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Come Here, and You will Grow: Connecting Writing Development with Writing Center Practices (SWCA 2020 Keynote Address)

Dana Lynn Driscoll

Growth. The term is used in a myriad of ways within our writing centers. When I think of growth, the first thing I think about is a seed being planted and fostered. At the Oakland University Writing Center in Rochester, MI, the Writing Center has a mural on one of its walls, playing on the “seed” idea (see *fig. 1*). In the mural, students are shown planting seeds, and from those seeds, they watch papers grow. Here, as the mural suggests, students come to the writing center to plant ideas and from those ideas, words and writing grow. The mural is prominently displayed in the writing center such that each student who comes to the center sees it as they enter. The message is clear: *come here and you will grow*.



Figure 1: Oakland University’s Seed Mural

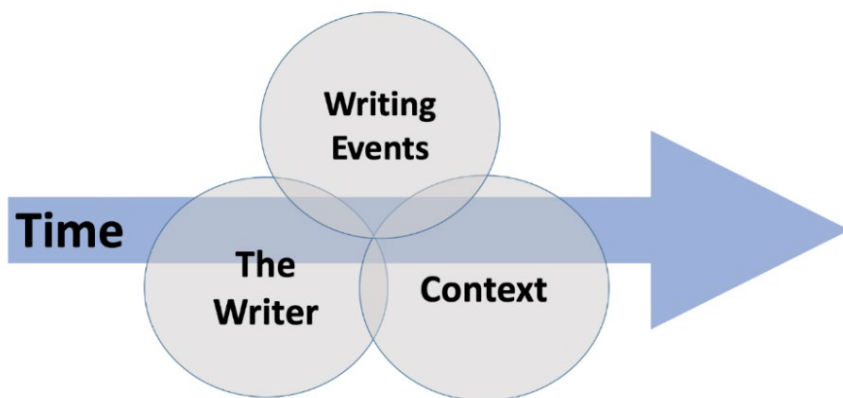
For a moment, let's step back from the idea of writing centers growing writers and think about the seed in a literal sense—because understanding how real seeds work can help us better understand how we might help writers grow. Seeds are really quite amazing. A seed contains an embryonic plant, tucked up inside a protective shell, ready to burst forth when the conditions are right. And that's the key to it all—the seed is able to grow when the conditions are right. A seed begins in a period of dormancy. Different conditions are needed to encourage the seed out of dormancy and into growth. In colder climates, like where I live in Western Pennsylvania, a seed may need a period of at least 90 days below freezing before it can grow. In fire-dependent climates, in the western part of the United States, the seed may have had to have been subjected to fire or very high temperatures. Some tiny seeds require light to grow. If they are buried in the earth, they will remain dormant until they are exposed to light, which is why you often see so many “weeds” pop up after the ground has been disturbed at a construction site. Some seeds need to be eaten first, or moved by ants, or depend on birds for being scattered. As you might be starting to imagine, getting a single seed to grow can be a fairly complicated process, with different seeds having fairly distinct requirements. As we'll see soon, seeds and writers aren't all that different when it comes to growth. Now that we understand some of the requirements of a seed to grow in a literal sense, we can use this knowledge to understand how we might help student writers grow, just as the mural at Oakland University suggests: *come here and you will grow*.

Growing writers is one of the core things we advertise as writing centers. But what are the things that help writers to grow? And what do we mean by growth? How does the writing center facilitate growth? In the rest of this article, I'll attempt to offer some answers to these questions and the kinds of conversations we might want initiate to explore the theme of growth. Specifically, I'll be discussing the idea of growth from a learning development perspective through the consideration of two questions: 1. What factors influence writing growth over time? 2. How can writing centers intervene and support that writing growth? These are the central questions that can shape and frame our discussions and practices in our centers.

Just like our seeds needing a variety of favorable conditions for growth that are distinct based on the type of seed, these are actually fairly complex questions to answer. Like a seed, writers require many things to grow. To sort some of this out, we can turn to theories of learning development to offer us a set of best practices to help support writers growth.

Just as different seeds have different needs if they are to grow and thrive, writers are no different. We obviously can't treat all writers and their needs in the same way—because the conditions for one writer's growth may not be the same as for another writer. When we ask what makes a writer grow, we have to examine a variety of converging influences, some of which may be fairly obvious, and some of which are hidden deep beneath the surface. We have to think about how different factors may be present for different writers, in terms of the writers as people, both in the writing they are producing as well as the broader contexts in which they write.

