



Accounting for Oneself in Teaching: Trust, Parrhesia, and Bad Faith

Alison M. Brady¹

Accepted: 15 February 2022
© Crown 2022

Abstract

This paper seeks to reconceptualise the basis for trusting teachers in current educational discourses. It proposes moving away from trust based on ‘absolute accuracy’ to trust as encapsulated in the practice of parrhesia. On the surface, parrhesia appears to be the opposite of Sartre’s concept of ‘bad faith’. Paradoxically, however, our attempts to be sincere in our accounts are inevitably tainted by this. This paradox is especially evident in autobiographical writing, an activity that is both parrhesiastic in nature and susceptible to bad faith. This does not mean that we should abandon trust in these ways of accounting for oneself, however. Rather, parrhesiastic practices in autobiographical writing can offer a different understanding of how we account for ourselves and our practices, one that does not pertain to a narrow definition of truth as accuracy, but instead leads to a form of self-criticism where one situates oneself in relation to the ‘truth’ of their accounts in new ways. Towards the end of the paper, I explore three ‘parrhesiastic techniques’ and their relationship to accounting for oneself as a teacher, to reimagine these techniques from technicist to existential ways of relating to our practices.

Keywords Parrhesia · Trust · Accountability · Autobiography

Introduction: Trusting Teachers

Trust—or, indeed, lack of trust—in the profession of teaching has become a pervasive topic in educational literature (See, for example: Ball, 2016; Grek and Lindgren 2015; Frowe 2010; McNamara and O’Hara, 2008; Perryman et al. 2018; 2017). Much of the issue is related to the discourses of teaching and learning that we find in an age of accountability. Measurement culture in schools exemplifies this lack of trust, particularly its accompanying fixation on a narrow definition of ‘evidence’. Trust in teaching requires the adoption of a

✉ Alison M. Brady
alison.brady.14@ucl.ac.uk

¹ UCL Institute of Education, University College London, WC1H 0AL London, United Kingdom

specific language - a language that is amenable to measurement and the necessary simplification of practices, often garnered from school effectiveness research and driven by the principles of evidence-based education (Brady 2016, 2019, 2020c; Biesta 2007, 2009).

But might we talk about trust in another way—the kind that is implicit in human relationships, for instance? Contrary to the idea that trust can only be attained should we be able to provide clear and distinct evidence that ‘proves’ that what we say is *accurate*, this is a trust that is instead concerned with *sincerity*.¹ But what, precisely, does this involve, and how might it be understood in the context of teaching?

In this paper, I aim to reconceptualise the basis for trusting teachers by first turning to the practice of parrhesia as discussed in the later writings of Foucault. In doing so, I explore a very different sense of account-giving—namely, as something that involves an ongoing and sincere attempt to situate oneself in relation to the ‘truth’ of one’s (past) practices. Autobiographical writing serves as a good example of this, which I then consider through Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Words*. Although Foucault and Sartre diverged in many respects, there is nevertheless congruence across their ideas, particularly in relation to parrhesia in opposition to Sartrian ‘bad faith’. As exemplified in Sartre’s autobiographical writing, however, bad faith is an implicit and inescapable component of putting oneself into words. But rather than abandoning trust in autobiographical writing as a result of this, I argue that we should instead reconsider trust in the pursuit of sincerity rather than in the pursuit of (pure) accuracy. Towards the end of the paper, I tentatively offer three ‘parrhesiastic techniques’ which may prove useful in counteracting the reductive ways in which teachers are expected to account for their practices, with further implications for how we might understand institutional forms of trust.

Foucault and Parrhesia

It is important to clarify that Foucault was by no means an existentialist, and equally, Sartre was not a post-structuralist (Flynn 2004; Gillam 2013). Indeed, Sartre and Foucault differed in many respects - perhaps most notably on the question of agency. Interestingly, both thinkers moderated their positions considerably towards the end of their lives, and both have been accused of inconsistencies in their thought as a result.² As discussed in this paper, however, my concern is not so much with the question of consistency between these thinkers, but more so with how we might use Foucault’s understanding of parrhesia as a way to consider Sartre’s autobiographical writing, and how this in turn allows us to rethink what we mean by accounting for oneself as a teacher. Nevertheless, as some have suggested (e.g. Flynn 2004; Seitz 2004), it is in Foucault’s later ideas relating to ‘care of the self’ that commonalities between the two thinkers can be found, of which parrhesia is a central part.

¹ These contrasting ideas of trust are explored widely in the epistemology of testimony which, due to space limitations, is not discussed here. For a start, see Lackey and Sosa (2006).

² For example, Sartre later began to acknowledge the importance of circumstances in our ability to act freely, particularly in his later attempts to combine existentialism with Marxism (See, for example, Sartre 2008). Conversely, the later Foucault (1987) acknowledges a sense of agency in subjects where power relations might be understood as ‘transversal’—i.e. no longer total or hegemonic, and thus, with ‘the scope for *resistance*... widened exponentially’ (Leask 2011, p. 63). This, in turn, opens up spaces for ‘acting and thinking differently about our relation to ourselves and others’ (Ball 2019, p. 133), and is particularly important for how we might account for ourselves within institutional contexts.

