Transformations: Working with Veterans in the Composition Classroom

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New Voice

Working with and learning from veterans reveals a wide range of inclusive opportunities that composition instructors might use to facilitate transformations of service-related experiences into effective compositions.

So, in community college no one would even know I was a vet. I had long hair and a long beard. At first, I was even accused of plagiarism because my writing skills were better than what was expected. I don't remember being allowed to write narrative, but I also don't remember being told not to. The first quarter was straight comp, doing the five-paragraph theme. The second quarter was writing about literature. I didn't learn about sentence combining and stuff until I was in grad school. I got my PhD when you started—mid-80s. I was in the community college in 1976 and at the university in 1977, graduating with the BA in 1979. I just wasn't seen as the vet, except in the VA office, I think.

—Victor Villanueva, July 4, 2008

In working with the veterans at Black Hawk College and other two-year and four-year institutions, I have learned that, when a vet is ready to write about a military experience, there is generally a sense of commitment to the process and the product. My comments as vets progress through their writing processes tend not to be harshly presented, even though most vets with whom I have worked resent shallow readings of their work and are not afraid of having their essays dug into. After all, boot camp helped most of us get past feelings of hypersensitivity. That is not the same in terms of ideological critique, however, which necessitates a more gradual approach. In short, the development of critical political sensitivities seems best suited to private journal writing, brief bantering, and research-based activities—research that allows entry-level vets to transform awareness by constructing contextualizing histories and then, in more advanced works, to begin seeing the global or interrelated nature of the political and historical webs of interaction that so affected their lives.[1]

That is a process that could take twenty years or so, but it is one that we can start in the composition classroom. Certainly, veterans, combatant or noncombatant, should not be dissuaded from experiencing writing as a process of reshaping service-related experiences into malleable compositions. That is not as easy as it

sounds, but it is what we can do to get vets started. To make that start, composition instructors must first recognize that we have much to learn from veterans, just as we have much more to do for them. More specifically, veterans of the current wars do not have the same emotional needs as those involved in past wars, although current veterans do have cognitive needs that are similar to those of other students.

Background and Current Terrain

Veterans make up a fair number of potential students. It is important to understand them, even if we do not agree with the politics of the War on Terror, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). According to the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA), in FY 07 there were nearly 24 million living veterans, forty percent of whom were under the age of sixty-five. Of those veterans, just a bit more than 1.7 million were female. There were more than 523,000 education beneficiaries. About twenty percent were first-time recipients. About eighty percent of living vets are White; in terms of minority populations, 10.9 percent are Black, 5.6 percent Hispanic, .08 percent Native American or Alaskan Native, and 1.3 percent other than those listed. Of OEF/OIF veterans, about thirty-four percent have been deployed multiple times. Another interesting fact, because it means that many of our veterans return to or are currently living in the districts that our community colleges serve, is that fifty-two percent are Reserve or National Guard members. At Black Hawk College this past year, there were 340 vets enrolled: 61 females and 279 males. In terms of economic support, many vets are going to school on the new GI Bill. They earned the opportunity—sometimes the hard way.

The discipline of composition theory and rhetoric has changed since Professor Villanueva finished his tour in Vietnam, left the Army, and made his way through the progression of experiences, schools, and degrees that eventually led to his authoring of *Bootstraps* and to his being of service to the countless students, teachers, and scholars for whom his work has been of influence. Vietnam vets often had to camouflage themselves within college settings. When we combine that with the complexities of minority status, the walls of racism, and the hurdles of poverty, we can begin to understand the significance of Villanueva's accomplishments and why his work offers the chance of inclusion while pointing toward liberation.

Three years after Villanueva's start at community college, Mina Shaughnessy published *Errors and Expectations*. By the time I made it to community college, Donald Murray had published *Write to Learn* and Professor Villanueva was working on his PhD. In the decade between Villanueva's college experience and mine, much had changed. Thanks to scholars like Murray, Shaughnessy, and Macrorie, among others, basic writing classes had become common. Narrative writing and sentence combining were commonly used. Writing labs had also become common. Without narrative, without sentence combining, without the additional support of basic writing or what many now refer to as prep courses, my development as a writer would have been less rewarding. At Spokane Falls Community College, I progressed through two basic writing courses and then received direct instruction

from a rhetorical perspective that helped me experience narrative and research writing while also learning possibilities garnered by synthesizing the personal with larger sociopolitical realities. Composition theorists have moved on since then, but much of the theory that influenced my teachers is still practical pedagogy, even though it's no longer in vogue.

