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Think Piece

Trust as a foundation for ethics and integrity in educational contexts

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Trust has been a central theme in academic integrity discourse for decades. In this piece, I think about trust from a variety of perspectives: student conduct, faculty conduct, and organizational trust. I then discuss the role of trust in addressing misconduct. These framings are drawn from a model of Comprehensive Academic Integrity (CAI), in which academic integrity includes and extends beyond student conduct.

Trust as an expectation of student conduct

Trust is often framed as an obligation or a responsibility on the part of the student framed loosely as "students should trust their university and their teachers" or "students should be trustworthy". There has been little problematization or questioning of what happens when trust between students and their institutions or between students and their professors is breached.

In some US universities an "honour code" system is used in which students' trustworthiness is articulated as an expectation. In some US universities that follow traditional honour codes, if students witness their peers engaging in misconduct, they are expected to report them to the school authorities. If student witnesses do not report misconduct, they can be held responsible for misconduct themselves. As a Canadian, I find this type of expectation objectionable. Students may not report on peers' misconduct for a variety of reasons, the most obvious (to me, at least) is that the witnesses may be in a vulnerable or less powerful position than their peers and they may feel it is too risky to their own well-being to report on their peers. I cannot help but think about the role that race and (in)equity play in such contexts. As one student at Princeton University wrote, the American honour code system can be especially "damaging for first-generation low-income (FLI) students — students who also often belong to racial minorities."

Trust is spoken about in matters of student conduct as a fundamental value, but I am troubled by a lack of problematization about why students should be expected to trust their teachers and their institutions without question, when there is ample evidence to suggest that students may have good reasons to be cautious.

Trust as a matter of professional conduct

Some of the most egregious transgressions of ethics and integrity in educational contexts occur when those in positions of power, such as educators and administrators, abuse their power and authority. In Canada, we have begun the long journey towards Truth and Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. We read story after story about how Indigenous children were abused, tortured, neglected, and even killed by educators and administrators of residential schools.

Abuse of students at the hands of educators is not a thing of the past. There are news reports today about sex-for-grades schemes in which students, particularly female students, are expected to perform sexual acts on their male professors in exchange for grades. Such actions are abhorrent and unforgivable, as they are both morally corrupt and illegal.

There is never – and never was – any justification for those in positions of educational authority to engage in such behaviour. Educators and those in school leadership positions are obliged to be trustworthy. When educators break trust with a student, they break trust with society.

Institutional Trust

One way in which institutions break trust with students, professors, and others in the learning community is when those in positions of leadership choose to cover up egregious breaches of trust, such as sexual violence or abuses of students. I heard an anecdote about university presidents being advised by their communications teams never to speak about academic or research misconduct in the media because it could tarnish the reputation of the institution. I disagree. Institutional leaders who speak up to acknowledge when egregious misconduct has occurred and share a genuine commitment to doing better present themselves as more trustworthy than those who use bureaucratic platitudes to cover up misconduct. We cannot expect students to act with integrity if the institutions in which they are learning are corrupt; and one telltale sign of corruption is a systematic intention to cover up wrongdoings. A more ethical path forward would be to acknowledge the transgression and then set a plan in motion to move ahead in manner that can help to sustain trust over the long term.

The Role of Trust in Addressing Misconduct

Institutional and relational trust can be built through system-wide policies and practices, but trust does not live there. Trust lives in the daily practice of leadership. Trust lives in transparency and in a genuine care for students and other members of the institution as human beings. The accused should be able to trust that they will be treated fairly and be permitted to maintain their dignity through the process. The United Nations considers dignity a human right, but too often in educational contexts, those accused of misconduct feel shamed, stripped of their dignity, and they feel they cannot trust those who are investigating or deciding the outcome of a misconduct allegation.

There are dignified ways of addressing misconduct. Restorative resolutions, in which the focus is on repairing harm, rather than punishing the accused, has been shown to be an effective method of addressing misconduct in many cases. There can be some instances in which restorative resolutions are not effective, but in many cases, restorative practices can help to preserve trust, dignity, and relationships. Too few learning institutions have options for restorative resolutions in misconduct cases, opting instead for punitive or legalistic responses that do little to (re)built trust, to preserve human dignity, or to preserve relationships.

Concluding remarks

It is unreasonable to expect students to trust their teachers and their institutions without question when history – especially colonial history – has shown that trust has repeatedly been breached by those in positions of power.

The word "integrity" comes from the Latin, *integritas*. It means "to make whole". There can be no integrity without trust, but there can be no trust without trustworthiness, meaning one must be worthy of trust; it does not come by virtue of one's office or one's position. Trust is not a goal to be achieved, but something to be earned through a daily practice of living, leading, and learning.

Author Biography

Sarah Elaine Eaton, PhD, is an associate professor at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Canada and holds a concurrent appointment as an Honorary Associate Professor, Deakin University, Australia. She has received research awards of excellence for her scholarship on academic integrity from the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education (CSSHE) (2020) and the European Network for Academic Integrity (ENAI) (2022). Dr. Eaton has written and presented extensively on academic integrity and ethics in higher education and is regularly invited as a media guest to talk about academic misconduct. She is the editor-in-chief of the *International Journal for Educational Integrity*. Her books include *Plagiarism in Higher Education: Tackling Tough Topics in Academic Integrity*, *Academic Integrity in Canada: An Enduring and Essential Challenge* (Eaton & Christensen Hughes, eds.), *Contract Cheating in Higher Education: Global Perspectives on Theory, Practice, and Policy* (Eaton, Curtis, Stoesz, Clare, Rundle, & Seeland, eds.), and *Ethics and Integrity in Teacher Education* (Eaton & Khan, eds.) and *Fake Degrees and Fraudulent Credentials in Higher Education* (Eaton, Carmichael, & Pethrick, eds.). She is also the editor-in-chief of the *Handbook of Academic Integrity* (2nd ed., Springer), which is currently under development. Dr. Eaton is an elected member of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) Council.

Further reading

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