

Welcoming Difference at the Limit of Tolerance Education

Elisabet Langmann

Mälardalen University and Örebro University

INTRODUCTION

When teaching classes related to tolerance and human rights education, teachers often face the problem of how to welcome and include people defined as culturally or socially “different” in the larger community, without, at the same time, stigmatizing them as deviant or inferior on that basis. Despite cosmopolitan overtones of openness to difference and tolerance of diversity, most teachers find themselves having to draw a difficult line between welcoming the “right” kind of difference and excluding the “wrong” kind of difference. Education for tolerance can be said to capture this difficult relationship between the tolerating “host” and the tolerated “guest” by addressing the very limit beyond which the other is no longer welcome. For example, according to the widely used teaching and learning guide *Tolerance: The Threshold of Peace*, produced by UNESCO and sent out to thousands of schools around the world, the aim of tolerance education is both to foster feelings of “solidarity and sharing based on a sense of security in one’s own identity” and to maintain “the observance of limits” to this generosity when the core values of human dignity and integrity are being violated.¹ According to this logic, the heterosexual offers tolerance to the homosexual, the Christian in Western societies tolerates the Muslim or the Jew, the dominant race tolerates minority races, and so on — but only to a certain point. Hence, at the same time as offering protection and hospitality to the less powerful in society, tolerance marks the threshold between exclusion on the one side and inclusion on the other, and, perhaps more importantly, between those who require tolerance and those who do not.

Lately, voices have been raised against the idea of promoting tolerance in education claiming that multicultural as well as liberal discourses of tolerance carry with them a certain expression of asymmetry and domination due to their binary structure.² According to these critiques, when we tolerate others, we tend to do so from a position of hegemony within a culture, allowing the recipient of tolerance to do no more than exist as an invited but strange guest within the dominant cultural identity. Hence, even if tolerance as a way of being-with-others seems preferable to intolerance, tolerance itself does nothing to change or question the sovereign identity of the tolerating majority. On this view, the hospitality and generosity shown by the tolerating majority becomes problematic, producing, it seems, a reaffirmation of the status quo and the continued empowerment of the already privileged.

In this essay I explore a way out of, or rather, *into* this dilemma by examining Jacques Derrida’s paradoxical suggestion that “only the one that endures the experience of being deprived of a home can offer hospitality.”³ Taking my cues from Derrida’s deconstructions of the Kantian notion of hospitality as a cosmopolitan right, in what follows, I make explicit what is often implicit about contemporary

discourses of tolerance — the undecidability between host and guest — in order to destabilize the asymmetrical relationship between the one who tolerates and the one being tolerated. I argue that it is not the tolerating/tolerated distinction as such that is the problem with the idea of promoting tolerance in education, but how we tend to think about the place of welcome in practices of tolerance. Following Derrida, I claim that identities and communities are always constructed in an inclusion/exclusion relationship, but instead of seeing this as a problem to be overcome, I suggest an approach that is open to interruption and change. Such interruptions or calling into question of one's identity as host, I argue, are not only unavoidable but indeed valuable for advocating personal transformation and social justice in education.⁴ They do not mark the end of our concern for others, but rather the beginning, since they open the possibility to welcome something new and unforeseen at the very limit of our individual, communal, or cosmopolitan selves.

THE "LIMINALITY" OF TOLERANCE

Tolerance is a phenomenon that, even in its failure, evokes the urgent question: How should we welcome and make room for the stranger, the foreigner, the other, while, at the same time, protecting the sovereignty of our "homes"? In responding to this question, Immanuel Kant's *Toward Perpetual Peace* has been of particular importance in testing out the moral and political implications entangled in the cosmopolitan willingness to accommodate difference.⁵ According to Kant, since humans inhabit a geographically limited planet it is our "destiny" to come into contact with one another and to "reconcile ourselves to existence side by side."⁶ This seems even more urgent in an increasingly mobile world where people and places across the globe are bound together through transnational flows of information, capital, cultures, and pollution. However, this destiny also involves risks since to live close to the other is to be open to the possibility that the other will be too different or different in the "wrong" way.

