices are heard and respected. Borrowing from Nancy Fraser, as discussed in Bozalek, et al. (2020), this means ensuring *participatory parity*, which is another way of claiming that, as in an ideal democratic polity, we must foster a community of peers in the classroom.

Understanding the constraints mentioned above involves exploring the proper aims of higher education and examining the extent to which these are undermined by both the internal conditions and the broader social context in which universities operate. This will be our focus in the first part of the paper, where we explore how local and global conditions intersect, leading to a lack of trust in the contemporary South African classroom, which, we argue, largely exemplifies a global trend. We explore two mutually reinforcing problems: the commercialisation of education and precarity, which together create classroom dynamics lacking the trust essential for a healthy student-teacher relationship. Our aim in the second part of the paper lies in building and maintaining healthy pedagogical relationships between teachers and students in light of the conditions described in the first part. After briefly examining the concept of trust—its meanings and role in pedagogical relationships—we offer contextually informed recommendations for instilling trustworthiness in university classrooms.

The expression "dark matter", featured in the title of this paper, refers to the invisible yet crucial aspects of learning and teaching that often go unrecognised. This includes the emotional and social dynamics between students and teachers and the hidden curriculum that imparts implicit values such as discipline and conformity. Additionally, systemic inequities related to socioeconomic background, race, and gender impact educational outcomes but are rarely addressed in formal discussions. Like cosmological dark matter, these elements are essential but tend to remain invisible. As we argue here, trust is a critical response to this dark matter, confronting its challenges by fostering openness and mutual recognition in educational relationships, allowing these unseen factors to be acknowledged and addressed. Through trust, educators and students can engage with the deeper, often neglected layers of the educational experience.

While we cannot ignore the psychosocial dimension of disadvantage in South African higher education and, more broadly, the socio-political forces that disproportionately impact historically marginalised groups, our focus below is on structural and ideological issues that shape students' experiences in *the global* university. This is not to say that we overlook the realities of

disadvantage in South Africa. On the contrary, we contend that challenges such as epistemic access and justice—issues that affect disadvantaged South African students far more than privileged ones—can also fruitfully be explored by examining the motivational dynamics that permeate universities worldwide. Recent empirical research supports this perspective, highlighting how these challenges are embedded in the very conditions of contemporary higher education (Fischman & Gardner, 2022). Abundant literature on the unique problems affecting disadvantaged South African students has been produced (see, for instance, Boughey & McKenna, 2019; Luckett & Naicker, 2019; Van Breda, 2017; Woldegiorgis & Chiramba, 2025; Zembylas, 2018), but zooming in on these specific concerns carries the risk of overlooking the extent to which the crisis we are facing in higher education is global, affecting students in all strata of society worldwide. Privileged students can better "play the game", but the problem is with the game itself.

Part 1. The negative picture: Structural & ideological conditions for the failure of trust

The commercialisation of higher education

The "commercialisation" of higher education—flowing from the commodification ethos that has engulfed the global order—has brought with it a new, and in our view distorted, way of thinking and speaking about universities, their aims, the nature of knowledge and its relationship to life, work, students and teachers. We now live in a "knowledge economy", universities are in the "business" of "knowledge production", academics are "service providers", and students are "paying customers" or "clients" until they are certified to join the mainstream economy and contribute with their "human capital" to the treadmill of endless growth through endless consumption (see Boughey & McKenna, 2021: 73-74). The university has come to be in the business of "adding value" to the "raw material" of our student body, thus reinforcing the trend of commodifying human life. Policy-makers and commentators speak about the need for universities to adapt to the "fourth industrial revolution". The implicit idea is that the principal function of the university is to create professionals who can serve the economy's needs, as opposed to promoting the common good and fostering personal growth. As economist Branco Milanovic puts it in his *Global Policy* opinion piece 'Universities as Factories':

> The administrators are not interested in values, but in the bottom-line. Their job is equivalent to that of a Walmart, CVS, or Burger King CEO. They will use the talk about values, or "intellectually-challenging environment", or "vibrant discussion" (or whatever!) … as the usual promotional, performative speech that top managers of companies nowadays produce at the drop of a hat. Not that anyone believes in such speeches. But it is *de rigueur* to make them. It is a hypocrisy that is widely accepted. The issue is that such a level of hypocrisy is still not entirely common at universities because they were, for historical reasons, not seen exactly like sausage factories. They were supposed to produce better people. But this was forgotten in the scramble for revenue and donors' money. (2024)

