

# Arts of the contact zone

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During a recent English Literature class we were asked to read and learn about the Arts of the Contact Zone by Mary Louise Pratt. This essay opened up a whole new concept for me. The new term “Contact Zone” appeared and Pratt defined it as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or the aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today”. The idea of the contact zone is intended to contrast with ideas of community that trigger much of the thinking about language, communication, and culture.

To illustrate this idea, one might examine the contrasting cultures between students, and how this impacts the learning in our classrooms as they exist today. According to Pratt, the two distinctive phenomenon of the contact zone are auto ethnographic text and transculturation. One of the characteristics of auto ethnographic text is that it usually involves some extensive collaborating process, between individuals of different social and intellectual classes. Writing classes can offer some significance with the contact zone because of this group effort process.

During this process every subject discussed can uncover hidden voices, not to mention every individual member can learn how to form and negotiate an opinion. It is usually in these formats that an outbreak of all the conflicting opinions of group members in different cultural backgrounds, and beliefs arise. In addition, transculturation is defined as “processes where by members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominated culture”. An example would be that they adopt some characteristics of the dominant culture as their own.

The text of “ The Contact Zone” will inevitably be interpreted differently by people in different positions within the “ Contact Zone”. I see culture as a monolingual structure that stands as a separate entity. Each is isolated and rarely do they combine and work together in my mind. Cultures are naturally shut off from one another and if one does not look to gain knowledge about another culture then that person will stay isolated. Over time this wall only grows and it becomes harder to break these prejudices against other societies, their views, and their cultures.

If one goes in closed-minded it will be extremely difficult to understand the point of view of the person you are in contact with. To read this text one must put aside all prejudgments, and must be willing to share ideas and perspectives on different subjects. Both parties must be willing to learn from one another, they need to be open to concepts that maybe they have never even heard of before. The people involved in this “ Contact Zone” will often be conflicted with different viewpoints and ideas; but it is their job to work through these rough areas to gain true insight.

That is what one must do to break down the barriers between cultures. For example, the very concept of existence may be the question at hand, something as huge as this can make it very difficult for the two individuals to see eye to eye in “ the contact zone”. In order to teach people of subordinated groups to write academic communication, we need to understand their histories and particularly their history of language. It would not be fair or effective to simply teach students from diverse backgrounds how to write in the language of power while ignoring their culture and the fact that there is a language of power.

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It is important for writing to incorporate all aspects in order to demonstrate true cultural diversity. As described by Paulo Freire in his essay, “The “Banking” Concept of Education”. Freire described an educational system in which students were objectified and existed not to learn, but rather to be vessels for depositing of information. When we fail to recognize the diversity of students and how they can enhance and increase the engagement of the students, we fail to see the benefit of education being a simultaneous opportunity for learning.

In the essay of the contact zone Pratt states “As scholars have realized only relatively recently, the transcultural character of Guaman Poma’s text is intricately apparent in its visual as well as its written component”. Most of what is found from ancient rhetoric isn’t words on a page they are art on walls, hence the power of the art. The illustrations provided within the essay give the visual impact of how dominant, and subordinate can be defined. While writing can often put a descriptive element to a story, it is in the visual pictures that help shape the true meaning of what is being described.

Once again, visual illustrations are a means in which individuals may understand, and interpret the definitions behind the picture. One student from an American decent may see the illustration as the man being a dominant, and therefore not giving justice to the power of a woman. However, another student of perhaps a foreign decent may look at the visual and see the visual as a social acceptance to the beliefs of their culture, where a man does take the dominant position. It is in these reflections that the transcultural demonstrations are depicted by the students.

So how does this all relate to the classrooms of today? The classrooms of today offer a wide variety of students from different cultures. Relationships can be the foundation, and powerful tool to our education system One-to-one connections with each other are the foundation for change. And building relationships with people from different cultures, often many different cultures, is key to building diverse communities that are powerful enough to achieve significant goals.

I would have to agree with Pratt's philosophy on the benefits to cultural learning, there is a tremendous opportunity for students of different ethnic backgrounds to learn from each other. It is in my beliefs that cross- cultural training, and experiences are vital to building our communities, and our country. However, this also comes with its distinct challenges. In my opinion it is the role of the professor, and or instructor to bring these elements together in order to execute the " Contact Zone" concept. When the professor can accomplish this concept they will have bridged the crossroads of learning to be the best that they can be.