THE CENTER FOR ETHICS & EDUCATION

Building Trust in Higher Education

TEACHING GUIDE

The Center for Ethics & Education created this curriculum plan to give faculty and students the tools to bridge philosophy and education. This teaching guide contains learning objectives, recommended readings, writing and discussion board prompts, and four potential in-class activities. We do not set out a particular structure for teaching this topic. Instead, we seek to provide adequate resources for you to teach your students tailored to their needs–after all, you know your students better than we do. We recommend reading through the guide and selecting which activities, prompts, readings, and timings work best for your class.

CONTENTS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **Students will…**
  - Gain conceptual understanding of trust networks and informational ideologies
  - Describe how trust impacts students and institutions of higher education
  - Be able to apply trust as a lens to view a wide array of issues in higher education.
  - Gain skills in problem solving while considering other perspectives and thinking charitably
  - Understand what institutions of higher education can do to build trust and create open-minded trust networks

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ANTHONY SIMON LADEN
AUTHOR OF *NETWORKS OF TRUST: THE SOCIAL COSTS OF COLLEGE AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT THEM*

There are many things that can make a college education difficult: the financial cost, the time and effort involved, the stress. But in addition to these, and happening more or less in the background, is the transformative effect that college can have on how students think and the (re)-shaping of the networks of sources of information they trust.

This conceptual lens—the transformation of trust as a mechanism and by-product of education—doesn't yield a theory we can apply or a set of proposals or answers, but it can help us see certain features of higher education more clearly (while no doubt obscuring others). I found that once I had named and begun to analyze this dynamic, I started to notice the role trust played throughout the educational process. I began to appreciate one reason why many students as well as their families and communities are anxious about and skeptical or even hostile towards colleges and those who teach in them.

Using this lens helps me notice things I had overlooked before and gives me language and metaphors to talk and think about the mission of higher education generally as well as what I am trying to do in my classes. See if it does the same for you.
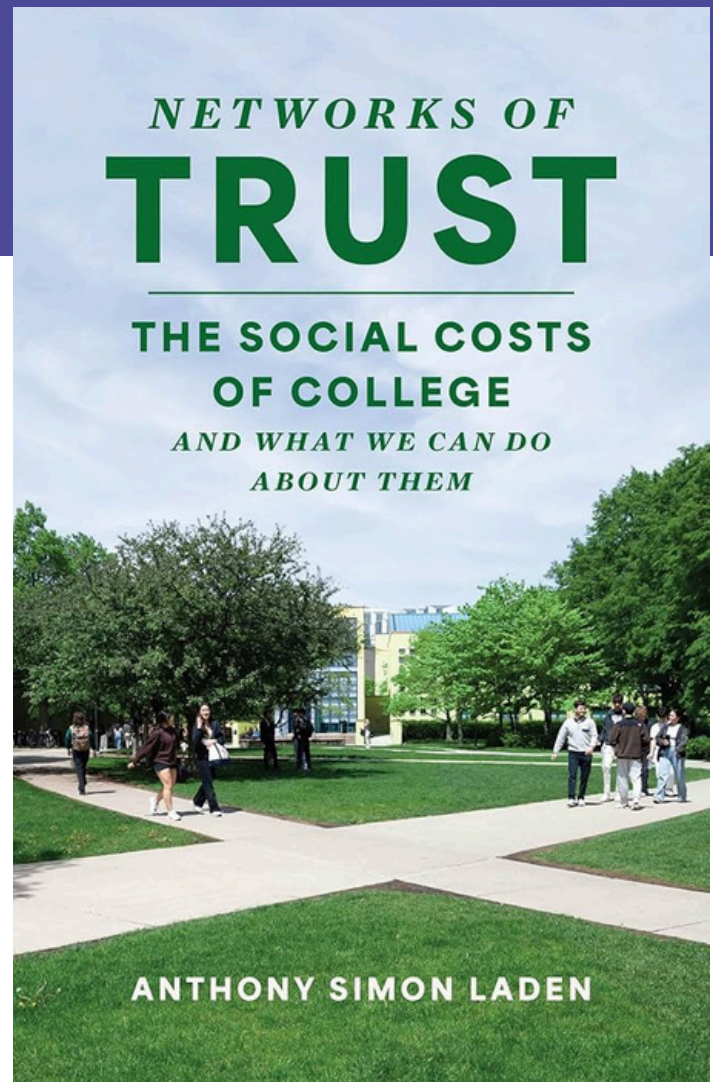
ARI COLLINS
UW–MADISON UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, TEACHING GUIDE AUTHOR

We need to trust sources of information to live, so how we come to trust what we trust is important. I have always thought that colleges impact students, but I never considered that colleges do so by impacting what sources students trust and how they come to trust them. Developing this teaching guide helped me consider my own trust networks.

