

Season 2, Episode 5: Values (Part 2: Trust, in others and in ourselves)

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Welcome to the Exploring the Core Podcast. I'm your host, Greg Mullen.

In this fifth episode, I continue my exploration of Values with a focus on Trust - as a Value - and I want to know whether more trust in a teacher-student relationship will result in more learning... more on that later because I want to quickly revisit what values are, because it isn't one single behavior that defines a value; instead, a value represents an ideal, they give us a way to reflect, not only on our behaviors, but our expectations for behaviors, in different contexts and situations. I share in the last episode how responsibility looks at different behaviors focused on ownership and accountability - we want people to take care of their things, to keep shared spaces neat and organized, and, for students, to take ownership and be held accountable for their own learning. I also share about Respect as a value, looking at behaviors that have to do with authority and self-worth - we want people to recognize their self-worth in context of a relationship's balance of authority, and how much we're willing to let one person make decisions for another person. And today, as I look at the value of Trust, I want to point out that trust isn't as easy to see like it is with respect and responsibility - we can see someone act irresponsibly, we can see a person act disrespectfully, but distrustful behaviors are not always easy to observe.

This is because Trust in a person is a belief we form in our minds when we see in someone three things: competence, reliability, and care. To trust someone is to recognize that they know what they're talking about (that's competence), that we can rely on them in both their words and their actions (that's reliability), and that their words and actions reflect an interest in what we think and do (that's caring). Now, we don't need all three things to have trust. A student might trust their teacher for their academic competence, and trust that they'll show up to the classroom every day, but maybe they don't trust them enough to approach their teacher with challenges, academic or otherwise; and maybe they don't have to - that degree of trust may be enough for that student to learn in that teacher. But would more trust result in more learning? Well, that's where I want to start exploring this core Value of trust in a learning environment.

And to help explore this value, I'll be sharing insights from two amazing individuals each with their own unique perspective on trust and learning. The first is Doug Thompson, a graduate student in pursuit of a medical degree, but also a physical therapist's assistant as well as an assistant coach at his local high school, where trust plays a big role in the kinds of relationships he develops. Then in the second half of this episode I introduce Allison Dillard, author and host of the podcast Allison Loves Math, and a community college math professor, where she teaches remedial math courses for students who did graduate from high school, but aren't quite ready for community college level math

courses, and she has some interesting thoughts on trust and learning. So stick around as we explore this core value of Trust, as one more layer to this larger season-long exploration of who we are, and how we learn.

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Doug Thompson has a wide range of experience coaching and assisting people in learning about themselves and their capacity to succeed. Not only has Doug spent years coaching high school football, he's spent years as a physical therapist aid, and is now studying in the Azusa Pacific Doctor of Physical Therapy program, with a focus on orthopedics. I talk to him about his experiences growing up and the role this value, Trust, has played in his life. Specifically, I ask him about his thoughts on this value's three aspects: competency, reliability, and caring.

DOUG: "So, start at the beginning, competency - do I know what I'm talking about. That's the bare minimum you expect out of your doctor. Do they know what they're talking about. That one's pretty self-explanatory because, even if I didn't care about how much I liked the doctor, if he didn't know what he was doing I would not go back to him. The reliability aspect - fortunately, in the physical therapy world, we see our patients relatively frequently; anywhere from once a day to once a month to maybe a couple of times a year, depending. Typically, it'll be anywhere from a couple of times a week to every other week is the typical range you'll see in a lot of physical therapy settings. Being in that setting, you're reliable just on the fact that, "hey, every day you come in, I'll be here to help you." So as long as they continuously see your face and you continually preach that message, they understand that reliability. The last one, caring, in physical therapy - it has 'therapist' built into its title, so you sit down and turn in to an actual therapist at times because you're one of the few medical professionals that people go FOR an extended period of time and OVER an extended period of time. Say I get thirty minutes with you, three times a week. That's the most you've seen your medical doctor in a year. I build that different repertoire so, I've always done my best in that setting to remember names - and I always struggle with that, too, and then from there, build off of some small relationship factor, whether it's a sports team, whether it's a child, whether it's a shared personal experience. I find something, for me, that I share with my patient so that way I can empathize with them a little bit more and create a relationship that, at the end of the day, I'm here for you. When you build that kind of trust from your patient, the buy-in is exponential. That's the biggest thing with physical therapy, how much is your patient going to buy-in to what you have to say."

