

Renewing Our Commitment to Connecting to Student Veterans

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In an effort to support and retain the increasing number of student veterans in two-year colleges and universities, this article provides strategies for instructors to engage student veterans in composition and literature classrooms.

As evidenced by numerous journal articles on ethnicity, race, gender, and language, English instructors strive to communicate and connect effectively to a diverse group of students. The effort in reaching out to students continues as instructors attempt to understand and connect to another group of diverse students: student veterans. As Kelly Gibson indicates, “As an estimated 1.6 million veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars separate from the military and transition to a civilian life, large numbers are taking advantage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and returning to school” (20). The increasing number of veterans entering our classrooms adds another layer of diversity to the already diverse classroom and prompts instructors to consider strategies for engaging student veterans.

Prior Research

In my own personal journey to engage student veterans, I quickly became aware of the need to become acquainted with the veteran population and the concerns of student veterans. Just as instructors read English journals to be informed of the current conversations related to teaching and student learning, I read veterans’ publications to become familiar with issues related to student veterans and current events. For example, veterans’ print publications such as *Veterans of Foreign Wars* and the *American Legion* include articles on topics such as the difficulties veterans encounter in their transitioning process and the challenges disabled veterans face as they enter civilian life. Many websites also offer valuable articles related to student veterans. *The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*, *Student Veterans of America*, and *Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions* are just a few of the websites that provide valuable information on current events and student veterans. In fact, the *Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions* contains a section dedicated to faculty training that offers information on how to be a veteran friendly instructor.

After reading veterans' publications, I incorporated the information I learned into my preexisting assignments. As Galen Leonhardy points out in "Transformations: Working with Veterans in the Composition Classroom," "[G]ood pedagogy in the composition classroom is good pedagogy for all students. We do not need to change what we do, as long as our practice is supported by theory and research" (345). Thus, the information that I gathered from veterans' publications allowed me to include new topics for preexisting assignments and discussions that interest both veterans and nonveterans. While appealing to both groups, the assignments described in the following paragraphs afford student veterans the opportunity to share their military experiences if they choose to do so. Some student veterans may not want to share their experiences, so it is important to respect their privacy.

Pedagogical Application

As I gathered information from veterans' publications for my preexisting assignments, I read a number of articles on the Stolen Valor Act, "which illegalized the making of false military service claims" (Wong 8). In connection with the Stolen Valor Act, I read more articles about the case of the *United States v. Alvarez*. "Xavier Alvarez was charged with falsely claiming to have received the Medal of Honor in 1987" (Dyhouse 10). Armed with the question of whether the Supreme Court should overturn or uphold the Stolen Valor Act, I managed to incorporate this topic into three of my classes. To introduce the Stolen Valor Act to students, we listened to the latest news about it on the National Public Radio website. Then my expository writing students engaged in an interesting in-class debate on the topic while my Argument-Based Research students composed journal entries about their reactions to articles on the Stolen Valor Act. Also, in my Literature-Based Research class, I managed to connect our William Faulkner studies to the Stolen Valor Act. Although the act did not exist in Faulkner's lifetime, my students were quick to see the connection between Faulkner and the idea of stolen valor. A close look at Faulkner's biography reveals the following information: "When the war ended before he served, he came home a self-decorated veteran, feigned a limp, and wore his RAF [Royal Air Force] uniform with wings he bought at a pawn shop. Locals mocked him as 'Count No 'Count'" (Cross 92). Overall, the classroom discussion of Faulkner and stolen valor allowed students to recognize the need to acknowledge the service to the country that veterans have provided and the honors they have earned. By voicing their support for the Stolen Valor Act, my students came to realize that they were acknowledging these services and honors.

In addition to creating assignments and having discussions based on current events articles in veterans' publications, I incorporated the information I learned about student veterans into my lesson plans. After reading a number of articles related to student veterans and the transitioning process, I began to notice the word *disconnected* seemed to appear in each article. Some veterans experienced a disconnected feeling because of their disabilities. Others struggled with adjusting to new identities as they were transitioning from soldier to civilian, parent, spouse,

employee, and student. To further describe the transitioning process, army veteran Cailey McClurken used the following words to describe her experience: “You’re leaving a controlled system where you have your unit, your platoon, your ‘battle buddies’ that you know would take bullets for you—people you can trust with your life. You’re leaving that, and you’re going to college where it’s very individualistic” (qtd. in Underwood 22). With these disconnected feelings in mind, I considered various approaches that I currently use in my classroom and possible approaches that I might use in the future to help minimize the disconnected feelings that some student veterans experience.

To reduce disconnectedness and promote a sense of community in the classroom, I, like most instructors, consider group activities and one-on-one conferences with students to be the most logical approaches to developing a sense of community, for these experiences provide veterans with the opportunity to get to know other students and their instructors. Peer response workshops, group presentations, and simple think, pair, and share activities are quite common in English classrooms, for these activities employ the universal design principles that emphasize the importance of creating an inclusive classroom environment for students “with a wide range of abilities and disabilities, ethnic backgrounds, language skills, and learning styles” (Burgstahler). In fact, in “Deserving Design: The New Generation of Student Veterans,” Cheryl Branker reinforces the importance of teamwork: “In combat, unit cohesion was vital for survival, so an intentionally designed educational environment for student veterans with disabilities should emphasize collaboration, not competition and isolation” (62). Thus, veterans are accustomed to teamwork and may welcome these opportunities to get to know their peers.