This specific model (see *fig. 2*) I'm going to share today and use to explore these questions of growth, which my co-author Jing Zhang and I adapted from Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological developmental theories, uses four major features to help us understand how growth happens: They are: **1) a writer** and all that they bring to a situation, including experiences, prior knowledge, and individual learning qualities; **2) contexts** that may support or detract from their learning, including home, school, and work; with **3) writing events** that happen over **4) time**. While this model seems simple in principle, we'll explore the layers of complexity in each of these areas. In many ways, the writer themselves is the most complex, and yet most under-explored, part of this equation.



*Driscoll and Zheng, under review

Figure 2: Growth Model

The Writer

First, there is the writer themselves—the human being that walks into our writing centers. Humans are complicated, and as we know from tutoring, there is a *lot going on* within us. Within a writer is a wide set of knowledge, experiences, dispositions, and identities that shape the way they encounter and work with each writing assignment or writing event. Some of the qualities they bring to the writing situation have been identified by researchers. The most common that we think about is a writer’s previous experiences and prior knowledge about writing (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak). But writers have many other aspects within them that directly impact writing, such as a set of beliefs about the world, their ability to write, and their own understanding of learning, such as epistemologies (Driscoll and Powell) and mindsets (Dweck), a set of individual qualities that are subconscious but deeply influence how they approach learning called dispositions (Driscoll and Wells; Wardle; Bromley, Northway, and Schonberg), a set of emotions about writing (Driscoll and Powell, Driscoll and Wells), and who they are as people and how they identify with writing and the topic (Ivanic). All of these are part of this equation.

Not all of these personal aspects may be salient for each writing moment or writer, but they are all present within a writer at all times. How these personal qualities manifest depends on the specific writing assignment, instructor, tutor, or other contextual features. Some of these qualities

may only become salient in certain situations and remain dormant in other situations. For example, a student who feels well supported by their faculty member may not struggle with writing assignments in one course and therefore not procrastinate, but in a course where a student feels less supported, the student may battle with low self-efficacy (Bandura) or the ability to believe that they can succeed, thus leading to procrastinating on the assignment. In this case, the student may always have low self-efficacy about writing, which can lead to procrastination, but it's feeling less supported that forces that quality to the forefront (in fact, what I just described was a common occurrence in some of my research participants). This is part of why tutoring is so effective. Skilled tutors can adapt not only to specific genres and writing assignments that writers bring, but also to all of these factors to offer unique interactions that help specific writers grow.

Unfortunately, in writing center settings, we have a tendency to see this writer "stuff" (e.g. emotions, dispositions, beliefs about writing) as somehow less central or important than the writing itself. As my co-author Jennifer Wells and I recently explored, some of these personal characteristics might be viewed by writing center practitioners as very detrimental to writing. Noreen Lape, in her *Writing Lab Newsletter* article, analyzes popular tutor training manuals and finds that manuals often present emotions and other personal characteristics that students bring to sessions in negative terms. She finds that emotionally charged sessions are seen as as "threatening to sabotage both the tutor's and the writer's efforts" (2). Lape reports that tutoring manuals offer tutors suggestions and strategies for dealing with such emotions but from the perspective of getting writers' emotions out of the way as soon as possible to get to the real work of the session: the writing.

But developmental theories about learning suggest otherwise: the writers' emotions, beliefs, perspectives, dispositions and backgrounds can be either developmentally generative (meaning they help produce growth) or disruptive (meaning they harm growth). Generative characteristics within people are so central to long-term writing development that Urie Bronfenbrenner and Pamela Morris say that these characteristics are the "precursors and producers of later development." Thus, we fail to support writers in developing these personal qualities that support their writing—and in helping them overcome these

challenging and disruptive personal qualities—it is likely that writers will not grow long term. You might see it like trying to plant a seed without the right kinds of soil or water—a seed without these things, even if sprouted, will wither and die.

