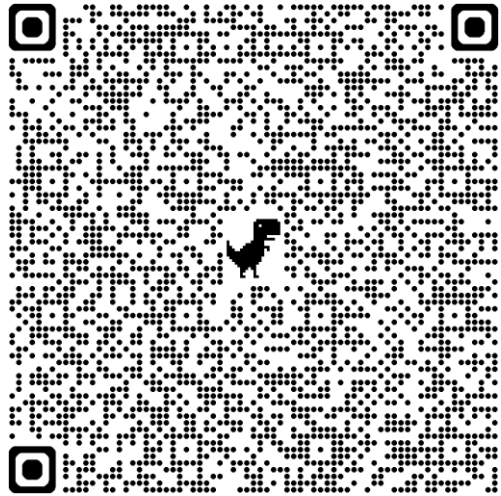




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Slides



Teaching for tomorrow: trust, agency and sustainability in higher education

RACHEL FORSYTH & MIRJAM S. GLESSMER



Liberating Structures: Impromptu Interview

Introduce yourself to your neighbor:

How do you want to participate today, at this conference on teaching for democracy and sustainability?

- What do you want to contribute to this community?
- What do you hope to take away from today?

2 minutes per person!

Who we are



Rachel Forsyth

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What we want to cover today

- Teaching for sustainability and democracy in any subject area
- Trust as a strong basis for learning
- What teachers can do to build trust, and what makes students trust their teachers
- Partnerships as practices of democracy

Teaching

“about”

Sustainability

Subject

“through”

“with”

“in”

“for”



Relationships and democracy

“Democracy asks something of us,” Biesta explains. “It runs against pure self-interest or simply doing whatever we want.” He describes this not as a flaw, but as a “valuable difficulty” that makes living together possible. Education, then, should not aim to remove this difficulty. It should help students recognise why it exists and why it matters.

Biesta (2026), cited by Tashdjian (2026)

Relationships and student learning

Relationships are important in student success (Felten & Lambert, 2020)

Relationships depend on belonging and inclusion (Wilcox et al, 2005)

Trust is an important factor in relationship-building (Cook-Sather et al., 2021)

Trust in classrooms is under-researched (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014)

Trust in the university classroom is...

...students' willingness to take risks based on their judgment that the teacher is committed to student success.”

(Chew & Cerbin, 2021, p. 23)

...the perception that the instructor understands the challenges facing students as they progress through the course, accepts students for who they are, and cares about the educational welfare of students.”

(Cavanagh et al., 2018, p. 2)

Trust in the university classroom is *not...*

...evenly distributed – *significant* variations of student trust in faculty and the institution by race, first-gen status, and family income.

(Fosnacht & Calderone, 2020)