The contemporary university is, for the most part, no longer in the business of helping to produce "better people"—an ideal discussed in Benson et al. (2017) and supported by the revolutionary work of scholars, activists, and visionary educational leaders. For instance, Ralph Waldo Emerson argued (in the gendered language of his day) that: '[t]he main enterprise of the world, for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of man' (1929 [1837]): 31). Emerson's broad ideal finds a more concrete expression in the work of Jane Addams, recipient of the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize and founder of the social centre *Hull House* in Chicago. Addams insisted that the distortion in the aims of the contemporary university has led to a distorted understanding of the roles universities should play in broader society. This argument, in turn, shaped Dewey's thinking on the relationship between education and democracy (Ryan, 1995: 149–153). Influenced by Addams, Dewey argued that learning should cultivate democratic citizenship. Extending this lineage of thought, Martha Nussbaum, in her article "Tagore, Dewey, and the Imminent Demise of Liberal Education" contends that:

> Education based mainly on profitability in the global market … [produces] a greedy obtuseness that threatens the very life of democracy itself. We need to listen, once again, to the idea of Dewey … favoring an education that cultivates the critical capacities, that fosters a complex understanding of the world and its peoples, and that educates and refines the capacity for sympathy – in short, an education that cultivates human beings, and their humanity, rather than producing a generation of useful machines … [The humanities] make a world that is worth living in, and democracies that are able to overcome fear and suspicion and to generate vital space for sympathetic and reasoned debate. (2009: 62-63)

"Education based mainly on profitability in the global market" produces "a greedy obtuseness". It is worth pausing to think of the strangeness of this accusation. How can it be that we have gotten to a place where educational institutions, universities included, foster "obtuseness"? Universities should foster the exact opposite if their mission is to educate.

Inevitably, these ideological underpinnings of commercialisation inform students' attitudes, through no fault of their own. For most of our students in South Africa and beyond, the university is a ticket to employment, a stable income, and an escape from precarity. As Benson, et al. put it:

> When institutions openly pursue commercialization, their behavior legitimizes and reinforces the pursuit of economic self-interest by students and amplifies the widespread sense that they are in college exclusively to gain career-related skills and credentials. (2017: 145)

The problem with this professional aim is not so much that it exists but is conceived *in isolation* from Emerson's ideal of "upbuilding" and, relatedly, the greater good of society. Universities that encourage "greedy obtuseness" cannot foster the educational ideal of

"upbuilding". This is a bizarre situation, given that public universities, by definition, should serve the public good. If this were not the case, taxpayers' support for funding such institutions would be difficult to justify. However, this tension is not acutely felt due to a particular interpretation of liberalism combined with the ethos of commercialisation. The form of liberalism in question divorces individual liberties from corresponding duties as if they were independent rather than mutually reinforcing.

The tension is especially acute in places like South Africa, where degrees are increasingly no guarantee of employment, and more often than not, unemployment means assured poverty and precarity for students and their families. Given the supply-and-demand logic of the market, it does not help that the value of a degree is progressively eroding globally. However, given that most of our students come from precarious backgrounds owing to our abject history, these factors lead to understandable distrust that universities will give them what they came to them for. What our students have come to university seeking is informed by the dual demands of commercialisation and precarity. Both forces pull students away from self-formation: one directs them toward prestige goods in an era that equates value with possession, while the other ties them to the demands of necessity, making it difficult to pursue higher goods—the worth of which is hard to appreciate when the bottom rung of the pyramid of needs remains unfulfilled.

To summarise what has been stated and implied so far, the position occupied by educational establishments in social space distorts the academic project, turning universities into certification mills rather than the homes of advanced learning. We should underscore that universities are not the sole protagonists of the crisis. As stated, they occupy a locale in social space, and this locale has played a powerful role in shaping the trajectory of universities in recent decades.

Because the aim is no longer "upbuilding" but certification, it is hardly unexpected that there is a culture of distrust in the tertiary sector. "Commercialisation" has led to an almost exclusive focus on certification. When certification is the exclusive focus, the teacher is transmogrified into a gatekeeper rudely placed between the student and prosperity, someone who can derail cherished goals and, far too often, basic human needs. The natural hostility that emerges from this is palpable in students' resistance to learning. It is a kind of protest against something they feel forced to do against their wishes to achieve their aims, which militates against genuinely committed learning. "Greedy obtuseness" coupled with precarity anxiety cannot lead to the sort of growth that we believe universities are meant to promote.

The contemporary university's immensely competitive and individualistic nature only intensifies this problem. Assessment regimes compel students to see themselves as rivals for marks and an ever-decreasing number of jobs. Our students often report that, for their parents, a degree once guaranteed lucrative work, whereas today it may improve prospects but no longer assures employment. One could say that "commercialisation" compels students to adopt the gladiatorial stance of *homo economicus*, which is hardly a recipe for trust and the enthusiasm teachers often wish were more present in their classrooms. The effects of this are exacerbated by

the ethos of the contemporary university, which privileges competition that tends to militate against collaboration, solidarity, and the trust that emanates from joint belonging.