I think the most important takeaway from these readings is being able to use trust networks as a framework to understand conflicts. Sometimes conflicts are about facts or data, sometimes they're about differing values, but sometimes they're really about trust and sources of information. Trust is a vital part of living with others and this book helped me understand how institutions of higher education can build and shape trust networks.

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ANTHONY SIMON LADEN

Anthony Simon Laden is an American philosopher known for his contributions to ethics, political philosophy, and the philosophy of education. He currently serves as a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and is also Associate Director at the Center for Ethics and Education.

NOTABLE PUBLICATIONS

- *Reasoning: A Social Picture* (Oxford University Press, 2012), where he presents an alternative view of reasoning as a fundamentally social activity.
- *Reasonably Radical: Deliberative Liberalism and the Politics of Identity* (Cornell University Press, 2001), which explores the intersections of liberalism and identity politics.
- *Multiculturalism and Political Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), co-edited with David Owen, a collection addressing various perspectives on multiculturalism within political theory.

His most recent work, *Networks of Trust: The Social Costs of College and What We Can Do About Them* (University of Chicago Press, 2024), examines how higher education impacts students' trust networks and proposes strategies for educators to foster positive relationships with students.

READINGS

The readings for this teaching guide come from Anthony Simon Laden's book *Networks of Trust: The Social Costs of College And What We Can Do About Them*. The book explores trust in higher education: what trust networks are, how colleges change those trust networks, and what colleges can do to support students and their communities. The book consists of six relatively short chapters that we recommend pairing in groups of two (you can pair them differently depending on the needs of your class and how many days you plan to spend on this topic).

Reading Overview:
- **Book:** *Networks of Trust*
  - Chapter 1: Laden introduces the topic of trust in higher education and sets up the arguments he will make throughout the book.
  - Chapter 2: Overview of informational trust networks and how three different kinds of trust (Informational Trust, Social Trust, and Trust as Entrusting) play important roles in higher education.
  - Chapter 3: How institutions of higher education shape student's informational trust networks through things like new social ties. Overview of the scientific trust network that colleges build.
  - Chapter 4: The social costs associated with universities changing their student' trust networks. Consideration of how these social costs can impact students with wide ranging backgrounds, from rural students to students from marginalized communities.
  - Chapter 5: Ways trust networks might be dysfunctional and how colleges can seek to build open-minded trust networks for their students to help avoid these pitfalls.
  - Chapter 6: How colleges can better earn and keep the trust of their students and their students' communities by showing gratitude towards students, placing trust in students, and reaching out to students' communities.

- **Podcast:** Building Trust in Higher Education: featuring stories of undergraduate students and a conversation with Anthony Simon Laden. Produced by the Center for Ethics and Education, this is a great starting point to introduce students to the issue.

- **Case Study:** Seeing Green from Justice in Schools. The case describes a teacher who, after teaching a class on climate change, faces pushback from students and their parents and needs to resolve competing values and networks of trust. It serves as a snapshot of issues that can arise when educational trust is not properly considered.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND WRITING PROMPTS

In this section, we offer a broad selection of potential in-class discussion questions, discussion board prompts, and writing assignments. Use any of the below suggestions that you think would be helpful for your class, and assign them in any order (before or after assigning the readings).

Suggested discussion board prompts:

- Leaving aside the professor of this class, do you generally trust your professors? Why or why not?

- Describe two sources of information that you trust. Why do you trust them? What might this say about your informational ideology?

- What do you think a classroom with high levels of trust looks like? What about a classroom with low levels of trust?

- What conditions need to be met in order for you to be vulnerable in an educational setting?

