Chapter 9: Towards an Existentialist Account of Teaching

I begin the final chapter with an account from my own experiences of teaching. The purpose of this account is not to provide an 'accurate' depiction of teaching, nor to generalise the experiences of all teachers. Rather, it should serve as a point of resonance that demonstrates how and in what way Sartre's ideas make sense in the classroom. Following this, I explore two ways in which this – and indeed any – account of teaching might be understood. Firstly, I discuss 'technicist' forms of account-giving that, with the aim of cultivating evaluative dispositions perpetuate an underlying assumption that connects accountability with accuracy. In contrast to this, I introduce what might be termed as 'existential' forms of account-giving, garnered from an engagement with Sartre. Ultimately, this can be thought of as an ongoing project of engagement with one's responses in the classroom, and with the commitments made manifest in these responses and with one's responsibility in light of this. Notwithstanding the complexity that this latter form of account-giving involves, new understandings of accountability and account-giving in teaching are invited, not as an imposed requirement or a skill, but as a way of being in the classroom.

Key words: accountability, teaching, responsibility, evidence-based education, existentialism, Sartre

"Look," he said, with sudden vehemence, "why don't you put *yourself* into your writing? You're more interesting than all these Renées and Lisas." The blood flushed up in my cheeks; it was a hot day, and as usual the place was full of smoke and noise. I felt as though someone had banged me hard on the heard. "I'd never dare to do that," I said. To put my raw, undigested self into a book, to lose perspective, compromise myself – no, I couldn't do it, I found the whole idea terrifying. "Screw up your courage," Sartre told me, and kept pressing the point.

Beauvoir (1994, p. 380) on a conversation with Sartre prior to 'Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter'.

9.1 An Anecdotal Account

When I was 19, I entered my first secondary school classroom as a teacher. I had done some work in primary schools before then, but this felt entirely different. For one, most of the students looked to be about the same age as me. I had been at university for about two years at that stage. I had studied lots of pedagogical strategies and tips, and like many teachers, I had a fairly good idea of what these different strategies meant and what they hoped to achieve. But I'm not sure how explicit they were in my thinking once I began to speak in front of the class. I had carefully planned my lesson beforehand, writing out neatly what I was going to do, how long each activity was going to take, what sort of approaches I would incorporate and why. This wasn't because I was particularly organised, but because it was needed for my teaching portfolio submitted at the end of my placement. These plans offered me a sense of security, however, and I continued writing them even when I didn't need to, just as a precaution in case I completely forgot what I was there to do – a worry that, of course, never materialised.

The feeling I had when walking into the classroom for the first time wasn't one of excitement or hopefulness. It wasn't exactly anxiety either, except when I allowed myself to overthink what might or might not happen, or when I paid too much attention to that slight feeling of tightness in my stomach. Rather, it was a strangeness that I felt - something to do with the idea that I would adopt a role I had witnessed in the many years of my schooling, that these students were going to be looking at me in the same way that I had looked upon my past teachers – indeed, that I would appear to them *as a teacher*. It was strange to think that, as soon as the students walked into the room, I would immediately be recognised as a teacher, and that if I appeared in another room in another building with other strangers, I wouldn't get the same response. I had certainly dressed for the occasion. Looking back, it was clear that I had in my mind what *my* teachers used to wear, and the clothes I wore were just used for teaching, as if I needed those clothes in order to appear 'teacherly'.

I remember that I stood at the front of the class and wrote my name on the board. I imagined that scene from *Freedom Writers* where Erin Gruwell accidentally wipes the chalk on her backside, making the students laugh at her. I was careful not to repeat the same mistake. I had completely forgotten that strategy of somehow writing on the board in a straight line without having your back to the students (something I still cannot manage today). I later learned why there was so much emphasis on this in my training. As soon as I looked away, it was as if a whole other group of people would appear behind me. We were all playing a kind of game, where no one was really being sincere with each other – me trying my best to appear 'teacherly', the students trying their best to look *just* serious enough so as not to appear mischievous, but *just* mischievous enough so as not to not appear overly serious. When I looked away, I could sense their quickened moves, the way they threw glances at each other, the stifled whispers, the crumpled paper as it flew through the air, some of the students looking on at those 'class clowns' and sniggering awkwardly, others petulantly annoyed. Often, the charade was difficult to keep up. A student would say something funny but inappropriate, and I would have a really hard time trying not to laugh. I'm not sure why I *didn't* just laugh, but instead, I had the same feeling as when you're trying not to laugh at a funeral, where suppressing it seems to make things even more irresistibly funny, though you're not quite sure why.

Once the students arrived in the room, I knew I had to just start, that I would most certainly feel less awkward than if I just stood there. So, I briefly introduced myself and the topic we were all here to look at. I seemed to be somewhat unconsciously enacting the idea that you shouldn't smile before Christmas, something I held onto quite steadfastly in my earlier years. I most certainly did not command much respect in any immediate sense – I'm not sure I did for the whole time I was there. The students were 'harmless', though cheeky and disruptive. They came up with fake names. They talked over me about irrelevant topics. I even had another teacher walk in and loudly say that she thought there wasn't 'anyone' in the room (ironic given that she could clearly hear the students in the hall – of course, by 'anyone', she meant a teacher). I had expected this to a degree – I used to be one of those students, and the university was very thorough about preparing us for this. They made it sound almost like a secret rite of passage, one that was difficult to explain but would be understood more fully once we had gone through it ourselves. I remember afterwards that I felt immensely shameful of how it was that I used to behave in class. But in that moment, I just pressed on as best I could, hypervigilant of myself as a body standing in front of others, with this anonymous crowd looking at me, evaluating to what extent I would live up to the image of the 'trainee teacher' in their minds. When the class finally ended, I felt a sense of relief. I realise that much of what I like about teaching is that feeling, in fact – not a relief that it is over exactly, but just that I could finally be 'myself' again.

During the lesson, I found myself parroting phrases that teachers used to say to me, mimicking their gestures. All of these intricate habits were not only premised on representations of teaching that I had come across, but also because of the ways in which I

imagined that I was *seen* by the students, and my interpretation of what I needed to do in order to *seen as* 'teacherly'. I had entered in the room as the category of 'teacher', and with that, all of the expectations that are attached – for some students, a knowledgeable, older other who had life experience and subject expertise; for others, an undeserving authority figure, who really only wanted a group of people to boss around. Rightly or wrongly, I implicitly *felt* that this was the way I was being looked at, and because of that, I unthinkingly inhabited the role that was in part defined by my own experience of being a student, by what I had learned in university, by teachers I had seen in films. It wasn't that I *couldn't* have acted in any other way. It was that I was so absorbed in 'myself as a body' in that moment that I didn't really think of myself as responding to the situation. Of course, I *was* responding, and I *am responding to it now*.

Is it even possible to know with any certainty the meaning behind my gestures in the classroom, or the extent to which I was sincere about what I felt? I may write about it retrospectively as if that is the case, because I know on some level that teachers *should* be sincere about what they do. But teaching is something I came to value much later in life. Despite what I felt about it then, it's difficult for me to not think about my early years as valuable or formative or even profound in some small way.

When I watch TV documentaries or films about teaching today, especially those centred on teachers just starting out, I get mixed feelings. On the one hand, I find it quite moving to see teachers on screen because I recognise myself in those moments. But I also know that there is an undeniable voyeurism perpetuated by these shows. I'm not always convinced by how the teacher is represented, nor the fact that the show invites armchair judgements from an anonymous crowd of onlookers, judgements that are not necessarily spontaneous but are cultivated through the manipulation of equally anonymous directors and editors. There is something potentially harmful in these overly romanticised ideas about teaching in fictional films like 'Dead Poet's Society', 'Freedom Writers', perhaps even comedies like 'School of Rock' and 'Sister Act'. I have also noticed an increase in TV 'documentaries' about schools that work in the same way – the 'fly on the wall' look at the classroom, the trials and tribulations of being a teacher in today's world, the important *and* (eventually) rewarding task that teaching is. Their narrative is recipe-like. The teacher enters the classroom for the first time, overly optimistic about what can be achieved. Confronted with 'difficult' students who do not share the teachers' perkiness, contestation continues until, on the brink of breaking point, the students finally see that the teacher *does* care about them, and that what they are teaching them is relevant to their lives. But in my experience, teaching was always much more like Sisyphus pushing that rock up the mountain only to watch it fall back down. For Camus (2005), Sisyphus is heroic in his ability to recognise this absurdity but to keep going despite this. Is this, perhaps, where the 'heroism' of teaching lies?

