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# From History to Practice: How Trust, Empathy, Reciprocity and Sensitivity in Relationships Create the Foundation of Learning

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# **From History to Practice: How Trust, Empathy, Reciprocity and Sensitivity in Relationships Create the Foundation of Learning**

**by**

**John A. Henschke**

## **Abstract**

Focus of this study is on the extent of trust, empathy, and reciprocity in relationships combine to create a solid foundation of adult learning. Sensitivity may enhance learning, but insensitivity may destroy it.

## **Introduction**

Trusting learners and fostering their trust of the professor/facilitator begins with the professor/facilitator extending the “benefit of the doubt” to learners. In the case of the workplace, it begins with the supervisor extending the “benefit of the doubt” to supervisees. This originates the modeling of reciprocity – which may carry such meaning as the following: interrelatedness, mutual assistance, give and take, aiding and abetting, mutuality, interplay, cooperation, collaboration. Trust is situated in the classroom or workplace, and teacher trust of learner (or supervisor trust of supervisee) must be met by learner trust of teacher (or the supervisee trust of supervisor). This happens in the day-to-day way of knowing, revealing and extending trust outward, to the learner (or to the supervisee). To build upon the trust factor, the literature calls for more research into the practice of developing and advancing the reciprocal relationship of trust between faculty and learners, or supervisors and supervisees (Henschke, 2011c; Vatcharasirisook, 2011). From the dawn of recorded history that is written about human beings, each of us was born into a context and world where trust was a very essential element for our survival. Much of it was automatic, but from the very start each of us developed our primary

‘rituals’ or ‘protocols’ that helped us know when we expressed ourselves in particular ways, dependable and predictable results were almost certain to occur – crying for food when it had been quite some time since we had eaten; for clean clothes when we had soiled the ones we were wearing; for a warm blanket when we got cold; or, for the presence of someone to be near or hold us when we sensed we had been alone long enough to not want that to continue. As each of us grew older, we learned that our calls were not always reciprocated in the way we desired – the will and reciprocation was also subject to what kind of relationship we had with another person that was responsible for our care and what decision that person made in response to our desires or demands. Thus, we had to learn about how to negotiate for what we needed. Nonetheless, empathy and sensitivity on the part of caregivers also influenced the extent and timeliness of the need being fulfilled.

### **Importance of the Best Practice to the Field for Engaging Learners**

Trust and its related concepts of empathy and reciprocity are central components to developing classrooms or workplaces ripe for fostering learning. Developing relationships that nurture learners *and* learning is of significant importance to the field of adult and higher education. Learning at its best, is built on trust, empathy, reciprocal relationships as well as sensitivity in learning and work environments that contributes to the field of best classroom or workplace practices. Through the use of the “Living Lecture” best practice, participants listen to selected segments of the history of trust, empathy, reciprocation, and minimizing insensitivity in the learning process, as well as the uses of the same “in practice”; and, will utilize the process of raising questions for clarification, rebuttal, elaboration and practical application. In this way, learners have the opportunity to construct a usable framework of trust, empathy, reciprocation and sensitivity through the lens of their own experiences that can strengthen learning in their own learning and work environments (Henschke, 2009, 2011b). The researcher adapted what he

