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The educational fiction of agential control: Some preliminary notes on a pedagogy of ‘as if’

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the rift between the teacher’s sense of self as a causal agent and the experience of being in lack of control in the classroom, by way of Hans Vaihinger’s philosophy of ‘as if’. It is argued that understanding agential control in terms of a valuable educational fiction—a practical (ethical) fiction in Vaihinger’s vocabulary—can offer a way of bridging this rift and can help teachers make sense of the tension between their felt need to strive for control and their experience of suffering from lack of control. A fiction, it is argued, is different from an illusion in that fictions can be affirmed without being believed. Unlike illusions, valuable fictions can be recognized as fictions and still retain some of their affective power over us, thereby allowing us to act ‘as if’. In education, this is helpful as it means that we can make use of valuable fictions without assuming that these have to be protected from the critical gaze of non-believers. In fact, we can openly acknowledge that we rely on fictions as this is part and parcel of being a human being with a limited cognitive ability.

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A question of control?

Sometimes when I have trouble sleeping at night I begin to mull over next day’s classes in my mind. I think about the preparations I have made, and I wonder whether they are enough, or whether I have in fact over-prepared, and I consider different unforeseen things that might happen to thwart my various plans for the day. In the morning I am usually anxious to get started, but also fearful of many of the things that could go wrong (but usually don’t). I feel very vulnerable and even though I’ve done this for several years now (and really ought to be able to shake my worries off with ease) I cannot help but doubt my ability to get through with it. For me, this is a constant struggle. I harbor fundamental doubts about my ability to control the circumstances that I am put in charge of, but I also feel that I should be able to control the unfolding of events as part of what it means to be a teacher. I would like to embrace the openness of processes of educational transformation at the same time as I am wont to act as if I should be in control as a teacher. This is not terribly dramatic, but it sets me up for constant emotional struggles where I find myself fluctuating between striving for two polar opposites—relinquishing the need for control and being in control—both of which seem equally impossible to reach.

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I suspect I am not alone in that, when faced with the daunting task of teaching, one of my greatest fears is to not be in control. I may occasionally pay lip service to the vague tenet saying that good teaching requires a leap of faith, or that it amounts to a collective dive into the unknown,¹ but deep down I am terrified of not being in control.² While teaching a class I desperately try to remain in control, but I rarely stop and ask what it is that I am trying so hard to be in control of. Am I striving to control the responses of other people—my students? Is it the flow of information in the classroom that I wish to control? Is it the passing of time or the order in which events play out? Or am I wanting to control my own responses to external influences better?

In a basic phenomenological sense, the introductory example above illustrates a desperate striving to control whatever it is that allows me to appear as a believable teacher before a group of students. For me, part of this is the ability to be in control (at least to some degree) of what goes on in class. It does not mean that I believe that the teacher should (or could) be in complete control of everything that happens, but that my conception of what it is to be a teacher is inescapably bound up with having some sense of control over what goes on as part of maintaining a degree of credibility and authority as a teacher. It is important to stress that this is not intended as a pedagogical creed on my part. It is merely an observation of how I tend to deal with the seeming paradox of being frequently caught between the experience of lacking control and the phenomenological sense of being a causal agent in the world in my role as a teacher.

Whatever it is that I seek to control, I behave as if my endeavors will bear fruit if only I would apply myself to them hard enough. Intellectually, however, I doubt that the degree to which I succeed has very much to do with willpower at all. This is part of what you might call my basic deterministic intuition I suppose. Deep down, I think I know that I am fighting out a futile battle with forces that are much more powerful than me. The problem, if you ask me, is not one of control, but of aligning my strong sense of being an agent in the world with an understanding of causal relations as infinitely complex and, therefore, hopelessly beyond my limited comprehension. This introduces a rift between what I feel that I ought to be able to do and experiences of what I am actually capable of, and this rift runs through and influences my every act as a teacher it seems.³

In what follows of this paper, I will explore the perceived rift between a teacher's sense of self as causal agent and experiences of lacking control by way of Hans Vaihinger's notion of practical fictions. It is argued that practical fictions—translated here into educational fictions—can allow the teacher to act 'as if' agential control is real while still acknowledging the very real sense in which the rift exposes it as a fiction compensating for an innate cognitive limitation. This, I argue, makes educational fictions different from illusions, where the assumption is that illusions (at least on Saul Smilansky's influential account) need to be safeguarded from skeptics lest they lose their affective efficacy. With these theoretical building blocks in place, I will then suggest a few starting points for outlining a practical pedagogy of 'as if' allowing the teacher to live and act with the rift rather than succumbing to incapacitating anxieties as a result of denying it.

