

Writing Program Think Tank #1  
November 15, 2005  
M. Himley

These notes reflect some of the ideas that emerged from the discussion that really struck me as significant.

Some questions and comments about the HillTV situation:

- When does bad taste become hate speech?
- How is the university response-able/responsible to the students on campus?
- What is the relationship of student attitudes to institutional structures, like housing arrangements or recruitment?
- Is this a non-issue that masks over other issues?
- Rather than opening up discussion and learning, this has entrenched people in ways they weren't entrenched before. It has been polarizing and it has become focused on legal issues, like what can you get away with? what is free speech?
- The issue narrowed to 'free speech', not what can we learn about not being offensive.
- Students expressed the feeling of being more uptight, more on edge about saying things.
- The speed with which HillTV is disappearing from the radar screen is upsetting, as if it were the flavor of the month – no sense of history.
- HillTV only marks what happens every day.
- Nancy Cantor sees this as institutional, which is good and which is why some students don't like her.
- But it can't just be all talk – there must be action or it's all forgotten, like the Denny's incident.

What is this fear about? What's at stake in saying something that might mark you as uninformed or offensive or worse? This continues a discussion from last year about shame, humiliation, and embarrassment, the social affects triggered in 'diversity discussions' sometimes and the way those affects shut things down.

There are so few models of reconciliation in our culture, where people express strong views and find common ground. There is a sense that argument is bad, never positive. There is a privatizing of these discussions. The public sphere has become a fearful place, shaped by legal consequences.

"On the edge" -- One student expressed his anxiety that he didn't want to be like those *Over the Hill* producers who were hauled before everyone – the press, the speak-outs, the *DO* – in their moment of shame. On a smaller scale, teachers too can function as that kind of power to shame or humiliate or grade down.

There's the question of knowledge and history – what did happen at Denny's? what are the procedures for closing down a student organization? How can we learn more? What if the *DO* didn't privilege editorials and opinions, and generated more investigative reporting to provide context and knowledge? And if not the *DO*, who else? Where else? Might the WP provide space for this in classes or in the Student Advisory Board or other projects?

What can we do? Sit-ins? Alternative *DO*? What else? What problems do we want to solve? For example, one student suggested that the OMA office is too small and too hidden in the basement of the Schine to send a strong, welcoming message. Might we try

to create new spaces – larger, friendlier, more visibly open to a range of students, more centrally located?

Ideas about classrooms:

- Documentaries, like *Before Stonewall* and *After Stonewall*
- Spend time letting students and the teacher get to know each other
- On the other hand, some classes, like learning communities, may know each other too well and are too comfortable and so afraid of disrupting their social relationships
- Everyone seems to have the same opinions in class, and then they express their differences in journals. How to disrupt that pattern?
- In classrooms, they said, there are sometimes too many differences to feel okay about speaking.
- Teachers should get out of the way and never show their own feelings, though still maintain civil boundaries in class discussions.
- For some, getting offended ‘fuels’ them; for others, it shuts them down.