There is one example that particularly springs to mind for me – an episode from 'Tough Young Teachers' (BBC Three, 2014)[1]. In one scene, we see Claudenia, a trainee science teacher, trying to enact what she imagined would be an effective strategy to demonstrate the phenomenon of sound. Claudenia is attempting something 'whacky' (according to the programme's narrator), involving a select number of students standing in front of their peers and re-enacting how sound vibrates and travels from its point of origin to its receiver. Now displaced from their usual spots behind their desks, the students start to act up. They are clearly frustrated, as indicated by one student who remarks that the task 'didn't make no sense', and with another accusing Claudenia of '[making them] look like idiots'. Claudenia, in turn, becomes visibly frustrated herself. She tries to power through, but ultimately caves into her perceived failure of the situation, and the awkwardness becomes all the more palpable when

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[1] 'Tough Young Teachers' follows the lives of trainee teachers undergoing their 'Teach First' placements in the UK.

the students start to mockingly applaud her and their peers for their effort. At one point, another teacher, Mr. McDonald, enters the classroom to check if Claudenia is having any problems. Through his 'death stare', he manages to force the attention of some of the students. But this is only momentary victory, since once he leaves, things go back to how they were. It's likely that Claudenia felt even more awkward given that he had (unintentionally) undermined her even further.[2] The scene ends with Claudenia visibly upset, stumbling over her words as she asks the students to pack up, later telling a colleague that she doesn't know what she is doing, and that the students also do not know what she is doing. She then relegates the entire lesson as a waste of everyone's time.

The scene is particularly poignant given that, the day before, Claudenia experienced a really great teaching moment, where she also tried something 'whacky' (filling balloons with different gases and putting a flame next to them so the students could hear the different 'explosions'). She was excited, the students were excited, and even another teacher who walked in when she heard the 'racket' in the hall, like Mr McDonald had, *also* appeared to be excited. But such are the highs and the lows of teaching, the uncertainty of how each lesson will pan out despite our best planning efforts and ideas, of how we will feel about ourselves afterwards, and the need to press on regardless of all of this. In that sense, Sisyphus may feel a momentary relief when he lets go of the rock, but his true heroism is in the way that he continues to push it back up that mountain.

Analysing Accounts

> She explained to me that a suitably programmed computer can read a novel in a few minutes and record the list of all the words contained in the text, in order of frequency. "That way I can have an already completed reading at hand," Lotaria says, "with an incalculable saving of time. What is the reading of a text, in fact, except the recording of certain thematic recurrences, certain insistences of forms and meanings? An electronic reading supplies me with a list of the frequencies, which I have only to glance at to form an idea of the problems the book suggests in my critical study. Naturally, at the highest frequencies the list records countless articles, pronouns, particles, but I don't pay them any attention. I head straight for the words with the richest meaning; they can give me a fairly precise notion of the book."

This passage from Calvino's (1992, p. 186) novel, *If on a Winter's Night A Traveller* concerns Lotaria, a student of literature, employing what might be called a 'technicist' method for reading an account (in this case, a novel). Lotaria, it seems, understands the 'true meaning' of an account as correlating to the frequency of repeated words. In doing so, she is undeniably missing out on much of the nuance and depth that reading the narrative as a whole has to offer. In reducing the text to frequencies of words, she is also narrowing her field of vision such that these wider and more implicit complexities are taken out of frame. This is akin to looking through a microscope, which 'effectively downgrades or even erases the embeddedness that is a feature of our normal experience of the world… [prioritising] what can be made explicit and in effect [denying] the ineffable' (Blake *et al.*, 2000, p. 7). Indeed, the very technology she employs – the computer as well as the method itself - changes not only the meaning of the story but also the very nature of what it means for her *engage* with an account, where it is the computer rather than the reader that generates the criteria for truth and meaning in the story.

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[2] It is important to mention that Claudenia is not just a young, inexperienced teacher but also a black female in a subject that, traditionally, both women and BME teachers are underrepresented in. The fact that Mr McDonald is a white older male might also have something to do with the automatic respect he seemed to generate. This is, of course, a belated explanation for the students' behaviour, but it nevertheless points to the idea that our relationship with others in part depends on the ways in which we are characterised by virtue of our race, gender, and 'place' within a particular subject area.

At a later point in the novel, the writer, Silas, with whom Lotaria shares her 'method', accounts for the self-consciousness that this revelation makes him feel:

> The idea that Lotaria reads my books in this way creates some problems for me. Now, every time I write a word, I see it spun around by the electronic brain, ranked according to its frequency, next to other words whose identity I cannot know, and so I wonder how many times I have used it, I feel the whole responsibility of writing weigh on those isolated syllables, I try to imagine what conclusions can be drawn from the fact that I have used this word once or fifty times. Maybe it would be better for me to erase it… But whatever other word I try to use seems unable to withstand the test… Perhaps instead of a book I could write a list of words, in alphabetical order, an avalanche of isolated words which expresses that truth I still do not know, and from which the computer, reversing its program, could construct the book, my book (Calvino, 1992, pp. 188-189).

In what sense does Silas represent an anxiety of performativity that account-giving might invite on the part of account-givers expected to employ technicist norms of communication? To what extent do we rely on these mechanisms to reveal the 'truth' of what we do, much as Silas relies on the technology to construct the meaning of his book? And to what extent might this alienate us from what we experience, and from our attempts to capture this *in our own terms*? Much as Silas' approach to account-giving is also altered by the ways in which he suspects his novel will be 'received', account-giving teachers also alter their accounts along the same lines.

Of course, I wrote my anecdote at the beginning of this chapter knowing that it was going to be read, and I most likely would have not written it in that way had I known that parents, or inspectors, or even students would be the ones reading it. Perhaps it may have looked more like the 'best practice' example taken from the *School Self-Evaluation* website (Figure 8.1) below. In this sense, when one offers an account, there seems to be an inevitable 'performativity' involved, given that any account is offered within a scene of address. It also seems to be inevitably tied to the expectations of one's role within a given context – a teacher reflecting on the existential underpinnings of her practice, or one describing her practices within accountability regimes.

Figure 8.1: Best Practice Example from the School Self-Evaluation Website (DES, 2016a, p. 4):

Teachers' practice
- At a staff meeting in August 2013 the whole staff reflected on teaching and learning using the SSE guidelines under the three themes learner outcomes (pages 30 & 31), learning experiences (student's engagement in learning – pages 34 & 35) and teachers' practice (teaching approaches – pages 40 & 41). The whole staff then used the overview of good practice on page 25 to reach a consensus on strengths, areas for improvement and priorities for action and recorded this on the staff reflection sheet on page 84 of the SSE guidelines. Based on this feedback, the core team designed a survey on teaching approaches and this was administered on-line using google forms (see appendix 2). After analysis of both the teacher & student survey by the whole staff at a meeting in September 2013, an anomaly appeared in relation to pair/group work, so all staff agreed to use a rubric designed by the core team for self-assessment of their teacher practice in relation to group work. Staff also agreed that it made sense to look at the key skills communicating and working with others as they tie in very well with the current focus on literacy. Consequently as part of subject department planning, teachers agreed to audit their teaching approaches through the lens of these key skills using a template provided by PDST (see appendix 3).

