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Modern Stoicism at the XXI Century University

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Abstract

The Covid-2019 pandemic has already demonstrated that modern people reflect less about the border between the real and virtual worlds. Being connected to the Internet 24/7, they become a temporary vessel for information passing through. This problem of information flow is painfully reflected in university education. In the circumstances of the overabundance of information, Humboldt University functions as a metanarrative. Therefore, the key research question is; how can an educator can help a student overcome the problem of objectification and become a free reflective subject of the educational process? Stoic practices seem to be the answer.

This article is devoted to the study of the application of Stoic practices at a university. Modern education provides the student with a collection of data but does not help to find answers to the questions of existential dimension as; who am I?, Where am I from? And where am I going? The first part of the article elaborates Stoic practices in the modern world, reflects the history of the issue and the specifics of modern Stoicism. We express our vision of modern university education and its problems. The university as a metanarrative turns educational actors into passive objects. In our opinion, this contradicts the very idea of education as the development and formation of a person. The second part of the article represents the research methodology and answers a practical question about the possibilities of applying Stoic practices at a university. What made it possible is the educators' orientation to the actual need of students in finding themselves, and the autonomy of their participation through the form of keeping a diary complemented by group meetings. In the third part, we analysed the study results and outlined the directions of the inner changes the students discovered. Our goal is to express the concept of “Vir bonus” as an original practice of taking care of oneself, that can be implemented by a modern student in the process of realising and overcoming the problem of objectification, in the development of critical thinking, and the virtues endowment on the way to a good life.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Prolegomena to Modern Stoicism

In a collection of 124 Moral Letters to Lucilius, Seneca greets Lucilius at the beginning and wishes him good health at the end. Presumably, these letters would have remained the property of only one addressee, and would not have been included in the history of philosophy if they had not touched upon significant philosophical topics (morality, virtue, conscience, happiness, justice). They were presented in the form of a diatribe outlining moralistic philosophising, not in a complicated logical portrayal, but in an emotional appeal to the addressee when Seneca relied on memorable cases to demonstrate his thesis.

In the first letter, Seneca invites Lucilius to “set himself free for his own sake” (Seneca, 1917). With the letters, Seneca seems to sum up all his philosophical commitment. He created the letters next to the end of his political career when he witnessed the republic turned into an empire (Rome, 1st century AD). According to Seneca, perturbations in the external (namely political system instability) contributed to the adjustment of a person, to the creation and strengthening of his or her inner core, and a durable system of moral values. In this context, Seneca's appeals to grasp and capture the present-day sound differently: it is not time that controls a person, but vice versa:

(2) What man can you show me who places any value on his time, who reckons the worth of each day, who understands that he is dying daily? For we are mistaken when we look forward to death; the major portion of death has already passed. Whatever years lie behind us are in death's hands/Therefore, Lucilius, do as you write me that you are doing: hold every hour in your grasp. Lay hold of today's task, and you will not need to depend so much upon tomorrow's. While we are postponing, life speeds by (Seneca, 1917).

In this “setting-yourself-free-for-your-own-sake” appeal one perceives the Stoics' quest for objective truth, which is acquired not by common faith but by the seeking mind. This mind is focused not only on comprehending the external nature but also on the internal nature, namely a human. Searching for this nature and discovering it is the primary goal of Stoicism. One who lives following his or her nature has attained knowledge of a true good (Seneca, 2017: 3-5) and lives happily (Seneca, 2017: 9). Seneca calls such blissful ones as “Vir bonus”, men that are not valiant but virtuous (Seneca, 2017: 29).

1.2. Modern Stoicism as a Practice Applied by Vir Bonus in the XXI century

The third period in Stoicism is called the New Stoa. This period marks the end of Stoic practices in the nascent Christian world (III-IV c.). However, Stoicism again came to the fore in philosophy in the XVI century, in alliance with Christianity. This mix was called Neostoicism and is associated with the name of the humanist Justus Lipsius (Sanzhenakov, 2018).

The revival of interest in Stoic ideas and practices happened only in the twentieth century. It is associated with the names of two French philosophers, P. Hadot and M. Foucault. The first drew the attention of a predominantly academic philosophical audience to the history of Stoicism as a system of unique spiritual exercises (Hadot, 2002); the second used the interest of European and American student youth in performing the system of Stoic practices as *technologies of the self*, accessible and relevant for a person of the twentieth century (Foucault et al., 1988). It seems that technology has become a practical tool in answering the question of the potentialities for applying the practice of taking care of oneself, the theoretical concept that in ancient Greece was called *ἐπιμελεια εαυτου* (Foucault et al., 1988).

According to M. Foucault, self-care was one of the key principles in a free city-state citizen existence; such concern was not based on intention, but the act regulating the social and personal life of a person. In turn, the twentieth century with its visible crises and perturbations provoke French philosophers to return to Stoic practices because a person experienced a kind of loss in the transforming external (World Wars I and II, political crises namely the power of communists in Russia, fascists in Germany and Italy, economic post-war stagnation). In this case, taking care of oneself is a person's search for the self-enclosed within himself. According to P. Hadot and M. Foucault, the task of a person who addresses himself, as philosophers and theologians did two thousand years ago, was to learn to talk to himself again.