Another approach to reduce the level of disconnectedness involves providing an open forum for students, both veteran and nonveteran, to discuss their struggles with identity, which is one of the most common struggles among adjusting veterans. I thought about the works of literature that directly address the struggles of adjusting to new identities. Bobbie Ann Mason’s short story “Shiloh” describes Leroy’s struggle in finding a new identity after he is unemployed. His struggles also include the difficulties he faces in reconnecting with his wife and adjusting to being at home after he has been a long-distance truck driver for many years. Another short story, “Soldier’s Home” by Ernest Hemingway, vividly describes a soldier’s struggle to adjust to life as a civilian. The protagonist Krebs finds it difficult to talk to girls, and he experiences difficulty in sharing his wartime experiences with even his closest family members. “Shiloh” and “A Soldier’s Home” are just two stories out of hundreds of stories that student veterans can relate to their own lives. When students are able to make personal connections to stories, they are often more enthusiastic in their contributions to classroom discussions.

Also, stories of initiation interest veterans and nonveterans and correspond to the disconnectedness student veterans often experience. Joseph L. Jennings, a former cavalry scout, describes the reason for his feelings of disconnectedness. “‘At first I had trouble relating to the other students,’ Jennings said. ‘I thought, most of

these people still live with their moms and dads, and they don't know the reality of life'" (qtd. in Hemmerly-Brown 9). Like Jennings, many students feel more mature than their classmates because of their travels and combat experiences. Discussing stories of initiation in which characters experience an event that assists them in their transition from childhood to adulthood will allow students to reflect on their own stories of initiation. In my expository writing classes, I provide students with the opportunity to write their own stories of initiation when we study narration and description. Student veterans often share their basic training experiences as well as combat experiences in their stories of initiation. Their nonveteran classmates typically respond with admiration and respect as they hear these amazing stories of transformation. After class I have witnessed nonveteran students in the hallways asking veteran students about their experiences. These casual conversations often lead to friendships.

Furthermore, in an attempt to connect to student veterans, many schools now have student veteran associations. In addition to helping students understand their VA benefits, these associations invite speakers to campus to discuss important veterans' issues. Members also participate in community service projects such as collecting cell phones and phone cards to send to soldiers. After learning more about the work of these student veterans groups, I quickly envisioned possible assignments connected to veterans' issues. Students may attend the guest speakers' presentations and write responses; they also may conduct interviews with student veterans for a journalism class. When the student veterans association collects items for a local veterans' homeless shelter, students may participate in community service projects. Such assignments as these give students the opportunity to connect to veterans and help their community.

Reading and Responding to Works by the New Generation of Veterans

While reading veterans' publications and repurposing preexisting assignments, I collected ideas for future reading and writing assignments. To promote enthusiasm and take a break from the traditional works in literature anthologies, instructors may include on their syllabi new books written by the newest generation of veterans. The new authors returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have meaningful experiences to share. In *The Yellow Birds*, army veteran Kevin Powers "shares his own experiences as a returning soldier—and what he sees as the challenges facing this new generation of vets" (Sherr 8). Like Powers's story, other works such as *Rule Number Two: Lessons I Learned in a Combat Hospital* by Heidi Squier Kraft, PhD and *The Long Walk: A Story of War and the Life That Follows* by Brian Castner may spark interesting discussions and writings about the events surrounding the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Many veterans experience frustration when they encounter civilians who are misinformed about events that have occurred in Afghanistan or Iraq. Reading and discussing these recent works told from the point of view of veterans may help nonveterans to understand the wars and imagine themselves in the position of the soldiers.

However, prior to introducing stories from the newest generation of veteran writers, instructors should consider their responses to students' questions and writing. When student veterans choose to write about their military experiences, instructors often struggle to compose an effective response. In "Grading the War Story," Melanie Burdick writes about her struggles: "I don't know, however, how I am going to respond to them without totally losing myself in the weight of the rage and despair of these voices" (354). Rage and despair can be overwhelming for readers and writers. Instructors must be aware of the possible trauma student veterans may experience when they choose to write about their military experiences. As Marilyn J. Valentino mentioned in her 2010 CCCC Chair's Address, "I have always espoused that we are not trained therapists; however, we do have an ethical obligation to react responsibly" (369). To fulfill our ethical obligation, instructors must be aware of the counseling services on campus as well as the counseling services in the community. Also, at the beginning of the semester, instructors may provide verbal and written warnings concerning works of literature or films that may trigger painful memories for student veterans.

After considering the trauma student veterans may experience, instructors must consider their responses to writing. They must be prepared to effectively respond to writing by studying the history of the Middle East. Galen Leonhardy clearly describes the benefits of studying the Middle East: "I can better check for historic inaccuracies and more effectively critique the vets' rhetorical strategies. I can also lead vets and non-vets alike toward source material when they are writing about the Middle East" (349). As informed responders, instructors can avoid becoming emotionally overwhelmed. Armed with knowledge of the Middle East, instructors can critique the content and serve as a guide by providing direction for further research and ideas for revision.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, the growing student veteran population serves as a catalyst for exploring new topics and repurposing preexisting assignments. The presence of the new generation of veterans in our classrooms supplies English instructors and nonveteran students with new opportunities to welcome veterans back to civilian life and show support for our veterans.

In an effort to support and retain student veterans, instructors must continue to explore new approaches for connecting to our student veterans. In addition to reading veterans' publications, English journals, and publications addressing the history of the Middle East, instructors may actively participate in the ongoing discussion of teaching veterans by attending the Conference on College Composition and Communication's Veterans Special Interest Group to share ideas about teaching veterans. With continued research and discussion, instructors can work to diminish the disconnected feelings of our transitioning veterans. ◀

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