So, in order to consider a more growth-oriented tutoring approach, we might explore the toolbox metaphor. This metaphor was given to me by Nora, one of the participants in my longitudinal study spanning 10 years and studying writers' growth over time. The metaphor is this: Each student has a toolbox that they are always carrying with them. Some students come to college prepared with many tools and they know how to use them. Other students may have relatively empty toolboxes or tools long unused that are gathering dust at the bottom of their toolboxes. Other students may have tools that they think are only useful for one purpose (like say, an English class), when in fact, they may be useful for many purposes. Some students don't even realize there is a toolbox or that they can put tools in it. Other students don't have the faith in themselves to pick up their past tools and struggle. What is in their toolbox aren't just skills like understanding how to outline or write a thesis, but also these other tools like emotional management, time management, self-efficacy, curiosity, and other dispositions that can help them successfully navigate challenging writing situations. These are tools that help them stay focused, stay on track, and accomplish their writing goals. This metaphor is really useful for writers to hear about. This metaphor, then, helps them shift their own beliefs about learning and what learning to write is all about and helps them grow as writers over time.

I'll share two examples of this from my own 10-year study of learners' growth to illustrate just how important this idea of the toolbox and personal qualities of writers is. In this study, I followed 13 writers from first-year composition to one year past graduation. I am still following my final two writers after a decade. I interviewed them at least once a year, collected writing samples, and got to know them as writers and as people.

In her first year, Nora is a generation 1.5 immigrant learner coming from a household who speaks Russian at home. She is the first person in her family to go to college. She is writing her first college paper ever for her

introductory composition course. Because of her background and experiences, Nora does not have many prior writing experiences to draw upon. Because she has experienced a lifetime of financial struggles with her family, she possesses a strong sense of determination and persistence and is determined to work as hard as she needs to succeed. These qualities are very “generative” to her as a writer. Even so, she recognizes that she has a bit of an “empty toolbox” (which were her specific words) with regard to her own previous knowledge, writing strategies, and especially her time management. She comes to the writing center for nearly every writing assignment because she knows the writing center helps her grow. In this case, the writing center helps her fill her toolbox with appropriate writing skills and writing adjacent skills that she can employ in diverse writing experiences. Nora’s persistent help-seeking behaviors worked well with the individualized writing support that writing center tutors offered.

In his first year, Derek is a native English-speaking student, whose father is a history professor and whose mother is a high school English teacher. His parents carefully helped him apply for college and supported his educational journey long before he got to his first-year composition course. He is writing his first college paper, and he is familiar with the genre and process because he has completed multiple AP English courses in high school. Because of his background and experiences, Derek has a wealth of prior knowledge to draw upon, high self-efficacy, a positive view of himself as a writer, as well as a supportive family structure that can offer him regular feedback on his academic choices and writing. This offers Derek a sense of self-confidence and offers him many “tools” to draw upon, like time management and goal setting. Derek doesn’t come to the writing center for this assignment, and he tells me that is because he doesn’t need it.

Obviously, Nora and Derek are very different as learners. Each of them is the sum of what they carry with them—not only their own previous writing experiences, but also their beliefs about themselves as writers and the kinds of resources and support structures they have to draw upon. They also have privileges—or lack thereof—from certain identities or backgrounds.

Thus, for a tutorial, even if they are bringing the same assignment to the writing center from the same class, what Nora needs to support her writing growth vs. what Derek needs is very different. Nora needs help with filling in the gaps in her own knowledge due to her lack of previous writing experiences and support to help her build her self-efficacy, while Derek may want to talk about the “big ideas” in his paper to generate an outline of where he wants to go next. This is why the “seed” metaphor is apt here as we think about growing writers. What is needed for one writer, based on their background and tools, is not what may help another writer. Being able to identify the personal qualities that writers bring that critically impact writing can help us be much better tutors. As we all know, no two writers are the same—and the more we know about how these personal qualities work, the more prepared we are to help diverse writers.

From a learning development perspective, these personal qualities that make up writers are extraordinarily influential on what happens to not only the writing they produce in the short term, but also, the growth that they have as writers in the long term. In fact, in much of the research I’ve done on writers, these personal qualities are the most central to long-term success as writers—even beyond specific writing assignments.

