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Facing the Center

Harry C. Denny

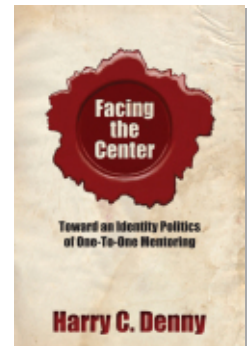
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INTERCHAPTER 4

**Liliana Naydan, former peer tutor, doctoral student in English,
Stony Brook University**

As a woman, I've always found writing centers to be among the most positive and safest places to work, perhaps because primarily women have worked as my colleagues. However, because writing centers tend to be predominantly female spaces, and because women come to feel so comfortable in them, it's all the more unnerving when the safety of the writing center is violated in some way.

When I worked in an administrative position at one writing center, I encountered a situation in which a group of women tutors called on me to help them with a particularly pushy male writing center patron. At our writing center, we had a policy that patrons were only permitted to make one appointment per week, and this patron insisted that he should be eligible for a second appointment. This wasn't the first or last time a situation like this arose. Patrons often had questions about writing center policies, and tutors often had to explain them.

What distinguished this particular situation for me at the time (and what continues to distinguish it for me) is that only women were in the writing center—only women were attempting to address this male patron's aggressive behavior. The women tutors responded to the patron professionally (and wonderfully), in my view, by explaining why the policy existed: to help patrons of the writing center retain a sense of agency over their own compositions; to help them avoid relying “too much” on the writing center for help. (Indeed, this patron in particular had a reputation for relying “too much” on his tutors.)

The problem, however, is that the patron persisted, becoming increasingly angered by the tutors, and that's when the tutors—flustered, by this point—turned to me. Out of what I felt was necessity, I responded a bit more assertively than the tutors to the pushy patron. Instead of attempting to placate the patron, I was firm: I told him that we'd simply not be able to help him. My strategy worked. The patron left, and the tutors felt relieved that the situation was over. However, the situation sticks in my memory because I've never felt that I behaved in a way that came naturally to me. I felt like I had to play the part of the assertive administrator, a part that felt alien and perhaps somewhat “masculine” to me. In

an ideal world, the kind of assertiveness I expressed wouldn't even be necessary, yet because the writing center is so often a predominantly female space, women working in writing centers will likely find themselves in similar situations, feeling that they need to behave in ways that don't feel comfortable to them in order to sustain the writing center as a safe and productive space.

Like so many of the other experiences shared here, sadly, this one too is common, and as Liliana references, the space of writing centers is gendered. What strikes me in that moment of recognizing the gender politics of our spaces is that we read and naturalize their femininity—that's what marked and rendered them visible—and we don't understand as signified the moments where masculinity is assumed, enforced, or dominating. I like that Liliana met this difficult student on his terms, but the situation leaves me wondering whether he learned or understood his performativity as problematic, even offensive, and what message, by implication, this student's behavior also sends to women (and men) who are the objects and witnesses of it. Liliana's response, as someone experienced and secure with self, was fully appropriate. Furthermore, I wonder whether we risk reifying that kind of behavior when we don't get at the conditions that make it possible, when we don't acknowledge, confront, and work through conflict when it's presented. How do we, in a classroom or tutoring session or at a reception desk, wade into a moment fraught with tension, but imbued with our socialized ways of responding (ways that are always gendered, raced, classed, etc.). As well as anyone else, I can attest to my own tendency to avoid conflict. Still, this is a conversation we must have, regardless of its difficulty and discomfort. Beyond the moment, this sort of situation begs consideration of the consequences when cultural assumptions conflict with one another: How do we ensure the safety of our staff while maintaining spaces that embrace a diversity of bodies, identities and practices?

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Sophia Mavrogiannis, former writing consultant at Long Island University

I remember a conversation with a fellow tutor and friend where she explained how, regardless of where she is, her body gives her away—that it outs her because she fits the stereotypical appearance of a lesbian: non-feminine and tomboyish. In the writing center, she explained, this translates to a strange need to “compensate” for the judgments people might make of her based on her appearance. In other words, she worked twice as hard and to be the “best” tutor she could be so that students would, she hoped, overlook her appearance and her sexuality and

just see a good tutor—as if being a tomboy or butch lesbian somehow discounted her intelligence, experience, and tutoring skills.

