

Giving Place to Unforeseeable Learning: The Inhospitability of Outcomes-Based Education

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OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION: THREE CRITIQUES

In recent years, under the influence of measurement and accountability discourses in North America, as well as in the United Kingdom, Australia, and South Africa, the concept of “outcomes-based education” has become increasingly popular. The idea is that the quality of education can and should be assessed by the measurable results it produces in terms of students’ knowledge and skills. Moreover, the processes of listening, reading, writing, thinking, playing, observing, and others that make up educational time should be designed for particular *predetermined* outcomes and are considered successful only when those outcomes have been achieved. In the design of specific curricula and pedagogies, the term “prescribed learning outcomes” is sometimes used to identify those predetermined outcomes whose achievement constitutes educational success — regardless of other, unforeseen outcomes of the educational processes.

Several authors have critiqued the economically driven paradigm in which a focus on outcomes fits. In the Australian context, for example, where outcomes-based education has already been widely implemented, John Smyth and Alastair Dow argue that outcomes rhetoric serves to justify “the scientific management of teaching and learning in a way that establishes a correspondence between the processes of education and the demands of industry.”¹ The technical-rational approach to teaching and the idea that education is “the ‘answer’ to the economic imperative” go hand in hand.² Also in Australia, Richard Berlach has critiqued outcomes-based education for its definitional vagueness, its reliance on corporate jargon, and its excessive requirements of assessment and documentation.³ Berlach thus points out that the demand for measurable outputs is coupled with heavy surveillance in the service of economic utility and productivity.

A second critique of outcomes-based education might take John Dewey’s pragmatic perspective and argue that outcomes-based education is, by definition, miseducative. By focusing education on predetermined outcomes, the experiences that students are set up to have are restricted and become, in turn, a hindrance, rather than a conduit, for future experiences — the very definition of a miseducative experience.⁴ Predetermining the valuable outcomes of an experience glosses over the fact that experience is, in Dewey’s terms, an *interaction*, and that one part of that interaction is constituted by the internal factors brought by the student. Dewey advocates education that allows the student to get “out of his present experience all that there is in it for him at the time in which he has it.”⁵ In other words, an educative experience is one that makes the fullest use of all that there is to be had from the interaction between the internal factors of the student’s previous experiences and the

external factors of the curriculum. In no uncertain terms, Dewey condemns educators and curriculum designers who believe that they can predetermine, without knowing the student, what interactions a curriculum will produce, and what learning will be the most valuable outcome of such interaction; the unforeseen or, in Dewey's terms, "collateral" learning is often more important than the intended learning. "Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time."⁶

A third line of critique addresses the incompatibility between a focus on outcomes and the concept of education itself. This is the approach taken by John Elliott, who revisits the work of Richard Peters and Lawrence Stenhouse in the 1960s and 1970s to argue that the kinds of measurable outputs defined in outcomes-based education narrow education to training and instruction, and do not do justice to the broader and more important educational processes of initiation and induction.⁷ The intrinsic goods of education — goods that are associated with the very concept of becoming educated, such as the development of "cognitive perspectives" — cannot be predefined in terms of measurable "exit behaviors" that focus on particular instrumental knowledge and skills that are extrinsic to education itself. Also making use of Peters's work, Yusef Waghid argues, in reference to educational reforms in South Africa, that those who focus on outcomes-based education remain trapped in a conception of education as justifiable by its instrumental purposes, rather than for its intrinsic educational goods, such as rational reflection and imagination.⁸

Several of the authors on whose work these critics of outcomes-based education rely, notably Richard Peters and Michael Oakeshott, emphasize the educational processes of initiation and induction. Peters writes that one of the central tasks of teachers is to help students "to explore and share a public world whose contours have been marked out by generations which have preceded both of them."⁹ And Oakeshott argues that education begins with "the deliberate initiation of a new-comer into a human inheritance of sentiments, beliefs, imaginings, understandings and activities."¹⁰ Leaving aside the particular conceptions of culture and inheritance invoked by Peters and Oakeshott, what I wish to underscore is that initiation and induction are both gestures that give newcomers a place, and that invite and welcome them into traditions or, pluralizing Oakeshott's famous phrase, "conversations of humankind." Giving place to newcomers is a gesture of *hospitality*, an ethical concept that has been theorized extensively by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida takes up questions of hospitality and inheritance in ways that are different from Peters and Oakeshott, but that further support the rejection of outcomes-based education. In this essay, then, I will add a verse from continental philosophy to the critique of outcomes-based education. Where the critiques described above focus on the *political*, *pragmatic*, and *conceptual* wrongheadedness of the idea of outcomes-based education, I will focus on the *ethical* problems that are produced by this idea. I will use Derrida's "ethic of hospitality" to argue that outcomes-based education fails to give place to unforeseeable learning, and is, therefore, fundamentally inhospitable.

