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# NEGOTIATING THE CONTACT ZONE<sup>1</sup>

*ABSTRACT: The author begins this article by charting a brief history of the teaching of basic writing, suggesting that work in the field has been shaped by three overarching metaphors of growth, initiation, and conflict. He then argues that recent views of the basic writing classroom as a site of struggle, as what Mary Louise Pratt has called a "contact zone," have failed to offer a compelling view of public discourse as a forum not only for expressing but negotiating cultural and political differences.*

What I want less is multiculturalism, which suggests the equal right of each group to police its boundaries, than a polyglot, cosmopolitan culture in which boundaries break down and individuals are free to reinvent themselves, not just affirm what they've inherited.

—Ellen Willis  
"Sex, Hope, and Madonna" (xxxii)

This article stems from a paper that I wrote several years ago and that went nowhere at the time—that was in fact rejected for publication, and I now think quite justly so, by reviewers for the *Journal of Basic Writing*. That paper was called "Growth,

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Initiation, and Struggle: Three Metaphors for Basic Writing,” and in it I tried to delineate three stages of thinking about the teaching of composition—the first centering on metaphors of individual growth, the second on metaphors of initiation into academic discourse communities, and a third and evolving view emphasizing the need for students to name, confront, and struggle with a whole range of discourses of which they are part (home, school, work, religion, the media, and so on). The problem with my argument, as the readers for *JBW* were quick enough to point out, was that I treated my three central terms quite differently. While I offered a strenuous critique of the metaphors of growth and initiation, I glamorized notions of struggle and conflict, talking about them as though they were somehow the final answer to the difficulties of teaching writing. For a long while I didn’t know how to respond to this criticism. It seemed fair; I just wasn’t sure of how to gain a critical edge on a view of teaching that I found exciting and was only then beginning to formulate. So the paper sat there. In the meantime, quite a number of people have begun to talk about things like contact zones and conflict and struggle—enough to make the terms seem a little more accessible to critique. And so I’d like to pick up here where I left off in that paper, to point out some of the limits of the new vocabulary we have begun to use in talking about the aims, practices, and politics of teaching writing.

But first let me cover a bit of old ground. I’ll do so quickly.<sup>2</sup> I’d argue that most serious approaches to teaching writing in the last twenty years have been framed by the competing metaphors of *growth* and *initiation*. Talk about learning has of course long been suffused by metaphors of growth. The strong effect these metaphors have had on the current teaching of writing in American colleges, though, stems in large part from the work of the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar, where many Americans were introduced to a “growth model” of teaching and learning that centered on the attempts of students to find increasingly rich and complex ways of putting experience into words. Many early studies of basic writing in the 1970s and 80s drew on the metaphor of growth in order to talk about the difficulties faced by basic writers, encouraging teachers to view such students as inexperienced or immature users of language and defining their task as one of helping students develop their nascent skills in writing. A continuum was set up between what inexperienced writers could already do and what they would be asked to do at

a university. Academic discourse was presented not as something different from the sorts of writing and speech students were already familiar with, but as simply a more complex and powerful way of using words. The task set for student writers, then, was not so much to learn something new as to get better at what they could already do, to grow as users of language. The growth model pulled attention away from the forms of academic discourse and towards what students could or could not do with language. It also encouraged teachers to respect and work with the skills students brought to the classroom. Implicit in this view, though, was the notion that many students, and especially less successful or "basic" writers, were somehow stuck in an early stage of language development, their growth as language users stalled. Their writing was seen as "concrete-operational" rather than "formal," or "egocentric" rather than "reader-based," or "dualistic" rather than "relativistic."<sup>3</sup> However it was phrased, such writers ended up at the low end of some scale of conceptual or linguistic development—as children in a world of adult discourse.