The Modern Stoicism movement is dedicated not only to the ability to talk to oneself, but also to *live* with oneself, in the broadest sense of the word. In its short history (since the 1990s), the movement has grown from a small group of enthusiast meetings online (*New Stoa*, the first lasting Stoic community) and offline (*The first Annual Stoic Week* at the University of Exeter) to international conferences open to a wide audience (e.g. *Stoicon*). To get an idea of the movement scope, one should look at the website created by Patrick Ussher and Greg Sadler and its diverse event tracks (<https://modernstoicism.com/>).

Today the contours of the movement scale are outlined by the number of books on Stoicism. If Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius are considered “old” guests on the libraries and bookstore shelves, then, since 2008, new names have been added to the ancient Stoics: Lawrence C. Becker ([Becker, Becker, 2017](#)), William B. Irvine ([Irvine, 2009](#)), Massimo Pigliucci ([Pigliucci, 2017](#)), Donald Robertson ([Robertson, 2019](#)), Ward Farnsworth ([Farnsworth, 2018](#)), Ryan Holiday, Stephen Hanselman ([Holiday, Hanselman, 2016](#)) and others. In their books, modern Stoics talk about their path to Stoicism (Massimo Pigliucci), refer to the foundations of Stoic ethics through the concepts of *virtue*, *good*, *happiness*, and *better life* (Lawrence C. Becker, William B. Irvine, Ward Farnsworth), ask questions about how to use the wisdom of famous Stoics in our everyday challenges (Donald Robertson, Massimo Pigliucci) and even offer a modern reader a system of daily stoic exercises (Ryan Holiday, Stephen Hanselman).

The academic environment does not show such a strong interest in the ideas of Stoicism. However, since the late 1980s texts on Stoics and Stoicism have been appearing in the pages of scientific journals and books. For instance, the work of S.K. Strange and J. Zupko, professors from Emory University, United States, on the influence of Stoicism on the philosophy of medieval and modern periods, modern philosophy, and psychotherapy ([Strange, Zupko, 2004](#)) and historical and philosophical work by T. Engberg-Pedersen, professor at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, on the transition from Stoicism to Platonism during the early days of Christianity ([Engberg-Pedersen, 2017](#)). What also is impressive is the work in which A. Still and W. Dryden (Goldsmiths College, University of London, United Kingdom) track the connection between spiritual exercises from the writings of Epictetus and modern psychotherapy ([Dryden, 2018](#)). In 2012, with the editorship of M. van Ackeren, a collection of essays *A Companion to Marcus Aurelius* was published. It was dedicated mainly to Marcus Aurelius, but also to the other Stoics (van Ackeren, 2012); there A.A. Long builds his thoughts around the problem of the self in Stoic practices ([Ackeren, 2012](#)). In some scientific articles, modern scholars refer to the Stoic figures ([Berryman, 2010](#)) or Stoic practices, eudaimonia and *αρετή* ([Lehmann et al., 2019](#); [Kraye, 2012](#)).

These materials register the growing interest of a wide, chiefly non-philosophical audience in the Stoicism practices. Many of the authors who consider themselves to be modern Stoics in Stoicism see the core of morality and ethics for a modern person, who lives in a situation of permanent perturbation, which today affects not only the real world but also the digital environment.

Finally, the article by Ard Kramer, a software tester from the Netherlands seems demonstrative. The OrangeCrest tester unambiguously states that the rapidly changing world (real and digital) complicates the tester's work. Ard Kramer himself found a recipe for doing his job well in four Stoic virtues: courage, justice, wisdom, and moderation ([Kramer, 2021](#)). In our opinion, the very appeal of a non-philosopher to the Stoic virtues indicates that in the twenty-first century *Vir bonus* still exists among us using daily Stoic practices.

The purpose of our research is to substantiate the idea of including Stoic practices into the educational process as a form of free student activity with the aim of critical perception of himself and his schedule.

The hypothesis of the research is that Stoicism can serve as a practice that allows a student to go beyond the student-as-an-object-of-education metanarrative and become an independent, free, and critically thinking subject in education. Acting on the research hypothesis, in the 2020–2021 academic years we conducted a series of events with second-year undergraduates of the South Ural State University (Chelyabinsk, Russia).

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

2.1. Comments on Design and Method

Modern education is often described in terms of economic transaction, where an educator is a provider and the student is a consumer. A major part of the methodological reflections in this

part are inspired by educators who are strongly against this “shopping attitude” to education. The key methodological question of the experiment was how to create educational space for students to exercise their subjectivity. G. Biesta argues that subjectification in education is the most important domain among qualification and socialisation. We agree that it is important to pay as much attention as possible to the educational situations that can remind a student that they can exist as a subject, “particularly in the context of the contemporary obsession with the domain of qualification” (Biesta, 2020b: 102). Subjectification is a phenomenon when “education impacts on the student as an individual, either by enhancing or by restricting capacities and capabilities” (Biesta, 2020b: 92). G. Biesta’s attitude to subjectification is based on the idea of freedom viewed as an existential matter (Biesta, 2020b: 93). Education as subjectification is “about being a self, being a subject of your own life” (Biesta, 2020b: 94) and “denying the comfort of not being a subject” (Biesta, 2020b: 95).

