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Review of *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity  
Politics of One-to-One Mentoring* by Harry C. Denny

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**Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring**, by Harry C. Denny. Logan: Utah State UP, 2010. 176 pp.

*Reviewed by Beth Godbee, University of Wisconsin-Madison*

A central contribution of Harry C. Denny's *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring* is the attention drawn toward the people involved and the identities they bring to writing conferencing. Writing center researchers have long been interested in and committed to working with people, as articulated in Stephen North's often-cited mission statement: "We are here to talk to writers" (440). Too rarely, however, have we given concerted attention to the identities that writers and writing center staff bring to this talk. As Denny argues, the importance of identity politics for composition teaching cannot be underestimated, as identities impact "the tangible effects of political, economic, social, and cultural forces at play in and often confounding education wherever it's practiced" (7).

*Facing the Center* succeeds in its aim of bringing research on identity to writing centers. The book offers no easy answers, but instead invites readers to question how our own identity politics influence how we teach writing, understand language, interact with others, and promote success in higher education. To engage in this exploration, Denny uses "face" as an organizing concept, uncovering assumptions of who "we" in writing centers are and how answers to this question shape our pedagogy. Drawing on a number of theorists (e.g., Kenji Yoshino, Cal Logue, and Stuart Hall) and situating identities within broader historical contexts and social movements in the United States, Denny argues that identities are ever-present, yet operate and are read differently depending on context.

One core argument concerns long-standing debates over how to teach writing in socially just ways, specifically whether to encourage assimilation or opposition to mainstream values and rhetorical expectations. Denny maintains assimilation and opposition are false choices that instead reflect "assumptions about power, historical context, and rhetorical need" (112). He proposes a spectrum of options and third possibilities, such as "subversion," or the opportunity for tutors and writers to work together toward rhetorical manipulation of what's expected of them—for example, reimagining assignments or leveraging personal experience where it's not readily allowed. He similarly advocates queer theory as an interpretive method that provides fluidity, hybridity, and liminality in understanding how identity can both oppose and bring into light dominant norms.

*Facing the Center* is divided into six chapters with five interchapters that put Denny in dialogue with writing consultants from the centers he has directed. The first chapter serves as an introduction to the central concepts of identity politics, face, and one-to-one mentoring. Here Denny shares his own history of civil rights activism in Colorado and HIV/AIDS activism in Philadelphia and tells the story of how he came to see oppression alongside rich possibilities for social change in writing centers. These changes he equates to “micro-shifts” such as those “slippages of tectonic plates” that occur in a slow process of building pressure over time (26). While social change may not be monumental or immediate, it can come about through “micro-successes,” culminating in a “tipping point” (8), which an understanding of identity politics helps us work toward.

The middle four chapters address four of the identities, or “faces,” writers, consultants, and administrators bring to writing centers. Each provides a theoretical lens for understanding politics associated with that identity: namely, performance for race and ethnicity (chapter 2), capital for class (chapter 3), normalization for sex and gender (chapter 4), and citizenship for nationality (chapter 5). These chapters follow essentially the same order: opening with scenarios and Denny’s personal experience and then defining and theorizing the chapter’s identity through historical context in the United States. From there, Denny considers what has been expected of marginalized writers who are asked to erase, mute, or cover their identities, and he foregrounds the politics of each chapter’s identity in writing centers before closing with parting thoughts.

Many central arguments of the book are initially presented in chapter 2, in which Denny offers his first reading of how identities have been normalized and stigmatized in the United States so that identities are made invisible to those in dominant, majority, or naturalized positions (e.g., white people not seeing race). He critiques the pedagogical expectation that students of color will (want to) “cover,” or adopt the rhetorical, linguistic, and behavioral rules of conduct expected by the majority. In doing so, Denny argues that students of color are too-often wedged between assimilation or opposition, a no-win situation that can be countered with subversion.

Next, chapter 3 looks at social class and provides theoretical grounding rooted in cultural studies, drawing particularly from Bourdieu and Foucault. As in chapter 2, Denny describes how middle-class values have been normalized so that working-class students are marked as outsiders. Again, and throughout these four body chapters, Denny critiques a deficit model of education (e.g., efforts to “clean up” drafts and “potty train” novice writers [72]). In contrast to the politics of race, in which legible faces mark students of color as Other, working-class people and sexual minorities are expected (and believed able) to pursue movement from the margin to center, yet with similar costs and loss attached.

