

Imagining Educationally Hospitable Schooling

Donna H. Kerr

University of Washington

Claudia Ruitenberg calls us to see that outcomes-based schooling is inhospitable, and proposes the notion of *khora* to imagine an educationally hospitable space. In response, I would like to outline her argument, consider how her notion of hospitable education might look in practice, and suggest further philosophical tasks.

Ruitenberg begins by acknowledging three other critiques of outcomes-based schooling. One charges that it reduces education to an economic management tool. Another, drawing on John Dewey, argues that such pedagogy *miseducates* by ignoring the interaction between the curriculum and the subjective factors introduced by the student. A third alleges that outcomes-based schooling violates the intrinsic purposes of the very idea of education, such as they are conceived by Richard Peters and Michael Oakeshott, who cast education as an enterprise of “receiving students, *giving place* to those who newly arrive in a world” (emphasis added). Hence, schooling, if it is to take education seriously, must provide a hospitable space.

Building on this third view, Ruitenberg makes a most interesting contribution by borrowing from Derrida in order to propose not a new conception of education, but instead a particular notion of *hospitality* that would make education more hospitable. Her deft, nuanced consideration of hospitality leads her to claim that education would be better served if we were to appreciate the host’s ethical task of providing a particular sort of place to students, namely a kind of “placeholder” place. Specifically, she proposes that the kind of educational space that the needed hospitality requires can be imagined, following Derrida, using Plato’s concept of *khora* — a space that can be inscribed as a place for particular students, rather like wax onto which a particular stamp can be imprinted. Here, *khora* is to be distinguished from *topos*, which is a place in a preformed sense.

In the *khora* sense, the hospitality of giving place means something similar to what Gert Biesta finds in Bernard Tschumi’s architecture, namely, offering a place in which the user determines its particular use, but without abrogating the architect’s responsibility to impose form. Ruitenberg notes that this is not a polarity inviting a “happy medium,” but rather an inescapable tension that is constitutive of the practice of architecture. Much as the architect cannot just abandon his responsibility to create form and still be said to practice architecture, so the teacher cannot forsake the task of helping students cash in their inheritance, to use Oakeshott’s language, and still be said to educate. Ruitenberg concludes that schooling that predetermines outcomes does not give the needed place to students, “forecloses the unpredictability of thought,” and, in “emphasizing the knowledge and skills that students should measurably and observably reproduce and demonstrate,” misses entirely the *double educational responsibility* of schooling.

Ruitenbergh helps us see that if we are to keep the beast of outcomes-based schooling at bay, teachers must *both* offer hospitable places for students to make themselves at home *and* help students learn their way into their rightful inheritance, even though there is an inescapable tension between the two. Here, I want to focus on this double educational responsibility: Just what would constitute an educational space where students could make themselves at home? And, at the same time, how might educator-hosts invite their students to the feast to which they are responsible for giving students access? With outcomes-based schooling so firmly ensconced, I propose that it behooves us to think of how this double educational responsibility might play out. To that end, I offer a couple of stories.

In high school, Kenneth Koch wrote of the urge to “step on a baby’s head because it is so big and round and soft like a balloon, and would go squash under my feet.” “That’s very good,” responded his poetry teacher Katherine Lappa, “that’s just what you should be feeling — part of what you are feeling. Keep doing it.” The “doubleness”: Lappa *both* welcomed Koch to make himself at home, antisocial image and feeling and all, *and* conveyed something basic about the discipline of poetry. Koch says that Lappa thus inspired him to pursue a life of poetry.¹

I think also of Nate Parham, a high school teacher who agreed to coach the defunct after-school debate club in a Title I school in Baltimore City, where it was doubtful that anyone would show up. Finding the school oppressive, and facing students who seemed not to want to be there, he invited those students to join the debate club in order to say what they did not like about their school; then he wanted to know what would make the school feel better to them. He listened. They came in and made *themselves* at home in a context where they reported feeling humiliated and dispirited. With very little instruction, and mostly through pep talks, they learned the discipline of debate — they learned about listening carefully to themselves and to others in the face of conflict, about becoming informed, and about focusing their arguments on what matters to them.²