Yet this conclusion, pretty much forced by the metaphor of growth, ran counter to what many teachers felt they knew about their students—many of whom were returning to school after years at work, most of whom were voluble and bright in conversation, and almost all of whom seemed at least as adept as their teachers in dealing with the ordinary vicissitudes of life. What sense did it make to call these young adults "egocentric"? What if the trouble they were having with writing at college was less a sign of some general failing in their thought or language than evidence of their unfamiliarity with the workings of a specific sort of (academic) discourse? In a recent *JBW* article, Min-Zhan Lu shows how this tension between the metaphors of growth and initiation ran through the work of Mina Shaughnessy—as can be seen especially in her 1977 *Errors and Expectations*, where Shaughnessy wavers between a respect for the diverse ways with words students bring with them to the university, and an insistence that, once there, they put them aside in order to take on a supposedly neutral and adult language of public transactions" (Shaughnessy 125, Lu 35).

But if she was unable to resolve such conflicts, Shaughnessy did succeed in bringing questions of social context back into a discussion that had long been preoccupied with the thought and language of the writer viewed as an isolated individual, and it was this social bent in her thought that many of her most

influential followers were to pick up on. In 1978, for instance, Patricia Bizzell invoked Shaughnessy in arguing that what basic writers most needed to learn was the “ethos of academic discourse,” the characteristic ways in which university writers represented not only their work but themselves to their readers. From there, her next step was to argue that the academy formed a kind of “discourse community” with its own distinctive ways of using language. If this were so, then the task of teachers was not to help students grow into more complex uses of language but to “initiate” them into the peculiar ways in which texts get read and written at a university—an argument Bizzell was to make throughout the 1980s along with others like Mike Rose, Myra Kogen, and David Bartholomae.<sup>4</sup>

These theorists argued that in coming to the university students confront discourses that draw on and make use of rules, conventions, commonplaces, values, and beliefs that can be quite separate from (and sometimes in conflict with) those they already know or hold. These new forms of speech and writing are not only often more complex and refined than their own, they are *different* from their own. What student writers need to learn, then, is how to *shift* from using one form of discourse to another, which in turn means that many of the issues they face are not only intellectual but political and ethical as well. But if metaphors of growth tended to gloss over such conflicts and differences, metaphors of initiation have often seemed to exaggerate them. It soon became commonplace to argue that one masters a discourse by entering into the community that uses it, by accepting the practices and values of that community as one’s own. But this seemed to lead to yet another transmission metaphor for learning in which experts initiate novices into the beliefs and practices of the community. In acquiring a new discourse the student was pictured as moving from one community to another, leaving behind old ways of interpreting in order to take on new forms of organizing experience. Learning was equated with assimilation, acculturation, conversion: You need to get inside to get heard, but to get in you may have to give up much of who you used to be. As Bizzell put it in her 1986 essay on “What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College,” “Upon entering the academic community, [students are] asked to learn a new dialect and new discourse conventions, but the outcome of such learning is the acquisition of a whole new world view” (297).

And so by the late 1980s, a number of teachers and theorists,

myself included, had started to argue that this is not the case, that the metaphor of initiation—with its split between insiders and outsiders—misrepresents not only the task faced by student writers but the conditions that give rise to much good writing. For both the metaphors of growth and initiation view the student writer as a kind of special case: The first sees her as an adult whose uses of language are mysteriously immature, the second as someone who has found her way into the university and yet somehow remained an outsider to it. But what if students were viewed instead as dramatizing a problem that all of us face—that of finding a place to speak within a discourse that does not seem to ignore or leave behind the person you are outside of it? If this is so, then the job of a student writer is not to leave one discourse in order to enter another, but to take things that are usually kept apart and bring them together, to negotiate the gaps and conflicts between several competing discourses. The goal of courses in writing would thus become less the nurturing of individual student voices, or the building of collaborative learning communities, but the creation of a space where the conflicts between our own discourses, those of the university, and those which our students bring with them to class are made visible.

Such spaces have been named “contact zones” by the theorist and critic Mary Louise Pratt, who in coining the term borrowed from the sociolinguistic notion of a “contact language”—that is, a sort of creole or pidgin that speakers of differing languages develop when forced into communication with one another. In an influential article that she wrote for *Profession 91*, Pratt defines contact zones as “spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out in the world today” (34), and then puts the term to use in theorizing a teaching practice which seeks not to erase linguistic and cultural differences but to examine them. Her ideas have held strong appeal for many teachers of basic writing, perhaps since our classrooms seem so often a point of contact for various and competing languages and perspectives, and in the last few years a growing number of theorists have cited Pratt in arguing for pedagogies that are open to conflict and controversy.<sup>5</sup>

