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Why Academics should have a duty of truth telling?

Abstract

In this **article**, I advocate that university education has at its core a mission to enable its communities of scholars (staff and students) to make judgements on what can be trusted, and that they, themselves, should be truth-tellers. It is about society being able to rely upon academic statements, avoiding deliberate falsehoods. This requires trust in oneself to make those judgements; an obligation to do so; and the courage to speak out when such judgements might be unpopular, risky or potentially unsafe. I suggest it should be a duty placed on academics to be truth-tellers and to educate potentially gullible others in what it is to have worthy and reliable self-trust in their own judgements.

Introduction

Trust has attracted the attention of higher education scholars in a number of forms and for a number of purposes. The discussion is, for the most part, about systems, organisations and accountabilities which are the basis, of higher education's public trust, a trust resulting from a reasoned expectation that involves both confidence and reliance that these educational institutions are 'acting responsibly and for the common good' (Bird, 2013: 25). It is certainly important that organisational trust is facilitated but this **article** concerns the need for academics themselves to be sincere in their actions in higher education. It goes further and argues that the scholars and faculty have an obligation to their students, to their colleagues and to society which transcends that of the institution of higher education, albeit contributing to it. It seeks to argue that academics and students have a duty to tell the truth even when it is unpopular, risky or potentially unsafe for them. In so doing, duty becomes the core of the spirit of the university, not the pragmatism of the current neo-liberal agenda.

The need to reaffirm such a commitment is appropriate at a time when political authority and the media pronounce negatively about **UK** vice-chancellors' pay and the tuition fee system, and threats of government interference in European Studies curricula, capping student numbers if fees continue to rise. How can a university administration speak out against powerful others using the ascribed authority of the Government when, I suggest, they become compliant with government non-academic interventions in many respects? The responsibility I want to claim is on the individual academic to speak out, risking much, to hold the university and those who control it to account for the consequences of its actions.

The Rationale

This is important according to Jameson for, in the current era of marketization, there is a 'loss of trust' (2012: 411) in UK universities, manifest in government rhetoric and its agencies of quality control. This is not a new observation. As early as 1992, Bok was seeking ways in which US universities could go about restoring public trust. Ten years later, O'Neill wrote of 'crises of trust' (2002: 45) and, after another decade, Collini made reference to an 'erosion of trust' (2012: 108) in a context where free speech interacts with social media and all are subjected to the force of the transient present.

In what has been termed a post-truth and post-trust era (see Harsin, 2015, for a formal discussion), statements are made, lies are modified and apologies given, and cynicism rules – a cynicism that we don't have time to answer. Resistance in the form of an assembled evidence base takes too long. It might be argued, as Peters (2015) does, that in the political field this is nothing new but, as Ferriss (2016) suggests, post-truth seems to be a media - especially a social media -, driven strategy. Its relationship to truth is strategic. Its goal is the exploitation of emotion in the way that sophism eroded the importance of rhetoric in our ways of persuasion. Such political interventions, intent on deceiving the public, are typified by the revelation of Arendt (1972). In her [article](#) on the systematic lies, deception and self-deception in the Pentagon during America's involvement in Indochina, she shows clearly how these were used to manipulate public opinion. As Peters suggests, it takes little imagination to understand that the notion of facts and evidence in a post-truth era affects not only politics and science but 'becomes a burning issue for education at all levels' (2017: 565). Moreover, he suggests that, as education has seemingly undergone a digital turn, criticality has been mostly avoided and replaced by narrow conceptions of standards and state-mandated instrumental and utilitarian pedagogies. Further, he suggests that this has led to a limiting of focus on job training, 'rather than a broader critical citizenship agenda for participatory democracy' (ibid.).

This has led to an assimilation of values, not a questioning of them through critical reasoning and speaking out against what is morally wrong, dehumanising or self-serving about society. Without addressing such issues, any notion of an educated person as one with freedom to think and act becomes superficial, leaving scholars and students in a place that can lack personal integrity. Moreover, in support of Sockett¹ (1989), this seems counter to liberal, transformative principles and leaves many universities in a state of self-deception,

¹ His opening line of that [article](#) is 'I take education to be a moral business' (1989: 33).

because they are espousing policies and procedures that they are aware undermine what they believe, broadly, a liberal education ought to be. Such self-deception comes in many forms, each liable to frustrate a productive sense of duty in encounter with either text or interlocutors, and thereby ‘inhibiting opportunities to produce meaningful educational ends’ (Blenkinsop and Waddington 2014:1511).

