TEACHING BEYOND THE CONTACT ZONE:
THE MIDDLE GROUND OF ENGLISH WRITING

Brian Brazeau,
American University of Paris

In a university with a student body comprised of nearly 100 different nationalities, linguistic diversity and its difficulties are common fare. The daily workings of The American University of Paris (AUP) confront members of our community with sometimes strenuous and always fascinating communicative challenges. Whether in the classroom, in faculty and administrative settings, or in general formulations of institutional identity, the multifarious linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the AUP population must be negotiated with care. Founded 40 years ago, The American University of Paris aims to provide a quality American undergraduate degree program to students from all national, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. As an accredited American university in a European setting, our situation is a particular one. AUP today has more than 800 students representing around 100 nationalities, including 35% from North America, 12% from France, and 26% from the rest of Europe. Other students come from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America. As an English teacher in this environment, I certainly hold one of the most intriguing and difficult positions on campus. The following paper treats the problems and possible rewards of my place in this institution.

The notion of the "ideal" English paper is an old and quite tenacious one. Indeed, most teachers of English composition are taught their craft with this specter in mind, which is essentially a statement that in the classroom, the product is to be privileged over the process. At the American University of Paris, were I to hold to this model, I would be forced to admit persistent failure. Many of the students I have had the pleasure to teach will never attain the level of written English fluency I have been taught to expect. However, if I begin to revise my thoughts on learning, by focusing on process, I am able to gain a more pleasing vision of what I do. The process of teaching, as many of us know, depends on an understanding and organization of that peculiar space we call the classroom. Here, two important notions from current studies in post-colonial thought will prove quite useful; the locus of teaching at AUP, although admittedly less dramatic, is easily comparable to clashes between Europeans and colonized peoples in the space of the New World. We will be examining the particular classroom site at AUP, where it would be quite possible that in a class of twenty students none share a nationality, through the conflict between the "contact zone" and "the middle ground". In *Imperial Eyes,* Mary-Louise Pratt outlines the contact zone as "…social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination."[1] This is certainly what my teaching is supposed to

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[1] Pratt, Mary-Louise, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*
(London: Routledge, 1992) 4.

be. I am to dominate my students' English, and often this domination meets with resistance, despite student efforts to comply. It is here that the notion of a "middle ground", described by the historian Richard White as "the place in between: in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires" is felicitous.[2] Through a discussion of several concrete examples, informed by current work in composition studies, I hope to demonstrate that the cultural exchange and (mis)understanding in our classrooms leads to a "middle ground", in which all relationships assume a hybridity not allowed for in traditional notions of teaching English. While we must still aspire to assist students in the writing of clear English prose, such a discussion can demonstrate that a failure to reach the abstract notion of "ideal" success does not denote a failure to achieve meaningful and enriching goals.

My mission in this particular institution, as it was presented to me, is to teach a diverse student body, once their English levels have been somewhat homogenized by introductory English courses, the written English of the academy. Despite the fact that on paper many of us do not adhere to the existence of the "perfect English academic paper", this is still how we broadly define our task, and it is the specter hanging over our professional heads. Despite models of process, student-centered learning, and changes in conceptions of the role of grading and assessment, the idea of the perfect paper-and the failure to produce it-still haunts us. I will discuss the causes, manifestations, and possible solutions of such difficulties in the specific space of my institution.

Bringing together a totally multi-cultural environment and the supposed mission of a composition teacher, we encounter a twofold problem, or two things with which I am uncomfortable. Firstly, my fundamental role seems to be to convert students. The more perspicacious ones have noted this to me, saying that often I am asking them to write in a way which is culturally foreign and unnatural to them. They more than anyone realize the implications of this. This is akin to an anecdote from my main area of research, early French colonial politics. In the seventeenth-century *Jesuit Relations*, written from Canada and published in France, the French often describe language as a way in which the natives can be brought to a very Gallic/Catholic sense of "civilization". The Jesuit Paul Le Jeune describes a young former British slave of African origin who has come into the missionaries' care. The boy is in a linguistically difficult position, as he speaks neither French nor the Indian languages. His comprehension of language and conversion, however, is striking. Le Jeune recounts that

> When we talked to him of baptism, he made us laugh. For when his caretaker asked him if he wished to be Christian, if he wanted to be baptized, that through this he would be like us, he asked whether we would have to skin him to complete the baptism.

