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Composing Our Classrooms: A Veteran Provides Context for Inclusion and Collaborations

by Anthony Albright

I am a veteran in most senses of the word. When I re-entered the world of academia after a five-year journey into the world of the soldier, I was lost, scared, and invisible. I didn't talk to anyone about my experiences in the military because I thought no one would understand. How could I explain to someone that I get teary over the *To Be Or Not To Be* soliloquy and also respond with, "Blood, blood, bright red blood!" when asked what makes the green grass grow? So I shut up. I became what so many veterans are when they go to college: invisible. But all along, I wondered why it was so hard to be a veteran in the classroom.

I offer four pieces of advice for writing instructors when dealing with veteran students, based both on my experiences as a veteran in academia as well as a writing facilitator in a veteran writing program and a university writing instructor: First, if a veteran doesn't self-identify, don't out them. If they do, privately ask if they are willing to share insights from their experiences. Second, leave your politics at the door. Veterans often revile politics, having been used as political footballs throughout their service. They often won't want to argue about politics and mistrust those who try to sway them in either direction. Third, recognize veterans' unique abilities and experiences. Fourth, design veteran-friendly assignments. Doing these things will help to ensure that veterans returning to academia feel more comfortable and a valued part of the classroom.

In *Who Joins the Military*, author Amy Lutz shows that the best predictor of who will join the military is

socio-economic status. Not surprisingly, many veteran students joined out of their desire to earn a college degree, paid for by the military. This was certainly a contributing factor for me. However, many of these students will want to forget their service, and any reminder of it will not be appreciated as the experience was likely connected with trauma. This is why it is so important to avoid identifying veterans publicly, as noted earlier.

Most often, however, veterans will self-identify in reflective writing exercises, testing the waters, not only to see if the instructor is listening, but also to test the reader's political orientation. Veterans have an ingrained mistrust of academics that results from the hierarchical ranking structure of the military, which puts young college graduates in charge of hardened veterans. This mistrust is exacerbated when the teacher shows an obvious political bias, especially when that bias is pacifistic or overtly left-leaning. Know your audience, teachers. Have a plan, make it a good one. Execute it. Leave your politics out of it, even if the views are meant to be well-meaning.

Recognition of the value military veterans can bring to the classroom is vital to a teacher of veterans. These students, like many non-traditional students, have lived through experiences that traditional students lack. If students are willing, "Think-Pair-Share" is an effective way to build bridges with traditional and nontraditional students. Such pairings offer the opportunity for discussions to evolve into true learning and collaboration.

Since veterans are most likely to reveal status in reflective writing exercises (memoirs, blogs, journals), including these types of assignments in class is both inviting and affirming. Using at least one of these assignments will help identify and serve veteran students, if they are interested in being identified. My experience facilitating veteran writing workshops has shown me that many veterans are excellent storytellers, given a willing listener and someone to help them clearly express their ideas. Designing such

assignments allows veterans to show their strengths and allows them to gain confidence in their ability to become academics.

By making these modest changes, you might not have helped all veterans, but you would have helped me.

Editors' note: For more on "Think-Pair-Share," reference Dave Stuart Jr.:
<http://www.davestuartjr.com/think-pair-share/>

Works Cited

Lutz, Amy. "Who Joins the Military?: A Look at Race, Class, and Immigration Status." *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 36 (2) 2008: 167-188.

Anthony J. Albright is a Ph.D graduate student in the North Dakota State University English Department. He is interested in story-telling as a decolonizing activity, veteran writing, community engagement through non-fiction dramatization, and sociolinguistics. He is also a facilitator with Red River Valley Writing Project's *Warrior Words*, and the founder of the *Open Minds Open Doors* project. More specifically, his work examines how U.S. soldiers are caught up in the project of imperialism as subjects to, rather than agents of, U.S. global hegemony, and the ways in which transitioning veterans can be helped to write about their experiences in a manner that engages a community that sometimes doesn't see them.