

**Denny, Harry C. *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-To-One Mentoring*. Utah State UP, 2010.**

Reviewed by Nancy M. Grimm

People who have never worked in a writing center are often surprised when I say that I find so much intellectual stimulation there. I'm thinking, in particular, of the flashbulb moments when I discover that I need to rethink my assumptions about the relationship between identity, language, and academic success. Those counter-hegemonic moments are more frequent than outsiders might realize, but they are so unexpected that I am often at a loss to name them, much less frame them in ways that contribute to the field of composition and rhetoric. For example, recently, in the writing coach education seminar, Roberta listened thoughtfully while her fellow undergraduate writing coaches talked about how much they valued the collaborative learning environment of the Center. They were explaining how comfortable they felt getting up during a session and drawing another coach into discussion of a confusing reading or a vague assignment. Roberta responded by saying that was something she would never do. Never do? To the stunned white majority, this sounded like a violation of the collaborative culture so deliberately fostered in the Writing Center. But then, for some, came the recognition of privilege, the understanding that when a white writing coach seeks collaborative input, it's a sign of strength; when a black writing coach seeks it, it signals deficiency. Another time when I needed to rethink my fundamental assumptions about writing center practice happened a few years ago when I noticed Geneva conducting her sessions with such a high degree of formality that it almost seemed an inverse parody of the unquestioned informality practiced in the Center. Did she understand that it was permissible to "be herself"? Only later did it dawn on me that Geneva knew exactly how a young black woman commands respect of her mostly white and mostly male peers. Both of the situations that I relate here problematize some

unquestioned and supposedly neutral best practices in composition studies—collaboration and informal reader response. Both situations challenged my assumptions and transformed my thinking.

I began reading Harry Denny's book, *Facing the Center: Towards an Identity Politics of One-To-One Mentoring*, for the first time on a hazy humid summer afternoon, weather better suited for reading beach novels or decorating magazines. In spite of the poor conditions for intellectual engagement, I was immediately drawn in, excited to find someone who shares my concern about writing centers' complicity with institutional regulation of a dominant literacy and my hunch that the so-called "special populations" that are too frequently "contained" in writing centers have much to teach the field of writing studies.

Even better, I was delighted that not only was Denny carefully analyzing those important moments when our uptake is challenged but also that he was someone I could trust. Denny shares the story of how his own political awareness developed in his civil-rights work and HIV/AIDS activism; he draws on his intellectual history in cultural theory, and he relies on his immersion in the everyday experiences as director of the two writing centers of St. John's University, one in New York City and another on Staten Island. With this rich background, he examines those generative writing center moments when diversity encounters privileged assumptions and expectations. Denny's own coming of age as a white working class gay man in Iowa and his experience in several writing centers keep him grounded in practice and alert to the moments when dominant codes are challenged. Readers will encounter careful intellectual theorizing in this book, but they will not find Denny on a soap box.

Denny's task is to lift the veil drawn over quotidian writing center concerns about mission, structure, and programming to reveal the "face" of the concerns. More often than not, he finds students who are first-generation, working-class, speakers of languages other than English, people of color as well as white, gendered in ways that challenge dominant codes, or a mix of some

of the above. His four central chapters take up the “face” of race and ethnicity, social class, sex and gender, and nationality. Each of these central chapters begins with narrative scenarios that highlight the ways these identities emerge in writing center interactions. In each chapter, Denny guides readers into the historical and theoretical frameworks that illuminate identity issues. His scholarly knowledge is deep but never overwhelming and always contextualized. Because of this, the book is satisfying to an experienced professional like me yet also serves as an accessible introduction to the cultural theories that illuminate and historicize the daily encounters experienced by undergraduates who work in writing centers. Between each chapter is an interchapter, comprised of reflective writings from former writing consultants. These multi-vocal reflections introduce issues that complicate or highlight some of Denny’s arguments. Because they are written by experienced writing consultants, they “keep it real.”

For those readers who are willing to put aside the perennial “how do I deal with \_\_\_\_\_ (whatever special population)” questions, Denny takes us into the micro-politics of social change, framing the faces of everyday writing center encounters within the meta-currents of interconnected social issues. As Denny observes: “Writing centers make local, material, and individual all the larger forces at play that confound, impede, and make possible education in institutions” (6). In each chapter, we find Subjects who offer us transformative learning experiences rather than Others for whom we need strategies or approaches.

To illustrate, I will focus on the second chapter where Denny “faces” race and ethnicity. Denny begins the chapter with a scenario in which an African American graduate writing tutor, Allia, engages with a Russian immigrant undergraduate writer, who employs what Allia perceives as racist rhetoric. When she raises questions about the student’s line of argument, the student begins to question her qualifications. As a returning student who has worked as a corporate trainer, Allia is able to draw on her years of work experience and her maturity to diffuse the situation.

Denny explains that when he has used this scenario at writing center conferences, his audience typically disbelieves that race is the real issue. They explain it away, generally not recognizing their own racial vantage points. As he does in subsequent chapters, Denny probes this scenario and people's reaction to it. He contextualizes it within his own racial history, growing up white in Iowa and his developing awareness of racial identity politics during his years of HIV activism. He frames the issue with identity theorists such as Linda Alcoff and racial formation theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant. In these excursions, he never loses sight of Allia, compelled by the material reality of her "face" to "prove her ethos in ways that white people just are never compelled to do" (36). This chapter concludes with Denny's reflections on Allia's choices during that session. Resisting simplistic binaries between accommodationist and oppositional discourse, Denny looks for ways that students and tutors can identify options for "leveraging" personal experience or developing "respectful" ways to challenge dominant expectations.