In her *Profession* article, Pratt draws on her experiences both as the parent of a school-age child and as the teacher of a large introductory course in “Culture, Ideas, Values” at Stanford

University in order to sketch out what a classroom might look like if thought of as contact zone rather than as a unified community. She analyzes moments where teachers fail not only to deal with dissent but even to acknowledge it. For instance, she tells of how when told to write about “a helpful invention” he would like to have for his own use, her fourth-grade son came up with an idea for a vaccine that would inoculate him with answers for stupid homework assignments (like this one, presumably). What did he get in response? “The usual star to indicate the task had been fulfilled in an acceptable way” (38-39). In a similar vein, Pratt tells of a conversation she had with her son when he switched from a traditional to a more progressive school:

“Well,” he said, “they’re a lot nicer, and they have a lot less rules. But know *why* they’re nicer?” “Why?” I asked. “So you’ll obey all the rules they don’t have,” he replied. (38)

In both cases conflict and difference get dealt with by not being noticed—much as the views, experiences, and writings of minority cultures have been studiously ignored in most American classrooms, even in schools where many students are African American, Asian, Hispanic, or working class. This leads Pratt to call for classrooms where such voices do get heard, even if at the cost of some conflict or confusion—for pedagogical contact zones rather than communities.

This is an appealing idea. Pratt is vague, though, about how one might actually go about making sure such dissenting voices get their say. What she seems to be doing is *importing* difference into her classroom through assigning her students a number of readings from diverse cultures. Students are thus brought “in contact” with writings from various cultures, but Pratt never explains the kinds of talk about these texts that occur among and across the various groupings *of students* that make up the class. That is, at no point does Pratt speak of how she tries to get students to articulate or negotiate the differences they perceive among themselves. How, for instance, might white students speak with black classmates about a text written by an African author? What forms of evasion, overpoliteness, resistance, hostility, or boredom might be expected to interfere with their talk? And how might these be lessened or acknowledged so something more like conversation and less like a simple trading of positions can take place? Or what happens when a student finds that—due to the accidents of race or class or

gender—he or she has somehow become the “representative” of a text (and by implication, culture) that the class is reading? In what ways is this student free to criticize or resist as well as to celebrate or identify with the claims that the text may be making? Or, conversely, how do students who are not members of the same culture as the author of a text gain the authority to speak critically about it?

Pratt has little to say about such questions. Part of the problem no doubt has to do with the logistics of teaching a large lecture course. But I think her silence about practical issues in teaching also points to a real difficulty with how she has conceptualized the idea of a contact zone. Pratt’s phrasings evoke images of war and oppression, of “grappling and clashing” in contexts of “colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths.” And yet many students whom I have asked to read and write about Pratt’s article have chosen instead to view the contact zone as a kind of multicultural bazaar, where they are not so much brought into conflict with opposing views as placed in a kind of harmless connection with a series of exotic others. While I think this is a misreading of Pratt, it is one encouraged by her examples, which tend to be either innocuous or esoteric—a clever dodge on a homework assignment, an odd Peruvian text (more on this later). Taken either way, as hinting at conflict or at connection, what is missing from such descriptions of the contact zone is a sense of how competing perspectives can be made to intersect with and inform each other. The very metaphor of *contact* suggests a kind of superficiality: The image is one of cultures banging or sliding or bouncing off each other. Pratt offers little sense of how more tolerant or cosmopolitan cultures might be created out of the collisions of such local groupings, or of how (or why) individuals might decide to change or revise their own positions (rather than simply to defend them) when brought into contact with differing views.