Behaving 'as if'

Hans Vaihinger is probably best known for having introduced the philosophy of 'as if' (1924/2021). The philosophy of 'as if' (sometimes referred to as Vaihinger's fictionalism [see e.g. Fine, 1993; Stoll, 2020]) entails that we rely on a number of not-so-substantiated assumptions in our daily lives. We assume certain things, not so much because we have a deep enough understanding of these things, but because by doing so we set up a practical framework for making sense of our experiences so as to temper debilitating psychological responses to our surroundings and

to facilitate our actions.⁴ We make use of certain fictions because these can allow us to act in ways that appear intuitively appealing (and beneficial even), but that may not be entirely rational when scrutinized.⁵ Falsities, that is, are sometimes practically useful for us even if they are (by definition) logically contradictory. A fiction, on Vaihinger's account, is therefore conceived as 'an expedient invention' (1924/2021, p. 35). We can, for example, ascribe our duty to behave morally to higher powers that we know very little of and whose defining features we quibble over.⁶ While there seems to be contradictions built into the very concept of a higher power (insofar as we refer to very different things depending on the context), there are certain actions that are made practically possible by evoking it. We can do some things in the name of a higher power that we could not otherwise do (at least not legitimately).

Some fictions, however, can be appealing (and therefore psychologically soothing) while at the same time being frustrating, and these can result in existential anxieties that are difficult to resolve. For Vaihinger, this is simply an innate aspect of the nature of thought. On the one hand, it is in the nature of thought to construct fictions that can function by facilitating action, but on the other hand, these fictions can also draw our attention to foundational logical contradictions embedded in them. Vaihinger writes:

Thought of its own accord twists the threads furnished by experience into knots. These sometimes aid it but may also entrap it, especially if they are supposed to be something in objective experience itself, instead of what they really are—subjective auxiliary constructs. (1924/2021, p. 122)

The teacher's desire for control appears to be connected with one such ambivalent brand of fiction. It is helpful in that it allows me to make sense of my role as a teacher in terms of an agent who is intentionally striving to bring about specific changes in other people. But it is also deeply frustrating insofar as there are countless situations where, as a teacher, I am being reminded of my near complete lack of control in this regard.

Vaihinger's fictions

Commenting on the false assumption that fictions, because they are per definition untrue or contradictory, are therefore also useless, Vaihinger suggests that,

An idea whose theoretical untruth or incorrectness, and therewith its falsity, is admitted, is not for that reason practically valueless and useless; for such an idea, in spite of its theoretical nullity may have great practical importance. (1924/2021, p. xix)

Because Vaihinger's use of the concept of fiction is extremely broad—with all of its various subcategories, ranging from the most basic fictions of science (space, matter, and atoms etc.) to the ones serving a practical purpose in people's everyday life (what Vaihinger labels practical or ethical fictions⁷)—it is difficult to apply it wholesale, without specifying how it is that understanding a concept or idea in terms of a fiction can render it useful without denying its contradictory nature. In a sense, Vaihinger's concept of a fiction is broad enough to be applicable to almost anything that we experience and try to make sense of.⁸ To the extent that this is so, it may be explained by the fact that human cognition is inherently limited and that our lack of knowledge needs to be compensated for by imaginative means. Fictions become a necessary means of coping with a degree of complexity that reaches beyond our natural capability. Vaihinger explains:

Since, then, the material is too complicated and confused for thought to be able to break it up into its component elements, and since the causal factors sought are probably of too complicated a nature for them to be determined directly, thought makes use of an artifice by means of which it provisionally and temporarily neglects a number of characters and selects from them the more important phenomena. (1924/2021, p. 17)

Two important aspects of Vaihinger's theory of fictions to keep in mind as we progress are that (1) fictions are *necessary* means of compensating for our natural cognitive limitations, and (2) some fictions are *good* insofar as they are useful (in a heuristic sense) in that they allow us to act 'as if'.⁹ Bad fictions, in contrast, are fictions that inhibit us from acting and behaving ethically. To get rid of fictions, then, is not feasible. To be able to distinguish between useful (good) and not so useful (bad) fictions, however, is not only feasible (on Vaihinger's account), but it is eminently desirable.

