Benefits of Discussing Growth Mindset as Part of Writing Center Consultant Education

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As I was designing my first tutor education course, I decided, almost as an afterthought, to spend a day early in the semester talking about growth mindset. A growing body of educational psychology scholarship explores the mindsets students hold about abilities and intelligences. Students with more of a growth mindset "believe that they can develop their abilities through hard work, good strategies, and instruction from others," while students with more of a fixed mindset "believe that they have a certain amount of ability and they cannot do much to change it" (Haimovitz and Dweck 1849). While these mindsets are often talked about as binaries, they actually fall along a spectrum from fixed to growth (Dweck, *Mindset*).

These mindsets have implications for students' relationship to writing. On the one hand, students with more of a fixed mindset about writing often think about it as a talent or natural ability; they are either born as a gifted writer or not (Truax). Students with more of a growth mindset about writing, on the other hand, are open to ongoing improvement, regardless of their innate talent or current ability. After reading about mindsets for our class, one of my students shared her revelation that she had a fixed mindset about writing. She had always been praised for her writing ability. She had internalized that messaging and could think of examples where she ignored or rejected feedback that challenged her view of herself as a good writer, causing her to lose out on opportunities for growth.

Her story resonated with me. When I began writing center work as an undergraduate tutor, I'd also been told that I was a good writer. I didn't really understand what made me a good writer and often felt like an imposter. As a result, I was often unwilling to take risks in my writing for fear of having my status as a good writer challenged. I realize now that I had a fixed mindset about writing. I also realize that working in the writing center helped me develop a growth mindset about writing. The revelations the student shared and the connection I felt to them made me wonder: how many writing center consultants enter into writing center work with a fixed mindset about writing? And, how does engaging with writing center work impact their mindset about writing?

I was surprised to find that both writing center studies and composition studies have largely ignored mindset theory. In my initial search of the literature, Laura Miller's article, "Can We Change Their Minds?: Investigating an Embedded Tutor's Influence on Students' Mindsets and Writing," was the only writing center article that directly addressed mindset theory. In this article, Miller shows the connection between mindset research and the research on dispositions in composition studies and writing center studies. She explains, "While dispositions refer to attributes and behaviors, mindsets are about beliefs. Research suggests that people's behaviors and attitudes stem from their mindsets (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). That is, a

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person's mindset influences their disposition" (107). Miller argues, and I agree, that the field of writing centers would benefit from more directly engaging with mindset theory in their research and practices. Currently, many writing centers are using growth mindset principles (e.g. encouraging and praising process and effort) to help writers grow and build confidence, but often without naming them or explicitly using the lens of mindset theory. In other words, writing center practitioners are thinking about mindsets and growth but, for the most part, haven't theorized it, named it, or thought about how to integrate it into their practices more holistically.

Given the impact beliefs have on behaviors, it would behoove writing center practitioners to engage in more research that helps us better understand how mindsets about writing, for both consultants and writers, might impact writing center sessions. For example, research in educational psychology suggests that teachers' mindsets about learning and teaching ability impact students' mindsets about learning (Dweck, "Teachers' Mindsets"; Yeager et al.). While there are differences between a writing center consultant's role and a teacher's role, I would argue that there are enough parallels to suggest that a consultant's mindset about writing and tutoring ability could impact a student's mindset about writing. Based on existing scholarship on mindset theory and my experiences incorporating mindset theory into my tutor education course, I argue that writing center directors (WCDs) should incorporate explicit growth mindset instruction into their consultant education courses and ongoing professional development.

Mindset theory can also be used in consultant education courses to teach students how to engage with social justice issues that may challenge their beliefs and worldviews. In *The Person You Mean To Be: How Good People Fight Bias*, Dolly Chugh uses mindset theory to explore social justice by looking at how growth mindset can be used to fight implicit bias. Chugh argues that most of us see ourselves as good people, which is a fixed mindset. When we see ourselves as good people and someone calls us out for saying or doing something discriminatory or problematic, we tend to react defensively because our identity as a good person has been threatened. In those moments, we're not listening or learning; we're protecting our identity and the way we want to be perceived. She urges us to let go of our "good person" identity and instead embrace being "good-ish." She explains, "Good-ish people are always growing, which is why being good-ish is better than being good. Being good-ish sets a higher ethical standard for ourselves, because when we are good-ish, we are learning" (Chugh 8). Engaging with growth mindset in this way aligns with writing center scholarship that encourages students to sit with their discomfort (Dixon) and engage with transformative listening (Garcia; Ratcliffe), skills that are essential for inclusive, equitable, and antiracist practices. By introducing growth mindset early in a tutor education program, WCDs can provide students with a framework they can use to engage with moments when their beliefs are being challenged.

