

Chapter 8

Trust in Peers: Conditions of Trust in Faculty-Based Peer Review of Teaching in Norway



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Introduction

Teaching in higher education has traditionally been conceptualised and acted upon as an individual responsibility in higher education institutions (Biggs & Tang, 2010). One challenge related to such a culture is that the levels of consciousness, attitudes and the sharing of experiences become limited. This lack of sharing among teachers is a particularly known challenge in education in general and higher education in particular (Edwards, 2010; Hargreaves, 2000; Thomas et al., 2014). Previous research has documented the positive outcomes related to activities that engage teachers in peer interactions to enhance their awareness of teaching (Thomas et al., 2014). Based on these insights, higher education is currently meeting new demands for university educators across disciplines to develop their teaching based on collaborative peer review (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). However, involving peers to ask challenging questions and offer constructive critiques necessitates discussing issues related to trust/distrust. Accordingly, this chapter discusses the development of trust in a peer review setting where teachers expose their teaching to colleagues. We take particular interest in what appears as presuppositions for the trust created within these groups, on the one hand, and the enactment of trust as collective in-group consistency, on the other.

The term ‘collective’ refers here to the relational dynamic in which norms and structures are not necessarily clear-cut and ready-made, but are created through negotiations and interactions in the group (Fenwick, 2008). From this analytic

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perspective, the individual is not considered a separate participant but is seen as an intersubjective relation achieved through interaction in the social group (Wenger, 2000). In the study underlying this chapter, this relational dynamic has been analysed through video-recordings of interactions in a peer group of four participants who review one another's teaching throughout a semester. The analyses aim to identify the significant elements in creating a dynamic of trust enacted in a micro-social setting.

Peer Review of Teaching

By involving trusted peers who can ask challenging questions and offer a constructive critique, peer-based feedback in groups has been suggested as a productive measure to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in higher education (Costa & Kallik, 1993; Kohut et al., 2007). This is particularly the case when involving peer observation and critical reflection about actual teaching practices (Martin et al., 2000; Donnelly, 2007). Although substantial literature exists on reflective practice as an important measure in developing teaching and instruction, empirical studies on the nature of productive peer-based reflectiveness about teaching are scarce (Hammersly-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). Previous research has typically raised questions on the types of activities that facilitate reflexivity, as well as the role that interaction with peers and faculty members plays in enhancing supportive reflections about teaching (Thomas et al., 2014). Especially when considering the outcomes of feedback processes, recent studies have not emphasised dyadic comments but social and dialogic acts instead (Steen-Utheim & Wittek, 2017; Ajjawi & Boud, 2015).

There is a particular focus on feedback as a long-term dialogic process in which all parties are actively engaged (Price et al., 2011). Findings suggest that feedback based on the participants' joint meaning-making with clear contextual relevance appears to be a productive approach (Price et al., 2010; Scaratti et al., 2017). This notion of situatedness and active engagement has a particular relevance in the study underlying this chapter. However, we do not focus on individual reflection but instead emphasise the interactional process in which reciprocal trust is developed. The research questions we address in this respect are formulated as follows:

- What premises can be identified as crucial for how trust is constituted in faculty-based peer groups?
- How is trust enacted in this kind of group setting?

The conceptual basis for this chapter is a sociocultural approach. The chapter will start with an exploration of sociocultural notions on trust. This is followed by a description of the context, methods and empirical basis of our study, followed by our analysis. Then, from our analysis and empirical findings, we will discuss how trust unfolds in this context and what premises appear significant with respect to creating spaces of sharing and collaboration in higher education, as well as enacting

trust. Finally, we highlight the possible implications for peer review as a faculty development measure.

Conceptual and Analytic Framework

Trust is commonly defined as the interdependence between the trustor and the trustee involving risk and vulnerability (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). This dyadic notion is frequently discussed in relation to rationalist calculations of predictability and vulnerability (Kramer et al., 1996). However, trust is also defined in terms of primary versus reflective notions, with the former referring to an ontological pre-conception and the latter achieved through learning, experience and reflective thinking (Markova, 2007). In this study, we use a definition that aligns with the latter tradition. We conceptualise trust as a relational process, something that unfolds and develops through the interaction between participants within specific contexts.

An overview of how trust is considered a sociocultural phenomenon is thoroughly discussed in the edited volume ‘Trust and Distrust’ by Markova and Gillespie (2007). In the introductory chapter of this work, the authors present a general structure of trust, which is relevant to our study, with Fig. 8.1 providing a helpful overview.

