

Re-Authoring Narratives: Reflective Writing with Veterans with Spinal Cord Injury

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This article describes a community outreach project for veterans with spinal cord injury and disease (SCI/D) that was particularly effective as a short-term veteran writing group. Sponsored by a grant from the Paralyzed Veterans of America, The University of Arizona hosted an outreach project for veterans with SCI/D in October 2013. When situated in a trusted community of veterans with spinal cord injury and disease, reflection afforded a space for re-authoring experiences wherein veterans were able to make meaning from military experiences. In this manuscript, we highlight reflective writing as a fundamental component of the community outreach because reflection was essential for identifying and sharing strengths to carry forward.

Writing groups for veterans of military conflicts are not new. Yet there's a continued interest in their potential for supporting veterans in transition. In a recent issue of *Veterans in Higher Education*, Marcia Baxter Magolda declares that supporting veterans begins with their "meaning making and self-authorship" (86) best prompted through acts of "reflection,

writing and discourse" (86). To be sure, serious reflective writing emerges as a core activity for supporting veterans in community writing groups and in various curricula in higher education. For veterans' groups across the nation, according to Eileen Schell, a common purpose is "providing a space for veterans to engage in defining and representing their military experiences for themselves and for various publics, often through first-person writing." Journal writing and reflective writing emerge as tools for fostering self-authorship, but how to help writers harness personal experience through narrative into various publics remains a complex enterprise. Courses in English, in particular, have the potential to support or disavow veterans' experiences. Often student veterans need to write "frankly about their war service in a safe and confidential environment" (81), expounds Baxter Magolda, but institutions fail to provide a safe, trusted environment for doing so. In veteran writing groups, it is essential to provide a supportive context that privileges writing "*with* a community of veterans" (Schell).

In this article, we describe a community outreach project for veterans with spinal cord injury and disease (SCI/D), and we highlight how reflective writing *with* a community of veterans was fundamental to the success of the project. In other venues, we discuss the efficacy of the outreach camp for helping veterans with SCI/D navigate the demands of new injuries and transitions to civilian life (see Hartley & Mapes). Sponsored by a grant from the Paralyzed Veterans of America, The University of Arizona (UA) hosted a small-scale educational and outreach project for veterans with SCI/D in October 2013. A product of collaborations between faculty in psychoeducational and disability studies, the writing program, the student veterans center, and the disability resource center, the five-day camp included morning and late afternoon recreational activities with reflective writing activities in between. An explicit outcome of the outreach project was to help veterans with SCI/D establish community connections to motivate them to pursue college, as previous research confirms the importance of community (Branker; Vance & Miller; Ruh, et al.). During the camp and in two separate follow-up interviews, one at six months and one at twelve months, camp participants frequently referenced the importance of being prompted to reflect, to write, and to discuss as a group. On the final day of camp, we began to realize the significance of reflective writing when veterans presented a card of thanks to

coauthors of this article—each coordinators of the project. Composed and signed by the group, the card read:

Thank you for the time spent making each of us feel so comfortable. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity for each of us. We gained more than we ever expected when we applied to this camp over the summer. We not only learned about going to college as Disabled Veterans & Adaptive Sports. We learned even more about ourselves. Many of us accomplished things we never thought of even trying. We shared some of our innermost thoughts and feelings with ease knowing that no one in the room would see us in a different light after hearing. We all had something in common. A new family bond was formed this week at the University of Arizona.

At the least, what we learned *with* and *from* veterans was how reflective writing provided effective support, and similar approaches could benefit student veterans in other contexts and community veteran writing groups. Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson, as guest editors of a special issue of *Composition Forum* dedicated to *Veterans and Writing*, call for better support for “warrior writers,” especially to diminish the problem of a military-civilian gap for student veterans. A large percentage of veterans who served in the conflicts of Iraq and Afghanistan are not enrolling in college because of an absence of accessible information, effective outreach, and, unfortunately, an absence of veteran-friendly practices (American Council on Education). Baxter Magolda argues that integrating veterans should involve allowing them to write “about their military experiences, using reflection to make meaning from these experiences” (85). In our outreach project, veterans praised the reflection activities that prompted participants to narrate experiences and to re-author them with a cohort of veteran writers through a process of reflection, writing, and group discourse. While this outreach project is unique because of the intersection with adaptive sports and veterans, uniqueness also represents *situatedness*. We believe that reflective writing instilled hope and optimism for valuable futures and has since become part of a structured resilience intervention (see Stuntzner & Hartley). When situated in a trusted community of veterans with spinal cord injury and disease, reflection afforded a space for re-

