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

Harry C. Denny
Utah State UP, 2010

by Elizabeth H. Boquet

About the Author

Elizabeth H. Boquet is Professor of English and Dean of Academic Engagement at Fairfield University. She co-edited *The Writing Center Journal* with Neal Lerner.

The colleagues in my building are emptying the refrigerator, powering down their computers, and wishing each other Happy Thanksgiving as I rework a last draft of this review of Harry Denny's *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring*. The new TSA scans, pat-downs, and opt-out day have been topics of conversation over lunch for those planning to get out of town. While I am grateful to have no travel plans over this brief break, I am concerned, as many are, about what these procedures say about the global moment in which we find ourselves.

If you are wondering what the Transportation Safety Administration has to do with writing centers, read Denny's book; if you are pretty sure you know what the Transportation Safety Administration has to do with writing centers, read Denny's book anyway.

In *Facing the Center*, Denny calls on those of us who work in writing centers to "infuse our everyday practices with the currency of academic life: intellectual questioning and theorizing of what's

possible” (146). Denny models these scholarly moves throughout the course of his own inquiry, drawing on his preparation as a sociologist, on his work as a community organizer and activist, and on his personal journey. Denny organizes the book according to familiar identity categories: race and ethnicity, class, sex, and gender, and nationality. Bookending these chapters are an extended introduction and a concluding chapter focused more explicitly on writing center administration and professionalism (though these topics are, of course, also woven throughout the earlier chapters).

Denny’s introductory chapter is compelling, connecting auto-ethnography to identity politics in ways that should help many readers to think again about the relationship of the personal to the political, and to consider all of these things in light of education generally and writing centers specifically. According to the author, “I came to realize identity wasn’t merely about self-discovery; I also began to understand its rhetorical dimensions” (7). While the book begins with a scene of everydayness similar to those my co-authors and I identify in *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*, Denny highlights not only the commonplace nature of these moments but the radicalism of them.

The framing provided in the introduction is critical in part because the chapters themselves stand independently quite nicely. Denny knits together tutors’ and writers’ experiences, his own reflections, and the work of theorists as diverse as Goffman, Bourdieu, hooks, Haraway, and Gates. Writing from his own experience enables Denny to make complex concepts accessible, and the structure of the chapters (complete with opening scenarios and parting thoughts) lends itself to spirited discussion. Tutors and directors should enjoy working through sections together as a result. His singular contribution lies not in unpacking any one identity category in its entirety (nor is he trying to do so), but in providing a lens through which we might view writing centers as “local sites where macro-dynamics, structures, and systems become tangible and real” (166).

Some chapters are, of course, stronger than others. The sections on sex and sexuality extend Denny’s longstanding scholarly interests in these areas, and the chapter on race benefits from the examinations of race in writing center work provided by Condon, Grimm, and

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Villanueva, among others. The chapter on class might have been better positioned following the chapter on sex and gender, rather than preceding it, allowing the socioeconomic analyses to be more deeply informed by the cross-talk of these other identity categories. Given that Denny references a number of female scholars to craft his argument (including Grimm, Miller, and Lindquist), I find the lack of examples of female working-class students in the “Facing Class” chapter to be a surprising oversight that hinders his ability to more fully explore this particular category.

Part of the difficulty may lie with the interchapters between each chapter, which were intended to explore gaps such as the one I identify above, “to transcend the boundaries of conventional chapters or essays in collections” (29). I appreciate the desire to disrupt expectations, but the segments don’t work for me as a rhetorical device. Additionally, the consultant voices in these brief interludes are disproportionately female. Rather than elevating the contributors’ voices, Denny’s decision to talk back to each of the interchapter observers—to have his words be the final ones—has the effect of making the writers’ voices seem less author-ized than his own. Rather than analyzing each consultant’s comment, Denny might have served himself and his readers better by integrating these rich insights at various points throughout the book or even by pulling them all together in one chapter that would have complicated the compartmentalization of the identity categories throughout the text.

Readers may be challenged especially by the final chapter in the text, which calls on us to imagine that writing centers perform identities of their own: “Writing centers as institutional units take on a face, a collective dimension with a shared morale and history that transcends the people who often have transitory existences within them” (151). This chapter could be engaged superficially as another attempt to explore the central-marginal tensions in writing center work; however, it suggests a much more deeply-rooted complicity with social, cultural, and political capital, as well as with forces that seek to normalize behaviors (such as language codes) and bodies that fail to conform. This chapter returns us to the early claim that everyday writing center work is radically oppositional, and it extends the previous chapter on nationality: “How one becomes ‘American,’

what that identity signifies, for whom, and under what circumstances is rife with identity politics grounded in the nation coming to terms with its own face and the very possibility of reconciling its inevitable diversity” (162).

As it turned out, Thanksgiving travel came and went without a blip. A friend posted on his Facebook page that the new body scanners went down at JFK, and the screeners decided that the standard no-jewelry, no-shoes, no-belt policy would have to suffice. From this, I am given to understand that we now find it unobjectionable to leave our adornments behind to cross a threshold that ushers us into a radically different space—across the country or across the globe—yet we find it terribly problematic that others might see beneath our skin. The bodies passing through these security checkpoints are the bodies passing through our writing centers every day, and the policing of identity practices occurs as surely in one place as the other. Those of us, which should be all of us, seeking to explore and develop the civic, moral, and ethical dimensions of teaching and learning with and through language will find in Denny’s book an inspiring read and a helpful guide.

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WORK CITED

Geller, Anne Ellen, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth H. Boquet. *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2007. Print.