As we can see in Fig. 8.1, basic and primary trust is something we take for granted and normally do not question. Basic and primary trust on the lower left

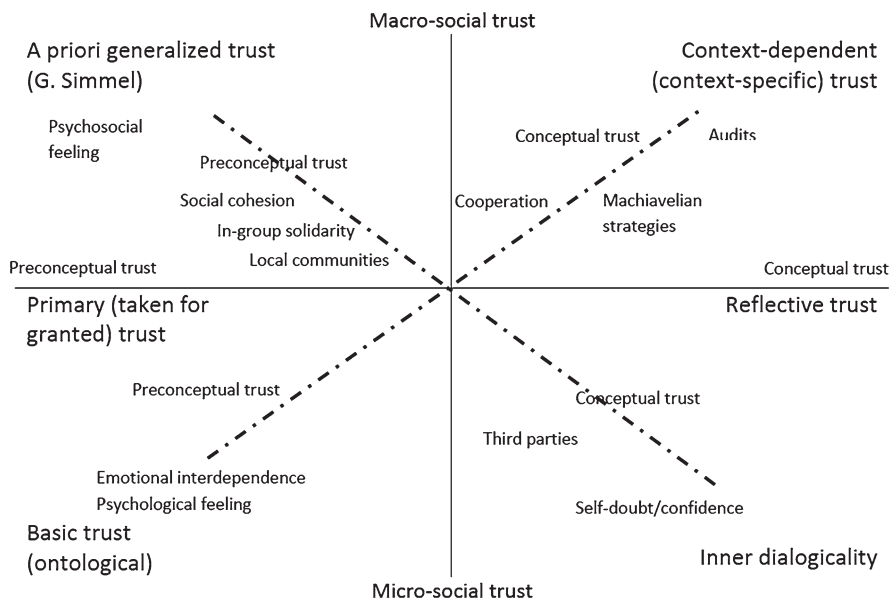


Fig. 8.1 General structure of trust. (Markova et al., 2007: 11)

quadrant refers to the pre-moral and affective attachments between the caregiver and the caretaker. A priori generalised trust on the top left quadrant refers to how we learn to trust in social settings, such as closely-knit communities, and friendship and kinship relations. This generalised notion concerns dependency on others and security against threats. This kind of trust is rarely conceptualised and primarily taken for granted. The third quadrant on the top right is based on a different kind of human relation typical of complex and modern societies, where we need to rely on people we do not know. In this kind of social structure, trust is more affiliated to roles and role-based expectations. This kind of generalised trust is more bound to the specific social practices established between strangers within organisations and institutions (Markova et al., 2007: 19). The fourth quadrant on the bottom right concerns interpersonal and intrapersonal trust and communication. The concept of inner dialogicality (dialogues within the self) relates here to the capacity of internal dialogue, such as evaluations of one's and others' past and present conduct, with a reflection on one's personal issues and making predictions about future conduct and intentions (Markova et al., 2007: 20).

For the purpose of addressing trust in this chapter, we emphasise the third quadrant of context-dependent institutional and organisational settings. Here, peer groups are considered a constellation involving employees from one institution with similar roles and obligations, but within a setting where the participants are personally unknown to one another, as well as affiliated with different disciplinary domains and parts of the organisation. This combination of shared norms, unfamiliarity and divergent affiliations brings about a cooperative setting where trust has to be established between the participants. At the same time, in settings like this, trust is rarely directly thermalized and therefore often remains implicit (Gillespie, 2007).

In our analysis of peer groups, we are especially interested in identifying how trust is revealed through interactions in professionally cooperative settings. Given the implicitness of trust in settings like this, our analysis will need to identify trust as specific occurrences. We will draw on the notion of Kramer et al. (1996) that trust is made visible when interactions open opportunities and represent vulnerability. Opportunity represents here perceived gains, both individually and collectively, that accrue when acts of trusted vulnerability are responded to by others. The vulnerabilities are derived from the potential costs associated with misplaced trust and loss of face, respect, self-confidence, and so on. In this way, the participants' behaviour entails a more or less conscious decision when they expose themselves to these risks. In light of this, we take interest in how a specific 'exposure' is enacted in the observed groups and how the participants reflect on their experiences of participating in a peer review group.

