What does Trust "look like": Viewing the Element of Trust from the Learner's Perspective in Educational Environments?

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Trust in the learning environment will be discussed and viewed through the perspective of the student who experiences a mutually trusting learning relationship with the facilitator/instructor/teacher (for this paper, these terms are interchangeable). This research addresses the necessity of establishing and "practicing" trust in the classroom. In order to develop a sustainable learning environment and promote adult learning at optimal levels trust is a primary requirement

Ongoing qualitative research by both authors focuses on how facilitators utilize elements of trust in learning environments, examining how we trust ourselves and learners. Trust or the lack of trust in learning is an important concern to both research and practice in adult education. Henschke (2011, 2012) asserts that trust in learning makes all the difference. Thus, trust is a vital element in developing and sustaining adult learners necessitating further research.

Research utilzing a version of Henschke's 1989 MIPI modified for student use, thus, the MIPI-S examines the perceptions of the students regarding the facilitator's use of trust in the classroom. The instrument was modified in two ways, a) to utilize only the elements of trust, and b) to administer to students. The MIPI-S assesses the facilitator's trust in the learner as perceived by the learner, evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale. The questions addressing trust included: a) how frequently did my professor communicate to me, that I am uniquely important, b) how frequently did my professor express confidence that I will develop the skills I need, c) how frequently did my professor demonstrate that I know what my goals, dreams and realities are, d) how frequently did my professor demonstrate that he prizes my ability to learn what is needed, e) how frequently did my professor communicate to me, my need to be aware of and communicate my thoughts and feelings, f) how frequently did my professor enable me to evaluate my own progress, g) how frequently did my professor indicate he is able to "hear" what I say my learning needs are, h) how frequently did my professor engage me in clarifying my own aspirations, i) how frequently did my professor work toward developing a supportive relationship with me, j) how frequently did I experience unconditional positive regard from my professor, and k) how frequently did my professor demonstrate that she/he respects my dignity and integrity. Each question was answered according to the following Likert scale: **1**. Almost Never, **2.** Not Often, **3.** Sometimes, **4.** Usually, **5.** Almost Always

Findings

In an ongoing dissertation study being conducted by one of the author's, the learners in that study provided feedback regarding whether or not they believed their professor trusted them as learners. A theme present in the data collected was evidenced by comments that reveal the learners were feeling trust between themselves and the professor which revealed itself through the theme of "choice and choosing", ultimately resulting in a sense of self-direction for the learners. One learner commented the professor allowed her to"…, pick the topic and due date to show me that she lets me make my own decision. She trust(s) me as a learner because she always let me make decisions on assignment we do". The presence of trust is evident and a significant factor in creating a climate that invites and facilitates learning and creates a climate where learners take responsibility for their own learning.

Additionally, learner's feedback around the notion of trust is revealed through learners in this class setting, as recipients and co-creators of a climate that encouraged and invited active participation; "we were able to write about our careers the way we wanted to", and "She [professor] is giving us the responsibility of putting it together ourselves on what we have learned and trusting us to be honest." Learners want to be trusted in classrooms and will reflect back that trust by becoming actively engaged, open in the learning environment and supporting themselves and each other.

An instrument developed as a complement to the MIPI-S, during a doctoral dissertation study (Risley, 2012) addresses the visible elements of trust (VETI) in a learning environment. The (VETI) identifies the previously mentioned eleven elements of trust from the MIPI-S, which if visible can help establish a trusting relationship, thus, a trusting learning environment. Each of these items is either "visible" or "not visible". Either there is trust or there is not trust displayed by the teacher. The VETI encourages learners to provide examples of the visualization of each element, thus, enabling teachers to assess trusting behaviors, beliefs, and feelings in the classroom from the learner's perception. Ideally, the facilitator will use the MIPI to self-assess the use of trust elements and compare results with the learner's perception of the facilitator's utilization of these 11 elements.

Conclusion

Trust is a vital element in any relationship and the learning environment is an environment rich in relationships. However, research on trust in the learning environment is limited and research from a learner's perspective is almost non-existent. To create an environment conducive to learning it is a necessity for educators to understand trust from the learner's perception. Adult educators must utilize the research available on trust within the adult learning environments (practice) to promote positive learning experiences and continue to advance the research on trust and its effects on the learning experience.

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