GREG: "Do you think this applies to your experiences as a football coach's assistant?"

DOUG: "Oh, absolutely. Big thing is, again, competency. Hey, I know what I'm talking about. That's the bare minimum. I've had coaches in my past that didn't know what they were talking about and I never listened to them. Then you get the reliability; after the

seven years I coached, I can count on two hands the number of practices I missed. That's big for kids to see that kind of reliability of, 'hey, every day I'm going to be here and I'm going to preach the same message to you every day; I might not have the same mood, I might have had a bad day and you might feel the brunt of that a little bit, but at the end of the day, I'm here for you'. Then that third thing with caring, if you really get to know a kid, and it's tough because a lot of kids don't want to open up to you, and I've had that where I've tried to - there are very clearly issues going on with the kid either at home or at school and you try to get them to open up and they just won't. But, just simply being there for that kid is huge because, a lot of times if I know a kid's got something going on, I give them my cell number and like, 'hey, if you ever need anything, shoot me a text, I'm there for ya'. If they know you're there for them, they're going to buy into what you have to say. Like you said, just building that trust, is how you get the best out of people, because then you get a mutual relationship to want to do well for each other."

GREG: Part of my conversation with Doug explored where this perspective towards Trust comes from, as a physical therapist, whether it developed coaching football, or if it stems from something earlier as a student growing up. One of the things that fascinates me about Doug's perspective is that we know we want patients to trust their doctors, we want football players to trust their coaches, we want students to trust their teachers, but, and I ask Doug about this, is there something about his growing up that led him to this understanding - did he always have this confidence in himself to put trust in others and know how to build trust at an early age?

DOUG: "For me, growing up, when I was in middle school, early high school, my confidence levels were very low. I had pretty low self-esteem, I knew I was smart but that's about it. I didn't have a ton of confidence in anything else and once I understood, 'oh, I'm really good at something', and I really started to share that, it helped my confidence levels rise and it helped me in other areas as well. A lot of times you'll have these kids who are afraid of failing, essentially, so they're not putting forward the effort that they necessarily need to, now if you give them the confidence to be able to teach this subject again by themselves, not only is it going to strengthen their understanding of it, but it's also going to open them up to be willing to ask more questions and learn better as well."

GREG: Something Doug hits on here really piqued my interest because what I heard was how it wasn't any one person who built this perspective toward trust in him, but that he somehow built this perspective toward trust in himself. When we think of relationships, we think them in pairs: parent-child, teacher-student, doctor-patient, but how often do we think of these three components of competence, reliability, and caring, in context of the relationship you build with yourself. I explored this idea with Doug by asking him whether his idea - expecting students to teach a topic, to strengthen their understanding which opens them up to ask more questions and learn more - whether

this applies only when a student is already interested in it, or if he thinks this applies to topics they might not be interested in and are being coerced into learning.

DOUG: “I think it helps create an interest, uh, because everybody likes the things they’re good at, at the end of the day. There’s a reason why athletic kids love sports. There’s a reason why gifted musical kids love music, and a lot of times that doesn’t interact. So if you create the confidence in something that you’re good at something, I feel like that, in the long run, is going to help kids create an interest because ‘I like what I’m good at’, so let’s create these systems where kids can create their own desires through their own confidence, essentially.”

GREG: My conversation with Doug branched into a variety of fascinating topics but, in context of Trust as a value, I was fascinated by the idea that we could build trust in ourselves by focusing on our interests - which is a big part of the self-directed learning side of the coin. It got me thinking how educators in a traditional schooling system might be able to create this kind of environment that promotes this level of trust, not just in the teacher-student relationship, but in the students’ relationship with their own competence, their own reliability, their own capacity to care for themselves.

This brings me to a different side of this idea of Trust as a value; and remember, a Value is an ideal, a way to reflect on behaviors in different contexts and situations, where Trust as a value is a belief when we see in someone, even ourselves, these three things: competence, reliability, and care. If we do not believe ourselves to be competent, if we can’t *rely* on ourselves, if we do not take the time to *care* about our own words and actions, what kind of anxiety does this create and what might this kind of anxiety look like, say, in high school graduates who are surprised to have to enroll in remedial math classes at their community college.

And that’s where I want to introduce Allison Dillard, a community college professor who sees this kind of anxiety in the high school graduates who show up to her community college classes, and who have a particular mindset about their own learning.