My experiences, however, have been entirely different because whereas my friend's body gives her away, my appearance conceals and protects me. On any given day on the street, in a classroom or in the writing center, I look white, feminine and hetero (not Greek, feminine, and gay). To this extent, I have the markers of privilege. This doesn't mean that I haven't experienced my share of insulting moments and mistreatments—typically in the form of catcalls, whistles, and odd solicitations from men— it just means that I somewhat just pass through my days fairly unnoticed and unscathed.

Disturbingly, I've come to suspect that students assume I'm intelligent and qualified because they perceive me as white, feminine, and hetero—or at least this is how they treat me. I say this because I don't recall a moment as a writing tutor when a student spoke to me inappropriately, asked to work with someone of a different gender or presumed sexuality, gazed or ogled at me/my body, made sexually insinuating comments or any such thing. Additionally, I look younger than I am, and I suspect students make inferences about my age that lead them to see me as a peer—an act which I believe helps them be more open, engaged, and active in our sessions, and keeps them wanting to come back.

Sophia speaks directly into the differential experiences of those who can't perform normalized or naturalized identities in the public domain of college teaching and learning. She attends to the ways in which all of us signify even before we utter words, not just the folks whose performances and bodies are always already read as different. Within the experience she shares, there's tremendous privilege and power in having the agency to pick and choose the terms by which she challenges gender and sexual norms and codes of expression. For those of us who cannot pass, there's a unique burden to experiencing the public domain that's akin to the inability of people to transcend their race, ethnicity, and class, to somehow signify without meaningful consequence. The obligation, then, isn't for them to take on the task of educating the world; rather, we—people like Sophia and me—have to pierce the centeredness from which our own privilege operates.

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Andrew Rihn, peer consultant, Kent State University

Universities and their writing centers often focus on words like “diversity” and “inclusion.” Like most buzzwords, these are easier said than done. This point was

driven home to me when I considered having our center designated a “safe zone” for LGBT folk. The sign, with its inverted pink triangle, would let students know the health and well-being of LGBT students was a concern of ours. But would it possibly turn other students away from using our services? Furthermore, would all our tutors be comfortable with the designation? “Safe zones” come with responsibility, and some tutors might not be willing, or able, to go that extra mile. In cases like this, when “diversity” and “inclusion” are on the table, who gets to be comfortable? (For the record, the “safe zone” idea never got off the ground.)

What I like about what’s going on here is a complicating of how we understand spaces and a refusal—whether or not Andrew’s center was aware of it—to buy into a concept purely for its political utility and the message that it sends. My colleague Anne Ellen Geller pushed my thinking on the notion of “safe space” or “safe harbors.” If memory serves me well, it wasn’t about writing centers; instead, she was challenging the notion that any classroom or meeting space could be truly safe, and she doubted whether we could (or should) ever even aspire to it. The point that Anne was making, I now understand, was that no space could ever be converted and made neutral, utopian, or free from the larger forces at play in our society and culture. We have to, in other terms, figure out ways to work with, and ideally through, difficulty when it presents itself in any context. Even then, tutors and teachers alike don’t enter conversations without interaction already primed for subtle control and steering. We have degrees of agency to both create and frame conversations that people coming to us aren’t necessarily ready to do themselves. We must act on our propensity for gentle, collaborative leadership. When I read Andrew’s passage, my heart is with him, but my gut also wants to create a space in writing centers inclusive of those who go against the grain intellectually, culturally, politically, and socially. I want a space vibrant with debate and dissent where queer-identified and allied students and staff can push and pull ideas from a range of perspectives, beliefs and value systems. The rub, of course, comes when individuals of any stripe operate from positions that exclude another’s right to be—theological, philosophical, and political positions that are among the currents in the contemporary world. On those rare occasions, how do we weigh secular and political relativism that is part and parcel of academic freedom against epistemologies of faith and belief? To what consequence, once we decide a direction or course of events? What do we do when our ethics of practice and inclusion reach an impasse? Suddenly, no matter how safe and inclusive we want our spaces, they aren’t so very.