

1-1-1982

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### Recommended Citation

Crouch, Mary Lou (1982) "The Writing Place at George Mason University," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1066>

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# The Writing Place at George Mason University

Mary Lou Crouch

Carl's teacher told him he had to go to the Writing Place if he expected to pass English 101 the first time around. He came, paper clutched in sweaty hands. In the first session he could not sit still. His fear of writing, of failure, and of me was obvious as he cracked his knuckles, wrung his hands, ran his fingers through his hair, sat forward, leaned back and then forward again. I had to calm him. We talked, or rather I did, about the school parking situation, the teachers, the strangeness of being in college, the stress, sports (his special subject), and finally communication. He moved constantly until I felt like screaming "sit still!" But I didn't; I tried to do the opposite.

Normally, I talk with a great deal of movement of my hands and my body, especially when I get involved with a subject. I actually tremble when I become totally committed to a subject. But with Carl, I had to be the opposite. I had to establish a comforting, calm, accepting confidential attitude. Even the way I sat in the chair, close to him but without touching or infringing on his space, was important. We sat at the end of the table, his chair on one side, mine around the corner. If I moved, I would touch him. My elbows rested on the table on either side of his paper; I leaned forward almost hiding the paper from anyone else's view. When his hands or arms rested on the table, we were almost touching. He moved back and forth, leaning forward on his elbows, leaning back to crack his knuckles. Not sure if he could trust me, he constantly changed position. I never acknowledged his movement. (Later, when I knew him well, I asked him about that first day. He remembered nothing about his activity.)

As we began to discuss his paper, my voice dropped lower, softer. I wanted him to know this session was only between us. No one else was



to know what he had written or what problems he had. That first day we worked for an hour. The paper was filled with fragments: "For the Pittsburgh Steelers had more all pros than any other team." or "Although Bradshaw knew how to find his receiver." He leaped from information about the Steelers' defensive backs to the coach's personal life to the impact of football on the viewer. He had a great deal of information, but didn't know what to do with it. He feared, no matter what he did, it would be wrong.

Our sessions continue on a regular basis. He began to relax as he realized I would not censure him or his ideas. As he became more comfortable, I grew more animated, more myself. I gauged my activity by his calmness. The day he arrived with a new paper in rough draft, sat down, leaned back with the air of someone coming home to relax, I knew we had made definite progress. His papers still have problems, but now he writes with complete sentences, connecting thoughts, concrete details and with the attitude that he has something valuable for an audience to read.

Now, when Carl shows up, I say, "Hi, what have you got today? Any problems?"

"Nah," he'll reply, "Just wanted to see if this sounds clear. Can you check if I'm getting my point across?"

Then, he flops into a chair, gazes at the posters, or works on another piece of writing, waiting as I read through. My comments remain tactful, but I don't worry about scaring or insulting him. He knows I won't do that. I can now say "What do you mean by this? Hey, you've switched tenses here. Don't you think this would be clearer if....?" And he responds just as casually and honestly—he will argue with me if he doesn't agree with a suggestion. This is still rare, but increasing as he develops his own sense as a writer. He is more aware of what sounds right. In each session I do less and less. I read his work aloud and he makes the corrections. He sees and hears his mistakes, his problems. And, amazingly, the more he writes, the fewer grammatical errors he makes.

In the tutoring sessions, I try to work on the most basic and what would seem to be the most obvious task—communication. The writer needs to communicate to the reader in the most efficient and effective manner possible. When a student, such as Carl, discovers this fact, when he sees the obvious, his desire to communicate motivates stronger writing. The student who is interested in what he is saying, wants to say it clearly, and believes what he is saying, pays more attention to detail. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation problems begin to disappear just as they did for Carl. The desire for correctness increases as the writer

discovers how small errors distract and hinder the reader's understanding of the writer's words. As the writer develops an awareness of the writing process, he continues to improve his writing.

Carl seldom comes to *The Writing Place* now. When he does, he brings his English paper, usually covered with his teacher's helpful comments. Luckily, she is aware of Carl's struggle with words and stays gentle but helpful in her remarks. Carl and I go over the remarks, talking about the problems I may not have seen or we may not have had time to work on. Carl's papers do not receive A's or B's, yet, and may never; but he is passing. Most importantly, he understands the writing process as a discovery process, an exploration of his own thoughts; he understands revision as the process for reorganizing his thoughts to communicate directly and efficiently with the reader.