In a series of lectures delivered shortly before his death, Foucault (2001) offers a genealogy of ‘truth-telling’ in Ancient Greece, relating this to the care of the self. Truth-telling in Ancient Greece centres around the practice of parrhesia and, as such, Foucault sets out to explain some of its key aspects. Most commonly, parrhesia is understood as a form of ‘frankness’, where one ‘says everything’ and ‘opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse, [giving] a complete and exact account of what he has in his mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks’ (Foucault 2001, p. 12). The parrhesiastes’ concern, however, is with telling *as well as* situating themselves in relation to truth. But what, exactly, might this ‘truth’ mean?

For thinkers such as Descartes, acquiring ‘truth’ necessitates clear and distinct ideas, a notion that leads to the subjective-objective dualism that is pervasive in modern epistemology. For the Greeks, however, truth is only guaranteed through a possession of particular moral qualities. It is therefore ethical rather than epistemological or metaphysical.

The measure of the sincerity of parrhesiastic truth is courage. In speaking the truth, one is often put in danger - anger from one’s interlocutor, a risk to one’s social standing within certain groups. It might even result in a threat to one’s life where parrhesia is employed in order to challenge political authority. Another form of danger implicit in the practice of parrhesia relates to the possibility of criticism from others. In fact, the very purpose of parrhesia is ‘not to demonstrate the truth to someone else, but [it] has the function of *criticism*: criticism of the interlocutor or of the speaker himself’ (Foucault 2001, p. 17). Parrhesia involves speaking the truth in order to account for oneself and one’s commitments, and to measure the extent to which those commitments are present in one’s actions. If there are inconsistencies within this, this paves the way for self-criticism. Self-criticism, however, is a duty—it is not something that can be forced upon a person, but rather, requires a freely chosen performance of the verbal activity in spite of the dangers it poses to himself and to his relationship with others. It is a duty to oneself as well as others, where such (self-)criticism is necessary in order to establish a closer union between the values one is committed to and the ways in which one acts, encouraging others to do the same.

Foucault outlines the shift in parrhesiastic practices from the political³ to the personal realm in Ancient Greece. In demonstrating this shift, Foucault uses the example of Socrates, someone to whom both the personal and the political apply. Socratic dialogues, for example, involve what Foucault calls ‘parrhesiastic games’—games that are face-to-face and personal, where interlocutors are not only ‘shown’ the truth but are actively encouraged to situate themselves in relation to what they say. The dialogues involve giving an account of oneself not in terms of a confession or a therapy of unburdening oneself, but in order that they live harmoniously, as explicated through a ‘rational’ account of oneself and the concordance between their words, actions and values.

Parrhesia and Bad Faith

As indicated, there are correlations between the concept of parrhesia and the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, even though this was not a term that he himself used. Sartre’s concept of

³ A discussion on this can be found in Hodgson (2010). For the purposes of this paper, I will focus primarily on the personal sense of parrhesia as a form of reflexive self-criticism rather than on the political sense—although, notably in the case of Socrates, these two are not wholly separate.

'bad faith' could be understood as the exact opposite of parrhesia, in fact. Bad faith is often considered to be a form of self-deception, but as Sartre (1943) painstakingly shows us in *Being and Nothingness*, this is not entirely accurate. Rather, it is a form of self-denial.

To understand the concept of 'bad faith', one must first accept that, above all, individuals are 'condemned to be free'. Ironically, this freedom does not serve to 'liberate' the individual, but forces us to confront our anxiety-inducing responsibility in the face of such freedoms. Broadly understood, bad faith is partly a kind of coping mechanism to curb this anxiety. It is intimately connected to the concept of 'role-playing', such as the roles we adopt in our workplace, like the waiter that Sartre (1943) admonishes in *Being and Nothingness* for being too 'waiter-like' and 'automatic' in his mannerisms, unreflective of his own fundamental freedom to behave otherwise. With a too-sincere form of role playing, there is a danger of thinking of ourselves *only* in terms of how we are defined in those roles we adopt. ⁴Good faith, on the other hand, involves recognising that one is always *beyond* the ways that they are defined. But this is inherently unstable. Indeed, where I might see 'my sincerity' as a fixed character trait that ensures I will *always* be sincere, I in turn reduce my freedom and responsibility to be *insincere*, and I am therefore (paradoxically) in bad faith. For Sartre, we are thus responsible for *continually* putting good faith into practice. It might instead be thought of as a 'reflective' attitude that comes about through our persistent and ongoing attempts to remain honest with ourselves and is therefore a key element in the enactment of parrhesiastic (self-)practices.