In my anecdote, it is also certainly the case that the account itself was influenced by ideas garnered from my engagement with Sartre, and as such, there are Sartrian 'themes' that may be abstracted from the text and analysed in a similar way to how Lotaria 'reads' novels. The account I offered was produced in this way *because* of my engagement with Sartre, and if I were to account for the same experience years ago, it would most likely look very different. Perhaps, since I have now acquired new theoretical, philosophical and linguistic lenses, I am

therefore better equipped in offering a more robust account of my practices, of myself, and of others in the classroom. Perhaps Sartre's theory allows me access to previously unarticulated aspects of classroom practices. Whilst the account I offer in my anecdote is not supported by what might count as 'evidence', it may nevertheless be seen as an improvement from the account I *would* have offered as an inexperienced teacher unacquainted with theoretical understandings of my practice. Arguably, this same logic exists in the 'capacity-building' agenda of school self-evaluation. So, on what basis is one account better or worse than others?

In one sense, the ability to 'distance' myself from my practices through an application of theory therefore allows me to formulate a more 'objective' account of them. This is very much what is implied in both school self-evaluation and, indeed, in more technicist forms of account-giving. These methods therefore serve to narrow my focus on what seemingly suppresses the 'subjective' in my account, focusing instead on what is explicit and measurable.[3] Lotaria's method might invite an assumption that what she is doing is more akin to a 'factual' endeavour, one that replaces human responses to stories with an automated technology that accesses and presents the 'brute' information in the text. And yet, even though Lotaria's method seems to invite this 'detachment' of the reader, the 'objective/subjective' divide this implies cannot be sustained. The method itself and her choice to use it inevitably reflects certain values – the importance of efficiency and simplicity, or perhaps of the need to remove 'reader bias' from the account such as to focus solely on what the writer said. Indeed, the nature of her project influences the means by which she reads the text, and by sharing this method with Silas, the means also inadvertently influence the ways that the account is given. How might we understand this in relation to technicist and existentialist accounts?

In the first part of this chapter, I will point to what I see are the main issues with practices like self-evaluation, which serves as an example of the kinds of 'technicist' account-giving expected of teachers within wider accountability regimes – namely, a norm of communication that prioritises accuracy, and the cultivation of 'distrustful' dispositions that perpetuate this. I will refer back to examples in Chapter 2, where this policy is initially outlined. Following this, I will introduce what it means to think about account-giving in existentialist terms, garnered from the ideas explored in Part II of the book. This involves seeing account-giving as an ongoing practice that forces us to continually (re)examine our commitments as teachers, and that encourage us to see responsibility in terms of our responses in the classroom. Ultimately, I argue that this latter form of account-giving opens up new ways to think about teaching in ways that do not reduce but instead embrace the lived complexities that being a teacher involves.

9.2 Technicist Accounts

In Chapter 2, we explored how the ways in which teaching is accounted for in practices like self-evaluation might be called 'technicist', in part due to the conceptualisation of teaching as that which can be analysed in explicit ways through the collection and examination of 'data'. As Biesta (2009; 2014; 2017) and others have argued, the over-emphasis on teaching as a measurable activity brings about a 'technological model of professional action'. This involves only considering instrumental values in educational evaluation without the more ultimate ones that underpin why we educate in the first place, or which interventions may be considered desirable.

Technicist accounts are broadly associated with the wider discourse of scientism that has pervaded the educational sphere in recent years (e.g. Halliday, 1998; Johnson, 2014;

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[3] Of course, my use of Sartre might be thought of in the same way - *because* of Sartre, I now focus on aspects of my practice that would have not been brought to light had I engaged with another thinker. I do not wish to deny that the anecdotal account I offer is latent with existentialist underpinnings. But as mentioned, Sartre serves as a 'touchstone' for *engaging* with my practices, and not for explaining them.

Mooney Simmie *et al.*, 2017), as caricatured in reference to Lotaria's method for reading. In simple terms, scientism focuses on the reduction of lived experience to what is calculable and most efficiently monitored and directed, employing mechanistic techniques to evaluate practices. As we saw in Chapter 3, the existentialist movement in part sought to address this, particularly the assumption that lived experience *can* be neatly categorised and explained through direct and explicit forms of observation and analysis. Technicist models fail to recognise that there is always a pre-reflective 'valuation' in every situation, where the meaning of that situation is *already* informed by one's fundamental project, and that what we pinpoint as educationally '(in)effective' hinges upon this – both as the writer and as the reader of accounts. In short: since educational practices cannot be understood in relation to 'pure objectivity', but as the ongoing product of the experiences of all of those involved in concrete classroom practices, the technicist logic that underpins accounts such as self-evaluation are fundamentally reductive.

Despite this, account-giving practices such as those outlined in the *Self-Evaluation Guidelines* seek to provide a language that perpetuates this technicist conception of teaching, where statements of effective practice serve not only as benchmarks against which teaching can be measured, but are also actively and continuously recycled within the accounts of teaching themselves. The report in Figure 8.1 serves as a good example of this, where much of the language employed to describe teaching comes directly from the guidelines. Just as Silas' reaction to Lotaria represents, these methods for account-giving also affect the practice of teaching itself. By making the teacher attuned to what counts as '(in)effective' in her practice, and by encouraging her to focus her accounts solely on explicit correlations with standards of effective practice, her classroom conduct is also narrowed. Thus, in attempting to disrupt technicism in teaching, we must examine not only the content of such policies, but also the ways in which they affect both the accounts of teaching as well as its practices.

Language and Accuracy

The language of educational policies is often clear, coherent and neat, and in order to achieve this, a reduction in its descriptions of teaching is necessary (DES, 2016b). This reduction also aims to ensure that the descriptions of teaching are standardised, as well as the ways in which we might recognise (in)effective practices. Often, this language is couched within a 'school effectiveness' discourse and driven by the principles of evidence-based research. By developing 'data literacy' in staff, the assumption is that they can then provide more robust accounts of their own strengths and weaknesses, and to set targets for improvement. As we explored in Chapter 2, since this technicist logic certainly seems to lead to more efficient and simplified ways of recognising and accounting for effective practice, it has often been hierarchised as the most accurate and, indeed, trustworthy.

Nevertheless, this technicist logic harbours a number of problematic assumptions. For one, it relies on a dichotomy between 'objective' and 'subjective', premised on a broader separation of 'fact' and 'value'. Such dualisms are not present in the lived experiences of teaching nor the accounts that we offer thereafter. Indeed, since any account that I give of my situation is *already* framed by particular values, this affects both the account that is offered as well as my interpretation of the so-called 'data' I use to do so. If I attempt to account for the extent to which my practice effects the engagement of my students, then in order to do this, I have already identified on some level what desirable engagement might look like. Perhaps this is evidenced by the students actively participating in class, raising their hands and offering their own perspectives on the topic. Or perhaps engagement counts as exactly the opposite – students *not* speaking but instead listening attentively to the teacher. The ways in which I value engagement thus impacts what is brought to light in the classroom, and whilst the data that I

use to evidence this might appear to be purely objective, it is inevitably framed by my *responses* to the situation.

In the technicist logic of self-evaluation, however, the teacher is expected to detach herself from her practice by assuming the role of 'evaluator', in pursuit of the kind of objectivity and robustness that would make the account trustworthy. Importantly, if we are to understand Sartre well, the self that is analysed in this context is what he calls the self 'in the world', i.e. the self that appears to us as essential and persistent, and yet is, in fact, continually (re)produced through our ongoing responses to the situations in which we find ourselves. This includes the situation of self-evaluation practice, where the self 'under evaluation' is thus also produced in part through the evaluation itself. Indeed, what we recognise as 'effective' does not correlate to some brute reality in the world – it is produced in line with the frameworks designed to recognise effectiveness, as well as the ways in which those frameworks are interpreted with this purpose in mind. The assumption that a teacher can somehow separate herself from the practice of account-giving is therefore a fallacy, since it fails to account for the fact that she is inevitably implicated in the process of evaluation. Indeed, the teacher *produces* herself as 'an (in)effective teacher' through the accounts of her practice she gives. Her very identification of what is (in)effective came about *because* she was implicated in the process, a process that in turn produces her 'self' as a particular kind of teacher.