In order to figure out if *the fiction of agential control* is to be considered good or bad for me as a teacher, we need to look closer at some of its ethical and practical implications. As indicated above, while the fiction of agential control allows me to act 'as if' I am responsible for events that I am not the full causal explanation of,¹⁰ and to thereby assume an ethical form of responsibility vis-à-vis my students' educational transformation, it also seems to present certain challenges insofar as it contradicts my everyday phenomenological experiences of not being in control and of the unpredictability of classroom interaction. While the fact that it is contradictory is simply an inherent feature of it being a fiction, it still needs to be capable of helping me 'overcome difficulties of thought' (p. xlii) and 'rendering action easy' (p. 64), rather than introduce further obstacles, if it is to be considered sufficiently valuable to be actively perpetuated. For a fiction to be considered valuable, it thereby needs to function as a kind of 'logical scaffolding of thought' (p. 95), and its justification requires that its 'particular structure is not superfluous, that it performs a service, and the extent of its influence must also be determined' (pp. 95–96). If a fiction can live up to these requirements it can be deemed valuable. In itself, a fiction is neither good nor bad, and '[w]hether they work for our advantage or disadvantage depends upon circumstances' (p. 147). Once it has served its practical purpose, however, a fiction need no longer be actively sustained lest we begin to confuse it with reality (in which case it will become corruptive rather than heuristically valuable).¹¹ The fact that Vaihinger's fictions are recognized as fictions sets them apart from illusions, where the heuristic value of an illusion hinges on the fact that we are kept unaware of its illusory status.

In an educational setting, the illusion of teacher control can easily lend itself to a game of fear and suspicion, leading to a constant struggle between teacher and students for dominion over the classroom. Because at least some students will probably suspect that the teacher is not in full control, for the teacher to protect the illusion of control doggedly might very well lead to a negative spiral where classes become less concerned with studying an aspect of the world jointly and more concerned with constantly negotiating an illusory sense of authority that no-one ever seems to be able to hold on to. If we conceive of agential control as a heuristic fiction instead, it becomes possible to look at it as a practical means for something else (for getting started) and not as a thing to aspire for and attain in itself. Teacher and students can all recognize the value of having a seemingly stable point of departure, even if the stability dissolves as soon as the fiction has served its purpose. The illusion of control, instead, functions like a dogma in that it restricts movements rather than allows for it.

Navigating between folk-psychological intuitions and theoretical rigor in everyday educational practice

Saul Smilansky (2000) proposes a theory of illusionism, arguing that a basic intuition (what he terms a Core Conception) is that 'people's control over their actions is very important' and that '[a]t least with respect to matters such as moral responsibility, desert, punishment, the question of control or lack of it is crucial' (p. 2).¹² Since, on Smilansky's view, there is little to substantiate this intuition metaphysically—as it ultimately hinges on implausible pretheoretical assumptions about causal control and origination—the common moral community to a great extent relies on the illusion of free will being firmly in place. He claims that if people would begin to have

serious doubts about their efficacy as causal agents, then this would impact their psychological well-being, and in extension the cohesiveness and stability of the moral community, negatively.¹³ In effect, he is arguing for the necessity of some beneficial illusions—such as the illusion of free will—being safeguarded by philosophers (philosopher kings?) who can be trusted to critically investigate contentious metaphysical assumptions without risking losing their sense of morality in the process. Illusions are false beliefs that are sustained indefinitely, and while Smilansky is not claiming that we need to invent such beneficial illusions as free will (as it is already in place), he is arguing that ‘it would be a good thing if it continued to exist in a manner akin to that which it possesses today’ (p. 289). Whereas illusions tend to lose their efficacy once they are called out and recognized as illusions, it seems as if a fiction can be recognized as a fiction without necessarily being rendered impotent in the process.¹⁴ Justin Steinberg illustrates this by drawing on the everyday experience of going to the movie theater. While some fictions can be disbelieved and dismissed as silly make-believe, other fictions can be disbelieved while still exerting a great degree of affective influence over us. Steinberg explains this, arguing that