Importantly, Sartre does not deny that we exist within a certain 'facticity', the situation in which our freedom is enacted. We are embodied in a specific way. We exist within a society and within institutions that involve social constraints, 'assigned' genders, sexualities, and statuses. We speak in a language that we ourselves have not created. We are subject to the gaze of the Other who 'recognises' us in particular ways, towards whom we make ourselves intelligible. Nevertheless, for Sartre, we are fundamentally free in how we respond to this facticity. We are thus wholly responsible for the ways in which we negotiate our existence in these situations, and how account for ourselves therein. In order to avoid being in bad faith (as much as possible), we must disavow neither this freedom nor this facticity, i.e. neither the factual limitations in which we exist nor the extent to which we can ultimately respond to such limitations.

Like bad faith, central to any discussion on parrhesia is the question of responsibility towards oneself and others, since such practices inevitably involve a 'scene' in which both myself and the other are addressed (Butler 2009). Parrhesia is in part a way for us to pay closer attention to our interactions in the world, to be sincere about how we have behaved, and to test the extent to which we are willing to take responsibility for this. But the extent to which we can really be 'sincere' about ourselves is tricky. This is especially complicated when, as Sartre (1964, p. 45) points out, it is almost impossible to judge retrospectively the extent to which we have acted sincerely in the past, as reflected in his autobiography:

⁴ As I have argued elsewhere (e.g. Brady, 2022), Sartre seems to consider 'bad faith' in a mainly individualistic sense. In doing so, he often fails to appreciate the institutional context in which one might *perform* 'bad faith', in part to secure a more authentic life in the future. An example of this can be seen with early career academics in the university, many of whom are actively encouraged by the institution to *be* in bad faith in order to secure a less precarious position in the future. The same, of course, can be said of a waiter, who perhaps smiles (too) enthusiastically at his customers in order to gain the economic means necessary for more 'authentic' forms of living outside of his job. Some authors (e.g. Catalano 1983) have argued for a distinction between 'weak' and 'strong' forms of bad faith on similar grounds.

I have set down the facts as accurately as memory permits. But how far did I believe in my frenzy? That is the basic question and I cannot make up my mind about it. I realised afterwards that it is possible to know everything about our affections except their strength; that is to say, their sincerity. Actions themselves will not serve as a standard unless it has proven that they are not gestures, which is not always easy.

How do we then take up a relationship of ‘truth’ with ourselves, one that engenders responsibility towards ourselves and others, without falling into bad faith? How do we situate ourselves in relation to truth when accounting for our past if the account we give is always ‘fictionalised’ in some way? How can we therefore trust these accounts? To explore this further, let us consider an example of how we account for ourselves in the past through autobiographical writing. In doing so, might one carve out an alternative form of accounting for oneself as a teacher beyond that which is encouraged in current accountability regimes?

Autobiographical Writing as a Parrhesiastic Practice

Parrhesiastic practices are not about providing a historical narrative on one’s life, but instead situating oneself in relation to the truth that is revealed in past events. Autobiographical practices, however, inevitably involve a (re)interpretation of events, and in doing so, one continually (re)situates oneself in relation to the ‘truth’ of what has happened. It is inherently confessional, although not in the sense of unburdening guilt. Confessions are also a means of ‘publishing’ oneself, of making oneself intelligible, of allowing for a ‘critical opening’ within which a process of self-(re)formation takes place (Butler 2009). Engendered in autobiographical writing is both a vulnerability and a ‘confessionalism’, and it is therefore a site upon which a parrhesiastic relation with oneself is possible. But it is also a site where bad faith may appear.

Frankness and (Self-)Criticism

At the age of 59, Sartre (1964) decided to write his autobiography, *Words*, covering roughly the first ten years of his life. The text is punctuated with particularly poignant but seemingly insignificant moments of his upbringing, serving as a critical commentary of the bourgeois values that underpinned much of what he understood about the world at the time, as well as much of his own behaviour and feelings. Interestingly, Sartre’s seemingly uncompromising position on freedom and responsibility softened considerably after the Second World War. As such, *Words* serves as a battleground of sorts, between Sartre’s original emphasis on freedom and the newer, Marxist-inspired ideas he was then concerned with. First drafted between 1954 and 1957, the autobiography was revised and eventually redrafted almost ten years later (Whitmore, 2006). It is therefore a palimpsest of sorts, with much of the text revealing an uneasy tension between the existentialist idea of radical freedom in making who we are, and the more deterministic idea that who we are is conditioned by our past and by our social circumstances.