In this analysis, we specifically examine the vulnerability emerging when the participants open up to alternative perspectives and suggestions on their teaching from their peers. We will also consider acts of closing down, in which the participants choose to disregard suggestions. Although trust is not explicitly addressed in these conversations, through the analysis, we hope to empirically identify the core presuppositions on how trust is cooperatively and collectively formed. Based on this focus, in the final section, we will discuss the potential of this particular trust-based

space in higher education, the organisational framing that is presupposed and the factors that might threaten trust in this context if it is used for purposes other than those originally intended.

Context and Methods

The peer group examined in the underlying study is part of a professional development program at a large research university in Norway. The focus in this program is to provide theoretical and research-based perspectives on teaching and student learning in higher education, as well as to relate these concepts to the participants' teaching. An important part of this program consists of establishing peer groups, in which colleagues observe, discuss and give peer-based feedback on one another's teaching. These peer groups are usually composed of four university teachers from different faculties and disciplinary backgrounds. These groups arrange to visit, observe and give feedback during the period of one semester. Table 8.1 illustrates how this set-up is organised.

The main purpose of this activity is to provide a collegial forum in which teachers discuss and reflect on one another's teaching practices. This arrangement is purely formative, building on the idea that formative reflection on one's own and others' instructional practices is imperative for opening up to alternative perspectives and motivating for experimental change and improvement (Bransford et al., 2000; Curlette & Granville, 2014; Lauvås et al., 2016). These groups rely on the participants' mutual trust to contribute productively when observing one another's teaching spaces. Table 8.2 shows the four participants in the observed group, their fields of expertise and their affiliation.

As we can see in Table 8.2, the members of this group have various disciplinary and organisational affiliations ranging from medicine to the social sciences and the humanities. The empirical data collected when following this group draw on longitudinal observations spanning a period of 5 months. These observations are related to the KUPP-project, which was financed by the Norwegian national fund *Norgesuniversitetet*¹ with a project period stretching from spring 2015 to fall 2016.

Table 8.1 Structure and organisation of peer group work

Part 1	Part 2	Part 3a	Part 3b
Establishing groups in the introductory course – The members get to know one another and select the teaching sessions	Pre-observation meeting – The preparation is based on written memos by each member describing his/her teaching sessions	Observation of teaching – Each group member is visited separately by the others based on the memos and discussions (part 2).	Feedback discussions – Each observed session is discussed immediately after the observation based on part 2 and 3a.

¹ See: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180130150624/https://norgesuniversitetet.no/>

Table 8.2 Overview of the participants, their fields of expertise and affiliation

Participant	Affiliation/field
Andrew: Associate Professor	Music sciences Faculty of mathematics and natural sciences (informatics) Specialisation in music technology, acoustics, sound theory and programming
John: Professor	Medical behavioural sciences, faculty of medicine Specialisation in clinical disciplines and infectious diseases Teaches medical students in both small groups and lectures
Peter: Professor	Political science and health politics, faculty of medicine Teaches mainly in the bachelor's program in health organisation, management and health politics
Kate: associate Professor	Sociology and welfare society, politics and state regulations, faculty of social sciences Teacher, head of the master's-level course in work-life and social affairs

Table 8.3 Overview of the collected data

Observation of peer-group activities	Main data	Background data
Pre-observation meetings	Video recordings (5 h)	Memos, task descriptions, lesson plans
Teaching observation	Video recordings (6 h)	Lesson plans, PowerPoint presentations
Feedback and discussions	Video recordings (5 h)	Lesson plans, written memos
Participants' reflections	Audio recordings (2 h)	Task descriptions, conceptual notions

The current data are based on observations for one particular track in this project focusing on peer-based feedback on teaching. Table 8.3 provides an overview of all the data collected in this part of the KUPP-project.

Our overall analytic approach to this material is based on a thematic analysis with the aim of providing an overview of the corpus (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). With the themes emerging from this thematic analysis, we examine the interviews, which represent the reflective data of the participants immediately following the last session of the peer group meetings. Drawing on a combined analysis of interview examinations and the thematic analysis (Silverman, 2013), we have selected representative samples from the interviews in providing illustrations of how trust is emerging in the micro-social setting of the peer group.

The extracts selected for detailed scrutiny represent incidents on how the participants reflect on their participation. Our take on this material is how these reflections mirror how trust unfolds in this social constellation. To illustrate this, we follow two themes that have emerged in the thematic analysis – on the one hand, what appears as premises for trusting one another, and, on the other hand, how this trust is enacted during the group sessions. It needs to be noted that these themes are not mutually

exclusive and therefore overlap in several occasions. We still consider these thematic categories as a productive distinction between conditions for and the enactment of trust.

