

Contact Zones in the Writing Center

By Cat Weiner

WHAT ARE CONTACT ZONES?

- ❑ In, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Mary Louise Pratt defines them 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 their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt 34)
- ❑ This falls under postcolonial theory, or the idea that as a postcolonial society, we need to allow individuals to maintain their identities in the modern world
 - ❑ This is relevant to Writer Centers as a common motto is to “focus on the writer, not the writing”

WHAT ARE SAFE HOUSES?

- ❑ In, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Mary Louise Pratt defines them as
 - ❑ “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” (Pratt 40)
- ❑ Like Andrew Rihn mentions in his article “Not Playing it Safe: Tutoring an Ethic of Diversity within a Non-Diverse Environment,” Writing Center appointments are mostly between a tutor and a complete stranger, so setting up a safe environment to share ideas is vital
- ❑ For some people, learning spaces have ALWAYS felt safe, but for others it is quite the opposite

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|-------------|---------------|
| Safe House | Contact Zone |
| Comfortable | Uncomfortable |

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|--------------|-----------------|
| Relate Ideas | Challenge Ideas |
|--------------|-----------------|

CONTACT ZONES IN PRACTICE

- In the “Not Playing it Safe: Tutoring an Ethic of Diversity within a Non-Diverse Environment” reading, a tutor is presented with a problem of a student concerned of whether or not their paper is racist
- To combat this issue, the tutor first makes sure the writer feels comfortable enough to ask questions and have a conversation, and then brings up the “uncomfortable” aspects of the paper— places where the writer needs to reconsider. He is honest before the conversation about how he feels about the topic.
- This session is productive; comfort and uncomfot are simultaneously present
- The tutor and tutee effectively participate in a contact zone, where they both feel safe, and are also productive
- Rihn describes it as
 - “At this point I had made the session somewhat uncomfortable — I had turned it into a contact zone — but I felt it necessary to alter the “safe” progress of the tutorial and be as up front and honest as possible with the student” (Rihn 3)
- “Contact zones can be an asset in diversifying the otherwise privileged tutorial session” (Rihn 2)

QUESTIONS

- Q: How can Writing Centers be contact zones and safe houses simultaneously?
 - A: Trust, as Rihn defines it, we need to have “risk-free learning” spaces
- Q: How can we be aware of creating a safe space during tutoring?
 - A: As we read in earlier readings, there is a power dynamic between the tutor and writer. Making sure the writer and tutor are switching places of power will help facilitate a safe conversation.

DISCUSSION

- What is the best way to create safe houses & contact zones asynchronously?
- Is it possible to create these “risk-free” learning spaces online?