Because of its transformative, rather than economically defined, purpose, neo-liberal education is dependent on a trusting relationship between the provider of the educational process and the recipient: one does not know what one is expected to receive, as it has to be jointly created. In this sense, having trust in the hegemony of state control of education is to believe that it will not be used to exploit and manipulate recipients. A relationship of this nature between student and academic without enduring evidence of the trustworthiness in terms of their authorship, accurate assessment of work, their competence in pedagogical practice and in a verifiable command of appropriate knowledge, much like that of authority, may be cynically received. This is because it appears to grant power, coercion and control to the party in whom trust has been vested. Such an imbalance of power is accepted because the powerful in the relationship are experts and students are not; but it is more than that. It requires that the lecturers recognise and deliver their obligation of truth-telling within the academy. Moreover, it requires students to take a stance on what they can trust in themselves; not succumbing to what Furedi (2016) calls the ‘infantilisation’ of higher education, but to make existential judgements and assertions based on what they know is feasible and likely to be the truth and, from that position, not to fear the lies of a post-trust era.

One of the consequences of the massive changes in contemporary higher education is the shift in the power relationship between teachers and students due to the marketisation of higher education and the changes in role for institutions to reflect, rather than critically to comment, upon society. This has led away from a Socratic questioning of them through critical reasoning and speaking out – but this is not new. The essence of Socrates’ *Apology* to the Athenians can be seen today if we take the liberty of substituting the target audience:

[*Students and Academics*] ‘From the city that is greatest and best reputed for wisdom and strength: are you not ashamed that you care for having as much money as possible, the reputation, and the honour, but that you neither care for not give thought to prudence, and truth, and how your soul will be the best possible?’ Plato 29d (*italics* are my addition)

There might be an argument here which does not just apply to students but to the lack of resistance shown by the various clusters of higher education institutions. It applies to the somewhat contradictory nature of embracing the market and its mechanisms at the same time as accepting the audit culture of the Research, Teaching and Knowledge Transfer framework. This was not offered but imposed upon educational institutions, ostensibly to enable greater transparency and accountability but whose functions are more to do with control. In the United Kingdom, this can be seen in the confusion and inaccuracies of the excellence framework in terms of what they do and what they are meant to measure. This has led, although not directly, to the dominance in higher education of the truth that is embodied in audit and performance indicators and tables, which of necessity lack informed and independent evaluations. Worse still, rather than increasing trust in our sector, these metric changes have led to concerns being raised, or at least doubts cast, about the trustworthiness of our institutions and the members who constitute them. The model of audit does not solve; rather, it displaces trust by shifting it from the object of the trust and those who we expect to trust to the new experts, whose skills are in policing and forms of documentary evidence of audit. Indeed, as Power has suggested as early as 1994, it might destroy 'the very trust it is meant to address' (1994:13). Insightful critiques are offered by, for instance, Conroy and Smith (2017) of the UK Research Excellence Framework and Canning's (2017) consideration of the teaching excellence framework.

The Veil of Self Deception

In its extreme, self-deception is the ploy of using a deliberate and irresponsible misreading of situations to avoid facing one's responsibility or the negation of self by others. This is both being-with-others and observing them for one's benefit. It is using others as a means to an end or giving up to others that which is central to one's autonomy: the responsibility for one's actions. What is more, it can readily lead to alienation or self-estrangement from what one might become, by losing oneself in the dualism of object and subject or in the determinism of others. To avoid commitment through which authenticity can be realised, the competencies of being-for-others may be used as a sham of security for inauthentic relationships and engagements. Those who self-deceive cannot be trusted to tell the truth. It is a duty for academics to dispel self-deception both in themselves and in others. This manifests itself in the pedagogical practices of critical reasoning which seemed relaxed in a context of post-truth and fake news.

It is a duty, I would claim, that members of the academy are able to recognise in their own practice where they are deceiving themselves and, because of it, the contagion

that affects others. Moreover, the social contagion of self-deception leads to a state of negation of trust in the trustworthy. This is evident in examples of academic and managerial practice in the institution. These may include: sticking with favoured theories rather than seeking evidence that might contest them; attributing more effort to one's contribution to an **article** than is fair; interrupting government policy in a way that is in one's own self-interest rather than the institution's; allowing unintended grade inflation to enhance student satisfaction; and allowing one's own ideological perspective to construe the needs of students.

