

## Review

Boquet, Elizabeth H.. *Noise from the Writing Center*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2002. 162 pages. \$19.95 (paper).

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As we began to re-envision our campus's writing center, a colleague suggested I take a look at Elizabeth H. Boquet's *Noise from the Writing Center*. Our current director, who held an administrative appointment for more than a decade, had recently announced that she would need to resign because of her husband's job relocation. Although the department was sad to see her go, her departure allowed us to expand our writing center by requesting a tenure-track line with a better salary and some administrative assistance. Boquet's book provides interesting observations and advice with stories rather than assessment reports that may help transform our writing center with the guidance of a new director.

For those of us who have spent time in writing centers—as a tutor, a client, or an administrator—we know they are seldom places where silence prevails. Boquet's impetus for her book *Noise from the Writing Center*, however, begins with a memo (in a pre-e-mail era) in which a colleague, referred to as Dr. PC, complains that too much noise comes from the writing center and that Boquet must take action to silence it. Apparently, PC, who is up for tenure, was working in his office one night when, down the hall, Boquet was conducting a staff meeting. Disturbed by the noise, PC confronted an undergraduate tutor “who acted as if [PC] was somehow in the wrong to ask for quiet. Further, at no time did anyone apologize for making such a racket,” infuriating PC enough to elicit a memo to the director (PC qtd in Boquet xiii). Boquet fires back a memo telling PC that the writing center staff was not there to socialize but to conduct important business and that such noise was part of the writing center environment. The two colleagues apologize for the volley of memos when they meet in person a few days later,

but Boquet writes that “few moments in my professional life have nagged at me the way this moment nags at me” (1). It pushes her to examine the noises that emerge from writing centers.

Figurative language related to music, noise, and lyrics dances across the pages in Boquet’s quest to better understand the writing centers and community relationships that form within them. After the prologue, which introduces PC and his memo, Boquet’s short book is organized into four chapters. The first chapter examines metaphors of the writing laboratory, clinic, and center. It reads like a dissertation’s literature review but does provide a good, albeit brief, overview of writing-center theory. Once the foundation of metaphors is in place (for example, the tutor as midwife who assists writers in their labors [18–20]), she adds other metaphors in chapter two, where we learn Boquet spends her days “trash-picking” in the “junkyards” of the “academic dump, [. . .] dusting and polishing and admiring things that my neighbors might discard or dismiss” (36–7). Although this is not the image most of us prefer (though many of our writing centers may resemble such a place), I think most of us have sorted through some of those writing samples students bring in, felt we were wading through rubbish in search of some hidden treasures, and reflected on the pay disparity that advantages real-world garbage collectors over English professors. Boquet’s analysis of the writing center brings her to examine the location—the space—of the centers on our campuses where tutoring takes place, so she can “explore the relationship, to exploit the tension, between sight and sound” that surround tutors, clients, and administrators (39). In chapter three, she uses a case study to examine the question of whether the noise metaphor can be transported into her chronicles of Rhode Island College’s summer tutor training program. The book concludes with the optimism and hope she has for the writing center’s future.

Invoking Jimi Hendrix’s harmonic feedback loop, Boquet notes that he “didn’t try to eliminate the noise. Instead, he embraced it for its randomness, for the possibilities that this feedback afforded, and he improvised by playing melodies against the feedback, by playing rhythm *and* lead” (69; emphasis hers). Hendrix described his music thus:

Once you have the bottom there you can go anywhere. That’s the way I believe. Once you have some type of rhythm, like, it can get hypnotic if you keep repeating it over and over again. Most people will fall off by about a minute of repeating. You do that say for three or four or even five minutes if you can stand it, and then it releases a certain thing inside of a person’s head. It releases a certain thing in there so you can put anything you want right inside that, you know. So you do that for a minute

and all of a sudden you can bring the rhythm down a little bit  
and then you say what you want to say right into that little gap.  
It's something to ride with, you know. You have to ride with  
something. (qtd. in Boquet 69–70).

By combining Hendrix's music theory with Trinh Minh-Ha's "purposeful repetition," Boquet attempts to move away from predictable tutoring sessions by investigating "rote repetition" which move tutors into exploring "fresh challenges" by examining noise in a more complex way than PC did at the book's beginning (72; emphasis hers). She cites Jacques Attali's definition of music as "the organization of noise" (qtd. in Boquet 75). By listening for "a greater tolerance of distortion," Boquet conceptualizes "that we can grow to tolerate it [noise], that we might even learn to like it and seek it out" (75). Simply put, Boquet attempts to hear the noise in the writing center as more music than chaos (75). This fresh approach casts tutoring sessions as improvisation, in which students can take risks as they attempt to write, and tutors can orchestrate sessions beyond the typical "here, let me fix your paper" that most WPAs dread hearing from their tutors. Although her Hendrix metaphor wears a bit thin with overuse, Boquet's focus on asking tutors to "groove" in such jam sessions moves everyone out of the stereotypical metaphors of the writing center as a fix-it shop, and it suggests, instead, that noise on the page can be turned into melody with the assistance of some tuning and harmonizing.

The case study in chapter three examines what Boquet calls performative pedagogy. She examines a professor who, in the year 2000, attempted to revamp an unsatisfying tutor-training course. Though the chapter seems somewhat out of place, the case study does offer some insight into tutors' views of course readings and assignments (for example, students disagree with the findings of *Women's Ways of Knowing*). The Hendrix connection is weaker in this chapter than in the previous one—in fact, Boquet's insistence on forcing Hendrix into this chapter detracts from the metaphor's power in the previous chapter. Yet we meet and get to know a group of students in a way many are not privileged to see, and, for that reason alone, the chapter earns its keep in the book.

The book concludes by addressing the importance of community in the writing center experience. Boquet uses Diane D. Davis's *Breaking Up [at] Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter* to examine the community that emerged in the tutor-training session. "Community is not a product; it cannot be built or produced. One *experiences* community. [. . .] It is not in the work but in the 'unworking' that community is exposed, *not in the pulling together but in the brrreaking up* [. . .] Pulling together doesn't produce community, but c-r-r-a-c-king up exposes it" ([sic] Davis qtd. in Boquet 143, emphasis

Boquet's). As with most WPA issues, the concept of community is one that permeates our work. Boquet's attempt to bring community into the writing center discussion through Davis' text and the case study's students allows readers another glimpse into the noise that occurs in our writing centers in order to better understand such noise.

As my department embarks on its search for a new writing center director, Boquet's book will assist us in re-visioning and listening to the needs of our students, our department, and our university by focusing on the noise from the center as we attempt to move into a more harmonic writing center. *Noise from the Writing Center* can also assist other writing center directors, consultants (both faculty and peer), graduate students, and undergraduate tutors—and perhaps even high-level university administrators—to learn not to fight the noise but instead to embrace and examine it in hopes of finding better ways to assist those who visit our writing centers with their writing. Although Boquet's book does not provide a fix-it to all writing centers' problems, *Noise from the Writing Center* offers readers a glimpse through cracks we often try to hide under carpets to show the wonderful possibilities available to those associated with writing centers—from the client, tutor, administrator, and even the professor down the hall who thinks we are too loud—if we stop and hear, as well as look at, what goes on inside those walls.