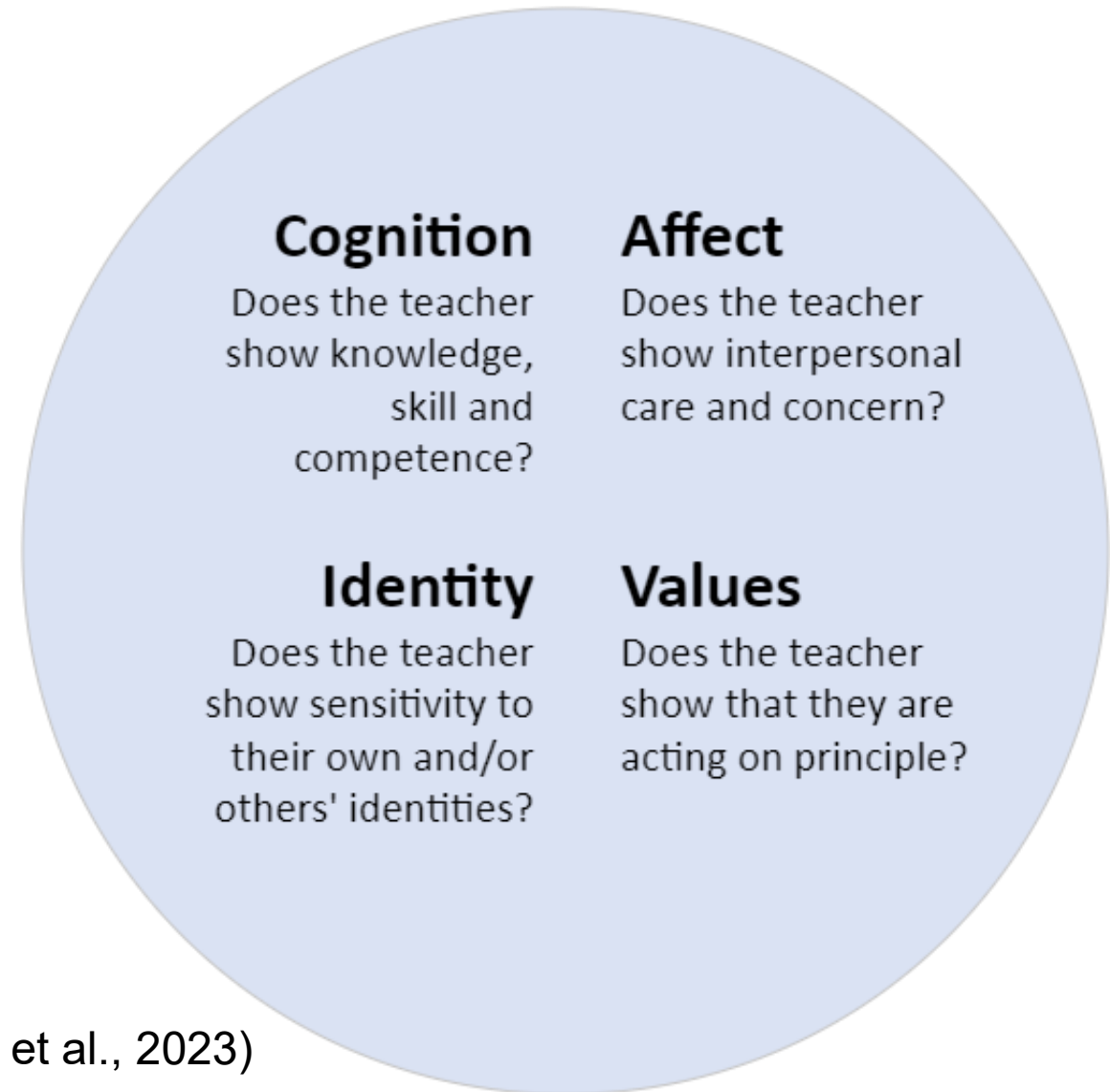
...necessarily high between students – which matters for active learning, seminars, labs, etc.

(Eddy et al., 2015)

What do you do to build trust
in your classroom?

Conceptual model for teacher-initiated trust moves

- International study (4 countries)
- Based on interviews with 29 STEM teachers
- 4 dimensions of trust moves



(based on Felten et al., 2023)

Survey findings: “Think of teachers that you trust. Please give examples of what they do that makes you trust them” (Glessmer, Persson, & Forsyth; 2024)

Frequency of all appearances of dimensions of trust (477 responses to survey in total, 467 to our question (6 "no trust", 12 names of teachers without explanation) => codable answers=449, total number of comments=701)

Affect (299 mentions).

Does the teacher show interpersonal care and concern?

“Know our names, be personal with us...”, “They give a welcoming first impression with a lot of understanding of the students' situation and are easy to deal with when things don't go as planned”

Cognition (289). Does the teacher show knowledge, skill, and competence?

Teaching skill (217) “They answer questions constructively”, “They are understanding of the problems one may have in absorbing the course material” or “Serious and clear lectures and answer questions clearly. Don't just stand and read from a Powerpoint!”

Subject knowledge (72) “Don't make mistakes during lectures, can answer complex questions that smart students ask”

Values (110): Does the teacher show that they are acting on principle?

“They are committed to their work ...” or “Their honesty”

Identity (3): Does the teacher show sensitivity to their own and/or other's identities?

“That they don't value me from how I am personally, for example clothes, dialect etc.”



