

INTRODUCTION

Making a Joyful Noise

I ran into PC in the hall several days after the rapid-fire memo exchange you just read in the Prologue. He seemed somewhat mollified by my response. He admitted that he had been in the office late on a Sunday evening because he was struggling to meet the deadline for his tenure and promotion application—enough to put anyone in a bad mood. I understood. Things are fine.

But few moments in my professional life have nagged at me the way this moment nags at me. I consider it a profound irony that his memo, this piece of *writing*, which I found so momentarily devastating, has become instead so *productive* (like a dry, hacking cough that suddenly l-ooooo-sens up).

Nearly a decade before I met PC, in a writing center half a country away from the one in which I now work, I had my first devastating-yet-productive encounter, a meeting that shaped my response to PC, and my response to all things teaching- and writing-related, in important ways.

It was the fall of 1986. Todd¹ walked into the writing center where I was beginning my second year as a peer tutor. I imagine that moment now as characterized by the signs of self-deprecation that came to mark our sessions: his hunched shoulders, the slow shuffle of his feet, the slap of his notebook as it landed on the table. But I know I've imposed that reading on our initial encounter. I'm sure I thought there was nothing different about Todd when he sat with me that first morning. He was just another student attempting, on this, his third try, to pass the first course of the university's three-tiered basic writing sequence.

Three days a week we met, for a whole semester, following the dictates of the center, not working on his actual papers, but instead

conjugating the verb “to do” in the present tense and checking pronoun-antecedent agreement exercises and quizzing him on subordinating and coordinating conjunctions. I imagine that we (or at least I) began these sessions eagerly, sure that a semester’s work in the center would leave him a much better writer, and that we ended them dejectedly, our heads in our hands, just trying to wade through another frustrating day.

But like I said, I’m not sure that’s the way it was.

What I do know for sure is that Todd failed the class. Again.

I don’t know that our work together changed anything for him. At least not for the better. I can’t imagine that it did. But it changed a lot for me—everything, in fact—sent me in search of answers about the things I thought I knew, about the things he didn’t know, about how we both came to be where we were. I am bothered that Todd has become another literate occasion for me, an event in *my* story, a story that writes me farther and farther away from where we began, he and I. But this is, in fact, the case: Todd made me feel no longer at home in my home.

I am reluctant to read my work with Todd (and later my reaction to PC’s memo) as what Nancy Welch has called “a neat turning point,” and I will follow her in viewing it instead as a moment that “worked to disrupt continuity, development and unfolding,” that “raised the discomforting but revisionary questions: *What am I becoming?* And *What else might I become?*” (1997, 31). My relationship with Todd presented me with questions like these to ask about writing center work. I’m not sure I even knew, before Todd, that there *were* questions to ask. I thought my responsibility was simply to sit down and, well, just tutor.² My work with Todd led directly, for me, to graduate school, to more tutoring—this time in a writing center where questioning was modeled and valued—to a dissertation, and then to my decision to spend my career working here, in a writing center of my own (so to speak).

For Todd, I can’t say where our work led.

During the decade between Todd and PC, I learned a great deal, and I often mentally revisited my work with Todd. As a beginning tutor, I had imagined that there existed at least the possibility of perfect communication—no static, no noise—between a writer and a

text, between a tutor and a writer. Communication breakdowns were the fault of the receiver, hence my frustrating attempts to fine-tune first Todd's poor reception as a classroom student and later Todd's poor reception as a writing center client. Where he initially was failing at only one, he ended up failing at both. And knowing it.

My courses, my reading, and my writing in graduate school—I view them now largely as attempts to repair that faulty communication between Todd and me. I acknowledged some responsibility as sender for the failure of that communication, and I began to see myself—as tutor, as teacher—also as a *receiver* of information. My newfound awareness of the reciprocity between sender and receiver would, I was certain, draw me closer to that perfect session I should have had, but somehow managed never to have, with Todd. Other disruptions in that sender-receiver relationship came to the fore as I learned about the static, the noise, of the race-class-gender triad, and I refined my questions accordingly: What do we do with the static *in light of* the racial inequities in the educational system? How do we clean up the signal *in light of* the gender bias of the educational system? How do we restore *order* so that we can attempt *again* that perfect communication that we're somehow missing? The memo from PC stunned me into realizing that this was a whole lot of cleaning to do, and somehow it didn't seem right.

Coming a mere two years into my stint as a writing center director, the memo from PC left me, as I crafted my response, with the sickening suspicion that the entire project of perfect communication was somehow simply . . . doomed. Not in an hysterical, fleeting moment-of-sheer-panic kind-of-doomed, where you go to work a week or a month or a semester later and realize that oh-you-were-just-overreacting doomed. No. In a deep-seated, feel-it-in-my-bones, it's-too-early-in-my-career-for-me-to-feel-this-way kind of doomed.

