# Libraries in the Contact Zone
## *On the Creation of Educational Space*

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*The "contact zone" has emerged as an important concept for understanding cultural difference in educational institutions. This article explores the usefulness of the contact zone as a guiding principle for academic librarianship. It suggests that by using contact-zone theory, librarians can develop a more reflective educational practice. Contact-zone theory is described and its implications for librarianship are explored.*

**I**n 1991, Mary Louise Pratt addressed the Modern Language Association annual conference. In her presentation, she used the phrase "contact zone" to describe "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power."[1] Pratt argued that education is negotiated in contact zones where students of diverse backgrounds learn to communicate with each other and with their teachers. By focusing on transmitting academic content, faculty often miss this fact, which means they can misread or ignore important dynamics in their classrooms. Pratt argued that students devise a multitude of strategies to deal with the contact zone. The effectiveness of the strategies they choose has much to do with their ultimate success in classes and in the larger cultural space of the institution. Students must resolve their own unique backgrounds, especially their language practices, with classrooms that demand standard academic English. Pratt described the creative approaches students must develop to negotiate this conflict as the "arts of the contact zone."

In the not-so-distant past, college students were a homogeneous group—white, male, and financially well-to-do. Today's campus, by contrast, is marked by increasing diversity in age, gender, ethnicity, and economic background. To be successful in this diverse environment, college students have to find ways to communicate successfully across cultural and linguistic boundaries, and it is in response to the ensuing challenges that they develop Pratt's arts of the contact zone. Many of these challenges will be posed by professors, who are powerful authority figures in students' lives, but others will be posed by their classmates and friends. Change is implicit in the educational process, and challenges can be important to encourage growth, but many students find that developing the kind of academic identity that colleges encourage undermines the identity that binds them to family and culture. This conflict between loyalty to the past and hope for the future that a college education can provide generates complex responses that give rise to the arts of the contact zone.

College is a time when many people encounter true *difference* for the first time. They have learned to deal with their families, towns, and neighborhoods. As their sphere of experience necessarily

widens in the university, their education involves exposure to increasing levels of difference. This process is by design and is generally healthy, but difference also generates conflict, and learning to negotiate conflict in productive ways is crucial to learning in the contact zone. A contact zone can become problematic when a student's cultural identity comes into conflict with the diverse culture of the academy, causing the academic performance of that student to suffer. As the academic library navigates its way through the many changes currently underway, theories of the contact zone can be used to create a more student-centered institution, one that acknowledges student difference, facilitates learning, and thereby provides a valuable service to the academic community. Two things will be presented in this discussion of the contact zone. First of all, the various ways the idea of the contact zone has shaped discourse in composition scholarship will be surveyed. Second, the ways that contact-zone theory might give shape to the practices of academic libraries and librarianship will be explored.

## PRATT'S THEORY AND ITS IMPACT

Pratt wove two narratives into her discussion of the contact zone. In the first narrative, she told the story of Guaman Poma, an indigenous Andean who addressed a huge correspondence (twelve hundred pages) to the king of Spain in 1613. In this missive, Poma uses the Spanish language (the Incas had no written language) to articulate a vision of the Incan world and how the Spanish monarch might rule that world in benevolent, culturally respectful ways. In her second narrative, Pratt told the story of her fifth-grade son and his growth toward literacy through baseball-trading cards and writing assignments in the standard public-school classroom. The two stories share themes important to Pratt's development of the contact zone as a defining principle for the educational process.

Poma's letter to the king of Spain proposes a new model of government for the management of the Incas. In the letter, Poma presumes to teach the king of Spain how to rule his empire. Pratt calls Poma's text autoethnographic, which she defines as "a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them."[2] In effect, the autoethnographic text is an effort to grapple with the description an outside culture has imposed on a less powerful one. At stake in this process is the ownership of culture and the right of the less powerful to define their culture for themselves. Pratt's theory is tied to language. The Incas had

no written language. Poma had to "construct his text by appropriating and adapting pieces of the representational repertoire of the invaders," the Spanish. Pratt calls this appropriation "transculturation," which she defines as "processes whereby members of subordinated or marginalized groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture"[3] Poma's "letter" was never delivered to the king of Spain, and for Pratt, such dead letters—efforts to communicate that fail to reach an audience—represent a common problem of those who attempt to articulate identity in the contact zone.