Our role as educators in the experiment provided us with the strong methodological problem formulated by I. Kant as the educational paradox: “How do I cultivate freedom through coercion?” (Schaffar, 2014) An educator is always in a position of power that contradicts exercising a student’s freedom in terms of subjectification. So, our role in designing the Stoic experiment was to give students an opportunity for “coming into presence”. We had the existential intention to give our students, not skills per se, but instead, to show ways of being through an experiment because skill or knowledge cannot occur without a subject.

We agree that the new language of education should be concerned with three concepts: trust without ground between actors in education, transcendental violence, responsibility without knowledge (Biesta, 2005: 60). G. Biesta offers a set of special parameters for subjectification in education to meet. The most important one is that subjectification requires a so-called “reality check”, or “interruption” of reality welcomed in the classroom. Meeting the real requires time, so the second principle is ‘suspension’ – slowing down, giving time to meet existential freedom and work through it. We agree with a critical analysis of fast reading strategy conducted by Milena I. Tsvetkova and support slow reading movement, “the philosophy of slow reading offers also a chance for happiness of the disorientated by the fierce speed of the multitasking and of the depressed, the desperate, the unhappy by lack of time people” (Tsvetkova, 2017). In general, the idea of “slowness” is increasingly referred to in modern philosophical discourse as a virtue. For example, N.C. Burbules examines philosophical dialogue through the prism of “slow writing, slow reading and slow philosophy” (Burbules, 2020). The third principle is ‘sustenance’ or support provision. All these aspects were implemented during the experiment design process. Philosophical practitioners from Norway respond in their own way to the problem of subjectification in education. Their response is implemented in a dialogue form (Noah Weiss, Hansen Helskog, 2020; Hansen Helskog, Noah Weiss, 2021).

Dialogue form was an aspect of crucial importance for the experiment design. It is “beneficial when teachers and students share responsibility for the content and process of the dialogue” (Rombout et al., 2021). With the reference to G. Ten Dam and M. Volman, F. Rombout, J.A. Schuitema and M.L.L. Volman states that “arguments for a dialogic approach to critical thinking education are that such an approach actively involves students in collaborative meaning-making” (Rombout et al., 2021). Meaning-making process is connected to existential dimension of education that we found important because of the students’ needs observation shown below in the results section (the gap between the inner, existential experiences and outer dimensions in the modern student world). Also there is an obvious concern that “many students do not participate in whole-class dialogues” (Frøytlog, Rasmussen, 2020). So, constructing positive and fruitful dialogue experience that starts at the university and leads students forward is seen as a key objective for dialogic pedagogy. The outlined practice for the experiment can be viewed as a generative dialogue (“The I-in-now”) in co-creation of learning that implement collaborative process, transformative interaction, collaborative output, collaborative outcome, learner’s agency, and new space for learning. “As an outcome through generative dialogue a new knowledge is co-created” (Kaminskienè et al., 2020), and this knowledge has existential dimension (S. Kierkegaard). However, dialogue as a chosen form of the experiment has its own limitations. We agree there is a need for “establishing communicative norms in the classroom where thinking together is encouraged” (Frøytlog, Rasmussen, 2020). These limitations can be

overcome by digital technologies or, as we maintain, by an implementation of diary form of students' self-dialog.

The experiment invited South Ural State University bachelor students of the second year to join voluntarily. An online survey based on Google forms was employed as the main method of gathering feedback during the experiment. The first part of the survey (pre-reflection) conducted in February 2021, the second one (post-reflection) was in June 2021, on an anonymous basis. The pre-reflection survey aimed to define the student's subjective feelings about the quality of their life. The post-reflection stage collected subjective data about the results of the work (see more about the results in the Discussion section below). The experiment itself included two forms of work: non-discrete (self-dialogue of a student daily within a framework of the Stoic Diary) and discrete (offline group meetings twice a month for meditation and slow reading practice).

2.2. Self-dialogue with a Stoic Diary

One of the key results of the work was the elaboration of the Stoic Diary, a guide to Stoic thought created in a reflexive format, which assumes a student's independent philosophical journey for three academic months (March, April, May, 2021). The Diary was designed for a self-sufficient experience with pieces of the original texts of the Stoics and diary practice for 12 weeks. In the process of this work, the student becomes acquainted with three iconic Stoics, and fragments of their works, learns to develop their reasoned position regarding Stoic philosophy, and attempts to feel like a Stoic in the modern world. "The most original feature of late Stoicism: the self-dialogue, which becomes the vehicle for practising philosophy and gaining self-knowledge" (Renz, 2017: 63).

The diary is a selection of fragments of the surviving works of three representatives of the Roman-Hellenistic period Stoicism: Epictetus, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius. Selected works for reading and reflection are *Enchiridion* or *The Handbook* (Epictetus, 1-4 weeks), *Moral Letters to Lucilius* (Seneca, 5-8 weeks), *Meditations* (Marcus Aurelius, 9-12 weeks).