powerful fictions are quite isolated—quarantined, as it were—from one’s other potent ideas. When one leaves the movie theater and the immediate stimulus for the fiction is lost, there is no network of ideas that will bolster these fictions. This is true for other fictions that one *knows* to be false: one can *feign* them, and thereby temporarily (and perhaps potentially) affirm them, without worrying that they will undermine one’s (opposing) commitments, because, provided that no further compensatory adjustment are made that enable such ideas to gain a greater foothold in one’s belief-system, there is a firm doxatic buffer that prevents them from exerting a steady influence. So, fictions, as isolated ideas, can be profoundly affirmed without being believed; unfortunately, so can rogue desires or representations of goodness. (Steinberg, 2018, p. 275, emphasis in original)

In a sense, then, fictions seem to be less vulnerable to doubt than illusions. A fiction can be entertained despite doubt, whereas illusions are more easily corrupted. At least in theory, I might entertain profound doubts about my causal control as an agent while still making use of the fiction of causal control as a means for overcoming anxieties about my capacity and skill as a teacher. Whereas illusions assume that there is a strict barrier between belief and non-belief—and that if this barrier is breached, then catastrophe inevitably ensues—fictions might be negotiated along a more gradual scale (from more or less useful/good to more or less useless/bad). It also does not assume that some people (i.e. students, children, and ordinary people) need to be indefinitely kept from certain unpleasant truths (by self-appointed philosopher kings), but that we all need to make use of fictions to some extent in order to cope with being limited cognizant beings in an infinitely complex universe. The problem, then, is not so much to ensure that fictions are firmly believed, but that the fictions used are sufficiently valuable in the sense that they allow us to act ‘as if.’

Gregg Caruso argues that, at bottom, our folk-psychological intuitions about free will are indeterministic and therefore incompatible with a deterministic conception of the world.¹⁵ As a result, we often feel that we should be able to do things that prove difficult, if not impossible, for us to do in real life:

From a first-person point of view, we feel as though we are *self-determining agents* who are capable of acting *counter-causally*. The phenomenology of volitional agency includes (at a minimum) a feeling of being undetermined by antecedent events, a feeling of origination and self-determination, and a feeling that one could have done otherwise. (Caruso, 2012, p. 75, emphasis in original)

In sum, Caruso argues that ‘our phenomenology reveals a sense of *self* that does not fit with compatibilist metaphysics’ (ibid., emphasis in original). Compatibilist metaphysics is best described in terms of being grounded in the assumption that free will and determinism are not at odds but can coexist. What Caruso is saying, instead, is that our sense of self relies on a conception

of contra-causal freedom that cannot be convincingly reconciled with the natural laws of a deterministic universe. Hence, the kind of free will that we feel that we have is typically not corroborated by our interactions with the external world. This is especially noticeable when we come up against things that clearly will not bend to our will. We cannot, for example, will ourselves to go to sleep when we suffer from insomnia. This risks creating a rift between our sense of self and our experiences in the world, and it can be highly distressing insofar as we take ourselves to be personally responsible for things that we have very limited influence over.

The folk psychology of free will is a constant companion in education to the extent that many educational theories seem to revolve around core ideas such as the promotion of agency, autonomy, and contra-causal freedom.¹⁶ While such ideas can be taken as axioms, facilitating educational endeavors that open up previously blocked conceptual pathways,¹⁷ they can also further exaggerate the rift between our sense of self and our everyday experiences. If this rift keeps on growing it may pose a risk to the well-being of the teacher, being the one assumed to ultimately be in control of the educational situation. This is where the pedagogy of ‘as if’ may be able to offer a much needed conceptual bridge between the sense of self as a causal agent and the experience of lacking control in many educational situations. To the extent that agential control is a valuable fiction—and not an illusion to be guarded against attacks by non-believers—it can be ‘profoundly affirmed without being believed’ (Steinberg, 2018, p. 275).