Pratt also describes her own son's experience in the educational system. This obviously bright young student is not the subject of a controlling monarch, but is instead a student in an elementary school. Nonetheless, Pratt sees her son employing many of the same linguistic strategies as Poma in his efforts to negotiate the contact zone of the classroom. In response to his teacher's assignments, he invents responses that "parody, resist, and critique the imagined classroom community"[4] In this way, he attempts to engage the teacher's representation of him, and he attempts to use the language he is being taught while still retaining control over his own ideas and identity. In other words, as he negotiates his identity in the context of the classroom, he practices the same autoethnographic and transculturalistic strategies as Poma. These negotiations typify students' responses to the contact zone at all academic levels.

Pratt concludes by noting that "community," which has become a feel-good mantra within educational circles, is, in fact, more problematic than many thinkers in the academy will acknowledge. Pratt calls these academic constructions of community "utopian," in that they hypothesize a world based on "equality, freedom, and liberty" without recognizing that the academy is not equal, free, or liberating for many students.[5] This problem can be particularly acute for students attempting to negotiate simultaneous membership in two communities that resist assimilation into one cultural identity. Bruffee suggests that when students enter college, they must learn the discourses of academia. Because students already have one community-based discourse (from home), Bruffee refers to this as a process of "reacculturation."[6] Gee notes that this process of acculturation is more difficult for students who are not from middle-class homes, because academic discourse reflects language practices of the middle class.[7] Bartholomae suggests that a college student must "build bridges between his point of view and his readers."[8] For students to write for a professor of English means they have

to write the way an English professor writes, or at least "to offer up some approximation of that discourse."[9] These theorists agree that mastering academic discourse relates directly to academic success. As Pratt notes, academic communities are based on the assumption that "whatever conflicts or systematic social differences might be in play, it is assumed that all participants are engaged in the same game and that the game is the same for all players."[10] In fact, the game is not the same for all students. In the modern multiversity (as Kerr described it) many students compensate with arts of the contact zone as they negotiate their identities in class and in the social world that surrounds them.[11] These arts include, of course, transcultural and autoethnographic strategies—efforts by students to use language to define themselves rather than letting others define them. They also include an abundance of other strategies—"critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, [and] vernacular expression," strategies that reflect varying degrees of resistance as practiced by the individual student to the idealized academic community he or she wants to join.[12]

The concept of the contact zone has been creative and energetic since the origination of the term. Miller has questioned Pratt's idealistic belief that contact zones can be negotiated in safe houses. For Miller, classrooms by definition bring discordant values and voices into conflict in ways that resist resolution.[13] Researchers have refined their perspectives on the ways that students from diverse backgrounds experience the contact zone as a reality of the college experience.[14] Writing centers, where peer tutors work with other students on their writing, create a special kind of contact zone where students work with each other's unpolished writing.[15] The electronic interface to a Web site or online learning environment has been explored as a virtual contact zone.[16] Theorists have explored the ways academic disciplines negotiate their identities with each other as an example of the contact zone.[17] Bizzell has gone so far as to argue that the contact zone should not only change the practice of composition instruction, it should also transform the teaching of literature.[18] Contact-zone theory taps into deeply held beliefs about the rights of students to hold their own languages and identities as they learn in school. It has become so significant for composition studies that at least one writer has described it as "Composition's Content in the University."[19] Indeed, when broadly interpreted, contact-zone theory applies to any situation where cultural difference (based on gender, ethnicity, geography, disciplinary practice,

religion—the list goes on and on) might alienate a student from higher education.