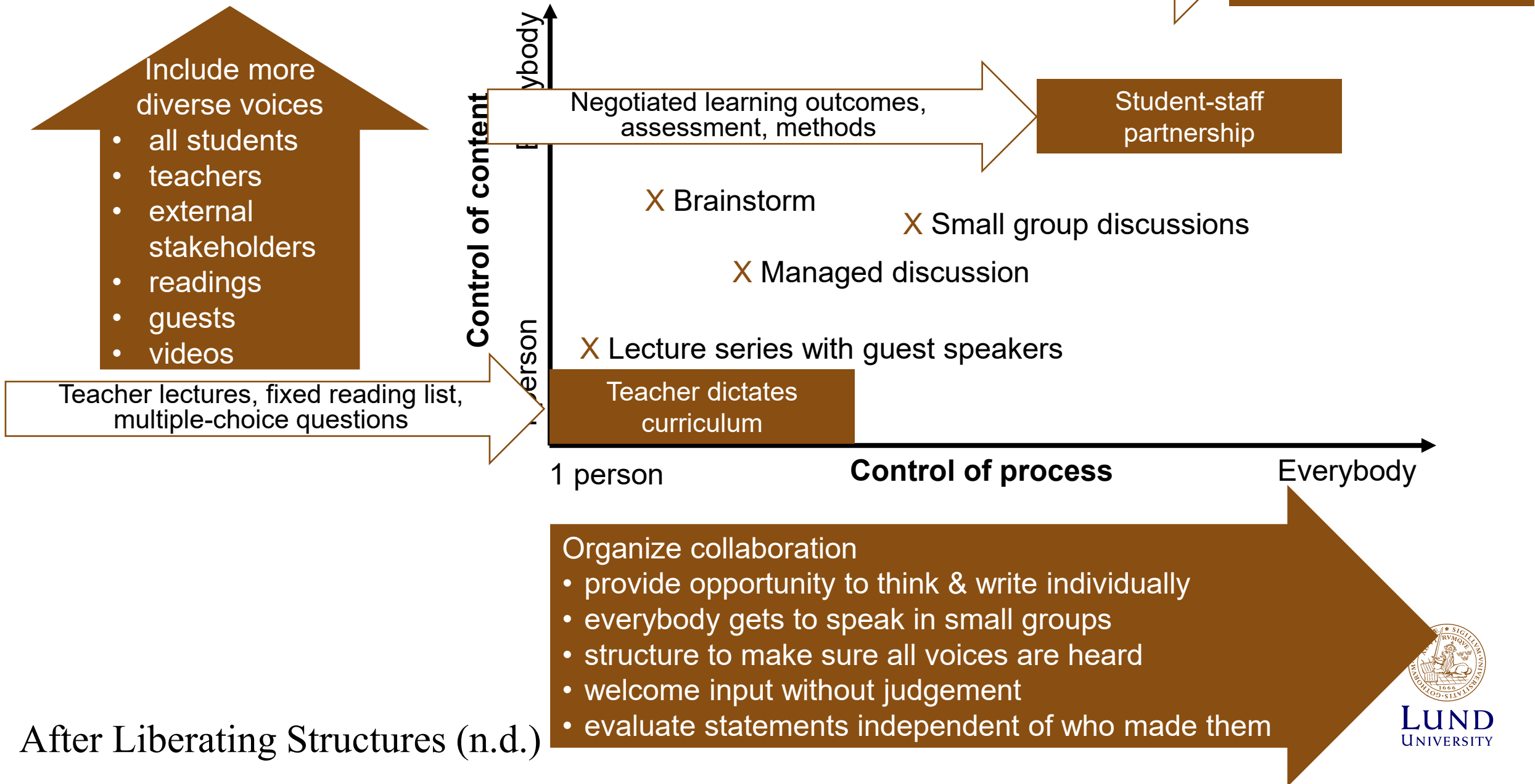
Students said...

“[saying] You need to hand in this, and the point system works in exactly this way. It works this way because this, the students have asked for this and this. That’s trust building. ... Yeah, and providing all the information so it’s clear as day. Okay, that’s super trust building for me, both administrative subject topics and the course material.”