Some preliminary notes on a pedagogy of ‘as if’...

Outlining a pedagogy of ‘as if’ sounds ridiculously pretentious, I know. It sounds like just another short-lived contender in the impossibly long line of grand pedagogical schemes purporting to change the future direction of educational theory. In order to avoid such accusations, I should temper my claims significantly before moving any further. What I am proposing is not really new at all. And it is certainly not an all-encompassing educational theory where all the pieces seem to fit neatly together. It is simply a few remarks on how we might think when we try to bridge the gap between the experience of being a teacher in the world and philosophical assumptions about the world that contradict this sense of self in a deep sense.

To the extent that my own experience of finding it difficult to navigate between folk-psychological intuitions about agential control and genuine feelings of doubt concerning my abilities to control different aspects of the teaching situations are recognizable to other teachers besides myself, I would like to propose three starting points for how we might begin to approach this tension. These would be valid both from the point of view of the teacher, but also with regard to educational theory more generally. I would suggest that we might:

- I. Acknowledge that the tension is real and not a question of a personal failure to attain (and remain in) control as a teacher.
- II. Recognize agential control as a valuable fiction in the sense of Vaihinger’s practical (ethical) fictions insofar as it is theoretically contradictory while at the same time being practically important to the extent that it allows us to act ‘as if.’
- III. Entertain the wider implications of the idea of a pedagogy of ‘as if’ in terms of it presenting a useful starting point for a great deal of educational practices insofar as these rely on us constantly being able to navigate between degrees of fictions, facts, and various contradictory experiences.

Together, these three starting points invite teachers to recognize certain tensions in their everyday lives, not so much in order to celebrate the contradictory or ambiguous nature of teaching, but so as to counter incapacitating feelings of inadequacy resulting from living with unaddressed rifts between phenomenological experiences and theoretical presuppositions.

Recognizing these tensions may not transform a teacher's life, but it may moderate some particularly unrealistic expectations. This, in turn, may help teachers navigate more safely between striving for control and suffering from the experience of always lacking it. It may also help teachers avoid being blinded by ideals of teaching that run counter to their phenomenological experiences. Just as importantly, it may help them deal with feelings of inadequacy resulting from responding in ways that seem to veer too far from these ideals. Let's take a closer look at the ideal referred to briefly in the introductory paragraphs of this text in order to clarify this.

The ideal of teaching for the unforeseen, oriented around the assumed ability to embrace unpredictability, may appear liberating at first glance but there is also a sense in which it might provoke debilitating clashes with one's experiences as a teacher. Insofar as teaching, in this understanding, is fundamentally geared at enabling 'a way of existing that is yet unforeseen' (Biesta, 2017, p. 6) and is conceived as inherently 'risky in that its outcomes are unpredictable' (p. 20), I suspect that the unintentional result may be psychologically disorienting rather than empowering. Later, in the same text, Biesta connects the way teaching operates with 'the idea of a leap of faith,' highlighting 'that to have faith indeed requires a leap rather than that it is a simple logical deduction from what we know' (p. 94). Teaching as a leap of faith, in Biesta's conception, is characterized by 'an orientation towards the unforeseen' (p. 84). My assumption here is that the prerequisite for this so-called leap of faith is—paradoxically enough—a pedagogical fiction of agential control, without which the leap is not so much an intentional pedagogical gesture as it is a leap into existential anxiety.

