

Stealth Veterans and Citizenship Pedagogy in the First Year Writing Classroom

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This essay supplements previous studies on effective strategies for instructing veterans in the first year writing classroom. Those studies typically focus on students who identify as veterans, but there are many veterans entering American universities who do not reveal their past military experiences. This essay explores one approach of developing a first year writing course that responds to the experiences of “stealth” veterans while simultaneously meeting the educational needs of all the students. I contend that a rhetorical education approach to writing instruction allows veterans to connect their writing with both citizenship and their former military service, and may reduce the divide between veteran and non-veteran students. I focus on how a citizenship pedagogy could allow veterans to see a stronger purpose for their academic work and to develop an understanding of how citizens can make decisions through inquiry.

Just a year after deploying to the Middle East for the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, I returned home to Pittsburgh and ended my active duty career of nearly eleven years in the Navy. I was disoriented to say the least. Initially, I noticed how removed

many civilians were from what was happening in the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan and how little they knew about the military itself. Some people seemed more concerned about who was winning American Idol than how many Americans, Afghans, and Iraqis were dying in the two wars. Unfair assessment? Perhaps. But in 2004, I felt that only fellow veterans and I were “conscious.” I felt we were the only ones who were aware that life and death decisions were taking place every minute and that those decisions affected the lives of many people we knew and served with. In my mind, many civilians were like zombies, the walking unaware, staggering from reality show to reality show and preoccupied with things that really didn’t matter. I will not speak for all veterans, but I believe that sentiment is similar for many of us, including the veterans in your classroom. Real or imaginary, I always felt a divide between the civilian world and the military.

That divide seemed even wider when, a few months after leaving active duty, I pursued a graduate degree in creative writing at the University of Pittsburgh. I was attracted to the program because it required graduate literature courses as part of the creative writing curriculum. Not only did I want to write like Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison, I wanted to study their work, too. I quickly discovered that an MFA program is about as far away environmentally as you can get from active duty military life. I was excited to be in this new world, but I was definitely an outsider. My fellow graduate students dressed differently, ate different foods, and spoke differently. I often remark that my first language was African American Vernacular English, but I also had become fluent in Navy Military discourse. It is a discourse heavy on dark humor, clichés, and acronyms. For example, “HM3 Jones said to go into PRIMS and fill out the PARFQ before the PRT next week.” In reading that sentence, a person in the Navy would know Jones’ job in the military and about how long he has served. The Navy member would also know the computer program used to fill out specific health readiness form that is required before taking the physical fitness test. Military discourse crams as much information as possible into the minimal amount of words and sentences. This is intended not only to maximize efficiency but also to ensure that military personnel who joined out of high school can fully grasp the information. But my comfort with military discourse also led to my feeling like an outsider in the classroom. There is a

considerable gap in the types of writing that take place between the military and academia.

When I began my graduate program, the quality of my writing when compared to that of my fellow graduate students was atrocious. Ten years had passed since I earned my undergraduate degree, and academic writing was a distant memory. My reentry into academic writing was a graduate level literature course I took the first semester of my MFA program, and it was a disaster. My paragraphs were too short, and I did not provide enough detail to support my arguments. To say the least, the class was a struggle, and I came close to quitting graduate school after earning less than stellar grades the first semester. In addition to my writing struggles, the academic vocabulary confused me. The professor and other graduate students were speaking in English but none of the words made sense to me. What did they mean by “scaffold,” “public sphere,” and “sublimity?” And I wondered who is this Foucault fellow, and why do my classmates keep saying his name? Not only did I feel lost in the class, but I also struggled to stay engaged in classroom conversations because they did not seem connected to events or discussions happening in the outside world. Despite my struggles in graduate school, I refused to ask for help. I did not want to be identified as the “military guy” who couldn’t hack it in the classroom. In fact, I resisted the military identity altogether. Initially none of my fiction writing included any military stories. I wanted to blend in, to be a stealth veteran.

A stealth veteran is a veteran who does not identify as such in the classroom because he or she does not want to be objectified as a veteran, be perceived somehow as less than whole, or be requested to tell war stories. Drawing from the research of DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchel, Ann Shivers-McNair writes that some veterans simply want to be part of the community and avoid uncomfortable conversations with classmates (224). I also suspect that some student veterans want to put their military past behind them and assume a new outward identity as a student and a civilian. That was the situation for me, and it was a feeling that I carried throughout graduate school. However, my military past still informed my academic choices, and it was a major reason why I decided to pursue a doctorate in rhetoric and composition. There seemed to be more “order” in this area

of English studies, and it offered a way to directly connect course material with current events. But more importantly, by studying and teaching rhetoric and composition, I felt that I could give back to other veterans and nontraditional students returning to the academic classroom. This work would be another way to serve.