Does making oneself at home consist of bringing in, without fear of reprisal, one’s yearnings, desires, beliefs, regrets, unbidden images, and prejudices regarding others and oneself? Does learning one’s way into one’s rightful inheritance require some guidance in connecting what one experiences to that potential inheritance? If something even similar to this is so, then the language of outcomes-based schooling is clearly not up to the task. The disciplined thinking of education is not thereby lost, but it is thinking of a very different sort. Whether, and in what measure, students feel at home and so bring themselves into the classroom is an objective matter of subjective life; welcoming them is an art calling for connoisseurship. So it is with learning their way into their inheritance — an objective-subjective fact that depends in some measure upon teachers’ succeeding as both a host and a coach. Predetermined outcomes can point to valuable learnings, but they miss entirely the educational aims that address the fundamentals of learning how to live a human life, which are understood in such different ways: with Mikhail Bakhtin, as appreciating oneself and others as characters with an interiority, rather than as epic figures who are totally knowable externally by their roles and status;³ or as coming *not* to think of seemingly

antisocial imaginings (for example, stepping on babies' heads) as something of which to be ashamed, but to accord them their appropriate status as something imagined, and not as anyone's call to action; or as coming to the liberating appreciation of the ways in which oppressive environments contribute to hatreds and self-loathing and imagining alternatives (for example, what would make this particular school feel better specifically to us?); or with Danielle Allen in *Talking to Strangers*, as coming to regard conflict as something to be negotiated, as if between friends, rather than as necessitating a regime of rule by some;⁴ or with Ruth Stein in *For the Love of Father*, as coming to tolerate uncertainties and differences, so as to avoid becoming immune to changing beliefs — an immunity that leaves no alternative but to harm others and even oneself.⁵

While Ruitenberg argues for a particular conception of hospitality — a hospitality that outcomes-based schooling fails to satisfy — her argument also points the way to helping us begin to sense the urgency of putting such narrowly defined instructional goals in their place so that schooling can refocus on the greater task of inviting succeeding generations to learn their way into their rightful inheritance. I would add that to do less is unnecessarily to abet human tragedy.

This brings us to the question of what more specifically it might mean to offer students an educative place where they can bring themselves, feel at home, and engage. I wonder how we might generate a more specific understanding of the formal requirements of an educational *khora*, or “placeholder place,” where students could bring themselves and feel at home? Would we look to examples of where it seems to happen, as I have done here in my initial musings, and then try to specify formally just what is going on? For example, might we look to the interaction between Kenneth Koch and Katherine Lappa, and to that between the argumentative students in that Baltimore school and Nate Parham, from which we might generate possibilities, such as the possibility that attending to the emotional states of students as they experience the school is part and parcel of the hospitality of helping students make themselves at home? An alternative, “theoretical” approach might be to think about different accounts of what becoming a human consists in and then use those accounts as lenses to consider what kind of pedagogy supports the educational project of growing humans, as intimated in my references to the literary critic Bakhtin, the political theorist Allen, and the psychoanalyst Stein. Might there be another approach?

Ruitenberg enables us to ask these questions and adumbrates what I believe to be a helpful way to talk both to proponents of outcomes-based schooling about how it falls educationally short — namely, it is inhospitable — and to teachers who are interested in functioning in educationally more hospitable ways, even if they must do so in the context of schools that are themselves inhospitable.

1. Adam Phillips, *Equals* (New York: Basic, 2002), 45. Quoted in David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

2. Nate Parham, “Visiting the Students’ Hallway” (paper presented in a seminar on “Educating Beyond Domination and Acquiescence,” University of Washington, Seattle, March 2009).

3. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 3–40.
4. Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
5. Ruth Stein, *For the Love of Father* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).