As a response to this risk, practices of tolerance can be seen as regulating transgressions of boundaries, whether these boundaries are literally the nation's border, the door of one's home, or the figurative threshold between self and other. In such regulations, the limit between inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, hospitality and hostility, is constantly in play, supporting efforts to create openings while simultaneously policing borders. Discourses on multicultural and liberal tolerance all trade on a welcome and openness to "diversity," while, at the same time, being unwelcoming to those whose differences are seen as antagonistic or problematic, such as the "racist" or the "intolerant."⁷ On this view, tolerance does not openly welcome difference, but rather "filters" it in order to delimit an open global community of diverse but "like-minded" individuals. As Voltaire once wrote: "We must cultivate the spirit of tolerance in our hearts, but we should not allow the policy of toleration to be exploited and abused by fanatical sectarian groups."⁸

By involving the contradictory process of what Sara Ahmed calls "incorporation and expulsion," tolerance thus seems to work to keep the tolerating community at the same time open *and* closed, welcoming *and* hostile, leaving us with a paradox that I discuss in the next section.⁹ More specifically, I explore two modalities of

welcoming the other by turning to Derrida's reflections on the ethical dimensions of hospitality. In relation to the dilemma of promoting tolerance in education, the ambivalent relationship between these modalities can be seen as opening new spaces for imagining the tolerating/tolerated relationship differently.

DIFFERENT MODALITIES OF WELCOMING THE OTHER

If tolerance poses the question of how to welcome and make room for the other without losing the sovereignty of our "home," this question assumes the figure of the guest and the figure of the host, in addition to images of boundaries and transgressions. These figures are also clearly central to formulations of hospitality, however, what constitutes guest and host in hospitality depends on the way the welcoming gesture is imagined and performed. For Derrida, hospitality is not primarily about hosting the other, but about responding to the "ethical demand of the heterogeneous."¹⁰ In this sense, hospitality can be seen as a response to a radical difference that "troubles identity" and puts the very boundary between host and guest, inside and outside in question. As Bonnie Honig notes, "the real challenge posed by the other is not whether or how to convert, tolerate, protect, or reject those who are not the same, but how to deal with difference, with those who resist categorization as same or other."¹¹ Derrida's deconstructions of hospitality, therefore, seem to intervene exactly at the point where communities reject or accept differences in the name of tolerance, by offering an alternative for thinking about openings. Hence, in order to explore the place of welcome in Derrida's thinking, we need to move to the limits of our communal and cosmopolitan selves.

HOSPITALITY AS THE RIGHT OF INVITATION

We are standing on the threshold of our "home," on the limit of what we are and call our own. How do we welcome the other, how do we respond to that which is on the outside?

According to Derrida, at the moment we welcome someone we have already insinuated that we belong here. That is to say, in extending hospitality to the other, one is simultaneously establishing a form of mastery and sovereignty over one's being in the world by "appropriating for oneself a place to welcome the other."¹² This asymmetry of belongingness defines the very "host-ness" of the host and the "guest-ness" of the guest. The host is at home, either literally in his house or homeland or more broadly in his cultural or social identity; the guest is a stranger, an incomer, a possible trespasser. Hence, despite overtones of generosity and openness, what the welcoming gesture effectively says is: "You are permitted to come and I shall thereby grant you some of *my* space and time, for I *rightfully belong here*; I am not...an interloper or trespasser."¹³

Translated into Derrida's own vocabulary, this limited welcoming of the other can be seen as a response to the others *right of invitation* in the Kantian sense of universal hospitality.¹⁴ The invitation is made between individuals, groups or nations on the basis of reciprocal rights and duties between hosts and guests. As Kant argues, in the sphere of cosmopolitan rights "hospitality signifies the claim of a stranger entering foreign territory to be treated by its owner without hostility" and

“as long as he conduct himself peaceably, he must not be treated as an enemy.”¹⁵ However, this symmetry of rights and duties is fragile, since there is always the prospect that the guest will take advantage of the host’s generosity by *only* taking or taking too much.¹⁶ One of the uncertainties of hospitality, therefore, is not only how to distinguish between the guest and the enemy, but how to make sure that the guest is not a freeloading parasite. Within studies of nationalism and immigration, for example, the figure of the immigrant looking for a home is conceived either positively as an invited guest in discourses of multiculturalism, or negatively in anti-immigration discourses as an uninvited parasite, a guest who is “wrong.”¹⁷