## A LARGER THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Contact-zone theory is derived at least in part from the work of social language theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work explores patterns of discourse in novels. He developed a way of understanding these books as either "monologic" or "dialogic." Novels dominated by the narrator's voice are monologic. In the monologic novel, all characters in the novel are subordinate to rules established by the dominant voice of the narrator. Novels that incorporate a multiplicity of voices, each one important to the collective community in the novel, are dialogic or "polyphonic."[20] In Bakhtin's scheme, novels mirror human culture, in which people use language to establish power and control dangerous social disruptions. According to Bakhtin, human situations are ritualized into "speech genres." These genres arise in the course of human interaction when a certain event or situation becomes governed by understood rules and conventions. These speech genres encode issues of class and are a key means by which conflict and difference are controlled.[21] They can become stiflingly formal if they become associated with moral judgment or social superiority, or they can be flexible and open-ended if such moral and social judgments are lessened. Following Bakhtin, educational theorists argue that monologic classrooms, where one dominant voice and style of speaking is authorized while others are controlled, create an educational system that eradicates individuality and institutionalizes the status quo.[22] Bakhtin's theories imply a preference for art and life as dialogic and polyphonic. By embracing many voices and the worldview they imply, Bakhtin's thinking has been held up by language theorists as a democratic model for art and culture.

Further complicating the question of voice and identity is the influence of educational theorist Lev Vygotsky, whose research explores the connection between language, identity, and the thinking process. Vygotsky argues that from a very young age, language and thought are intertwined in human processes of growth. As young people learn language, he reasons, they learn a voice that develops into a thinking process. When the voice they use to speak aloud becomes internalized (and silent), it develops into thinking. For Vygotsky, thinking emerges from the social process of language acquisition: "intellectual growth is contingent on . . . mastering the social means of thought, that is,

language."[23] The increasingly sophisticated use of language enables increasingly sophisticated thinking. Put quite simply, thinking is much like talking to yourself, which you learn by talking to others. Vygotsky hypothesized that students continue to acquire language and thinking ability by engaging in increasingly sophisticated language and thinking, and he suggested that they learn in a "zone of proximal development" characterized by their ability to discourse at higher levels when in the company of higher performing teachers and peers.[24] The zone in Pratt's contact zone clearly echoes Vygotsky's zone of proximal development.

Taken together, Vygotsky and Bakhtin create a great pedagogical tension. Both theorists emphasize the importance of voice and suggest that individuals are created by and shaped through the language they use. Creating educational environments that normalize language and enforce universal standards can greatly simplify the educational process, but at what cost? Indeed, the tension between the students' right to use their own voice and the need to teach correct grammar and sentence structures constitutes one of the primary struggles in writing instruction, a struggle with important implications for information-literacy librarians. This struggle can be very pronounced in students whose linguistic traditions are markedly different from the academic norm. As Corson notes, "There is now much evidence about the discourse norms that culturally different people acquire from their socialization, norms that usually reflect quite different cultural values. Teachers can easily misinterpret different discourse norms when they come across them."[25] He goes on to note that when "students themselves are marked down for not understanding the messages of the school, it is really teachers who seem to be lacking in understanding. Teachers struggle to apply norms based on school-approved ways of behaving, to students whose norms they often know little about. The school's norms are accepted uncritically."[26]

In one of the earliest and most influential position statements issued by the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the problem is succinctly stated:

> [M]any of us have taught as though the function of schools and colleges were to erase differences. Should we, on the one hand, urge creativity and individuality in the arts and the sciences, take pride in the diversity of our historical development, and, on the other hand, try to obliterate all the differences in the way Americans speak and write?

