Episode 51: Harry Denny
Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, I talk with Harry Denny about identity politics in the writing center, writing centers as sites for activism and empowerment, mentoring tutors, and fostering a sense of community in the writing center.

Harry Denny is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Writing Lab at Purdue University. His scholarship focuses on writing center theory and practice, cultural studies and research methods. Harry is the author of *Facing the Center: Towards an Identity Politics of One-to-one Mentoring*, a co-editor of *Out in the Center: Public Controversies, Private Struggles*, and co-author of the forthcoming *Gender, Sexuality and the Cultural Politics of Men's Identity in the New Millennium: Literacies of Masculinity*. He is also at work on a new project about the rhetoric of contemporary civil rights debates.

Harry, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your book, Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring, takes up issues of power, agency, and language. Can you talk about identity politics in the writing center, and how social and cultural factors impact interactions between tutors and students?

HD: So what got me thinking about that idea way back when was the whole notion that a lot of our literature talks about writers, particularly in Writing Center scholarship at the time, as though writers occupy this uniform, unified, cogent identity. Those of us who have taken any post-modern, post-critical, feminist, critical race, you name it kind of theory, immediately think about identity positions as always complicated and fluid. So when a writer comes to the writing lab, they're not just coming with that signifier, they're coming with all sorts of identities and baggage and concerns, but it's not just the writer that we interact with at the table, we also have tutors or writing consultants or writing fellows who don't suspend who they are when they come to a session.

So over the years where that's become really tangible is when writers come in or tutors encounter issues and topics that can be really controversial. Whether it's a student writing about affirmative action and depending on what their position is being counter or pro and being in conflict with whoever they're working with, or someone writing about reproductive issues and having conflict there. Every once in a while, I haven't had it so much in Purdue, but at previous institutions, writing consultants really being frustrated that students aren't working hard enough, and sort of suspending an awareness of their own privilege when it comes to the ability to focus on education.

At many of our institutions, we have lots of first-gen students for whom college is one of many things occupying their time. I don't know about your institution, but we have lots of students here at Purdue that work, maybe two, three, four jobs, are working between 30 and 50 hours a week to pay for school. So that impacts people's connections to how you learn and how you experience

teaching and how you do teaching. I also think about sexual minorities. We are in an environment where it's more or less okay to say offensive things or be the object of offensive things. And tutors and students alike are constantly struggling with that. I think a lot of times the impulse is to create bubbles of same mindsets rather than figure out how do we have dialogue about rhetorical situations, about genres, about expectations, and all those sorts of things.

So when someone meets another writer at a table, if only we could suspend the world – it would be a wonderful place, but the writing lab or writing center or writing studio, anywhere in the country, whether urban, rural, North, South is going to have everything that's percolating in that very space. We can't suspend and make the writing center a vacuum. So real life issues are going on. I think of my former tutor, who's now on her way to Oklahoma, who talks about tutoring while Black. That when she enters a session, her race isn't suspended, it's obviously always legible. Versus someone like me who may or may not pass as gay or straight. I can invoke that; I can play with that in sessions. But how our identities are legible and read or not legible and not read impacts interaction in so many ways.

So I wish we could suspend all of society and all culture when we're talking about writers, but you and I know enough about comp theory to also be aware that you can never do that. So why would we want to pretend as if society and culture and politics and economics stop at the door? Writing centers just like regular classrooms are spaces where all it has to be hashed out and thought about. And it becomes really, really interesting and I think really powerful and magical and tragic, you name it. It's a great environment.

SW: So let's take everything you just said—complex identities surrounding cultural and social systems, politics, and the exchanges between tutors and students in the writing center—and let me ask this question: What are some of the most important qualities and characteristics of a writing center tutor?

HD: I have a whole laundry list. I think at the top of my list is the whole notion of empathy. That you need a tutor, or a client needs the tutor, I think both sides of the equation are critical here. But just thinking about what makes really good qualities of tutors is, to me, always empathy. That's an X factor that's hard to cultivate in a tutor training class or a tutor education class, is how do you have empathy? How do you have some baseline regard in valuing of the human with whom you're working? I'd add another quality as being open and connected with being open, being inquisitive. Ask open-ended questions and understand that you aren't the smartest person at the table all the time. We have enough people in our world and in our politics who think that they're the smartest people in the room.