However, the right of invitation does not only presuppose a distinction between the guest and the parasite. Hospitality is not offered to every stranger, nor does every stranger perceive hospitality as a gift. Paradoxically, it is only those recognized, identified, and *familiar* strangers that have the right to be invited. In this sense, hospitality is never fully open to the other; there is always some violence and exclusion. What our welcoming says is not “You are welcome” but “You are welcome *if*,” and this “if” is conditioned depending on the others name, identity, or citizenship. Moreover, since the other must be recognized as a possible guest *before* the invitation, we are in one sense also already expecting to meet the other. Although there remains a necessary possibility that the other will surprise us by, for example, coming sooner or later than expected, the essential function of the invitation is to inhibit such unexpected transgressions of the boundaries of the host’s home.¹⁸

In this regard, it is not too difficult to see similarities between Derrida’s understanding of hospitality as a right of invitation and contemporary discourses of tolerance. When middle and high school students, for example, are urged to tolerate one another’s ethnicity, culture, religion, or sexual orientation, the tolerated other is not just excluded from feeling legitimately at home in the cultural identity of the host community, but is also in a certain sense placed under a “debt of hospitality” towards the tolerating majority. But, more importantly, this kind of limited and conditional welcoming of the other does not result in modification of the asymmetric relationship between the one who tolerates and the one being tolerated. Indeed, far from laying the grounds for a questioning of the sovereign identity of the host, the logic of the invitation enables the tolerating party to appropriate and maintain a sovereign place for him or herself by saying: “This place belongs to me; we are in *my* home now.”

However, if we are truly hospitable, Derrida wonders, should we not also welcome the unexpected visitor, and not merely the invited guest?

HOSPITALITY AS THE RIGHT OF VISITATION

We are back at the threshold of our home. How do we welcome someone who is neither expected nor invited?

According to Derrida, at the moment we welcome someone, we are also in one sense entering the domain of the “not-knowing” and the “perhaps.” That is to say, before we appropriate for ourselves a place to welcome the other, indeed, before we even ask to know the others name or identity, we must be open to the possibility of

an “absolute surprise.”¹⁹ What Derrida wants to emphasize here is that hospitality also is an experience *beyond* knowledge and categorization, an ethical sensitivity or responsiveness directed to the other as the absolute stranger of whom nothing is known. Maybe there is, Derrida argues, an other “whose strangeness does not limit itself to strangeness with reference to language, family or citizenship.”²⁰

For Derrida, this experience of not-knowing who, when, or even if the other will arrive is an openness that answers to an ethical demand, in the Levinasian sense of infinite responsibility, to welcome and make room for anyone who might stand on the thresholds of our home. Whereas hospitality as a right of invitation is always offered by a sovereign figure of power to an identified and particular someone, hospitality as an ethical response is offered unconditionally to any anonymous stranger, before the other has even been identified as either guest or parasite, either friend or enemy. If there is unconditional hospitality, Derrida writes, “it should consist in this opening without horizon of expectation, an opening to the newcomer whoever that may be.”²¹

This is an opening so radical that the host is forced to abandon all claims of property and ownership in order to face “the greatest of risks.”²² In fact, since the other’s identity and character is not yet known, the other may even pose a threat to us by causing us to question everything we are and call “our own.”²³ This risk takes on even more explicitly ethical overtones when Derrida — borrowing a Levinasian term — turns to the notion of *the right of visitation*. In *Adieu*, Derrida suggests that Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics may be understood as a “treatise on hospitality.”²⁴ However, hospitality as a metaphor for the ethical relation should not be understood as a relation that *completes* us, but one that *implicates* us.²⁵ Since we come into a world already inhabited by others, the unexpected visitation of the other also puts our being-at-home into question, or even worse, our very *right to be*. It is a question of whether our being is justified, or whether it is not already “the usurpation of somebody else’s place.” Hence, in welcoming the unexpected and unknown other, Derrida seems to argue, we suddenly find ourselves being strangely welcomed by the one we intended to welcome.

Following Derrida’s logic of the visitation, when hospitality no longer serves to appropriate a safe and sovereign place of our own, the welcoming gesture necessarily transcends all practices of multicultural and liberal tolerance since there is no longer a possibility of limiting or conditioning the entrance of the other. Moreover, it is a welcoming that resists any opposition between the tolerating party and the tolerated party, between the one who invites and the one invited. Since the unexpected arrival of the other calls into question “all the distinctive signs of a prior identity,” unconditional hospitality can only be heterogeneous to, and yet inseparable from, the host/guest distinction.²⁷