This question brings derision from his interlocutors. Le Jeune continues,

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[2] White, Richard, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991) X.

> Since he saw that we laughed at his query, he spoke in his pidgin, as best he could, saying that "You say that through baptism I will be like you. I am black and you are white; you will thus have to remove my skin so that I can become like you.[3]

The young slave in this text has understood the politics of conversion, to a much greater degree than the Jesuits. To be converted is to have one's identity taken away and replaced with another. My students' remarks demonstrate an understanding of this notion, an understanding greater than mine when I started teaching.

The second element of the specifics of the AUP classroom is one hinted at above. Even if I were comfortable with the politics of conversion present in this space, I would have to admit about a 50% failure rate. In addition, even if I wanted to place the responsibility for this on the students, I could not, because although there are those who have trouble because they do not do the work, most of them study quite hard. For example, what do we do with the following writing sample, which comes from the end of the semester?

> When Petrarch is with his lover, every thing he sees are covered in colors and joy, all what he carries is good energy. As a good poet, he lives in this fantacized [sic] world with his lover, share time feelings and inspiration with her. Unfortunately, Petrarch has to face the fate of lossing [sic] his soul-mate lover and spend the rest of the time missing her and think about her in memories from the past.

This is the final exam of a native speaker of Chinese, who was in my office weekly, who rewrote every paper, and who worked diligently throughout the semester. Despite this-and her case is not an anomaly-one can see that there are many problems to address. What does one do here? I have two choices, in the context of the "perfect English paper". I can simply fail the student, as they have not lived up to the rules and regulations of the academy. On the other hand, I can turn things back on myself, and say that I have failed in my job, and move into another profession. Neither of these seems satisfactory to me.

Since nobody wishes to feel uncomfortable with the job presented to them, especially when they and their colleagues are committed to doing it well, and nobody likes to admit that they are failing, what do we do? If I cannot produce the "Perfect English Paper" at AUP, what can I do? Satisfy myself with less? I do not propose to have a complete answer to this, but I have, in the context of the space of my specific and fascinating institution-at the same time different and similar to many American universities- begun to reflect on ways to feel better about what I do, without lowering the intellectual standards of my classes. In order to do this, I have been exploring ways to move away from traditional notions of the writing class. I have chosen to focus on questions and conceptions of process rather than product, never forgetting that I am trying to produce writers, asking what is beneficial about the specific process in which I am involved. The process model, which can roughly be described as thinking about what it means to teach and learn writing, is far from new. Peter Elbow, the champion of student-centered pedagogy, has been discussing the merits of process over product for thirty years in such texts as *Writing Without Teachers* (1973); *Writing with Power* (1981)*; Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*, published in

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[3] Gold Thwaites, Reuben, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (Cleveland: Burrows Bros., 1896-1901) V:62.

2000. His writings have inspired a multitude of composition teachers. Despite such work, however, the application of these methods remains difficult.

In teaching and learning, process is a twofold predicament. There are moments of contact, and there are moments when students are alone. The focus here is almost solely on moments of contact, treating briefly the dynamics of a special space, that of the classroom. Much has been written on the uniqueness of the classroom environment.[4] It seems to me that the classroom can be felicitously understood in terms of colonial contact, relating back to the colonial conversion process I discussed before. The classroom is both a "contact zone" as discussed in the work of Mary-Louise Pratt and more specifically it is a "middle ground" as outlined in the book of the same name by the historian Richard White, the specifics of which we return to below. Currently, there is exciting work in composition and language acquisition studies, especially the writings of A. Suresh Canagarajah in his recent *Critical Academic Writing and Multilingual Students*, which links the postcolonial with writing. The classroom is a space mediated by at least three factors: the expectations placed upon students by the academy, the ways in which teachers adhere or deviate from those expectations, and the diverse cultural backgrounds of the students in a course.