I really cultivate among my crew ask questions and not necessarily baiting or rhetorical or leading questions, but, "Huh, tell me more." When I work with faculty across the campus, I'm amazed at how many people I win over, just because, "Hey, tell me more. I don't know anything about this." So I think that's a good quality that really helps us to be open. Don't always morph into, "Let me crack open your head and pour in what you need to know," but how do we have a really good critical dialogue? Another thing that I always tell tutors that I think is really critical is having a mindset of always being willing to *learn with* rather than *learn from*. Embedded in that, to me, is this whole notion of valuing transactionality, if that's a word, or mutuality. I respect you

and I want to learn with you, I am not top down, but we are horizontal with one another, if that makes any sense.

That we can learn from one another, we can learn with one another, but it's not just me delivering to you what you need to know. If I'm having a session with a kid from biology or a grad student from nuclear engineering, “Hey, I can learn something.” They can teach me about their field. They can teach me about how their field thinks and how they do inquiry. And yeah, there might be things that I can teach them about writing, but it's not one way, it's not linear, but it's dialogic in my head. And then a couple last things that I would add to that is the willingness to be improvisational. I'm always trying to teach my folks, don't turn every session into a robot, like I've figured it out, here's the recipe, here's the template.

How do you morph from session to session? How do you read the person that you're with and think about what their needs are? I often joke, one session, I'm the goofy gay uncle, the next session I'm very serious, the next session I'm reserved. I'm always trying to riff off of who I'm working with. And I think that's another really good quality. Then, the last thing that I think is a really good quality and it's another X factor is approach teaching and learning moments with good cheer. If you approach teaching and learning like, “Aargh, I'd rather be off doing something else, but, oh, I've got to do this.” That sets a vibe. Who wants to work with Debbie Downer or the Womp-Womp queen? I want to work with someone who's fun.

I have all these tutors who, I don't know how they keep the energy throughout their shifts, but they go from student to student, faculty to faculty, excited and energized. Granted not that we're pumping happy cheer through the writing lab, but it's refreshing and it's encouraging particularly at big institutions for clients to meet someone who actually cares about them.

SW: How can writing centers be a site for activism and empowerment?

HD: I think to answer that question is both a local answer, but also across the board and across institutions. I think at an institution like Purdue, where we can make change happen is to recognize what are critical issues on campus for which we can impact dialogue? That can be...particularly on our campus, pushing at people around how they imagine multilingual or translingual issues, how we challenge people, faculty, and students alike to think differently about what vernaculars are privileged. So really to push at, to use our position of privilege and our position of expertise around writing and mentoring to talk about what are the consequences, if you don't think expansively about language or languaging practices, as I think Vershawn Young would say. I think we have a responsibility to say, here's what we're seeing.

And as a faculty director with tenure, I recognize I also have a different voice. I can go out and say, “Dear colleagues, when you say something really problematic or embedded in racialized or ethnocentric notions, here's the damage you caused the students.” All of us in writing studies, whether in writing centers, writing programs, writing across the curriculum, we see the damage that happens when students begin to understand themselves as exterior to the world of writing. I've written any number of times about how it breaks my heart when students refer to themselves as having “broken English.” What the hell would that even mean? Or when I'm meeting first-years two days before classes start every year and they come up to the writing lab table at the

student activities fair and say, “I got to come to you because I'm not a writer.” How do you get to a school like Purdue and imagine yourself not as a writer? So we can change all those conversations about how pedagogy and how people teach writing. That it has real material consequences, real ideological, real existential consequences.

