Elmborg asserts that Pratt’s contact zone theory has usefulness in the library setting. Do you agree? How might this theory be put into practice in our work as reference librarians?

Libraries are indeed contact zones in that they are public educational spaces. Whether we refer to public or academic libraries, their shared goal is to meet the information needs of a heterogeneous populace. As such, I agree with Elmborg that Pratt’s theory has usefulness in the library setting. In particular, I think Pratt’s theory will be especially beneficial to college students and teens.

As Elmborg (2006) asserts, “many students find that developing the kind of academic identity that colleges encourage undermines the identity that binds them to family and culture.” (pg. 56) As students’ sense of language shifts to assimilate with more rigid academic standards of convention, they may begin to feel fractured or bifurcated resulting in a lack of self-confidence. Will these same students opt to approach the reference desk when they believe they can search from the anonymity of their browsers? They will if they feel like they’re part of the library environment.

Creating relaxed, friendly and open spaces for patrons to ask reference questions is vital to performing quality reference service. Effective listening, eye contact and positive attitudes can go a long way toward impacting patrons’ perceptions of the reference desk as a barrier to library services. Staff may also consider the more direct approach of “roving reference” as an engaging tactic to help patrons acclimate or assuage “library anxiety” (Elmborg, 2006, pg. 60)

Another way to foster a positive learning environment is to involve patrons in the design and layout of the reference space. Staff can rotate monthly exhibits of featured patron artwork to honor the “polyphony” of patron ideas, cultures, languages, and identities. It also seems prudent for management to implement mandated diversity and sensitivity training courses for the entire staff. Back in 204, I read an article by Arai, Wanca-Thibault, and Shockley-Zalabak that stressed the usefulness of a diversity-trained model which “increased interpersonal effectiveness…wherein… participants are provided training in building intercultural communication skills, cross-gender communication skills, and conflict resolution skills in a diverse environment.” (Arai; Shockley-Zalabak; Wanca-Thibault, page 6) This model sounds like a great starting point for reference staff to educate and sensitize themselves about improving patron services in the contact zone.

One question I am left with is whether it is helpful or harmful to coach patrons on “more efficient search strategies” by employing controlled vocabulary over natural language searches. Should reference staff instruct patrons as to better searching, or is this too close to being perceived as oppressive or of reshaping native language?

**References**

Arai, M., Shockley-Zalabak, P., and Wanca-Thibault, M. [Communication theory and training approaches for multicultural diverse organizations: have academics and practitioners missed the connection?](https://liffey.sjsu.edu/AngelUploads/Content/SPRING_2010-SJSU-SLIS_68/_assoc/A1E7D3052BDB4139BA7FD8C5AFD38875/%20void%200). *Public Personnel Management* v. 30 no. 4 (Winter 2001) p. 445-55

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