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Allison Dillard is a community college math professor at Irvine Valley College, in Irvine, California. Allison has taught classes that specifically address students who have had to enroll in remedial and co-requisite entry-level math courses, and she has a pretty good idea of the kind of anxiety towards learning that can develop in students, which I’ll let her describe.

ALLISON: “So my perspective from Irvine Valley College is that I teach more of the remedial math classes, so for example I taught college algebra in the Spring, it’s a transfer level math class, it transfers to any of the four-year colleges, but I was teaching

it with what they call co-requisite support which means that, technically, the students who were in the class didn't have the grades to qualify for that class so they give us the extra two units on the side to learn the prerequisite skills that they need for that class. So, I was working with students who were not necessarily prepared for the college level math classes, so I'll just preface what I'm saying by saying that those are the students that I'm working with, which is a different group of students who are just placed immediately into calculus and are prepared for it, and they go on to take calculus two and three - that's a different set of students who are at the community college. What I found was that I have students with math anxiety, I have a lot of students who didn't have strong math foundations, and a lot of students who, honestly, didn't like math, didn't want to learn math, and just wanted to be told this is what I do, just tell me exactly how I do it so I don't have to think about it and I can just regurgitate things and pass I'd be really happy. So, good students whose hearts are in the right place and want to do well, and want to succeed, but that would probably be the best description of the students who were placed into the classes that had remedial math support."

GREG: With a better sense of the kind of students Allison was teaching, it isn't too difficult to connect this to the conversation about this value of trust, and the kind of anxiety that can develop in students if this trust isn't developed, not just in the teacher-student relationship and the trust that develops there, but in the students' relationship and trust in themselves, because - and I'm excited to talk about this - one of the things Allison has started doing this past year is hosting her own podcast, called Allison Loves Math, where she speaks to all kinds of different professionals related to education; one of those professionals being Maria Ryan who holds a Ph.D. in Education with a focus on math anxiety, and so I asked Allison about what she took away from their conversation.

ALLISON: "So I was talking to her the other day about her work and stuff and so I think she's working on a paper now that's talking about how identifying the root cause of math anxiety can help students to overcome it. It was something we talked about on the podcast episode, and I looked, and she's writing a paper about it, doing research, talking to other people about it, but I think that was something that was just very interesting because so often students just have math anxiety, they think that they're bad at math, and some students are just brilliant at it, and some aren't, and they're just one of - it's almost like they think it's magic - like in Harry Potter, Harry Potter's got the magic and the rest of us are just regular people. But, I think when you identify that experience, that teacher who said you were bad at math, or maybe it was a parent, or a friend, or it was just a really bad test that you just never recovered from, whatever that experience was, it just started you down that path of math anxiety. Once you recognize it, you sort of realize that it's not who you are. You're not necessarily defined as a person who has math anxiety and it'll never go away; it helps you to realize that, 'you know what, there was this experience that may have shaped who I am right now, but I can overcome that'. And, of course, in different experiences, and different conversations, and

interactions from different people can all change that by doing different things. That was something that I thought was really interesting because I've already had so many conversations with students about that over the years, and never realized that was something that was being researched; that's a game changer for students with math anxiety."

GREG: As our conversation headed in this direction of students with anxiety toward math and towards school, I want to pause to make this connection that, when we don't believe we have competence in something, we do not trust ourselves as much as we might be able to, and, as Doug mentioned earlier in this episode, that trust in our own competence creates interest. I wanted to know more about Allison's approach to teaching, given her awareness of this value of Trust that's involved in teaching and learning; I asked about her thoughts on whether she believes her approach toward building this trust was something that was intentional, or intuitive, in her teaching.