Suggested writing assignment prompts:

- Write from a professor's point of view. What changes do you need to implement in your classroom to gain the trust of students and their parents?

- Ch.2 - Describe the difference between safety and security. How do you know when an environment is safe vs. when it is secure?

- Ch.4 - Think about Tara Westover's story (Laden, p. 55). How was her college experience similar to and different from your own? What are the social costs she faced due to her education, and how do they compare with social costs you have faced? Write a short reflection.

- Ch.5 - Which of Laden's suggestions to foster open-mindedness in classrooms do you think would be most effective on our campus? Why?

Glossary Activity

For either or both of the following lists (depending on what you think your students need), have your students look up each of these terms and write down definitions. This could be something that they do while reading the book and hand in at the beginning of class, or it could be something they do in the first 10-15 minutes of class. For some there are very clear definitions in the text, but others are left more vague, and students won't all come up with the same definitions.

Terms for Understanding Scientific and Open-Minded Trust Networks

- Chapter 2
    - 1. "Unquestioning Attitude" (p. 16)
    - 2. Informational Trust Networks (p.19)
    - 3. Informational Ideology (p.22)
    - 4. Inscrutable (p.23)
- Chapter 3
    - 1. Critical Thinking (p.40)
    - 2. Scientific Trust Network (p.49)
- Chapter 4
    - 1. Pitfalls of Scientific Thinking (p.68)
- Chapter 5
    - 1. Better Knower (p.73)
    - 2. Dysfunctional Cognitive Structures (p.75)
    - 3. Open-minded Trust Network (p.83)
    - 4. Rationality Based Informational Ideology (p.83)
    - 5. Non- Dogmatism (p.83)
    - 6. Evaluative Skills (p.84)
        .

Unfamiliar Philosophical Terms
These are contested concepts, which are much less well defined in the text than those from the other list.

- Values (p.3)
- Duty (p.4)
- Restorative care (p.12)
- Grounds (p.22)
- Ideologies (p.23)
- Genuine knowledge (p.24)
- Indoctrination (p.24)
- Obligations (p.26)
- Attitudes (p.53)
- Ethical Costs (p.54)
- Dogmatism (p.83)

Trust Network Visualization

The following two activities can be used to help students understand what Informational Trust Networks are and how each person's trust network will be different based on their background experiences. Use one or both depending on what your students need.

Trust Ranking

Have students rank these 9 sources of information in terms of how much they trust them.

- Family
- Close Friends
- Professors
- *The New York Times*
- *Fox News*
- The local newspaper
- Religious Figures
- Neighbors
- Social Media

Discuss with the whole class or in small groups about your rankings. Which were the hardest to place? Are you comfortable with your ranking? Why or why not? Why do you trust the sources you trust? Get the class to reflect together on why their rankings are diverse (if they are) or why they are uniform (if they are).

Trust Story

First, have students read the short story below, then ask students to assign levels of trust (1 being lowest, 10 being highest) that Timothy would have in each of the following sources. Get them to discuss in pairs why they made the assignments that they did.

Timothy Walton was born on April 6, 1967, in Nebraska. His mother was a Sunday school teacher and grew up on a farm. His father was a teacher and school superintendent who had previously served in the U.S Army. Timothy had a very close relationship with both of his parents. Timothy grew up on his family's corn and soybean farm, learning local farming knowledge from his parents and neighbors. He was raised Catholic but moved away from organized religion as he grew up. In school, he played football and basketball and ran track. After school, he went hunting with his friends. He graduated from Butte High School in 1982 in a class of just 25 students and then went to Chadron, Nebraska for college.

While in college, Timothy found that his professors, despite seeming very knowledgeable, did not seem to understand the community he came from. He became disillusioned with college, eventually dropping out to go into the military like his father.

Informational Source	Level of Informational Trust	Level of Social Trust	Level of Entrusting Trust
Parents			
Professors			
Catholic Church			
Neighbors			

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY #3

Trust and Vulnerability Jigsaw Reading

This activity will have students practice close reading and conceptual analysis skills while helping students understand the role trust and vulnerability play in education.