My personal experiences in graduate school influenced my approach when I began teaching first year writing at the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) in Pittsburgh, PA. I wanted to design a first year writing course that met the writing needs of all students but that would also have special appeal to any veterans in the class. In my own teaching, I never ask if anyone is a veteran. I respect the fact that someone may not want to share with the whole class that they served in the military. On the first day of class, after I share my military background, some veterans self-identify during class introductions. Others may wait until the end of the semester to share with me their former military affiliation. Even if my students do not identify themselves as veterans, I can usually spot the stealth veteran by their punctuality, classroom discipline, or the vocabulary they use in their writing.

The central point in my pedagogical approach to teaching writing has been to focus on course content connected to real-world issues outside of the classroom – to see writing as a form of citizenship. Michael Hale asserts in *Radical Teacher* that teaching the immigration debate in his composition classroom provided his students “the opportunity to develop their writing skills by confronting a demanding issue that was being discussed in their homes, in their places of worship, in their local and national newspapers, and in the streets of their community” (1). He terms it “socially conscious purpose-driven writing” (Hale). Along those lines, I wanted my class to become a space for inquiry, deliberation, and action on arguments taking place in the local community. This issue-centered approach stems from my experience of feeling alienated in the classroom and wondering why some of my instructors were reluctant to connect the material in our graduate courses to discussions or debates outside of the classroom.

Following Carnegie Mellon University’s Interpretation and Argument course structure for their English 101, I designed a course that

focused on whether or not Marcellus Shale natural gas drilling known as hydrofracking should be allowed in Western Pennsylvania. This debate was very heated when I first developed the course in 2011, but not much was known about the hydrofracking process at that time. I centered the course on developing writing skills, but I also asked students to fully engage in contributing to conversations taking place outside of the classroom, and to work together in deliberating over the various positions surrounding the issue. This process shrinks the divide between veterans and civilians while allowing them to think and write critically and analyze a civic issue that directly affects them.

CREATING A CITIZENSHIP PEDAGOGY

With the aid of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, more veterans are enrolling at community colleges than at any other type of institution for higher education (Corley). According to CCAC's website, 94% of our graduates live and work in western Pennsylvania. This means that veterans are not only enrolling in community college but many of them are likely to stay in the area when their education is completed. Veterans are already a part of communities in which new ideas and perspectives need to be heard. These students, through their jobs, families, and social groups, are already living what ancient educators called "*vita activa* -- the active life" (Enoch 5). Not only are veterans participating in their community's events, they are also voting in higher percentages than nonveterans. According to the US Census Bureau, "Seventy percent of veterans cast a ballot in the [2012] election, compared with 60.9 percent of nonveterans" ("FFF: Veteran's Day").

Since my institution is a *community* college, students should take an active role in the conversations concerning the local community. Therefore, I think it is important that the issue chosen as the topic of my writing course should have a direct impact on my students' lives and communities. The whole course can be developed around this single topic. Veterans and civilian students alike can become active in an important local issue. Analyzing and deliberating a local issue like the risks and benefits of Marcellus Shale drilling in Western Pennsylvania enabled my students to more readily identify the stakeholders (some of which they knew personally), to recognize

the locations being discussed, and to find local outlets through which to enter the conversation. I call this a citizenship pedagogy.

To clarify what I mean by citizenship, I draw from Robert Asens's idea that citizenship is "a mode of engagement" (190), and from William Keith and Paula Cossart's view that citizens can simultaneously "enable or embody citizenship" through a set of deliberative, communicative, and discursive acts (46). Viewing citizenship in this manner allows for citizenship to be seen not only as a specific act such as voting but also as a "process that may encompass a number of different activities" which can include writing and communication activities in the classroom (Asen 195). I argue that citizenship in the classroom means writing, speaking, deliberating and participating in conversations and decisions that affect the community. A citizenship pedagogy is grounded in the notion that writing should engage issues outside of the classroom. The mere fact that students are deliberating over and forming arguments about public issues that affect their community is an act of citizenship.

Although I am labeling my approach "citizenship pedagogy," we do not discuss the word citizenship in my class. In the first week of class, I write the word community on the blackboard and have the students write their own definition of the word. We then spend the entire class period trying to come to a consensus on a definition that the entire class can agree to use for the duration of the semester. This exercise serves a dual purpose: first to try to get everyone involved in the class discussion, and second, to get students to begin thinking critically about a concept that they may previously have taken for granted. Often the conversations converge on the question of whether or not community simply means the neighborhood in which one lives, or also includes the activities in which one participates. For instance, a single mother argued in class that the low-income neighborhood where she lived was not her "community" because she did not associate with anyone there and did not involve herself with any neighborhood activities. The argument some made in response to her was that because she lived in that neighborhood, she was still a part of that community. In the end, the class recognizes that people belong to multiple communities including neighborhood, work, school, and even digital communities. I also add to the discussion that our

classroom is now a community and that we should try to be respectful of one another. This idea on its surface may be initially difficult for some veterans in the class to accept because we often see ourselves as separate from civilians even when we are no longer directly active in military communities. Nevertheless, I continue to reinforce the idea that our class is operating as a community throughout the semester.