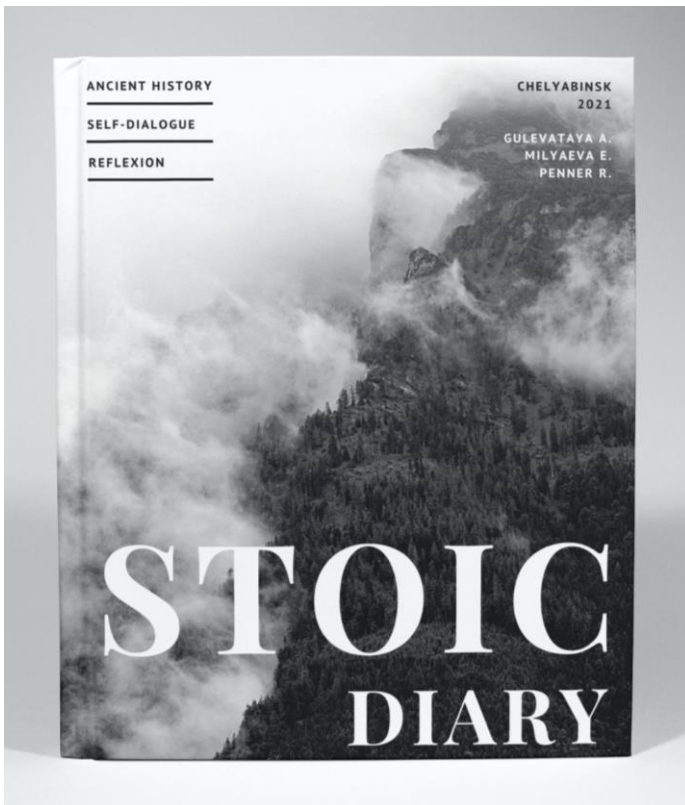


Fig. 1. Stoic Diary. The cover

It is remarkable that in the diary journey, students get acquainted with the slave Epictetus, the poet and teacher Nero Seneca, and Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Of course, each of the Stoics

made a significant contribution to the treasury of philosophical thought, but we, as a team of research authors, focus the attention of the participants in the experiment on the fact that in this practice we are not involved in the history of philosophy; but if these philosophical ideas can be useful to the students in their everyday lives. Thus, keeping a Stoic diary is not a theoretical subject: we emphasise that we do not have a goal for the students to read as much as possible about the Stoics and the texts of the Stoics themselves. On the contrary, we offer fruitful reflexive work with oneself through the thoughts and ideas of the late Stoics, focusing not on the amount of reading, but the quality of immersion in the text, and the level of its comprehension concerning our everyday life.

The method of keeping a Stoic Diary involves reading daily fragments of the text. We encourage the students to read a fragment of the day slowly, thoughtfully, preferably aloud in the morning. After that, if possible, we asked them to close their eyes and think about the text not only in words but also in abstract images. Further during the day, it was important to keep track of the moments when something unpleasant happens, stop and ask yourself the question about the level of significance of what is happening. At this stage, the students chose the degree of significance of the event for themselves: it can be significant in a negative sense, it can contain hidden advantages, or even be neutral. At the end of the day, they need to re-read the fragment and assemble the details of the day into a whole, slowing down at key points. After that, it was important to write down thoughts next to the Stoic text, thinking about whether they managed to study the Stoic lesson of the day and if this lesson helped that day – on a specific day with its specific, peculiar and unique events.

In the proposed method, consistency and self-reflection habit development are important. The work begins with the very first text (Epictetus) and goes sequentially to the last one (Marcus Aurelius), the student does not skip fragments and does not run ahead. One day is equal to one piece of text. Every day they need to commit a certain amount of time (from 15 to 60 minutes) in their busy timetables. The participant was advised to use any relevant method of concentration: meditation, deep breathing, affirmations, etc. After that, they should focus on the given fragment of the day employing slow reading practice. At the end of each week it is proposed to grasp the experience of keeping a diary for six days, and to record in writing any thoughts in two diary entries: *Letter to the Author* (questions, comments, suggestions) and *Mirror* (what I learned about myself reading the author's text). At the end of each month, it was recommended to summarise the reflections, compiling daily experiences for a month. For this, the following diary entries are proposed: *Theoretical Benefits* (what I have learned in the aspect of the philosophical thought history); *Practical Benefits* (what Stoic ideas I want and can implement in my everyday life); *Unanswered Questions*; *Life Flow* (will it be important to come back to the Stoic text and when); *Takeaway for my future* (precise practical steps after reading the Stoic).

The existential experience of a philosopher, presented in the form of diary entries, is not just a kind of philosophical knowledge but represents a real experience of being, so this idea opens up an existential dimension of education: “Existential education is not about obtaining objective truth, it is rather a matter of obtaining subjective truth” (Saeverot, 2013: 3).

According to our idea, with the help of the diary, each participant of the experiment can step the philosophical path independently; and for everyone this path is their own, subjective, individual, unique, personified. Thus, the experiment in the format of diary entries is a journey towards oneself in a polylogue with another with reflection maintenance and in a constant internal dialogue with oneself, and an attempt for educational space for subjectification.