calls a “living lecture” for helping learners and teachers construct and identify what happens in the classroom situation or workplace. The researcher refers to this “living lecture” as one “best practice” the researcher has used frequently in various situations and to great benefit (Henschke, 2011b). The living lecture for helping learners and teachers construct and identify what happens in the classroom situation is described as follows. Before a short lecture on any topic, the audience may be asked to serve as “listening teams” according to the section of the room they are sitting in – one section to listen to the presentation for points requiring clarification (the clarification team), another for points with which they disagree (the rebuttal team), another for points they wish to have elaborated on (the elaboration team), and a fourth for problems of practical application they wish the speaker to address (the application team). After the short lecture the teams are asked to “buzz” in groups of four or five to pool their thinking about the points they want raised, following which one member of each group in turn presents one point at a time, which they want addressed and the speaker responds until all items are discussed or time runs out. The researcher was not the originator of this adult and higher education “best practice” that he has labeled a “living lecture.” It was borrowed from Knowles (1970), and there is no doubt that he contributed greatly to it, not only by his texts, but with his spoken word and lectures. Savicevic (2008, p. 375) called Knowles “a ‘masovik’, i.e. a lecturer on mass events in 10,000 visitor stadiums, as if he was inspired by an ancient agonistic spirituality!” This kind of spirituality could be described as: tough, gung-ho, sporting, contending, grappling, challenging, vying, surpassing – all reflections of the very positive way that Knowles was known for in his andragogical approach of conducting his work in adult education. He used this learning/teaching technique during my doctoral program at Boston University. It “caught-on” with me. Consequently, Knowles’ contribution to the dissemination of the “living lecture” ideas is huge. The researcher’s involvement in the living lecture for interaction between learners and teachers

has been quite modest by comparison (Henschke, 1975, 2009, 2011b); especially in helping to encourage teachers to become more congruent between what they say and what they do in the higher education classroom. In addition, the same may be said concerning supervisors regarding their interaction with their supervisees and the extent to which they are willing to become congruent between what they say and what they do in the workplace setting.

### **How the Best Practice Relates to the Conference**

The R2P conference has a rich history of moving research *to* practice (Berger & Henschke, 2013 Forthcoming). Trust, once thought of as lofty and abstract, is brought into the learning environment as a *matter of practice* in a practical, usable way, where the rubber-meets-the-road in application (Henschke, 2011b, 2011c; Lubin, 2013; Risley, 2012). Participants in this session may take away usable lessons, grounded in theory and history that are applicable to their environments. The “living lecture” described earlier in this paper is/was used during this conference session. Trust affects our success and satisfaction in learning and in our work. The relationship of mutual trust between teachers and learners (as well as between supervisors and supervisees) is of particular value and concern. Research and practice regarding trust, empathy, reciprocity, and relationships that exemplifies sensitivity is changing the way classrooms, the workplace, and learning environments operate in a fundamental way. Fostering trusting relationships can no longer be out of reach. It is the future of classroom and workplace practice.

### **The Modified Instructional Perspectives Inventory**

The researcher developed the Modified Instructional Perspectives Inventory (MIPI), which includes seven factors: (1) Teacher Empathy with Learners; (2) Teacher Trust of Learners; (3) Planning and Delivery of Instruction; (4) Accommodating Learner Uniqueness; (5) Teacher Insensitivity to Learners; (6) Learner-Centered Learning Processes (Experience-Based Learning Techniques); and (7) Teacher-Centered Learning Processes (Henschke, 1989). Although each

factor contributes to the overall validity and reliability of the inventory (it has been used in 17 doctoral dissertations) (Henschke, 2011a; Risley, 2012; Lubin, 2013) and been validated and revalidated four times since its inception in 1989 (Vatcharasirisook, 2011; Henschke, 1989) three factors are the most important toward its central contribution to Teachers and Learners in the classroom (in addition to supervisors and supervisees in the workplace) related to the field of adult and higher education. The three most important factors are: 1. Teacher Empathy with Learners; 2. Teacher Trust of Learners; and, 5. Teacher Insensitivity toward Learners. The inventory has been adapted for use with various audiences, even for supervisors and subordinates in the workplace. To accommodate space limitations, the researcher has only included the following below: The Learner and the Teacher versions as well as the Subordinate and the Supervisor versions of Factor 1; the Learner version of Factor 2; and, the Learner version of Factor 5. With each of these factor listings, the researcher has included each item that makes up each of those factors. He has also included the Subordinate and the Supervisor version of Factor 1, to illustrate how the wording differs between the classroom and workplace. The researcher will also address issues that have to do with those factors being so influential and impactful. Following in order are listings of Factor #1 Teacher Empathy with Learners from the learner perspective and from the teacher perspective; Supervisor Empathy with Subordinates from the subordinate perspective and from the supervisor perspective.