Nigel Tubbs offers another illuminating example of a teacher ideal geared at uncertainty and unpredictability. Here, the teacher is conceived as one who 'offers the gifts of uncertainty and doubt as positive, even authoritative agents for growth and self-development' (2005, p. 58). Teaching for the unforeseen, for Tubbs, is connected with what he terms a 'post-enlightenment pedagogy,' where the challenge for the teacher is 'not to over-prepare but rather to keep open the space for unforeseen possibilities and not to prejudge what the learning must be' (p. 96). Terming it 'post-enlightenment pedagogy' entails that it is conceived as a critical response to a kind of teaching associated with what is loosely referred to as 'the enlightenment project.' Again, the ideal of abandoning the claim to control seems sensible enough, but it also assumes that this is conceived in terms of an available choice for the individual teacher. If it is not, that is if the desire for control is rather a kind of pretheoretical striving that is part and parcel of the human condition, then it risks setting up a false dichotomy between a sought-after yet unattainable ideal and a hopelessly fallible—and sometimes even derogatory—conception of the teacher.

Not only are there ideals of teaching connected with embracing the unforeseen and daring to relinquish control in the classroom, but there are also powerful counter-images of the destructive aspects of being a teacher who strives for control. These counter-images can further amplify the anxieties of being an inadequate teacher insofar as they portray the teacher-striving-for-control as a power-hungry oppressor.¹⁸ Paulo Freire, for example, when outlining his influential conception of the banking model of education, connects the striving for control with the necrophilic desire to objectify students, turning them into inanimate objects to be sorted and domesticated through the act of teaching-for-control. Trying to control the educational process, in Freire's understanding, amounts to negating life and celebrating death:

Oppression—overwhelming control—is necrophilic; it is nourished by love of death, not life. The banking concept of education, which serves the interests of oppression, is also necrophilic. Based on a mechanistic, static, naturalistic, spatialized view of consciousness, it transforms students into receiving objects. It attempts to control thinking and action, leads women and men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power. (Freire, 1970/2017, p. 50)

Needless to say, this is not a conception of the teacher that one would want to identify with, and to the extent that one still struggles with the striving for control, it is quite easy to see

how this unwanted desire can be both shameful and self-destructive if denied. While Freire's critical conception of education as banking is surely a relevant critique of some of the reproductive and passivating aspects of education, it also seems to assume that the striving for control can be shed at will. As I have argued in this paper, I am not convinced of this. As a result, I fear that since the striving for control will not simply dissipate, it will rather transform into a shameful aspect of teaching, denied and hidden away from plain view.¹⁹ To the extent that this is so, I believe that it would be more productive for the teacher to approach it in terms of a practical educational fiction to be acknowledged and utilized as a means for action, rather than allowing it to become an incapacitating obstacle for teachers in their daily lives. Bridging the felt gap between the striving for self-determination and the experience of causal determination by way of educational fictions seems to allow for some grey area in the false dichotomy between being a teacher who in Freire's terms would live up to the ideal of a liberating revolutionary leader and one whose sole motivation to act is reduced to 'the necrophilic passion to oppress' (1970/2017, p. 114).

...and a few concluding remarks on educational fictions

My conclusion, such as it is, would be that there are certain fundamental pedagogical tenets—such as the causal control of the teacher—that act as necessary presuppositions for overcoming anxieties that are intimately connected with deep-rooted existential aspects of teaching, and—in extension—for allowing the pedagogical relation between teacher and student to bypass these anxieties. For the relation between teacher and student to function dynamically and purposefully, there must be something to bring about movement, to instigate action, and to do so in a given direction. Explanations of these actions tend to hinge on notions such as the intention of the teacher and/or the desire of the student, all in relation to the object of study and a sought-after process of transformation. And at the end of the day, these different expressions of so-called willpower need to presume some sense of causal control in order to make sense. At the same time, however, the presupposition about causal control is profoundly contentious in that it—at bottom—seems to demand something that I am very doubtful of. I am simply unpersuaded of the high level of causal control that individual human beings are typically assumed to possess. I am much more inclined to believe that we are involved in complex causal networks where we do have some limited degree of causal efficacy, but where this efficacy cannot be persuasively grounded in any stable sense of origination (which at the end of the day requires something akin to self-causation). In other words, while our actions are surely efficacious, I cannot see how we could be the causal origin of these actions ourselves. And if we want to claim causal control in the ordinary strong sense, then this is the kind of grounding it would require.

