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Harry Denny

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Introduction to "Multiliteracies, Social Futures, and Writing Centers"

by Harry Denny

Summer time at St. John's writing centers is a disquieting period of calm, cool, and recollection. This time is a departure from the academic year's frenetic pace, and it allows the staff to take up the months that were. From shared reflections, reviews of session logs, and improvised conversations, we problem-pose the peaks and valleys of mentoring and learning in our everyday practice. Consultants who work during those more staid months ruminate on all those murky, lumpy insights and dig into them through reviews of literature or other preliminary research. Our writing centers, as a consequence, lurch toward agenda setting and create a common vision that is organic, contextualized, and rooted in consensus.

That labor is a conscious departure from the cyclical nature of so much of writing center work. Our writing centers seek to transcend the everyday pressure of what Anne Ellen Geller would call fungible time and its incessant pressure to beat the clock and the demands of efficiency and efficacy. Beyond that tick, tick, tick of what we do, the writing centers at St. John's try to move toward the epochal, characterized by spaces where tutors, students, and staff come "to think, to imagine, to experiment, to collaborate, to build a relationship, and to learn" (Geller 9). But our time never exists in a halcyon world void of politics or the material consequences of ever-shifting demands and expectations of institutions, themselves extensions of wider currents of social, cultural, and economic interests; instead, turning our gaze to epochal requires a simultaneous queering. We need, I maintain, occasions and spaces to doubt as much as we

believe or to read against the grain in order to map what's naturalized, marginalized, and rendered invisible.

John Trimbur's corpus of scholarship speaks into the epochal and infuses it with a strong critical sense of ideological, political, and material implications (George and Trimbur; Trimbur). His critical consciousness is, of course, not unique in writing center studies. Our bookshelves whisper the antecedents of our shared genealogy, especially in Boquet's and Lerner's essays, and that history becomes one of transformative potential commingled with another of skewed intentions never quite resolved. Frankie Condon and Victor Villanueva each call out to us to critically reflect on and imagine the physics of race and other forms of difference in our practices. Nancy Grimm pushes us to (re)imagine a terrain where writing centers are transformed into spheres where tutors and students inform, complicate, and expand on one another's postmodern identities.

In "Multiliteracies, Social Futures, and Writing Centers," Trimbur outlines an enduring charge for writing centers that's not often referenced and still not realized in much of our scholarship, let alone our programming and staff development. He invites us to interrogate the literacy needs that circulate through and around our writing centers and to become advocates and practitioners of "new," multimodal, and multilingual literacies. Trimbur wants writing centers and their staffs to not be confined to conventional genres and texts. To complement our core knowledges and comfort-zones, we should, he argues, equip ourselves with strategies of mentoring and learning about (effective) communication in a variety of modes and media, what I would interpret as the internet's webspaces of blogs, wikis, and community sites (e.g., Facebook or LinkedIn) or other digitally- and audio-infused presentations along the lines of PowerPoint and beyond.

That agenda is powerful. Ten years later, it's just as relevant as ever: facility in multimodal communication and literacies signifies forms of privilege that we have an obligation to continue to broadcast and champion whenever we have an opportunity. Trimbur details what I would argue is among the most important social justice needs of our lifetime. Having facility in a variety of media and with a range of occasions for dialog has truly material consequences. Individuals

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who can switch and flip within and across them bring a different skill set to entry-level work and the professions that those who have been denied access to them don't possess. Just as important, students who reference and perform in multiple linguistic traditions have a greater command of language in general and substantive empathy for the complexity and variety of communication.

Turning back to St. John's, I often turn to Trimbur's words and those that echo him today. My institution has as its mission addressing social justice, whether opportunities arise among our student body or the communities in which we exist. We have made great strides leveling the playing field through ensuring access to technology, but I realize our writing centers must do more. We can't be confined to the conventional tactile paper or the usual rhetorical modes. We need to think through and develop strategies, always in collaboration with students, that attend to the literacies they need or offer us for growth. Even more, in our linguistically diverse communities, we must be advocates and clear paths to make the dream of a multilingual, even a multiliterate, writing center a reality. John Trimbur's essay here presents a guidepost we continue to reference as we assess our histories and futures in writing centers.

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