

Is Professional Education a “Double Challenge?”

Christopher Martin

University of British Columbia, Kelowna, Canada

INTRODUCTION

In “Receiving Students and Patients,” Claudia Ruitenberg extends her argument for an educational ethic of hospitality to professional education. Such an ethic is founded on the emancipatory principle that “those that inhabit the world do not own it, and that it is a general responsibility to share the world one happens to inhabit and to pass on to newcomers.”¹ However, an additional argumentative step is required in the case of professional education because, as she rightly notes, it is distinctive from general education and specialist academic learning.² Ruitenberg’s central claim is that, while we must always be hospitable to students, the professional educator has a responsibility to balance this educational responsibility against the best interests of the client or, as she puts it, the “end user.”³ On this view, professional educators must strike a resolute balance between renewal and socialization. I say “resolute” here because my understanding is that the so-called “best interests” of the client places stronger normative constraints on educational practices in professional education than educational processes that lack such clients (an education in the liberal arts come to mind).⁴

In order to fully appreciate Ruitenberg’s position, one must understand her critical target. One might claim that the preparation of professionals is not only distinctive from general education, *but also exempt from* the principles that define it. Professional education should not indulge in the cultivation of persons, for example, because the aim of professional schools is to churn out effective *practitioners* in the most efficient manner possible. This is especially germane to medical school where legitimate concerns about patient safety have led to a strong focus on the “end user.” Ruitenberg wants to show that medical schools nonetheless have good reasons for abiding by educational principles. More specifically, any such education must be hospitable, in her sense of the term, for otherwise there will be little opportunity for professional renewal and change in its epistemic, ethical, and political dimensions.⁵ In sum, while the medical *profession* may be a conservative enterprise for good reasons, it does not follow that an initiation into the practice of medicine should be similarly conservative.

I believe that Ruitenberg is right to call for a greater focus on the educational dimension of professional education. Further, I agree that her proposed ethic of hospitality, if justifiable as an educational ideal, is generalizable to professional education. However, I am not yet convinced that professional educators have any reason to constrain their educational practices because of the “end user.” Accordingly, in what follows I want to raise some questions about the relationship between educator, student, and client that are best understood, not as objections, but as an invitation to elaborate on and clarify an argument that has much value for professional education.

PROFESSIONALS, CLIENTS, AND EDUCATIONAL INTERESTS

An education too focused on an undistorted picture of the student's inheritance may effectively "see through" those students entirely, neglecting their interests and treating them as a mere means to the preservation of that inheritance. This is a clear and present danger for professional education in which traditionalist arguments are often mounted on the rhetorically powerful appeal to "the best interests of the client." While this means that professional education should involve a "critical translation" of the field, too radical a translation may result in a degradation of professional norms at the expense of those clients.

Does this mean that professional educators are caught in a dilemma and must therefore strike a balance between student and client? While professional educators may *feel the need* to strike such a balance, this felt need trades on the assumption that the professional educator's obligation to initiate the student *in a critical way*, and the interests of the client, must conflict. I see no such conflict. When professional educators experience a tension I suspect that it is better explained by conceptual confusion on their part about what it means to educate a person, rather than as a moral dilemma to be resolved.

First, does the dual responsibility apply to all professional educators? For many professional educators there simply cannot *be* a double challenge between student and end user because such educators are not part of the profession to begin with and are therefore unqualified to educate for the patient's "best interests." If a double challenge did indeed exist, it would follow that non-professionals would be barred from playing a role in professional education because there would be a risk that such non-professionals would naively "prioritize" the interests of their students over those of patients. Yet, being an anatomist and not a physician is by no means a moral objection to teaching anatomy to medical students, just as being a philosopher is by no means a moral objection to teaching philosophy to teacher candidates.

Second, what does the double challenge have to do with education? When professional educators see their role as being limited to *training* there may be a tension between student and client. This is because the professional trainer has to do all the critical reflection and judgement in advance *for the student*, ensuring that the know-how and skills that he or she wants to "build into" that student will directly translate into effective practice. One might say that the professional trainer has to "person-proof" the trainee in order to protect the client. However, in professional *education* the tension between student and end user dissolves because critical reflection and judgement is handed over to the *student*. To be sure, when students choose a particular profession they consent to an initiation into the standards and practices that define it. This will require training, in part. But it does not follow that they should be uncritical adherents of those standards and practices. If, as Ruitenberg claims, changes in medical practice have only occurred because some practitioners were able to question the knowledge and skills they were introduced to,⁶ it is because they received an education, and not mere training, in that knowledge and those skills. To be educated in a profession is *at the same time* to come to understand the "reasons

why” of that profession, and to be able to critically assess those reasons. It would be odd to claim that one is educated in a profession while being unable to critically assess and, where necessary, revise the understandings that define it.

Third, if professional educators conceive their role as balancing between student and patient they risk undermining the developing professional autonomy of the student. It is true that a good professional education is one that keeps the social role of the profession in view. However, the legitimacy of that social role is grounded, in part, by the professional’s ability to make informed decisions about what is in the best interest of their client. A professional educator can and should alter their practice because they want to ensure that future professionals are up to this task. Anatomists may teach medical students differently than they will their fellow anatomists. However, this does not reflect a balance between student and client; rather, this just *is* educating the student to *be* a professional. In fact, to the extent that professional educators constrain their educational judgement on the grounds that, say, their students will not use that knowledge and understanding in the best interest of the client, one might claim that they are in fact paternalistically undermining the future professional autonomy of those students. To be sure, the student who desires to be at home in her chosen profession while refusing to internalize the profession’s *legitimate* norms may find it inhospitable, but this is because they refuse to accept the responsibilities that come with professional autonomy.

These questions aside, I do observe, despite her likely misgivings,⁷ a productive symmetry between Ruitenberg’s emancipatory principle and R. S. Peters’ and Michael Oakeshott’s notion of “education as initiation.”⁸ Those that know and understand a form of knowledge do not have a monopoly on that form; rather, they share in public criteria and standards that ought to be open to and revisable by all persons. Education, here, is properly understood as an initiation into a *human* inheritance that is revisable over time as an expanding membership makes new contributions. If Oakeshott and Peters never saw the need for a balance between being hospitable and inhospitable to newcomers, I think that we can rightly fault them for it. It is here, I think, that Ruitenburg’s ethic advances the conversation about professional education: professions are not (merely) vessels through which certain technical achievements can be secured. Rather, professions are part and parcel of that larger complement of human achievements through which society has learned to understand itself and, through that understanding, we *take care of one another*. Those who volunteer to make a contribution to such achievements deserve nothing less than a hospitable education in the fullest sense of that term.

1. Claudia Ruitenberg, this volume.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Claudia Ruitenberg, *Unlocking the World: Education in an ethic of hospitality* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 2-3.
8. R.S. Peters, "Education as initiation," in *Philosophical Analysis and Education*, ed. R. Archambault (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965).