The resolution goes on to argue:

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language. . . . Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.[27]

Indeed, Pratt's conceptualization of the contact zone derives more or less directly from this foundational statement and is supported in composition studies by broader theories of Bakhtin and Vygotsky.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR LIBRARIES

Envisioning the academic library as a contact zone positions the library to more effectively work with all kinds of students, but librarians and those who educate them will need to think differently for such an effort to work. The rhetoric and research that has surrounded libraries and their administration has emphasized efficiency and service. It has presumed that people who come to the library present a relatively simple set of communications problems that can be addressed through more efficient system performance. While libraries have always managed space for aesthetic and functional reasons, little consideration has gone into the ethical or pedagogical dimensions of the way libraries create and manage space. The contact zone is a metaphorical space, or rather, it is a way of conceiving the nature of shared educational space. When one enters the contact zone, one enters a kind of space that recognizes culture, language, and individual identity. Recognizing difference initiates a process of translation across boundaries for both students and academics. Students' research questions arise from this rich mix. For authority figures, awareness of the contact zone brings increased consciousness of the way power is deployed and of the ethical demands of that power. As librarians continue to conceive of themselves as teachers and of their libraries as classrooms, it becomes increasingly important that they bring their management

of the library as pedagogical space into alignment with the values of information literacy. Teaching brings new dimensions to librarianship. They do more than provide information. They challenge learners' assumptions, and they set academic standards. They encourage learning and they challenge lazy thinking. All these activities are appropriate at the reference desk and in the information-literacy classroom, but they require an awareness of the contact zone and knowledge about effective and constructive ways of working there.

Pratt defines the contact zone as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other." Such a definition applies well to the library, a space where divergent views are philosophically accommodated and the collection is a polyphonic, even discordant, accumulation of voices. The library's collection, indeed, is marked by meeting, clashing, and grappling. All these voices are, however, brought under the control and direction of one dominant, monologic voice, the voice of the Library of Congress Classification System, or the voice of the Dewey Decimal System. Olson argues that Dewey's goal in creating the classification system "was to impose a universal language to overcome individual diversity." For Dewey, a "universal language is the answer to the confusion of diversity."[28] Berman has repeatedly argued that the classification systems we use in libraries function as linguistic obstacles, obscuring access to information that white, middle-class society finds threatening. The ultimate function of controlled language, Berman argues, is to control the language of the library's users, to keep them from thinking naturally about their needs and desires.[29] By controlling voices, the library classifies, organizes, and thereby defuses the disruptive polyphony of the contact zone.

Language is crucial to the arts of the contact zone. It is the vehicle humans use to construct thought, meaning, and, ultimately, identity. While librarians constantly negotiate between the controlled language of the catalog and the natural language of searchers, they often ignore the political and social dimensions of library language. The library is organized by subject classifications expressed in words. These words are not free words, but controlled words. Stated otherwise, to use the library, students and faculty must use the language of the library and of librarians—a language evolved precisely to reflect the white, middle-class construction of knowledge that education has always presumed to create and reflect. If students attempt to use any other kinds of language in subject searching—language that would be perfectly reasonable given their backgrounds—they will fail. Their language will then have to be converted into controlled language. Their linguistic anomalies will be corrected, their language leveled and normalized. In this process, their ownership of their own language is devalued and their cultural agency as searchers is effaced.

This process has far-reaching implications. According to Vygotsky, the connection between language and thinking demands that students work with language to make it their own. Unless librarians create a zone of development where language is encouraged to develop, the connection between language and learning will be short-circuited, and students will learn that their words do not work in the library. Many will be intimidated or lose confidence, a reasonable explanation for the age-old problem of "library anxiety"[30] As Pratt argues, dead letters are a consequence of failure to negotiate the contact zone. In such cases, confusion occurs when students assume or perceive that the library rejects their culture and language. When instructional librarians insist on teaching subject searching to early undergraduates, they should understand the political and social implications of this strategy, and the likelihood that it will alienate many students. As effective as controlled language may be as a search strategy, its use may be more appropriate for students who have declared academic majors and are embarking on the journey toward academic specialization with its accompanying specialized language.