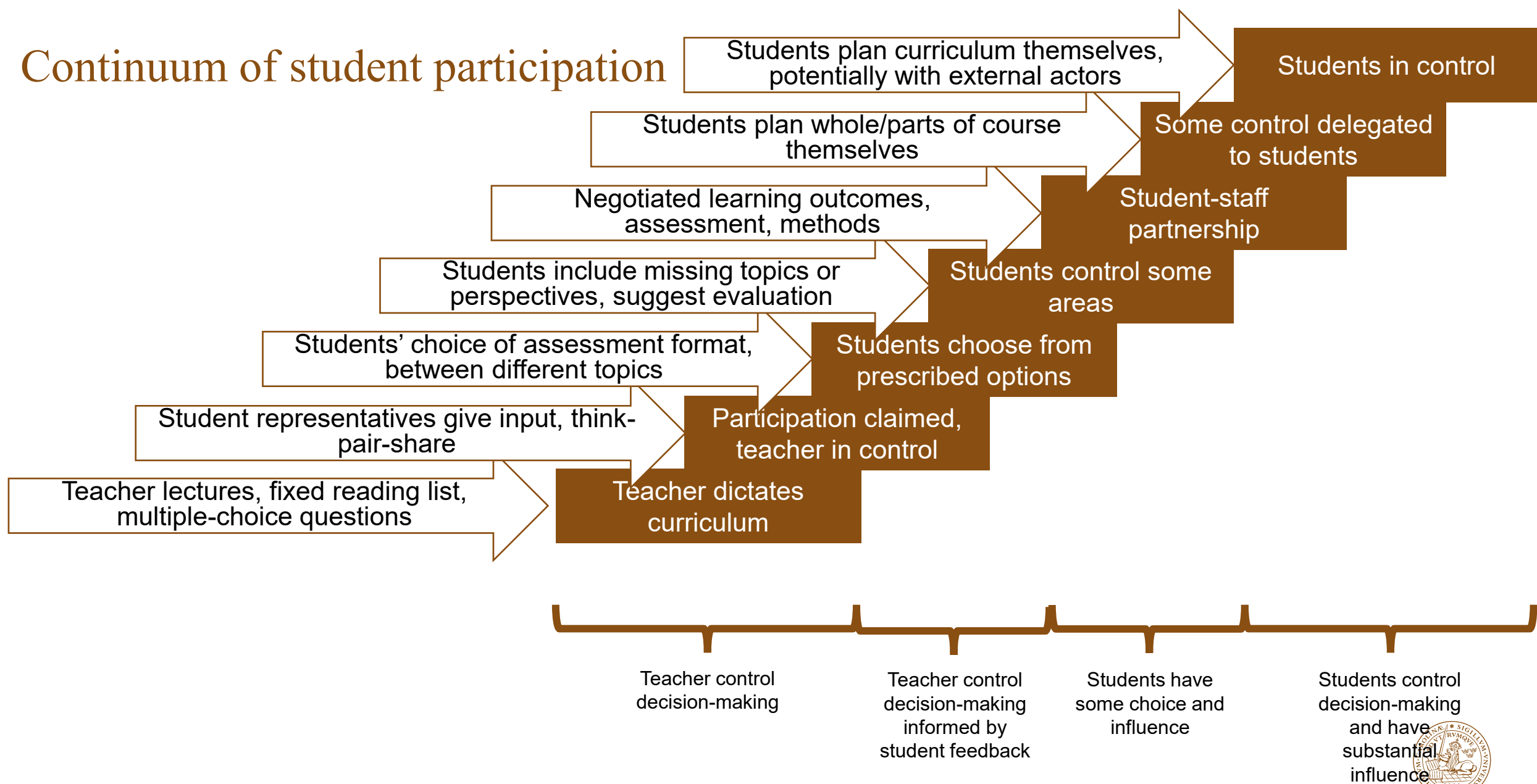
"They actively show that they care about us students by taking into account our opinions and needs."

"Gives everyone a chance to have their say."