#### **Factor #1 Teacher Empathy with Learners – Your Teacher**

4. Feels fully prepared to teach; 12. Notices and acknowledges to learners positive changes in them; 19. Balances her/his efforts between learner content acquisition and motivation; 26. Expresses appreciation to learners who actively participate; 33. Promotes positive self-esteem in learners.

#### **Factor #1 Teacher Empathy with Learners – As a Teacher**

4. Feels fully prepared to teach; 12. Notice and acknowledge to learners positive changes in them; 19. Balance my efforts between learner content acquisition and motivation; 26. Express appreciation to learners who actively participate; 33. Promote positive self-esteem in learners.

**Factor # 1 – Supervisor Empathy with Subordinates – Your Supervisor**

4. Feels fully prepared to present you information on a working project; 12. Notices and acknowledges to you your positive changes; 19. Balances his/her efforts between your content acquisition and your motivation; 26. Expresses appreciation to you for actively participating in projects; 33. Promotes positive self-esteem in you.

**Factor # 1 – Supervisor Empathy with Subordinates – As a Supervisor**

4. Feels fully prepared to present to each subordinate information on a working project; 12. Notice and acknowledge to each subordinate positive changes in her/him; 19. Balance my efforts between helping each subordinate in content acquisition and motivation; 26. Express appreciation to each subordinate for actively participating in projects; 33. Promote positive self-esteem in each subordinate.

When both groups, comprised of teachers and learners as well as supervisors and subordinates, rate each one of the items very high and fairly close to each other regarding empathy, it becomes quite clear that there is an excellent relationship between the two based on what these items express. Moreover, the excellent relationship between the two groups could be labeled as reciprocity, which becomes part of the nature of the relationship, and obviously the following expressions and descriptions of a reciprocal relationship characterize the situation -- interrelatedness, mutual assistance, give and take, aiding and abetting, mutuality, interplay, cooperation, collaboration. This Factor #1 is one factor that contributes toward learner



satisfaction with the learning situation and the subordinate job satisfaction (Vatcharasirisook, 2011). Factor #2 following also relates to subordinate job satisfaction.

### **Factor #2 Teacher Trust of Learners – Your Teacher**

7. Purposefully communicates to learners that each is uniquely important; 8. Expresses confidence that learners will develop the skills they need; 16. Trusts learners to know what their own goals, dreams, and realities are like; 28. Prizes the learner's ability to learn what is needed; 29. Feels learners need to be aware of and communicate their thoughts and feelings; 30. Enables learners to evaluate their own progress in learning; 31. Here's what learners indicate their learning needs are; 39. Engages learners in clarifying their own aspirations; 43. Develops supportive relationships with her/his learners; 44. Experiences unconditional positive regard for her/his learners; 45. Respects the dignity and integrity of the learners. Although we have listed only the learner perspective on Factor #2, if each of both groups, comprised of teachers and learners as well as supervisors and subordinates, would rate each one of the items (included and not included) very high and fairly close to each other regarding trust, it would become quite clear that there would be an excellent trusting relationship between the two based on what these 11 items express. In addition, reciprocity becomes part of the nature of the relationship, and obviously the following expressions and descriptions of a reciprocal relationship characterize the situation -- interrelatedness, mutual assistance, give and take, aiding and abetting, mutuality, interplay, cooperation, collaboration. This Factor #2 comprises the other factor that contributes toward learner satisfaction with the learning situation and the subordinate satisfaction with the job (Vatcharasirisook, 2011). The combination of these two factors – empathy and trust – not only leads to learning situation satisfaction and subordinate job satisfaction, but, in turn, these in combination secondarily lead to the learner and subordinate wanting to stay in the learning situation or want to stay employed in the

organization where they are working (Vatcharasirisook, 2011). When one considers the amount of time and money it takes an organization to orient a learner or subordinate to the culture, values, and practices which make up the atmosphere or climate of that institution, it is important that the atmosphere and climate be conducive to encouraging personnel to remain and be retained within. When this happens, these personnel may possibly contribute productively to the purpose and mission of the institution. There are other considerations to be observed relating to retention of personnel within an institution. This is related to Factor # 5, as indicated below.