The contact zone is created between individuals and in groups where people of unequal power and status—as indicated by different linguistic traditions—attempt to negotiate academic goals. Its existence in the library is a reality articulated by Blandy, who notes,

> a lot of our students have been taught that even the academic power structure can't help them because it has been systematically denying their reality; they are caught between the need to do the assignment to pass the course and the belief that the assignment can't be done. . . . Some of these students are so tense that the reference interview almost begins as a confrontation.[31]

Indeed, the tension comes precisely from the point identified by Blandy. Up until very recently, students have needed to learn to use the library to succeed in college. They have had no choice. Whether they have seen the librarians as facilitators of their educations or obstacles to be gotten through, they have needed to deal with the library and librarians. Blandy's ambivalence about the

situation derives from her understanding that the academic power structure really has been "systematically denying their reality," and a justifiable pride in that same academic tradition, which is, in Blandy's words, "a great tradition of literacy, of investigation and exploration, of the right to private and personal opinion, and of aspiration to fair play."[32] Herein lies the single most important question for libraries and librarians. How can the library best represent the great tradition of literacy and aspiration to fair play, rather than representing the academic power structure that systematically denies people their identities?

A major part of the library's problem is in its naïve ideal of value-neutral service. This model, based on the belief that libraries should be managed by scientific, standardized principles, suggests that all people who enter the library should be treated in exactly the same way. According to this professional code, librarianship is based on scientific principles, and librarians should eschew values and focus on facts. As Weissinger notes, librarianship "embraces the fact/value distinction whenever it claims to be 'value neutral' or a 'scientific profession.'"[33] He points to a central contradiction within librarianship that leads to confusion: On one hand, the profession aligns itself with "value laden social advocacy . . . to fulfill community purposes." On the other hand, it sees itself as "a neutral tool in providing information and knowledge."[34] Weissinger cites Dick, who has argued that this identity crisis derives from efforts by academic library and information science (LIS) programs to gain disciplinary status by imitating the value-neutral methodology of the social sciences. As Dick notes, "Pretensions of value neutrality and objectivity . . . have led to a greater emphasis in library and information science activities on the means of service delivery rather than their ends, that is, whether they are desirable or morally valuable."[35] This emphasis on value-neutral objectivity has deluded librarians into thinking they can avoid the sometimes difficult work of the contact zone.

A great deal of energy has gone into information literacy in academic libraries over the past few years, and public services in academic libraries are increasingly defined in educational terms. Dick argues persuasively that the future direction of the profession will hinge on "whether the library profession is essentially a disinterested social enterprise or a committed education enterprise.[36] Indeed, before information literacy can become a full-fledged academic enterprise, librarians will need to articulate its values, and they will need to bring a full discussion of educational method to bear on those values. More to the point, librarians will need to

articulate how information literacy's values manifest themselves in the educational encounters librarians have with students. In order to begin this process, librarians need to explore the philosophical and pedagogical implications of the contact zone. Weissinger correctly traces the problem to the profession's reliance on the values of intellectual freedom and privacy, values which in many cases directly conflict with the realities of the academic contact zone. At the heart of academic work is the idea of publication, the making public of ideas to be debated and challenged. Students have academic freedom to think what they like, but they must learn to have their thinking challenged, even in the library. To be truly involved in the teaching and learning process, librarians must be willing to talk in honest and authentic ways with students as they attempt to develop productive arts of the contact zone.