Control of content and process in the

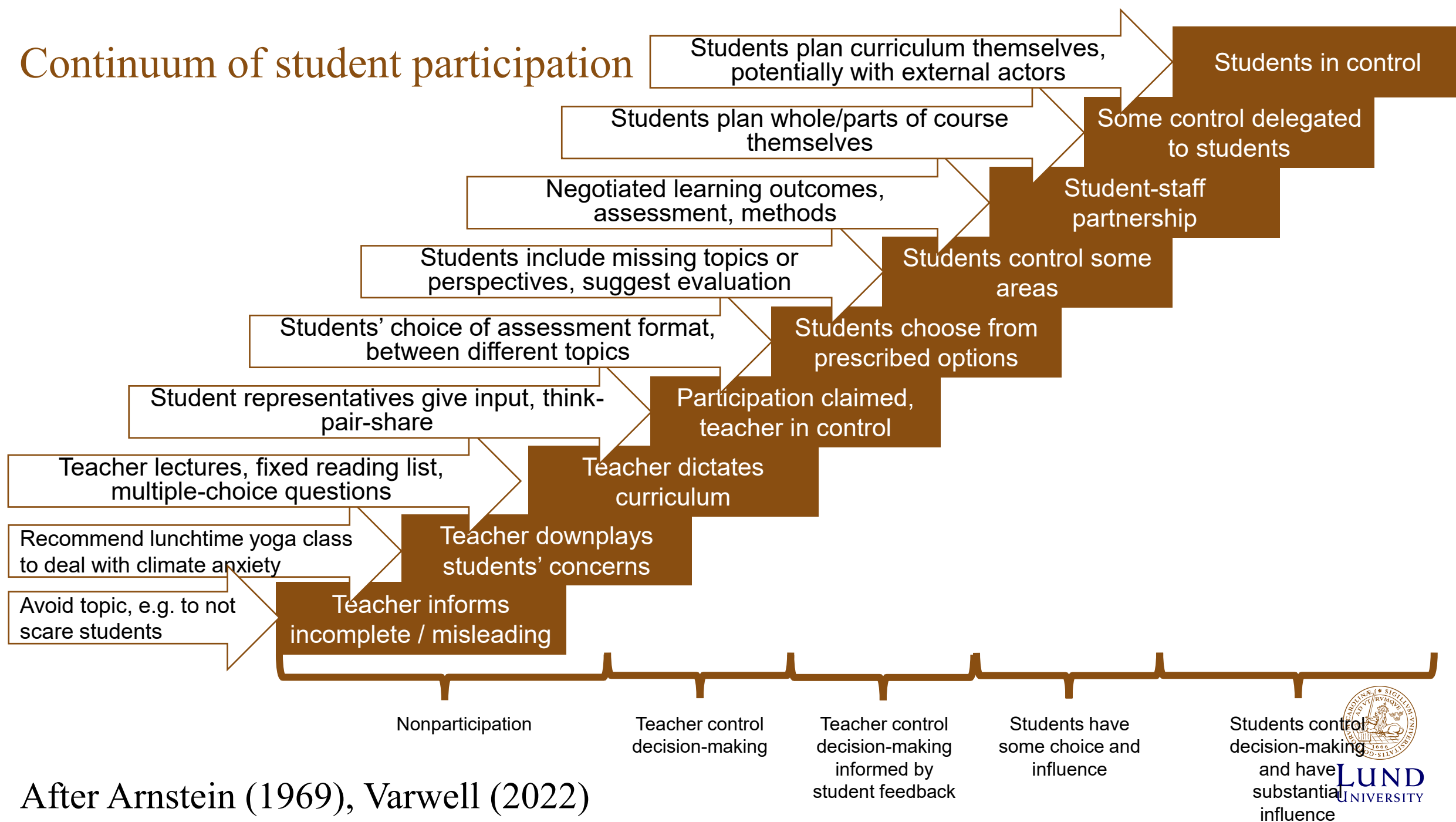


Continuum of student participation