AN ETHIC OF HOSPITALITY

The work of Derrida does not provide us with a full ethical framework or set of moral principles that would allow for moral reasoning. That would be anathema to Derrida's very conception of ethics, which is not "moral calculus";¹¹ on the contrary, Derrida considers "a certain undecidability...the condition or the opening of a space for an ethical or political decision, and not the opposite."¹² In other words, the real demand of an ethical or political decision lies in the fact that, in the final instance, the decision is without guarantee and cannot be fully calculated or planned. Derrida emphasizes throughout his work the ethical decisions of forgiveness and hospitality, both of which are aporetic in the sense that they are responses to impossible, impassable ethical demands. In order to support my claim that outcomes-based education is inhospitable, I will conceptualize hospitality by means of three impossible ethical demands that it entails: the demand to address a guest one cannot ask to know; the demand to protect the home one must surrender to the guest; and the demand to reciprocate outside of a paradigm of reciprocity.

The common-sense understanding of hospitality involves the receiving of a guest by a host. But this guest may have arrived as a result of the host's invitation, or may have turned up unannounced. Extending hospitality to an invited guest is generally not a demanding task, and the risks of invitational hospitality are small. The guest who visits unannounced, however, presents a different situation and may not be recognized as a "guest" at all, but rather as a "stranger." And yet, true hospitality requires that I receive precisely this stranger, without first ascertaining if s/he is a worthy recipient of my hospitality. Derrida writes that

absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity...or even their names.¹³

This brings me to a first characteristic *impossibility* of hospitality, the demand to address a guest one cannot ask to know:

On the one hand, hospitality does not seem to be hospitality if what we are welcoming is not a stranger, a real guest, someone whom we have not already identified or identified with.... On the other hand, the stranger must be welcomed — in particular ways, by means of particular conventions, within a particular language. To be effective, that is, to have a genuine effect, to be a real welcome, the guest must be identified, and if not called out to or greeted by name at least selected, picked out, *invited*.¹⁴

For hospitality to be a pure gift, it ought to be unconditional, and hence offered to a stranger who has not been asked to make her or himself known. But for hospitality to be a gift offered and addressed to the other, the other cannot be treated as just anyone, as *n'importe qui*. Hospitality ought to be a personal address, for which I have to know whom I am addressing. When Derrida was asked to address this *aporia*, he responded,

Hospitality consists in doing everything to address oneself to the other; it consists in granting him, indeed in asking him, his name, all the while trying to prevent this question from becoming a "condition," a police interrogation, an inquest or an investigation, or a simple

border check. The difference is subtle and yet fundamental, a question that is asked on the threshold of one's home [*chez-soi*] and on the threshold between inflections.¹⁵

A teacher is confronted with a student who is a stranger to her, and whom she must receive hospitably, that is, by doing everything to address herself to this student without demanding that this student make himself known. Derrida demonstrated this educational hospitality to Michael Naas when the latter approached Derrida after a seminar to ask if he could give an *exposé* later that year. Naas recounts,

After my brief description of that *exposé* in halting and embarrassed French, Derrida looked at me kindly, with a light and perhaps somewhat amused smile, and asked, "*Alors, qui êtes-vous?*" ... Spoken not at all out of impatience or irritation, as a way of asking me, "*Alors, qui êtes-vous? Vous vous prenez pour qui?*" — "Just who are you or who do you think you are?" but, rather, out of what I would like to call hospitality, I heard the question as an invitation, "*Dites-moi un peu plus. Dites-moi qui vous êtes,*" "Tell me a bit more. Tell me who you are," for example, "Tell me your name."¹⁶

Derrida was a host who opened up an educational space for Naas by addressing him *in particular*.

Furthermore, extending hospitality requires having, or having access to, a space in which the guest can be received. The host receives the guest in her or his home, whether this "home" is a tangible or intangible space. Thus, hospitality requires that the host both have a home and risk it by opening it to the other. The question one is left with is

how to welcome the other into my home, how to be a good "host," which means how both to make the other at home while still retaining the home as mine, since inviting others to stay in someone else's home is not what we mean by hospitality or the gift. Hospitality... means to put your home at risk, which simultaneously requires both having a home and risking it.¹⁷

This brings me to a second impossibility of true hospitality. Absolute hospitality annihilates itself: it is a gesture in which the host surrenders the home to the guest, and is thus effectively no longer a host, and hence no longer in a position to offer hospitality. Therefore, hospitality is necessarily a self-limiting and imperfect gesture. The host expects certain things from the guest so that the space into which the guest is welcomed is preserved and the host can continue to extend hospitality. Expectations placed on the guest, however, limit the hospitality extended to her or him.