Based on this discussion, I offer some growth-oriented suggestions for tutoring. First, a goal of writing center tutoring can be to help increase the number of tools students have access to and the range of specific uses of tools students (tutoring for transfer); to give them this metaphor is one useful approach. Second, Growth-oriented tutoring focuses not only on the immediate assignment but also “growing” the writer over time by supporting personal characteristics that encourage growth. This may include bringing to the surface many underlying beliefs about writing that may harm long term development. There are many such ones, including the idea of “giftedness” first identified by Palmquist and Young. Giftedness is feeling that you are either born a good writer or not. If a writer believes this, it offers little room to grow. Third, realizing that non-writing “stuff” (emotions, dispositions, writing beliefs) is not just “junk on the table” but rather, can be as developmentally important as writing skills and knowledge and thus, understanding these features and attending to them in our tutorials and training is critical. Finally, for writing center administrators, offering

tutor education in these “person” qualities so tutors can recognize them and directly intervene to support long term growth.

The Context

A discussion of the family histories and living circumstances for our two learners leads to our second growth factor—context. Context is a term we often hear tied to the rhetorical situation—writers are always situated within specific contexts, with audiences, genres, and purposes (Bitzer). When we think about context from a growth perspective, it offers us a bit of a different angle. Early in my study, Nora and Derek are writing a similar rhetorical analysis assignment, and there are many aspects about their context that are the same: they have the same curriculum that is standard for the writing program, taught by two long-term instructors, both of whom have won teaching awards. They have access to the same university resources including the university writing center. They are embedded in the same institutional culture. Thus, their current educational context is the same.

And yet, their home contexts are radically divergent. Nora works 20 hours a week at a part-time job, lives at home with her extended family, has childcare responsibilities for her younger siblings while her parents are at work, and struggles to find quiet time for her to focus and get her work done. Derek also lives at home but does not need to work a part time job due to his parents’ support. He is able to do his homework in a quiet setting and ask questions of his parents when needed, both of whom have academic mastery of English. One of the questions you might ask after hearing these two students’ stories is, is one home context or another more conducive to growth?

Statistically, we know that it’s easier for people like Derek to succeed in school (and grow as writers) than it is for people like Nora—we can see this from national rates on graduation and completion based on socioeconomic status and first language (Battle and Lewis; Kanno and Cromley). We also know, from Lori Salem’s work focusing on who chooses to come to the writing center, that Nora is statistically much more likely to use the writing center than Derek because she is a woman, has low previous educational achievement, has parents who did not go to college, and has a non-English linguistic background. In this case, the context of the writing center, combined with Nora’s strong help-seeking

and persistence, allows her to get the help she needs to succeed, despite her being underprepared for college in a multitude of ways.

While it is the tutor's job is to help every writer to continue to grow, we might also recognize that the most growth may be seen among those who need it the most; they have more room to grow, so to speak. Regardless of the differences between educational, linguistic, and personal background characteristics, all learners have a chance at success if they get the right support structures—something a writing center provides.

Given this, here are research supported suggestions from learning theory that can help support writers' growth from a context perspective. First, time management for students like Nora is really important. Nora has to be able to navigate multiple contexts and learn how to be efficient with her time because of family, work, and school obligations. But because of her lack of tools, she gets overwhelmed. This is yet another way a writing center can support writers' growth—provide them with specific information on time management, goal setting, and models of student success in explicit ways and directly train tutors in these strategies. Another piece of this puzzle is what Reiff and Bawarshi call “boundary crossing.” Coming into a new context is a boundary; successfully navigating that boundary is challenging. Writing center tutors can help students identify the rules and expectations and successfully cross these boundaries. Helping students identify new and divergent genres, and helping them recognize points of similarity and difference, are helpful strategies here. Finally, as Tinto argues, belonging is critical for students like Nora, and this is one of the reasons that writing centers strive to be welcoming and open places for students. For students in their initial stages of growth as college writers, hearing the phrase, “you belong here” can help them persist.

Writing Events

The third aspect of our model is the role of writing events—the specific assignments, activities, and writing tasks that students do throughout their college career. I think we often focus on these as the center of development, but in reality, they are but one piece in a larger puzzle. In some cases, across the course of their college careers, students do hundreds of different assignments and writing activities in diverse genres (as Dan Metzger's work suggests). Students are exposed to and have to

navigate the conventions of multiple genres (Metzer) and academic discourse communities (as Beaufort's work explores). What's interesting about these writing experiences from a growth perspective is that not all are created equal. Some key experiences have deep impact on students' long-term growth, while, unfortunately, most of the others are simply things that students write because they need to pass. Once these papers are written, they are quickly forgotten. How can we tell if a writing assignment is conducive to growth or not? You can't always tell the difference in the moment.