Denny's personal experiences have taught him to resist simplistic solutions, so readers can expect to encounter complexity rather than simple answers. But they can also expect to encounter hope, because between the binaries one finds agency, choices, and opportunities for "change that doesn't necessarily announce itself" (22). Central to that hope are lessons that the privileged must learn, such as acknowledging the ways "race signifies people before they have a chance to signify themselves" (24), attending to the ways that that signification is embedded in the history of race relations in the U.S., and learning that their ways of making and sharing knowledge "aren't always the default positions" (55). Denny's approach to identity politics is not a simplistic celebration of difference but a challenge to the privileged to pay more attention to what they have been missing.

Denny's chief contribution to writing center discourse is his determined exposure of "face" as a challenge to writing centers' "tacit assimilationist contract" with hegemonic discourse (48). By identifying the quotidian negotiations between "face" and the

“meta-currents” of contemporary society, he invokes the transformative intellectual potential of writing centers. Denny’s profound book is a convincing demonstration that diversity, as it manifests in the racial, social, cultural, linguistic, political, gendered performances we call “writing,” is the nuts and bolts of writing center work. Rather than ignoring the often uncomfortable tensions around these differences, we need to find ways to engage them.

Denny’s final chapter examines the problematic nature of writing center professional identity. If I were to pick a bone with this book, it would be with this final chapter. Denny, smartly, is careful to not step on toes, but between the lines I sense (and share) his frustration with the diffuse professional identities of writing centers. Very gently, he pushes the field toward the more rigorous intellectual questioning and theorizing that characterize other fields. When I return to that chapter, I find I’ve underlined sentences buried in the middle of paragraphs that taken together make a strong case for a necessary reconceptualization of the field. He writes, for example:

- “. . . these queries [on the electronic listserv] are legitimate and genuine, but they also reference a certain paucity of standards for what it means to operate in this field that wouldn’t wash anywhere else.” (146)
- “only twenty-six percent of directors held tenure-track positions.” (147)
- “we don’t have a code or widely agreed consensus about performativity, nearly anyone can claim our identity.” (149)
- “. . . I’m troubled that there’s not really all that much of a community out there.” (150)

- “I fear that writing center professionals too often don’t understand themselves in relation to an emergent profession. . .” (154).

Denny is careful to locate some of the field’s identity issues in the institutional demand for assessment and the ongoing pressures to quantify the value of what writing centers do. Yet he also notes that his efforts to foreground diversity as a leader in conference workshops have been dismissed in favor of more “nuts and bolts” recipes for writing center conferencing.

Perhaps worn down by his persistent efforts to change the issues the field could be exploring, Denny returns to the “margins or center” debate that he carefully avoids in his discussions of race, class, gender, and nationality. This is the chapter most in need of the subversive tactics he identifies elsewhere. The “reacting and legitimating” stance (148) of so much writing center scholarship needs to be contextualized in long-standing historical and social histories of literacy and in impoverished definitions of what “literacy” actually is. Contrary to popular views, writing centers are not about remediating students. Rather, when they operate at their full potential, writing centers are places where students who bring cultural and linguistic diversity to college can find ways to mediate hegemonic discourse.

Denny’s central chapters provide ample evidence of the complex ideological mediations that are at the center of exciting new work in composition studies, much of it recently published in the edited collection, *Cross-Language Relations in Composition*. Sadly, the only time writing centers are mentioned in that book is when Paul Matsuda laments,

Even when language differences are recognized by the teacher, those differences are often contained by sending students to the writing center, where students encounter peer tutors who are even less likely to be prepared to work with language differences than composition teachers. (86)

I agree with Matsuda's point about composition's desire to contain differences, but clearly he hasn't met the tutors in Denny's writing center or in mine or in many other centers that recruit tutors who are skilled at shuttling (Canagarajah) across differences, many of whom, like Allia and Geneva and Roberta, have been subverting the dominant paradigm for a long time. Rather than prolong the unproductive debate about margin/center among ourselves, writing center scholars need to engage with composition as a field. As Beth Boquet and Neil Lerner argued in a recent *College English* essay, writing center scholarship rarely touches readers of *College Composition and Communication* or *College English*. It's time for that to change. In *Facing the Center*, Denny provides examples of how to frame the mediation that happens in writing centers every day.

To that end, I plan to use Denny's book in the weekly writing center staff development seminar, with a special focus on the ways he identifies the intense work of ideological mediation. I am convinced that if a strong research trajectory is developed in writing centers, this work of mediation will be its focus. But I also want to use this book when I teach composition and literacy theory courses. When graduate students read compelling arguments written by John Trimbur, Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Suresh Canagarajah, and LuMing Mao (all of whom are represented in *Cross-Language Relations*) and ask me "what does this look like in practice," I can point to the chapters that Denny has written and invite them to apply for assistantships in the writing center. Denny argues that writing center scholars need to start asking a different set of questions, ones about "who and what we represent as a discipline," questions that can make our field "relevant and vital to a post-industrial academy" (5). He's right, particularly if the "we" is all writing specialists, including peer writing coaches, technical communication specialists, literacy scholars, and composition teachers. What Denny's book provides all of us is a wider definition of the "we."

### Works Cited

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