As a young former marine learning to write, I started with narrative, focusing on my West Pacific Fleet experiences in Asia. By allowing me to write about my experiences in order to make meaning of those experiences, teachers helped me learn that oppression, as framed by Paulo Freire, was malleable—a reality I could work to transform (31). The story of a teenage prostitute in the Philippines became a letter to then Speaker of the House, Thomas Foley. Through writing, the oppression that I had witnessed moved me into the civic discourse of my nation.

A political science teacher shifted my focus from Asia toward American involvement in South America and the maintenance of dependent economies. The process was gradual and connected to research-based activities: American political and historical interactions became global realities. By then, I could write and read well enough to survive and I knew where the tutors were when problems arose. In short, my knowledge of writing and my critical political sensitivities were shaped by experiences that included research and that allowed me to contemplate political and historical relationships.

And now, twenty-some years later, I am the college teacher, one who quite often has the opportunity to work with and learn from combatant and noncombatant military personnel. Unfortunately, more vets should be in basic writing classes. Like many two-year schools across the country, mine uses a computerized test that consistently places vets into college-level writing classes, even though their compositions exhibit extreme sentence-level cohesion issues, not to mention other indicators of precollege-level fluency. It is the same with non-veterans. Worse yet, the State of Illinois, like many other states, funds precollege classes as less than full-status classes.[2] The lessons garnered from the post–World War II education rush by veterans are discounted, as are the lessons of open admissions and the contributions of countless writing and assessment theorists. We are left trying to figure out how to keep vets from falling out as they shift from a context that privileges kinesthetic intelligence to a context privileging those intelligences that are required in academic investigations.

Veterans, Combat Zones, and Composition Theory

> Common sense told me to stand up and run from the German machine gun. When I was a soldier in World War II, the soldier's craft taught me that machine guns rise as they fire; it is best to stay low and run toward the firing machine gun.
>
> **—Donald M. Murray, 4**

Much has happened since Murray's experiences. Nowadays there are women who write about being caught in ambushes and being involved in firefights. One multilingual (Spanish and English) Latina, the mother of a three-year-old, wrote about

firing her .50 caliber at enemy positions, covering her comrades while the unit repositioned. Brown-eyed, stone-faced, systematic in her acquisition of skills, she passed the class and made it into the nursing program. Just recently, I saw her in the Testing Room at our school. She was pregnant and in a wheel chair. Refusing to accept a "C," she drove, even though she had been ordered to bed rest by the doctor. She did not ask for an extension: she just achieved the objective. Despite being multilingual, she refused to incorporate Spanish overtly into her writing. There was no room for ideological critique, a vast difference from the majority of young Latinas, most of whom find relief in learning that there is a place for their multilingual, multirhetorical skills (see Villanueva Jr., *Bootstraps*). She is a proud woman warrior, an American soldier wanting to become a nurse, gain economic stability, and raise a family (see Villanueva, "Considerations for American Freireistas").

In terms of male vets, this past semester there were six marines, one student who served in the Navy, and one who served in the Army; six were White and two were Latino. Based on sentence fluency, all six marines ought to have been placed in a basic writing course. The soldier, Don, a multilingual Latino and four-tour Army combat veteran, turned out to be a devoted student: although he could hardly create a paragraph-length series of coherent sentences when he started, his habit of going without sleep and willingness to work with English as a Second Language (ESL) tutors allowed him success. The young man who had been in the Navy was the only one with entry-level skills. He excelled until right near the end, when he had a two-week meltdown and vanished. I allowed him the opportunity to catch up on the work, which he did. On a less hopeful note, even though the semester-long class started with three weeks of sentence combining and two weeks of narrative writing, all but one of the marines dropped out. By the end of the class, only three veterans remained: the sailor, the soldier, and one devil dog,[3] two of whom were Latino.

Each veteran who passed, regardless of initial literacy, completed the sentence combining assignment and a narrative related to his military experience. Two of the three, both Latino, used our ESL writing labs, in which we have professional, caring, college-degreed tutor/instructors rather than student tutors. Don's narrative, after a significant amount of revision, included the following description of an ambush experience:

> As we drove our second of five routes patrolling, an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) struck my truck. All I remember was a high pitched ringing noise because after that, I had a ruptured left ear. I couldn't hear nor did I have my bearings. However, I was more concerned with the lives of my team rather than my own. Next thing I know I was out of the truck and attempting to check on my team when the platoon's medic stopped me and proceeded to provide first aid. He pulled me down and started to ask me questions, but soon realized that my hearing was not fully functional. I had blood down my face, but it was from my ear and the medic physically checked my wound and gave me the thumbs up. There were bullets all over the place but I couldn't hear them.