This is an odd state of affairs, given that South African public universities are meant to promote the common good rather than offer a platform for personal enrichment. Arguably, this puzzling situation is explained by the neoliberal ethos, in which the relatively unhindered pursuit of private (or familial) benefit is seen as the path to social happiness or "the soft life". This ethos leaves universities caught in a contradiction: charged with cultivating the common good, yet increasingly experienced as gateways to private gain.

Precarity

We live with the legacies of a history of social injustice in South Africa. South Africa has inherited inequalities from its colonial and apartheid past that still overly burden the Black majority. Our oppressive past is echoed in continuing unequal access to opportunities, facilities, and the fulfilment of basic needs. Furthermore, power imbalances inherited from white supremacy are still pervasive in a society characterised by precarity for most. These legacies and imbalances—perpetuated by structural and institutional racism—impact teaching environments and the relationships between teachers and students—amplifying power imbalances between students and teachers where there are racial (and other) differences and divides.

The constraints we touched on above are compounded when we add to this picture the precarity that most of our students experience in South African universities—the majority of South African students are recipients of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), annually compounding student debt, and graduating is no longer a guarantee of employment and income. In such circumstances, the teacher becomes someone who has the power to decide on a student's fate, akin to making triage decisions in medicine. Our students face increasingly high risks, as their chances of escaping precarity steadily decline. Having a degree is still a marker of employability. However, it no longer offers a near-certain guarantee of a rise in the steep economic ladder in one of the most unequal countries in the world. Understandably, this leads to a considerable amount of anxiety, which erodes cognitive bandwidth that could otherwise be used for studying.

In considering how precarity born of scarcity can capture the mind, Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir (2013) address the idea of a "bandwidth tax". In this context, bandwidth refers to the measure of mental capacity and consists of a person's cognitive capacity and executive control, both of which scarcity can affect. What they mean by this is that our mental capacity can be affected by how much strain our bandwidth is under. Mullainathan and Shafir use the example of a financially strapped student who misses easy questions in a test. This student is not necessarily incapable or unprepared, but is perhaps just heavily taxed regarding their bandwidth. One of the biggest bandwidth depleters is stress, a function of precarity and, at the same time, the gladiatorial ethos of the contemporary university. So, students' cognitive capacities are adversely affected, further exacerbating levels of stress and undermining students' abilities to learn. Students cannot commit fully to their studies due to stressors that result in depleted

bandwidth. Meanwhile, lecturers are pressed to measure and quantify student performance without considering the circumstances of unequal backgrounds.

The 2015-2016 "Fees Must Fall" and "Rhodes Must Fall" protests were a watershed moment in the history of the South African university. However, immediate monetary concerns have since largely muffled the dimension of these movements aimed at radical curricular transformation. The need to obtain employment seems to have quickly trumped the concern for transformation among many of our students. This picture is further complicated when we combine precarity with the false idol of consumption, which offers the addictive allure of instant gratification through the possession of prestige-enhancing goods. In a public lecture on curriculum transformation and the decolonial turn entitled 'Trepidation, Longing, and Belonging: Liberating the Curriculum at Universities in South Africa', hosted by the University of Pretoria in 2017, Saleem Badat remarked:

> Following the student protests of the past two years, it is clear that much work is required to overcome misrecognition, and to forge social connectedness and trust at all levels and in all arenas of the university.

While decolonial concerns remain essential—and there is a burgeoning body of literature exploring them concerning curriculum and pedagogy in South Africa—we have chosen to add to the existing literature by focusing on issues less commonly addressed in South African higher education discourse. This does not mean the epistemic dimension of distrust should be overlooked, especially towards curricular content rooted in colonial legacies. Standard curricular practices in South Africa often imply that valuable knowledge originates in the metropole, with legitimate thought predominantly framed as white and male. This can, understandably, foster suspicions among many of our students, especially as most are Black and female, that the content covered in class does not speak to them or, indeed, alienates them from the goings-on in the academy. While we acknowledge the validity of these concerns—and explicitly address them in other work—we must also consider that many of our students come to university to enhance their prospects for lucrative employment *within* the existing socio-economic framework. We suggest addressing these broad structural issues fostering distrust prior to or in conjunction with decolonial concerns. Another way of putting this is to free our students from their transactional orientation to learning if we want them to have the mental bandwidth to engage deeply with decolonial issues.

If the above picture is accurate, it should be no surprise that a trust deficit pervades the South African classroom—its vectors run in all directions. Many of our students see their teachers as holding the power to decide their fate with a flick of the pen, a power imbalance that readily produces fear and distrust. Teachers, for their part, may suspect students of merely pretending to be interested in learning, while their only goal seems to be securing a degree as a pathway to economic stability. For students themselves, desperate circumstances calibrate the mind to focus on what is most immediately necessary. How, then, can we create a classroom dynamic that fosters mutual trust and shared learning, and where attention is directed toward genuine

education rather than mere survival? Addressing this question requires, first, a more precise grasp of what trust *is*. The following section takes up this task.