ALLISON: "My background before I was a math teacher, I was a math tutor so I started tutoring in high school, it was my part time job in college. After college, I did it for years and I think it was really helpful, in that sense, when it comes to math anxiety and all of this mindset stuff because, as a math tutor, I was always working students who were struggling in math - obviously, that's why they needed a math tutor - and I found that it didn't matter how you explain a concept to a student. If they're in the wrong mindset, it just goes right over their heads, they just ignore everything that you do, they literally block it out and just [say] 'I can't understand it'. But if they're in the right mindset, honestly, you can do a crappier job of explaining a math concept and they'll get it. So, it was really weird because I had these years of math tutoring which ultimately was just me working one-on-one with students with their mindsets; honestly, I think back, and I think that was the biggest thing that helped so many of my students. All of the parents that I worked with were like, 'oh you're so good at explaining math, and I was just, you know, in retrospect, 'no, I just got your kid to believe that they were able to do it, and the rest just took off from there'. That was a huge challenge for me when I moved into teaching was because I was so used to being able to have this positive effect, one-on-one, and then all of sudden you're in a classroom with thirty, forty students, my biggest class had seventy-five students, and it's very hard to have that - do the same thing in a large class. So, then once I started teaching, basically, that's what I started experimenting with, was, well, how do I take what I was doing one-on-one and do that for forty students, instead of for just one student - it's a challenge, but at the same time it's cool, I could do that! I can impact so many more students than back when I was tutoring! [Greg: "I'm on the edge of my seat wondering what you did to figure it out!"] No, I'm still figuring it out! Like anything, it's a constant challenge, but I think that, oh, all of the stuff that we're talking about, it's just little things that, and I've interviewed other teachers that are doing a great job at it, on my podcast, I interviewed Dennis Sheeran who wrote 'Instantly Relevant', so he wrote an entire book on how to make math relevant for students and how that engages them and gets them going and learning

math, as long as you can find that way to get them to be interested in it. I actually interviewed the head of my math department at my school because, honestly, he's somebody who has, you know, all of the math classes will be open and he has a wait list of like seventy students for his classes, so I was like, 'I need to find out what you're doing', you know? He was talking just about he gets students, his students understand that he cares. He cares about their success. It's not a student-teacher relationship, it's a 'we're all on the same team trying to figure this hard stuff out', you know? It's flipping that sort of student-professor relationship around, so students know their in this safe place where they can ask questions where their teacher's not against them but working with them. There's just so many different little things..."

GREG: With everything Allison has done in her tutoring, in her teaching at the community college level, and with everything she's learning from others through her podcast, it got me thinking about how students connect with Allison, how they develop that respect, that responsibility and ownership for their learning, and how that trust between her and her students translated to the next class with the next teacher; I was curious about her thoughts on how a school might help students to not rely solely on this need for this trust in the professor-student relationship, and perhaps focus the students' attention on what they themselves can control, to build that trust in themselves, in case the professor-student relationship just isn't there for a particular student.

ALLISON: "I think that's such an important question because I did find that early on, I was really focused on getting students to be successful in my class, right? So I did all of these things, I got them to like math, I got them to have that growth mindset, to feel encouraged and motivated and all that stuff; then I had a student come back and say, 'oh you know what, I dropped out of the next level of math, but now I'm going to take it with you so it'll be okay, because the other teacher, he just, he wasn't good, he wasn't interesting, he was too hard' and I was like, 'Oh! That was not my goal'. That was *not* my goal. And so I do really focus on, basically, what your question is - how, obviously, step one is to get them through your own class, right? But if you're not setting them up for success in the next class, you're doing them a disservice."

GREG: This focus on developing a student's trust in themselves, to develop that sense of competence, of reliability, of caring, that this role of the teacher is not strictly academic-focused, that our role is to identify, assess, and engage students to develop their own sense of values toward the opportunities for learning teachers are offering - their authority as a learner, their ownership of their learning, and their trust in themselves. The way we talk about education often sees these aspects of the classroom as a separate course of study, or a thirty-minute twice-a-week scheduled lesson on social and emotional competencies, but what I get from this conversation with Allison is that our role as educators is not just to instruct academics with a side of social awareness and emotional intelligence. Our role as educators is to help students learn

how to learn, and not just about academics but how to learn about themselves in order to improve their capacity for learning academic topics, at any age. I ask Allison about this kind of growth mindset aspect of teaching and learning, and about her thoughts on our role as educators, the beliefs we tell ourselves, how we often see ourselves as math teachers and not psychologists.

ALLISON: “But isn’t that one of the hardest things about math education, though, is that anybody who’s teaching math, our background, our area of expertise is math. None of the psychology stuff, which is so incredibly helpful for students to succeed in math, none of that is actually taught to us in school; no, I take that back, that could just be me coming from the Masters in Math where it was strictly math, but if you have a Masters in Education, hopefully there’s a lot more of that, but, for someone like me at a community college, where I come from just a straight math background, I’ve never taken a class on any of that psychology and mindset stuff that is so helpful for math.”