Some additional notes on our analysis are required. The primary focus of this study is how trust emerges in close collegial constellations. A primary tool for our inquiry is an in-depth analysis of large amounts of data, in which we systematically search for indications of trust. An important premise in this analysis is that the informants rarely address trust explicitly (Riva et al., 2014; Markova et al., 2007). The identification of indications of trust is therefore not based on fixed meanings but on cues. These cues are typically marked by the willingness to expose oneself, the reliance on peers not exploiting this exposure and confidence in peers' willingness to invest effort in productive contributions to their peers in the groups. Looking for these cues of trust and making assumptions about their significance will therefore frequently appear in the analysis presented below.

Empirical Analysis Based on Participant Reflections of Peer Group Participation

In the analysis below, we will present the main results from our more extensive analysis of the material collected through longitudinal observations. We will discuss the above mentioned two themes, where the first theme (i.e. what appears as premises for trusting one another), relates to what we, in our thematic analysis, have discovered to be an important starting point for the participants' trust in one another as university colleagues.

Premises for Trust in the Peer Group

We will examine data showing what we consider as presuppositions for the trust created in the group. This is revealed in several ways in the participants' interview data. An interesting pattern that emerges from these data is how the participants describe the respect they experience in relation to their colleagues. This is addressed in Kate's statement below:

Kate: “(It) has been inspiring; it is, in a way, fun to see that you are at a workplace where people are engaged in so many different things and that there are so many competent people that work here. And I had a very nice peer group that gave me a lot of positive energy. So I think this simply was very enjoyable.”

In this extract, Kate both emphasises the diversity in her colleagues' affiliation, as well as displays her respect for her colleagues' competencies as experts in their own fields. This contrasting feature is a basic characteristic of how these peer groups are organised. It also creates an interesting dynamic of mutual respect and a neutral

ground given their distributed institutional attachment. These notions are likewise confirmed by John:

John: "... it has been enjoyable... because it have been completely different special fields. It is, it is rather fun... It is quite enjoyable, yes... to have feedback from these persons that do not look at the academic content. Well, I mean, that are not bound to the special field, but that have focus on how you, how you present the academic content and how you make contact with the audience."

John also emphasises the value of disciplinary diversity. He elaborates this value with reference to not judging the content, but the pedagogy and how this relates to the audience of the teaching. This appears to create a more open and less vulnerable atmosphere for critique, compared with a setting that involves colleagues from the same discipline or community. According to these statements, this disciplinary mixture appears to provide an opportunity to expose oneself.

The question is how this mixture of diversity and respect creates an atmosphere of trust. A plausible assumption is that on the one hand, respect implies that the teachers trust their colleagues to have valuable insights to contribute; on the other hand, their differences in disciplinary expertise simultaneously contributes to the teachers' reduced vulnerability which, in turn, creates greater openness in the group. Nevertheless, the participants clearly express that they still experience this setting as slightly frightening:

Andrew: "... very challenging is the fact that you, in a way, are being pushed out on thin ice... and, I mean, you're pushed out there, and you become exposed to colleagues and not only to students. (...) Yes... perhaps, perhaps... well, challenging is not... I mean challen ... I don't know if challenging is the right word, but it was... well, a bit scarier to give a lecture to a colleague than to a student. Merely (...) Simultaneously, I had plenty of good feedback, and a lot of that was useful, things that I will bring along further."

What Andrew here describes, which is representative for the whole group, is that inviting colleagues clearly makes him more vulnerable compared with just teaching students. The experience of being pushed therefore appears to involve taking a risk, but by allowing this exposure, the professors also open up themselves for very productive feedback. Again, we see this simultaneous relation between exposure and the opportunity, which presupposes trust. These perspectives provided by Andrew are elaborated further by Peter:

Peter: "This really challenges us. The real challenge is there, of course, when people come and watch you in the authentic situation... I mean, in the teaching here. That part is a very important part to include."

As Peter explains, the fact that they are being observed in genuine teaching settings is essential. This means that the group does not discuss abstract notions, but it engages in real performance that shows what the members actually do as teachers. This exposure is considered risky, but it also represents a valuable potential for making feedback count. Peter states this clearly in the next extract:

Peter: "Well, you are being confronted and it makes you more conscious about what you are doing. So, it means that you have to stop and think, you have to reflect on 'OK, how do I do this and why am I doing it?' And there are other things I

actually could, actually could do to become better or to develop the... how can I formulate it, the pedagogical aspects, aspects of teaching, helping students learn.”