So far as I can determine, contact languages do not often seem to hold the sort of symbolic or personal value for their users that native languages do; they are rather born out of expediency, as a way of getting by. It is thus a little hard to see who (except perhaps for a teacher) would have much at stake in preserving the contact zone, since it is not a space to which anyone owes much allegiance. And, indeed, in her descriptions of her own teaching, Pratt quickly retreats to talk about the importance of what she calls “safe houses,” which she describes as places for “healing and mutual recognition... in which

to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world" (40). Pratt thus fails to do away with the idea of a unified and utopian community; she simply makes it smaller, reduces it to the level of an affinity group. And so while her aim is to offer a view of intellectual life in which difference and controversy figure more strongly than in descriptions of seemingly homogenous discourse communities, she is left in the end with no real answer to the question of how one constructs a public space in which the members of various "safe houses" or affinity groups are brought into negotiation (not just conflict or contact) with other competing views and factions. Or, to put the question in terms of classroom practice, Pratt never makes it clear how a teacher might help students move between the exhilaration and danger of contact zones and the nurturance of safe houses.

Much of this issue was recently the subject of intense debate in the pages of *College English*, sparked by Min-Zhan Lu's 1992 piece on "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?" Lu argues that in seeking to make their classrooms more comfortable and less threatening, many basic writing teachers end up disallowing the very expression of conflict and difference that could lend real interest to the writings of their students. Such teachers thus enforce a kind of stylistic and intellectual blandness by in effect making sure that students never get to draw on their strengths as writers—since doing so would surface the very sort of conflicts in culture, language, and politics that many teachers hope to contain and assuage. Lu's piece attracted a number of vehement responses which appeared in a "Symposium on Basic Writing" the following year in *College English*. Her critics argued variously that she romanticized the underclass, didn't work with "real" basic writers, was too hard on her students, and was intent on imposing her own political program upon them. Lu replied that she had been misunderstood, and that it was not she but her respondents who were acting as if they had sure knowledge of what the needs, abilities, and concerns of basic writers were. And thus it was they, not she, who were verging on intellectual and political dogmatism.

Basically, I agree with Lu on all counts. But I found myself troubled by the form the debate had taken, which reminded me of several difficult and polarizing arguments that had recently occurred in the department where I work over issues in personnel and required course offerings. For while there was plenty of



conflict and struggle in these arguments, very little if any of it seemed to result in a useful negotiation of views or perspectives. Instead the exchanges quickly devolved into a kind of position-taking, as the competing factions on both sides of the issue soon retreated back to and defended the very arguments they had entered the debate with. As it happens, I was on the losing side of one of those departmental arguments and on the winning side of the other, and I can say that I felt equally miserable after both. For neither argument produced anything but a victory or a loss; no refinement of ideas, no negotiation of perspectives, no real surprises (at least of an intellectual sort) came out of either. And I felt much the same way reading the arguments in *College English*: I knew what side I was on, but that was pretty much it; I didn't feel as though I had learned much from the encounter. Such experiences have helped to convince me that there is something missing from a view of teaching that suggests that we simply need to bring people out of their various "safe houses" and into a "contact zone"—and that is a sense of how to make such a meeting of differences less like a battle and more like a negotiation. We need, that is, to learn not only how to articulate our differences but how to bring them into useful relation with each other.

Pratt tends to downplay the importance of such negotiation and to romanticize the expression of dissent. "What is the place of unsolicited oppositional discourse" in the classroom? (39), she asks, but her few examples of resistance are all suspiciously sympathetic. Her son is clearly a smart and likeable kid, and we appreciate his parodies of schooling even if his actual teachers do not. And the only other example Pratt offers of a writer in the contact zone is rather exotic: Guaman Poma, a seventeenth-century Peruvian cleric who wrote a long and slightly mad letter to the King of Spain, explaining and defending his home culture to its new colonial ruler. Pratt praises Poma for his blurring of western and indigenous discourses, dominant and oppositional ideologies, but his writing could just as readily be seen as a negative example of two cultures brought into contact but not meaningful interaction—since the letter Poma wrote quite literally made nothing happen: The King of Spain never read it and it lay unnoticed in an Amsterdam archive for the next three centuries. Tellingly, much of the current appeal of Poma's text has to do with how it voices the very sort of "opposition" to the status quo that, as liberal academics, we now most tend to value. Poma's letter is a

hypererudite version of the sort of writing we wish we *would* get from students but rarely do. In particular, Poma says just the right sort of thing for advocates (like both Pratt and myself) of a more culturally diverse reading list for undergraduates in the current debate over the canon. His unsolicited oppositional discourse has made it to *our* mailboxes if not to the King of Spain's. We have read it and we agree.