When Derrida writes, "I am not proprietor of the place open to hospitality. Whoever gives hospitality ought to know that he is not even proprietor of what he would appear to give," he challenges the connection of the gift of hospitality to the ownership of the space into which the other is received.¹⁸ For physical educational spaces, this is uncontroversial, as teachers today would not claim to own the school buildings into which students are received. For cultural educational spaces, like the "human inheritance" or "public world" of which Oakeshott and Peters speak, it may be more difficult for teachers not to consider themselves as owners of property or, at least, as guardians of the propriety demanded by these spaces. But teachers have themselves been received into both the physical and cultural spaces of education, and in an ethic of hospitality they can offer hospitality to newcomers only in the spaces in which they themselves are guests.

To dare to say welcome is perhaps to insinuate that one is at home here, that one knows what it means to be at home, and that at home one receives, invites, or offers hospitality, thus appropriating for oneself a place to *welcome* [*accueillir*] the other, or, worse, welcoming the other in order to appropriate for oneself a place and then speak the language of hospitality.¹⁹

A teacher's gesture of "welcome" into physical and cultural educational spaces is, therefore, not a masterful gesture by a host in possession of a home, who can afford to invite a guest, but a more humble gesture made by a host who knows that she herself has been received and that she is not truly in possession of her home.

Absolute hospitality is offered not in exchange, but as a gift. The third *aporia* of hospitality is that the host offers hospitality to reciprocate for having been received, yet hospitality must be an unconditional gift, given outside of a paradigm of reciprocity. True hospitality can only be offered by a host who recognizes her or his indebtedness — to others from whom s/he has received hospitality, but even to the guest to whom the host is about to offer it. Derrida underscores this when he writes that the person who extends a welcome "is first welcomed by the face of the other whom he means to welcome."²⁰ For example, the teacher who extends a welcome to a student on the first day of class can do so only after being welcomed by the student's face that says, "You are my teacher."

When Derrida uses the phrase "ethic of hospitality," he refers to this impossible unconditional hospitality that offers a place to the other without demanding respect, reciprocity, or other assurances. "The other may come, or he may not. I don't want to programme him, but rather to leave a place for him to come if he comes."²¹ But programming students is precisely what outcomes-based education sets out to do: like a controlling, inhospitable host who has not only picked the party games but also predetermined how much fun each one of the guests will have, outcomes-based education seeks to predetermine not only what students will *do* but also what they will *learn* in the educational spaces into which they are received.

As Peters and Oakeshott have reminded us, education *qua* education is fundamentally oriented toward receiving students and giving place to those who newly arrive in a world. Derrida acknowledges that the concrete phenomenon of state politics cannot be run based on the principle of unconditional hospitality, but he argues, nonetheless, "that a politics that does not maintain a reference to this principle of unconditional hospitality is a politics that loses its reference to justice."²² Likewise, I acknowledge that the concrete phenomenon of mass schooling cannot be run based on the principle of unconditional hospitality, but argue that schooling that does not maintain a reference to the principle of unconditional hospitality loses its reference to education, and to ethical education in particular.

Education, following this logic, ought to be concerned with giving place to students and with receiving children and adults who arrive, who are, in spite of the best attempts at preparation by teachers and administrators, unpredictable and wholly other. The otherness of this arrival is unequalled even by the otherness of physical birth, as "families prepare for a birth; it is scheduled, forenamed, caught up in a symbolic space that dulls the arrivance."²³ This absolute *arrivance* is not dissimilar from what Hannah Arendt calls "natality," the human entry into the world

that brings a newness that both threatens the world as it is and is its only hope for survival. Writes Arendt, “each generation grows into an old world, so that to prepare a new generation for a new world can only mean that one wishes to strike from the newcomers’ hands their own chance at the new.”²⁴ Education is the point where this urge is resisted and “their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us” is *not* struck from the newcomers’ hands.²⁵ Education in an ethic of hospitality is aporetic because it must give place to newness without imposing conditions, while at the same time limiting this gift in order to preserve the world for future arrivals.

