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Collaborating in the Contact Zone: A Writing Center Struggles with Multiculturalism

[Spring 2004 / Columns](#)

by Jay D. Sloan

Consultants in the Kent State University Stark Campus Writing Center enter the "contact zone" in order to help each other and the writers they work with wrestle with diversity.



Jay Sloan

Like many universities, Kent State University's Stark campus has taken "embracing diversity" as one of its primary initiatives. According to our mission statement, we seek "to prepare students to think and act in a worldwide context of many races, cultures, and political systems." This is particularly challenging at a regional campus like Stark. Unlike the very large, very diverse central Kent campus, less than 8% of Stark's students are minorities. The majority of our students come from local, rural, largely monocultural communities. And for this reason some Stark instructors utilize "contact zone" pedagogies to engage students in multicultural thinking that lies beyond our students' experiences.

In her 1991 essay, "The Art of the Contact Zone," Mary Louise Pratt defines contact zones as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (34). And, Pratt argues, classrooms can be utilized as such social spaces, since through "exercises in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others," the contact zone classroom requires that divergent voices and viewpoints be heard and engaged (40).

In fall 2003, I developed a collaborative project between my English I (freshman composition) course and the [Stark Writing Center](#), which I also

direct. The course asked students to read and discuss a wide range of readings relating to issues of difference and personal/cultural identity and then to negotiate some of those same issues in their own writing. At the same time, I introduced Writing Center tutors to the goals and methods of contact zone teaching, the English I readings, and the course writing assignments. We discussed the exploratory, open-ended writing that contact zone approaches try to elicit and contrasted those with the closed-form kinds of argumentative writing—inherently dismissive of other views and experiences—that seem to come so naturally to freshmen writers.



The staff of the Kent State University Stark Writing Center learned to work with writers in the “contact zone.”

Tutors were asked to assist students on two projects: 1) a reading portfolio which targeted students’ abilities to read both accurately and fairly and 2) a longer “race essay” in which students analyzed their own racial identities in light of the opinions and experiences of at least two minority writers. Two primary tutorial strategies were designed to complicate and deepen students’ experience of these assignments:

1. Initially, tutors would ask students to revisit and explain course texts, helping to identify and correct any misreadings or misunderstandings.
2. Later, tutors would focus upon students’ abilities to describe and analyze their own racial experiences. If descriptions were lacking, tutors would try to activate more storytelling about the students’ backgrounds and encounters with other races and cultures. If analysis were lacking, tutors would try sharing stories of their own, describing how these incidents had impacted their own thinking regarding race.

Tutors were asked to report on two issues: 1) students’ abilities to negotiate “alien” cultural views and 2) the impact that attempting to “push” students into deeper negotiations had upon their tutoring methods.

Tutor responses varied, depending on their clients’ willingness and abilities to engage in multicultural thinking. One tutor noted, “I did not really need to push [the student] very far—she pushed herself into the contact zone very well. . . . Personally, I love the contact zone approach and did not find it difficult or extremely different from what I would normally do.”

Another, however, noted concerns: "I recognize what you are trying to do . . . , but it is very challenging to attempt to do it here in the Writing Center. It's very hard to politely challenge one's personally held views regarding a controversial thing like race. My problem is that I want the writer's paper to remain their property, under their control. . . . I don't want to influence them too much, but on the other hand, I recognize that they may need . . . someone to help them see a different point of view."

As these comments reveal, bringing contact zone pedagogies into the writing center raises important questions about our own sense of ethos: How do such practices affect student "ownership" of their writing? What are the implications for the non-directive tutorial methods we traditionally endorse? And ultimately, where should we position the writing center in the face of institutional mandates to "embrace diversity"?

Works Cited

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession* 91 (1991): 33-40.

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