

## Mobilizing Inclusion

In the space we call the classroom, in this intimate space of engagement with knowledge, we learn. The process of engaging with knowledge production provides a unique opportunity to examine the potential of an inclusionary space. As a microcosm of something called the real world, or at least as a space wherein the paradigms of this real world can surface, the classroom provides opportunities for the application of inclusive practices for the sake of personal and social transformation. As Howard Zinn said, “You can’t be neutral on a moving train.” As something of a conductor, the teacher in the classroom often predetermines the course of the knowledge train, by designing the course, establishing the grading criteria and so on.

What I plan on exploring, is the process that takes place when one third of the train likes its current direction, another third vehemently demands a change of course, and the last third has just realized they are lost and are pondering a decision. I question the social, ethical and personal realities of this convoluted journey. The teacher in a classroom centered on inclusive practices, practices that challenge us to speak across difference, often seeks to confront the alienation and isolation that can be caused by a variety of –isms. Though that may be the mission, the missionaries are not always that well informed, including those that support the agenda. In the course I took, I found the central concern when tackling these issues, from a multiplicity of perspectives, to be communication.

The ability to communicate our understanding of these issues was limited, in general, and even more so when it came to the specifics of the way these ideologies intrude upon our beings. I found speaking through these –isms in ismological language to be incredibly frustrating, at

best, and maddeningly ineffective, at worst. However, the assumption I make here is that there can be a language outside these perversions of power. I assume that we can exist and communicate in a context beyond these restrictions. That is optimistic and a bit utopic, to say the least, especially in the context of an undergraduate classroom with a multiplicity of standpoints.

The reality of a teacher approved process of inclusion, as I experienced it, was confusion and miscommunication with a lot of support from volatile emotions, whether implicit or explicit. Knowledge production inevitably becomes knowledge consumption and a sharing of knowledge inevitably becomes a caring for knowledge. However, the problem I witnessed in an inclusive classroom was the clash between the intentions for the space, the negotiation of the space and the distortions of these processes by the ever ready presence of ismological language. Therefore inclusive educational practice, in my opinion, needs to be reconciled with the realities of an educational space.

This leads me to Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone. She defines the contact zone as "social spaces where culture meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical power relations." A classroom dealing with issues of difference classifies as a contact zone, in that the ideologies that accompany students' cultures facilitate the clash of interests that ensues. The transmission of academic content, in a contact zone, must account for the voices of the students and the ways in which the student must renegotiate herself. The imagination of the student role-a continuation of the imagination of the civic role-that all students carry with them is challenged when we enter the contact zone. Inclusive practices imposed upon the educational space we occupy critically examine long held beliefs of dormant and active minds alike.

The challenge is to allow this process to occur in a manner that is not about domination and subordination, however present they may already be in the educational atmosphere. The challenge is to allow the student voice to speak to issues of difference without reinforcing, to quote Reiland Rabaka, epistemic apartheid, a separate and unequal segregation of classroom ideologies in flux. As bell hooks state, “I want there to be a place in the world where people can engage in one another’s differences in a way that is redemptive, full of hope and possibility. Not this ‘In order to love you, I must make you something else’. That’s what domination is all about, that in order to be close to you, I must possess you, remake and recast you.”

I believe this quote is pertinent to the work of inclusion in the classroom and to the negotiation of this classroom as a contact zone. If the student is to participate in the production and the sharing of knowledge, the teacher cannot be the only one with an understanding of the dynamics of inclusion. If the student is to achieve this understanding, she must participate in its creation, in its invention. The problem with an educational contact zone, as I experienced it, is the danger of miscommunication. The hope of an educational contact zone, as I experienced it, is the creation of roles and space, the opportunity to invent ourselves, our voices and our surroundings anew. It is the dream of a realized inclusion, from people to ideologies, from histories to languages, from thought to being.