Deception and self-deception may also be identified in the contextualising of instructional policy and practice of higher education. They can be seen in how education has drifted from being an end in itself towards a supply economics imperative or where scholars seek favourable student evaluations rather than stretching students' capabilities, fuelled by emotional labour and creating personal brands. Although such practices seem counter to principles of liberal, transformative education, they present a dilemma. Should we facilitate students and staff to speak the truth to each other, when this might not be in their best interests in a world that encourages compliance rather than free thinking, a world where we are under constant surveillance and are often herded by the industrial and commercial global powers? How, morally, should we prepare them to help them to flourish? A response is truth telling in ways that care but do not mislead students into believing they have mastery of what they do not: to coach mediocrity as merit. Such truth telling risks retribution due to higher failure rates, more students discontinuing and less lavish final credentials. But perhaps that is fair in the long run and will enable students to be more trustworthy and aware of their attributes?

Students too might exhibit bad faith in the way in which they protect themselves from the transformative opportunities of the university: over confidence hiding anxiety; playing the culture of student as consumer; abdicating responsibility for the self by shifting blame to a higher authority. Students appear to lack self-insight, "inhibiting authenticity and actively limiting one's ability to enter into genuine relationships with others' (Blenkinsop and Waddington (2014:1512). This is resolvable through self-trust which is a counter to such deception.

Self-trust is the basis of independently and critically knowing one's world and being in that world. Lehrer encapsulates this as being able to 'consider myself worthy of trust in what I accept and prefer' (1997: 5), and what makes me worthy of my trust in my capacity to evaluate my beliefs and desires. As Lehrer continues, our ability to make judgements about the trustworthiness of others 'may result in a change in what I accept and prefer, and that

change can make me more trustworthy for myself and others' (ibid.: 127). Such trustworthiness is implied in the notion of academic freedom and free speech; it is something that academics should exhibit and students should learn in the acquisition of higher education. It is, indeed, embedded in the level descriptors that signify what higher education is.

Obligations before Rights

Among the things that we can do to help students is to tell them the truth of what they have been offered for their futures. This role is a duty, of academics, I believe, to transcend their disciplines in preparing students for a world in which their contribution is significant and worthy. Indeed, these duties of truth-telling, as Weil (1953) has advocated in the first line of her book, *The Need for Roots*, 'come before that of rights, which is subordinate and relative to the former' (1953: 3). This is not to assume all those that have rights have obligations but that there is, in unexceptional circumstances, a direct relationship in which duties should precede rights, especially in higher education with the privileges it provides and bestows, upon students and academics. These duties explored by Weil (ibid.: 36-39) include truth and the obligations of the truth-teller. If accepted, this might require us to consider a reorientation of the notion of the rights-based contemporary university (O'Neill, 2002). This seems to have roots in the Socratic notion of the harmony of truth-telling and behaviour, as revealed in Plato's *Laches* as care for the soul: a caring for the morality of oneself through knowing, trusting and being the stance that one takes for oneself. This requires a sense of courage to grasp freedom to be for oneself amongst others and, as universities become more managerial, extended and digital, they are less conducive to such freedoms.

The neo-liberal context in which higher education institutions act tends to prioritise rights over obligations: the right of students enshrined in customer contracts where students are treated manifestly as consumers, imbued with a certain sovereignty. As O'Neill suggests, if 'we take rights seriously and see them as normative rather than aspirational, we must take obligations seriously' (2005:430). I am suggesting that we have obligations which go beyond those embedded under current law where universities have a duty to protect free speech and equality but even here judgement is needed, for, as the Grant Report (2011) on Freedom of Speech states, 'there are circumstances when universities must map out a way forward between contradictory positions' (2011:7). It is within the flux of legal duties and political pressures which often seem more aspirational than normative that we

must trust our academics to serve the interests of truth. It is one of the things which ought to set universities apart from other institutions.

Indeed, Williams argues that the 'authority of academics must be rooted in their truthfulness in two respects: they take care in what they say, and they are sincere in what they say' (2002: 11). This is because sincerity is not rule-constrained but is a form of trust that avoids actions that manipulate and dominate others. The disposition itself enables the agent to think clearly and without self-deceit about the occasions when deceit is required, and to keep a sense of those when something is lost by it (Williams, 2002: 121).