Let's return to Derek and look at the role that different assignments play in his growth as a writer. Derek didn't experience many writing challenges in his first few years—because he had AP classes in high school, he used a fairly standard process that he learned in middle school for college writing. His assignments were enjoyable to him, but did not challenge him and did not contribute in any meaningful way to his long-term growth. Then, in his third year of college, Derek took an early Irish history class. The assignment required him to write in the style of a 9th century Irish monk. This assignment was extremely stressful for Derek while he was writing it. Thus, he finally visited the writing center for support to help him through the assignment. The tutor didn't just help him with the writing but talked through his anxiety and stress about the assignment. Derek was able to successfully manage these issues and completes the assignment with an A and the hearty praise of his professor. This assignment changed Derek permanently as a writer—to write it, he had to deeply engage with the texts, navigate multiple texts at once, draft small sections, and engage in what he called “micro-editing” at the sentence level. Four years later and well beyond his college experience, Derek still talked about the importance of that assignment on his overall growth as a writer.

What was so special about this particular writing event? What might a writing center do to intervene successfully? The assignment pushed him in new ways as a writer, pushed him out of his comfort zone, and asked him to write in a new genre. The assignments that often cause such growth look a lot like Derek's. But this assignment, because of its new demands, caused Derek no small amount of anxiety and frustration—the tools he had were not sufficient, so he had to devise new tools and new ways of using his tools. The writing center tutorial was instrumental in

helping him overcome his frustration, helping him shift his process, and leaving him with a sense of accomplishment and pride. This assignment was meaningful to him because he was able to triumph over the difficulty.

As my co-author Roger Powell and I found in investigating the role of emotions in long-term learning: whether or not a writer “grows” has a lot to do not only with the kinds of writing they do but with how they manage their emotions like anxiety and frustration when faced with difficult assignments. In other words, if Derek hadn’t been able to have support with his frustration about the assignment, that emotion might negatively “color” the entire experience for him, meaning that it is much less likely that he’ll grow as a writer long term from it or transfer that experience elsewhere. I saw this time and time again in my longitudinal study—so many opportunities for growth that were lost. In Derek’s case, we see the synthesis of developmental factors that contributed to Derek’s growth: his ability to manage his emotions, writing center support, and the opportunity that a challenging writing assignment provides.

Thus, a critical role in the writing center in growing writers is helping them manage and work through negative emotions about challenging writing assignments. Some tutoring suggestions include the following. First, as Carol Dweck’s work suggests, when faced with challenge and struggle, some students shut down; this shutting down has developmentally stifling effects. Helping to encourage writers to understand that challenges and struggle are opportunities to grow is key. Second, we can work to help students build what Eodice, Learner, and Geller talk about as *meaningful* writing experiences, specifically, help them find the meaning in projects and build engagement and motivation. Meaningful writing also has more potential for growth. Third, we can help students who are struggling with difficult assignments manage their emotions and plan for success. Finally, we can recognize that the ability to overcome these difficult emotions can be the difference between an assignment that allows them to grow and one that they push away and do not learn from (Driscoll and Powell).

Time

Now we get into the final aspect of our model that helps us better understand the idea of “growth” – and that is time. The concept of time

is inherent in growth. If I plant a seed, it doesn't grow instantaneously. But if I come back to that soil in a few days, I will see a small sprout coming forth. Each day I visit the sprout, it will get larger and larger—and in this way, growth and time are interwoven.

Sometimes in a writing center, we can clearly see this across tutorials. Nora is a student who frequently visits the writing center, and she often works with the same tutor. Her regular tutor, Jenn, can see Nora's progress—how Nora remembers things from one session to the next, how her newfound knowledge is employed in future writing assignments, and the general level of confidence, and her growing grasp of time management. But not all students are like Nora, returning to the writing center time and time again and working with the same tutor. Sometimes, we see a student only once, like Derek. And that's where the questions might set in. Once that student walks out the door, we really don't always know what happened. Did the student get an A? Did we make a difference? Did they grow?

Because Derek was a research participant, I know how valuable that one writing session was for him. It had momentous impact on his growth as a writer years past the study. But I doubt that the tutor has any idea what that session did for his growth.

