TRUST AND THRIVING LEARNING ECOSYSTEMS
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INTRODUCTION

The importance of trust in learning ecosystems is often emphasised but rarely interrogated. The aim of this piece is to guide deeper dialogue and reflection about the practice of weaving trustful relationships as a foundation of thriving learning ecosystems. It is in no way intended to be definitive or comprehensive.

WHAT IS TRUST?

There is no universally accepted definition of trust, but the following points are common to many definitions. [i]

Trust is a willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another person or group, based on the feeling, judgement, belief, expectation, and confidence that the other person or group will be:
   o Benevolent: They will protect your interests.
   o Reliable: They are consistent in their actions.
   o Competent: They have the ability to achieve a desired outcome.
   o Honest: They are truthful and authentic.
   o Open: They share information transparently.

Trustful relationships involve creating a field of trust in which:
   o Each party feels trust, trusted, and trustworthy.
   o Each party feels safe, and therefore displays vulnerability, authenticity, and openness.
   o Altruism and sharing are customary.
   o Norms of reciprocity are established and collaboration flows.
   o Trust is earned, given, received, shown, and grown.

WHY IS TRUST IMPORTANT IN LEARNING ECOSYSTEMS?

Now that we are clearer about what trust means, let's turn to the question of why trust is so important in learning ecosystems. And to do that, the following definition of a thriving learning ecosystem is helpful:

A thriving learning ecosystem is:
a trustful and diverse community;
consciously learning, working, and evolving together;
through a variety of formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences & environments (including nature);
with the shared purpose of thriving together. [ii]

Trust and community

The idea of an education system often brings forth the idea of an inert machine which functions entirely according to the workings of systemic mechanisms, such as policies, processes, and assessments. In contrast, the idea of a learning ecosystem focuses attention on people's mindsets, behaviours and relationships that bring the system to life. A learning ecosystem is a dynamic living system that is strongly influenced by the functioning of its mechanisms but that is more fundamentally defined by the quality of its social fabric. A learning ecosystem is a community. And thriving communities are defined by the presence of trust. [iii]

"Core to the Remake Learning ecosystem is the trust that each participant feels and experiences – trust for their craft; trust that their ideas have merit; trust that they know their classrooms, schools, or communities. And if each person knows that they can trust the broader approach, then there's a genuine network that can, together, advance new ways of doing things." [iv]

Trust and diversity

As with any ecosystem, a learning ecosystem thrives on diversity. Learning ecosystems require collaboration between a wide variety of stakeholders, including front-line actors (who have a direct influence over the learning of others) as well as second-line actors (who exert an indirect influence). The variety of collaborative relationships in thriving learning ecosystems contrasts with traditional education systems in which hierarchy and competition and fragmentation dominate. Thriving learning ecosystems are, by definition, full of trust.

"Across conversations with learning ecosystem leaders it was found that overwhelmingly the most mentioned element that… can help education ecosystems flourish is trust." [v]

Trust between adults and young people

Higher levels of trust between children, adolescents and their educators often correlate with better learning outcomes.[vi] This would stand to reason insofar as students, in trustful environments, are more likely to be willing to take risks, make mistakes, admit to not knowing, work harder, and take more responsibility.[vii] This is also likely to be true for young people learning with parents and other front-line actors. In a thriving learning ecosystem, young people trust adults to have their interests in mind, and to be honest and competent, while adults trust young people to take the lead and become independent, self-determining learners.

"Swinburne's [learning] ecosystem offers extensive enrichment programs which build into the comprehensive process of schools. Programs connect schools, communities and industry, engaging students on multiple fronts. For connections between these groups to flourish, schools need to develop a trusting relationship with partners, like Swinburne, in providing the right support required for effectively running the programs." [viii]

Trust among front-line actors

A learning ecosystem involves the provision of a variety of formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences & environments, preferably coordinated and scaffolded throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. This requires coordination and collaboration between school leaders, teachers, non-formal educators, and family members. And, in some cases, also between health and social workers, community and faith leaders, and other front-line actors who have a direct influence over people's learning.

Research shows that trust between teachers increases their competence; willingness to share knowledge and make mistakes; ability to initiate and implement change; job satisfaction; recruitment; and retention. And it enhances students' learning. Beyond the school setting, weaving

trusted relationships 'horizontally' between teachers, parents and other front-line actors is essential in a thriving learning ecosystem. [ix]

Trust among second-line actors

Policy makers and government administrators are key second-line actors who are engaged in complex decision-making structures and processes. Coordination and collaboration between government actors is important in learning ecosystems. Studies suggest that higher levels of trust within government structures lead to higher quality policies and better consensus building across different levels of government. [x]

Government actors also need to weave trustful relationships 'horizontally' with and between other second-line actors in the system, including education administrators, teacher trainers, teacher unions, businesses, the media, funders, and so on.