Chapter 4 addresses another impasse—this one regarding sex and gender—in which women and sexual minorities walk a line between, on the one hand, being feminized and not taken seriously, and, on the other, being perceived as too tough, outspoken, and therefore, threatening. Denny says that of many “faces,” he is made aware daily of this one, as his sexual identity as a gay man challenges dominant codes. Here Denny proposes queering identity politics as a strategy for disrupting and demystifying expectations that are naturalized and for forcing the margin and center to “bleed into the other” (110).

Chapter 5 turns to multilingual writers, both international students and permanent-resident/immigrants, who face overt bias toward language, which reflects broader concepts of citizenship in the United States, specifically ideas of “who we’re *not*” and “who we’ll *allow*” (123). Putting research on citizenship and second language acquisition into conversation, Denny teases out how the myths of national identity and language together exert pressure for multilingual writers to attempt to pass or cover, pressures that feed into narratives of “fixing” L2 writers’ texts and parallel similar pressures facing students of color, working-class students, women, and sexual minorities. In contrast to “fixing,” Denny suggests teaching writing through a strategic stance that again gives writers the agency to choose subversion, while also educating faculty about Global English.

As the conclusion, chapter 6 uses the understandings of identity developed in chapters 2-5 to raise proactive questions about the “face” of writing centers, both as a professional identity and as a unit or site on campus. Chapter 6 concludes by unpacking the relationship of individual and institutional identity, highlighting the position of writing centers as marginal or central to their institutions, and questioning what subversion could offer writing center professionals.

To be honest, I came to the book a bit skeptical about this chapter organization. How could Denny pull apart the intersections of identities and the logic of oppression into discreet chapters? By the end of chapter 3, however, Denny had convinced me, a skeptical reader, of the importance of this organization—both its predictability and its repetition of core concepts, including the push-pull of assimilation and opposition and the choices and demands of covering and subverting. This repetition of key themes helps to reiterate issues of power and privilege across identities and to show how individual identities are part of larger institutional inequities. Further, the reiteration demonstrates the consistency in identity politics and helps us understand how some identities are consistently privileged, while others are excluded and Othered. The organization additionally allows Denny to position himself within each identity, which models for readers the reflective personal inquiry he advocates and strengthens the theory he builds through narrative autoethnography.

In total, *Facing the Center* reminds readers that issues of power and privilege, the center and margin, assimilation and opposition are central to the mission of writing centers and composition teaching, as they are central to higher education. I can certainly see adopting *Facing the Center* in courses on composition pedagogy, writing center studies, and peer tutoring practice. Because Denny introduces readers to identity politics and how they are so intricate within institutions, he also makes an important call for educators to consider deeply our own identities and those of writers. In doing so, he draws attention to writing centers as “sites *par excellence*” for making “local, material and individual all the larger forces at play that confound, impede, and make possible education in institutions” (6). For the broader field of Composition and Rhetoric, this book highlights the social change possibilities in writing centers, important sites in which identity politics are enacted, contested, and subverted on an everyday basis. For writing center practitioners, the book is a call to action, a call I hope more and more writing centers take up in their missions.

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### Works Cited

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**Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition**, edited by Alexis E. Ramsey, Wendy B. Sharer, Barbara L’Eplattenier, and Lisa S. Mastrangelo. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2010. 317 pp.

*Reviewed by Marta Hess, Georgia State University*

*Working in the Archives* offers a valuable assessment of and guide to the increasingly complex endeavors of archival research. The editors state that this collection, which includes eighteen full-length essays, seven interviews, a general introduction, and an introduction to the interviews, “will help scholars find, access, analyze, and compile the archival materials upon which diverse histories of rhetoric and composition might continue to be built” (4). Indeed, while the book accomplishes all of its intended goals, it also provides the reader a welcoming community of scholars from which to learn and feel part of, asking questions that allow us to think about our work in different ways. Notably, the short interviews/essays interspersed with the longer, more academically traditional selections include both novice and experienced researchers into a group whose enthusiasm for and dedication