Let us return briefly to the opening example. In the example I reflected on my habit of struggling with myself and my doubts about whether I had prepared enough or whether I had perhaps prepared too much for next day's classes. These doubts would give rise to questions that I frequently struggle with, and I typically carry these questions along with me all through the morning and on my way to the morning class. Then, just as we are about to get started, something happens. Even though my doubts are still present in the back of my mind, I begin to act *as if* I am in control. Admittedly, it's a shaky set-up. The slightest thing could throw me off kilter, and sometimes when things do not quite align the result will suffer. Mostly, however, the ability to act *as if* I knew what I was doing, and *as if* I had it all under control, is what helps me overcome my initial anxieties and begin to connect with the students of my class. I know that I am not in full control (in fact I feel it with all my body) but I also know that acting 'as if' is my best shot at persuading the students to trust me and to join me in whatever intellectual endeavor we have planned for the day. I only need us to go along with

it for a little while, but I need this heuristic fiction to function long enough to allow the pedagogy of ‘as if’ to act as a launching pad for, and a legitimization of, the joint investigations to follow.

This puts me in a position where I have to act ‘as if’ I am in control, despite the fact that I am inclined to believe that agential control (in the ordinary strong sense) is a fiction. It is important to note, however, that because I also believe that affirming this fiction of agential control is crucial for my ability to act as a teacher (at least in some situations), I cannot simply treat it as a folk-psychological fairytale. In order to be able to act on it, I need to be affectively moved by it. Fortunately, Vaihinger’s conception of practical (ethical) fictions allows me to make sense of, and perhaps even in some ways to escape, this apparent deadlock between my determinist leanings (telling me that I am caught up in, and influenced by, a constant flux of causal forces that I have very little control over) and the necessary educational fiction of being in (or at least of having the capacity of being in) control. It spares me from having to despair over the rift that I experience whenever I feel a loss of control as a teacher. Instead, I can recognize it as a necessary rift, part and parcel of the experience of being a teacher in the world.²⁰ Better then to recognize it as a valuable educational fiction allowing me to act as a teacher, while also acknowledging that because it is a fiction, I probably should not expect it to perform miracles for me.

Notes

1. I am primarily referring here to more general trends of celebrating uncertainty and unpredictability as ideals of teaching, but I am also thinking of such recent theoretical calls for a reconceptualization of teaching and the teacher as those put forward for example by Gert Biesta, where he suggests that teaching is ‘concerned with opening up existential possibilities for students, that is, possibilities in and through which students can explore what it might mean to exist as subject in and with the world. Along these lines teaching begins to appear as the very *opposite* of control [...]’ (Biesta, 2017, p. 3, emphasis in original).
2. This is certainly not to say that teaching *ought* to be about control, but that—on my view—the striving for control (however futile) is a fundamental aspect of the human phenomenological experience. For a critical discussion of teaching *as* control, see Biesta (2017, pp. 2–3).
3. bell hooks recounts a personal example, strikingly conveying the sense in which this rift can cause anxieties for the well-meaning teacher. Describing a morning class that would not yield to her desire to create a learning community guided by the excitement to learn, she concludes that ‘[m]ore than any other class I had taught, this one compelled me to abandon the sense that the professor could, by sheer strength of will and desire, make the classroom an exciting, learning community’ (1994, p. 9). Thinking back on the class, hooks admits that ‘[t]hat failure was heartbreaking to me. It was hard to accept that I was not able to control the direction our classroom was moving in’ (p. 159).
4. Vaihinger is relying, in part, on a Kantian understanding of the unbridgeable gap between the world as it is and the world such as it presented to us and conceived through the available categories of knowledge.
5. For Vaihinger, the utility of fictions is perfectly aligned with the nature of thought insofar as ‘[t]he true and final purpose of thought is action and the facilitation of action’ (Vaihinger, 2914/2021, p. 60).
6. Vaihinger refers to Schleiermacher’s philosophy of religion as an illustrative case in point, where the fictional symbolisms at the core of Christianity are turned into practical instruments: “God” is not the “father” of men but he is to be treated and regarded as if he were’ (1924/2021, p. 21).
7. Practical (ethical) fictions are conceived by Vaihinger as transitions between semi-fictions (such as systems of classification and methods of abstraction) and real fictions (such as ‘the Atom, the Infinite, and the Thing-in-itself’) (p. 71). True fictions are identified on the basis that they are ‘always accompanied by the *consciousness* that the fictional idea, the fictional assumption, has no real validity’ (p. 72, emphasis in original).
8. In fact, after having concluded that fundamental concepts such as subject, object, space, and infinity are all useful fictions, Vaihinger claims that ‘[a]ll that remains is sensations, which exist, and are given, and out of which the whole subjective world is constructed with its division into physical and psychical complexes’ (p. 70).
9. Accordingly, Vaihinger proposes that ‘[t]he criterion of a good fiction is simply its fertility in practical use’ (p. 49).