We have already made the link between the classroom and the (post-) colonial world. Let us theorize this a bit more closely through a look at Mary-Louise Pratt's notion of the contact zone, a notion ridden with power. Pratt describes the contact zone as "…social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination- like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today."[5] In the research for this paper, I found that A. Suresh Canagarajah also uses Pratt to discuss the classroom space. His argument focuses on the word "asymmetrical" in the preceding citation. For Canagarajah, "heterogeneity shouldn't be taken to mean that the academy is an egalitarian domain".[6] In this world, for Canagarajah, students adopt "creative strategies to fuse their interests and values into the academic conventions."[7] It is thus a world into which students accede through channels other than those presented to them, a situation which is created by the conflictual relations of power in this world -and Canagarajah is inspired throughout by Foucault-of competing "discourse communities". This is an attractive model, but I am still uncomfortable with a notion to which he holds, as he states at the end of this chapter, which is a notion of clash. As he notes,

> Students who are socialized into different patterns of communicative styles and versions of reality in their homes and native communities have to critically renegotiate the cultural and interactional patterns of the academy. In deciding the extent to which they can bring their own discourses into the academic community, students realize writing as conflict and struggle.[8]

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[4] A. Suresh Canagarajah, in his recent *Critical Academic Writing and Multilingual Students*, devotes a substantial amount of space, notably his sixth chapter, to "Issues of Community". Canagarajah, A. Suresh. *Critical Academic Writing and Multilingual Students*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002.

[5] Pratt, 4.

[6] Canagarajah, 173.

[7] Canagarajah, 173.

[8] Canagarajah, 206.

I am not sure that this is necessarily the case. Do strife and struggle *always* have to part of this world? Although Canagarajah certainly moves away from the process of creating the Perfect English Paper, his argument seems to have as its base the notion that learning and teaching are fundamentally about moving from one discourse community to another, and the problems encountered in this move. This seems to me to rely on another product.

On the other end of the spectrum, where process is everything, I am not sure that what Peter Elbow proposes functions in my environment either. In his various texts, the process of writing is emphasized to the point that, and Elbow himself acknowledges this, the product is sometimes effaced, and it is difficult to know when one is to stop thinking about writing in order to grade.[9] What Elbow does bring, however, is the notion that thinking about writing as a process, especially on the part of the students, can make them appropriate that process for themselves. Giving student writing back to the students, for me, is the major contribution of Elbow's work, and it is something I try to do in the classroom, as a few examples will demonstrate below.

In between –theoretically- the ultimately conflictual world of Canagarajah, and the sometimes impractical world of Elbow, and in between -practically-the notion of the Perfect English Paper and failure, why not try to find what the historian Richard White calls "The Middle Ground", which starts in the classroom? White, discussing events "in the trenches" in colonial relationships, defines the middle ground as,

> the place in between: in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires and the nonstate world of villages. It is a place where many of the North American subjects and allies of empires lived. It is the area between the historical foreground of European invasion and occupation and the background of Indian defeat and retreat.[10]

It is essentially a notion which helps define how the actors of colonialism "constructed a common, mutually comprehensible world" in the actual place of their contact.[11] I would like to envision what I do as taking place on a "middle ground".

What can we find between the discourse of the "perfect English paper" and that of failure? What lies between the theories of writing and the actual practice of teaching it at AUP? What can we use, learn, and gain from the trenches, from the "middle ground"?

To attempt a partial answer to such questions, I can propose an outline of what the middle ground of the classroom in my institution resembles. First there is the notion of audience. My expectations, as I am the audience, have had to change, I have had to look for alternative positive elements. Canagarajah notes that "What we are now finding is that audience is much more integral to the writing process".[12] He discusses this, however, in relation to the student, who has to decide which is "the appropriate persona to adopt, the attitude/feelings/tone to be displayed, the footing and relationships to be maintained"; these are, he says "defined variously by the different audiences".[13] This is certainly true, but one must also remember that in the classroom, the audience is the teacher, a thinking, breathing, cognizant being, who is

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[9] See, for example Elbow, Peter. "Taking Time Out from Grading and Evaluating While Working in a Conventional System." *Assessing Writing* 4.1 (1997): 5-27.
[10] White, X.
[11] White, X.
[12] Canagarajah, 161.
[13] Canagarajah, 162.