authoring wherein veterans were able to make meaning from military experiences. Reflective writing created a powerful context to imagine possibilities informed by previous experiences with war, injury, and transitions to civilian life.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Importantly, writing—and literacy—is fundamental here. In her book *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*, Kathleen Yancey contends that “literacy is connected to our meaning making” (175). Reflection as a practice fosters a model of review and meta-analysis to discern patterns and generate a new way of thinking about a situation (see, for instance, Gutiérrez & Rogoff; Gutiérrez; Yancey). In this project, reflection through writing provided what we call a space for *re-authoring narratives*. A space of authorship, according to Baxter Magolda, involves enabling individuals “to situate themselves in their own experience” and establish an understanding of who they are and who they want to be (89). It requires drawing meaning from past experience through the process of reflecting on, writing about, and discussing it with a trusted group of people. It can’t be overstated that the conditions for *re-authoring* involved, firstly, a community of veterans with SCI/D and, secondly, a series of reflective writing prompts across the five-day period that enabled a space for authoring. The writing prompts began with (1) setting goals for a five-day camp; (2) reflecting on a past event when you were at your best; (3) setting long term goals; (4) reflecting on goals set for the camp; (5) designing a playlist for you at your best narrative (see Appendix).

In the outreach project, reflection privileged the role of identity and the ability to narrate experiences as examples of agency. Our understanding of identity and agency builds from a situated learning theory outlined by Dorothy Holland, William Lachicotte, Barbara Skinner, and Carole Cain in *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Employing a cultural analysis of learning across settings, Holland and her coauthors blend Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism, Vygotsky’s theory of play in childhood development, and Foucault’s strategic model of power to define identities in practice and figured worlds. Through this multi-framed analytical lens, figuring a world is a form of authoring through artful “orchestration” whereby individuals engage in a process of “arranging the identifiable social discourses/practices

that are one's resources (or voices) in order to craft a response in a time and space defined by other's standpoints in the activity" (Holland, et al. 272). Holland and her co-authors provide case studies of figured worlds in different social contexts, such as how new members of an AA community perform testimony or how college women respond to the discourse of romance. In each case, actions and storytelling are examined as individual agency in response to specific social environments through which people construct and are constructed by cultural discourses. Opportunities to narrate experiences are central to this process, which reflection and writing can foster. In this way, reflection allows writers to construct imaginative play worlds through writing. Imagination promotes newly authored identities that influence actions in subsequent contexts, a process Holland et al. refer to as "identities in practice" (270).

In terms of how to foster re-authored identities in first-person writing, project coordinators emphasized the writing prompt called "You at Your Best" to generate positive narratives of resilience for veterans, which aligns with research on identity and narrative in rehabilitation counseling (see Davis & Novoa; Dunn & Burcaw). From a resilience perspective, what matters most are the relationships between intrapersonal resilience factors, such as locus of control, emotional self-regulation, spirituality, commitment, and interpersonal resilience factors, such as social and family support (Hartley). All of these factors work together with a cumulative effect (i.e., the more success from meeting challenges, the more resilience builds upon itself). At the UA camp, as a result, participants were involved in individual and small group work designed to share memories and dreams with other participants who had similar concerns and interests (Kennedy & Duff). In this project, veterans with SCI/D offered tangible voices of difference, and in our analysis, we privilege their emic perspectives because it is through their voices that we were able to understand how reflection fostered re-authoring narratives.

PROJECT CONTEXT

The main objective for the UA camp was for veterans with SCI/D to establish connections in order to motivate them to remain active with adaptive athletics and to pursue college. Veterans with SCI/D were recruited from different Veteran Affairs rehabilitation facilities

across the country. Various centers distributed information brochures for the camp and helped to identify potential applicants, including centers in Atlanta, Boston, Miami, Norfolk, and Phoenix. Veterans with SCI/D who participated in the project were diverse in their military experiences, as depicts in Table 1. Participants agreed to participate in follow-up interviews once the camp was completed.