Ultimately, however, the technicist logic of account-giving is premised on a debased understanding of 'truth as accuracy' – i.e. that truth is what corresponds to the apprehension of 'brute facts' without the presence of 'subjective bias/values' – and so too the basis for what would make this account trustworthy. This in turn narrows the focus of account-giving only on what is amendable to measurement, and therefore explicit in practices. In doing so, it puts the more implicit aspects of lived experiences out of focus. As explored throughout the book, these implicit and immeasurable experiences are both manifold and complex: the ways in which we encounter not only what is present but absent in our experiences, for instance, or the immediate and *pre*-reflective responses that we have in relation to the world, ourselves and others. These implicit experiences also include the values that are embedded in our decision-making, and the fact that we are *always* deciding on, interpreting and responding to the situation we are thrown into - responses that, in fact, bring those very situations to light. Indeed, there is so much that goes on in the concrete and lived experience of the classroom that *cannot* be accounted for in any simple or straightforward way. Yet, there are certainly ways that we might *try* to articulate them, not with a focus on accuracy[4], but instead with more (existential) sensitivity and sincerity. I will return to this in the final sections of the chapter.

The technicist logic that underpins these kinds of account-giving, however, not only deny the implicit aspects of practice that are difficult to put into words. They also fail to appreciate the significance of the fact that our explanations are always *after the fact* – namely, that they are constructed in order to explain experiences that have already taken place, and yet are not necessarily present in the moments that initially moved us to act. In order to explore this further, let us turn to one of the aims of self-evaluation practices – to cultivate 'evaluation literacy' in teachers.

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[4] Of course, this is not to suggest that we should *never* be concerned with accuracy in accounts, nor that all accounts are of equal merit along these lines. It does not suggest that accuracy cannot be 'approached', nor that accounts should not be open to interrogation, particularly when there are high stakes involved. But for such concerns to be part of the conversation, the instrumental value of those accounts needs to be considered – i.e. what those accounts are for, and what they seek to capture in light of this. In the case of accounting for teaching, perhaps accuracy is not the ultimate aim.

The Disposition of Account-Giving

Policies like self-evaluation, where one is required to reflect on or 'inspect' one's own practice, often imply that giving an accurate account is not something that comes 'naturally' to teachers. Rather, accurate account-giving should be understood as a *cultivated* disposition (Peterson, 2016). Key to this cultivation is the initiation into particular norms of communication – the so-called 'language of evaluation' that seemingly allows for more robust, evidence-based accounts, or the increase in the 'data literacy' of teachers (DES, 2016b). Conventionally speaking, dispositions not only function as explanations for behaviour, but also allow us to predict (and direct) future action. The basic idea behind the cultivating dispositions is premised on this – that if a person is equipped with a 'reflective' disposition, they are more likely to recognise (in)effective practices and act on them accordingly, both now and in the future. Importantly, cultivating dispositions is not merely about cultivating desirable behaviour but also *desirable persons* – in this instance, the often lauded 'reflective practitioner'.

Sartre (2011; 2018), however, offers us another lens. For him, dispositions *do* relate to the ways that people act. But rather than determining who that person 'is' or 'will be', these dispositions are constructed *on the basis of* actions, which in turn, *produces* that person as being disposed in particular ways. A person may be led to believe that they have certain dispositions by reflecting on how they have behaved. Perhaps I am more disposed towards thinking of myself in terms of others, hence the reason why I seem to feel so exposed in my account of classroom experiences. Perhaps this disposition explains other areas of my lived experience – I am terribly performative on first dates, I am (and always will be) afraid of public speaking, and so on. But the 'assignment' of a disposition functions as an explanation of why I behave the way that I do after the fact - they are not constituted by brute facts that determine 'who I am', since who I am is always (re)produced, and always therefore *in question.*

For Sartre, the way we 'assign' fixed dispositions to ourselves can also lead to bad faith. Indeed, thinking of ourselves as being a 'particular kind of person' can often limit us in acting otherwise. It can also be used as an active excuse in order to avoid taking responsibility for future behaviour. For example: I categorise myself as an 'anxious person before others' based on my previous experiences, and as a result, I think of myself as fundamentally *unable* to speak in public. This becomes a reasonable explanation that I then perpetuate about myself (e.g. by never speaking in public) such that it comes to further concretise who I am. And yet, the very notion that who I am is fixed in this way is a myth, one that denies my fundamental freedom to *be otherwise.*

What is particularly dangerous about this line of thinking is that it can lead to a narrowing of our accounts. In Chapter 6, we considered the ways in which institutional bad faith might do this - for example, in implicitly understanding teachers as objects of analysis, as predictable and as malleable in line with standards of effective practice, teachers are then limited in accounting for (or perhaps, even thinking about) themselves in other ways. In self-evaluation or other forms of self-reflective practice, teachers are responsible for moulding *themselves* in this way, and are thus tasked with accounting for themselves in such a way as to achieve this. This is the reason why self-evaluation aims at cultivating a specific *kind* of account-giving – one that engages with evidence, that refer to statements of effective practice, and that ultimately encourages teachers to understand themselves in these same essentialist ways.

And yet, all of this denies the extent to which teachers are present as subjects in both the classroom *and* in their accounts – as underpinned not by a set of dispositions but a fundamental lack. It is this very 'lack', as we will see further below, that makes the classroom appear as meaningful in the first place. One aspect of teaching that emphasises this, perhaps, is in how difficult it can be to simply 'discard' one's role as a teacher once one exits the

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classroom, or indeed, to 'discard' any other sense of self we have before entering.[5] Particularly when I was starting out, I had to work hard to maintain the image of the 'effective teacher' in front of my students. This very struggle to suppress my vulnerability before others is also indicative of the inevitable ways my personhood was always on display: the fact that I am defined by others in ways over which I have very little control, simply because I am embodied in the room and am characterised by particular social expectations. As a teacher, however, one is always *already more* than the neat definitions of their role. And yet, in technicist accounts of one's practices, one is given little space – or, indeed *trust* - to think about their practices or themselves as beyond this.

Cultivated Distrust?

As explored in Chapter 8, the concept of 'trust' works in a similar way to (bad) faith. Of course, trust is not inherently bad – in fact, it is very much a necessary component of navigating our existence, much like bad faith, in fact. But there *are* problematic examples of trust. Trusting can sometimes mean 'resigning' ourselves to situations, a trust that therefore tempers anxiety when faced with the ways in which we are always responsible for – or, indeed, *responding* - to situations. In Chapter 8, we discussed how trust that is based solely on our capacities to be 'accurate' (but perhaps not necessarily sincere) can also be problematic – not only in education, but more broadly as well. Trust in the educational context implies both of these – for example, the idea that we can (only) trust a teacher's judgement about herself if she uses adequate forms of evidence, since this in turn pacifies the anxiety we feel about letting her make so-called 'subjective' judgements (Brady, 2019). In Calvino's novel, perhaps Silas' anxiety of being exposed to the Other can be tempered by allowing the computer to 'construct' his account. Teachers may think in similar ways about their *own* accounts of effective practice.