able to change his or her expectations. When the audience is a single person, that audience has the power to shift. This is what I have had to do. Again, I come back to the student from China. What was wrong with her paper remains so. However, there is much that would be lost, such as the beauty of the following constructions, "everything he sees are covered in colors and joy, all what he carries is good energy", "self-improve his own strength and power in life", were I to simply call these sentences "wrong". If we move to the other end of the spectrum, where we see a very good writer of English papers in an Armenian student, we see the possibility of removing a remaining minor eccentricity. He writes that, "The juxtaposition of the notions of love in *The Flowers of Evil* and the *Canzoniere* **seems to produce** a single important difference that **perhaps** places them on the two ends of love poetry's spectrum [my emphasis]". I spent much of the semester noting that his writing and argument were weakened by the repetition of such qualifiers, until the day when this student finally told me that in his language and culture, it is considered heavy-handed, even vulgar, to state things with the force we ask for in English writing. From then on, I took it as enough that he was making the conscious choice to include them. An exercise here, rather than sanctioning such occurrences, is to go around the classroom and discuss what is culturally specific about some things one finds in student writing. For example, it would be difficult to be an understanding teacher in my institution if one did not have French. This is true not because we speak in French, but rather because of some of the fun glitches we see in papers such as the following, "The Great Gatsby and Manon respectably have an experience leading them to death. In both text, they both abuse it to their own tragedy. In their use of the love and money, both characters resemble each over." Here we see more than just the traditional French addition of articles. If anyone has ever heard a French person with an accent speak, these are clear and understandable imperfections. Let us not forget the American students, for even if they are native speakers, they have their troubles. Level of language is a common shortcoming, for example, "In Des Grieux's case, he came from a wealthy family but quickly runs out of money, due to him chasing Manon. Whereas, Gatsby is filthy rich…". Again, this is a person who had made much effort all semester, and whose final exam, of which this is a portion, is in fact a great improvement. Of course, all of these could have to do with individual idiosyncrasies, but after many semesters of seeing them linked to cultural background, one is (or should be) more sensitive to them, and should adjust their expectations accordingly.

The second aspect of the AUP middle ground is the very important notion of classroom discussion. While the writing we are producing is perhaps not as pure as it could be, the discussions in class are at times even messier, and all the more fascinating for it. There are moments, for example, when students do not understand each other. The American generally brings things back to the everyday, or to a movie; the Armenian is always a bit more intellectual; the Italian often jokes; and the Chinese student is tangential and flowing. Without reducing this space to stereotypes, these are common traits, and are quite noticeable, especially at the beginning of a course.   By the end of the class, the students, and I, are able to work from these differences, laugh at them, and use them to ameliorate both their writing and understanding of the texts. Beyond this, it helps me keep heterogeneity in my expectations. It is up to the teacher in such an environment to direct (or not) discussion so that these differences and specificities become an integral part of the space and experience in that classroom. When this is done well, I see students who are happy to come to class. If this is done at the beginning, the students tend afterwards to do it themselves, either by snickering when a fellow student makes a statement typical of their previous ones, or by prefacing

comments with "I know so and so won't agree, but I think…". These are very gratifying moments. This is when I know there has been some sort of middle ground created. This changes both the students and the instructor by the end. Anecdotally, a recent class of students, with whom the creation of a group dynamic had been particularly successful, happened to find themselves together in the next English level the following semester. A student in the new class related to me the wonderful cohesion among the students due to their experience the preceding semester. A group of culturally and linguistically disparate students was thrilled to find itself reconstituted. It is at these moments that one realizes the possibilities, beyond attempting to produce perfect writers, of cultivating a "middle ground".

Thus, both the audience and the subject are changed by this space of the classroom. Perhaps this is a step towards making better writers; I am not sure. I still have trouble grading my students, and I must admit that I often do it in relation to an abstract perfect paper. As in the citation from Canagarajah above, it is clear that the audience is integral to the writing process; perhaps in changing my expectations, or perspective as "the audience" I can be a more positive force in the evolution of these students' writing. However, what I am essentially proposing is that this can often be of lesser importance than other issues. In the classroom, when we are together, something else is happening. Cultures are being misunderstood, understood, transmitted, changed, and fused. I am no longer the sole teacher in the classroom, and my students are no longer hierarchically placed below me on the ladder of what can be exchanged in the classroom space. As with all utopian visions of the learning process, I eventually have to return to the grade and the sanction of the academy, but perhaps, within the space of the middle ground, something else will have been accomplished and created.