Table 1: Outreach Project Participants

	Age	Gender	Military	Injury Level	Complete/Incomplete	Years since Injury
Anton*	23	Male	Navy	T7	Complete	1 year
Emilio	30	Male	Navy	C3-4	Incomplete	2 years
Violet	44	Female	Aur Force	L4-5	Incomplete	3 years
Andy	32	Male	Army	T11-12	Complete	3 years
Laura	38	Female	Army	T3-4	Complete	3 years
Eve	36	Female	Army	MS	N/A	4 years
James	50	Male	Army	MS	N/A	7 years
Franz	30	Male	Army	C5-6	Complete	8 years
Porter	40	Male	Army	T6-7	Incomplete	10 years
Cole	44	Male	Army	T7	Incomplete	10 year
Jackson	49	Male	Army	T4	Complete	12 years
Wes	46	Male	Aur Force	C6	Complete	16 year

**All names are pseudonyms*

Data for the research included field notes from the camp experience and, primarily, interviews. We conducted an intake interview prior to the camp and two follow-up interviews after the camp. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using an iterative process to look for how participants used language for social positioning (see Patton). In first review of data, we identified language references, charted frequencies, and then analyzed how “patterns in vocabulary” represented social dynamics, metaphors of understanding, and a shared repertoire (Blommaert 29). During constant-comparative analysis more stable categories gained prominence, which were continually refined and verified. Code patterns were triangulated across interviews to capture participants’ perspectives. Data were sorted into two stable parent codes, each with nested

“sub-codes” (Saldaña 77). During the process of coding data, we tracked discussions by participants about the relevance of writing with veterans. Within the code of reflective practice, the importance of reflective writing emerged as supporting veterans to narrate past events with future contexts in mind. After coding and analysis, member checking was performed to confirm the validity of code patterns: Participants received a final report at 12-months after the camp via email. We then conducted phone interviews a week after sending the report. During final interviews, we asked participants to confirm results accurately reflected their experiences during and after the camp. In our analysis, we forefront participant voices in order to situate disability from a “disability rights movement’s position” (Linton 11).

RE-AUTHORING NARRATIVES: WRITING WITH/WRITING FORWARD

We knew the camp had a tremendous impact once we learned at the six month post-camp interview that eight of the twelve camp participants had either enrolled in coursework or applied to a college degree program. Overwhelmingly, camp participants identified reflective writing as providing a source of strength to set and pursue personal goals. Though the writing group was part of a short-term, five day outreach camp, it nonetheless modeled a series of reflective writing activities that provided a scaffold for looking back, discerning patterns, and moving forward with new understandings. The trajectory of writing prompts began with setting goals for the camp and then reflecting on “You at Your Best,” a prompt that directed participants to recall a time in their lives when they felt they were at their best. They were asked to think about what happened, what they did, and why this was their best self. Then they composed narratives, including as much rich detail as possible. On the second day, they partnered up to read their narratives, and partners were directed to listen to the story and subsequently identify qualities of the narrator that encapsulate or represent what was best about their actions, thoughts, and responses. In the narratives, some veterans described first experiences with injury. Others described loss of loved ones. A few described events in active duty, such as Franz, who focused on dealing with feelings of guilt after his injury:

In my case, it was after the fact I started having all these feelings of guilt having to get the Medevac to leave my man behind and things of that nature. But I deal with it the best I can. When you become military, you do military things. You hang up your boots. Hang up your sword. You hang up your M16 or rifle, and move on with life. You can't stay stuck in a rut. And you don't realize it when you're at war.

While many narrated military experience, others considered roles they had taken on more recently. For instance, Cole focused on his current work with community youth. He described:

I've always been a big community advocate. I had an after school community center in one neighborhood and all that kind of stuff. God keeps up my spirit even though I don't have a ton of money to help people. Now I've been put in the position to help people. I am in the position from a time-wise standpoint that I can do a lot more to help some of these kids that are able bodied and don't understand that they are blessed every day. They need to put more effort towards their education if they ever want to see a better life.