How does Sartre navigate these two opposing ideas? There is a certain frankness when he admits that much of his upbringing allowed him opportunities that would later influence his decision to become a writer. This, in fact, appeared to be determined from the very start. Throughout, he (1964, p. 53) consistently refers to the influence that circumstances and

the adults in his childhood had on the bourgeois values he uncritically held, referring to himself as a ‘monster they were forming out of their regrets.’ His grandfather, Charles, was particularly influential in this regard, so much so that Sartre (1964, p. 108) saw his future as a writer to be a fully determined fact, ‘just as Charles was [his] grandfather, by birth and for ever.’ He (1964, p. 150) admits that his ‘most recently acquired knowledge’, presumably through an exposure to Marxist ideas, ‘gnaws at [his] old established facts without entirely dispelling them.’ The very act of autobiographical writing revealed such tensions in his thoughts, thoughts he would later moderate considerably, admitting that those ideas which made him the most famous were, in fact, over-stated. There is a vulnerability in what he writes, in how he (1964, p. 27) portrays himself as a coddled, precocious son, a ‘cultural possession’ who was both impregnated with and reflected bourgeois values, a child marked by ‘arrogant hypocrisy’ who ‘knew [his] worth’ (Sartre 1964, p. 20). Such statements are forms of self-criticism that the older Sartre directs towards his younger self. They are also criticisms towards bourgeoisie values in general, many of which his readers might recognise in themselves. By exposing his own hypocrisy, he is therefore exposing the hypocrisy of his audience.

Should Sartre be criticised for inconsistencies between his later and earlier thought? Perhaps. The point here is not to argue about these thoughts specifically, but rather, the way in which we account for such inconsistencies, and how we might admit to them despite the consequences this has for our own self-understanding. Arguably, it is only through parrhesiastic practices such as autobiographical writing that these ‘critical openings’ can appear, given the deep level of introspection that this involves. Indeed, in accounting for oneself in this way, we often reveal ourselves to be different than we had initially thought. As Sartre (1964, p. 126) says, however, a clear separation between our past and present selves is purely an invention in the present moment:

It is no good putting yourself in the dead man’s shoes... you cannot help assessing his behaviour in light of results which he could not foresee and of information which he did not possess, or attributing a particular solemnity to events whose effects marked him later, but which he lived through casually... It is not surprising: in a completed life, the end is taken as the truth of the beginning.

It is not always easy to talk in a sincere manner about how we behaved, and thus, perhaps this ‘invention’ is necessary in order to account for oneself in the past. Much of *Words* serves as a confessional in this regard—Sartre is admitting to the moments in his life when he was an imposter, often with vehement criticism that we would not normally direct at a young child. He does not do this in order to unburden a sense of guilt in living the way that he did, but rather, to situate himself in relation to his past, encouraging his readers to do the same. In laying himself bare in this way, he is also forcing himself to take responsibility for the values he reflected, and for the (dis)harmony between his commitments then and his commitments today.⁵

⁵ We should not understand this as formulating explicitly the values that we are committed to. For Sartre, delineating values abstractly to then work towards them is also a form of bad faith, since in doing so, we fashion ourselves as having a fixed end-point, leading us to manipulate (or deny) all of our actions in order to work towards that pre-specified end. Our commitments to values, rather, are manifested *through* our action. See ‘Being for Itself’ in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1943).

Truth, Sincerity and Bad Faith

But what if Sartre was wrong about *why* he behaved the way that he did? Indeed, to what extent do autobiographies allow us to capture the ‘truth’ about our past and its relationship to now? In autobiographical writing there is often an element of fictionalisation. Fictionalisation as understood here is not only the extent to which we fabricate stories, or in terms of the explicit selectivity with which we remember certain events, with a concern for how it might be that we are portrayed to others and to future generations. It also refers to the way we relate to our past selves. The past is a facticity, the context in which our freedom is enacted. It carries weight in the present moment, as something we are therefore responsible for both in terms of its influence in the present but also in terms of how we continually (re) interpret it.⁶

Sartre constantly reminds us of the difficulty of deducing the sincerity of our past motives, however. As a child, he was fond of role-playing. In terms of how we recount our past, the centrality of role-playing (and, indeed, bad faith) should be acknowledged, since ‘how could [one] pinpoint—especially after so many years—the intangible, shifting frontier that divides possession from play-acting?’ (Sartre 1964, p. 46) How can one situate themselves in relation to truth when the ‘truth’ of the past is unclear, where our motives are suspect? And what of our responsibility for those situations when, as we have seen, the distinction between role-playing as bad faith and the more ‘authentic’ choices we make is thoroughly ambiguous?

Much of this comes from the conflation of ‘sincerity’ with ‘absolute accuracy’. But the concern with accounting for oneself in this instance is not one of absolute accuracy, since ‘truth’ as understood by both Foucault and Sartre is distinct from our conventional understanding. Its concern is not with how assured we are about our interpretation of the past. It is about how we situate ourselves *today* in relation to such truth, understanding that the commitments made manifest in how we have acted *as well as* how we have interpreted these actions in the present moment. Thus, we must accept that our past is always tainted by the present re-interpretations, subject to further re-evaluation in light of future events. And this, of course, has implications for the evidence-based ways in which one might be expected to account for oneself as a teacher, as well as the institutional understanding of trust that relies on this.