Setup:
Assign each student a letter (A,B,C,D corresponding with readings below). After each student has read their corresponding section, create groupings of the same letter for the first round of discussion (Group of As, Group of Bs, etc.) Then make groups of four with one member of each letter (Group of A, B, C, D), then have them discuss using the questions below.

Reading Assignments Groupings:
Group A: Vulnerability in education - Chapter 2 (p. 11-14)
Group B: Social trust - Chapter 2 (p. 25-29)
Group C: Charitable Thinking - Chapter 5 (p. 87-90)
Group D: Trusting students Chapter 6 (p. 112-114)

First round of discussion (10 min) - initial grouping (All As, All Bs, etc.):
- How does your section understand vulnerability or trust?
- In what situations is the vulnerability or trust described important?
- Based on your readings what is gained/lost when we trust/don't trust?
- Do you agree with the point this reading is making?

Second round of discussion (15 min) - mixed grouping (A,B,C,D):
- Share a brief overview of what each persons' section was about.
- How do these ideas of trust and vulnerability overlap or diverge?
- Do some situations described in the readings that require trust/vulnerability seem more important than others?
- Is the role that trust and vulnerability play in education essential or supplementary?

Teaching Open-Mindedness

In the following exercise, each student is given a role with a point of view and values. Students are then asked to come to a solution with a group of fellow students all in different roles. Then, a second round of the same activity occurs, but this time students are placed in a different role.

Intended Outcomes:
1. Students will come to understand how to create and defend a position they may not necessarily hold.
2. Students will gain insight into how different (reasonable) people might approach a situation
3. Students will recognize the value in open-minded discussion and how it can produce better outcomes for a whole group of people.

Example:
Have your students read the case study Seeing Green (this can be done before or during class). Next, place students into groups of four assigning them each a character from the story. Have them discuss what they should do about teaching climate change in the classroom and decide upon one of the following four courses of action for Ms. Maguire to take.

- Ms. Maguire continues to teach climate change as she has been.
- Ms. Maguire continues to teach climate change but allocates substantial time to discussing the benefits of the oil industry.
- Ms. Maguire should avoid discussing climate change as it can be controversial and alienate students.
- Ms. Maguire should connect climate change discussions to community issues and values but does not necessarily have to defend the oil industry.

Each member of the group is given one of the following four roles, each with a corresponding position they have to advocate for.

Mrs. Lee (School Principal): You want to do what's best for everyone involved but you are particularly worried about the school's image and maintaining community support.

Ms. Maguire (Teacher): You want what's best for your students. You see the importance of connecting science to community values, but you feel that discussing the economic benefits of fossil fuels while trying to teach about climate change is not a good solution.

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Teaching Open-Mindedness Activity Cont.

Mr. Darrow (Parent): You want the classroom to remain apolitical. You worry by teaching that climate change is bad and that human oil industries have caused it will lead to students being taught to hate what their parents do for work.

Mason (Student): You feel that teaching that humans have caused climate change is overly political for a classroom setting.

If some groups need to have five members, add this character:

Martha (Mediator): Your goal is to help all the stakeholders come to a fair agreement about what to do about climate change education. You have no favored value but want to see the group come to an agreement,

Structure:
- First round (10 mins): reach a conclusion (Note, students won't reach consensus, because conflict is built in).
- Second round (10 mins): assign each of the students a different role.

Then: Get each student to write down, individually, what they think the best choice (not necessarily the one they argued for) would be. (2 minutes)

Then: ask the students the following questions (ask them all at once and get them to discuss in pairs for 5 minutes):

- Do you think you'd have made a different ultimate judgement if you'd been assigned different roles?
- Did you listen to your classmates differently depending on the roles you and they were assigned?
- What was the value of looking at the matter from different perspectives than your own?

Open up to a whole class discussion (10 minutes).

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We at the Center are committed to encouraging philosophical reflection on contemporary issues in education. This curriculum was developed for use in undergraduate and graduate education, philosophy, and sociology classes. It is available for free.

The Center for Ethics & Education is housed in the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The Center supports the field of philosophy of education by supporting scholars, graduate students, practitioners, and policymakers in thinking analytically about ethical issues in education.

How did it go using this teaching guide with your class?
We'd love to hear from you!

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