

1-1-2010

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Elizabeth H. Boquet

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Recommended Citation

Boquet, Elizabeth H. (2010) "Introduction to "From Silence to Noise: The Writing Center as Critical Exile," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 30 : Iss. 1, Article 9.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1654>

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Introduction to "From Silence to Noise: The Writing Center as Critical Exile"

by Elizabeth H. Boquet

I mean, really, who doesn't want to have Nancy Welch's incredible mind?

I first encountered it in graduate school. Which happens to be when she was also in graduate school. Which happens to be when I was writing essays for my Politics of English Studies seminar and she was writing essays for . . . well, *College English*.

She might as well have been a mythical creature. And that essay was poppin'. The voice, the style, the content, the courage. I admired it all. Then I wondered whether I could do that. Or something like it.

When "From Silence to Noise" was published in *The Writing Center Journal*, I was writing my dissertation on the history, theory, and future directions of writing centers. Nancy was writing one revolution ahead of me, and I was drafting off of her. She tutored me, through her writing, as surely as she tutored Margie, the student with whom she works in this essay.

Nancy integrates writing center work into the business of composition studies more seamlessly and skillfully than anyone. She takes as a given the writing center as a site for transformative literacy studies. She places writers, purposefully and respectfully, at the center of her work. Yet she doesn't, ironically, make a lot of noise about it, doesn't call our attention to the fact that too few people make these moves, doesn't pat herself on the back for remembering. She just does. The result is work that is part literary journalism, part social critique, part tips-for-writers, part writer's journal, part

theoretical exploration and explication. This particular article is but one of several such examples.

Noise from the Writing Center was my early attempt to do what Nancy was doing, and it owes more than its title to the article that is reprinted in this issue. Without Nancy's example, I'm not sure I would have known how to engage the provocative memo from my colleague that opens my book, not sure I would have had the courage to write into some of the moments that appear throughout the book, not sure I would have been able to break free of the conventions of academic discourse that too often constrain the role of narrative in examining the delightfully messy process of teaching with and learning from actual students.

Nancy would probably caution here that many voices prepared me for that moment, shepherded me through the writing, and complicated my thinking on these issues. She would be right. But she was my peer and my tutor. Nancy's work has guided me, in ways that I hope are apparent but the depth of which I am certain is not, from my own professional silence (as a graduate student, searching) to noise.

When the *WCJ* editors asked a number of us to recommend influential articles for this retrospective issue, I thought instantly of Nancy's "From Silence to Noise." And though I halfheartedly flipped through back issues to make sure I wasn't forgetting something, I never really considered anything else. Reading her work still makes me want to write. More than that, it reminds me that I have missed her voice in these pages and in our other writing center venues over the past few years. That she is still exploring ideas critical to the ongoing work of our writing centers is a certainty; that readers may have to look a bit harder to locate her scholarship is true. But it will be well worth the effort.

WORKS CITED

- Boquet, Elizabeth H. *Noise from the Writing Center*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2002. Print.
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