Part 2: The positive picture: Conceptual and practical conditions for trust

The what and why of trust

In the university context, one of the basic requirements for trust is a sense of belonging. Belonging entails feeling welcome, perceiving the university as a place where we are valued, and recognising that others are attentive to our well-being and capacity to learn and grow. Trust is reflected in the experience of encountering a friendly face in one's teacher when entering the lecture hall rather than a gatekeeper in a competitive arena. In considering what a healthy relationship between students and teachers consists of, Paulo Freire emphasises that 'founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence' (1968: 64). Freire argues that a lack of trust can lead to a failure in communication. When genuine dialogue—rooted in mutual recognition and characterised by love, humility, and faith—fails, trust between teachers and students cannot develop. Conversely, authentic communication nurtures trust, reinforcing the student-teacher relationship. Indeed, it may be that without trust, "intelligent growth"—which, following Dewey, we take as the real aim of education—does not get off the ground. Teachers need to be cognizant of the constraints under which their students live and design their curricular practices to subvert the conditions that undermine genuine dialogue. To achieve this, we must do more than lament the lack of trust. Crucially, we must be clear on what we seek to achieve. But what exactly is trust, and how do we create the conditions under which trust can enter the contemporary university setting?

We can start by noting that most social theorists agree that 'trust is necessary for social existence' (Lewis & Weigert, 1985: 456). This relatively intuitive observation places trust at the heart of the human condition. However, other than flagging its importance, it does not speak to the nature or specific functions of trust. Is trust a bet on the future (Hardin, 2006)? A form of social commitment (Gilbert, 2015)? Should we consider trust an intellectually motivated conviction or an emotional leaning? Can we choose to trust someone at will? On the face of it, it seems that trust is closer to an attitude than a choice. To understand why, it is helpful to consider the nature of attitudes and how they differ from choices. Choices typically involve conscious deliberation, weighing alternatives, and making an active decision. In contrast, attitudes are dispositions or orientations toward particular objects, people, or situations that develop over time and are influenced by experience, emotion, and perception. Rather than being something one can will into existence, trust tends to emerge through repeated interactions of a particular nature, social conditioning, and affective responses.

Another crucial feature of trust is its relational character, as it always emerges in relation to something or someone—for instance, trust in the university or one's teacher. This relational aspect reinforces the idea that trust is not voluntary: I do not simply *choose* to trust my teacher. Instead, trust is an attitude fostered by an ongoing process that is itself shaped by history—the

history of the country, including race relations, and of higher education in South Africa—as well as context, including the ideological and material constraints discussed above, and mutual engagement, such as classroom dialogue based on mutual recognition. Distilling the essence of recent attempts to flag its most essential features, Rachel Botsman defines trust as 'a confident relationship with the unknown. (2017: 23). This definition underscores the leap of faith inherent in trust, the essence of taking risks by stepping into unfamiliar situations—such as a university setting—while committing to the process or individuals involved.

Moreover, trust has an affective dimension, often grounded in emotional responses rather than calculated reasoning. While trust can reinforce rational considerations, it is not reducible to them. For example, even if all evidence suggests that someone is trustworthy, deep-seated feelings of suspicion or past betrayals might prevent an individual from trusting them. Conversely, individuals sometimes trust others despite apparent reasons not to, driven by emotions such as hope, attachment, or solidarity. This emotional component aligns with the understanding of trust as an attitude inclined toward trust rather than an explicit decision to trust. Following this line of thought, we can characterise trust as a relational, affective attitude fostered over time.

In social sciences literature and social philosophy, trust is widely acknowledged as a societal resource that defines and shapes all spheres of everyday life on an individual and institutional level (Cohen & Sheringham, 2016). The process of regaining trust after conflict has been thoroughly researched, especially concerning statehood (Koechlin & Förster, 2015) and in spaces where institutionalised hierarchies have been abused in the past. Post-apartheid South Africa represents a complex case in that it cannot simply be labelled "post-conflict". Although it possesses standard liberal democratic institutions (open elections, equality under the law, and constitutional government), racial (and other) inequality remains a lived reality for its citizens. Additionally, distrust towards the current principally Black government is widespread, mainly due to high levels of corruption and the government's inability to address racialised inequality and its lived consequences.