Not every veteran writes about such edgy experiences. Regardless, narratives

of military experience seem important for vets who completed the course. Basic skills such as study habits and sentence construction, however, appear to be more important. Specifically, veterans who did not complete the class, all of whom were White, did not do the first assignment, the sentence combining, or any work with writing tutors. In terms of recommendations, vets need to be accurately placed with authentic forms of assessment. If vets need additional support, two-year colleges need to make the highest levels of support available. If composition teachers cannot orchestrate such change, it is our job to meet the students where they are, which is why I start with sentence combining. In terms of composition pedagogy, not much needs to be changed for the sake of veterans.

After sentence combining and narrative assignments, vets and non-vets alike can move toward increasing their awareness of rhetorical strategies and then argumentative research assignments. Summary writing, timed arguments, and learning to construct pages for works cited are part of that process. Daily journal writing, like sentence combining, is foundational in my classes. Free writing, as Macrorie points out in *Telling Writing*, liberates students to write without fear of being castigated and helps create a mental state that is conducive to remembering past experiences more fully and vividly (288). Despite a bit more complaining from generally younger non-vets, this process works for most and does not require changes for veterans.

Vets do sometimes bring traumatic military experiences to classroom interactions, but then so do other students. In the same room where Don first penned his ambush experience, a twenty-two-year-old civilian described in detail the story of being pulverized in front of her children by a former husband. "He beat me so bad that night that I had two broken ribs, a hairline fracture in my ankle, a broken nose, and in both of my eyes, all the blood vessels were broken." In the end, her husband put a shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Beyond allowing extra time on tests for physically and/or mentally wounded vets, the fact of trauma only means shifting enforced thematic content from what is obviously inappropriate. I make room in the class for undocumented trauma because I believe that combat zones are not isolated to battlefields. Accordingly, all students have extra time on tests if needed. In terms of composition pedagogy, it does not seem prudent to focus course content thematically on the war. Some vets do not want to write about it, for obvious reasons. In terms of assignments, however, the primary objective should be allowing vets opportunities to explore their military experiences and to facilitate that process if and when veterans so choose.

Inclusion, Banter, and Remembering Transformations

Said simply, vets deserve inclusion in our composition classrooms. Inclusion for vets should progress from personal to public. If they choose to write about military experiences in journals, the writing should be for their eyes only. The one-page daily entries that are required in my classes are private beyond page counting. In terms of moving from private to public, composition teachers need to keep their ears open around vets. One of the valves that opens the space between personal and public for many vets seems to be banter.

Banter is a playful and sometimes competitive, although most often good-humored, exchange of jesting. I promote, monitor, and control banter in classroom interactions because it allows students to test informally my expectations and their ideas. Banter provides brief glimpses of what vets are thinking, and some veterans use classroom banter to test material that might be used in future writing. If a veteran chooses to explore his or her experiences within the banter or writing, at that point it becomes public.

After small group interactions and within class discussions, veterans often banter competitively with me. In terms of common topics, sailors remind me that the Corps is part of the Navy. I call sailors "squids" because, when they march, squids are all arms and legs and one great big bulbous head. Banter itself is one of the rhetorical conventions used by service members to communicate serious issues while leavening emotional intensity. It can sometimes produce disquieting moments, however. One marine noted to a group of soldiers that he would not have had to go into Fallujah if the Army had done its job. The four-tour Latino soldier once joked about a mixture of aspirin (as I recall) and a cough medicine that he and his platoon members called their "ritual," a concoction that would put them to sleep and keep away nightmares.

Within such banter and subsequent discussions, there are many opportunities to present reliable information and to debunk falsehoods in relatively nonthreatening ways. For example, there is often room for the political redirection of students who are inclined to believe that Iraq was responsible for the 9/11 attacks, as well as the redirection of those students—both veterans and non-veterans—whose nationalistic and xenophobic philosophies support more restrictive paradigms. In short, if it suits the teacher, banter can open spaces for the dissemination of reliable information and support a variety of dialogic interactions. Certainly, within competitive banter, the space opens for the kind of ideological redirection that those of us who are opposed to misinformation might hope for.