Collectively, we listened to each narrative and discussed how our experiences revealed shared strengths of persistence and optimism. We talked about our best qualities, staging a trajectory of reflective writing that moved toward setting goals for future contexts.

For veterans with SCI/D in this project, reflective writing felt transformative, we argue, because participants reclaimed experiences for empowerment through a process of re-authoring with a trusted community of veterans. Across follow-up interviews and based on notes taken during the five-day camp, many participants referenced the benefits of reflection, and they told us about the ongoing impact of sharing strategies for responding successfully and creatively to spinal cord injuries and diseases. Across the data, we noted two major themes for modeling inclusive veterans' writing groups. Firstly, valuing veteran community and military discourses emerged as inextricably connected to their desire to engage the camp. Secondly, participants

reacted positively to writing reflective narratives, describing it as a source of motivation.

Valuing Veteran Discourses: “A Brotherhood”

A crucial element of the outreach project involved the *how* of communication and discourse, which depended on writing *with* veterans. Baxter Magolda argues in her theory of self-authorship that reflection works as long as it involves productive discourse (86). We learned immediately how important discourse functioned for the group on the first day of camp. A dozen veterans with spinal cord injury and disease—some in wheelchairs, some with other assistive technologies—arrived and taught us appropriate greetings, a fist pump rather than handshake. Most proceeded to identify in terms of their military branch of service, calling out Air force, Navy, Army, or Marines. In the next few days, identification with other veterans proved to be essential to building community. Similar to a common dialect, frequent references to military language allowed participants to affiliate with and embody values of loyalty instilled within the military, a trend outlined in previous research on supporting the transition from military to civilian contexts (see Demers; Hall; Schading).

The shared sense of military culture among the participants offered a powerful way to translate a past sense of competence into present and future interactions. For example, Cole described the experience in the following way: “We all coalesced, from being individuals, we all coalesced and became a unit... It’s something that’s instilled in us when we come [into the military]. And it’s something hopefully we carry on through the rest of our life.” The term “unit” tapped into his past while also allowing him to carry it forward into the future. According to another participant, Anton, the experience was “fantastic” because “there was that much of a group of people in the same situation trying to do the same thing. It was like, it was like our own little clique.” The shared values practiced through military language seemed to impact how participants connected with one another. Building upon cultural ways of knowing in the military created a bond and established interpersonal skills of belonging and peer support. Across the interview data, participants referenced

others speaking their language and bonded through military discourse, which they described as forming a *unit, a brotherhood*.

On a second level, the camp was designed to privilege a social model of disability in which adjusting to disability is more than adapting to biological impairments (see Conyers); it is also contesting dominant cultural perspectives that position people with disabilities as diseased, broken, and in need of fixing (Longmore & Unmanskys; Smart). Highlighting the unique community that emerged, Violet noted that it was important “as a veteran to see and talk with other veterans from across the United States that aren’t just settling with a disability but still trying to live their lives and be a positive part of everyday life.” Another participant, Laura, described the experience of being with a disability community as “very motivational.” She explained, “So it was really compelling; it was really a good thing for us to get that little bit of a bond in that short time.” Another participant, James, explained the importance of being with other veterans with SCI/D:

We all know we’re living the same thing. We know nobody’s getting off easy. We’re all in chairs. We’re all suffering from skin sores over time and urinary tract infections. We’re all suffering from the same thing over the course of the life of our injury. We’re all going to have the same issues to deal with, so nobody’s getting off easy, but we share our experiences with each other and help each other avoid the pitfalls.

Violet, Laura, and James all represent a common perspective of veterans in the camp about the importance of interacting with a supportive disability community. A commitment to a social model of disability, we believe, was fundamental to discussions during camp.

Many of the veterans claimed that experiences at the camp contributed to their ability to make changes in their lives. Indeed, at the six month interview, eight had tangible plans: Four participants had applied to four year university programs, seeking a bachelor’s degree. Three had enrolled in college courses. One applied to and accepted an internship with the military that included computer security training. According to Anton, the camp “showed how much more was out there for someone in a wheelchair.... I did not know

what was available for people with disabilities and for veterans.” Andy said, “I wasn’t planning on going back to school anymore and going to your camp got me interested in going back to school and finishing.” And for some, like Emilio, it reenergized their desire to work with communities. Emilio described a long term goal to create a supportive disability community to offer resources in his hometown:

I mean, I think my idea comes from just being a representative or liaison, someone that whether it’s from a desk or an office—whatever it might be. But as long as I’m there and we have a group of people that are actively working and I can help people with disabilities that they don’t know anything about like employment, education, volunteering, and other resources for their needs. All that kind of stuff I think the DRC concentrates on like school and education. So, I’d like to do the same, but for an agency I guess or an organization.