Outcomes-based education is, by design, inhospitable. It does not consider education to be charged with giving place to students, but with predetermining what learning should take place in educational spaces. Moreover, by standardizing outcomes and assessing the same behaviors and products for each student, outcomes-based education does not address itself to any particular student; the student becomes *n’importe qui*. Thirdly, outcomes-based education does not offer any basis for teachers’ understanding both their indebtedness as guests who have themselves been received into traditions, and their concomitant responsibilities as hosts, charged with receiving newcomers into these traditions that are not of their own making.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF HOSPITABLE EDUCATIONAL SPACES

Gert Biesta considers how the architectural creation of physical spaces can help us think differently about the creation of spaces in and by education. Echoing Arendt’s arguments about natality, Biesta proposes that education today ought to create a “worldly space, a space of plurality and difference, a space where freedom can appear and where singular, unique individuals can come into the world.”²⁶ In analyzing the design of physical spaces, Biesta is drawn toward architects such as Bernard Tschumi, who seek to overcome functionalism, the desire to control how people use the spaces that have been designed for them. Tschumi is interested in the point where the actual activities that take place in a space disrupt any ideas that the architect may have had about the uses of the space.

Of course, designing necessarily means projecting onto a space some potential uses that one wants to enable and disable; the only way for an architect not to play a role in the shaping and limiting of human activity “is not to build anything at all, but this would mean the end of architecture.”²⁷ Giving place does not mean giving a place that is so predetermined that it leaves the user little freedom, but neither does it mean disavowing all architectural responsibility and abandoning the user in empty space — space that does not give place.

Biesta focuses on the architectural impossibility both of controlling how people use a space, and of not restraining the use of that space at all. In the pressure to meet “prescribed learning outcomes,” the temptation of a functionalist curriculum, a curriculum that seeks to control the uses of the educational spaces framed by it, is considerable, but just as people use and fail to use spaces in ways that defy the architect’s intention and imagination, students learn more and less and differently from what any curriculum designer or educator can anticipate.

Once again, the educator encounters an *aporia*: not a polarity in which she must find a happy medium, but an inescapable tension that is constitutive of the practice, in this case the practice of creating educational spaces. The responsibility of the educator who takes seriously this *aporia* of the architecture of learning is not unlike the responsibility of the postfunctionalist architect: as Biesta argues, both face the paradoxical demand of giving place, of creating space by delimiting it, and of enabling uses by constraining them. Instead of trying to avoid this paradox, the architect should “take the contradiction seriously and...give it a central place in [her or his] understanding of what it means to be an architect.”²⁸ The same holds true for the designer of educational spaces. The responsible postfunctionalist designer of educational spaces, like the responsible postfunctionalist architect, should “be committed to both spaces and events, to both design and the transgression of design, to both building and its undoing.”²⁹

EDUCATIONAL SPACE: FROM *TOPOS* TO *KHORA*

So what kind of educational space can offer hospitality? It seems to me that the concept of *khora*, as elaborated by Derrida, is a good way to think about the kind of space that gives place. In the essay “Khora,” Derrida considers the concept of *khora* as it is used in Plato’s text *Timaeus*. He leaves *khora* untranslated because it is a complex and multilayered concept that is used to refer not only to place or location (for example, in the allegory of the cave), but also to mother or nurse, and to receptacle or imprint-bearer. Like the wax in which a seal can be imprinted, *khora* is perhaps best understood not as place, but as *placeholder for place* — as space that can become inscribed as place, but that never becomes a place itself. In Derrida’s words,

Khora receives, so as to give place to them, all the determinations, but she/it does not possess any of them as her/its own. She possesses them, she has them, since she receives them, but she does not possess them as properties, she does not possess anything as her own.³⁰

Derrida refers to *khora* both as “it” and as “she,” which illustrates that the concept is associated with the feminine, both linguistically, as in Greek $\eta \chi\omega\rho\alpha$ is a feminine word, and culturally/ psychoanalytically, in its connotations of receptacle, abyss, chasm, mother, and nurse (although I caution against essentialist interpretations). The connections between place and the feminine are evident in the terms “Mother Earth” and “motherland,” and conjure up feelings of home and belonging, but “we must not attempt to identify (the) *chora* [or *khora*] and the mother, for fear of giving back a propriety to what cannot have one.”³¹