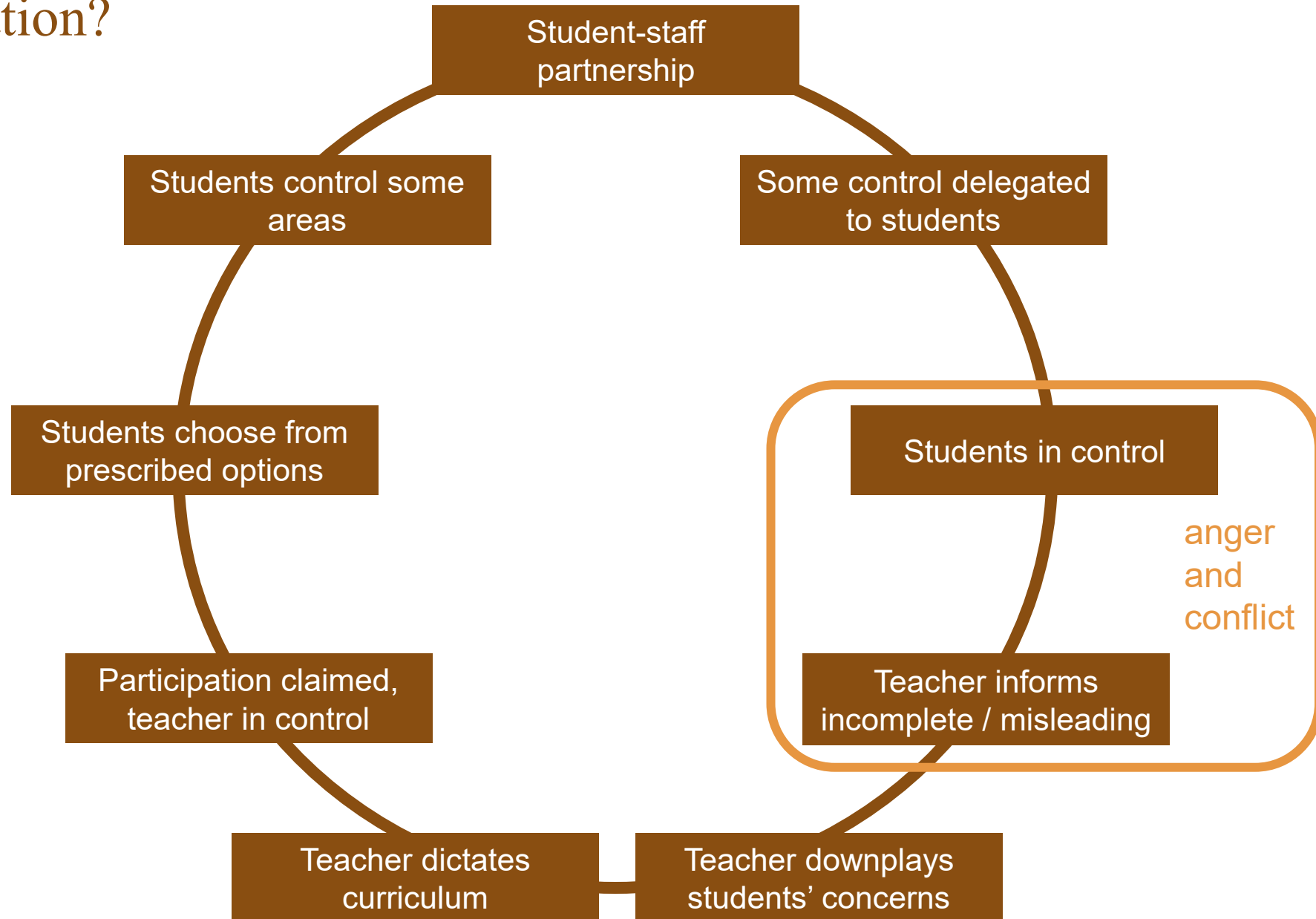


After Bovill & Bulley (2011)

Continuum of student participation



Nonparticipation?