Within social philosophy, trust is central to conceptualising shared action as an affective, unquestioning attitude (Nguyen, 2022). The basic idea is that trust is an emotional orientation, or attitude, that creates a space for mutual recognition and sharing intentions. Drawing on Hans Bernhard Schmid (2013), this transformative quality of trust, which enables collective action within the classroom, can be referred to as 'the power of trust' (2013: 50-51), wherein trust functions as a partially self-fulfilling attitude. Schmid's view differs from instrumentalist conceptions of trust as a bet on others' future behaviour (as found in Hardin, [2006]). The idea is not that the other becomes a means to fulfil one's desires. Instead, the power of trust lies in how our attitudes toward the future shape its unfolding in the desired direction. Schmid's view does not explicitly exclude a theoretical underpinning of probability calculation—that is, calling into question the trustworthiness of someone—but it hints at an attractive alternative, according to which trust is to be seen as a genuinely social phenomenon. The point is not that the *outcome* of trust is social cohesion or team spirit—although that might also be true—but that its transformative power is already invested in the very act of trust.

We must also look at the opposite of trust. *Dis*trust in an overarching structure—for instance, a university—can manifest in personal interactions within these structures, for example, on campus, in the dean's office, or in the classroom. In other words, distrust in institutions can affect affective, confident attitudes towards others, including peers and teachers. Institutional distrust in governmental institutions—such as public universities—and the people holding power within these structures may bring social distrust in the generalised "other" and interpersonal distrust into existing relationships. In this way, the institutional and the personal dimensions of (dis)trust interlace and affect the dimension of shared everyday practices such as teaching and learning.

Building trust in pedagogical relationships

Given the structural and ideological conditions that promote distrust in the classroom, we recognise that nurturing trust in a single course is insufficient to effect broader institutional change. This challenge is particularly pronounced in higher education, where uncertainty about the university's purpose remains a persistent global concern. In an ideal world, following the footsteps of Fischman and Gardner (2022), higher education institutions would be guided by a clear set of goals, including harmonising the vocational and non-vocational aspects of the curriculum. These goals would be embedded in institutions rather than merely stated in vision and mission statements as aspirational declarations lacking a concrete pathway from word to deed or from statement to embodied practice. However, as highlighted above, we must also recognise that students come to higher education with mindsets shaped by their historical and social contexts. Fischman and Gardner (2022), in a study of ten colleges in the United States, found four broad and not mutually exclusive mindset types among students: inertial, transactional, exploratory, and transformational.

A key dimension of alignment, borrowing from Fischman and Gardner (2022), is that students' mindsets should be brought into dialogue with the embodied aims of higher education institutions that are thoughtfully and coherently articulated. In short, students must have exploratory and transformational mindsets rather than inertial or instrumental ones. Those with exploratory and transformative mindsets are keen to learn and grow. The inertial mindset, by contrast, is passive, adrift, and shaped by a sense of inevitability. This is the mindset of students who do not think they have a say in how their lives will go and come to university because it is fated once they complete school.

In contrast, the transactional (or instrumental, as we have been calling it above) mindset is devoid of both the exploratory and the transformational. For students with an instrumental mindset, education is merely a means to an end—a stepping stone to success and financial stability. As Fishman and Gardner argue in their study, these mindsets are neither mutually exclusive nor inherently static. Students may possess hybrid mindsets or undergo shifts in their mindsets over time, transitioning from one to another throughout their studies. Alternatively, students may exhibit disjointed mindsets, where their attitudes appear to operate as distinct, isolated elements within their cognition. A robust education should impart specialised

professional knowledge and cultivate the appropriate mindset for effective learning. We could conceptualise these mindsets as epistemic frames, some that are epistemically conducive—namely, the exploratory and transformational—and others less so—such as the inertial and the transactional.

Fischman and Gardner (2022) argue, as do we, that exploratory and transformative mindsets are necessary for authentic learning. Yet most students arrive at university with either an inertial or an instrumental mindset, which makes onboarding particularly important as a moment for redirection. *IiNtetho zoBomi* would be maximally effective in this space, since its explicit aim is to cultivate a disposition of exploration and transformation in students.

An adequately aligned tertiary sector would foster trust, in contrast to the prevalent trend towards distrust we observe in our teaching practice, where students perceive their teachers as gatekeepers rather than guides. Teachers become gatekeepers when their work is perceived as burdensome and alien. This often, though not always, occurs when students' mindsets toward learning are misaligned with the aims of the course—when teacher and student are at cross purposes, and their aspirations fail to converge. In such situations, teachers are seen not as facilitators of learning but as obstacles to progress, reinforcing a sense of alienation and distrust. Students have various reasons not to trust, as they may have experienced power abuse on personal and institutional levels.

The web of conditions under which a safe space of classroom interaction can emerge is complex and has to be understood in the specific context of institutional structures. The confident relationship with the unknown that Botsman (2017) envisions needs motivation, but how do we get to this mysterious realm of confidence necessary for trust? How can trust emerge within existing structural and ideological constraints, creating conditions for more trust to grow or emerge? What can we do *with* our students—rather than *to* them—to earn trust and instil trustworthiness? How can we work on interpersonal relationships within prevailing neoliberal structures to build 'pockets of trust'? We may not be able to change the system. However, we can potentially create safe spaces within that system—indeed, 'pockets of resistance' to the prevailing order—thus eventually and gradually changing our collective attitudes from within.