The public process of reshaping experience from journaling to narrative often, but not always, leads to a gradual reshaping from narrative into argumentative research, which may include portions of original narratives or may be tangentially refocused on a topic relevant to military experience. A narrative written by a Latino marine, for example, reshaped into a research paper about the Veterans' Administration and medical benefits. For the vets who complete a narrative, connecting to researched information is often a process that takes place, as Macrorie wrote in *The I-Search Paper*, because "somebody needs to find out something or wants to satisfy an itch of curiosity as insistent as athlete's foot" (162). Memories, even though they may be the stuff of nightmares, are vital to writers. Memories, that is, shape and can be reshaped.

Beyond listening to what veterans say and providing opportunities for direct instruction and the gradual acquisition of skills, how can we best facilitate their needs in our composition classrooms? My more caring colleagues keep asking me that question. The answer has two parts. First, good 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. In terms of working specifically with vets, however, I suggest leading by example.

We need to take the point position. One thing that helps me work with veterans and non-veterans alike is completing my own course assignments. It is common for quality composition instructors to be writers who teach. Taking a classroom assignment and creating a published work both validates assignments and allows for remembrance. Writing narratives and transforming them into argumentative research papers or publications provides opportunities to remember the work, the feelings, the mistakes, the hurdles, and the accomplishments that go with learning college-level requirements.

Last semester, students and I shared the experience of journal writing. My entries were public, an attempt to model Ken Macrorie's notion that good journals do not "speak" privately (*Telling Writing* 141). The students' entries were private, freeing them from the forced sharing of intimacies. I wrote at least two entries for every one of theirs and sometimes read short selections, which often led to interesting discussions. The essay that you are reading began as one of those journal entries and then became the source for a history assignment. I first wrote about one of my more significant military experiences—one previously denied expression. What helped most in getting that journal-based version on paper was believing that the process of writing about my military experience would help provide the insight needed for what Nancy Sommers, in "Across the Drafts," referred to as "the work of entering into our students' minds and composing humane, thoughtful, even inspiring responses" (248). It was a deeply emotional struggle, just as it is for many vets. Those entries were more rant than narrative, more a scribbled bunch of memories and condemnations. The rant was reshaped into a basic narrative about experiences as a member of the Lebanon Peacekeeping Forces, which became the foundation for the history assignment. It is my goal to lead by example, remember learning experiences, remember being a younger creatively engaged writer, and thereby, become better able to facilitate students' self-critique and problem-solving processes.

Leading by example allows me to engage a process of remembering, to patrol carefully the epistemological path of recollection that leads me through the jungle terrain of my postmilitary transformation as a writer, preemptively locating the positions of error. Remembrances can be used in lectures or in more personal settings, such as small groups or one-on-one interactions. The process of completing my own assignments also increases my empathy and provides models that help me understand more fully the difficulties, physical and mental, of pounding, shaping, and reshaping an essay. I could, but usually do not, share drafts. Instead, I keep the knowledge and empathy until it is needed, introducing veterans and non-veterans alike as gently as possible to the claylike nature of writing.

Having empathy is important as teachers prepare students to get their hands into the clay. I remember early experiences as a college writer. As it was for me, the majority of veterans in my college-level classes often have no idea of how to locate

a thesis statement in a *Newsweek* or *Time* editorial. They see more what interests them rather than authorial intent. Nor do they understand well how to paraphrase or generalize. Seeing cohesion or paragraph-level focus errors in their own or peer writing is quite difficult. Many have a difficult time reading even basic narratives or understanding academic expectations. In most cases, my class provides the first real opportunity to experience the process of reshaping an essay and to consider ideological influences deeply. I understand all of that.

There are things I cannot reminisce myself into understanding, however. Some of the minority veteran students enlisted because they wanted citizenship or a bootstrap with which to pull themselves and their families up. Many returning vets have memories with which I cannot fully empathize. In such cases, the vets have to help me understand the clay with which they are working.

In terms of making the private public, most veterans understand collaboration well and can involve themselves in small group interactions that support their first tries at real revision. In peer groups, vets get to have their work read, quite often for the first time. Small groups seem to facilitate class discussions, which allow vets to establish in-group relationships and non-veterans to ask questions—questions that some students deeply long to have answered.