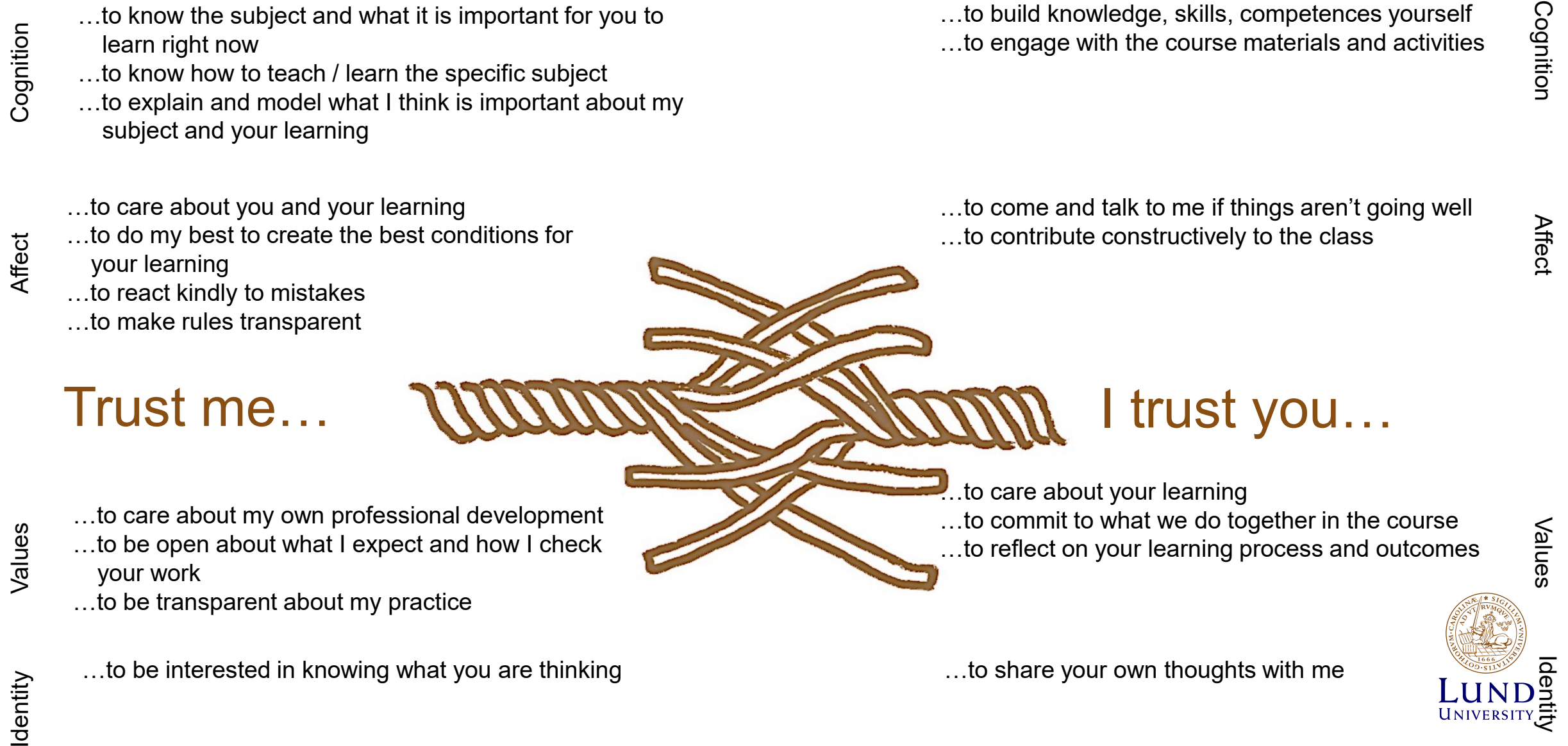


After Varwell (2022)

Current study: What happens with trust in the presence of GenAI?

- 12 semi-structured focus group interviews with teachers (and students, but that data is not used here)
- explores how teachers talk about trust to each other and with students when thinking about GenAI

How teachers build trust with students (in the presence of GenAI)



How is this relevant to GenAI?

“Developments in AI pose profound philosophical, ethical, social, and political challenges to the way we live, work, and learn today. Confronting these will require lengthy and difficult democratic deliberation among an educated citizenry” Sparrow & Flenady (2025).

Thoughts for the rest of the day...

- Educators have a responsibility to consider trust, agency and sustainability, and to model democratic principles, whatever they teach
- This is embedded in normal relationship-building
- But we have to actively build relationships in the classroom, we can't take them for granted

“It is our responsibility as educators not only to impart knowledge but also to inspire and support our students to make a difference.
For if we don't do it, who will?”

Bolander Laksov (2025)

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You are welcome to be in touch!



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Why it is so Difficult to Talk about Sustainability: The Spiral of Silence

- 89% of respondents worldwide (97% China, 85% Sweden, 76% Norway) want their national governments to do more to fight global heating
- 69% are willing to give 1% of their income to fight the climate crisis (81% China, 72% Sweden, 67% Norway) ...
- ...but think only 43% (56% China, 44% Sweden, 42% Norway) would be willing to do the same
(after Andre et al., 2024)

There are political and industrial players who benefit from, and thus artificially create,