Pockets of epistemic trust: A beginner's guide for those holding power in the academy

If the power of trust as an affective, relational attitude lies in its transformative effect of establishing a space for sharing intentions and collective action, then trust is essential to education, as it fosters a commitment to mutual understanding, sharing information, and learning together. Given the inherent power dynamics between lecturers and students and their manifestation in the university context, how do we cultivate this trust in the classroom? More particularly, if we consider trust as essential for effective teaching and learning, then how do we foster trust between us and our students that would allow us to create meaning together and enable our students to grasp the vital relationship between thought and action—between intellectual engagement and real-world agency—and between the vocational and non-

vocational aspects of education? How do we, as educators, cultivate these essential 'pockets of trust'?

This beginner's guide to building trust in the classroom is based on our experiences facilitating *liNtetho zoBomi*. As already indicated—and drawing on insights from scholarly research into teaching and learning, including but not limited to the literature mentioned in the preceding sections—*liNtetho zoBomi* is designed as a common course in ethics with a student-centred, student-led, and humanising, experiential pedagogical approach to teaching and learning that aims to engage our students actively, and as holistic beings, in their learning.[1] Course content focuses on the relationship between education, ethics, and personal freedom, the external and internal forces that present obstacles to our individual freedom—often pushing and pulling us in ways we would not want to be moved upon reflection—and the role of active, dialogical, and ethical engagement with others in enabling us to see ourselves, others, and our social reality more clearly and, thereby, to more frequently act in line with the values and beliefs we reflectively endorse. Tutors co-create and co-facilitate the curriculum of *liNtetho zoBomi* with us, bringing the course content to life for our students in their voices and epistemic frameworks in student-led lectures. All students engage in weekly service learning, ongoing peer-assessed reflective writing, and conscientising conversations with their peers.

Additionally, we draw on carefully selected films, documentaries, readings, and poems to enrich their reflections. Students submit their reflective writing in a journal or portfolio—depending on their creative tendencies—twice a semester for formative and, eventually, summative feedback from academic staff at the centre. Through these activities, we hope that they come to see their stake in being ethical agents, the obstacles that hinder them from moving through the world as they would wish upon reflection, and the connections between education, ethics, and personal freedom. To borrow the words of Kathy Luckett and Ann Cahill from their 2019 review of *liNtetho zoBomi*:

> The course aims to develop students as ethically autonomous agents. ⋯ The goals of the liNtetho zoBomi course are ambitious; namely to promote students' engagement with the 'life of the mind' and to develop an intrinsic motivation to learn. The pedagogy of the course is based on a view of learning as an existential, self-determined activity that relates to students' inner drives, lived experiences and social contexts. … The course aims ultimately

[1] For more on the philosophical and pedagogical underpinnings of *liNtetho zoBomi*, see Kelland Tabensky (2024) and Kelland, et al. (2024). In brief, *liNtetho zoBomi* is co-designed by philosophers at Rhodes University and its students to help foster students' ethical leadership capacities understood in terms of self-mastery. A term with a long philosophical lineage, self-mastery refers to the capacity to govern oneself—one's impulses, desires, and actions—in a way that aligns with one's considered values and commitments. Students in *liNtetho zoBomi* are encouraged to grasp education as an existential endeavour enabling them to take authorial control of their lives and reshape themselves in light of their engagements with ideas and others. A humanising, experiential pedagogical approach is central to revealing this dimension of education to our students.

> to lead to self-transformation and in this way to contribute to the transformation of institutional culture; this is both an ethical and an epistemic project. … From our observations of the pedagogy on this course we are confident that its unusual methods are highly conducive to achieving the aims of the course. … [T]he course resonates with the lifeworlds of the students leading to high levels of engagement, not normally seen in more traditional undergraduate courses.

We have been refining *IiNtetho zoBomi* for the past decade with the help of both external and internal reviews and a decade's worth of student cohorts, experimenting eagerly with approaches to teaching and learning that allow our students to bridge the gap between thought and action and weave their learning into the fabric of their lives. The following is a beginner's guide to building trust in the classroom based on our experiences facilitating *IiNtetho zoBomi*. While the three steps we present are not exhaustive, they provide a foundational approach from which individualised solutions can emerge.

Step 1: Acknowledge systemic inequality. This entails:

- Addressing the challenges that exist within the classroom, including potential biases, blind spots, and unequally distributed obstacles.
- Signalling openness and approachability to discuss these issues.
- Recognising that not all problems may be immediately visible or solvable.

Effect on trust: Students witness challenges being recognised and addressed without feeling pressured to reveal their vulnerabilities prematurely.