This disposition, as Williams (2002) proclaims, is based on our assertions being both accurate and sincere. Moreover, such truthfulness is in the word, intentions and actions of the one who is deemed trustworthy. It is a value-laden notion that transcends mere instructional contractualism and word games of deception; it is about being intrinsically comfortable with one's truthfulness in one's assertions and the implications that may reasonably be assumed to follow such assertions. It is not about self-interest.

Yet at any time, but especially in our current epoch of complexity, as O'Neill (2002b: 6) points out, it might be wrong to expect that trust can 'require a watertight guarantee of others' performance', and what we can expect is that certain standards and obligations will be maintained. One of these should be that a duty of truth-telling is placed on academics to educate and potentially transform gullible others into those who can make judgements based on worthy and reliable notions from their own self-trust.

I do recognise that a criticism of this position might be that it is a lingering, nostalgic yearning for a sector that once had values that better suited the self-accountable, autonomous academic. Such nostalgia for a time gone by misses the important change in opening up the opportunities of higher education to the many, and often neglects to confront the privileges conferred upon the few, academics and students, whose very participation was likely to have been based on the social class from which they emerged. The massification of higher education might well be at odds with the notion of Humboldtian *Bildung* and Newman's liberal education, but they were of a different epoch and context. It may be fair to argue that to act as if the conventions of those days still pertain is self-deceiving.

What can the higher education institution do?

Teaching in higher education also carries privileges and associated obligations: 'If we can clarify our perception of duty and gain public acceptance of it, we will have fulfilled an important obligation to the society that nurtures us. These obligations constitute the

highest institutional form of academic duty' (Kennedy, 1997: 22). These are the closing sentences in the first chapter of Kennedy's *Academic Duty*. By placing duty central to the notion of academics in higher education institutions, Kennedy identifies a moral responsibility for academics that offers a way of establishing the trust that was shared between the university sector and the general public. Duty in the existential sense is not, however, the Kantian imperative of following given universals (although we might choose to act as if they did), nor the liberal balance of rights, but is an accountability to oneself to have the courage and skill to interpret one's individuality within our world as a dialectic between oneself and humanity. In this, it is an ethical exercise and is built through trust as an implicit obligation – voluntarily accepted, in the case of an academic – to pursue worthy activities and not the mechanisms of competencies.

As O'Neill (2013) proposes, we need ways to distinguish trustworthy from untrustworthy informants. Moreover, if society trusts what universities say about how they can facilitate choice and opportunities for a student's future, our appointment to the academy should signal that. Examples abound. From embracing league tables when it suits and critically objecting to them when it doesn't; arguing for a social mobility that is not evident (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2012; Bowl, McCaig and Hughes, 2018) rather than seeking social justice (Brown, 2017); lending academic authority to populist propaganda in terms of marketing (Advertising Standards Authority, 2017) and claiming that earning benefits will be enjoyed by all from being awarded a degree (Department of Education, LEO, 2017) do nothing to build confidence in the university as a site of truth-tellers. As revelation of these deceptions leads to loss of trust in the trustworthy and a construction of reality, higher education's authority as a source of truth is questioned. These deceptions may be hidden in the pretext of a university education that is value for money for the majority of students (although the 2017 National Student Survey results seem to show this is now being questioned), rather than as a social mechanism to manage an increase in age-group demographics.

The issue for scholars then is that they can think correctly and that they enable their students to strive to do the same. Opinion has to be set aside for an obligation to enable the freedom to search for truth and this requires an obligation to take responsibility for one's ideas. As Rider so elegantly puts it, the "desire to think freely entails that one also desires to think rightly, not for conceptual or psychological reasons, but for moral ones' (2018:39). This requires courage and, if the university is to be other than an instrument of the agendas of the political and economic, we need to take seriously our duty to actively develop communities of truth seeking and truth telling in ways that can be trusted. To confront

post-trust, an academic should not be an apologist for those who speak of their power rather than to it. In this sense, I am reminded of Foucault's Paris lectures (2010) on *parrhesia*, of speaking to the truth and of Peters' (2003) discussion of truth-telling as an educational practice. To speak out when the consequences may be unfavourable to oneself requires courage and a reconstitution of what higher education has become. This is a return to an ethos of personal growth that better represents what humanity might become, rather than offering a service of blinkered higher skills training. Moreover, it requires the teacher to be trustworthy and veritistic, to show by example what a search for answers looks like. It requires a form of self-trust that can avoid the deception of society and of oneself; a deception that was prevalent even before a post-trust era, yet which is more acute and acceptable within it. If this is taken as an inherent duty of an academic it might enhance our credibility as moral and epistemic agents rather than show time experts for the media.