For Sartre, with freedom in our (re)interpretations comes responsibility. Indeed, one might argue that we are not only responsible for what has happened, but also in terms of our (re)engagement with our past ‘selves’. And our inescapable responsibility in recounting the past in this way is intimately tied to *how* it is that we ‘account for ourselves’. This is not a form of responsibility that is cultivated or attained—in responding to our past, we are inevitably *responsibilised*.

The Scene of the Address

It is important to acknowledge that, even in autobiographical writing, the Other is present in some way. In struggling to account for oneself in this way, we are also struggling within the particular social normativity in which we are situated, and this must be incorporated if

⁶ The relationship between three dimensions of time (past, present, future) and the concept of responsibility is discussed in ‘Temporality’ (*Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1943)).

the account is to be intelligible (Butler 2009). Such norms are impersonal in nature—they are not created by us as individuals, but rather, our stories are always told in a belated sense, through the ‘facticity’ we have been thrown into. Foucault refers to these as ‘regimes of truth’ - regimes by which we recognise ourselves, deciding what and who can be recognised, and by extension, what we can ‘be’. Sartre might argue that an over-emphasis on the conditioning aspects of these norms is a form of bad faith, where we deny the extent to which we are free to respond to these conventions. But (the later) Foucault also agrees that norms are always negotiated through our lived experiences. Indeed, we situate ourselves in relation to them, and in doing so, we situate ourselves in relation to the ‘selves’ that we are as subject to such regimes. This, however, requires a level of reflexivity—a form of self-questioning where one may risk becoming unrecognisable, fictionalised, where one struggles within and against the facticity in which one is situated. This reflexivity is represented in parrhesiastic practices, and in the ways in which we might enact this through our attempts to account for ourselves in an autobiographical sense.

Like authors who leave behind legacies of words, words that are then read, reread, reinterpreted by audiences, individuals are similarly (re)defined by others through how it is they account for themselves. As Butler (2009) points out, the *structure of the address*, where certain norms facilitate my ability to give an account of myself, must be appreciated. There is thus a vulnerability towards the other who may (re)define us in ways over which we have no control, and it is in this instance that we might understand one of the dangers of parrhesiastic practices—the danger of being misrecognised, or concretised in such a way that it leads us into bad faith. This ‘crisis’ of misrecognition, however, may inaugurate an opportunity of renewal, where our account challenges the limits of what is recognisable, where the entire situation is potentially overturned as a result. Such crises also awaken us to the furtive ways that bad faith functions in our lives, thus serving as the basis of our existential freedom.

As Foucault (2001) points out, if we are to account for ourselves in a parrhesiastic way, we must not only accept the risks it poses to ourselves, but welcome these as a measure of sincerity. Nevertheless, he argues that ‘the account of myself that I give never fully expresses or carries this living self’. Might it be because the self is only ‘graspable’ through a concret(ised) account one gives of oneself to the Other? But in doing so, might we also say that this account is inevitably in bad faith, since it implies we *can* be defined in a concrete, fixed way? As Butler (2009) argues, there is an inevitable dispossession that occurs when one gives an account of oneself, a dispossession of oneself when putting the self into words. Such accounts cause what Sartre calls an ‘irruption of the self’—the production of a psycho-social ego which we misguidedly correlate to an essentialist understanding of ‘who we are’.⁷ But Sartre himself refers to his ‘true self’ on several occasions throughout *Words*—ironic, given that he spent much of his career repudiating the sense in which we *do* have a ‘true self’, a ‘self’ awaiting to be uncovered through psychoanalysis or other means. It seems, rather, that this very notion of a ‘true self’ only comes about in situations where the Other is involved in some way. And inevitably, this conception is also accompanied by a critique of imposture that Sartre (1964, p. 53) as a child seemed to embody:

⁷ In the *Transcendence of the Ego* (Sartre & Richmond, 2011), Sartre explores how, even if one is not in the company of others, one often thinks of themselves through an ‘othering’ lens. Indeed, in order to be *present* to oneself as a (psycho-social) self, this ‘othered’ stance is inescapable. For the educational implications of this idea, see: Brady 2020a>.

My true self, my character and my name were in the hands of adults; I had learnt to see myself through their eyes... I was an imposter... Those bright, sunlit appearances which composed my personality gave themselves away: through a defect of being which I could neither quite understand nor stop feeling. I turned to the grown-ups, begging them to vouch my merits: I was plunging into imposture.

And yet, Sartre appeared to have battled with this, a struggle within the very scene of address in which he was situated, in which he (1964, p. 109) was concretised by the Other:

I was leading two existences, both of them lies. In public, I was an imposter: the famous grandson of the well-known Charles Schweitzer; alone, I was absorbed in an imaginary fit of sulks. I corrected my false glory by a false incognito. I had no difficulty in switching from one role to the other... Yet I was threatened: my true self was in danger of remaining those alternating lies of mine to the very end.

What was it that allowed Sartre to escape from this? Was he naïve in thinking he could ever escape fully? Perhaps. But it appears that through writing in a parrhesiastic way, he could therefore pay closer attention to the gestures or role-playing underpinning his behaviour such that they could then be interrupted, tested, called into question. This only appears to be possible when such gestures are made explicit, when one enacts a certain parrhesiastic reflexivity, when one can therefore account for oneself in a way that does succumb to the (mis)recognition of others, since this (mis)recognition, too, is called into question.