2.3. Group Stoic Meetings

Self-dialogue was supported by offline university meetings that were free to join and usually included 8-12 students and three educators; one as a discussion leader, two as observers. These meetings followed 5 stages: (1) introductory discussion about everyday matters; (2) meditation for relaxation; (3) slow reading of a given Stoic text fragment; (4) self-reflection upon a text; (5) polylogue in a group. The methodological content of these stages is discussed below.

Stage 1. Introductory discussion about everyday matters is a “reality check”, or “interruption” of reality. Educational communication is an open and undetermined process. So, unpredictability of an open discussion is also a part of the method. The experiment in general does not require a definite outcome, because it is designed as an existential challenge, that is always urgent and never resolved. No ‘learning outcomes’ for the experiment were defined in advance.

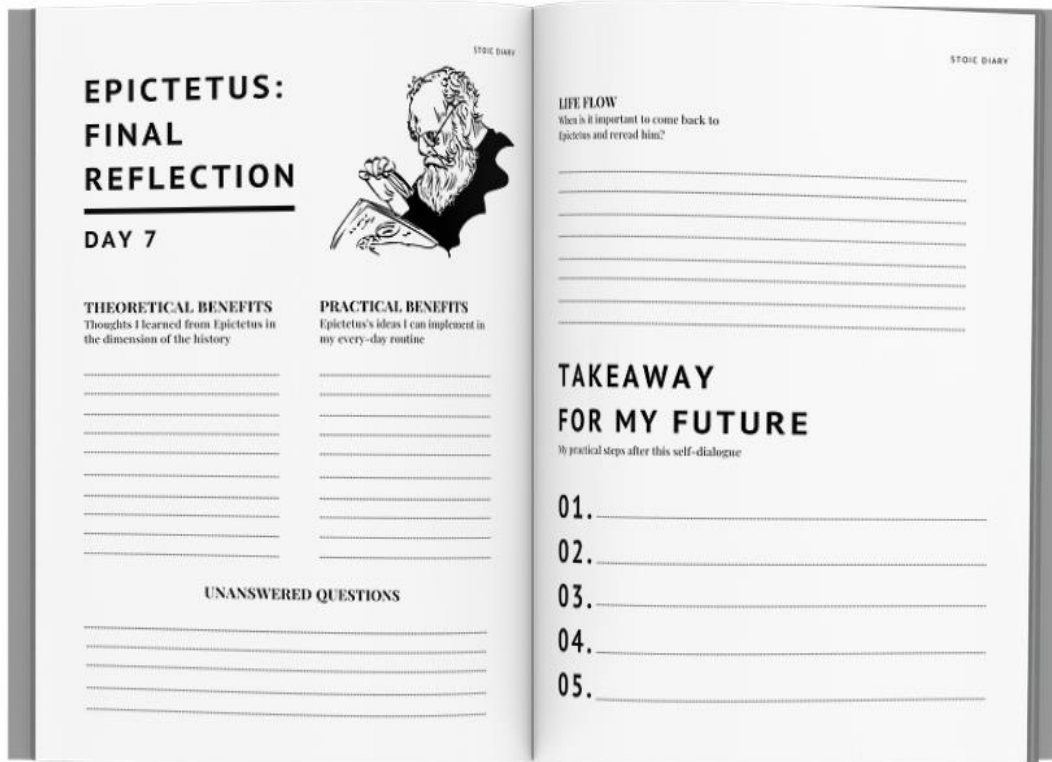


Fig. 2. Stoic Diary. Final reflection of the week

In order to check reality, it was valuable for us to create a space where students could share their vulnerability without being judged. It is good to remember that “if we ask academics to hold students in a space of vulnerability and uncertainty in which they can embrace their own beings, it is necessary that we create the kind of environment where academics can explore their own vulnerability and uncertainty” (Berg, Seeber, 2016).

Embracing the challenging disturbance is an emotionally uneasy task for both educators and students. It is a problem of trust as M. Platz puts it (Platz, 2021). Unlike educational events designed in the edutainment paradigm, this experiment was designed to present the students with difficulties, challenges, and risk, it was pronounced clearly that it was not something easy, attractive, and exciting. But, in our opinion, it is worth taking risks for education actors who are already frustrated by being “objects of approval and disapproval, both by others and the person” (Danziger, 1997: 145). The first stage helps to re-comprehend educational space not as a place of approval and disapproval, but as a place for existential subjectivity to come into being without any evaluation.

Stage 2. Meditation for relaxation provides a powerful embodiment shift. The meditative component of group meetings and the elements of body relaxation techniques were aimed at overcoming the dichotomy of the mental and bodily in the academic environment. Relaxation and meditation exercises were carried out according to a pre-planned method and depend on the educator's personal preferences (simple gymnastics, Qigong exercises, any version of Pranayama, yoga breathing techniques). These practices are based on ancient philosophical ideas and their effectiveness has been proven by modern science (Waters et al., 2015; Ramsburg, Youmans, 2014; Russo, 2019).

