Why teach “social capital”?

All of our research, and an impressive growing body of research across scores of academic disciplines and lots of countries, indicates that to effectively form active citizens and for citizens to understand the connections between individuals and governmental performance, students need to understand the frame of “social capital.” (In fact the sheer volume of research on “social capital” is one of the fastest growing areas of research in social science and has gone from one or less academic paper on this topic pre-1992, to close to 500 a year today.)

All that the concept of social capital stands for is that social networks (who you know) has value, certainly for the people in these networks, and often for innocent bystanders as well.

Social capital has considerable value to students over their lifetime. For example, your life expectancy and happiness and economic prospects are powerfully connected with one’s social networks (so that people with smaller social networks, controlling for baseline blood chemistry, get sick more, have lower recuperation rates, and lower lifetime expectancy). People’s lifetime earnings are predicted more by who they know rather than what they know (regardless of whether they are North Carolina welfare mothers or corporate CEOs). [Far more information on what social capital is and why it is important can be found in Robert D. Putnam. (2000). *Bowling Alone*. Simon & Schuster.]

And specifically in the realm of active citizenship and government, it is important to know that:

a) one’s likelihood of being an active citizen is strongly influenced by one’s social network, so that people who are involved with groups, or have larger networks, are more likely to vote, more likely to volunteer, more likely to give to charity, etc.

b) mobilization: part of being an active citizen is mobilizing others around shared interests. And it is much more difficult to do so in the absence of social networks of trust of reciprocity. Imagine if in trying to enlist others to change zoning regulations, or sign a petition, or support a candidate, you had to meet people, convince them you are trustworthy and convey information about your cause. This is obviously far more difficult than mobilizing through friendship networks that you already know and who trust you and who can then mobilize others. But in places where social networks are weak, it is much harder to mobilize others through these more effective channels, which is why mobilizing is much more frequent in high social capital environments.

c) There is strong evidence that government itself is more responsive and better performing in places where social networks are strong. [Making Democracy Work by Robert D. Putnam (Princeton University Press,1993) is a book devoted solely to this topic.] The reason for this connection partly relates to governmental leaders being held more accountable in places of stronger inter-connection, partly relates to a culture evolving of trust and reciprocity, and partly relates to more active citizens in these civicly connected places.

For these reasons, it is a big mistake for students not to graduate knowing about social capital. They can use this knowledge as a tool and a lens in: 1) thinking about how to spend their private time; 2) students evaluating their families; 3) helping to shape life choices, careers, and designing or adapting organizations with which students go to work when they graduate.

While we have not seen model curricula developed yet, this could be taught as young as Kindergarten and taught up through high school or college, although the activities, theory, nuances, etc. would obviously vary depending on the age of the students.

Note: Learning to Give (for which I was on the Board) has done some helpful work developing lessons for teachers K to high School to teach about philanthropy and social capital and mapping onto various state standards). [www.learningtogive.org] They have recommended state
standards for Philanthropy (which includes social capital) and a mapping of close cousins of social capital in various state standards; one can access this from their website.

Here are some examples of activities/standards that one might have for different age groups.

**K-2:**
- Trust: maybe learning about trust through stories
- Trust games
  - What determines whether these work or not?
  - How do people decide who to trust?
- Value of human connections (when sick, when need help), parents/family as an example of value of connections
- Identify ways that trust is important in the family, school, and neighborhood.
- Describe a benefit of group cooperation.
- Maybe work on collective projects (e.g., community garden) and use reflection to draw out issues of common good, working together, etc.
- Identify individuals who are important in students' lives, such as parents, grandparents, guardians, and teachers, and give examples of how families cooperate and work together.
- Suggest ways that students' actions can contribute to the common good of the community.
- Have students develop rules for the classroom

**Grades 3-5**
- Cooperative learning in teams and its relationship to social networks
- Examples from history of things being done in interest of common good (barn raising, mutual aid societies, settlement houses, etc.)
- Actions taken to encourage social capital (e.g., volunteer fire departments or colonial militia, etc.) or things done to block social capital (e.g., rules that forbade slaves from socializing or meeting in groups because slave-owners saw power of groups)
- Understanding intersection of environmental progress with social capital (how do we get individuals to take action against self-interest – driving more – to better preserve a shared asset like our ecosystem). When can you rely on individuals to take action; when do you need governmental rules and coercion?
- Historical stories (e.g., Shackleton Antarctic adventure where focus was on collective, not individuals)

**Grades 6-8**
- Different kinds of social capital
  - Strong ties v. weaker ties (what are the differential value of this)
  - Bonding vs. bridging (ties to others like or unlike you) and how do these make a difference
  - Ties built out of fun vs. out of public-purpose
- Issues of the “commons” and collective action
- Game playing (like prisoner’s dilemma)
- Tragedy of the commons
- How to overcome self-interest and role of social capital?
- Social capital measurement: (how do techniques for measuring social ties differ when you are measuring social ties of a very small group, like a workgroup where you can map who knows whom, from when you are measuring the social capital of a whole city; what kind of proxies are there to measure the social connectedness of a community)
  - How is one's family in social capital?
  - Analyzing one's week in terms of social capital
  - Analyzing how diverse one's networks are
Charting improvement or drop in levels of social capital over year (in school, community, etc.)

