Self-Trust and Teacher Education

Lesley Coia

Agnes Scott College
lcoia@agnesscott.edu
Education operates on trust. Like the air we breathe, it is necessary for teaching and learning; and like the air we breathe we only notice when it is in short supply. In the educative relationships that make up our teaching lives, trust is necessary. No matter how experiential or social constructivist we are, students have to take on trust much of what we teach (Harris, 2012; Webb, 1993). And just as learning requires trust, so does teaching: In order to teach we must trust our students (Thayer-Bacon, 2012). These crucial relationships extend beyond the classroom to our institutions and the education system as a whole. Finland, for example, credits a large part of the success of its highly functioning education system to public trust in teachers and schools (Sahlberg, 2011, pp. 130-131). Unfortunately, in many systems, including the USA and UK, such strong relationships of trust are not so evident. Lack of trust is reflected most obviously in the increasingly intrusive systems of accountability to which we are subject in our audit culture (Baert & Shipman, 2005), and while this breakdown in trust is evident throughout higher education (Shore, 2008), it is especially noticeable in the field of teacher education (Martusewicz, 2013; Townsend, 2011). As Craig (2010) argues in her self-study on the effect of accountability measures on our work as teacher educators, we are subjected to checks at every level of our practice. We are not trusted.

In this paper the erosion of interpersonal and institutional trust is approached through a study of self-trust, a relatively unexamined concept in philosophy of education. The focus is on the dynamic relationship between self and others in our understanding of ourselves as trustworthy. This is accomplished by connecting self-trust as it operates in teaching/learning relationships with wider issues of interpersonal and institutional trust.

Self-trust is an affective attitude (Jones, 1996) that is fundamental to our lives as persons and teachers. It provides grounds for rationality (Lehrer, 1977) and for acting on our own values (Govier, 1993; McLeod, 2002). It is of epistemological and ethical import: We need to be able to trust ourselves in order to make the judgments necessary to our lives as teachers. Playing a fundamental role in our sense of ourselves as agents capable of autonomous action and rational thought, self-trust is of especial interest to teacher educators.

It is of some note that self-trust is most commonly addressed by feminist philosophers (Baier, 2010; Borgwald, 2012; Govier, 1993; McLeod, 2002) whose work is concerned with the effects of lack of self-trust in women, and who draw on feminist perspectives to give an account of self-trust that starts from a social view of the self and the indispensability of relationships, including relationships of dependency and vulnerability. Feminist work on self-trust is also concerned with how women’s self-trust can be eroded through sexist oppression and the downplaying of women’s abilities. These arguments are relevant to teacher educators and education researchers. Just as work on self-trust shows how women’s self-trust is harmed as a result of patriarchy, restricting their ability to act authentically according to choices they have made, this paper explores how distrust of teacher educators as a group can have adverse effects on the goals and values with which they identify with the possibility of leading, for example, to such distrust of one’s own goals and values that one ends up identifying with goals and values that function to continue the perception that teacher educators are not to be trusted with teacher education. When self-trust is undermined in this way, the appropriate interplay between appraisal of one’s own judgment and that of others is lost. In such a situation, when considering whether a judgment is justified one refers not to one’s self, but to others resulting in an erosion of agency and sense of self-worth.
This may appear too strong when thinking about teacher educators. After all, one of the requirements of self-trust is domain competency (McLeod, 2002), something teacher educators have through credentials and professional standing. External measures of competence undoubtedly support the self-trust we need to go about our daily work in the classroom. While self-trust should be the norm in situations where competency is evident, when it is continually questioned and professional judgments constantly checked, when we are not trusted to know what we are doing and that we can do it well, self-trust becomes an issue. However, since self-trust is responsive to multiple others, the role of students’ trust in us as particular teachers should not be underestimated. The perspective taken in this work is that the extent of our self-trust depends on the many contexts in which we work. At the heart of the argument is the idea that self-trust is variable because of the relational nature of self-trust. We may be trusted and trust ourselves as individuals, but we are in a field that is not trusted, and that impacts our self-trust as teacher educators.

Self-trust, while primarily a relation between myself now and myself in the past, shares with the prototypical case of interpersonal trust the need for others. This centrally includes our students, but must also take into account the presence or absence of trusting relationships that sustain our work in the classroom. A relational theory of self-trust is able to acknowledge these complexities but raises questions of its own. Primary among these must be what justifies self-trust and how it might be promoted in an era of distrust. Justified self-trust involves accurate internal and external assessment, while promoting justified self-trust involves developing reciprocal relations of trust: relations that respect teacher educator competency and resist over-simplifications of our work.

At the center of teaching lies uncertainty. It is what makes for meaningful learning. When we engage with our students to learn together we make ourselves vulnerable and need a measure of trust. But to honor what each of us brings to the conversation we need self-trust. It is self-trust that puts uncertainty on a firm footing.

References

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