Whilst measurement culture in schools is thought to exemplify a *lack* of trust (e.g. McNamara and O'Hara, 2008), it is simultaneously a redefinition of what is trustworthy. This is a trust that conflicts with a more everyday sense of the term, one that inevitably involves risk and uncertainty. Much like bad faith, this trust, premised on a debased understanding of accuracy, is a project that must be continually willed into existence. For Sartre (2018, p. 113), bad faith is possible because of its peculiar 'non-persuasive evidence' – evidence that is questionable to begin with, but that later becomes the premise upon which we believe in something, such that this original (dubious) evidence enters to the 'background' of our thinking. This can make it difficult to gauge the extent to which we *are* in bad faith, thus allowing bad faith to endure. Technicist accounts and their related capacity-building agenda may be said to operate in the same way. They begin by offering clear accounts of teaching, accounts that are portrayed as 'trustworthy' because they are based on evidence or 'common sense'. Despite such evidence being questionable in the first place, it nevertheless forms the basis of 'profiles' against which educational effectiveness is measured. These 'trustworthy' profiles of effective practice then function as *further* evidence upon which the account must be based. Paradoxically, however, this kind of trust is willed into existence *on the basis of questionable evidence*. In order to expose this, there therefore needs to be a disruption of sorts, one that not only calls into question profiles of effective practice but also the centrality of this kind of 'technicist' trust.

Before turning to what is referred to as an 'existential' account of teaching, it might be useful to think through the implications of this technicist trust by drawing on Sartre's account

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[5] This is perhaps also true of the waiter in Sartre's (2018) example of 'bad faith'. Indeed, the waiter was also *already* exposed as a person, despite his attempts to suppress this through enacting exactly what he believed his 'role' required. This is what makes the role so difficult to sustain – for example, when confronted by a rude customer, it is difficult to maintain composure in the way that waiters 'are supposed to'. Waitering also involves a sense of vulnerability, one that Sartre does not seem to appreciate in his example.

of psychoanalysis, something we touched upon in Chapter 6. For Sartre (2008; 2018), psychoanalysis understands the patient as someone who does not know their own drives and dispositions. Rather, these dispositions can only be identified by another who 'accesses' them in part by observing to their behaviour. The patient therefore requires a 'technician' (i.e. the psychoanalyst) to act as a mediator between those dispositions and himself. For Sartre, the issue is seeing these dispositions as innate rather than as another's interpretation of 'me' in the world. Their account is not necessarily (more) accurate (in the sense that it might more or less correspond to brute facts about a person), but rather, it is purely the Other's own response to the situation in which I appear, a situation brought to light by their fundamental values. Despite this, I become more and more reliant on the psychoanalyst for the purpose of understanding myself, and I increasingly distrust my *own* intuitions. Analogously, one could argue that teachers who are embroiled within the technicist understanding of trust in institutional settings therefore experience a similar kind of *cultivated distrust* – of their own intuitions, of their own judgements, and indeed, of their ability to give an account of these *on their own terms*. But if we were to reconceptualise trust – a trust based on an ongoing pursuit to be *sincere* with ourselves rather than a pursuit of some debased sense of accuracy - might this then call for a change, not only in terms of how we describe and measure teaching, but also in how we account for it?

9.3 Towards an Existentialist Account

As you can probably imagine, it is not that an existentialist account is more 'accurate' than the technicist model. In fact, an existentialist model of account-giving is inherently flawed if we are to evaluate it in this way. Where it *does* differ is in its efforts to capture more fully the lived experiences of being a teacher. In many ways, it seeks to emulate the acts of parrhesia discussed in the previous chapter, where it understands risk and uncertainty as key components in the process of giving an account. This risk arises because of the inherent 'fictionalisation' in account-giving, and also because of the frankness and sincerity it requires, through which we continually situate ourselves in relation to the 'truth' of our accounts *even* if that means opening ourselves up to (self-)criticism. Existentialist account-giving, in this sense, requires courage. Importantly, there is no set 'product' or 'endpoint' for such accounts. Rather, they are *ongoing* practices, much like parrhesiastic practices involved in caring for oneself.

By considering the anecdotal account at the beginning of this chapter, one might be tempted to say that this is the kind found in narrative research - certainly, there are similarities between both approaches. Narrative research also focuses on lived experiences. Its concern is not with the 'factuality' of stories, but instead with how individuals organise and understand their own experiences through the accounts they give (Ricoeur, as cited in Josselson, 2012). In this sense, narrative research tends to focus more so on describing experiences rather than predicting or measuring their outcomes, with an emphasis on meaning-making rather than causation, interpretation rather than the more 'hard-lined' forms of analysis (Josselson, 2012; Kraatila, 2019). Narrative researchers start from the viewpoint that the individual is embedded within historical, cultural and social contexts. Since individual accounts exist within these webs of wider interconnected narratives, the role of the researcher is to disentangle these, often with a means to understand how the participant's self-identity is formed in response to 'grand narratives' imposed from the outside (Moen, 2006). Narrative research thus endeavours to capture human complexity in each situation, to interpretively account for varied perspectives in light of context, knowing that these accounts will differ depending on who is recounting, and indeed, who is interpreting such stories (Josselson, 2012).

For some narrative researchers, human existence is 'rendered meaningful' (Ricoeur, as cited in Polkinghorne, 1998) through account-giving, such that it is then open to more direct forms of observation. Of course, what is observed has already been 'selected' by those giving

the account and is therefore already infused with meaning. The researcher may look for patterns of meaning in what participants say, piecing together 'data' in order to connect what may seem to be unrelated aspects of the story – ultimately, to make what is invisible in the account visible for all parties. Although it attempts to see the events recounted from the perspective of the story-teller, narrative researchers also recognise the role that the researcher plays in this process – for instance, the way the story recounted exists under their gaze and is informed by their research project, where the meaning of the story is thus 'filtered through [their] mind' (Josselson, 2012, p. 5). Often, there is an implication that this is something to suppress as much as possible, however, with some authors (e.g. Moen, 2006) suggesting that the systematic deployment theory allows for the necessary distance between the researcher's position and their object of study.

Undoubtably, there are various kinds of narrative research, and with that, much discussion around how to assess the quality of narrative projects, as well as the systematic robustness of the methodology itself (e.g. Fraser, 2004; Atkinson and Delamont, 2006; Polkinghorne, 2007; Josselson, 2007; 2012). Whilst not the same as the debased sense of 'accuracy' discussed earlier, there is nevertheless a tendency to explain and to evaluate narratives with the assumption that, on some level, *a priori* explanations *can* be uncovered, i.e. the original motivations of the account-giver for both the ways in which they behaved and the ways in which they have interpreted this behaviour in their accounts. Indeed, there are attempts to ensure the 'correctness' of the stories told (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006; Kraatila, 2019), and to therefore remove researcher bias as much as possible. This involves not only paying attention to the account itself, but the implicit reasoning that may be 'invisible' to account-giver but apparent to the researcher. In light of this, some (e.g. Phillips, 1997) have even argued that the outsider's interpretation is often *more* accurate because storytellers are not always aware of or honest about the meaning they apply retrospectively to events. Indeed, there are several steps that make the process of narrative inquiry more or less correct, systematic and rigorous, with the assumption that certain explanations are closer to the truth than others, and that certain positions allow us to 'see' explanations in a more or less objective way. Importantly, these positions are demarcated by the capacity to apply a theoretical lens in one's analysis of an event (Moen, 2006). For instance, the narrative that I offer at the start might be seen as more 'rigorous' given the theoretical framework I am now able to apply, since this means that I am therefore better equipped in understanding and in explaining my own past experiences at an 'objective' distance.