How would you measure social networks in classroom (where you can survey everyone) versus in city, state or nationwide (where you couldn’t)

Grades 9-12

- How does social capital relate to volunteering?
  - Does all community service lead to more social capital?
  - Or to non-profits?
  - Is there more social capital in non-profits than for-profits?
  - Do non-profits always lead to more social capital?
  - Trust Exercises (see Appendix) - to better understand how trust improves the group performance

- Analyzing some of the evidence of the importance of social ties (relation to good government, public health, crime, happiness, outcomes for children, education, employment, etc.)
  - Making Democracy Work
  - Bowling Alone
  - Stories of political mobilization or social change
  - What is the relationship between governmental action and social capital?
  - Does governmental action increase or reduce social capital and under what conditions?

- Mapping social networks in a school or a classroom
  - Who are the bridgers?
  - What are the social cliques?
  - How do bridgers facilitate entente between cliques and how do cliques inhibit common action (we v. they)?

- Drawbacks of social ties: when are they used to bad ends
  - Privacy – can you have social capital without loss of privacy?
  - Is social capital associated with less tolerance?
  - Harmony/politeness vs. social ties

- Define and provide examples of fundamental principles and values of American political and civic life, including liberty, the common good, justice, equality, tolerance, law and order, rights of individuals, social diversity, civic unity, constitutionalism, popular sovereignty, and representative democracy.

What follows is a bit of explication on what a high school curriculum for teaching social capital might look like. [I welcome comments or ideas for improvement at: tom_sander@harvard.edu, and if you have specific curricula that you’ve developed we’d be grateful if you shared them with us.]

Possible High School Social Capital Curriculum

1. Why is social capital important?
   - i.e., how effective do you think you could be in getting your neighborhood to mobilize around some issue important to you if you didn't know any of them and had to mobilize them quickly?
   - How much harder do you think it would be to get a job if you didn't know many people and could only use the want ads?
   - How well would you fare if you were sick and had no one to check on you?
2. Value of social capital to YOU and to bystanders. Sometimes you benefit from being in the networks (health, jobs, etc.) and sometimes innocent bystanders benefit by others being socially connected (schools work better, government more responsive, less crime, etc.).
   - Why would that be?
     - get people thinking about costs people pay in communities for being dishonest if lots of people know each other vs. if everyone isolated (reputation travels faster in places that are connected) and thus people pay a multi-fold penalty in reputation for being dishonest (for any advantage they gain in the particular transaction).
     - In places where people know and trust one another: people actually are more trustworthy (a higher percentage of wallets are returned intact that are dropped in these communities in experiments) and this makes it easier to transact life’s business
       - And people have more a sense of criminal activity (*eyes on the street*)
       - And government held more accountable.

3. Different dimensions of social capital
   a. social contacts built for fun
   b. social contacts built in service of community change (crimewatch group, or PTA, or...)
   c. strong ties (bosom buddies) vs. weak ties (nodding acquaintances)
     - ask students whether they think these are good for the same things
       - Bosom buddies much better at offering emotional support in tough times, bringing you chicken soup
       - Weaker ties are actually more valuable in job searches (because more likely to connect you to folks you didn't know about already)
       - Even really weak ties can be valuable (e.g., people more likely in elevators to come to aid of stranger having epileptic seizure when the stranger had nodded to the individual beforehand)
   d. Bridging vs. bonding ties
     - Get students to classify their own friendships. List friends and then have columns that list age, sex, race/ethnicity, neighborhood

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<th>Friends</th>
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<td>Name</td>
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</table>

   - Once filled in, have each student go across each row (for each friend) and circle the entry in that column if it is the same as you (for example, that friend is in 5th grade and so are you). So if you are a 10-year old African American boy that lives in Greenwood, your table might look like this.
Example: for 5th grade white boy living in Greenwood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Greenwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Greenwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Greenwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedro</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Greenwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Columbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>6th</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Greenwood</td>
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<tr>
<td>% circled</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>82%</td>
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[Note you can do the same thing with “best friends” or “close confidantes” rather than friends to see how it changes the results.]