THE DILEMMA OF THE HOST

However, while the conditional aspects of hospitality — which also seem to characterize practices of tolerance — are those which we in fact live with day-to-day, this pure or unconditional hospitality is practically impossible to live.²⁸ If we

imagine giving up everything we are, existentially speaking, then most of us can identify with how impossible performing any unconditional and unlimited welcoming of the other would be. Moreover, this radical exposure to the other threatens to dissolve the very categories of guest and host that make the welcoming gesture possible in the first place. Despite this, Derrida insists that without at least the memory of the unexpected arrival of the other, we would have no concept of hospitality in general or be able to determine any rules or limits of a conditional welcoming. For if it makes no sense to speak of hospitality without “an orientation being established between the one offering or welcoming and the one being offered or welcomed,” it also appears to make no sense to speak of hospitality without the memory of an unconditional welcome.²⁹

This is why the question of hospitality begins, for Derrida, with an aporia, in a nonpassage, placing us at the very limit of knowing. In order to be an inviting power, we need to preserve our home against the unexpected visitation of the other, but if we were completely successful at walling ourselves off from that interruption, we would become inhospitable. Likewise, if a community is too welcoming or tolerant, it loses its identity as host (and with that its ability to be hospitable), but if it keeps its identity intact, it becomes unwelcoming and intolerant. But, this aporia should not be understood as a difficult conceptual riddle to be solved; nor should unconditional hospitality be seen as some utopian ideal upon which we must keep our eyes fixed. As Anne Dufourmantelle notes, hospitality can only be offered *somewhere*, in a particular time and place, in a particular language and not another.³⁰ Hence, even though the welcoming gesture always becomes conditional at the moment it is extended to a concrete other, the very “unforeseeableness” of the other seems to make the host/guest relationship possible by perpetually interrupting it.

These interruptions, however, should not be seen as a temporary disturbance of the purity of one’s identity as host or inviting power, but as a sign of something new and unforeseen coming into presence. This is also how I understand Derrida’s claim that “only the one who endures the experience of being deprived of one’s home can offer hospitality.”³¹ While hospitality aims to welcome and make room for a difference that “troubles identity” by exceeding all our prior expectations, it also risks turning into an interrogation bent to protect and affirm the limits of our home at the moment it is put into practice. Thus, Derrida argues, the interruptions of one’s identity as host cannot in any sense be organized or planned; they can only “happen,” disturbing and altering the field of social life.

This opens the possibility of defining hospitality not simply as two contradictory but yet inseparable rights — the right of invitation and the right of visitation — but as an “ethical attentiveness” to the deconstructive moments that simultaneously interrupt *and* make possible all social relationships.³² Here, I only briefly reflect on what place such attentiveness may have in thinking the tolerating/tolerated relationship differently in the context of tolerance education. Following Derrida’s deconstructions of hospitality, while the distinction between host and guest seems crucial to practices of tolerance, this distinction is never stable. Thus, in order to reconsider the notion of tolerance in education, we also need to reconsider what it

means to be a host or inviting power, and to let ourselves be disturbed by “being-at-home” with ourselves. In this light the “where” of tolerance becomes a place originally belonging neither to the tolerating party or the tolerated party, but to “the very gesture by which one of them welcomes the other.”³³ Far from supporting the sovereign identity of the tolerating majority, this is a “humble gesture” extended to the other by a subject who recognizes that he or she never is, and never has been, completely at-home.³⁴

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that, contrary to what some critics have argued, the problem with the idea of promoting tolerance in education is not the tolerating/tolerated distinction as such, but how we tend to think about the place of welcome in practices of tolerance. Drawing on the ethical dimensions of hospitality, I have suggested that the concept of tolerance can be opened up to the ambivalent intersections of host and guest that simultaneously (de)construct those safe places we call home. What Derrida draws to our attention in this context is what we might call the dilemma of the host. In order to have a home from which to welcome the other, we need to preserve our self-identity and sovereignty against the unexpected arrival of the other. At the same time, if we are completely successful at walling ourselves off from such interruptions, we become unwelcoming. Nevertheless, the way out of this dilemma, which might better be described as a way *in*, is not to choose one of the options, but rather to see the welcoming of the other as an essentially aporetic encounter, a nonpassage or crisis of choice that could become “a deconstructive entrance...for the incoming of something new, something unforeseen.”³⁵