Although narrative research thus recognises the 'fictionalisation' in account-giving, its aim is to navigate this by finding ways in which to 'detach' oneself as the analyst of the story. In doing so, it therefore represents an attempt to suppress or perhaps overcome fictionalisation and uncertainty rather than accepting it as an important part of the process. All of this seems reasonable, but it is distinct from the approach that I would like to take here. Ultimately, exploring the possibility of existentialist account-giving should not be understood as offering a methodology for doing so. Indeed, the anecdote that I offer at the start of this chapter (or perhaps the autobiographical account in Sartre's *Words* explored in the previous chapter), should not be thought of as a blueprint for account-giving, since this implies pre-defined steps or criteria in order to ensure that accounts are 'existentially robust', as well as explicit rules that are more likely implemented by those with some kind of training in 'existentialist thinking'. Not only this, but there are all sorts of ways that accounts seem to go *against* what might be deemed as 'existentialist' – my tendency to explain why I or Claudenia behaved the way we did, for instance, a tendency that appears difficult, if not impossible, to suspend.

Existentialist account-giving should instead be thought of as a *process* by which an account is offered, where the resulting account is continually (re)engaged with rather than a fixed 'product' that is measured against pre-set methodological criteria. Partly, this makes it

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difficult to think of the account purely in terms of accuracy, since it implies an ongoing openness and re-engagement that the certainty and the time-constraints of other forms of account-giving might not allow. Perhaps it may be thought of in terms of the more everyday sense of recounting an event, something that is inevitably accompanied by complexities, uncertainties, risks and paradoxes, and that alters as time progresses and as the story is retold in new situations. In this sense, its measure is not exactness but affectivity, where revisited accounts may change, for instance, not because the past itself has changed, but because our responses to the past are never entirely 'fixed'. Instead of aiming at producing harmony between the 'life as lived and experienced and life as told and rendered in text' (Goodson, 1992, as cited in Moen, 2006, p. 62), existentialist accounts are examples (and perhaps also the means) by which we navigate these complexities *without* necessarily resolving them, such as they are irresolvable in lived experience. This involves recognising that any attempt at resolving uncertainties in our accounts is a reduction couched in the present moment, and that any criteria for 'exactness' will also involve an interpretation not present in the moments recounted. In order to explore this further, let us consider what such accounts might involve – their challenges and their opportunities.

Language, Certainty and Commitment
When considering the writing of important thinkers associated with the existentialist movement, there are certain noticeable aspects of their language and style. Those associated with existentialist writings, for instance, are often fragmentary and disorienting in their accounts. These thinkers require an active engagement of the reader, who is then forced to take responsibility for their own interpretations of the words on the page. In *What is Literature?*, Sartre (2001) compares two types of writing - prose and poetry – and argues that the former is subject to scrutiny in accordance with the commitments signalled on the part of the writer, whilst the latter is not. Neither prose nor poetry need necessarily be concerned with 'technically accurate' depictions of the world. But prose *is* concerned with the instrumental use of language in order to convey a *committed response* to the world in a way that poetry is not.[6] These commitments might not remain unchanged throughout time, and yet an attempt to articulate them, rather than using rhetoric to mask one's true position, is nevertheless important. Of course, there are many ways that this might be done – including more committed forms of art or poetry. Paradoxically, whilst we may say that existentialist writers such as Kierkegaard wrote in a *non*-committal way (e.g. given his use of pseudonyms), his reason for doing so in order to provoke his reader is in reality a commitment to the value of writing *as necessarily provocative*. Sartre's autobiography also functions to demonstrate that in giving an account of oneself, one is also attempting to lay one's commitments bare, and to provoke the reader into doing the same.

But what about Sartre's early philosophical writing, the focus of our discussions throughout? Certainly, Sartre's aim is to offer an account of existence in its most basic conceptual form whilst also showing how this 'makes sense' in concrete, lived experiences. And whilst his writing often appears to be technical, the reason for this is distinct from the technicism inherent in many educational policies that describe teaching. As I've tried to show throughout the book, Sartre's accounts do not attempt to reduce lived experience to its most simplified format, but instead to open up new ways of accessing, understanding, and accounting for this and for oneself as a (conscious) human being. In this sense, his writing may not help to clarify our experiences, but showcases an attempt to capture experience in all its complexity and richness. This may also awaken the reader to the false consciousness by which

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[6] Poetry might also do this, but one would not necessarily be fazed if a poet decided to write in a non-committal way. Sartre argues that poets use language in a different way than prose writers – e.g. they are less concerned with being directly intelligible, or with sending a clear message to their readers.

they live - the overly simplistic ways in which we conceive of being a human, perhaps, or our failed but persistent attempts at certainty in 'knowing' ourselves. The purpose, therefore, is not merely to offer an explanation for human behaviour, but to incite the reader into taking responsibility for own thoughts and actions.

For Sartre, it is a failure to find certainty is a key aspect of being human. It is intimately apart of the ways in which consciousness projects itself onto the world, where our attempts to 'know' both the world and ourselves with certainty also involves recognising our inability to do so. In this sense, the drive for certainty is underpinned by a more fundamental *un*certainty. Importantly, existentialist accounts do not shy away from these uncertainties in the way that technicist models of account-giving do, where these more reductive models assume that lived experiences can be neatly categorised and are thus open to direct observation and analysis. This in itself is misguided, however, since if these accounts truly gave us access to the 'objective' data of lived experiences, how might we then explain the different responses that the same data invites? A sociological researcher might consider an account in a more context-sensitive way, seeking, perhaps, to understand the meaning that is constructed by the individual in relation to wider socio-historical discourses. The public may read the same accounts in different ways, depending on their own personal educational histories. Educational institutions, whose focus is often on holding individuals to account, may analyse information in reference to profiles of effectiveness. Even Lotaria, who uses a computer to make accounts more 'digestible', still *responded* to the data by homing in on words that have the 'richest meaning'. Indeed, one's interpretation of the account – as well as the very account itself - greatly impinges upon the perceived purposes and 'end-points' of account-giving, but also the fundamental commitments of those involved.

In existentialist account-giving, both the construction of an account as well as its reconstruction through our reading of it are essential and ongoing aspects of the process. The point is not that, in amalgamating the two, a more 'accurate' picture of what is going on is made available. Rather, by acknowledging both, one must accept that our interpretations are always belated, that any attempt to 'concretise' one description or analysis over another is not only misguided, but an example of bad faith. It is also to recognise that each account is situated within a scene of address, and that each interpretation of that account is distinct because of one's underlying fundamental projects. In accepting that the multivocal interpretations of accounts are not somehow 'closer' to the brute existence of the situation, we can begin to value this for entirely different reasons – as 'evidence' of the fundamental freedom and responsibility of *all* of those involved in the very process of account-giving itself.

The Tendency to Explain
For Sartre, we often come to think of our actions in clearly definable ways because of a misinterpretation of the fundamental nature of consciousness. In Chapter 4, we discussed how, for Sartre, consciousness is fundamentally 'pre-reflective'. And yet, the conflation of pre-reflective and reflected forms of consciousness seems unavoidable when putting oneself into words, given that the language we use to describe experiences inevitably puts us on the 'reflective' plane. In making ourselves 'intelligible' to others, we are therefore both grasping at and (re)producing ourselves in the world.

Interestingly, in the case of self-evaluation, there is a hardened separation between the self that is accounted for and the self that is recounting the experience now, *even* when strictly speaking, both are the same person. As we have seen, this arises from the problematic dualism of 'objective' and 'subjective' that underpins the expectations of self-evaluation policy more broadly. In the Cartesian mind/matter dualism, there is a similar assumption that a clear and direct line of access to one's 'self' is possible without being 'implicated' as the person

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observing. But for Sartre, the 'self' that Descartes 'discovers' was not there in an *a priori* sense. Rather, it is produced *through* his systematic reflection.