Stage 3. Slow reading of a given text fragment Slow reading is a small part of a wider slow life cultural movement. The academic members of this movement are concerned about the frantic pace of modern university life (Berg, Seeber, 2016). In such a pace it is impossible simply to be here and now, to connect with an existential dimension. In a rushing life, slow reading technique as opposed to speed reading, acquires special relevance. Modern students experience “information fatigue syndrome” (D. Lewis), “information overload” (B. Gross, A. Toffler), even “analysis paralysis”. “The educational way, the slow, difficult, frustrating, and weak way, may therefore not be the most

popular way in an impatient society” (Biesta, 2013: 4), and we bravely face this risk. It is the philosophical text that is the basis, and the key prop for the group work. The educators use the existential dimension of philosophical texts to start a deep reflection process, and then a discussion. The participants read the proposed fragment of the text calmly, without tension, very slowly. For the first time a text is read to themselves, and aloud for the second time, one by one. So, the fragment is repeated aloud several times in the group.

Stage 4. Self-reflection upon a text. At this stage we again employed the discussed above ‘suspension’ principle – slowing down, giving time to meet existential freedom and work through it. This is a reading-into-writing part of the meeting. The facilitator can suggest a variety of exercises (making notes for themselves, freewriting, finding *subjectively* key words, creating a piece of poetry, etc.). One formal moment of group meetings is important to mention here – we decided upon a deliberate rejection of all digital formats for reading and writing, and instead returned to analogue means of communication. This is important in terms of embodied cognition: “disconnect to reconnect”, so to say.

Stage 5. Polylogue in a group. The main idea here was not a demonstration of one's awareness in the field of philosophy, but true philosophising; the practice of elaborating one's own personal worldview. The responsibility of the educator at this stage was to convey this attitude to the participants, releasing them from unnecessary stress associated with the uncertainty of their cultural baggage and philosophical experience.

The axiological vector of this group work can be defined as follows: respect for the otherness, calm attitude to the polyphony of the opinions expressed, valuelessness, inclination towards acceptance and openness, and desire for a natural flow of dialogue. To approach the education event as an art, not a science. One can find methods of existential psychotherapy like the method pronounced here in seeking an individual approach to a person, and as it is an example of uncertainty, dialogue and co-creation of the therapist and the client. A breakthrough to being is carried out intuitively, and intuitive cognitive experience cannot be reduced to formal methodological recommendations. That is why the development of the axiological principles of the experiment is an important part of the reflection of its method.

At that point we can conclude that with the help of discussed methodological approach the experiment became an educational event of subjectification, “when individuals resist existing identities” (Biesta, 2013: 7), an experience of ‘coming into presence’ (Biesta, 2005: 62), not getting more and more information to make it internalised. The meetings were designed the way that every student had an opportunity to “to show who they are and where they stand” (Biesta, 2005: 62), because there was no specific “learning outcomes” to follow, and the agenda was elaborated during the flow of an event in terms of a virtue-based attitude to communication.

3. Results

Stoic Experiment at the University

3.1. Experiment participants

At the start, 65 bachelors of the second year studying at different faculties took part in the experiment. Participants were 60 % female, and 40 % male. The average of the participants was 19-20 years of age. Most of the participants were representatives of technical and natural science departments (chemistry, physics, heat power engineering, mathematics). The humanities were presented by journalists, historians, and linguists. As noted previously, participation in the study was voluntary, as it was recognised that it added an extra load to the students' usual educational practice and their participation in social and scientific events. All participants at the time of the experiment were mastering the General Course of Philosophy; experimental participation did not give them any “bonus” for the final grade.

The students' need for going beyond the Russian university modern system metanarrative is manifested in this study in the following features. In the introductory survey, participants highlighted family, friends, health, creativity, freedom of choice, and opportunities for self-development as the key components of a good life. Only 2 % of participants regarded education as a component of a good life. Participants understand a good life as an opportunity to satisfy material, spiritual, and intellectual needs in free choice circumstances. According to the participants, the university currently did not provide such an opportunity. We hope that with the humanization of higher education in Russia, such opportunities will gradually become available at the university.

At the beginning of the study, 20 % of the participants observed dissatisfaction with themselves, 15 % honestly stated that they did not see the meaning of their lives (at the end of the study, the answers transformed to 16 % and 13.5 % respectively). 37 % of participants noted that they often experienced anxiety and despair. We tell students that free psychological and psychotherapeutic assistance is available at the Student Health Centre. At the same time, most participants (60 %) indicated that they were satisfied with personal relationships (friends, relatives, classmates, etc.). These figures represent the gap between the inner (existential experiences) and outer dimensions in the modern student world. The inner dimension seems frightening to a young person who does not have the skills to reflect upon himself (actions and thoughts) and the world around him.

Most of the participants, before starting to work with the diary, had a general idea of the Stoic philosophers gained from the philosophy course. At the same time, 22 out of 65 participants (33 %) were ready to announce themselves as Stoics and 29 out of 65 (44.6 %) noted that a Stoic lifestyle in the modern world is more likely possible than not. After three months of independent and group work, 17 out of 37 participants (45.9 %) called themselves Stoics, and 20 out of 37 (54 %) participants agreed that in the modern world it is possible to attain a lifestyle that is based on Stoic virtues. The students participating in the experiment defined the Stoic way of life as the ability to be spiritually strong, to be aware of their place in the world, to build a system of value guidelines, and to determine to what extent life able to be controlled by an individual.