After a period of group work followed by classroom discussion, a nineteen-year-old female asked what many might consider a rude question. Group work had led to talk about the war in Iraq. She asked if I had personally shot at or killed anybody. The openness caught me a little off guard. She had no fear of asking. I replied that luckily I had not. She asked if I had seen anybody shooting at people, to which I said that I had seen the cruiser *Virginia*, the *John Rodgers,* the *Bowen,* and the destroyer *Radford* firing on enemy positions when I was part of the Lebanon Peacekeeping Forces. She went back to work. Many non-veterans have a deep curiosity about the war in Iraq, as well as about war in general. I consider it my duty to be honest and to support such investigations; however, asking a person if he or she has killed another person does seem to push the limits of propriety, something that teachers might want to get across to students in a way that does not stifle curiosity.

In terms of ideological redirection and classroom management, the vast majority of vets in my classes tend to be more experienced students who understand rule-based instruction. There are times when reality contradicts understanding. The teacher must maintain governance over behavior expectations. We teach students how to recognize reliable sources, even when that means challenging their emotionally laden beliefs. Most of the vets seem comfortable debating an idea adamantly while still understanding the value of reasoned evidence. For teachers who are not inclined to banter, the process of research provides opportunities to move students away from myths. Students can be referred to magazines such as *The Nation* and *The New Republic* or toward articles in *The New York Times*, as well as toward websites such as thenation.com, npr.org, and brookings.edu. In short, journals, bantering, and research-based activities allow vets access to inclusion and opportunities to understand their experiences as politically and historically interrelated.

Learning and Leading

Taking a history class on the Middle East from 1700, or at least making a study of Middle Eastern history and the religions of the area, benefits both teachers and students. Goldschmidt and Davidson's *A Concise History of the Middle East* and John L. Esposito's *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam* provide reliable starting points for both composition teachers and students. As composition teachers, we would also do well to know a bit about European colonialism, the thinking of anticolonial theorists like Franz Fanon, and the basics of world systems theory.

The Middle East has been a land of trade and a battleground for a few thousand years. Over the millennia, millions upon millions have traded there. No small number of those folks fought for land that linked what might be defined in the world systems perspective of Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People without History* as a multiethnic web of interactions, a set of interactions linking the peoples of the Mediterranean Basin with Europeans, Africans, and Asians, as well as North and South Americans, through a series of interconnected and interdependent trade routes and other social networks. It is interesting to watch vets in my classes move toward their own understandings of global interactions and what some come to see as the abhorrence of American imperialism.

In terms of knowledge associated with taking the lead for the sake of inclusion, composition teachers need to be aware of our minority vets. Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps* is a must-read text for instructors who are interested in more fully understanding the experiences of minority and multilingual students, non-vets and vets alike. The text offers us ways of enhancing inclusion.

In terms of leading, issues associated with ethnicity, as well as race and racism, spark discussions. Interestingly, vets in my region seldom self-introduce such topics. Instead, my experiences, used to model academically acceptable discussion conventions and topics, have been the catalyst for communication about diversity, race, and racism. For example, revealing my personal experiences in the history class that I took, the one for which I revised this essay while it was still a narrative, led to one classroom discussion. The recorded lectures for the online history class included a racialized description of the Middle East—in which the professor who lectured (not the professor who managed the online class), after giving a head nod to anthropologists who objected to such descriptions because of "so much blurring of racial lines by intermarriage over the centuries," went on to note that, in a demographic description of the Middle East, we would find "some of the Negroid race in the Sudan region, Saudi Arabia—even some in the Persian Gulf [while] you would find some Mongoloids predominantly in northeast Iran and some parts of Iraq." For the most, however, "the Middle East can be categorized as Caucasian, and, from an American perspective, if you travel there, many would not look darker skinned than what many in the west would consider to be Caucasian." According to the professor, this is a fact that shows how races have "merged to the point where they are virtually indistinguishable."

I told my writing students about the experience of listening to that lecture

with my Black office partner. Both Latino veterans (a marine who served in the first Gulf War and the four-tour combat veteran) made their disapproval known, as did African American students, all female (not vets). The composition students used computers to locate and read the *American Anthropological Association's Statement on Race*. I pointed out that race does not exist, but racism does, which Professor Villanueva has been telling composition theorists for years. The class discussed racism in general and racism in their own lives, as well as the idea of racism in college contexts and the idea of racism in relation to people from the Middle East, an age-old objectification that supports dehumanization of the enemy. Vets and non-vets asked in class how I dealt with the situation. As it turned out, because I had critically challenged material in online discussions and included the *American Anthropological Association's Statement on Race* in contrast to lecture content, the professor of the class wrote a note asking me to "chill out" and commenting that there was little hope of ever healing our friendship.