But should we trust his account? And if not, doesn't this call everything he says into question? Let us return to this question in the context of teaching.

Accounting for Oneself in Teaching

Thus, autobiographies can be seen as parrhesiastic practices in which we account for ourselves. Parrhesia as a form of sincere 'truth-telling' in terms of absolute accuracy may be impossible, given the unfeasibility of deducing precisely when we acted in a committed sense, or when we performed mere gestures under the guise of bad faith. Importantly, any account of oneself is situated within a scene of address, one that implicitly involves the Other. As such, a sense of exposure inevitably accompanies any account we give, acting as a risk in three ways - self-criticism, criticism from others, and also a form of bad faith where (mis)recognition of ourselves from the Other may come to be how we recognise ourselves, particularly when we take up a relation to ourselves in the past. Yet, a willingness to expose oneself in this way is a measure of sincerity, where we situate ourselves in relation to the truth of the (dis)harmony between our value commitments and our behaviour. In trusting such accounts, there is more at stake than a scientific understanding of truth as measurable objectivity—it is a trust in the sincerity of the account-giver.

In teaching, giving an account of oneself and one's practices is often tied to a conception of accuracy enclosed in dominant educational discourses, a narrow definition that underpins and is underpinned by a mistrust of teachers and their ability to account for themselves in other ways (e.g. Brady 2019). But in order to allow teachers to give an account of themselves in a different way—and, indeed, to *trust* them to do so - an entire shift in the discourse of teaching and learning must occur - a radical reconceptualization of what teachers *do* in the classroom, and the extent to which this can be 'accurately' accounted for in the first place.

As such, I propose that *accountability* itself should be reconceptualised, based on the idea that teachers *can* give an account of their practices in an explicitly parrhesiastic way, one that cannot escape wholly from ‘bad faith’, but one in which there is more at stake than a conflated understanding of truth as ‘objectively evidenced’. Let us thus turn to three parrhesiastic techniques proposed by Foucault. These techniques may appear to be ‘technical’ in nature, fitting in nicely with current educational discourses, and thus, they are further reimagined here in an existential vein.

Self-Examination

Self-examination should not be confused with the technicised ‘self-evaluation’ or ‘self-reflection’ in current educational discourses. It does not rely a narrow, assured definition of evidence. Its function is not to neutralise but to open up critical questions about what is going on, about ‘who we are’ as teachers, about what is valuable or not in what we are doing. Self-examination involves positing an inner judge who, rather than accuse, measure or ‘evaluate’, simply takes stock of what has happened. The (self-)criticism that is opened up is not one of guilt or shame, but instead focuses on ‘practical errors’ and how to habituate changes in one’s behaviour in light of these.

This account of taking stock of things is, perhaps, overly rationalistic. It may not align with what it feels like to have an inner judge, nor account for some of the catalysts of self-examinations in educational settings. Certain crises that appear in the classroom, a disruption, a student who voices a concern that makes you question entirely what it is you are doing there together—these are often the moments where we begin to examine more intensely what we are doing, and why (Brady 2019, 2020b). Or if not crises, then situations where lessons go well, where one is so completely immersed in the activity at hand that they forget the time, where the lesson plan goes off-track because something more important happens. Self-examination requires a rigorous form of introspection and exposure, and can be harrowing and uncomfortable, but also revealing. It is inherently risky - we may not like what we see when we expose ourselves to an honest account of our practices. At the same time, it may allow us to re-evaluate what is at stake in what we do, calling us to respond to our practices, to take responsibility for them not simply because we are coerced into doing so, but because we believe that these practices matter. Self-examination requires courage—the courage to expose oneself, to undergo introspection by which this is possible, to confront the ways in which we behave and the extent to which we are comfortable in taking responsibility for this. But it does not have to be so solemn. Self-deprecating humour can often provide a window into what we really think about what we are doing, or how it is we are ‘presenting’ ourselves to the class. Sartre’s autobiography is, indeed, replete with such examples. In short: where autobiographical writing involves a similar form of self-examination, it may therefore be employed as a model for accounting for one’s practices as a teacher that concerns sincerity rather than accuracy.

Self-Diagnosis

For Foucault, self-diagnosis is a matter of self-governance, the ‘self-possession of the self’. Of course, the term ‘self’ is inherently complex. Both Sartre and Foucault diverged greatly on this, but both understood the self as that which is produced by being in the world with

others. It is unclear what Foucault meant by self-diagnosis exactly (or if, indeed, this was his own account or merely a description of the Ancient Greeks). For the purposes of this paper, self-diagnosis refers to the idea that she who is undertaking this self-diagnosis is also she towards whom the examination is focused, and this both conditions and produces 'self-mastery'.