#### **Factor #5 Teacher Insensitivity toward Learners – Your Teacher**

5. Has difficulty understanding learner's point of view; 13. Has difficulty getting her/his point across to learners; 18. Feels impatient with learner's progress; 27. Experiences frustration with learner apathy; 32. Have difficulty with the amount of time learners need to grasp various concepts ; 36. Gets bored with the many questions learners ask; 41. Feels irritation at learner inattentiveness in the learning setting.

This is one of the most crucial aspects of implementing the issue of learning situations and job satisfaction aspects of trust, empathy, reciprocation, and sensitivity between teachers/supervisors and learners/subordinates. All may be well in these regards and indications may be leaning toward "smooth-sailing" between them, especially when trust and empathy are harmonizing. However, when it comes to the extent of sensitivity/insensitivity between teachers/supervisors and learners/subordinates, if the leanings of either or both are toward sensitivity, harmony may easily be maintained. Nonetheless, if the leanings of either or both are toward insensitivity, the harmony generated by high trust and empathy may almost certainly be lessened at best, scuttled or destroyed at worst, with the accompanying result of the learners/subordinates acting on their desire to get out of that learning situation or workplace

(Henschke, 2011a; Vatcharasirisook, 2011).

It may seem strange that it works that way. Moreover, if only one item from Factor # 5 is amiss, one may think that it will not matter or influence the learning situation or the workplace sufficiently to have a negative impact. Notwithstanding, it is a quite well known fact that it takes five positive statements to off-set one negative statement so also in the case of Factor # 5 items and influencing a person to leave a corporation. When the South African government was being helped to rid the country of apartheid, there were nine major elements that the consultants considered as necessary to help them accomplish that task (McLagan & Nels, 1995). Their research substantiated that all nine elements held together as a unified major influence. If all elements except one were upheld, the one element not upheld contributed to destroying the unity and the total effort crumbling and resulting in no value to the country seeking to eliminate Apartheid. In addition, Lazarsfeld and Katz (1955, 2006) found in their original research, which is still valid a half-century later, that it is the relationship that teaches – the closer the relationship is, the more learning will occur; the more distant the relationship is, the less reciprocity, interrelatedness, mutual assistance, give and take, aiding and abetting, mutuality, interplay, cooperation, and collaboration; consequently, the less learning will take place.

Thus, the same is probably true relating to the sensitivity/insensitivity factor between teachers/supervisors and learners/subordinates. It is not just one of the seven items in this factor that may be acceptable to overlook, but it is that if one of the seven items in this factor is considered unimportant, all of the 11 items of trust, combined with all of the five items of empathy will be of no avail in building the solid foundation of learning that will flourish with trust, reciprocity and relationships. All seven items in this factor hold together as a unified influence. If one item is missing, the influence of this factor is nullified. Or, from the opposite point of view, if one item of insensitivity is strongly present, it nullifies what could be the

positive influence of the other six items of this factor as well as nullifying the positive effect in the relationship of the factors of trust and empathy. This means that concentrated attention must be given to greatly reduce or eliminate entirely each item our practice that relates to insensitivity on the part of teachers or supervisors toward learners or subordinates. This is a critical distinction to make and needs to be dealt with as being of utmost importance.

## **Conclusion**

Best practices in building a foundation for adult learning originates from such factors as teachers trust of learners, or supervisors trust of supervisees. Nonetheless, teacher empathy with learners and supervisor empathy with supervisees add another building block in this process. Moreover, reciprocation from the learners or supervisees toward the teachers or supervisors is also critical in building this foundation. Ultimately, the balance between sensitivity and insensitivity may either enhance or destroy a foundation of adult learning. This study illustrates the combinations.

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