The experiences at camp continued to resonate for participants, and in concrete ways, they were making plans to be ambassadors for veterans with spinal cord injury and disease in other contexts—some in small behaviors and others, like Emilio, with largescale plans for building supportive communities. In the next section, we examine how the positive effects of forming a *unit* fostered a space of authoring in reflective writing, and we explore why opportunities for reflective writing with a community of veterans with SCI/D had resonance beyond the five day outreach camp.

Reflection: “It was more; it was much deeper than I expected.”

One agenda of reflection activities was to promote goal-setting in a safe space so that activities provided a scaffold for looking back, discerning patterns, and moving forward with new understandings. With each story, more qualities of strength emerged. Every day of the camp, we made time for reflecting, writing, and discussion. Every day, participants gained more confidence to respond to each other’s narratives and to emphasize strengths. During follow-up interviews, first at six months and then at 12 months, all campers mentioned the impact of reflection. Eve, a woman with spinal cord disease, explained it best:

What you all put into it was really good. When I went there, I had never, I had no idea, and never expected what I got out of it, what you guys gave us with respect to the different schools, and different activities. It was more; it was much deeper than I would ever have expected it to be. You kind of touched, kind of made us, dig deeper into our personal selves and thoughts.

Eve left motivated by reflective practice. Like others, she shared how surprised she was to feel touched by reflective writing and by sharing them with others. Another camper, Jackson, described the group as experiencing “epiphanies.” He elaborated, “It was kind of nice to see that with some of the people there—how they opened up to the group. I thought the group epiphanies were very well set up and gave us plenty of opportunity to talk with each other and get to open up to each other.” Systematic reflection created opportunities for these veterans with spinal cord injury and disease to affirm their experiences. It seemed that productive group discourse about first-person writing contributed to new understandings.

In this way, reflection provided a scaffold for looking back, discerning patterns, and moving forward with new understandings. Narrating or *figuring* positive identities helped participants creatively apply personal realizations from the camp to other contexts in their lives. James noted, “Personally, not only did it help me physically because it reminds me of things that I did before and will continue doing, but emotionally it helped me quite a bit because I still have a lot going on here, and I’m self-conscious about things of that nature.” For James, during opportunities to reflect with other people with SCI/D, the camp promoted a productive space to work through some emotional needs. In addition to creating a context for expressing emotions, many participants said listening to other camp participants’ experiences and dreams left the deepest mark. Laura noted:

When you see and feel the strength, the motivation, the endurance, from all of the participants, you can see it from the youngest all the way to the oldest. You could get different perspectives. It was really, really, really cool to know that you’re not alone, you’re not the only person out here. You’re not crazy. There are other people going through the same types of things and they are making it.

Like Laura, participants often remarked on the benefits of reflective writing for promoting a sense of strength and motivation, which was a pattern in the interviews.

Importantly, first-person writing provided a space for re-authored narratives. In particular, according to Porter, the final writing prompt of creating a playlist of songs for “You at Your Best” allowed him to imagine stories as social histories. Composing a playlist became a mechanism for re-authoring his life story and carrying forward his personal and social history. He equated the ability to tell stories to being like a troubadour:

I keep on thinking about the song assignment. I keep on hearing my son say, “Dad, you should’ve put on that one and that one.” Contributing something. I keep on saying, “That would’ve been a great one.”... You hear a certain song and it takes you back to a certain point in time, even to a place. When you’re a storyteller, it’s another euphemism of life telling a story. I figure a troubadour is a storyteller because troubadours are special. They used to go from town to town every day in history carrying history on and keeping it alive, which I think is what you’re doing in your own way.