But what about discourse we don't agree with? What about students or writings that oppose our own views or authority? The "Culture, Ideas, Values" course that Pratt taught was the focus of a highly publicized debate over political correctness" at Stanford a few years ago.<sup>6</sup> While I don't side with its detractors, I do think we have to see how the inability of Pratt (and many others) to articulate how the competing views of students in their courses are acknowledged, criticized, and negotiated points to a legitimate worry about the micropolitics of teaching—about whose voices get heard in what classrooms and why. This is not a concern that can be answered with new theories or new reading lists; it calls instead for attention to the details of classroom work, to how teachers set up and respond to what students have to say.

And this is precisely where teachers of writing can powerfully extend and revise the agenda of recent cultural criticism. For instance, in his recent "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone," Richard E. Miller contrasts two differing and actual forms of response to what was, in both cases, truly unsolicited and unwanted discourse. In the first instance, the chairman of a large corporation responded to a racist illustration in a company magazine by firing several of the people involved with its production and writing a letter to his employees calling the cartoon a "deplorable mistake" and urging them to "tear that page out and throw it in the trash where it belongs" (389-90). In the second case, an openly gay teacher responded to a homophobic student narrative by treating it as a work of fiction and commenting on its effectiveness as a story—a strategy which, while in some ways dodging the politics of the piece, did not totally avoid or dismiss its troubling content and also kept student and teacher on good working terms. Miller notes that when this teaching situation was discussed at a recent meeting of CCCC, most of the teachers present argued for a response much closer to that of the corporate chairman's—namely, "that the student be removed from the classroom and turned over either to a professional counselor or to the police" (392), while

others insisted on ignoring the content of the piece altogether and commenting on its formal surface features alone. Though Miller admits that the teacher's decision to treat the essay as fiction was in many ways a problematic one, he argues that:

[The chairman] did not address the roots of the problem that produced the offensive cartoon; he merely tried to make it more difficult for another "deplorable mistake" of this kind to further tarnish the image of multicultural harmony the company has been at such pains to construct. [The teacher], on the other hand, achieved the kind of partial, imperfect, negotiated, microvictory available to those who work in the contact zone when he found a way to respond to his student's essay that... kept the student in his course. (407)

The lesson to be learned here, then, is not that treating troubling student writings as fiction is always or even usually a good idea, but that if we hope to get students to rethink (rather than merely repress) what strike us as disturbing positions—if we want, that is, to work with students who voice beliefs that are not so much "oppositional" as they are simply opposed to our own—then we need first to find ways of keeping them an active part of the conversation of the class. Miller deepens the idea of the contact zone by imagining it not as a space which one can form simply through bringing differing groups and views together, but as a forum which one can only keep going through a constant series of local negotiations, interventions, and compromises. The contact zone thus becomes something more like a process or event than a physical space—and it thus needs to be theorized, as Miller does, as a local and shifting series of interactions among perspectives and individuals.

A similar interest in how differences get negotiated (or not) in varying situations by particular teachers and students now characterizes some of the best work being done in composition. Tom Fox, for instance, has explored how African-American students can learn to use writing not only to enter into the university but also (and at the same time) to criticize some of its characteristic values ("Repositioning"). Similarly, Geoff Chase and Bruce Herzberg have described writing courses that have helped students from comfortable backgrounds (white, suburban, upper-middle-class) take on a much more critical stance towards mainstream American culture than might have been expected while, conversely, Cy Knoblauch and James Berlin

have noted how students can often resist or tune out teachers who seem to push a particular political line too openly or aggressively. And Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu (“Professing”) have both written on ways of teaching students to edit their writing that problematize easy distinctions between “error” and “style,” and thus point to very specific and local ways in which a writer’s phrasings can be linked to a set of political choices and affiliations. Such work does more than take the concerns of recent cultural criticism with conflict and diversity and apply them to the classroom. It redefines those concerns by looking for signs of difference not only in the revered texts of a culture (whether these are seen as authored by Guaman Poma or William Shakespeare, Alice Walker or Saul Bellow, Emily Dickinson or Janet Jackson) but also in the views and writings of ordinary people. Rather than representing life in the contact zone through a set of ideal texts or suggestive yet brief classroom anecdotes, such work populates it with the differing and sometimes disturbing writings of actual students. The contact zone thus becomes less of a neomarxist utopia and more of a description of what we now often actually confront in our classrooms: a wrangle of competing interests and views. And the goals of pedagogies of the contact zone, of conflict, become not the forcing of a certain “multicultural” agenda through an assigned set of readings or lectures but the creating of a forum where students themselves can articulate (and thus perhaps also become more responsive to) differences among themselves.