In the remainder of this article, I will share examples that show how WCDs might integrate mindset theory into their consultant education and ongoing professional development curriculum and the potential benefits of doing so. I will end the article by naming some of the benefits of connecting mindset theory to writing center work.

INCORPORATING GROWTH MINDSET INTO OUR CENTER'S CONSULTANT EDUCATION

I would encourage WCDs to incorporate mindset theory early on in their consultant education curriculum. For example, I introduce mindset theory on the third day of the 3-credit hour course prospective consultants take. To prepare for class, students watch Carol Dweck's talk, "The Power of Believing That You Can Improve," which introduces mindset theory and the concept of growth vs. fixed mindset. They also read the introduction and chapter one of Chugh's *The Person You*

Mean To Be: How Good People Fight Bias. I like pairing these two texts together for several reasons. First, they both provide a clear explanation of what it means to have a growth mindset about something but approach the conversation from different perspectives. Dweck talks about how having a growth mindset applies to learning in general, while Chugh talks about how fighting bias requires a growth mindset. Seeing growth mindset applied in different contexts lays the groundwork for helping students understand the nuances of mindset theory. As Miller notes, "psychologists are careful to clarify that mindsets operate along a continuum and that people can be more or less growth- or fixed-minded in different contexts (Mercer & Ryan, 2010)" (106). People can have a growth mindset about some things and a fixed mindset about others. They can also be somewhere in between. The power in mindset theory is that it encourages a focus on learning as a process rather than a specific destination. I also like pairing these two texts together because they encourage students to make connections between writing and social justice.

To help complicate their thinking about mindset theory, I lead my students through a series of reflections that help them make connections to writing center work. In small groups, I ask them to first define growth and fixed mindsets. I then ask them to describe how these mindsets manifest in attitudes toward writing. The students are usually quick to identify negative fixed mindset statements, such as "I'm not very good at writing" or "I've always been bad at writing," but it often takes them longer to realize that fixed mindsets about writing can manifest as both negative and positive beliefs about writing ability. Students with positive fixed mindsets about writing may say things like, "I don't need to use the Writing Center. I'm already a good writer" or "I'm a good writer. The only reason I don't get better grades on my papers is because I procrastinate." Students with both negative and positive fixed mindsets about writing are likely to be resistant to feedback and critique, which has significant implications for writing center work.

Once the students are able to identify what it sounds like when someone has a fixed or growth mindset about writing, I take them through an activity that asks them to identify their own mindsets about writing and other areas of learning. I typically label the sides of the room as either fixed or growth mindset. I then ask them a series of questions related to mindsets and have them move to where they feel they fall on the fixed to growth mindset spectrum. I usually start by asking them: what is your mindset about math? Starting with a question about math serves as a quick check to see how well they understand mindset theory because students often have strong feelings about their math ability. It also subtly reinforces the idea that people can have different mindsets about different subjects; just because they have a growth mindset in one area doesn't mean that they have a growth mindset about all things. I then ask students: what is your current mindset about writing? I've now done this exercise with several different consultant education classes. Each time, the majority of the students position themselves towards the fixed mindset part of the room with a few being closer to the middle and only one or two positioning themselves closer to the growth mindset side of the room. At this point, I'll often share with them that research in educational psychology suggests that a teacher's mindset about learning and teaching ability impacts their students' mindsets about learning (Dweck, "Teachers' Mindsets"; Yeager et al.) and ask them to consider how their own mindset about writing might impact the way they interact with writers during sessions.