Bakhtin argues that speech genres create performance expectations in culturally shared space.[37] Indeed, it would be difficult to navigate the day without some expectation that contextual rules govern our relations with others. Our lives are composed of generic moments that can seem baffling to outsiders. Trips to the grocery, to the theater, meetings with friends—nearly all recurring events are scripted to some extent. Some speech genres can be mere pleasantries (the way we all understand the response to "how are you?"). Others are more complex. The reference interview has been codified as a speech genre in the library literature, and its components prescribed in textbooks in LIS programs. Bopp and Smith (authors of one such text) give the following formula for the reference interview:

1. Open the interview
2. Negotiate the question
3. Search for information
4. Communicate the information to the user
5. Close the interview

In the process, librarians are encouraged to pursue three goals:

1. Gain the trust of the user
2. Ascertain from the user an accurate understanding of the question, so that it can be answered as completely as possible
3. Make sure that the user is satisfied with the answer provided[38]

In a relatively short list, this standard reference text has provided librarians with a generic script that defines the genre of the reference interview. The text is silent on the subject of the student's

performance in this narrative. Where do students learn their roles in this generic transaction? What expectations do librarians bring to the genre? Another reference text gives us some idea of how the process can go wrong. The author describes the standard behavioral guidelines for patrons as codified by the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA). The author then notes, "[n]ot all readers follow 'standard behavioral guidelines' and these individuals have come to be known as 'problem patrons.'"[39]

Librarians have spent a great deal of energy defining the reference interview as a genre. As described in the literature and in practice, it is a crisp and formal transaction that involves, at its best, a clear channel of communication from question to answer. This simplistic approach to language and to information remains one of the principle problems with reference practice. The reference interview is, in fact, the ultimate contact zone. Librarians can see this reference-interview genre as either prescriptive (which implies that students fail when they do not perform their end of the bargain), or they can treat it as a flexible, open-ended educational conference in which language and identity are encouraged and constructive play with ideas is the goal. With genres come implicit performance expectations. When students do not understand these expectations, or when they refuse to perform their part (by practicing evasive or defensive arts of the contact zone) librarians might well be tempted to feel that somehow these students are problems. According to Bakhtin, speech genres are repressive when formal language roles are rigidly controlled and a monologic order is established. This order invokes institutional power that people must succumb to in order to play a role in the genre. When there is room for improvisation and humor, genres can be generative and spontaneous.

## INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTICE

Contact theory's power derives from its ability to bring theoretical perspectives to bear on daily practice. It encourages educators to see their work through the lens of the contact zone, and to animate their work with an understanding of the pedagogical and ethical implications of cultural difference. "Classroom research" has emerged as one of the major techniques for the scholarship of teaching. As a research methodology, it encourages teachers to see their classrooms as sites of experimentation and research and to explore questions in the context of their daily work as educators by bringing theoretical and intellectual constructions

to that process.[40] This practice encourages a reflective and theoretical mindset. Contact-zone theory provides an overall framework within which such questions can be generated. Librarianship has been plagued by what Budd calls the "unexamined life."[41] Contact-zone theory mandates that librarians examine their daily practice in light of educational goals and objectives, that they examine the life of academic librarianship as intellectual and educational.

Indeed, in contact-zone theory, the discourse of academia is inseparable from the intellectual content of academia. In this process, teaching is not a didactic process of conveying content, but rather a dialogic one. Bechtel has argued that conversation is a new paradigm for librarianship.[42] By that, I take Bechtel to mean that by talking with students, engaging them in the discourse of the academy, librarians can create the zone of proximal development advocated by Vygotsky. By paying careful attention to how they talk, librarians can have tremendous impact on the development of young thinkers. On one hand, librarians need to be facilitators. They must to some extent represent academic standards of discourse, but they can do so as guides and supporters of student work. On the other hand, when students ask questions that imply a lack of understanding of power and privilege, librarians should be willing and able to challenge the simplistic assumptions these students make in formulating their research questions, and, indeed, in formulating their emerging views of the world. Doing so will be a radical departure for many academic librarians raised on the values of "neutral service."