Unlike the Vietnam-era vets I know, veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan remain relatively quiet about the subject of race. Vietnam-era vets, by the way, make up the largest segment of living veterans in America, a group composed of some 7.9 million service members, who can be quite outspoken advocates of civil rights (Department of Veterans' Affairs). In boot camp, I was indoctrinated with the idea that there were only light-green and dark-green marines. Still, the percentage of dark-green was higher than that found in civilian populations. Having served with marines from a wide variety of economic conditions and ethnicities, I developed a deep respect for minority marines. Most knew and many of us talked about the racism that they faced.

College readings and sociology classes later introduced the idea that the reason so many minority marines entered the service was likely a result of economic considerations. For OIF/OEF vets, a variety of editorials in local newspapers have openly contradicted such reasoning in relation to current military composition, pointing out that, in the Midwest, rurally located, White middle-class males make up the majority of current enlistees, a notion that is partially confirmed by Department of Defense FY 2006 recruitment statistics showing that enlistment in the nation's smallest cities is significantly higher than in the nation's largest cities, with 12.4 recruits per 10,000 residents in small towns versus 8.7 in the cities (Fischer). A trip to the local U.S. Marine recruiting center not too far from Black Hawk College revealed lines of mostly White faces in the Polaroid images of local enlistees. Regardless, Latinos, Latinas, and African Americans comprise a significant portion of the veteran population in my classes. Still, there is little self-initiated discussion about race or racism. That noted, when the topic is introduced, I have found that vets are interested in it.

Twenty-one years ago, the process of reading and making connections between the information garnered from research and my military experiences was a foreign task, mostly because of the difficulty associated with learning how to express those connections in my own words and how to incorporate and cite source material. Attempting to shortcut the citation process produced a litany of

error patterns: citing at the end of the paragraph for all of the material within the paragraph, and using an author's words rather than my own, to name two personal embarrassments now mirrored in the attempts of current vets. I had to learn how to connect to my readers with the use of sensory description, constructions of place that made historical facts more interesting. In addition, I had to learn to transition between the information from research and my personal experiences, a process that led to both failed and successful attempts with flashbacks, excerpts used as transitions, and direct quotations, experiments that helped develop my literary imagination. I also learned how to cut personal narrative and diatribe for the sake of academic tone and length requirements. Engaging in active remembrance has helped me preemptively intervene when vets and non-vets choose to pound the claylike forms of narrative into research-based writing and to connect, more often than not, the personal to larger social realities. Certainly, these are specific and beneficial strategies that composition teachers can provide for vets.

In terms of connecting personally with vets, I must admit that the idea of telling my students about my own military experiences never really occurred to me until returning veterans started coming to my office because they heard that I had been a jarhead, and, even then, I never mentioned being off the coast of Lebanon—beyond once showing my DD214 and a map of Lebanon to a young marine, choosing to tell funny stories about the people that I served with instead of explaining the rather short list of ribbons and medals. Like Vietnam vets, my generation of service members often found themselves *personae non gratae*.

As the populations of multitour OEF/OIF student veterans increased, my own self-imposed writing assignments led to more open and honest in-class discussions explaining how lived experience can be transformed from journal entry to narrative and promoting the realization that essays are malleable structures, like clay, that can be formed and reformed before the final firing of publication. Student vets learned quickly that their experiences were valuable, malleable, and ultimately useful, like a ceramic bowl. Having endured a trial by fire, the bowl can be used to serve other people for a greater good. Scuttlebutt made its way around, and, eventually, I was invited to become the advisor for our student veterans' organization.

Adding to narrative constructions a sense of history or a sense of place—or even adding information that is relevant to other discourse communities—can create the space for veterans to transform simple narratives and, thereby, find inclusion. Having a cursory knowledge of the history of the place that was the focus of military experience allows me to facilitate and critique my vets' writing about a war that has so dominated and will likely continue to dominate their perceptions. Having written about the Middle East and having lived again one of my own significant Middle Eastern military experiences, 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. In short, composition instructors need to be informed about the Middle East and the current war if they are to lead effectively.