GREG: There was one more question I had about this idea, with regards to building in students this sense of trust in themselves, and it’s how there seems to be this consistent obstacle in the way of getting teachers and students to see this value as something they can work toward. I mention to Allison that, since we as humans, as students, we are not machines, and we know that there’s so much material in any one course, so with everything else going on in our lives, it’s reasonable to acknowledge how hard it is to have a hundred percent mastery of every single concept, with retention, for every student in any classroom. Managing this expectation for self-competency is important and is a very difficult thing to discuss, how, at the end of a course, we might reasonably expect that most students are going to get most of the material, and that would be considered a success, but then when they go to the next course, with those gaps, that if they go in knowing that those gaps are a reasonable expectation, then, and it’s this that I ask Allison about, if the students know what the gaps are, so when they go to the next course, and they know that those gaps are partly responsible for the challenge they’ll face in the next more complex course at her college, is there anything that can be done to help students with this sense of self-awareness and self-management.

ALLISON: “It probably depends on the student, right? I think some students are more self-aware than others are. I think there are some students who come out of class saying, ‘you know what, I know that really well but I know that I don’t know this other stuff very well’; and I think there are other students who go, ‘you know what, I passed, therefore I must be good enough and everything’, and I don’t think they necessarily think about things that way. And I think that is something I struggle with, with the students who place in these classes with co-requisite support, you know, that they don’t, I don’t know, I see students who get to college and maybe been passed through all of their math classes, so they’ve passed through them but somehow have managed to not learn very much through four years of math, or through twelve years of K-12, and it’s

hard because they don't know very much and it's because they don't have that self-awareness to recognize that they just, they're not learning certain things. So that's difficult, and it's a hard conversation to have with students when they say, 'but I was always a B math student' and I have to say, 'but you don't know anything that you need for this class - and it's okay! You can learn it, this is a seven unit class, we got those extra two units to learn the stuff that you don't know, so you can, but, you have to recognize that seven unit class is a lot of work and you have to delegate your time appropriately so you can learn those things you need as you need them'. So, yes, that's a hard conversation with students sometimes, but, it's better to be honest, I think, I feel like there are students who are, I don't know, you have to be honest. When they're up against a lot, they need to know what it is so they can do the work necessary."

GREG: When I think of Allison's perspective and insights, in context of this episode's focus on the *Value* of trust, I think, with students who are coming from a high school setting, who maybe had minor learning gaps from elementary school with maybe something like fractions, then in middle school had those gaps widened with ratios and proportionality, and then maybe hitting a wall as they entered high school with slope, geometric functions and statistical analysis, it makes me think about the trust these students have developed in themselves because of that relentless annual schedule of learning, where 60 or 70 percent moves a person through those courses, and each year that 30-40% not learned compounds until they find themselves in Allison's classroom where they realize that their beliefs about their competence in math, their beliefs toward their own reliability to perform consistently well, and the care with which they learn to treat themselves as Allison coaches them not only on the math but on learning how to learn, it makes me think about how often we as teachers assume students are receiving that kind of personalized attention toward this layer of values, of ideals, of expectations for behaviors, and how this system we've created for *academic* success, measuring and enforcing an annual schedule of academic expectations, might need an overhaul that refocuses attention on creating that trust, that respect, that responsibility for both teaching and learning, because we can't forget that teachers are a product of this same system we're talking about. So as we explore this core layer of Values, and think about how it feeds the outer layer, the Elements of a Learning Environment I describe in episode three, we get closer to creating a shared language and a shared understanding of these values and what they mean for us as individuals, for us in our different relationships, and for us in our communities both big and small.

And in the next episode, I explore how we develop the kinds of social and emotional competencies that feed this capacity for addressing the kinds of Values I've shared in this episode and the last. These SEL competencies, such as managing emotions, developing communication skills, and recognizing our value as responsible members of our various communities, this focus on self, social, and societal awareness and management, is a deeper layer in my exploration of who we are and how we learn.

Now as I bring this fifth episode to a close, I want to once again revisit this second season's introductory episode, where I talk about capturing a rainbow. These *Values* are not in themselves an explanation for who we are and how we learn. The topics and all of the people throughout this second season are all part of the environment responsible for the metaphorical rainbow I described in this season's introductory episode. The question to ask is not how this episode answers our questions about who we are and how we learn, but how these ideas connect with the ideas in the other episodes to help you come to a conclusion that's meaningful to you and your community. So I hope you're enjoying this second season of episodes, and I thank you for listening. Talk to you next time.