- **misinformation**
- **polarization**

Within communities, there is a

- **lack of confidence** to speak about topics without being an expert (and it's a wicked problem)
- perception that fewer people care than actually do ("**silence misperception**")
- **emotional resistance** to engaging with negative messages
- doubts in **who** we should engage, and **when**
- educational system does **not adequately prepare and encourage people** to have conversations about sustainability

Based on Crease, A., & Singhasaneh, N. (2023). *Climate Change Conversations with Children: Making Sustainability Meaningful, Tangible, and Actionable* (Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

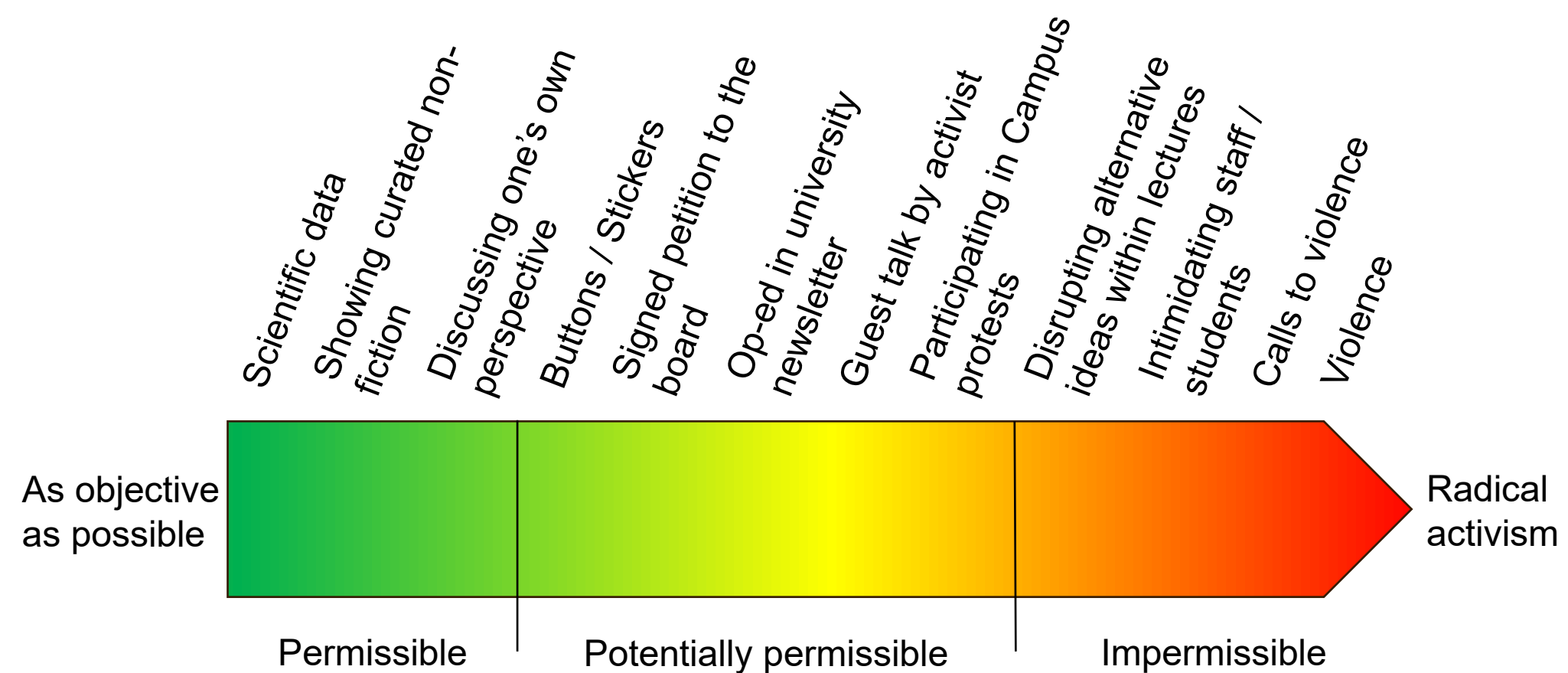
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Permissibility of different forms of academic activism

(redrawn after Nooij et al. 2025)



After: Nooij, J. M., Collin, N. D. H. & van den Berg, F. (2025). “Do not leave your values at the door; the permissibility of activism in the lecture hall”, Higher Education Research & Development, 44:6, 1512-1527, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2025.2514508>