- First, see if see how many friends each person lists and you can chart this as a class to see what the averages were, what the variation was from one person to another
  . Ask what criteria students use to judge whether person was a friend; was this the same across students
  . What percent of friends in each column were the same as *you* (see above sample filled out chart)
  . Can graph the class across certain dimensions and see if some people in class are especially good bridgers across certain dimensions (race, gender, neighborhood, religion, etc.) and why they think they are good at this
  . Can see whether almost everyone finds some dimensions easier to build friendships across than others (is it easier across neighborhood than religion, or easier across age than gender). Why? What makes building bridges hard? How can they make it easier?

  . Get students’ opinion about whether bridging and bonding are useful for different things
    - can they think of examples of communities where there are social islands (no friendships between Catholics and Protestants, or folks on the east side and folks on the west side of town, or this ethnic group doesn’t talk to that ethnic group)? What are the results of these cleavages?

- Also interesting for youth to think about whether *friends* they have met on Internet are as valuable as friends they know not over the Internet. Would their Internet-friends (through MySpace, or chat room, or …)
  . Visit you if you are sick
  . Lend you $20 if they needed it
  . Help you find a job
  . How well you know that person

5. Have students engage in hands-on exercises to think about things they could do to make
   . Their community more social capital friendly (more relationships among neighbors or their community)
   . More social capital in their school (either within groups or cliques, or between cliques, or between racial and ethnic groups)

6. Using games (to understand trust, fairness, reciprocity, etc.):

   a) Watching Pay It Forward (dir. by Mimi Leder, 2000) and discussing this as a strategy to build more social capital. Class can also play the Giving Game derived from this movie that enables one to track a growing tree of serial favors performed [www.givinggame.org]
b) The Dictator Game/The Ultimatum Game: divide the class into teams of two. Assign one person in each group of two to be the proposer and one to be the responder. The proposer gets some amount to split up ($1 or a bag of 20 M&Ms or…). The proposer proposes a division of this good to the second person (and records it on a piece of paper). The responder can either accept or reject this split and notes it on the paper; if the responder accepts it, the goods are divided in the way the proposer suggested. If the responder rejects the split, neither gets anything. The teacher can shuffle around individuals and have their assigned new roles in a new group of two, or have the group play 10 rounds. Then the class should graph up the relationship between the division proposed and the percent of the time the offer was accepted. If the class played multiple times you might want to see whether proposers who initially proposed really unfair divisions were penalized by having the responder accept fewer of their later offers. You can see whether people really do behave “rationally”; economists would predict that any offer should be accepted by the responder that gives the responder something (even 10% of the proposer’s resources) since it is more than the responder would otherwise have. But in reality, responders are far more likely to reject offers where they don’t get something very close to their “fair” share of the resources, i.e., they would rather see neither person get anything than have them get an unfair share. Do you see that in your class? Why do people respond this way? What does this tell you about people’s sense of fairness? What does it tell you about how individuals are likely to respond in group networks if not treated fairly?

c) Trust Game: Here player A gives some money to player B, who invests it (multiplying the amount given by say 3), and then decides how much to return to player A and how much to keep. Player A stands to benefit more by giving player B more money, since it creates a larger sum that can be allocated between A and B, but this requires trust on A’s part that B will return a significant share of the proceeds from the investment. B might decide to return nothing, or only to return as much as A gave to him (keeping 100% of the investment gain).

To play this, you break class into pairs. You can play only 1 round or say play 10 rounds. You can do the same exercise as in “b” charting what investments people make over say 10 rounds and what gets returned, and then graphing this up and seeing whether people who “invested” more wound up with more. Whether people’s behavior on a given turn was the product of what the other player had done on prior rounds. Whether people give more and receive more if they can see the other player than if they do this anonymously, etc.? The class can debrief discussing expectations, what led to more trust or inhibited it? How did player B decide how much to return – based on evening out amounts that A and B had, based on giving A back just what he invested in B, based on giving A back half of the amount A got after the investment, or some other rationale? What message did B intend to give? Was that the same message that A took away from the exchange? Etc. Did the amount given back by player B represent the degree to which player B was trustworthy? Do people play this game rationally? If players were going to play additional rounds, how has their behavior been shaped by the trustworthiness of the other player in previous rounds? Is this like our reputation? How does our reputation expand or limit the possibilities of what we can achieve?