The exposure that we ourselves experience through forms of self-diagnosis can, as we have seen, be uncomfortable. Foucault refers to Seneca's metaphor of seasickness here. When one is undertaking a voyage at sea, one feels a certain malaise due to the 'perpetual vacillating motion which has no other moving than "rocking"' (Foucault 2001, p. 153). This rocking motion is partly related to a lack of self-mastery over what is happening, a lack of stability that is nauseating. This rocking movement is nevertheless an inescapable component of the journey, and because it cannot be overcome during the voyage itself, we must find a way to live with it. Sartre famously talks about the nausea of existence (Sartre, 1938), of coming to realise the superfluity of the world. It is through this nausea that one comes to realise their freedom as conscious human beings, however, as 'not' those inanimate, non-conscious objects existing superfluously. This allows us to realise our *innate* self-mastery—a fact that is both liberating and anxiety-inducing.

In teaching, often this feeling of exposure can arise when one enters the classroom for the first time, when one 'realises' oneself to be standing there in front of others, who look to her as an authority they may either respect or challenge. This feeling of exposure can be anxiety-inducing, but if lived with well, it can dissipate as the lesson continues, as the class becomes more absorbed in what is going on. This initial feeling of exposure is testament to her freedom in front of the classroom, a freedom in the sense that we are *always* responding in the world—we simply cannot choose otherwise (since choosing not to respond is also a choice). We are even responding in moments where it seems that we are constrained by conventions, by social norms, by the circumstances, by 'lesson plans' - even by the institutional definitions of our role which fail to capture in full the complexity of our day-to-day experiences. In the context of teaching, this appears to be hindered by the discourses through which one 'speaks' as teachers, through which one describes or translates their practices to the wider public who then hold teachers to account. And yet, teachers do not *need* to speak through these discourses—they do not need to adopt the 'language of effectiveness' in order to evaluate themselves, nor in describing or providing rationales for their conduct in the classroom. Through parrhesiastic acts modelled on autobiographical writing, it is then possible for teachers to find *another* way of speaking about their practices, of giving an account of themselves and what they do in a less detached way than that which is encouraged by current forms of evidence-based accountability.

Self-Testing

Self-testing, for Foucault, is a form of self-surveillance. Although it involves an element of self-governance, it is not a governance that involves the internalisation of externally-generated norms and values, as some have taken Foucault to mean. Rather, through this form of self-governance, one can attain a form of self-mastery, both of which are required for a parrhesiastic relation to oneself.

Sartre (1943), of course, would not see self-mastery as an end to be attained but an innate aspect of all human beings. He nevertheless argues that most of us try to live in accordance

with a ‘fundamental project’ - a ‘fundamental act of freedom [that] gives meaning to the particular action which I can be brought to consider... [a] constantly renewed act [that] is not distinct from my being; it is a choice of myself in the world’. Since we do not live aimlessly, Sartre argues that we make a so-called ‘fundamental choice’, a choice through which all of our subsequent actions are ‘meaningful’. This fundamental choice provides the context for the actions we have undertaken, and thus the person we ‘are’ by virtue of those actions. Of course, we *can* go against this fundamental project, but to do so may cause a crisis since it would call into question our entire sense of self as ‘produced’ by our meaningful actions in the world with others, exemplified in *Nausea* with Roquentin’s decision not to continue the Robellon biography prompts a series of breakdowns.

Self-testing can therefore be a way to ‘check in’ with (and potentially (re)evaluate) one’s fundamental project. It is important to understand that this project is not always clear, nor is it always (if ever) possible to ‘make intelligible’. When a teacher asks themselves why they entered education in the first place, or why education matters, they may not be able to articulate this clearly in words. The answers, however, might be made evident through accounting for one’s practices in the classroom in a parrhesiastic way, since it is in these moments that one’s commitments are made manifest. The difficulty, however, lies in *how* we account for these. Again, our concern here is not necessarily with absolute accuracy or truth as ‘objectivity’. The problem with accounting for oneself is the reason why *Words* and other forms of engaging with oneself in the past are often so ambiguous, especially when it comes to delineating why we behaved in certain ways, or, indeed, what our fundamental project is.⁸ Our attempts to account for ourselves are inherently fictionalising, and are thus susceptible to bad faith. But bad faith is often how we navigate in the world and thus must be accepted as an inescapable component of human reflection. Any account of ourselves will inevitably involve this, including the accounts we give that are ‘tests’ of how we have behaved, that consider to what extent our commitments to certain values are manifested in the actions we choose in the classroom.