In these comments, Peter also notes that his colleagues’ perspectives have challenged him to both see more clearly what he actually does as a teacher and realise what this implies in his role as a teacher. A reasonable supposition drawn from the notions so far is that trust in this group setting is based on the assumption that one’s peers are capable of giving fruitful feedback with the best intentions. It is important to note here that no internal competition exists in these groups, compared with what often is the case in ordinary academic settings.

Whilst this peer group setting appears to open an arena where the participants are willing to take the risk of exposing themselves, the participants still consider this as somewhat challenging. We saw this in Andrew’s description above, but it also resurfaces in an interesting way in Kate’s elaboration below:

Kate: “No, it was, it was challenging in a way, to invite people to the classroom. So, yes, of course, I was nervous the first, the first time. It was, well, as I said, it was exciting both because it was a new subject and new students to me. But it was also exciting to have colleagues that you... don’t know very well in that setting.”

As we see from this extract, Kate, like Andrew, considers this setting slightly stressful. We also see here that Kate, in one sense, opens up by inviting other people to her class, but she also seems to protect herself by lowering her expectations when describing herself as a novel teacher in an untested course. The sense of risk is apparent here, despite the organisational distance and the difference in the areas of expertise of the peer group members.

In summary, what we see from the analysis so far is that not only a combination of respect and difference in areas of expertise, but also the challenge of being observed in genuine settings creates a dynamic of trust, which the participants experience as potentially valuable. The question now is how this space of opportunity is accomplished in practice.

Enactment of Trust

The main aspect we observe in this part of the analysis is how the participants approach one another when observing and giving feedback on their teaching. The data we draw on here are still mainly based on the interviews, but to a limited extent we also draw on observations to illustrate how trust is handled in the group. We first start with Kate and how she describes her experience of receiving feedback:

Kate: “I believe that we were rather considerate with one another. It was a lot of positive feedback. But also a few things that they grasped, that will be useful to take hold of. That I can... yes, perhaps not so much critique, but somehow more of how to see things from the outside. It was peculiar to listen to how they explained that I gradually thawed up. In the beginning, I was a bit nervous... and then I got up the steam. Well, that kind of thing is a bit interesting to hear actually. Because you seldom see yourself from the outside... that way.”

Kate emphasises that her peers were being thoughtful in the way they gave their input but that they were still able to address aspects in her teaching that could be improved. This indicated a respectful relation, in which the teachers approached one another with caution or even avoided a direct critique. This was partially achieved by mirroring descriptions and elaborating accounts of the teaching. Simultaneously, a range of episodes in our data reveals how this attentiveness is being enacted. The following extract from our observational data illustrates a particular incident of this sort:

Peter: “(You can) give a theme to your students, let them know that ‘This is what we will be discussing next lecture, and I will ask questions randomly; I will let each one give a two-minute presentation of the theme’. But it is a bit pushy, though, to make them read and prepare themselves.”

Kate: “Mmm.”

Peter: “But, then, it means that everyone is, well, everyone risks to be asked.”

Kate: “Mmm.”

Peter: “But it can, I mean, I have never tried it myself, but...”

Kate: “No, but...”

Peter: “... This is something I have wanted to try myself in seminars.”

Kate: “But it might tip over, so that people... well, if they don’t manage to prepare themselves, they might not dare show up in the lecture.”

The above excerpt displays first how Peter responds to a previous invitation by Kate to develop her teaching in a student-engaging way. This invitation has set off a string of suggestions on how to accomplish the suggestion. At the end of the excerpt, we see how Kate respectfully rejects this because of what she fears as a negative consequence of the proposal. In the following parts of this conversation, Peter respects this demarcation by not pursuing his idea further. This mutual respect and attentiveness are seen in numerous incidents in our material. It indicates that the peers in the group have developed a form of interaction, which allows them to regulate the theme of the discussion in their own teaching. The productiveness of this dialogic form in the group is underlined by all members, as illustrated by Peter in the following:

Peter: “I believe that there could have been even more of this type of group work. Because there, you, well, that is where you really get the greatest opportunities to exchange experiences and to try out thoughts. And you can listen to others that try out their thoughts (...) Exactly this, this interplay between colleagues and the opportunity to share experiences... and to have these discussions...”