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1 John Cassidy in a *New Yorker* article (“Mind Games”, 9/18/06, pp. 30-37 at p. 33 describes the ultimatum game as “[I]Imagine that you and a stranger are sitting on a park bench, when an economist approaches and offers [you two together] ten dollars. He asks the stranger to suggest how the ten dollars should be divided, and he gives you the right to approve or reject the division. If you accept the stranger’s proposal, the money will be divided between you accordingly; if you refuse it, neither of you get anything.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>ColumnA</th>
<th>ColumnB</th>
<th>ColumnC</th>
<th>ColumnD</th>
<th>ColumnE</th>
<th>ColumnF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letter=</td>
<td>A investment with B (btwn 0 and 10)</td>
<td>After investing: A’s investment with B x 3</td>
<td>Amount of Column C returned to A (btwn 0 and column C amount)</td>
<td>A’s score (columnA-columnB+ColumnD)</td>
<td>B’s score (columnC-ColumnD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Round</td>
<td>Original amount A has</td>
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[So, for example, if player A invested $3 of his/her original $10 with B in round 1, those $3 would expand to $9. If B returned $4, A would wind up with $10-3+4=11, and B would wind up with $9-4=5.]

d) Repeated Prisoner Dilemma games: “prisoner's dilemma is a type of non-zero-sum game in which two players can ‘cooperate’ with or ‘defect’ (i.e. betray) the other player. In this game, as in all game theory, the only concern of each individual player (“prisoner”) is maximizing his/her own payoff, without any concern for the other player’s payoff per se. In the classic form of this game, cooperating is strictly dominated by defecting, so that the only possible equilibrium for the game is for all players to defect. In simpler terms, no matter what the other player does, one player will always gain a greater payoff by playing defect. Since in any situation playing defect is more beneficial than cooperating, all rational players will play defect. (But by both parties behaving rationally, they will each get the worst payoff, and far worse than if both could be induced to cooperate).”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prisoner B stays silent</th>
<th>Prisoner B rats on A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prisoner A stays silent</td>
<td>(-1,-1) (A,B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisoner A rats on B</td>
<td>(5,-10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Generalized away from the prisoner’s setting the payoff is typically viewed this way

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player 2 cooperates</th>
<th>Player 2 defects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Player 1 cooperates</td>
<td>(3,3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player 1 defects</td>
<td>(5,0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Or:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player 2 cooperates</th>
<th>Player 2 defects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Player 1 cooperates</td>
<td>(win,win)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player 1 defects</td>
<td>(win much,lose much)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“In the iterated prisoner's dilemma the game is played repeatedly. Thus each player has an opportunity to “punish” the other player for previous non-cooperative play.” The optimal result is if cooperation arises as an equilibrium outcome.
Divide the class into pairs. Assign a letter to each pairing so one will be pair A, one will be pair B, etc. It is interesting as a class to play this over 10 rounds keeping track each time of what each player does (each player should have their own scoresheet where they record what they are doing on the next round and when both sides have done this, they show to the other, then each records the other’s actions, and then record what the payoff was to each player from each round. They should mark a “1” if they are cooperating and a “0” if they are defecting.

Then write up each pairings in the class on an overhead transparencies with the Pair number and player 1, player 2, score for 1, score for 2. Go through each transparency with the whole class at a time. Find out who was pair A. Then uncover first round of moves. Find out what each was thinking when they did the move. Find out what each thought about the other’s move and therefore what player 1 decided to do on round 2. Then see what player 2 responded and whether this was consistent. See if an equilibrium of cooperation or defection arose and what total scores were. Go through pair B, etc. See what conclusions class came to about when it makes sense to cooperate (be trustworthy) and when it makes sense to defect.

Can also tell students at end of debriefing that there is now going to be an 11th round, and see how that affected students who were mean to their “opponent” on the 10th round since they thought it was the last round.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair Letter=</th>
<th>Round</th>
<th>My action</th>
<th>Opponent’s action</th>
<th>My score</th>
<th>Opponent’s score</th>
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Discuss what the optimal strategy is for such a game. May want to discuss “Tit for Tat” which is the computer strategy that did best across a whole range of opponents. Tit for Tat cooperated on first round and thereafter mirrored whatever opponent did on prior round. It did well because it was initially cooperative, forgave relatively easily, penalized quickly, and communicated as clearly as could be communicated in a game with no talking. [Biologists call this strategy “reciprocal altruism.”]