Sartre argues that the irresolvable issue of bad faith arises because of the nature of faith itself. Faith is inherently paradoxical—it holds us in a position where we both believe and *not* believe since, in faith, we *know* that we *cannot know* for certain that what we believe is true. In the same way, there is something paradoxical about how we account for ourselves, our attempts to be frank and sincere knowing that the explanations themselves are taken on faith. Much of these accounts we offer must therefore be taken on faith, or indeed, ‘trust’—the trust that is directed at teachers from the wider public who hold them accountable, and the trust that is directed towards themselves. This is not a trust that is cultivated on the basis of certain capacities to be ‘accurate’ in one’s account (for example, in the use of evidence). Rather, it is a trust that is much more akin to how we meet people on a personal level, a trust in their ability to use their own language to talk about their own practices - in short, to account for themselves *on their own terms*. Trust is, of course, risky, but it is an intimate part of what we do as humans, and thus, unless we think of teaching as a purely technical endeavour, it is also a part of what we must give those we put in charge of education.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give

⁸ De Beauvoir (2018) explores how one might *live* with this ambiguity in her work on *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Ball, S. J. 2019. A horizon of freedom: using Foucault to think differently about education and learning. *Power and Education* 11 (2): 132–144.
- Brady, A. M. 2022. Early career anxieties in the university: the crisis of institutional bad faith. In *The promise of the university*, ed. A. Mahon, 67–78. Cham, Switzerland: *reclaiming humanity, humility and hope*, Springer.
- Brady, A. M. 2020a. From the reflective to the post-personal in teaching. *Teoría de la Educación: Revisita Interuniversitaria* 32 (1): 55–71.
- Brady, A. M. 2020b. Struggling teachers and the recognition of effective practice. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 54 (1): 183–200.
- Brady, A. M. 2020c. Response and responsibility: rethinking accountability in education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12501>.
- Brady, A. M. 2019. Anxiety of performativity and anxiety of performance: self-evaluation as bad faith. *Oxford Review of Education* 45 (5): 605–618.
- Brady, A. M. 2016. The regime of self-evaluation: self-conception for teachers and schools. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 64 (4): 523–541.
- Biesta, G. 2009. Good education in an age of measurement: on the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 21: 33–46.
- Biesta, G. 2007. Why “what works” won’t work: evidence-based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research. *Educational Theory* 57 (1): 1–22.
- Butler, J. 2009. *Giving an account of oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Catalano, J. S. 1983. Good and bad faith: weak and strong notions. In *Sartre & Psychology: Studies in Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*, ed. K. Hoeller, 79–90. New Jersey, USA: Humanities Press.
- De Beauvoir, S. 2018. *The ethics of ambiguity*. New York: Open Road Media. Originally published in 1947.
- Foucault, M. 2001. *Fearless Speech*, ed. J. Pearson Boston, MS: MIT Press.
- Flynn, T. R. 2004. Sartre and Foucault: a cross-generational exchange. *Sartre Studies International* 10 (2): 47–55.
- Foucault, M. 1987. *The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom: an interview with Michel Foucault on January 20th, 1984 conducted by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, Helmut Becker and Alfredo Gomez-Müller*. London: SAGE Publishing Ltd. S. J. J. D. Gauthier, trans.
- Frowe, I. 2010. Professional trust. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 53 (1): 34–53.
- Gillam, C. 2013. Sartre in dialogue with Foucault: towards a post-existentialism, *Political Studies Association Conference*, Cardiff [online]. Available at: https://www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/965_486.pdf [Accessed 14 May 2020].
- Grek, S., and J. Lindgren. 2015. *Governing by inspection*. eds. S. Grek, and J. Lindgren, London: Routledge.
- Hodgson, N. 2010. ‘Voicing the self: Foucault, Cavell, and an ethics of citizenship’. In *Happiness and personal growth: dialogue between philosophy, psychology, and comparative education*. Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto University Press.
- Leask, I. 2011. Beyond subjection: notes on the later Foucault and education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44 (1): 57–73.
- Lackey, Jennifer, and Ernest Sosa, eds. 2006. *The epistemology of testimony*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Perryman, J., M. Maguire, A. Braun, and S. Ball. 2018. Surveillance, governmentality and moving the goalposts: the influence of Ofsted on the work of schools in a post-panoptic era. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 66 (2): 145–163.
- Perryman, J., S. J. Ball, A. Braun, and M. Maguire. 2017. Translating policy: governmentality and the reflective teacher. *Journal of Education Policy*, 32:6, 745–756, DOI.
- Sartre, J. P. 2008. *Between existentialism and Marxism*. London: Verso Books.
- Sartre, J. P. 2011. *Transcendence of the ego: a sketch for phenomenological description*, S. Richmond, trans., London: Routledge. Originally published in 1937.

- Sartre, J. P. 1964. *Les mots, or "words"*. I. ed. Clephane (trans.) Middlesex, England: Penguin Classics.
- Sartre, J. P. 1943. *Being and nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology*. (H. E. Barnes, trans.), London and New York: Routledge Classics.
- Sartre, J. P. 1938. *Nausea*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Seitz, B. 2004. Sartre, Foucault and the subject of philosophy's situation. *Sartre Studies International* 10 (2): 92–105.
- Whitmore, J. J. 2006. "The double-writing of "les mots": Sartre's "words" as performative philosophy. *Sartre Studies International* 12 (2): 61–82.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.