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The Classroom as a Contact Zone

As the leaves begin to change in colour and the content of conversations transitions from that of summer vacations to deadlines and intellectualism, many students will enroll in a brand-new school year. Upon initially entering an unfamiliar classroom setting, especially lecture halls on university campuses, each student possesses distinct reactions to his/her new surroundings, including curiosity, nostalgia, optimism, etc., as well as unique qualifications and reasons for taking a particular course. However, professors do not typically recognize these differences, assuming each student to exercise similar abilities and purposes for being in their classes, which consequently creates an asymmetrical relationship of power between the students and their instructors. In her acclaimed keynote address delivered in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1991, captioned "Arts of the Contact Zone," Mary Louise Pratt argues the importance of the classroom as a "contact zone" as opposed to a homogeneous community, which upholds various meanings in my limited experience as a freshman at UNLV, as she suggests professors and students should aim to achieve mutual understanding in academia.

Since graduating from West Career and Technical Academy with an emphasis in Civil and Environmental Engineering, in which both my engineering and honors courses comprised of less than thirty students, my friends and parents imparted to me a number of preconceptions of large lecture halls at universities. I was intrigued by their explanations of how the students are increasingly marginalized by their professors with respect to class size, which can be

mathematically represented on a spectrum of marginalization, placing small classes on the left-hand side and large classes on the right-hand side. This relates to Pratt's definition of the "contact zone," which refers to "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (487), because the large lecture halls would represent a social space in which the academic "cultures," or learning styles in the context of students, are compelled to adhere to the mold of the professors' expectations. At other high schools besides WCTA, students who weren't as fortunate to experience small classes and attention from their teachers would most likely have a greater understanding of how they would perceive large university lecture halls.

Currently, as a member of the Honors College, while I am grateful to engage in small classes with less than twenty-five students, Pratt's "contact zone" relates not in how professors employ personal attention, but in how they require their students to conform to special guidelines to produce the desired results. According to Gerald Graff, Professor of English and Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, during the prologue to his work *Clueless in Academe*, titled, "In The Dark All Eggheads Are Gray," he stipulates, "Professors are trained to think of cluelessness as an interesting negative condition, a lack or a blank space to be filled in by superior knowledge" (3). The degree of "cluelessness" Graff refers to can be interpreted as how poor a student's response to a question on a class assessment is in relation to the professor's answer key or stylistic preferences, which I have particularly noticed in my Honors Calculus I class. Having earned a score of "5" on the AP Calculus AB exam, I maintained all of my notes and methods from the previous year to use as study material for the class. However, on the first of four exams, I lost several points for not entirely abiding to my professor's subtly interjected formatting preferences during specific lectures, despite obtaining almost all of the correct

answers in the end except for two questions. Similarly, Pratt exemplifies a similar use of conformism in elementary schools, yet another arena of education also characterized by personal attention, "On several occasions my fourth grader, the one busy obeying all the rules they didn't have, was given writing assignments that took the form of answering a series of questions to build up a paragraph" (495). In this example, Pratt invokes the "contact zone" as her fourth grader, in what seems to be a writing class, must disregard a creative paragraph format, instead formulating the sentence structure to a simple paragraph according to seven rigidly defined questions, which they should learn to generate on their own.

In the middle of the marginalization spectrum, which in context, signifies classes not too small, but also not too large, lies my CEE (Civil Engineering) classes. Being one of the arguably smallest majors on campus, there are approximately forty to fifty students in each of these classes, which is both a blessing and a curse. Pratt ideally describes this situation to suggest a balance of emotions associated with the middle of the marginalization spectrum, "Along with rage, incomprehension, and pain, there were exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom–the joys of the contact zone. The sufferings and revelations were, at different moments to be sure, experienced by every student. No one was excluded, and no one was safe" (497). In order to teach engineering students the pertinence of communication skills in academia and the professional industry, my CEE professors encourage collaboration and teamwork by designating teams of five to six individuals for the first design project. As a result, large groups of students consult both in-person and electronically with each other during each phase of the design project, which represents my interpretation of the "mutual understanding" Pratt explicitly refers to.

In comparison with my professors in Honors courses, the CEE professors are tasked with a greater difficulty of memorizing all their students' names and assessing the progress of the individual members within a design team unit. For instance, in the class Ethics and Professional Practice of Engineering, which contains about fifty-five students, and obeys the Toastmasters International Guidelines, we are assigned random numbers to arbitrarily determine who discusses ethical case studies or an icebreaker speech. I would experience "suffering" when I expressed nervousness in the front of the room in the form of swaying body language, which speaks louder than my words, although my "revelation" consisted of an exhilarating moment of confidence when I embraced the opportunity to describe my Hispanic culture and how I became interested in pursuing civil engineering since childhood. In large lecture halls, a common cliché dictates that a student is merely viewed as a number for a while, although this is only partially relevant to my ethics class because while students control the classroom by relaying their findings in ethical case studies or their background stories to their peers, the majority of us are still only numbers to a professor who teaches numerous undergraduate engineering courses in a similar fashion.

Lastly, in my General Chemistry I lecture, which contains about 120 students, I have experienced the highest level of marginalization from a professor. To start, I was amazed at how my professor handled teaching all 120 of us in one room. Since he is an older, middle-aged man who doesn't speak loud enough for members in the back to hear him well, I have made it a habit to sit as close to the front as possible to maximize my auditory retention of information, and my friends followed suit in the exact same manner. Consequently, Pratt's example of teacher-pupil language applies to how ineffectively the professor communicates with his students in this class, as she stated, "Teacher-pupil language, for example, tends to be described almost entirely from the point of view of the teacher and teaching, not from the point of view of pupils and pupiling

(the word doesn't even exist, though the thing certainly does)" (494). Students who sit in the back of the classroom are inherently at a disadvantage in class because my chemistry professor doesn't articulate well, and doesn't hear students when they ask him questions for clarification. Therefore, while I have yet to experience larger lecture classes in future semesters at UNLV, my initial perception of them is rather dismal, because the professors seemingly dominate their classrooms, leaving inadequate space for student participation and acknowledgment.

In conclusion, within each classroom size, asymmetrical relationships of power exist between the students and the professor in different forms, from failing to acknowledge the special qualities and experiences of each student to encouraging students to conform to a template or standard in order to produce desirable results. As a result, Pratt's example of the "contact zone" is perceptibly applicable because the students constantly grapple with their creative geniuses to meet the expectations of their professors. In my academic life, the definition of the contact zone applies in various ways, as exemplified by employing the ideal marginalization spectrum to explicate how my professors treat their students in different class sizes. Finally, while it can be argued that today's academic curricula in universities are indeed becoming increasingly liberal, and the United States is particularly distinct in this respect compared with other first-world countries, an unfortunate number of institutions still employ traditionally flawed models of education based on conformism. Everyone has their share of both good and bad teachers, but if we wish to reform our education system to promote meaningful interaction between professors and their students in the university environment, we must learn to acknowledge the classroom as a "contact zone."

Works Cited

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