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Facing the Center

Harry C. Denny

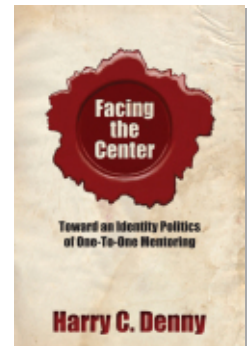
Published by Utah State University Press

Denny, Harry C.

Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring.

Utah State University Press, 2010.

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INTERCHAPTER 1

A READER'S GUIDE TO THE INTERCHAPTERS:

Over the years, I've been inspired by texts in composition and writing center studies that attempt to transcend the boundaries of conventional chapters or essays in collections. My most direct influences have been Donna LeCourt's (2004) self-reflections on her experiences growing up working class in Boston and her conscious work to encode her language and wider performance as signifying something other than the economic roots from which she came. Joe Harris (1997) writes in a similar vein in his review of composition studies scholarship since the late 1960s. He channels his own working-class experiences as fodder to push and extend his argument. Mark Hurlbert and Michael Blitz (1991) follow a different tack in their edited collection, turning to transcripts to provide opportunities for texts to apply theoretical lessons learned.

As I've considered this text, I've been deeply conflicted about the dominance and privilege that my voice and narrative takes on, particularly in the context of a monograph that's as much about disrupting the face at the center as it about facing the center, in writing centers, composition studies, and beyond. In that sense of center as uninterrogated, privileged, and unmarked, I'm an author who ironically calls for attention to the fluidity and liminality of the center, margin, and face, even as I have the authority and agency to easily embody and perform each of those positions. I am—I do—the very postmodern identities that I call for the field to inventory and problem-pose. But, while I am queer and celebrate my working-class roots, my material and ideological reality today is thoroughly privileged. My authority and expertise are granted, for the most part, by audiences who read my body and affect as socio-cultural markers for ethos. Though I make attempts to qualify and signal the lens through which I perceive the world (and it me), I fear suggesting my experiences are foundational or somehow transcendent. To check or bracket them and to complicate my narrative, I sought an admittedly convenient sample of writing consultants who have worked with me or who have spoken to me at conferences over the years and who might push what I'm arguing or invite further dialogue with readers.

Like the scenarios that lead off each chapter, I imagine this text being fodder for tutor education courses or wider conversations among new and experienced

classroom teachers. Our professional convention workshops and listserv conversations frequently get requests and postings asking for pragmatic advice. Too often these dialogues are more about exchanging recipes and how-to's as opposed to fostering deeper thinking and problem-posing. Anne Ellen Geller (2005) understands this tension as one of timing, where the pressure to beat the clock or meet the demands of the moment (fungible time) too often eclipses or denies occasions to dig deep and revel in the potential of the moment. These interchapters will work to model a different way of doing critical exchange. Often, it will not even be about a right or wrong answer, but thinking differently through a new set of eyes. My own responses to what these consultants have to say should not be read as the final word; rather, my hope is to offer them as a model and launching pad for putting into practice the very ideas and themes that each chapter seeks to present.

* * *

Michelle Solomon: New York City English teacher; former writing center tutor at SUNY Stony Brook and Long Island University/Brooklyn

You discuss “white, middle-class, straight, American privileged colleagues” who might wonder “why ‘they’ (the Others) weren’t more present.” At what point would my own actions be seen as “embracing” or “reflecting” the Other? I expect the same level of hard work and professionalism not only in the students I tutor, but in the students I teach in the classroom. I expect work to be done well and on time, regardless of background (with the understanding that I am always available to those who need it because of background). I choose texts that reflect “the Other,” and populations who struggle and whose voices are not always heard by dominant populations. I assign writing assignments that allow students to write about their background, their families, their struggles, themselves. I give a voice to as many of my students as I can, inexperienced teacher as I am. Yet I know that more is expected of me, simply because I am not an Other. I expect the students whom I tutor to come to the writing center prepared to work. I’m still trying to determine how much of their Othered background I should pay attention to, if I should pay attention to it at all. The truth of the matter is that their Other status is immaterial to me from the standpoint that I still expect my students to work, and only really consider that background if it affects their work in some capacity.

I hear both tension and frustration in Michelle's words. Those feelings are real and legitimate and experienced by almost every consultant and teacher at one time or another. I suspect the frustration comes in the gulf between her expectations and investment and those that her students possess. In writing centers and composition

courses, tutors and instructors work to negotiate where our students are rather than where we'd like to be. In that sense, we begin to channel the improvisational spirit that Beth Boquet (1999) writes about so cogently, but I've also become more comfortable negotiating demands and expectations with students on the premise that I've got an obligation to tap into their own developmental motives and needs as well as to think about how I can make what they need to write about relevant to their personal and collective interests. If we view the context of writing, learning, and teaching through our students' eyes, instead of battling them on our terms, then how can we create a common, even middle, ground?

Michelle also seems frustrated by the dynamics of the Other. I hear a hint of a desire to find a teaching and learning space that's beyond the politics of Other (and same/privilege), that's exterior to "work" or whatever wider learning we facilitate in our classrooms and conferences. I just don't buy that we can get beyond identity however it's expressed in our classrooms or consulting sessions. What would that world look and feel like? How would we go about suspending who we are to engage any learning? Of course, we never interact with our environments fully cognizant of how our identities make knowing possible, but we're always already who we are. It'd be, I suppose, a compelling learning environment to suspend awareness that I'm gay, a man, a professor—to flick a switch and turn any one or set of them off—but I don't see any utility in such exercises. Instead, I think what's more powerful in what Michelle is struggling with is how we address the experience gulfs between ourselves and others. I'm drawn to the lessons that Nancy Grimm teaches in her 1999 work, *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, in which she teaches us to think about how we change our teaching and learning relationships from uncomplicated linear transactions between institutions and individuals and toward interaction that's rooted in being cultural informants. What would her classroom or tutoring sessions look like if they were mutually informing, enabling her students to shape and communicate knowledge through their experiences for her as a teachable audience and vice versus? What might those conversations look like if she worked toward collaborative learning within subsets and across plenary groups of students?