According to Sartre's logic, then, Descartes' substantial self 'poisons' the pre-reflective consciousness that underpins it, just as our explanations 'poison' those original intentions that move us to act. In pushing the assumption that we should only account for what is explicit or measurable in our practices, technicist forms of account-giving also 'poison' those original and more complex moments that it seeks to capture. This includes the ways one might offer belated explanations for one's motivations for acting, where, in doing so, it enters into those moments an opacity that fails to capture the immediate, pre-reflective choices that bring each situation to light. The division of the self in self-evaluation, 'where one part can remain at the outside in order to check whether or not what the other part does is justified in terms of effectiveness' (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019, p. 104) relies on this push for explanations, however. Of course, this does not imply that it would ever be possible to write or to read an account *without* offering some form of (implicit) explanation for ourselves or for what had happened. But the 'truth' of those explanations needs to be reconceptualised - from a truth measured in accordance with accuracy, clarity and certainty to a truth as that which we *relate* ourselves to in an ongoing fashion, a relation that is ultimately subject to our committed responses in the world.

My anecdote at the start was not merely an account of what had happened. As narrative researchers testify, the aspects that I recounted were *selected*, whether in full awareness or not, and as such, they are already infused with meaning and, indeed, *choice*.[7] Narrative researchers may focus on *why* I have selected certain moments, and what that says about what I 'value' in the narrative itself, or the identity I have constructed by virtue of this. But because such explanations are produced in the moment of reflection, coming up with a satisfactory answer can often be a fruitless endeavour. This is not to suggest that I 'made it all up', of course. Rather, it shows that whilst our accounts testify particular situations, our understanding of this situation that can vary in accordance with the freedom underpinning those engaging with the account. As we saw in Chapter 5, our actions in the world are always underpinned by our fundamental projects – the broader sense in which we are oriented in the world in relation to our 'horizons of significance' (to use Taylor's (1989; 1992) terminology), horizons that move (rather than determine) us to act in implicit ways.

Whilst the meaning of these cannot be extracted and examined in any abstract or exact form, there is nevertheless a tendency to do so, particularly in the evidence-based explanations required in the more technicist accounts of teaching. This in turn relates to the inherent mistrust other forms of account-giving, namely those that are 'subjective' in nature. But all of this fails to acknowledge that one is always responding to situations in some way, both in the moments in which they occurred and in the ways in which we account for them afterwards. Importantly, it is not just that subjectivity should be acknowledged. Subjectivity should be valued as an essential component of the process of account-giving itself because it is only *through* subjectivity that our narratives can come to light in the first place – indeed, that they *make sense*. Without this subjectivity, there would simply be nothing to make sense of, and there would also be nothing to 'read' - it would simply be akin to the computer in Calvino's story digesting a text and arbitrarily giving a list of words in order of frequency. In this sense, the process of accounting for experiences (as both the account-giver and as the reader) is also a response imbued with a deep and important subjectivism, one that is embraced in existentialist

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[7] Choice in this sense does not mean that I am always 'choosing' to offer an account of myself or not, but rather, it relates to the ways in which situations are brought to light by virtue of our (freely chosen) fundamental projects, a choice that is therefore embedded both in situations where one feels compelled to offer an account on their own accord *as well as* in situations where one is forced into offering an account because they are 'answerable' to another (e.g. their superior).

accounts but that exist *even* in those forms of technicist account-giving that attempt to suppress it.

Response and Responsibility

Given the current educational climate, it would be remiss to make more explicit the connection between account-giving and accountability. Accountability is 'chameleon like' but, in simple terms, it may be thought of as being 'called to give an account' to some external authority, a form of social interaction 'in which people are required to explain and take responsibility for their actions' (Sinclair, 1995, pp. 220-221). This in turn implies a relationship between those who seek answers and those who are answerable, those who may impose sanctions and those who anticipate them. There is, of course, a distinction between simply *giving* an account and being *called* to give one (Mulgan, 2000), the latter of which implies an authority who 'enforce[s] responsibility' on another (Thynne and Golding, 1987).

Overtime, accountability has become more 'managerial' in nature, and thus more concerned with the performance of individuals and institutions, particularly in the public sector. With this comes the increasing use of the language and logic of financial accounting systems (e.g. 'effectiveness', inputs/outputs binaries). Such forms of accountability often involve a contract of sorts – in exchange for the acceptance of managerially-defined control, it promises new forms of (professional) autonomy (Brady, 2020). Ironically, however, this creates what some researchers have called the 'responsibility paradox', succinctly defined by Jos and Tompkins (2004, p. 256) as follows:

> Responsible interpretation and application of legitimate external accountability demands depends on the cultivation of virtues that support good administrative judgement, but the institution and mechanisms that are used to communicate these external standards, and that monitor compliance with them, often threaten the very qualities that support responsible judgement.

In response to this, many institutions have called for more 'professional' accountability. This involves not simply holding individuals to account through coercive or managerialist measures, but training professionals to hold *themselves* to account, thereby signalling a shift 'away from the central importance of external scrutiny' (Mulgan, 2000, p. 557). As we have seen in Chapter 2, this is primarily the kind of accountability promoted in school self-evaluation and similar policies.

Before this is possible, however, those being held to account need first to be recognised as 'professionals', as having acquired the techniques and values necessary for making professional judgements in unsupervised contexts, and as having demonstrated the requisite professional dispositions. These include: a 'sense of (personal) duty' (Sinclair, 1995, p. 230) in relation to their respective professions and to the individuals they are accountable to; a form of 'practical wisdom'[8]; a stable set of cherished values that are steadfastly and consistently applied to relevant situations; an ability to tolerate uncertainty and to conduct oneself with openness and flexibility (e.g. Jos and Tompkins, 2004). Professionals also have reflexive self-understanding such that they can examine and decide on the applicability of professional rules and standards in each situation, 'tacking' between both internal and external viewpoints in order to do so (e.g. McNamara and O'Hara, 2008). Indeed, professionalisation does not imply that individuals are left to their own devices, since most professionals are still answerable to

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[8] This is often linked to the Aristotelian concept of 'phronesis'. In the literature on professional accountability, however, phronesis is often narrowly defined as a 'skill' or a 'technique' (e.g. Jos and Tompkins, 2004).

their superiors (Mulgan, 2000, p. 559). Additionally, they are answerable to the numbers – i.e. to inputs, outputs, and other forms of 'objective' measures used to evaluate their performance. Professional accountability therefore involves a responsiveness that is *already* defined along particular lines - in relation to the needs of 'clients', in anticipation of the wishes of superiors, in the alignment of one's actions with performance measures or, in the case of school self-evaluation, to standards of effective practice.

The sheer potential of external scrutiny has led many authors to question the so-called 'internal' focus of professional accountability models (e.g. MacBeath, 2006; Grek and Lindgren, 2014; Brady, 2016). But perhaps more importantly, responses that are witnessed are not necessarily evidence that desirable 'character traits' are actually cultivated. Such virtues are measured in accordance with the explicit 'output' of the action, and as such, the belated explanations offered do not necessarily correlate with what moved a person to act. One may behave *as if* they are acting in good judgement, when they are really only focused on ingratiating themselves with superiors, for example. Perhaps, in reality, they care little about their students or other important aspects of their professional responsibility. Whilst the discussion here is not concerned with what 'good judgements' consist in, this nevertheless demonstrates that unpredictable (and perhaps, undesirable) responses to situations may yield the same results as desirable ones, making it therefore impossible to 'test' whether or not a sense of 'genuine' accountability has really been developed.

Importantly, the question of *who* one is accountable to is often unclear, particularly in the context of education where competing demands reveal tensions between personal responsibilities and professional accountability. Such tensions may in part be due to the changeable nature of accountability itself, understood both as 'something a person is or feels', or as 'a more abstract impersonal property of an authoritative structure' (Sinclair, 1995, p. 221). A teacher may know that 'teaching to the test' is harmful to students in the long run, but they may nevertheless recognise that, in some cases, this is a way to ensure so-called 'effective learning'. Thus, the personal responsibility she feels in relation to her students may run counter to her professional accountability. Of course, there is no right way of solving these tensions – arguably, both responses are equally justifiable. The point, of course, is that the teacher *responds* nevertheless – either in submission to the professional standards she disagrees with, or by going against them in some respects, or perhaps by finding a balance between the two, as teachers often do.