At the beginning of the study, most of the participants (65 %) defined the goal of their participation in the study as knowing themselves. Students used the following wordings: "Learn[ed] something new about myself and others" (30 %), "Understand myself" (22 %), "I want to understand myself and my life" (27 %). In addition, the following goals were identified: "to gain new knowledge" (32 %), "to learn how to keep a diary" (35 %).

3.2. Stoic virtues educating

Students were faced with the fact that participation in the study, and training of Stoic virtues, required both the sincere desire of the students themselves and their systematic work on themselves. We warned the participants about this as the diary work started, and focused their attention on the absence of any constraints, and control on the part of the teachers.

The conditions of daily dairy work without constant teacher supervision and lack of assessment for modern youth, accustomed to the fact that in the educational process each step is monitored and evaluated by "adults", turned out to be a difficult challenge. 37 participants (57 % female, 43 % male) persisted till the end of the three-month daily work with the diary. Those participants who quit at some stages noted that this happened due to the high workload. It is worth noting that those who finished, fully completed the tasks for the Philosophy Course and received good exam marks. Of those who stayed till the end, 51.4 % noted that they had difficulties with self-discipline. 29.7 % stressed that it was difficult to encourage themselves to think about important things daily. So, in a day crammed with routine and information noise, modern young men and women simply do not have time for the most important thing, namely genuine self-care for themselves. For most students, the skill of time and resource management is not developed either in the family or at school, only one individual out of 37 complained about the lack of time to complete the assignments.

Most of the participants who reached the end of the study stated that they had achieved the goals formulated for themselves at the start. In the closing survey, students noted that they were able to look through a different prism to adhere to "common truths" and apply them to their own lives and thoughts. The diary format helped to acquire self-control and master a habit of self-reflection, and to reflect on the fundamental issues of human existence. Two participants noted that the diary helped to cope with family losses, so Stoic practices became a kind of support in times of trauma.

One of the important results of the diary work is that the participants realised that their life depends primarily on themselves, on a Stoic attitude to themselves, to their time, emotions, on taking care of themselves not only on a physical level but also on a spiritual level. The participants regarded that the skill of reflection allowed them to comprehend their existential experience, which helped to overcome anxiety, stress, nervousness, and assisted to harmonise relations with oneself and with the

world around them. In the beginning, 23 out of 65 participants (35.4 %) noted that their life is full of meaning, and at the end, this figure changed to 17 out of 37 (46 %).

The aim of the given research was to validate the idea of incorporating Stoic practices as a form of voluntary student activity in the classroom, so the research is qualitative, not quantitative. A survey was designed to collect data on the thoughts and experiences of participants who were exposed to the practical application of Stoic ideas. The analysis of the thoughts and ideas presented by the participants allowed us to formulate and confirm the hypothesis about the possibility and prospects of using Stoic practices in the additional educational work of a teacher with higher education students.

4. Discussion

Possibility and Necessity of Modern Stoicism at the XXI-century University

We begin our search for a *Vir bonus* in a modern university by identifying the problems of the university and education in general.

In his work *La condition postmoderne* (1979) J.-F. Lyotard writes about the beginning of a new era, namely the era of postmodernity, associated with the end of the *great narratives* (Lyotard, 1984). Among the metanarratives J.-F. Lyotard distinguishes archaic narrative, classical science, and education. The common thing for the listed metanarratives is the legitimation of knowledge. It means that this narrative meets clearly defined criteria, formed in accordance with predetermined standards. J.-F. Lyotard associates the metanarrative of education with the originating of Freie Universität Berlin (early 19th century). Even though W. von Humboldt's memo proclaims the university's independence from any political power, the university's goals are formulated in the tone of ethical and social prescriptions: to cultivate science, to use it as a material for spiritual and moral education (Humboldt, 1998: 2). One glance at this document is enough to understand that it is not a denotative manner (a description of *how it is*), but a prescription manner (an indication of *how it should be*).

J.-F. Lyotard is bothered not so much about the concept of the university as a metanarrative, but about the form of legitimation of knowledge that is inherent in it, namely effectiveness. The quality of undergraduate education is measured by the amount of knowledge packed into it. Times change, new students come to the old universities, but the problem of metanarrative is that the university is not a living organic system that optimally responds to changes in the external. Usually, the modern university announces the program that was consolidated in the 19th century, so it can be called the knowledge paradigm.

H. Arendt also worries about the knowledge paradigm. In *The Crisis of Education* (1954), she differentiates the concepts of learning and education. Only the first one is undeviatingly related to the knowledge building up; education, in its turn, is associated with preparing children for harmonious existence in an adult world. There H. Arendt goes:

“Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it, and by the same token save it from that ruin which except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world” (Arendt, 1954).

In order to “prepare them for the task of renewing a common world,” education needs to go beyond the knowledge paradigm. Moreover, education should establish a secure balance between the old, on which the external to the child world is based, and the new, that the child brings into this world. Hence this interesting contradiction yields: “*Exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world*” (Arendt, 1954).