10. For Vaihinger, the idea of free and responsible action is a paradigmatic example of a practical (ethical) fiction as 'it not only contradicts observation which shows that everything obeys unalterable laws, but is also self-contradictory, for an absolutely free, chance act, resulting from nothing, is ethically just as valueless as an absolutely necessary one' (p. 39).
11. Vaihinger argues that the lifespan of a valuable fiction is directly related to its practical utility. He offers a historical example: 'Thus an idea like immortality may be necessary for a time in order to give birth to moral ideas. But once these have been developed, the scaffolding, i.e. the concept in question, can be demolished' (p. 119). If fictions are indefinitely upheld, they will eventually turn into dogmas, in which case they are no longer conceived as heuristic aids, but rather as mental shackles. Humans, Vaihinger laments, seem to have 'an inclination for dogmatism' (p. 139).
12. For a critical discussion of the educational implications of Smilansky's theory of illusionism, see Dahlbeck (2020).
13. For a critical discussion of the plausibility of the basic assumptions of Smilansky's illusionism, see Nadelhoffer and Feltz (2007).
14. In fact, for Vaihinger, the idea that we can be made aware of the falsity of a fiction while still retaining it for practical purposes is what separates it from a dogma. As Kwame Anthony Appiah notes: 'None of his [Vaihinger's] cases involve deception or even the intention to deceive; he has no interest in defending expedient political lies. On the contrary, Vaihinger's formulation in terms of the idea that a thought might be useful for some purpose other than mirroring reality invites us to consider what that purpose is ... and whether it is good or evil' (2017, p. 4).
15. For an in-depth discussion of the free will problem in relation to education and educational theory, see Dahlbeck (2017, 2018).
16. Norm Friesen, in a response to a posthumanist critique of the humanistic tradition of education, vigorously defends the normative value of these core ideas, arguing that 'the loss of claims to the "autonomous exercise" of "will" and "choice" that come with posthumanism could not be more detrimental to ways of acting and reflecting in education' (Friesen, 2018, p. 1).
17. I am thinking here for example of Jacques Rancière's starting point in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) where equality is posited as an axiom rather than an ideal of education. I am grateful to Piotr Zamojski for reminding me of this connection.
18. There are plenty of examples of the archetypical power-hungry teacher, and it is an image that is often connected with a near-pathological desire to control students. bell hooks, for example, describes the power-hungry teacher in terms of an effective deterrent, allowing her to better understand what kind of teacher she would *not* want to become herself. She notes of these teachers that 'they often used the classroom to enact rituals of control that were about domination and the unjust exercise of power' (1994, p. 5).
19. One danger here is to deny the striving for control altogether, but another, of course, is to embrace it in full so as to demand total obedience in order to satisfy this desire. As bell hooks notes with respect to teachers who act on this desire in a non-reflective, and ultimately self-destructive, way: 'Fear of losing control in the classroom often leads individual professors to fall into a conventional teaching pattern wherein power is used destructively [...] ensuring that the teacher will have absolute authority' (1994, p. 188). This, to my mind, is simply another (equally unsuccessful) strategy for dealing with the anxiety caused by the rift between a strong sense of self as causal agent and the experience of not, ultimately, being in control of what goes on in the classroom.
20. Recognizing the rift between sense of self as causal agent and experiences of lacking control is, to my view, part and parcel of developing the kind of self-knowledge that Chris Higgins, (2003, p. 152) argues is a necessary precondition for being able to flourish as a teacher.

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