But I think that writing centers and writing labs and writing studios can also take the lead in changing how we understand student and faculty learning, and collaboration and research. We can be spaces where we make possible different sorts of learning, where we can bring voices into mentoring that might otherwise be excluded. So we have to think about who our tutors are, but we also have to think about what does our traffic look like? I think we can take leadership in helping foster critical conversations on campus, whether that's critical race issues, whether that's questions of literacy, whether that's thinking about how we get writing centers into places that don't have those resources.

I think here in Indiana, the only place where you see high school writing centers are really wealthy school districts. When I lived in New York City, same thing, writing centers were everywhere where there was wealth, but very under-resourced or not present everywhere else. Then, I think the other place that we can really push at activism is thinking about how we can be good allies, or as Neisha-Anne Green calls “accomplices.” How do we partner with other units on campus to use what resources we have to help them?

SW: What are the biggest challenges to work in and through writing centers?

HD: I think in terms of that activist work the challenge is finding enough time in the day to do that work. And embedded in that I think is, as we look across writing centers at different types of institutions, are different allocations of resources and different positioning of writing centers. When I think of that question, I think of writing centers, specifically writing studies or writing programs in English departments and student success. I think about how we are positioned as a discipline. Are we understood as a discipline? Are we understood as a service? I've joked in different places that if writing programs are the redheaded stepchild, speaking as a redhead, of English departments, what then does that make writing centers? How are we positioned?

I think the other challenge we face is we get so caught up in service that we aren't very mindful of the habitus of institutions and the academy that really value teaching and scholarship. So if we understand that a field comes of age by how much scholarship and research it's producing and how we are being integrated into a teaching culture, are we successful across the board? And the jury is out on that. I think when I look across the AAU schools or the Big Ten, the faculty writing center director is a dying breed. Whereas no one would ever doubt a faculty writing program director, so what's that say about our disciplinary status?

When you move to a regional comprehensive, like Salisbury, then suddenly the faculty writing center director is ubiquitous, but are they given the resources to be both a scholar and a teacher and someone who provides campus service? Then I think of the two-year college or the smaller liberal arts school, many different institutions, and it's completely unclear what is the disciplinary academic status of writing centers? So in some fields, disciplinary status and credentials are critical to their ethos, but for some reason, writing centers are in this odd liminal space. I haven't

heard many writing programs or many English departments have to fight for their ethos in the same way that writing centers do. But then we in writing centers aren't as invested as we might be in generating scholarship and research.

So it becomes this sort of yin and yang dynamic that, I'm not sure what the future lies there, but I do know that I often will tell people the academy is pretty conservative and how we change the habitus of the academy is slow and grinding. I'm not sure where we are on that. I think the jury is still out on the long-term trajectory of writing centers as a scholarly disciplinary endeavor.

SW: Harry, how would you mentor or help guide a future writing center director knowing that these are the challenges ahead?

HD: I think it's tricky. I think there are a whole bunch of people in the younger generation of writing center directors coming into the field for whom their identities are as writing center directors. They're being trained as writing center directors or WPAs or WAC people. I think that's really, really interesting, to be really involved in sustainable long-term research, but to have your primary identity being, "I want to produce scholarship coming out of this field. I want to have a scholarly identity that's in printed with this work." I think that's really cool. Then when I see a lot of job listings, I'm a little disheartened where it's really a 19th century Victorianist position with the writing lab or writing center tagged on. I think the more people in graduate programs that can claim writing centers as either a specialty or sub-specialty I think is really, really good. My sense is schools are dying to get well-experienced writing center people that they can bring to work in their writing centers. And there's just not enough people being generated.

So schools will often give up and offer up lines that are hybrid, content specialty, and writing center or WAC or writing program, but how cool would it be to have people who want to go off and come into a school like yours and say, "This is my identity. This is what I want to spend my life doing." Versus, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'll spend my pre-tenure years doing double duty, but what I really want to be doing is X area, that's not connected to writing centers." I think that sends a subtle message, do we care about cultivating the field or do we care about the jobs? Again, I think the jury is out on that. But I think if I were to...the people I advise…throw yourself into Writing Center scholarship, people really care about that work. At least the people coming out of Purdue or Michigan State, I can think of any number of places, if they have a really strong Writing Center scholarship identity, they're landing gigs, they're getting jobs.

