

# Chapter 37. Growing Like Moss: Theorizing the Labor of Writing Center Placemaking

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We think of “plants” as possessing roots, a stem (or trunk), flowers, fruit, and seeds. Most of us do not automatically think of the plants that grow on rocks, rooftops, concrete, and any other moisture-laden area; however, this opportunistic bunch, choosing many eclectic substrates, exists . . . . “They” are the mosses.

– *Oregon State University Science, “Basic Moss Biology”*

A few months back, I lost my grandpa. As I grieved, many memories from my childhood resurfaced. Much of my time growing up had been spent in my grandparents’ home. I lived with them for several years and spent countless weekends at their house after my parents and I moved out. My grandpa was a quiet, contemplative man. He wasn’t much for conversation. He was also an avid smoker, but my grandma did not allow him to smoke in the house. This meant he spent a lot of time on the back porch and in the front yard, observing the plant and animal life. I used to like joining him. Most of the time, we just sat together in the quiet, but sometimes, he would tell me about the birds and plants.

I remember how he told me about the different kinds of moss that spread over the damp ground. He used to say, “See how it spreads horizontally? It just kind of shoots itself out there and latches on, and before you know it, it’s taken over half the yard. It’s not imposing. Most people don’t notice it until it’s already there.” I used to love watching the moss spread itself out, lush and mossy green against the backdrop of the dark soil. Some varieties bloomed tiny flowers. These were not true mosses—they were actually succulents—but they grew in the same unruly way. My favorites were the moss-rose and purslane, which had plump succulent leaves and delicate, layered, rose-like blossoms in rich colors.

My career as a writing center administrator (WCA) had developed very similarly. The growth of my center might look haphazard to someone looking in from the outside, but it had its own kind of wayward intentionality. Through partnerships with various units, faculty, and programs, we developed relationships that moved us into new territory and helped us to reshape our identity and sense of belonging in new ways. For example, when I began my position, my center served primarily undergraduates and was staffed by undergraduate peer consultants. Yet, one of the first opportunities that presented itself was a partnership with the

university's Nursing Ph.D. program and the Center for Nursing Research. At first glance, this partnership didn't make sense. It would stretch our resources and extend us into a population we weren't targeting at the time. While I had reservations, I quickly realized the faculty in the program were highly invested, and it would be a misstep to pass up the opportunity. It was fertile ground.

This partnership ended up flourishing for years. We developed robust writing support for the Nursing Ph.D. students through consultations, writing groups, and workshops, and the program director and I developed an interdisciplinary research agenda focused on graduate writing in the health sciences. This growth was the result of an organic relationship between two faculty—myself and the program director—rather than a top-down initiative. When I began my current position, I had very little access to upper administration or even my own department chairs. I think my experience is common among many WCAs. What I did have access to was students and faculty. So I focused on relationship-building and making cross-unit connections.

Sometimes the relationships I formed flourished and lasted, and new offshoots developed out of them. For instance, out of my work with the Nursing Ph.D. program came opportunities to work with other health science graduate programs. We were also able to petition for professional staffing two years ago because of our growing commitment to graduate students, and our center now looks very different than it did five years ago. Other times, however, the relationships we formed were more one-off: they served both partners well for a brief interlude, but then we both moved on. Strong partnerships require motivation and commitment on both sides. Our center is patient and flexible; we can wait until the time is right. This opportunistic behavior is in part due to necessity. Within the increasingly neoliberal model of the university, we cannot afford to make bad investments. WCAs, in particular, often lack support and find their labor extended in unsustainable ways. Our approach to growth was an intentional effort in sustainability and a means of providing as equitable a space as possible for our staff.

Our wayfinding approach to placemaking has led our center to places it would have never found if we were viewing our growth and sense of place linearly or vertically. We grew like moss, finding niches where we belonged and could flourish, surviving and thriving by putting out our feelers, latching on, and using that growth to spur new growth. Our presence on campus very much exceeds our physical and even virtual spaces. According to Fink Fletcher (2019), "Space is location, physical space and physical geography." Place, on the other hand, is defined by social relations and "is what gives a space meaning, 'personality' and a connection to a cultural or personal identity." Massey (1994) further explains that places are not bound by physical location; they include "relations that stretch beyond" (p. 5). We have established a sense of place by growing outward and being open to changing course when resources become scarce, conditions become less than ideal, or a need no longer exists.

I mentioned the analogy of moss to my good friend within the writing center field, Joy Bracewell, who sent me an article she had recently read about this very phenomenon. The article featured Robin Wall Kimmerer, an Indigenous botanist at SUNY Syracuse (CBC Radio, 2020). During the early tumult of the COVID-19 pandemic, Wall Kimmerer asked her students, “What would moss do?” Her students responded with answers like “Give more than you take,” “be patient when resources are scarce,” and “find creative ways to use what you have” (CBC Radio, 2020). Wall Kimmerer explains, “Mosses have this ability, rather than demanding a lot from the world, they’re very creative in using what they have, rather than reaching for what they don’t have . . . when there are limits, the mosses say, ‘Let’s be quiet for a while. Abundance, openness, water, will return. We’ll wait this out’” (as cited in CBC Radio, 2020). Like mosses, writing centers aim to balance their ecology. They are creative and resilient spaces within universities.

This is not to say writing centers should not be demanding, or that they should settle. Writing centers bring added value to their campuses and local community contexts, and they deserve to be recognized for their labor and contributions and supported in their work. And yet, the horizontal, opportunistic approach of moss and writing center professionals seems strategic and sustainable, not just reactionary. Although I am not romanticizing the very real lack of resources and support that most writing centers face or suggesting that WCAs stop advocating for the resources, spaces, and seats at the table they need, I do wonder if we might be missing opportunities to theorize our labor in ways that make what and how we do what we do compelling and advantageous.

Writing centers are, after all, part of larger networks. To flourish, part of our work is getting a lay of the land and being intentional about how we move within our environment. Recently, my relationship with our Nursing Ph.D. program began to break down. A new program director was appointed, and a new department was formed. Our partnership is continuing for now, but I can feel the ground becoming less stable and fruitful. This may change—we might be entering into an even richer period of collaboration. But I am open to the possibility that this may not be the case. Only time will tell. Thus, I’m also pursuing an offshoot pathway into our DNP program, where another newly appointed director seems highly invested in working with us. I felt a sense of grief at shifting my focus away, ever so slightly, from what had been one of the best partnerships of my career in writing centers; but at the same time, I see how this partnership may become a drain on our energy if it is not prioritized equally on both sides. Even if we end up completely redirecting, I am certain that the years we invested into the partnership will continue to nourish us indirectly. We gained insight, skills, and connections that will carry through to new partnerships.

Growing like moss and establishing a sense of place for myself and my center required intentional flexibility and stretching. It required creative thinking and the willingness to constantly redirect. I knew places I wanted to belong and connections that I wanted to make, but the path I took developed organically

and sustainably. Giving is central to this analogy: WCAs may give more than they take, but this need not always be synonymous with exploitation. It could be a pathway toward sustainability, innovation, and growth. Writing center place-making means finding opportunities in situations that are, more often than not, outside of your full control. It means being part of a complex, shifting ecology that requires flexible but strategic movements. This kind of growth holds its own kind of potential for agency.

## References

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