

Episode 80: Elizabeth Boquet

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, I talk with Elizabeth Boquet about the history of writing centers, post-disciplinarity, the tension between chaos and order in writing center work, and writing creative non-fiction.

Elizabeth Boquet is Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at Fairfield University in Fairfield, CT. At Fairfield, Beth has held several faculty leadership and administrative positions, including director of first-year writing, associate dean, and associate vice president for academic affairs. She is the author of *Nowhere Near the Line* and *Noise from the Writing Center* and co-author of *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*, all published by Utah State University Press. She served two terms as co-editor of *The Writing Center Journal* and is a two-time recipient of the IWCA Outstanding Research Award. She has additional interests in life writing, and her creative nonfiction has appeared in *Full Grown People*, *The Bitter Southerner*, *100 Word Story*, and *Dead Housekeeping*.

Beth, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I was hoping you could give us a brief overview, this is a large task, of the history of writing centers. You actually write about this in Our Little Secret, which I would encourage everyone to read.

EB: Thanks, Shane. And first, let me just say it's great to be here and thank you for asking me to be part of your wonderful podcast, which I really love and use a lot and love using in my teaching, especially. I just want to put a plug in for anybody who's listening that these episodes are just great for us and they're great for our students, too.

I think the question tracks in that one of the things that we might think about when we start thinking about writing centers, and certainly it's a question that my students have is how did writing centers come to be? And I guess to flip it a little bit, mostly the way that students say it to me is I didn't even know there was this thing called writing centers, right? So students will come and they've used the writing center or they've been recommended to be a tutor or something, and they know that our university, Fairfield University, has a writing center, but it's not a concept that they've sort of generalized to think, "Oh, like this is a thing that exists in lots of places." I always find that interesting, especially because, of course, classrooms are completely generalizable, right? It's something that every student expects to encounter anywhere they're going to school. So the fact that writing centers are not something that is just part of the picture of being at a college or university is still a thing that I find interesting, curious, worth thinking about.

That's how I got interested in the history of writing centers. I really think of myself as kind of an accidental historian because I'm not a particularly good historian and there are other scholars who I think are much better to read in terms of writing center histories certainly now than I am. Neal Lerner certainly is somebody who has sort of the historical methods and the mind. I'm not a particularly thorough researcher. I'm not an archivist. My approach to the history of writing centers was just my own curiosity.

The thumbnail that I can offer is when I started working on my dissertation, which was largely a history of writing centers, there really had been no written history of writing centers at the time. And because this was the early '90s, you could still read everything that anyone had written about writing centers. That would be very hard to do now, if you could even do it, which is exciting. There's just so much work happening in so many different ways. But at the time, I just decided that to focus writing a dissertation on writing centers, I needed to get all the back issues of *Writing Center Journal*, all the back issues of *Writing Lab Newsletter*, read through the *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*. And that was pretty much what you could do.

So my history of writing centers as I represented it back in the '90s was a very preliminary first draft. What I would say about how they started is, well, different now, I guess, from what I said back then because I feel like we have so much more to learn about how they started in particular places. And that really requires more people looking at more institutions and thickening that description of the histories. When Harry Denny and I wrote a piece on historiographies, historical methods for writing centers, some of what we do is try to suggest where those gaps are. I feel, I guess I would say a little uncomfortable now saying what the history of writing centers is because I want to know more about what those histories look like at community colleges, for example, what they look like at HBCUs, what they look like at HSIs.

Where I said they started in that article in "Our Little Secret," I think it provides some helpful signposts because I do think people could fairly read that article and say, "Well, what this person did is she looked at everything that had been published up until that time of 1999 and that's what we knew." But now I think what we've started to see in other people's work and what I'd like to see more of is here's what wasn't published. Here's what was happening at this institution or at these types of schools. And then I think we'll really have some exciting additions to those histories.

SW: So just a brief follow-up. You mentioned writing your dissertation on the history of writing centers. Is that where you first got interested or that you first knew about writing center work?