Composition teachers also need to be aware of the power of comments on

vets' papers. The process of completing an assignment for the history class allowed me to remember what it is to submit my writing for assessment and evaluation. Four weeks into an eight-week class, the teacher returned my first paper with three comments typed in bright blue. The first was a reminder that "Navel Institute" should have been "Naval Institute" (an embarrassing error, but one common to those of us who have moved from basic writing courses to upper level studies).[4] The second comment noted an interesting point[5] without providing commentary explaining why the content was interesting. And the third comment, with its missing period, was a sloppy salutation.[6] It was upsetting that my teacher did not check or make comments about dates, sources, content, or future possibilities—which my community college teachers did to facilitate my growth as a scholar. As composition teachers, we need to be able to help our vets by making sure that their information is accurate.

The process of molding the narrative and then reshaping it from conventions that are associated with English composition to those associated with the study of history has helped me explain processes for bridging discourse community expectations. It also allowed me to realize how frustrating it was to get superficial comments after laboring for weeks with a self-valued topic, how embarrassing it is to struggle with spelling, and how greatly I abhorred those teachers who did not care to help me grow as a scholar. And then there were the feelings of being humiliated by comments that, in their superficiality, devalued or dishonored the effort of writing about painfully important experiences—such as watching a fourteen-year-girl sell her body to military comrades or not being allowed in 1983 to return to Lebanon after the October 23rd Beirut barracks bombing. What I wanted, as a younger vet-scholar, were comments that would allow me to gain authority, comments pointing to errors in my reasoning as well as in my spelling, comments that let me tell others about my experiences in the military in ways that would allow my ideas to facilitate the creation of a better world, a place where children could be free from the horror of commodification and rape. As composition teachers, let's not devalue vets' writing in the way that my history professor did. Assigning an "A" grade does not exempt us from assessment.

Conclusion

When all is said and done, I try to do for my veterans what my community college teachers did for me. It seems apparent that allowing for inclusion and providing freedom of choice in terms of writing topics produces less resistance in veterans and non-veterans alike. The process of starting with sentence combining and moving on to narrative and then to argumentation allows me to introduce in nonthreatening ways ideas that are often quite radical. Beyond that, I have come to accept that some vets want to write about service experiences. Others do not. It is not my job to "push" a veteran to relive his or her combat experiences or any other aspect of his or her military experience. The vets write about their military experiences if and

when they are ready. There is enough for inclusion and enough for the possibility of transformation in that.

Notes

1. Paul Lindholdt, Anne Bolliti, Dana Elder, and Victor Villanueva, as well as Editor Jeff Sommers and two *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* reviewers helped make the writing of this essay possible.

2. In FY07, the college received $15.78 per credit hour for what our school refers to as "developmental" courses and $19.06 for baccalaureate-level courses.

3. Marine.

4. "<SURELY YOU MEAN NAVAL> (US Navel Institute, 1984); you aren't writing about the Bellybutton institute right?"

5. "I was readying myself for a fight, and I distinctly remember wondering about the countless hundreds of thousands or perhaps millions of other fighters like me who, over the course of centuries, had readied themselves. <interesting point>"

6. "Fun read Galen. Thanks for sharing it 40/40"

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Nell Ann Pickett Service Award

For her outstanding dedication, service, and leadership, *Sharon Mitchler* of Centralia College in Centralia, Washington, has been selected as the 2009 winner of the Nell Ann Pickett Service Award. The Pickett Award is granted each year to an outstanding teacher whose vision and voice have had a major impact on two-year college professionalism and whose teaching exemplifies such outstanding personal qualities as creativity, sensitivity, and leadership. The award, presented at the annual CCCC Awards Ceremony, consists of a plaque from NCTE and free registration to the following year's CCCC Convention. Teaching qualifications include demonstrated past or present excellence; service qualifications include positive contributions to leadership in professional organizations at the regional or national levels and an inclusive vision demonstrated in such activities as mentoring, publication, or work uniting the goals and efforts of organizations and groups. Any person may nominate a candidate who meets the award criteria by sending an overview of the applicant's qualifications in no more than two double-spaced typed pages to Linda Walters, Nell Ann Pickett Service Award Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. (The selection committee may request other supporting materials.) The 2010 award committee will select the winner from nominations postmarked no later than **November 15, 2009.**