As we also saw in the conversational excerpt, testing out thoughts and ideas but retaining full independence to follow up on these within one’s own context and by one’s own choice safeguards the autonomy of all members of the group. Peter also underlines that this way of discussing teaching could be implemented on a wider basis. However, emphasising that this dialogic form is fundamentally based on trust is vital. This is both rooted in the teachers’ willingness to open up their teaching and the respect they show in the dialogue, which appear to be essential elements that constitute the level of trust in this peer group.

The above notion also relates to the respect shown by the participants when engaging in this group work. Because participating in the peer groups is compulsory, an important premise for this participation is not to compel the teachers to follow a specific spectrum of 'correct' teaching methods. Rather, the point is to let them explore and reflect openly on their teaching and to receive mirroring perspectives from thoughtful peers. This relatively open framework for peer review teaching appears to be productive for these purposes. The approach is in itself based on the trust that the participants are capable of efficiently handling this setting on their own, a point, which is well described by John:

John: "What I think has been of importance and that I have learned is that you are not supposed to... you are not going to play a role that differs a lot from who you really are. I believe that it is of importance in a teaching situation, that you dare be yourself. (...). You can use different measures, but it is you as a person that attends to the situation. And I, well, I liked the way this was organised. The arrangement highlighted that we, as participants, should not be pressured into ways of acting that felt affected."

A final remark in this second part of our analysis is that the enactment of trust in this setting is partially ingrained in an open and exploratory procedural framework, a relational respect between competent colleagues and a dialogic form, which allows the participants to maintain autonomy and ownership of their own teaching practices.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the discussion of our results, we consider it relevant to revisit the introductory part of the chapter and the research questions posed. In the introduction, we underlined that relational trust in social groups is not based on clear-cut norms and easily available labels. This is clearly also the case in our studied peer group setting. What is important to understand, though, are the value and significance of trust in how such constellations are created and maintained. This kind of relational trust is assumed to be something that we deeply depend on in order to function well in complex modern societies and professional institutions where personal closeness and familiarity are often an exception rather than the rule. This means that we need to trust colleagues although we are often unfamiliar with them. This is especially important in higher education in which we are completely dependent on colleagues trusting one another by virtue of their formal positions and professional roles. Formal obligations here are not assumed as the only premise for trusting one another. We constantly need to actively build trust in the relations we have with other people.

The first research question addressed in this chapter, which concerns the premises that can be identified as crucial for how trust is constituted in faculty-based peer groups, can provide a peek into this relational realm. Drawing on our findings from the underlying study, we see that this relational trust is embedded in the

development of personal relationships in which we depend on one another. This dependence, at a certain point, is unquestioned or taken for granted because the participants have faith in one another's competence and ability to understand what counts as productive. It also rests on a basic assumption that the participants can feel safe in this environment and that they mean well with the perspectives they contribute.

In re-addressing our second research question concerning how trust is enacted in the group, we simultaneously see a restless feature in that the participants constantly negotiate implicitly about trust. In this perspective, not only is trust made visible through interactions that represent vulnerability, as well as through open opportunities for supporting contributions from colleagues, but it also allows maneuvering away from or around less-relevant themes or issues that are also considered challenging. This relational integrity appears to be vital both in establishing and in maintaining trust.

In this sense, the analysis can provide an explanatory confirmation of how trust-based group expectations, norms and relational stability are established. In the theoretical section, we established this as a conceptual grounding of cooperative settings relevant to our study of peer groups. Our analytic approach to this relational basis of trust and how it is achieved through interactions is an interesting perspective, which we would expect to be more thoroughly explored in educational research. This counts both for collegial relations and the relation between teachers and students in higher education. The former perspective might prove important in the timely pressures on productivity and quality assurance, which, in many respects, directly undermine trust not only from an organisational perspective but also between colleagues. The latter focus on students might provide us with more insights into establishing trust, which is supportive to student learning, without diminishing the confidence we need to have in higher education teachers.

A concluding remark in this regard is vividly illustrated in the trust emerging from the group observed in this study. An efficient removal of basic trust in this setting would mean replacing the reliance on the willingness to support one another with formal measures of quality control. In this sense, the value of trust both reaches beyond corporate control and presupposes institutional success. As a final concluding remark, we would also like to mention a limitation in our own study, as we realise the fine line between respect and fear of criticising colleagues because they might be offended. At this point, we suggest more research based on thorough interactional analyses to reveal these complexities.

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