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Review: Noise from the Writing Center

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Boquet, Elizabeth H. *Noise from the Writing Center*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2002.

Reviewed by Michele Eodice

The evolution of writing centers has taken a relatively predictable course. In writing center work, our history—as seen through familiar articles and axioms—started out with the pioneers emerging from the ranks of academic stasis to engender a kind of learning environment that fosters care for student writers. In time, writing centers sought to professionalize, to get a firm grip on methodology, to disseminate the good news about what happens there. Currently, many are choosing to abandon adaptation and maintenance as a primary M.O. and move from accepting (or continuing to whine about) particular locations and conditions within the academy to critiquing those practices and positions *especially* as they relate to our institutions. It should come as no surprise, then, that Beth Boquet has produced a provocative extended essay that maps the journey but arrives at the point of productive critique.

Beth Boquet's writing wakes us and rocks us. We find through her experiences and insights a means of critiquing traditional and predictable practices and positions. What frames Boquet's world and propels it into ours is her insistence that we take another look—that we be more than just mindful—indeed, that we re-see or re-vise our perspectives on writing center work. To do this she asks us to follow her lead in looking at writing centers as dimensional protean places, places that hold truth, error, promise. The book pulled me away from staid thinking about my daily work and invited me to consider the multiple ways in which I could view my work, talk about my work, and actually do my work.

I believe the book may represent a new genre for writing center scholarship, a kind of hybrid musing and theorizing about the day-to-day sparking off of ideas. It is a sustained display of genuine interest and real thoughtfulness about our work, not a how-to tutor-training manual.

In addition, the book doesn't merely nod to but seriously considers the impact of specific scholarly contributions to writing center literature, such as Grimm's *Good Intentions*, and the work of Carino, Harris, Welch, and Lerner. She spars with the familiar terms of our territory—assessment, efficiency, hope—and gets us thinking fresh thoughts about what we long ago internalized as necessary and unchangeable. Boquet also portrays stu-

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dent peer tutors as grownups in the act of both learning from us and teaching us a thing or three, something we rarely see done in print.

Boquet launches the essay and anchors it with the story of a memo exchange with a faculty member who was disturbed by the writing center as a soniferous space—the noise was overflowing into his world. The professor described the activity in the writing center as “racket,” “not an appropriate place for parties,” and a problem that needed to be prevented in the future. Boquet’s revives this exchange, and her chain of reactions to it, throughout the book as a way to demonstrate the generative power of these types of encounters. The uncomfortable and problematic situation with the faculty member may seem on the surface to be one more piece of evidence in our field’s ongoing us-against-them litigation, but beware: Boquet challenges us to re-see this situation as an opening to possibilities, a way “in” to understanding our often tenuous relations with others in our institutions and ultimately our view of ourselves as we work in writing centers.

On one level, the book is accessible due to the effect of twinning music/noise with tutoring/working in the writing center. Her ideas of sound, music, and noise don’t function as superficial metaphors for what happens in writing centers; the book/essay functions in the way good old-fashioned essays should—by carrying a theme and idea through and around while finding new and unpredicted ways to view your subject. She shifts easily from an academic sounding discussion of academic spaces to describing “sounds as bubbles on the surface of silence, as eruptions/disruptions, rising to the surface and returning to obscurity, sound and silence as partners rather than opposites” (39). But Boquet expands and conjoins notions of riffs, repetition, feedback, amplification, and composition. Think about how *riff*¹ works for you and me and tutors and musicians:

1: an ostinato phrase (as in jazz) typically supporting a solo improvisation; *also*: a piece based on such a phrase;

2: a short succinct usually witty comment; *also*: bit, routine.

We are pushed in this text to follow a somewhat indirect (but more scenic) route just to find out that our work is not that simple—and it should in fact be more complicated and actually driven by our uncertainty. Boquet argues for a more high risk/high yield model of staff education and practice. Such a model is not for the faint-hearted, but, if you can, you should definitely try it at home:

By predicting what writers are likely to *need* in a session, we imagine we can forestall problems by preparing tutors to address those needs. This makes potentially frightening occasion seem less risky, right? Here's how to begin the session. Here's a good question to ask if the paper doesn't yet have a thesis. This is a very disciplinary model: It makes tutoring appear as a content area to be mastered. It assumes that gaining experience is the same thing as acquiring expertise. And it downplays the amount of risks one might need to take in order to find the work meaningful, fulfilling, even pleasurable. (78)

Informal reviews of the book at IWCA in Savannah and on WCENTER listserv discussions include expressions like “dude-it rocks!” and predictions that “it seems pretty clear that change is afoot in the writing center world.”² There is plenty to commend this book, but what might remain most memorable is the idea of channeling Jimi Hendrix.

For those of us who cringe when that favorite Hendrix song from our youth is featured on a TV commercial for a car that no one working in writing centers can ever hope to afford, the book will, at the very least, get you listening to Jimi Hendrix again. I read somewhere a while back that Jimi Hendrix said the goal of his guitar work was to “get color into music”; Boquet's work “gets color into” our workaday thoughts about writing center work—her splashes of incredulity, the detailed brush strokes in stories about Meg Carroll and Meg's tutors, the spectrum of ways she is able to come at writing center work—from a palate of history, critical theory, and everyday life.

Boquet wants us to bring on the noise, the funk, the excess, the potentially monstrous: “Such a monstrosity exceeds expectations for the ‘normal’ and that excess, for those of us who work in writing centers, is potentially a way in/out/around the central/marginal/community quagmire we've been stuck in for too long” (32). She argues in fact that more energy should go to ensure these disruptions because these disruptions make our work less predictable, richer in both problems and possibilities. What do I think will happen, then, if we all read this book? I think we'd see more than just a faddish effort to embrace both the playfulness and seriousness of what goes on in our writing center. I think we'd see—and *hear*—more.

Notes

¹ From Merriam-Webster OnLine: <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>

² Thanks go to Lauren Fitzgerald for permission to use her comments on WCENTER listserv (April 21, 2002).

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