

Teaching in the Contact Zone

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In “The Arts of the Contact Zone,” Mary Louise Pratt describes contact zones “as social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.”¹ Considering classrooms as contact zones has particular resonance today, as legislation across the United States passes to limit student access to ideas, curriculum, and conversation related to LGBTQ and racial issues. The authors included in this first issue of the 78th volume of *Philosophy of Education* explore teaching in the classroom contact zone. Collectively, they extend Pratt’s seminal ideas into the phenomenology of teaching, curricular experimentation, and ethical, political, and social contexts of the teaching profession.

Pratt contrasts contact zones with “safe” spaces in educational institutions; “safe houses” are “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogenous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, [and] temporary protection from legacies of oppression.”² While these spaces are educationally necessary, Pratt argues that contact zones are equally necessary. They are places where everyone, including the historically marginalized, has “the experience of seeing the world described with him or her in it.”³ Exposure, precarity, and risk constitute the conditions of the contact zone.

The first set of essays and responses center on teachers’ challenges in contact zones. Cristina Cammarano worries that a teacher’s comfort, habits, and routines “anaesthetize” and narrow the perception of students while simultaneously cultivating an “arrogance” of understanding.

Drawing from María Lugones, she writes of learning to travel into the worlds of students in a way that requires cultivating teacher perception that “unfixes habits,” that “detect[s] the unexpected, and receive[s] it as a surprise, a promise from the other.”⁴ The value of teacher uncertainty and vulnerability can also be seen in Mordechai Gordon’s “Living with Existential Self-Doubt.” Using Paul Cézanne and Rainer Maria Rilke as examples, Gordon distinguishes between epistemic doubt—doubting what one knows—and existential self-doubt—doubting one’s vocation or “what we are meant to do or be.”⁵ He then asks how teachers might “approach the challenge of living with existential doubt”—rather than resisting it, embracing it as part of the teaching practice. Finally, Mary Jo Hinsdale analyzes teaching in the decolonial contact zone through scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer’s best-selling book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*.⁶ Tensions between academic and native sciences, as well as between evangelical students and their Potawatomi teacher, inhabit Kimmerer’s description of teaching in the contact zone. Hinsdale describes not only disruption and discomfort in this zone, but also what Pratt describes as the “joys of the contact zone”: “exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom.”⁷ A decolonial classroom contact zone, Hinsdale concludes, is characterized by gift-giving, reciprocity, and gratitude.

Whereas the first set of essays examines the phenomenological experience of teachers and teaching, the second focuses on frictions in curriculum and pedagogy in the contact zone. Lana Parker describes students’ online worlds and classrooms as “frictionless,” diminished places of contact where “students may never have a chance to talk at length, to argue with someone, to rebut or refute an idea.”⁸ She proposes that to create contact, classroom pedagogies ought to leave textbooks and the canon behind and “engage a geopolitical and sociocultural plurality

of modes and narratives,” particularly online modes and narratives that can be “shared, troubled, and wholly engaged.”⁹ Maya Cohen, too, advocates for a new *pedagogical frame* for teachers to reconceptualize classroom discussions addressing American political conflict and polarization. She advocates that this new frame center on concepts such as democratic fragility, resilience, and erosion. Similarly, Aline Nardo describes a new evolutionary theory, Extended Evolutionary Synthesis (EES), which challenges the dominant genetic-focused educational paradigm of evolution. EES, she argues, has much to offer in thinking about cultural inheritance and education’s relationship to biological evolution. Using the work of philosopher Michel Serres, Wiebe Koopal and Joris Vlieghe offer three pedagogical and curricular suggestions for once again allowing music to put students into contact with the generative and creative potentials of noise.

The final set of essays asks readers to consider the ethics of contact between classroom teachers and the social, political, and ethical worlds. Drawing from her own empirical work describing the struggle of teachers of color in educational contact zones, Doris Santoro asks, how can we ethically induct these teachers into “a profession that we know may impede their ability to flourish?”¹⁰ Yibing Quek calls for social and institutional intervention to support the work of teachers as caregivers. Her call arises from her conception of teachers as professional care workers, thus connecting to the generally accepted idea that carers need to be cared for in ways that allow them to effectively do their work.

All told, the essays in this issue explore teachers and teaching in the contact zone of education and ask us to contemplate what it means to reclaim education as both parts risk and joy. Together they surface the interwoven needs and hopes for teachers as well as the students they teach, for the art and practice of pedagogy, and for the classrooms, schools,

and societies in which education takes place. We are pleased to put these authors in conversation with each other as another opportunity to enact Pratt's vision for contact, and thus friction, among scholars who aim to improve teaching and learning.

1 Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 33-40; 34.

2 Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 40.

3 Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 39.

4 Cristina Cammarano, "'What would it Take For You to See Me Unbroken?,' Insights from María Lugones on Cultivating Loving Perception in Teaching," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 1 (same issue).

5 Mordechai Gordon, "Living with Existential Self-Doubt," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 1 (same issue).

6 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

7 Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 39.

8 Lana Parker, "Classrooms as Places of Productive Friction," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 1 (same issue).

9 Parker, "Classrooms as Places of Productive Friction."

10 Doris Santoro, "Teacher Education in the Contact Zone: The Integrity of Recruiting Educators of Color Within the Context of the Bad Character of Schools," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 1 (same issue).