Trust in all directions

Furthermore, there needs to be coordination and collaboration between second-line actors and front-line actors. Inclusivity is a key feature of a thriving learning ecosystem and it is important, therefore, to weave trustful relationships both horizontally and vertically. Or perhaps, to address the all too frequent disconnection between policy makers and 'grassroots' actors, as well as the often-unhelpful preference for either top-down or bottom-up initiatives, it is better to think of trust as being multi-directional. [xi]

Trust and collaboration

Thriving learning ecosystems require multi-directional, multi-stakeholder collaborations in which community members go further than merely coordinating to sharing strategies, plans, resources, processes, and opportunities. And trust is the bedrock of effective collaboration. Trustful relationships allow people to remain engaged through difficult conversations and shared challenges; it allows information and opportunities to be shared freely between collaborators; and it increases the probability that people will share their resources with each other because it involves the expectation that others will behave in non-exploitative ways. [xii]

Trust and innovation

In contrast with traditional education systems, members of a learning ecosystem work together to consciously evolve their ecosystem so that it is continuously adapting to the changing needs of everyone in it. The generation and spread of innovations should therefore be commonplace throughout a learning ecosystem. And innovation is enabled by trust because it facilitates the exchange of new practices allows for risk-tolerant environments in which new practices can be tried safely. [xiii]

Trust and learning

The evolution of a learning ecosystem requires people in the system to be consciously and continuously learning to get better, together. In a thriving learning ecosystem, people pay attention to the nature of the existing system, including themselves as part of the system. And they adapt their strategies, plans and behaviours to improve as a system. Learning is therefore not only an outcome of the system. Nor is learning only for young people. Rather, learning is something that everyone in the ecosystem commits to together. And by doing so, the ecosystem itself continuously learns. To foster intentional learning throughout the ecosystem, trust is paramount. [xiv]

Trust, alignment, and thriving

Learning together and working together are essential characteristics of a learning ecosystem. But the community also needs a shared direction and common understanding of success. In a learning ecosystem, as with other collective impact approaches, members of the community align explicitly to a shared purpose. [xv] In many education systems, discussions about purpose are lacking, and the purpose which is implicit in the day-to-day realities of assessments and audits is often not aligned with people's preferred purpose. This is why so many educators, parents and young people feel frustrated at the relentless focus on academic achievement. For many people, their preferred purpose would be to learn to thrive together.

Trust plays a critical role here. First, the process of aligning a community to a shared purpose requires trust, because people need to be able to express their deeper beliefs, values, and objections in a safe environment. Second, once agreement is reached as to the community's shared purpose, people need to trust each other to uphold that purpose through their everyday actions. And third, in a learning ecosystem whose purpose is learning to thrive together, trust is embedded in the purpose itself. In other words, thriving involves feeling trust in others and feeling trusted by others.

> *"Trust is the invisible glue that allows for learning ecosystems to flourish. Trust allows for walls created by preconceptions and suppositions to be weakened, opening the space to weave strong connections between all participants in the ecosystem."*
> Luis Camargo, Bogotá Mountain School Network learning ecosystem [xvi]

HOW TO FOSTER TRUST?

Weaving trustful relationships between diverse actors who are used to competing and who have different perspectives and levels of influence requires considerable attention, skill, and patience. And because a learning ecosystem is continuously evolving, with new actors coming and going, the practice of building trust must be an ongoing process. This is why it is critical to build weaving capacity in the learning ecosystem. While there are no clean formulas for fostering trust, the following approaches are helpful. [xvii]

1. **Build weaving capacity:** Name and train weavers whose explicit responsibility it is to weave trustful relationships.
2. **Take your time:** Don't expect trustful relationships to emerge overnight. People need time to trust each other. And trust is alive, easily lost, and needs continuous attention.
3. **Talk about trust:** Make space to discuss and reflect on trust. But make sure that in talking about trust, you don't inadvertently create the feeling that trust is an issue when it's not. Be precise when you discuss trust. Be playful. And celebrate trustful relationships openly.
4. **Measure trust:** For inputs to your discussions and reflections, capture data about trust. Creating survey questions with members of your community will itself stimulate dialogue about what trust means to your community.
5. **Address mistrust early:** Call out feelings of mistrust before they have time to grow. Do this in a way that allows everyone to explore the root causes of mistrust. Encourage curiosity over blame. Create safe spaces. Listen empathically. Use non-violent communication techniques.

6. **Model trustworthiness:** It is unreasonable to expect others to create trustful relationships if you don't model it yourself. It is important, then, to show benevolence and fairness; reliability and consistency; competence and integrity; honesty and authenticity; openness and transparency.
7. **Give trust:** Give people the benefit of the doubt. Assume positive intent. Share decision-making power. Give people a voice. Listen empathically.

> *"The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them."*
> Ernest Hemingway

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