The writing center is in a unique position to help students with long-term growth even if we can't always see it. Unlike a single 14-week class, we see students like Nora over a period of years. In this way, the writing center may be directly responsible for facilitating a good portion of her growth. Scholars who study transfer of learning, like Heather Hill and Bonnie Devet, have recognized the ability of the writing center to intervene and support writers' long-term growth in ways that classes cannot.

On the one hand, with 30- to 45-minute tutorials, we are almost always focused on immediate and short-term writing needs. But growth is a long-term phenomenon. How do we consider the long term? To tutor for growth, we can't just think about tutoring a piece of writing. You might say that writing growth is an end product of cultivating a writer and helping them navigate their many writing experiences over time, just as a mature tomato is the result of careful cultivation in rich soil. As the

graphic in *fig. 2* suggests, it's the integration of these experiences with writing into a writer's toolbox and into a writer's self that is really where the deep writerly growth happens.

Thus, the most important work we do, from a growth perspective, is to tutor with the understanding that we are growing writers who can then engage in specific writing experiences more successfully, and learn from those experiences over time. Classic writing center lore puts the writing and the writer in opposition, saying that we should only focus on tutoring papers and helping the writing in the immediate situation or we should only focus on tutoring writers. These older debates suggest that we have to choose one side. But from a learning development perspective, we need to recognize that this tutoring writers vs. writing debate is a false binary. To be effective to support growth, we need to do both. It's not either/or, it's both/and. Writers grow through specific writing experiences, which they then generalize or "abstract" into tools they can use and adapt in the future. Growth-oriented tutoring is about tutoring with an understanding that we are helping a writer grow, we help them with every specific assignment thereafter. It reminds us to stay big picture while also focusing on the details.

My final set of suggestions, then, draws upon longitudinal research to help us think about our own centers as growth-oriented places where we can focus not only on immediate writing support but also on helping grow writers over time in very specific ways. At the administrative level, focus on strategies and supports for returning students: the students who are frequently using the writing center represent a very different population than those who come only once or twice in their college career. Focus not only on writing support but training tutors to navigate between the specific details of one assignment and the "bigger picture" of growth. For example, at Indiana University of Pennsylvania in our Writing Center this year, we are focusing on learning about student retention, what underprepared students struggle with, and developing resources that help them with writing adjacent skills like time management, goal setting, and more. These are all growth-oriented skills and once mastered will serve students for many years.

At the tutorial level, encourage tutors to tutor developmentally. This includes tutoring for learning transfer (e.g. how can I take what I'm

learning now and apply it in the future) (Devet, Driscoll, Hill). It also includes tutoring to help students understand threshold concepts, concepts that apply to many different writing events (e.g. rhetorical situations, genres, etc.) (Adler-Kassner and Wardle). Finally, it includes tutoring beyond the writing to support the development of positive personal characteristics that make writing more successful.

Conclusion

Thanks, in large part, to writing center tutorials, Nora was able to fill her toolbox and grow as a writer over her time in college. I'm happy to report that Nora's sheer amount of determination did have her finally graduate after eight years as a full-time undergraduate. She's now successfully employed as a nurse in a hospital in a major metropolitan area. Derek, too, graduated in five years and is currently employed as a French teacher in that same metro area. Both of them grew, and both of them succeeded, and their successes was in no small part to the support that the writing center offered them at key moments. For Nora, that support was ongoing and long term. For Derek, that support happened very infrequently, but when it occurred, it was critical in helping him grow permanently as a writer.

To conclude, I want to return to our seed metaphor and the mural on the wall of Oakland University. Growth isn't about how many students we serve, or necessarily how we can grow our budgets (although our deans and upper administrators may not agree). Ultimately, growth is about how well we serve students, how we help them grow, and how we might engage in specific practices to support their growth over time. Growth is about helping them grow not only in writing skills, but with writing adjacent skills as well as human beings. I urge you to consider the many different ways we might think about growth: How can you grow in your own understanding of tutoring practice? How can you grow as a writer yourself? How can you develop practices to help others grow? Think about the power of that one tutorial that Derek had. Without the intervention of the tutor, he might never have grown at all. That's the power that is in within each of you, to help writers grow and impact them over time. This is the promise, but also the challenge, of writing center work.

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