In our annual introduction to *IiNtetho zoBomi*, a considerable portion of the lectures (which we renamed "meeting of minds") explicitly acknowledge the unequal *status quo* that shapes the educational environment. While this insight into educational inequality in our country may initially seem disheartening to students, and our discussions about the point and value of education may disrupt their taken-for-granted ideas, our experiences suggest that students value this transparency. They view it as a step toward bridging the gap between their perspectives and ours. Audre Lorde (1984) has argued that openly naming systemic inequalities is essential to dismantling them, as silence only perpetuates the marginalisation of oppressed voices. By vocalising these realities, we foster a space where students feel seen and understood, paving the way for more equitable and engaged learning experiences.

Of course, giving voice to the realities that inform our context and, thereby, the power dynamics in the classroom—whether in large class discussions or smaller peer-to-peer dialogues—can give rise to heated debates as the *status quo* in South Africa remains grossly unjust. The material effects of the system are felt in the everyday lives of students and staff. Indeed, as those involved in movements for social justice driven by conscientisation have understood for decades, critical dialogue involving disagreement is often required for us *to see*,

to become aware of, our own biases and blind spots, allowing the social reality of others and its effects upon us to come more clearly into view. In imperfect conditions, this is never a comfortable process, and so recognising and addressing these realities in class requires cultivating what we call "the ethics of conversation"; principles and attitudes we strive to embody in ourselves and foster in our students. These form the foundation for conversations that enable mutual growth and understanding. Among these principles and attitudes are humility, curiosity, courage, and openness to different perspectives and insights that we each bring to the conversation. Willingness to see what one would rather not see (for whatever reason) requires humility and courage. Curiosity is central to what Julia Galef (2021) calls the "scout mindset"—crucial for good judgment—the courage to see what is the case rather than what one hopes to see or what might be more comforting to hold onto. To approach the world this way is to be curious—exploratory—and to displace one's ego. To engage in the requisite kind of conversation, one cannot keep one's interlocutors at a respectful distance. Instead, one needs to let the "other" in, so to speak, allowing them to shape the ways we see ourselves and our place and role in (transforming) our social reality. As Lorde puts it: 'meeting across difference always requires mutual stretching' (1985: 3). This also means acknowledging that not all problems are visible from every vantage point; others, in fact, are often better positioned than we are to see certain moral truths about the self, as Marilyn Friedman (1989) reminds us.

This foundational step—acknowledging problems transparently—creates a learning environment in which students understand that challenges are recognised and addressed in an attempt to create a safe space—or, better put, a *conducive* space for learning.

Step 2: Cultivate an inclusive atmosphere. This entails:

- Demonstrating sensitivity to students' diverse interests, strengths, needs, and learning approaches.
- Utilising rhetoric that empowers students as competent epistemic agents, thus signalling belief in their capabilities and intelligence.

Effect on trust: Students feel more confident and empowered when they sense that we recognise them as knowers and have positive expectations of them.

liNtetho zoBomi is designed to be accessible to students across disciplines, faculties, and years of study. Although the AGCLE is housed in the Philosophy Department and aims to bring philosophical ideas to life in the curriculum of *liNtetho zoBomi*, it is accessible to all Rhodes students. It would be best situated in an onboarding space as students are introduced to higher education. Given this, we have experimented with several creative pedagogical approaches to respond to the diversity of our students. These include student-centred and student-led pedagogies, as well as experiential learning approaches such as service learning. At the same time, we have worked hard to develop a philosophical praxis that brings ideas about personal freedom, ethics, and responsibility for our lives—within the constraints discussed above—to life

through films, readings, conversations, mentoring activities, and reflective writing. We aim to enable students not merely to *think* about ideas, but to *live* them.

We allocate substantial time to developing an empowering rhetoric, encouraging our students through the course's student-led and -centred nature to articulate and reflect on their own ideas and to engage critically with problems during lectures and tutorials in collaboration with their peers. We strive to ensure that students recognise the value of their distinct knowledge backgrounds and understand that their unique perspectives contribute to the learning process for everyone. Drawing on Miranda Fricker's (2015) work on epistemic contribution as a central human capability, Melanie Walker (2020) has recently argued that students need a space to develop their epistemic agency in relation to others. In other words, we need to work with others to build this capability so that coming to *think for oneself* requires *thinking with others.* We thus work towards creating learning environments in class in which our students feel confident to express themselves and contribute to a collective process of inquiry, not only engaging with the thoughts of others but contributing their own ideas so that all those participating in the conversation are empowered. As bell hooks (1994) emphasises, fostering a participatory classroom environment where all voices are valued is essential to creating a democratic space for learning. Inclusivity, here, speaks to creating a space where every student is afforded their rightful place within socio-epistemic practices, to borrow a phrase from Matthew Congdon (2018). By empowering students to contribute meaningfully to the knowledge project, we emphasise that their individual experiences and insights are relevant in the academy and vital to collective intellectual growth.