In the modern academic library, the role of neutral service has been usurped by the computer. Students ask questions and the computer provides the most neutral response imaginable. This situation will grow more pervasive with the maturation of search technologies. Indeed, this is the value of the computer in the minds of students, and as Google continues to expand its range into terrain normally managed by libraries, the role of the librarian as value-neutral "question answerer" will become increasingly antiquated. Librarians can adapt by helping students learn how to think about the information they encounter. In order to fulfill this role, librarians will need to accept their responsibility to mediate between academic discourse and undergraduates. This role may involve more intimate knowledge of research practices in the disciplines and more challenging encounters at both the reference desk and in the classroom than librarians have come to expect. Librarians will need to represent the academic community as they

intervene in the research process to ask challeng-ing questions and encourage honest engagement with ideas. Librarians will need to learn that their humanity makes them accessible and, ultimately, valuable. This idea, that teachers in the academy should bring their full humanity to the classroom, is itself radical. hooks describes the historical "ob-jectification of the teacher . . . that seemed to deni-grate notions of wholeness and uphold the idea of a mind/body split." She concludes that "part of the luxury and privilege of the role of teacher/profes-sor today is the absence of any requirement that we be self-actualized."[43] For librarians to have any credibility in the contact zone, they will need to engage themselves fully and wholly in their work as literacy educators and as human beings. In hooks's words, "Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks."[44]

The library can be seen as, in Pratt's words, a "safe house . . . where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with a high degree of trust," a place where students can go to find out what they need to know.[45] To make this new model work, con-versation between students and librarians should be as horizontal as possible. Information literacy seems to pull librarians in two directions. On one hand, being more involved in teaching brings in-creased stature to the profession, something aca-demic librarians have long sought. Ironically, the pedagogy that most equips librarians as teachers demands that they reject this increased stature by rejecting authoritarian modes of teaching and the academic authority they bring. As librarians increasingly teach information-literacy courses that carry academic credit, the power relationship between students and librarians will inevitably shift. Such situations create Pratt's "asymmetrical power relations" and cause students to hide their weaknesses from those who would grade them. These are the less productive arts of the contact zone that prohibit growth and prevent honest dis-course. Librarians need to explore more honestly their desire to teach courses for credit. At present, the motive to impart knowledge is uncomfortably commingled with the desire for academic cred-ibility and increased stature.  The shift to assigning grades will come at some cost to the relationship with students, a fact not to be taken lightly.

## CONCLUSION

For better or worse, the library has traditionally been perceived on campus as a place marked by silence and formality. In the intellectual construc-tions of many academic departments, these quali-ties have ideological dimensions of suppression and fear. Radford and Radford have amply described the connection between fear and power within the ideology of the library.[46] The view they discuss is widely understood on campuses today. According to Bakhtin, the surest antidote for an atmosphere controlled by fear and power is laughter. Bakhtin suggests that the ritual of carnival provides an in-stitutional means to upend the power structure and allow free and easy discourse between people who are socially unequal. Whether the library chooses to create carnival with events that flatten hierarchy, or whether it chooses to work consciously toward a lighter, less pretentious tone, it is imperative that students see the library as an accessible and ap-proachable place. Humor is crucial to breaking down the barriers created in the contact zone.

Contact-zone theory has opened new ways of thinking in composition studies, and its cen-tral principles can be used with great effect to clarify the ways librarians and libraries work in the academy. As libraries redefine their identities for the profound changes wrought by information technologies, a great deal of effort has gone into streamlining library systems. Not nearly enough work has been done to redefine the nature of refer-ence and instructional librarianship in light of the changing nature of power and cultural identity. If librarians are to see themselves as teachers, and if they wish to make information literacy their sub-ject, they need to directly address the issues of the contact zone. Literacy is intimately tied to language and identity. As students learn to navigate complex information systems, they will inevitably encoun-ter problems with their language as they endeavor to make their own words work in a system that cares little about their cultural backgrounds. In the contact zone between student and library system (in all its complexity), librarians can find their pedagogical identity. It has been argued elsewhere that the "reference desk can be a powerful teaching station, more powerful, perhaps, than the class-room."[47] Learning to productively negotiate the arts of the contact zone will be crucial to achieving the educational potential of the reference desk, and indeed, of the library.

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