A comprehensive discussion of the duty of trust within the confines of academic teaching practices is provided by Curzon-Hobson (2002)². He argues that trust is a fundamental element in the pursuit of higher learning, for it is only through a sense of trust that students embrace an empowering experience of freedom, and the exercise of this freedom requires students and their teachers to take a risk:

It challenges students to think and act according to their own perceptions without recourse to recitation or transcending ideals. This sense of freedom and the experience of risk is that which underpins students' projections to realise their unique potentiality. It requires a sensation of trust that is different from that which forms the basis of prescriptive accountability mechanisms and is, in fact, marginalised by such practices. (Curzon-Hobson, 2002: 226)

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 differentiate 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, free action. To be able to accept the responsibility that this implies, of constituting a reasoned world reality, facilitates the ontological integration of self. It encourages creativity, confidence and community through the negotiation of shared realities.

² I focus on teaching as an example but much the same applies in research where an obligation of truth precedes the right for research findings to be taken seriously.

In building this reasoned network of preference and acceptances of 'truth', in the sense of everyday-ness of action, students should reveal themselves both as self-trusting and as trustworthy people. To reach that position, they must be able to distinguish between their justified confidence in their competence in certain arenas and where they are incompetent. Students are likely to retain their self-trust only 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 revelation process is interpreted by Tierney (2006) as a 'grammar of trust' which has requirements and obligations on its users.

Higher education should therefore encourage self-trust developed through reasoned argument, debate and freedom of thought and a recognition of the obligations that accrue to such freedom. For students to be prepared to risk the socially constructed self to a process of authentic discovery of truth demands mutual and empathetic 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 sincerity and empathy, which can manifest itself in the *praxis* of critical being (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 (or, perhaps, ought to be) the basis of public trust in higher education institutions.

Academics have a dependency relationship with students that requires a duty of sincerity from the academic to avoid the potential for exploitation of the vulnerabilities of both student and of the academic herself. In relation to the discipline, academics are trusted by their peers to share common goals that include: responsible conduct in research and authorship practices, no form of harassment and the avoidance of conflict of interest. These erode the fabric of trust on which worthwhile social interactions are constructed. A test of a profession's trust may take place when one of its number contravenes these principles. Is a sanction dependent on incompetence, assuming moral good intent, or is it based on the competence of deceit: being caught?

To re-establish such a duty both epistemologically and ontologically, if indeed it has really been missing rather than hidden, will not be a quick fix in this environment of managerialism now fostered by post-truth and -trust. It might require a fundamental commitment to a duty of truth-telling in those charged with the revelation of the potentialities of those who offer themselves to the pursuit of higher education and on whom much of our civic flourishing may depend.

Concluding remarks – a duty of trust as the foundation of higher education

This **article** has sought to confirm the duty of trustworthiness in our academics at a time of post-truth and fake news, in what Peters has called ‘viral modernity’ (2018). This is an evolution which serves to encourage deceit, lies and uncertainty and I have suggested that higher education has not been exempt from its influence. A duty of trust owed by academics to students and their communities has been considered as a virtue of ‘good’ higher education. It has allowed opportunities for one to question the importance of self and one’s contribution to society, and this might well help to settle the purpose of higher education. Certainly, in an educational framework where the self has to expose its vulnerability to others, anything other than a moral duty of trusting care would make the offer of education potentially loaded and exploitative. Indeed, I follow Olafson (1998) in that a failure to respect others is a violation of the trust placed in us, as academics, by those to whom we are responsible. But this trust is eroding and what I am advocating is a need to reassert the spirit of duty; especially that of truth telling.

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 and the fluidity in what is taken as truth?’. ‘Value’ falls to the level of the market and the freedom to explore is constrained by expediency. A competence model of education has benefits for those who feel attracted to this economic expediency model. However, the appropriateness of such business comparisons for higher education is debatable and, even if valid, changes not only the process of becoming but the very nature of the autonomous individual.

I suggest that a failure of academics to speak out against the institutional bad faith in our engagements with students within the institutions in which we work and, for them, likewise not to speak out to policy, can easily result in the objectification of the other for both students and educator, inhibiting opportunities to produce meaningful educational ends. The issue has to be addressed through an assessment of what we expect from the university: quite simply, in whom can we trust?

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