Showing sensitivity to the diversity of our student body and providing various spaces in which the recognition of epistemic agency is possible—among teachers and students, between peers, and in service-learning engagements—students are enabled to find their authentic voices, gain confidence with one another, and come to value their own contributions to the knowledge project. Indeed, to create inclusive spaces, in this respect, is to create spaces in which participatory parity (Fraser, 2003) exists in the classroom, and teachers and students alike become student-teachers and teacher-students (Freire, 1968).

Step 3: Demonstrate reliability. This entails:

- Following through on promises, especially regarding openness and transparency.
- Show empathy and maintain integrity, particularly when discussions move beyond our comfort zones.

Effect on trust: Students come to trust that they will not be abandoned when challenges arise, even when these challenges test our comfort and boundaries as teachers.

In the literature that explores trust between lecturers and students in higher education settings, the focus is often on trust in relation to students' perceptions of lecturers' benevolence, competence, and reliability—that is, their concern for their students' success, their ability to help

their students succeed, and their reliability in doing so, where this is explored on several different levels (e.g., in curriculum design, class, assessments, and feedback) Our experiences designing and facilitating *liNtetho zoBomi* have shown us that demonstrating reliability is especially important to earning and maintaining the trust of our students.

Insofar as we aim to create a space in which students feel confident to approach us and express their concerns and ideas openly and honestly, believing that we too will be open and honest enough to acknowledge and address them, we need to follow through on our promises and our students' expectations, particularly concerning openness and transparency to addressing challenges—including biases and blindspots—in the classroom. To create the requisite space for conversations that build trust and allow for mutual understanding, recognition, and growth—which may involve conflict and discomfort—we need to "show up" for our students by signalling that we are willing to recognise them in their diversity and recognise ourselves on their terms, even when this means moving beyond our comfort zones. When the time comes, we need to follow through on this modelling of the humility and openness we hope to receive from them in return. We need to *perform* (hooks, 1994) the ways of knowing, being, and contributing openly and honestly to the class and its inquiry that we want our students to mirror back to us. If we are consistent and reliable in this regard, students come to trust that they will not be abandoned when challenges arise in their learning.

Conclusion

Trust must exist in the academy for teaching and learning to unfold as we believe they should. For this to happen, the true aims of education must be pursued collectively, with vocational and non-vocational aspects aligned, enabling students to think critically and, in turn, develop the ability to guide their actions in the world authentically. As it stands, structural and ideological constraints affecting the contemporary South African university undermine the proper aims of education and militate against trust. They also lead our students to adopt inertial or transactional mindsets to learning, whereas they would be better served at university and beyond by embracing exploratory and transformational mindsets. While we may be unable to change many systemic factors that constitute the context within which the *status quo* persists, we can work towards building 'pockets of trust' within the academy where students can feel a sense of belonging and healthy dialogical relationships can flourish.

We have suggested that a foundational approach to building trust in this context—upon which individualised solutions can be developed—involves addressing problems in the classroom openly and transparently, cultivating an epistemically inclusive environment, and demonstrating reliability. If we can earn our students' trust, we may be able to reveal to them the actual value of a higher education. As we have argued here, trust serves as a vital antidote to the dark matter of higher education, cutting through its unseen barriers by cultivating openness and mutual recognition in educational relationships. It is the key to bringing these hidden forces—emotional undercurrents, unspoken expectations, and systemic inequities—into the light, where they can be confronted and transformed. Through trust, educators and students alike are invited to delve

into the deeper layers of the educational experience, creating an environment where the invisible becomes visible and meaningful, equitable learning can truly take root.

Author Biographies

Anna Bloom-Christen works at the crossroads of anthropology and philosophy. Her postdoctoral project, *Transformation of What?* examines institutional culture and attentional habits in higher education. Her first book, *Walking Together* (Routledge, forthcoming), rethinks walking as a method for challenging philosophical and ethnographic paradigms.

Lindsay Kelland is a feminist philosopher based at Rhodes University (South Africa), where she works on the transformation of pedagogy within Higher Education. She has published several papers addressing questions in this area—recently, 'I See You, You See Me: Playful Self-Discipline in the South African Academy' (2024 in *Theoria*).

Pedro Tabensky directs the *Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics* (AGLE) at Rhodes University. He is the author of *Happiness: Personhood, Community, Purpose* and *Camus and Fanon on the Algerian Question: An Ethics of Rebellion*. *Ethics and Education as Practices of Freedom* will appear in 2026. He edited *Judging and Understanding: Essays on Free Will, Narrative, Meaning and the Ethical Limits of Condemnation; The Positive Function of Evil*; and coedited *Being at Home: Race, Institutional Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions*.

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