e. The Yarn Exercise: this was developed by Donna Rader (at Winston-Salem Foundation) and is used by Johnathan Milner (in Winston-Salem schools). The class stands in a circle. A ball of yarn is handed to one of the students who holds onto the end and is instructed to throw the ball of yarn to someone they know and to tell the class how they know them. That person holds on to the yarn and repeats this action, throwing the ball of yarn to another member of the class and saying how they know that person. This gets repeated for some time. The resulting web of yarn is the social capital network for the class. The class can
then discuss the exercise and what the pattern of yarn tells about the social network of the class. You can also have the class discussing what they think the patterns would look like and how dense the networks would be if you randomly brought together the same number of people off the street from your town or city. Do you think it would look as densely woven with as many people knowing others or not? Why? What about this happening in an ongoing class leads to different networks? If there were cliques in your classroom where say only the blue-eyed students knew each other and only the brown-eyed students knew each other, what would the yarn pattern look like? How would it depend on who started with the yarn? Etc. [There is also computer software that one can use to depict social networks, but the yarn exercise is much more tactile, visual, and participatory.]
Appendix: Trust Exercises

These exercises could be useful for almost any age group, but probably grades 9 and up would most benefit from them. Some require a relatively mature group.

There are lists of such exercises at: http://wilderdom.com/games/TrustActivities.html

1. **Group Walk** (for high school age or above)
   [helps group understand how interpersonal communication, trust and collaboration critical to working well together.]

   The group sits in a circle (There should probably be 8 or more in the circle). Each team member a 1 yard piece of string/rope. Each person ties their left leg to the right leg of the person sitting immediately to their left.

   **Exercise:**
   The teacher now instructs the group where they need to go to next, and once there, gives them their next destination. The group has to move as a group (i.e., all group members must remain tied together); if their string comes loose, the group needs to stop for these two individuals to retie themselves.

   - This activity is made harder if they must complete the first half of the destinations without talking.

   **For Teachers:**
   - If doing outside, make sure class is advised to wear clothes they don’t mind getting dirty. Best to do on soft ground or floor as group may fall many times. Requires close teacher supervision.
   - You need a high level of staff monitoring for this, due to the inherent risk of slips, trips & falls.

   **Debrief as a group:** Did you achieve your goal? What worked well or not so well? What role did communication play in second half and how hard was it without communication? How does group “negotiate a plan or a strategy? Etc.

2. **Spider’s Web**

   A "spider's web" is constructed with thin ropes between two trees. There are holes of different sizes and shapes.

   The task for the group is to pass each person through the web without touching the ropes. They can choose one hole to pass two people through, otherwise the rule is: one person, one hole. If anyone touches a rope, the group must start again.

   **Debrief as a group afterwards:** Did people see it as their task to just get themselves over? Did they help others behind them? If so, how? How was that help received? How was it having your success tied to success of the group? What made this challenging? How is this like or unlike real life?

3. **Electric Wall**

   The group holds hands in a circle.

   A rope, symbolizing a solid electric wall, is tied between two trees at approximately 3 feet in height (will have to vary height depending on height of your students). The task for the group is to get over the wall (rope) without touching it. If anyone touches the rope the whole group
has to start again. They are allowed to make one break in the circle, but the chain of hands has to remain in place.

You can try this enabling team to talk to each other or in silence although the former is probably preferable.

Debrief as a group afterwards. Did people see it as their task to just get themselves over? Did they help others behind them? If so, how? How was that help received? How was it having your success tied to success of the group? How is this like or unlike real life?

4. Blind obstacle Course/Also called Mine Field

Equipment: You’ll need a bandana or cloth as a blindfold and depending on group size you’ll have to decide if you want 2 or 3 parallel obstacle courses to enable group to do faster or if you want one course and have everyone other than the team doing the obstacle course watch. If you have multiple obstacle courses going in parallel, you’ll need additional blindfolds.

On a field or gymnasium are placed various obstacles that people need to navigate around or climb over (like chairs), cones, balls, etc. [Can even have individuals need to walk across a plank that is on the ground.] Class breaks into groups of twos. Each group of two does the obstacle course twice. First time with one person blindfolded and the other person (sighted) leading the blindfolded person. Then they switch roles and pass the blindfold and the sighted person (now blindfolded) and is led by the person previously blindfolded. It is good to enable the teams to talk to each other.

Debrief as a group afterwards. Did groups finish? What was hard about the task? How was it being dependent on another person? Where did trust enter into the game? How was it giving help? How was it getting help? Do they usually in real life give a lot of help? Do they in real life receive a lot of help willingly? How is this like or unlike real life?

[further directions can be found at: http://wilderdom.com/games/descriptions/Minefield.html]

5. Other interesting ideas are described elsewhere:
   c. Trust Lean/Trust Fall (for older audiences) [http://wilderdom.com/games/descriptions/TrustLean.html]