EB: I was an undergraduate peer tutor in the writing center at my undergraduate institution, which was Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana. I think you did a recent episode with Gavin Johnson who's another Nicholls State alum. Gavin and I are many years apart in our time there, but we've connected over our mutual Cajun roots. So yeah, I was an undergraduate

English major. One of my professors said, "You'd make a great tutor." Kind of the same way that it sometimes happens now, and I became a writing center tutor. I think I am probably, in our rhet/comp generation, in like the early generation of undergrad peer tutors who then went on into rhet/comp programs. A lot of the folks who were directing writing centers at the time that I was working as a tutor were people who had lit PhDs or some other kinds of PhDs.

I think there's been some interesting generational moves, but I was an undergrad peer tutor. And I kind of continued those connections. I then was a graduate student peer tutor in my doctoral program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. So I worked in the writing center with Ben Rafoth, which was just an absolute gift, and I got to, I think for that graduate assistantship, I was two years in the writing center before I started teaching.

SW: In that article, "Our Little Secret," you write that the writing center is "most interesting" to you because of its "post-disciplinary possibilities." What do you mean by its post-disciplinary possibilities?

EB: When I wrote in "Our Little Secret" about the post-disciplinary possibilities, I think I probably would talk about them as transdisciplinary possibilities now. At the time, I think I was searching for a way of capturing what to me is so exciting about writing center work. And that is what a great place it is for anybody who's curious, who is interested in ideas, who wants to sit with people who are thinking through ideas, who wants to help them shape ideas. And I always think about one of my favorite quotes from one of my undergraduate peer tutors at Fairfield years ago, but it's just one of those that has stayed with me. When they were graduating, and they had been tutoring for a couple of years, so they had a lot of experience, and when they were graduating and reflecting on their time as a peer tutor, they said, "I feel like I've taken every course at this university."

And that strikes me as so true, right? If you have a four-hour stretch in the writing center, you might work with an incoming first year student in their first-year writing seminar, or on an international studies capstone. You might work on a doctorate of nursing practice clinical report. It's unbelievable the view that tutors get into the teaching and learning at their institutions. I think it is just a wildly untapped resource. I think that it would blow most of my colleagues' minds if they had any idea how much our peer tutors know about students' experiences in their classes, especially learning in and around writing. I truly think you cannot comprehend it unless you sit in a writing center for a long time and just sink into it and watch it happen.

So that's what I think. I feel like this is my extrapolating, but I feel like if you're really deeply invested in disciplinarity, the writing center is probably not a great place for you. But transdisciplinarity, I just don't think there's any better place at a university for it.

SW: In Noise From the Writing Center, you write, "If the writing center is to function as an apparatus of educational transformation, that order must develop out of chaos, not through the elimination of it. We must imagine a liminal zone where chaos and order coexist. And we would

certainly do a service to ourselves, to our students, and to our institutions if we spent as much time championing the chaos of the writing center as we do championing the order” (p. 84). Can you talk more about the tension between chaos and order in the writing center, and perhaps the necessity of chaos to writing center work?

EB: Yeah, I think that that quote is right around or in some way connected to the part of the book where I'm writing about a history of writing centers as a kind of cleanup service. As a grammar checker, come make the paper neat and orderly type service, which is certainly a part of the history that I was absolutely challenging and would continue to challenge and still would challenge. So, yeah, I think just to contextualize that out of chaos and especially at a moment like this one where we're obviously, we've all had a lot of chaos in our lives in this past year. And I know we would all agree that no one needs more chaos right now and certainly not students.

I would bracket that as we think about this quote at this moment, still I think the basic...I would stay on the basic sentiment, which is that creativity, curiosity, these are not linear processes and they're messy. And often, students equate messiness with wrongness when it comes to academics. Not every student and not all the time, but we make a generality for the purposes of exploring this kind of quote. The part of what I think we can do in the writing center is engage the pleasure of exploration. When we don't always know where it's going to wind up, let's listen. Let's be curious about what we're hearing. Let's just brainstorm a little bit. And maybe this will go nowhere and that's fine. There's no pressure for it to go anywhere. I'm not your teacher. I'm not sure...you leave here and if you don't want this in your paper, it doesn't go in your paper or your project or whatever you're working on.