I think the more people like that, that we can get out there, the better. I just don't know if that's a broad message, "Hey, you can be a writing center director. That can be your primary identity." I think there's folks like Romeo Garcia, Anissa Carey, Rebecca Martini, Travis Webster, there's a whole generation of people your age, who I think are really changing the field and showing other people coming up through graduate school that, "Hey, you can have writing centers as your primary identity and be really successful at institutions." And all those people are at a variety of institutions that really reward that work.

SW: This is my last question. How do you foster community in the writing center? What are some practical strategies or practices?

HD: I think we start off with, and I've done this at every institution at which I've worked, is asking the staff, what does community mean to us? What metaphor is going to govern how we understand who we are, what we're about? And I'm often very worried about a writing center becoming a clubhouse of exclusion, of elitism, of whatever. So I always want us to be really thoughtful and mindful about what community means, who is included, who is excluded, who do we see in our staff? You know enough about me to know that I care deeply about, who's in, who's out, and how do we get there? But I also think that when we build community, we're actually in effect building communities.

So at a school, a very STEM school like Purdue, how do we make sure that our writing center has tutors from those fields? How do we make sure we have engineering students in the writing lab? How do we make sure that we have scientists and all the very interesting aeronautics and nuclear engineering, you name it, that happens at Purdue? But also commingle them with the interesting creative arts that's happening at a place like Purdue. How do we have theater students? How do we have English creative writing people from across the liberal arts…have a space in there? And as I talk to you about that, obviously right, is a bias towards the academic. What other communities might we build with? And that's when we have to do, really, not aggressive, but proactive outreach to other communities on campus. I think my staff does a really good job of reaching out to the LGBTQ center and thinking about how might we be accomplices? But also how might we have representation among our staff of people from that community? All the while recognizing that there are people already on staff that are part of that community.

But similarly, any cultural center on campus, how do we build bridges to them? How do we make the writing lab or the writing center a space that's inclusive? I think about how do we imagine both the mainstream student, but also the marginalized student, the at-risk student and the not at-risk student? I think all those are really critical elements. I think that we also have to think about how do we create community in a way that's reciprocal? That we're not just poaching, but that we are fostering across communities, if that makes any sense. I think it also means showing up. Community means if you have tutors that are doing a reading or doing a performance or presenting research, that we support them, that we get out there and we make them feel valued. Community means not just doing our own thing, but community means being there for one another.

I think that's really critical. I jotted down community means having fun with each other. It means eating with each other, it means doing things together. We might bowl, we might go to sporting events together. We might...I don't know, have any number of things going on. But understanding that community means going to a conference and then maybe going off to NCPTW or IWCA. And when you're at that, spending time with one another. I'll never forget whether it was out East or while I've been at Purdue, those long drives to conferences are such good bonding moments where you get to know one another and laugh and spend time together. You can't replicate that in a staff meeting, you can't replicate that in a tutor training class.

Building community means getting to know one another, not just, how did that last session go, but how are you doing?

I suspect you know that in your heart, too, that if you want a community, it has to be material, it has to be tangible to people. You have to create a space where people want to be. You don't want a space where people are just punching the time clock. That they are invested in the space, that they get to put their imprint on that. I like spending a lot of time out on the floor with my tutors. Our physical setup at Purdue makes that hard, but when I was at St. John's rather than sit in my office for ten hours, a lot of times I would just go hang out and pull out my laptop and write with the tutors. And what was interesting there between me and Anne Geller, soon enough, we had faculty coming up to the writing center and hanging out and writing in that space.

And then suddenly the students were like, “Holy cow, faculty write? Faculty write together, faculty write in public? Wow, this is a cool space.” And then, that changed the dynamic. Suddenly, faculty are hanging out with students and writing, there's a whole culture of writing. It’s not the monastic writer, but this very...we know this, this social space where writers are hanging out with writers, but there's also tutoring happen.

SW: Thanks, Harry. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.