In what sense might account*ability* relate to offering an account of oneself? Perhaps a deeper understanding of the connection between accountability and responsibility may offer an answer to this question. Returning to Vlieghe and Zamojski's (2019) book, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching*, they consider in part what 'responsibility' in teaching consists in. For them, the default position when thinking about teaching is related to a 'transcendent' rather than an 'immanent' view of education, where teaching is often justified in terms of external demands. Since teaching is often understood in this goal-oriented sense, performance-related accountability has invaded the conversation on what teachers ought to be responsible for.[9] In order to address this, the authors call for an 'immanent view' of education, where teaching is seen as 'autotelic' - a meaningful activity *in and of itself*, corresponding to its own internal

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[9] The authors also locate this line of thinking in what we might consider to be the more 'noble' justifications of education, such as the emancipatory aims that you find in thinkers such as Freire or Rancière.

logic (and, indeed, language) that does not need to be justified in reference to external aims.[10] In reference to the so-called 'logic of emancipation', Vlieghe and Zamojski (2019, p. 79) touch upon something pertinent to our discussion here:

> Within this transcendent framework… freedom is seen as the goal of education… from an immanent point of view i.e. starting from the logic of responsibility, there is always already a sphere of free action in relation with things in the world.

Although accountability in school self-evaluation is not necessarily tied to such aims, it nevertheless applies the same logic – that in order to offer an account of one's actions, the capacity (e.g. 'evaluation literacy') to do so must be cultivated. But what this denies is the extent to which those giving the account are *already* capable. They are, in fact, *already* responsible for the situation that they are recounting, insofar as one must inevitably respond to the situation in which one finds oneself. Indeed, as Vlieghe and Zamojski (2019, p. 88) remark, responsibility means 'giving a response'. Given that we are *always* responding to the situations in which we find ourselves in, we are therefore always responsible *as such.* Indeed, responsibility is embedded in the very situation that one acts, not as 'enforced' or 'cultivated', but a 'fundamental relation of each human being with the world' (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019, p. 88). Indeed, '[it] conditions the very possibility of situations in which someone is rendered accountable' (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019, p. 88). Might we say the same about accountability? That in every situation, we offer a response of both ourselves and of the situation – a response verbalised as an *account* – and for this reason, we are always accountable *as such*?

Of course, the concept of accountability can be understood in both formal and substantive terms – the latter of which relates to *particular* things or persons to whom we are accountable (e.g. students, the lesson, the wider public). Substantive accountability, however, relates to this (aforementioned) ontological condition of *being able* to respond and to offer an account of something, and thus being accountable *as such*. In current educational discourses, our conception of accountability focuses only on the formal sense of the term. In doing so, it denies the extent to which accountability *as such* cannot be defined or decided in any *a priori* sense (in terms of the content of desirable actions) – rather, it is a form of a response that is 'invented in each situation' (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019, p. 93). This therefore points to accountability as a form of 'orientation' rather than something enacted or cultivated with a pre-defined direction, an ongoing process that is (re)negotiated with an existential sensitivity to lived experiences in the classroom. And it is this orientation that existentialist forms of account-giving seek to articulate, despite the complexities it involves.

9.4 Giving an Account of Oneself

So, what then does it mean to give an account? The answer to this question therefore depends on our interpretation of what purpose or use accounts serve, and indeed, what they are. As we saw throughout, technicist accounts are concerned primarily with a debased sense of accuracy,

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[10] I am not fully convinced by this account of immanence, however, given that any description of teaching that we might call 'immanent' involves implicit norms and expectations that 'transcend' the given moment that is described. Indeed, descriptions involve explanations that are implicitly normative in that they relate to the meaning-making of those offering the account – i.e. their own values that transcend the interpretations of each given moment itself. Whilst I disagree with the overly sharp distinction between transcendence and immanence, the discussion is nevertheless useful in situating the current focus of accountability on external justifications rather than the ways in which a teacher is *ontologically* accountable in the classroom.

and the use and inculcation of a reductive description of teaching for this purpose. Despite the problematic assumptions that these descriptions harbour, technicist accounts are nevertheless hierarchised as the most 'trustworthy', given the so-called evidence that they are seen to be based upon. Account-giving in the technicist sense is not 'natural' but is a disposition that is cultivated through training and professionalisation. But this is also a cultivated distrust – a distrust in the possibility of accountability without managerialism, and in one's own capacity to account for situations in 'subjective' terms. And whilst some authors claim that professional accountability leads to more autonomy (and therefore more 'trust' in professional judgement), it nevertheless determines criteria for trust such that other kinds of accounts are seen to be wholly unreliable and, perhaps, pointless.

Existentialist accounts, on the other hand, recognise that the act of account-giving is not cultivated but is inherent in teaching itself, since teachers are always responding as subjects to situations and are therefore always responsible *as such*. In the classroom context, teachers inescapably offer an account of something – their meaning-making in situations with others (upon which they base their judgements), the subject matter that they love, the world as they understand it (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019) - accounts that signal a particular response to the world. In this sense, accountability is not a skill but *a way of being* in the classroom.

Importantly, existentialist accounts are not centrally concerned with an 'accurate' portraying of events (ones that can be proven or disproven through selective use of evidence), but rather, with *relating oneself* to such events. Account-giving is thereby a process inevitably underscored by irresolvable complexities and risks, given that the pre-reflective judgements it attempts to articulate are fleeting, our explanations always belated. Indeed, existentialist account-giving recognise the ways in which accounts are often 'poisoned' by our tendency towards (easy) explanations, and yet, doing so in a *persistent* (perhaps critical) manner can signal our deep and inescapable freedom and responsibility not only *for* situations or *for* others, but in the very act of account-giving itself. The purpose of our accounts is thus not to deduce the causes or reasons for behaviour in situations, and what can be done to guide and improve action in the future. Rather, it is about laying oneself bare - examining the commitments that are made manifest in one's actions, and to continue to examine and to test those commitments, much like the ongoing parrhesiastic practices of the self.

For this reason, existentialist account-giving does not necessarily involve a pre-specified direction. When I wrote my anecdote above, I did not check with any explicit framework for what it is that I needed to say. I tried instead to write it like an Emersonian essay, without a real understanding of what would transpire in the writing itself, where it would lead me, or what it would reveal about my practices and about *myself*. In some ways, autobiographical accounts can function in the same way, as discussed in the previous chapter. This in part demonstrates the riskiness that offering an account in an existentialist sense involves, the anxiety that may appear in not knowing how the account will 'pan out'.

Of course, I had all sorts of (Sartrian) 'explanations' in my head already, and I knew that my account was going to be read by others. Undoubtably, Sartre's writing has shaped my conception of teaching considerably over the last number of years, and thus, the account I give is most certainly laced with 'existential threads' that would probably not have existed had I written this when I had started out as a teacher. Again, I am not suggesting that this is a blueprint upon which other teachers can offer an account, nor that one's thinking escapes the influence of the situations in which we exist, the books we read, the people in our lives. Account-giving should ultimately be seen as a response within these situations, one that reflects my responsibility both in the situation recounted, in the act of accounting for the situation itself, and in the process of interpreting it for our purposes here. It is a form of reflective practice, but not the pre-set 'skill' as defined by Schön (2008) and others. Rather, it serves as an example of

care of the self, one that Vlieghe and Zamojski (2019, p. 102) define as a relation of the teacher 'to herself/himself in a particular way, which is not spontaneously given, but which on the contrary presupposes practicing and demands *making a continual effort*'. Accounts are not to be 'settled' in this sense – they are an important part of our continual attempts to understand ourselves and to open ourselves up to continual critique, to 'test' oneself and one's commitments with as much frankness, sincerity, and indeed authenticity, as any account might allow, *despite* the uncertainties and risk that this involves. What, indeed, is the measure of that?

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