I think that in the time since *Noise* was written, we've come a long way really in working with students and just in working pedagogically, I hope, in ways that allow for more breathing room in our intellectual processes. But at the time, the justification in lots of different zones for writing centers was to try to trend toward an improvement imperative. I'm thinking about Timothy Oleksiak's recent work on slow peer review that was in *CCC*, right? The improvement imperative in writing centers was pretty strong. I think we've complicated that certainly in the past couple of decades, but I think we need to continue to remind people that we need to interrogate that improvement imperative more and that writing centers are places that are routinely positioned to interrogate that improvement imperative.

SW: I'm thinking about the writing center as a space for curiosity and creativity, traits that you've mentioned. I'm also thinking about other characteristics like the writing center as a place to brainstorm, to listen and respond, to really engage with peers. Thinking about these attributes and values, how has the writing center transformed your teaching or your approach to teaching writing?

EB: I had so much time in writing centers before I ever got into a classroom. That's very hard for me to...it's hard for me to really think about how it influenced my teaching in a certain way, right? Because I can't imagine myself as a teacher without imagining my entry into teaching

being this deeply situated one-to-one work with writers, right? So on the one hand, I kind of have no idea, but on the other hand, I think what I can say is that on my best teaching days or in my best framing of teaching work, what my connection to writing center allows for is just a deeply responsive pedagogy. And the pedagogy that fundamentally is about trusting students and listening to students, I think that's absolutely influenced by my commitment to writing centers.

I think probably the drawback is that one of my colleagues once described me as a threshold teacher and I said, "Please, don't even name what this is," which is like, I call it the audible. Like no matter what plans I have for how a class day is going to go, I get into the class and it's like all bets are off. Anything could happen. I want to hear from you...so it's very hard for me to really plan. And especially some of the long range, like semester-long planning that I see people doing, it's very hard for me to plan a class before I have met the students, which is of course imperative. There's a lot of class preparation that happens before you meet your class, but...

So that's a weakness and it's something I work on and it's something that I struggle with, but I think it's really born out of the fact that my strengths are sitting down with somebody who comes in with basically an exigence, right? And then puzzling through that and identifying some steps. So as I work through my own courses, I have tried over time to respond to the structure that many students want and need and deserve by really thinking about it as what Pat Hoy calls an enabling constraint. That we need that and then figuring out how to keep and retain the responsiveness in there as well.

SW: You also write creative non-fiction, Beth. How do you see your interest in creative non-fiction as connected to the work you do as a writing center director?

EB: In some ways I think it's as connected to my teaching, but maybe it's and/or is probably both. When I started as a beginning assistant professor and had to figure out how I was going to manage my teaching and my research and my service and my administration and get tenure, one of the things I started doing was making sure that any time students were writing, I was writing. And often I would start with their prompts, in other words, the prompts that they were working on, and then I would kind of morph them into something that would work for me. I didn't really realize at the time that I was calling for some of my experiences with the national writing project. Some of that was at Mississippi, right? Because I don't know if it's still at USM, if there's still the Southern Mississippi Writing Projects there, but it was when I was there and I did some work at USM on the Mississippi Writing Project. Now I actually work a lot with the Connecticut Writing Project.

So there's a writing project element into how it informed my writing with students always, but that was also just part of a strategic way of getting my writing done while teaching and while doing all the other things. I didn't quite realize that it was going to become such an important part of my writerly identity to do my own creative non-fiction writing or to kind of wrap these creative non-fiction elements into my scholarly writing, but it has really been about being a companion with the students that I'm working with and also how they have accompanied me in

my ability to continue to write. So there's a companionship element to it. Fairfield University is a Jesuit school, so that's a key Ignatian principle is this idea that you walk with people, right?

I started to really understand it as part of a process of companionship. And certainly the more I was the director and the farther I got away from my own personal tutoring experience, the more I missed some of the true pureness that happens in a writing center. I think the creative nonfiction piece has been a way of being a companion, even as I'm very far from the pureness of my students now in a lot of ways. I also think I had just great models. One of the people who was writing just a little ahead of me as I was in grad school is Nancy Welch, who has always done that work and just done it so magnificently. So when I started...as I was reading, I just found the work of the people that I found compelling. Nancy was certainly one, Richard Miller is another one, and my own dissertation director, Claude Hurlbert, is very much in the tradition of my own graduate work too and it's really just continued from there.

SW: Thanks, Beth. And thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.