G. Biesta extends the idea of education as a student *emancipation* (Biesta, 2020a), so education seems as a person's holistic preparation for existence in the outside world: “*subjectification has an orientation towards emancipation, that is, towards ways of doing and being that do not simply accept the given order but have an orientation towards the change of the existing order so that different ways of doing and being become possible*” (Illeris, 2018: 246). For several years he has been using the concept of good education (Biesta, 2016). The predicament

is that the “good” conveyed by the metanarrative is different from “good” from the learner's point of view. For a narrative, “good” is specifically measurable knowledge and skills; for a real person, it is an opportunity to holistically exist in the world, and not to be torn into fragments, in order to be an integral personality in his or her actual existence. A similar idea of “educational goods” is being developed by Harry Brighouse and colleagues (Brighouse et al., 2018). Scholars also focus on the fact that when thinking about the education of a real person, one should maintain a balance between external requirements (achievement, school Finance & Accountability) and the student's inner request (valuable experiences and freedoms) (Brighouse et al., 2020).

The contemplations above reflect the situation in Russian education. The process of education is regular and algorithmic; it does not always imply an understanding of what is being broadcast (like a stream). At the same time, broadcast expresses an attitude to a student as to an object, if a student is not asked what he thinks about what he hears (in general, it does not matter what he thinks and whether he thinks). In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the problem of student objectification in the educational process has intensified. This is indicated by the content of publications, where the authors mark the forced online turn of education as “*shock digitalisation*” (Nazarov et al., 2021) or a “*new normal*” (Nesterchuk et al., 2020). It is revealed in the teachers' difficulties to adequately transpose their material into an online format, and a low degree of student involvement in this modified educational process. “The formalization and dehumanization of education” in the digital era is perceived as a destructive consequence of digitalization (Frolova et al., 2020), that is the reason why existential dimension of education should be kept in mind as a possible vector of finding a solution for that.

Following the thoughts of philosophers and educators, we define the problem of our research within three arguments:

1. Higher education in Russia follows the form of a stream and requires a student to integrate into this stream without an individual critical assessment of the stream content;
2. In this educational context, a student is an *object of activity*, not a *subject in activity*;
3. For a student, education itself becomes formal, it turns into a flow of information that passes through him from session to session.

G. Biesta sees the accomplishment of his “*good education*” concept in “*subjectification*” (Biesta, 2020b), the practice when a student goes beyond understanding and presenting himself as an object of the educational process. He becomes a full-fledged subject in educational activity, realising his freedom as an independent actor in the adult world. In our opinion, “*subjectification*” has a connection with Stoic virtues, and with freedom, happiness, and balance. These virtues are associated with subjectivity, the formation of the self, since they draw the student's attention from the outside to the inside, to the self. Since antiquity, Stoicism has taught a person to connect externally given imperatives with his own desires and aspirations. Following the ideas of Epictetus, sorting things out into those that are in our control, and those that are beyond, can help the modern student to distinguish between what he can, and should do, from what he cannot change. This understanding entails inner peace and harmony and can help a person find happiness.

For us as educators, the most important achievement of the experiment was that the participants learned to pay attention to themselves on their own; to take care of themselves through the philosophy text reflection, to correlate experience with their thoughts. It seems suitable to quote the words of one of the participants: “With the help of daily reflections I structured my worldview. You know, like in a mechanism, where the things are connected into a single chain. Of course, objectively speaking, I am very far, tremendously far from understanding something in this life, but at least a small part of it has formed, again, not in a complete, but at least in some kind of a picture”.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to make a contribution to a discussion about the possible ways of subjectification in education through modern application of Stoic philosophy, so the outlined above experiment was conducted. A major reason for many students to engage in the experiment was to understand themselves, to find out the way out of a rigid university curriculum, and to try a new format of educational communication. Many students realized that their engagement in the experiment was a transforming event for them.

The results demonstrate that modern university students are ready to go beyond the boundaries established by the traditional educational system. This retreat is possible due to the desire to know oneself and the unique existential experience of each person involved in education. Stoic practices in the individual diary format and face-to-face group meetings contribute to the development and application of students' skills such as free reflexive activity in the critical understanding of themselves and their lives. The skills of self-reflection and introspection, grown in the process of individual work with the diary and discussion of the Stoics thoughts in a group, help the student to get out of the predicament of a passive participant of the educational process, and enter the university as an independent, free and critically thinking subject of education, focused not on the having mode but being mode (E. Fromm).

For educators, the experience of participating in the outlined research allowed them to see students not only as vessels for filling with knowledge but living, experiencing, feeling, encountering, exploring beings. This helped to achieve three goals. First, overcome the formal educators' attitude towards their students in conditions of high education pressure. Second, to find an option to restore a live dialogue of those moving together towards living real knowledge. Third, to remind the spirit of the university as a place for human self-cultivation. Participation in such practices with students allows the teacher to overcome the negative consequences of professional deformation, and burnout, that destroy the dialectical essence of the teacher-student relationship; to turn the educator from an educational conveyor wheel to an active creative subject of education.

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