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Facing the Center

Harry C. Denny

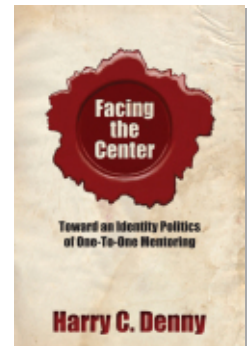
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INTERCHAPTER 3

Anna Rita Napoleone, former tutor

My first semester as a writing center tutor, I recall trying to hide my way of talking because I didn't tawk the tawk. What I came to realize is that many of those coming into the writing center tawked different and I loved it. One day, I had a Russian tutee (we were assigned tutees that would come for weekly appointments) come in and say she wanted to fix her grammar and I talked to her about process and that language acquisition takes a while. After all, I'd been in the country for over twenty years and I still had an accent but I did and I didn't realize that my accent was a classed accent. However, I knew how it translated within the classroom, on paper, and to some professors and it was frowned upon. I felt like David, ashamed, embarrassed but my talk, my tawk, was linked to greater things than school so in my shame and embarrassment there was a lot of anger. I started to discuss with the tutee that grammar isn't everything and that grammar is linked to bigger issues than just "getting it right" but she didn't want to hear that; she wanted a grade; I wanted a fight.

This tension between Anna Rita and her client speaks into many of the issues that arise in writing centers and composition classrooms around the politics of language, and also the subtle ways that class (or mitigating class) plays out in sessions. The underlying assumption here is that grammar and accent signify our class identities, even when we're not aware of them. Our codes and affect also perform many other aspects of who we are—our race, sex/gender, nationalities, etc. Here, I'm also interested in the relationship Anna Rita feels between this woman's ethnicity (she names her as Russian and likely, given the New York context, also an immigrant) and her class position. In this case, I suspect Anna Rita understandably turned toward advocating a critical awareness of the language enforced versus the language natural to one's voice. Her own early embarrassment, and journey to reclaim her code beyond the academy figured in Anna Rita's empathy toward her student, based on what she assumed was an experience they had in common. I wonder whether that concern was premature or reflected an agenda Anna Rita brought, a priori, to the session. Just as students have a right to their own languages, to channel Kynard (2007), Delpit (1995), and

Parks (1999), my gut tells me they also have a right to refuse critical consciousness or to come to it on their own terms. To question it differently, what are the conditions or contexts that make empathetic or critical intervention appropriate and which are less tenable? Under what circumstances does this sort of discussion transition from advocacy to proselytization? I suspect the tipping point comes from cues that a student or client might present that suggest frustration with or anxiety about admittedly arbitrary standards of language. Otherwise, I'm tempted to meet clients where they are, as opposed to where I'd like them to be. The experience provides a lesson for critical pedagogy that we've learned from the false debates of being directive or non-directive with students in writing centers; perhaps the real decision point involves not whether or not we should raise consciousness but whether or not the context lends itself to the sort of conversation a student can hear, internalize and act upon (at some point). Rather than push our students into fights that they haven't picked on their own, we are better served to enable them to choose battles that match their own agendas and sense of activism.

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Kerri Mulqueen, Doctoral student and former writing center tutor at St. John's University, chairperson of the English department at Nazareth Regional HS (Brooklyn, NY)

Growing up the child of an Irish immigrant father and a first generation American mother, neither of whom had the opportunity to pursue higher education, I somehow always considered myself middle-class. It wasn't until I began my doctoral program that I really took stock of my personal history and realized that most of those around me had not grown up watching their parents work twelve hour swing shifts in the decidedly blue-collar jobs of, respectively, an emergency room nurse and a doorman/bartender/porter/superintendent. My parents were a part of the unionized labor work force and they enacted the working-class culture of only buying things they could pay for in full, working as much overtime as it would take to buy a home, pay the bills, and have gifts under the tree every Christmas. And always they pointed all four of their children toward college campuses with the clear message that it was those expanses of green grass and red brick that allowed one to move up in life.

In the last few years, I have come to realize that my constant drive to prove myself, to excel, to be recognized, has its roots in the story of my parents and my

upbringing. There is a part of me that needs to justify my place in the academic world and there is a part of me still working to validate all the hours they worked, the tuition they strained to pay, and the encouragement they doled out to me to “read, read, read....”

Kerri's experience is common and shared by so many folks on St. John's campus and around the academy. I think of so many of her own peers whose experiences could easily share these pages with hers and mine, and I think of the canonical texts in cultural studies from folks like Paul Willis (1981) and Raymond Williams (1983) and those who have taken them up like Richard Rodriguez (1983) and Stuart Hall (1993). In composition studies, working-class voices further multiply as this last chapter suggests. Writing centers are critical sites where students like us can find a professional home and supporting place to learn and mentor one another. But just as important, our writing classrooms have an obligation to make a space for exploring and bridging the gulf between home and school as well as the challenges, opportunities, and losses that come along with movement between those places. Still, it's not enough to have occasions for expression; teachers and consultants alike need to consider when and how our pedagogies and work reinscribe differences and the guilt/shame/conflict that attends overcoming or bracketing them. Without such problem-posing, we're doomed to be repeat the history of William's and Rodriguez's "scholarship boy"—the one who can't go home again, but who can never feel quite secure in the academy either. We also have a duty to enable students to see that the dilemma of choosing between home and school is false because the inevitable consequence of that choice is giving short shrift to where we come from. How might we develop ways of growing that enable pride in one's roots, especially when our education takes us, in real material ways, away from them? How can we come to see and use our origins, their histories and places, when they aren't the ones typically normalized or venerated, as grounds on which to reflect and leverage, as central to how we learn, rather than as impediments?