Doom is such a depressing word. It even sounds heavy; it sits like a big thud on this page. Gloom. Loom. Doom. So I don't know how to explain, really, the energy I felt from that realization. It makes no sense, but there it is. I felt driven again, as I had with Todd, to think harder, smarter, differently. PC's memo made me think that maybe I had been asking the wrong questions, that maybe I needed to come

up with a different set of questions, a different way of imagining the work of writing centers and the relationship of the work that goes on in them to students, to faculty, to . . . me.

This book begins, then, by considering what others have said about the work of writing centers and the relationships within them. Specifically, chapter one takes up the metaphors associated with writing center teaching, particularly the clinic and lab metaphors. Through this reconsideration, I try to make these metaphors more pliable, more flexible. In chapter two, I depart from previous metaphors associated with writing center work to consider a metaphor not so rooted in a politics of location, as are the clinic, lab, and center metaphors. I take up, instead, a metaphor of a more sonic nature: noise. I explore the relationship between noise and music in an attempt to hear again what tutors, students, and colleagues have been saying (and writing) about the institutional context of writing centers and about the pedagogical moments taking place in our writing centers (in other words, the feedback). In chapter three, I chronicle the summer 2000 staff education program at Rhode Island College, one that is suggestive of one direction that tutor education might move if we are to make hope, possibility, and play a meaningful part of students' intellectual experiences. Throughout the book, I try to jam, to (in the words of one reviewer) poetically provoke you, the reader, while (in the words of another) taking seriously the emotions and care that come with writing center work.

It is only in retrospect that I am able to appreciate the degree to which Todd was dis/figured by institutional failure, and I'm sure I can't fully appreciate it, even now. But since I met Todd I have experienced my own version of institutional dis/figurement. That memo was one instance. And I, like Todd, have come up against my own limitations, have tried to work within them and around them and finally through and beyond them. This book represents much of that continuing struggle. As such, it is my attempt to develop and refine and refute a philosophy of teaching and writing center work, a process that leads me to use theory to push through the limitations of my practice and to use practice to push through the limitations of my

theory.³ I hope that readers will see themselves in this project, as educators who, like me, are bumping up against the limitations of your own practices in many ways, faced with new technologies, with increasing workloads, with pressure for accountability. Educators who no longer feel at home in our homes.

For many of us, our universities are not the communities we thought they would be. Where we once imagined growing old gently languishing on green lawns, with the sun on our faces and tattered copies of [choose-your-favorite-novel-here] in our hands, we find ourselves stuffed in committee meetings, arguing with a student about a grade, or commuting from campus to campus to make ends-meet. This is not what we had in mind.

I suspect the university Todd encountered was not what he had in mind either. *The New York Times* recently carried a piece on workers in one of the local recycling plants. What a dismal job, separating recyclables from trash day after day after day. Each worker is responsible for picking out a particular type of recyclable—plastic milk jugs, for example, or juice containers, or brown glass bottles. It's easier that way. More efficient. The article ends, as we have come to expect, with the promise of the American dream: a quote from a worker who keeps this job, he says, because he has two sons whom he wants “to go to college and do something else” (Stewart 1).

As I clipped that article, I noticed a television commercial for the United Negro College Fund playing in the background. It began with a young man dressing for his first day of college. His father urges him to wear a tie: “A tie says you're serious.” After a series of if-I-were-you's, the son replies, in an exasperated tone: “Dad, you're not going. I am.” The father lowers his eyes and says softly, “I know, I know.” The commercial ends with the son walking over to his dresser and retrieving a tie. The voiceover comes on: “When you're the first in your family to go, you're going for a lot of people.”

I imagine sons like this to be students like Todd, arriving at college not only with their own hopes and dreams, but carrying the weight of the dreams of another generation as well, and finding within these walls not quite what they expected. Perhaps opportunities they never knew to imagine, as I found questions I would not otherwise have

known to ask, but also pain. Again, maybe I've imposed this reading. But maybe not.

Dislocation is a traumatic experience, involving separation and loss even as it holds the potential for relocation and regeneration. In times of such dislocation, noise should be expected and recognized for what it is: an attempt to alert others. To warn them. To gain assistance. To garner sympathy. To raise awareness. For these reasons and more, this book asks readers to consider the kinds of noise that we are asked to make, that we are allowed to make, that we are supposed to refrain from making, as we experience dislocations in our university communities and in our professional conversations. At the same time, it encourages readers to imagine other possibilities, alternative ways of enacting a pedagogy, an administration, a profession. Imagine the noise of laughter. Of life. Of joy.