Still I worry about the view of intellectual life that the idea of the contact zone seems to promote. One of the central aims of public education in America—at least when viewed from a certain liberal or Deweyite perspective—is that of working towards the forming of a nation state that is not tied to any single ethnicity, of helping to create a public culture open to all individuals regardless of race, gender, or social rank. To invoke this sort of democratic culture is *not* to call for a return to a set of shared and communal values; rather, it is to call for a forum in which issues and concerns that go *beyond* the borders of particular communities or interest groups can be worked through collectively, debated, negotiated. It is to call for a sort of public discourse, that is, that dialogue about contact zones and safe houses often seems to work against. Look, for instance, at this brief glimpse Pratt offers us of her Stanford course:

All the students in the class had the experience, for example, of hearing *their culture* discussed and objecti-

fied in ways that horrified them; all the students saw *their roots* traced back to legacies of both glory and shame; all the students experienced face-to-face the ignorance and incomprehension, and occasionally the hostility, of others. (39, my italics)

“Their culture” and “their roots” subjected to the uncomprehending gaze of “others.” There is no hint here that, despite the differences in their backgrounds, these students might also hold some experiences in common as members of contemporary American culture, or even that they might share a certain set of concerns and issues as U.S. citizens. Instead we are offered an image of a balkanized classroom: a collection of different “cultures” with separate “roots” clustered in their various “safe houses.” Who could blame students in such a class if they chose not to venture into the “contact zone” that sprawls dangerously beyond? What reason, beyond the thrill of the exotic, have they been offered for doing so? Why should they care about what goes on in the contact zone if they already have their safe houses to live in?

I don’t mean in any way to suggest that we should step back from a valuing of difference or a willingness to work through the conflicts that may result from doing so. But I am growing less inclined to valorize notions of conflict or struggle in and of themselves. I want instead to argue for a more expansive view of intellectual life than I now think theories of the contact zone have to offer—one that admits to the ways in which we are positioned by gender, race, and class, but that also holds out the hope of a more fluid and open culture in which we can *choose* the positions we want to speak from and for. To work as teachers towards such a culture, we need to move beyond thinking in terms of fixed affinities or positions and the possible conflicts between them. We instead need to imagine a different sort of social space where people have *reason* to come into contact with each other because they have claims and interests that extend beyond the borders of their own safe houses, neighborhoods, disciplines, or communities. We need to find ways of urging writers not simply to defend the cultures into which they were born but to imagine new public spheres which they would like to have a hand in making.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I have had the opportunity to present various versions of this article at a number of conferences—CCCC, the National

Conference on Basic Writing, Penn State—and thus owe thanks to the many colleagues who have talked with me about these issues. But I would particularly like to thank Tom Fox, Richard Miller, and Phil Smith for the advice they offered me in refining this piece for publication.

<sup>2</sup>I have criticized each of these metaphors at some length in “After Dartmouth: Growth and Conflict in English” and “The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing.”

<sup>3</sup>These terms come from three pioneering works on basic writing: Lunsford’s “Content of Basic Writers’ Essays,” Flower’s “Revising Writer-Based Prose,” and Hays’ “Development of Discursive Maturity in College Writers.”

<sup>4</sup>See Bizzell’s “College Composition” and “What Happens,” Rose’s “Remedial Writing” and “Language of Exclusion,” Kogen’s “Conventions,” and Bartholomae’s “Inventing.”

<sup>5</sup>See Lu’s “Conflict and Struggle,” Fox’s “Basic Writing as Cultural Conflict,” Bartholomae’s “Tidy House,” and Bizzell’s “Contact Zone.”

<sup>6</sup>Pratt herself offers an account of this debate in “Humanities for the Future.”

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