Opportunities to share stories and reflect upon the meaning of these stories generated new understandings of a situation. Participants felt empowered to do so, and Porter specifically referenced the reflective projects as a factor. He said, “The feeling of just being educated again, even on a small scale, like in the classroom, the projects. It was really interesting to me. It helped me understand that I could do that kind of thing. Confidence and knowledge you can do it. Get out there and do it and find out. I mean, things to look forward to, good options in your life.”

Similarly, Franz spoke to the goal of reflection and described that he generated a new way of thinking that acknowledged his lived experience but did not give way to feelings of disappointment:

There was another thing I thought was really good—the classes you guys had where we each took time to reflect on ourselves, our injury, our goals, our strengths because that's something the person in the chair doesn't think about. At least I didn't until I got back into school. I really felt my role was being in a chair until the day comes that I get to die. And it doesn't start off that way, but slowly your world closes in on you over time. And you do less, and less, and less, and your world gets smaller, and smaller, and smaller. And during those introspective looks at yourself and what it is you wanted out of life because the thing I learned is just because I'm in a chair doesn't mean I can't do the things I always wanted to do.

Porter and Franz each illustrate how participants of the camp continued to see themselves as carrying stories and personal histories forward. Consistent with figured worlds (Holland et al.), these stories become an opportunity to re-author meaning and to promote resilience (Hartley).

Writing With/Writing Forward

It was partly the reflection prompts, partly identities as veterans with SCI/D, and partly the unique social space distinct from typical home life for these veterans that coalesced into a remarkably supportive context, where writing and discussion moved us collectively through a trajectory of reflection on past events, writing about those events, sharing them, and then setting goals for future contexts. The reflective prompts of the writing group sustained a twofold engagement, where writers narrated stories about selves in action, thus constructing identities, while a group of veterans responded to narratives with insights to carry forward. An important layer emerges in these imagined, co-constructed narratives. The cacophony of voices, as defined by Bakhtin, represents a complexly interwoven psychic-social space that “fills personal authorship with social efficacy” (Holland, et al. 272). According to Holland and her coauthors, “Vygotsky's understanding of play is crucial to this argument. Just as children's play is instrumental in building their symbolic competencies, upon which adult life depends, so too social play—the activities of free expression, the arts and rituals created on the margins of regulated space and time—develops new social competencies in newly imagined

communities” (272). These play worlds rehearse a disposition that comes to permeate actions in everyday life. It became apparent that the five-day outreach camp at The University of Arizona evolved into a space for “free expression.” In a tangible way, the veterans’ writing group in this outreach project sustained a context for narratives to circulate as both intrapersonal stories and durable public discourses.

For the participants, many describe the activities of the camp as creating a type of free expression, of making worlds that also developed new roles or imagined selves to carry forward to future contexts. Participants described the importance of sharing stories with other, which helped to identify specific strategies to model in their own lives. The benefits of sharing stories in trusted community align with research on recovery to injury and disease in rehabilitation counseling (see Williams, et al.). The intersection of disability and military experience made the five-day outreach program unique. The structured reflection activities allowed participants to recognize historical and cultural shared resilience practices that can be brought to bear in different settings, so as to gain dexterity with applying these practices in current and future contexts (see Miller; McGeary; White, et al.). Equally relevant was the process of self-authorship through identities in practice. Cole, for instance, explained how the experience of reflecting and writing in the group impacted him. He described, “Everybody sees themselves as somebody. And so, you do your best. We’re not saying you’re out on the street as nobody. I just try to make sure everybody feels they’re special. And you guys did that.” Participants needed to be valued, Cole implies, and the UA outreach camp for veterans with SCI/D created a space to be valued. Reflective writing was essential for capturing this experience and for facilitating this meaning-making process. Re-authored narratives became opportunities to find strengths. These voices coalesced to say, powerfully, that shared reflections reaffirmed one’s sense of self and value in the social world.

CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD WITH VETERANS

Initially, during the five-day outreach camp for veterans with SCI/D, project coordinators planned to emphasize adaptive sports with minor activities in reflective writing, but there were days when, after lunch, participants wanted to remain in the classroom to share reflections

even though they would be late for the next sport activity. The voices of these veterans with spinal cord injury and disease confirm Hinton's assertion that writing environments must be flexible to allow veterans moments to reflect and to share experiences while also being respectful and attuned to their values. To support veterans is to respect their rich, cultural experiences. Hinton argues that composition instructors can better support veterans if we consciously make visible the cultural knowledge shared across "their military, educational, professional, and rhetorical experiences."