John Sallis argues that “it is of the utmost importance...to prevent $\chi\omega\rho\alpha$ from settling into a determinate, stable meaning” and “to resist the tendency...to let the word take on the sense of place (*lieu*).”³² The force of the concept of *khora* is precisely its openness to receiving and being imprinted by the other, and any determination of *khora* as a place, as a *topos*, would prevent it from giving place to an other. Sallis notes that this difference between *topos* as a place and *khora* as a placeholder for place is supported by the *Timaeus*, where “a difference is marked between place ($\tau\omicron\pi\omicron\varsigma$) and the $\chi\omega\rho\alpha$, and it is declared that, caught up in a dream, we are unable to distinguish these, so that the thought of the $\chi\omega\rho\alpha$ gets conflated with the thought that everything must be in some place ($\tau\omicron\pi\omicron\varsigma$).”³³

When asking, then, what kind of space education should offer, and how it may give place, I would suggest thinking of educational space as *khora*, rather than as *topos*. The critical difference between these two conceptions of place is *hospitality*. Educational *khora* is a space in which learners are received, and where they can make themselves at home without the space becoming their home in a permanent sense, which would restrict the possibility of the space receiving others at a future date. Although different spaces will make it easier or more difficult for certain kinds of learning to occur, educational *khora*, this space that gives place, does not *prescribe* what students should learn any more than the wax prescribes what stamp it should receive. A conception of educational space as *khora* is thus fundamentally incompatible with “outcomes-based education.”

To want to predetermine the outcomes or results of the activities that take place in an educational space is not to give place to students. Such predetermination renders educational spaces profoundly inhospitable; instead of inviting students and studying to take place, it compartmentalizes knowledge and forecloses the unpredictability of thought. Emphasizing the knowledge and skills that students should measurably and observably reproduce and demonstrate at the end of their stay in an educational space is to miss entirely the *aporia* and double responsibility of the architecture of education.

1. John Smyth and Alastair Dow, “What’s Wrong with Outcomes? Spotter Planes, Action Plans and Steerage of the Educational Workplace,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 19, no. 3 (1998), 295.

2. *Ibid.*, 302.

3. Richard Berlach, “Outcomes-Based Education and the Death of Knowledge” (paper presented at the annual conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Melbourne, November/December 2004).

4. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1938), 25.

5. *Ibid.*, 49.

6. *Ibid.*, 48.

7. John Elliott, “Making Evidence-Based Practice Educational,” *British Educational Research Journal* 27, no. 5 (2001): 555–574.

8. Yusef Waghid, “Peters’ Non-Instrumental Justification of Education View Revisited: Contesting the Philosophy of Outcomes-Based Education in South Africa,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22, no. 4 (2003): 245–265.

9. Richard Peters, “Aims of Education — A Conceptual Inquiry,” in *The Philosophy of Education*, ed. Richard Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 26, quoted in Elliott, “Making Evidence-Based Practice Educational,” 564.

10. Michael Oakshott, “Education: The Engagement and its Frustration,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 5, no. 1 (1971), 48.

11. Julian Edgoose, “Just Decide! Derrida and the Ethical Aporias of Education,” in *Derrida and Education*, eds. Gert Biesta and Denise Egéa-Kuehne (New York: Routledge, 2001), 120.

12. Jacques Derrida, “Ethics and Politics Today,” in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971–2001*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 298.

13. Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 25.

14. Michael Naas, *Taking on the Tradition: Jacques Derrida and the Legacies of Deconstruction* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 159.
15. Jacques Derrida, "Il n'y a pas de culture ni de lien social sans un principe d'hospitalité" ["There Is Neither Culture nor a Social Bond Without a Principle of Hospitality"], *Le Monde*, December 2, 1997, quoted in *Ibid.*, 160.
16. Michael Naas, "'Alors, qui êtes-vous?' Jacques Derrida and the Question of Hospitality," *SubStance* 34, no. 1 (2005), 7–8.
17. John Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 57.
18. Jacques Derrida, "I Have a Taste for the Secret," in Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 85.
19. Jacques Derrida, "A Word of Welcome," in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 15–16 (emphasis in original).
20. *Ibid.*, 99.
21. Derrida, "I Have a Taste for the Secret," 83.
22. Jacques Derrida, "The Deconstruction of Actuality," in *Negotiations*, ed. and trans. Rottenberg, 101.
23. *Ibid.*, 95.
24. Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 177.
25. *Ibid.*, 196.
26. Gert Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm, 2006), 100.
27. *Ibid.*, 114.
28. *Ibid.*, 115.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Jacques Derrida, "Khora," trans. Ian McLeod, in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 99.
31. Geoffrey Bennington, "Derridabase," in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 210.
32. John Sallis, "Last Words: Generosity and Reserve," *Mosaic* 39, no. 3 (2006), 21.
33. *Ibid.*