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Writing Center as Contact Zone: Meeting ESL Writers Halfway

by Jared Bezet

Paired with Jessica Murray's article (see below), Jared Bezet's piece theorizes the challenges of introducing ESL writers to standard academic English.

One role of the writing center in the American academy is to include the segment of the student population unfamiliar not only with American academic discourse, but also standard American English. Mary Louise Pratt's "Arts of the Contact Zone" and Muriel Harris's "Individualized Instruction in Writing Centers: Attending to Cross-Cultural Differences" offer terms useful in this consideration. These terms allow us to distinguish the writing center's role from that of the composition classroom in student writers' development.



Moira Ozias

Harris posits that many composition teachers are unprepared to recognize the pressures placed on students to conform to American academia. As writing consultants, we are aware that speakers of English as a Second Language (ESL) may follow different culturally-based rhetorical and grammatical processes. However, many American composition teachers may not be familiar with this phenomenon, known as contrastive rhetoric. Awareness of contrastive rhetoric is what enables instructors and writing center consultants to help ESL writers situate themselves profitably within academic discourse.

ESL students may feel that their own ways of writing are wrong or undesirable because many composition teachers misunderstand the root of the writer's difficulties. This situation results in assimilation in which the writer's native rhetorical style and cultural identity become subsumed under and lost in the rhetorical style to which the writer is trying to adapt.

Pratt's concept of the contact zone—"social spaces where cultures meet, clash

and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power"—invites us to conclude that this policy of assimilation is patently flawed (607). The purpose of the composition classroom is not to create a uniform, monolithic understanding of the world. Rather, the purpose of the composition classroom and the writing center should be one of acculturation, a process by which the writer becomes fluent in multiple composition styles. Acculturation never endangers the writer's cultural identity by replacing it with something else: it can only ever expand and augment that identity. Rhetorical style is a tool to be utilized according to the writer's audience, and ESL writers should be allowed to add various culturally identifiable styles to their "toolboxes," enriching their stylistic repertoires.

Encouraging writers to assimilate to any one style is reductive and also carries an implicit undertone of ethnocentrism that has no place in the academy. Certainly human beings are more likely to reject a voice we feel is foreign, uncomfortable, "other," but, as Pratt would have it, when envisioning the academy as a contact zone, we are not looking to comfort ourselves or to hide in "safe houses," "social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression" (618). We are instead attempting to bridge a gap of meaning, to allow cultures to "meet, clash and grapple" (607).

Pratt's terms are important because we must recognize language not simply as a way of communicating universally comprehensible and translatable ideas, but as a signifier of a cultural standpoint. We must remember, as Harris observes, that the way in which a writer constructs his or her thoughts is necessarily connected with the way a writer speaks and writes. With this in mind, asking a student to switch between ways of writing in cross-cultural communication is a daunting prospect, especially for a composition teacher in charge of an entire class.

This is the point at which the writing center's attention to the individual becomes most significant. Rather than focus on grammar and spelling in a prescriptive "tutorial" mindset, the writing center's goal should be to guide writers not so much in their ways of writing but in their ways of thinking. The individual attention that consultants in a writing center are able to invest in a writer lends unique authority to help students acculturate.

Giving credence to Pratt's argument that systems of meaning-making will necessarily signify differently to members of different cultures (612-13), we can construct the writing center as a more controlled contact zone in which cultures must still struggle and grapple with each other in order to make meaning, but where this struggle is nonthreatening. Nonthreatening as it may be, the tutor/student relationship—much like the teacher/pupil relationship cited by Pratt—creates different cultures that keep us from directly understanding systems of meaning-making as the writer does. However, the conflict and oppositional discourse that characterize the contact zone for Pratt can be ameliorated by a leveling of "highly asymmetrical power relations" in the writing center. This can occur because the operation of the writing center is neither punitive (we don't grade writers) nor prescriptive (we don't demand anything of writers); it is merely suggestive (we only offer advice).

Harris recognizes this circumstance: "Writing center theory specifies that we do not 'teach' students anything, we help them learn by themselves" (107). We do

not force writers to conform to an ethnocentric system that labels competing systems of meaning-making “right” or “wrong”; we offer alternatives to help writers within the American academy. The vocation of the writing center is giving credence and respect to the writer’s cultural identity, enfranchising the writer, providing a forum in which to be heard without fear of rejection or penalty. We must extend to our students an invitation into the cultural and academic discourse, providing them with a social space in which their ideas and identities can be validated. By doing so, we can meet ESL writers halfway in their efforts, enacting what Pratt calls “the all-important concept of cultural mediation” (618).

Works Cited

Pratt, Mary Louise. “Arts of the Contact Zone.” *Ways of Reading*. Eds. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002. 605-618.

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