I then ask them: what mindset about writing do you think students who use the writing center have? There's usually a little more hesitation with this question, but most students end up on the fixed mindset side of the room. Before I let them go back to their seats, I usually ask someone from each side why they think students who use the writing center have that mindset. The responses often reveal assumptions and implicit biases the students have about users of the

writing center. One big assumption that often comes up in these conversations is that students who use the writing center struggle with writing and therefore have a fixed mindset about writing. Others who chose the fixed mindset side often cite required visits as the reason they think writing center users have a fixed mindset about writing. These assumptions get challenged when the students who chose the growth mindset side begin to share their reasons. Often they cite that people who use the writing center want to improve their writing and that seeking to improve is a feature of growth mindset.

These observations usually lead to larger discussions on our beliefs and assumptions about writing center users. Students often speculate that non-users and one-time users are more likely to have a fixed mindset about writing and that frequent users are likely to have a growth mindset about writing. Unfortunately, there is little research to back these speculations. Writing centers have historically neglected to publish research about non-users. In 2016, Lori Salem highlighted this gap and called for more research that investigates students' decisions to use and not use writing center services. Since then, there has been a slowly growing body of research that explores various factors that may influence students' decisions to use/not use the writing center (Arbee; Colton; Freeman and Getty). To date, only one of those studies has drawn on mindset theory in their quest to better understand students' choices about using the writing center, and that study looked at students' general mindset about learning, not their specific mindset about writing (Freeman and Getty). More research is needed to better understand the impact a person's mindset about writing has on their decisions to use writing center services.

This exercise also leads us to question how a consultant's assumptions (e.g., beliefs about remediation, ability, intelligence, and work ethic) about a writer and their mindset about writing might impact a session. Questioning assumptions is a key component of our center's consultant education course. We don't land on a neat solution or conclusion, but this line of questioning becomes an integral part of our writing center work. One of the main goals of our consultant education course and ongoing professional development is to get our consultants to think critically about what it means to create a welcoming space for all students, and we cannot do that work effectively if we are not questioning our individual and collective assumptions about who we are welcoming and what we see as welcoming (McKinney).

Chugh's argument that we need to stop seeing ourselves as good people and instead embrace being good-ish people furthers this line of thinking and questioning. It gives students space to be human; they don't have to be perfect. They can (and will) have bias. The power of a growth mindset approach is that it does not seek perfection; it provides a pathway for learning and growth. Anecdotally, since I began using Chugh's work early in the semester to frame the writing center work we will do together, I have found that students are more willing to take risks. In the past, conversations about race, identity, discrimination, and other social justice issues were often stilted at the predominantly white institution where I teach. Students were afraid to say the wrong thing and so often opted to say nothing. Approaching social justice work as a good-ish person allows students space to explore and try-on ideas. This approach helps them realize that social justice work is a journey, not a destination; it requires constant reflection and questioning.

Incorporating mindset theory into our consultant education course has changed the way our writing center staff–administrators and consultants alike–talk about writing center work. During the consultant education course, students regularly connect new theories and practices back to growth mindset. For example, I have them read Kara Taczak's article, "The Importance of Transfer in your First Year Writing Course," as an introduction to writing transfer. In their reflections and class discussions, students regularly connect mindset theory to "Misconception #3: There's

Nothing More to Learn" (308) and it's corresponding "Truth #3: There's Always Something More to Learn About Writing" (310). As part of the course, students engage in a service-learning experience where they go into the community and help high school students with various kinds of writing. In their reflections about the service-learning, they often talk about how the students' self-statements about writing reflect their mindset about writing. They talk about how many of these students have negative fixed mindsets about writing and the things that they have done with these students to try to give them more confidence and encourage a growth mindset.

The students continue to make these kinds of connections, typically unprompted, after the course when they become writing consultants. The assistant director and I often overhear discussions about growth mindset during staff meetings and in informal conversations between consultants during downtime on their shifts.

CONCLUSION

Using growth mindset to frame writing center work helps students more quickly internalize why writing consultants need to think about writing as a process rather than as just a final product, a value that writing centers have long held. I have found that this frame has led to richer conversations about what it means to give helpful, effective feedback that encourages growth. It also helps future and current consultants understand the connection between emotions and writing. They see how writers' beliefs about their writing ability impact their confidence and willingness to engage with the writing process. Given all of the connections between writing center work and mindset theory, the field of writing centers would benefit from theorizing about writing mindsets and more explicitly incorporating mindset theory into its research and practices.

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