Re-authored narratives, it seems, afforded strategies for thinking through prior experiences and imagining future roles. The benefits of reflective writing described by the veterans resonate with findings in Hinton's qualitative study. She proposes that writing curricula should embrace veterans' abilities to reflect on previous experiences "and connect those prior experiences to current successes and failures." With reflective writing, however, it's important to be goal-oriented and to foster productive discourse that functions to abstract principles from a prior situation to different contexts. The veterans in our project reminded us that opportunities to reflect and abstract new understandings from previous experiences is fundamental to the process. Second, it's important to allow student veterans to choose topics of reflection. Cleary & Wozniak argue that "writing projects that are personally meaningful as well as goal-oriented" are imperative for veterans in transition. In the same way, reflection can provide the most appropriate curriculum of flexibility and openness to create personal meaning when it calls for figuring worlds that rehearse positive identities.

Because of the profound feedback about camp from the participants, we want to highlight aspects of reflective writing for subsequent veteran writing groups. One lesson is creating an environment that privileges veterans' cultural ways of knowing, using these experiences for activities of reflection, writing, and discourse, which is in line with other scholarship on veterans' writing groups (see Baxter Magolda; Hinton; Schell). Project coordinators learned that veteran culture was an important identity affiliation, and it was beneficial to embrace this cultural knowledge. Respect for military discourse helped to construct a collective identity among participants and functioned both as a

common dialect and as a means to affiliate with and embody values of loyalty and commitment in military experiences (see Demers; Hall). Hinton argues that student veterans exhibit a strong “collectivist identity,” and our experience with this camp demonstrated that the collectivist identity can be harnessed for effective veterans’ writing groups. So, too, Cleary and Wozniak suggest that “writing teachers can use veterans’ collaborative inclination both to support veterans in their classes and to value veterans.”

A second lesson from the camp is specific to veterans with disabilities: what made the outreach project unique was the intersection of disability and military experience. Schell warns those interested in establishing veterans writing groups should understand that “writing’s effects must be presented in a complex and multi-faceted ways, and veterans’ own aims and purposes must be paramount.” In our outreach camp, it was essential to draw from a social model of disability in previous research to resist or temper negative discourses informed by ableism and to situate disability as experienced complexly and differently across contexts (see Conyers; Longmore & Unmansky; Smart). As stated before, the context at University of Arizona could support multi-faceted aims of veterans with SCI/D because of collaborations between student veterans’ center, the department of disability and psychoeducational studies, and the writing program. All were especially relevant for creating a supportive social situation where veterans with disabilities could respond effectively to cultural norms. Aspects of the reflective writing, however, could be adapted to other sites with an equally robust partnership. We argue that building upon veterans’ experiences requires affirming military culture and, when necessary, disability culture as “linguistic and cultural-historical repertoires” that offer resources from which to make meaning (Gutiérrez & Rogoff 22). To cultivate resources for meaning making, we believe in activities of free expression that re-author narratives through reflection, first-person writing, and productive discourse *with* communities.

APPENDIX: REFLECTIVE WRITING PROMPTS

- (1) Set goals for the immediate future.
 - a. What do you want from this workshop?
 - b. What do you want from this semester?

- (2) Reflect on an event when you were at your best.
 - a. Write detailed narrative of event.
 - b. Share with a partner.
 - c. Partner describes qualities demonstrated in the narrative.
 - d. Share in large group.

- (3) Carried Dreams. Setting longer term goals for one or two roles in your life.
 - a. Participants identify their important life roles and set goals.
 - b. They narrate success at one or two of these goals using qualities defined during You at Your Best Reflective Writing.

- (4) Reflect on the goals set for the workshop or semester.
 - a. Reflect on tasks of the immediate semester or workshop.
 - b. Assess the goal setting and make plans for the future.

- (5) You at Your Best Playlist.
 - a. Design a Playlist as a theme for "You at Your Best."
 - b. Reflect on and describe how the playlist tells a story of "You at Your Best" to motivate you in future contexts.

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