From an educational point of view such an “ethical attentiveness” towards what is coming towards us from the future might also open practices of tolerance for ways of being-with-others that are inaccessible through multicultural and liberal discourses of tolerance alone. Education for tolerance, in this sense, involves a refusal to conceive the tolerating party and the tolerated party as pre-constituted identities, and hence, the recognition that they are relational, unstable, and shifting as all identities are. What is at stake in tolerance education, therefore, is not primarily whether or how to accept or reject those who are not the same as “us;” nor is it simply a question about how to maintain and reproduce the current status quo. Instead, so I wish to argue, the educational significance lies in our willingness to endure the impossibility (im-possible insofar as it exceeds the range of given possibilities) of knowing *who the other is*, and in the attempt to endure it again and again and not once and for all.³⁶ This is far from being a safe educational endeavor, since to be open to the other is to be open to the risk that the other will be too different or not different in the “right” way. Thus, hospitality calls for a more courageous and risky approach to tolerance education, one that acknowledges the pedagogical importance of both otherness *and* familiarity, both losing one’s place *and* finding one’s place. On this view, the welcoming of the other in tolerance education is less a science to be taught or a moral law to be followed, than “an art and a poetics.”³⁷ “Hospitality,” Derrida writes, “must be so inventive, adjusted to the other...that each experience of hospitality must invent a new language.”³⁸ This is why hospitality can be seen as a

path of becoming, as a way of learning *from* the other.³⁹ In welcoming the other, the self is never left unchanged — to truly welcome the stranger is to arrive somewhere new.

1. UNESCO, *Tolerance: The Threshold of Peace. A Teaching/Learning Guide for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy* (Paris: UNESCO, 1994), 9, 30, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0009/000981/098178e.pdf>.

2. See, for example, Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2009); and Mireille Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

3. Derrida, quoted in Anne Dufourmantelle, “Invitation,” in *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, eds. Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 56.

4. See also Gert J. J. Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder Colo.: Paradigm, 2006); and Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis, and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

5. Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay* (1795), trans. Mary Campbell Smith (New York: Garland, 1972).

6. Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, 138.

7. See, for example, Anne-Marie Fortier, *Multicultural Horizons: Diversity and the Limits of the Civil Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2008); John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); and Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande, *Cosmopolitan Europe* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2007).

8. Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance and Other writings* (1763), ed. Simon Harvey, trans. Brian Masters and Simon Harvey (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

9. Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 97.

10. Irina Aristarkhova, “All Like One in Cyberspace: The Homogenizing Logic of Net Communities,” in *Cyber Asia: The Internet and Society in Asia*, ed. Zaheer Baber (Boston: Brill, 2005), 159.

11. Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 194.

12. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 15-16.

13. Robert Plant, “Doing Justice to the Derrida–Levinas Connection: A Response to Mark Dooley,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 29, no. 4 (2003): 440.

14. In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant uses “visitation” to describe the cosmopolitan right to universal hospitality, a concept Derrida reserves to hospitality seen as an ethical response in the Levinasian sense of infinite responsibility.

15. Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, 137.

16. Jacques Derrida, “Foreigner Question,” in *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby, eds. Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

17. Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality*.

18. Jacques Derrida, “Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1998).

19. Derrida, “Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility,” 70.

20. Derrida, quoted in Mustafa Dikeç, "Pera Peras Poros: Longings for Spaces of Hospitality," *Theory, Culture and Society* 19, nos. 1–2 (2002): 230.
21. Derrida, "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility," 70.
22. Derrida, *Adieu*, 137.
23. Michael Naas, *Derrida From Now On* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).
24. Derrida, *Adieu*, 21.
25. Plant, "Doing Justice to the Derrida-Levinas Connection."
26. Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, trans. Sean Hand and Michael Temple, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 85.
27. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias: Dying-Awaiting (One Another at) the Limits of Truth*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993), 34.
28. Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
29. Naas, *Derrida From Now On*, 24.
30. Dufourmantelle, "Invitation."
31. Derrida, "Foreigner Question," 56.
32. Todd, *Learning from the Other*, 63.
33. Dufourmantelle, "Invitation," 62.
34. Claudia Ruitenberg, "Education as Séance: Specters, Spirits, and the Expansion of Memory," *Interchange* 40, no. 3 (2009): 302.
35. Gert J. J. Biesta, "Witnessing Deconstruction in Education: Why Quasi-Transcendentalism Matters," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 3 (2009): 400.
36. See also Gert J. J. Biesta, "The Education–Socialisation Conundrum: Or: 'Who is afraid of education?'" *Utbildning och Demokrati* 16, no. 3 (2007): 25–36.
37. Derrida, quoted in Naas, *Derrida From Now On*, 26.
38. *Ibid.*, 26.
39. Todd, *Learning from the Other*.