This dynamic conversation on establishing a class definition of community is then supplemented by having the students read an excerpt from Sharon Crowley and Michael Stancliff's, textbook, *Critical Situations: A Rhetoric for Writing in Communities*. The authors define community as the place "where our strongest commitments lie. It is where we have our closest connections, our greatest pleasures, and our most serious problems" (8). It is that last clause that we most often have to add to our class definition and which, for me, is the exigence of the course. How does a community discuss, resolve, or address "our most serious problems" or what Crowley and Stancliff call "critical situations?" This is the gateway to discussing the word "critical" and its definition as being a "the practice of inquiry and analysis." It is through these initial conversations that I could reach any stealth veteran in the class to help her or him see that this course will discuss "serious problems" and perhaps offer solutions that could benefit a variety of stakeholders. Our work as veterans often involves helping people and helping solve complex problems.

The civic issues focus I adopted is also connected to Jessica Enoch's definition of rhetorical education where she "equates rhetorical education with any educational program that develops in students a communal and civic identity and articulates for them rhetorical strategies, language practices, and bodily and social behaviors that make possible their participation in communal and civic affairs" (Enoch 8-9). The rhetorical skills are developed for a specific purpose – to engage with a civic issue and to extrapolate from that engagement rhetorical moves that can be applied to other situations. Likewise, military training is designed to prepare service members to be able to perform a specific task. Rhetoric can provide a focus on the process of discovering, making, refining, delivering, and listening to messages, whether they are oral, written, visual or digital, all of which is important to citizenship. Deliberating with fellow classmates over

key issues is just as important to citizenship as writing, speaking or voting on an issue.

In my classroom, I have found that a rhetorical education approach to writing instruction allows veterans the option to connect their writing on citizenship with their former military service, which is one of the highest forms of civic commitment. This approach echoes the classical rhetoric ideas of Isocrates and Quintilian. These classical aims of rhetorical education are highlighted in the Mt. Oread Manifesto where William Keith and Roxanne Mountford assert that,

We seek a world in which Citizens recognize the limits and possibilities of a given mode of communication for their purpose and the needs of the audience and situation...and average citizens can ask productive questions of politicians, employers, business and community leaders, and each other, as fellow citizens. ("The Mt. Oread Manifesto on Rhetorical Education 2013" 3)

A rhetorical approach can help ease veterans into the academic classroom. Mallory and Downs have written of the difficulty that veterans have in entering the academic discourse community. They argue "that it is not only veterans' positions that change in entering college, but their language and discursive knowledge" (Mallory and Downs 54).

Since the students were writing their essays on local issues, I was well aware of the potential political nature of the course and how that might affect my students and the work we were doing together. I am ever mindful of Maxine Hairston's declaration that the social goals of the teacher should not be placed before the educational needs of the student (476). Her belief is that the first year writing class is not a place for politics and ideology and that the focus should remain on students improving as writers. In contrast to Hairston's view, James Berlin argues that every teacher and every classroom practices an ideology. He states, "Every pedagogy is imbricated in ideology, in a set of tacit assumptions about what is real, what is good, what is possible, and how power ought to be distributed" (135). In response to both of those composition theorists, I practiced what I call the ideology of neutrality during classroom discussion. This meant

keeping my personal beliefs on the local issues to myself while still making sure multiple positions were being discussed during the discussion. In other words, I was more interested in students making a well-constructed argument than what position on the issue the students took. Having said that, I still debate with myself whether or not this is the best approach because my students were always asking me what my position was on the issues. Nevertheless, my primary focus was on assessing students' writing abilities and following the first year composition outcomes that were developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators.

Three key features I used to develop a writing course focused on citizenship include the following:

1. **Choosing a local issue with multiple viewpoints.** Veterans, like all students, need to know how their work in the classroom *matters* outside the classroom. Mike Rose in his article "Reclaiming Education" talks about working with Vietnam veterans and refusing to develop a course around grammar. Rose focused on teaching four skills to the veterans: "summarizing, classifying, comparing, and analyzing" (11). To accomplish these goals, he often connected academic articles with more common sources such as magazine and newspaper articles. For instance, Rose describes how veterans used theories developed by Sigmund Freud to analyze why a person committed a murder as described in the local paper (15). I took a similar approach of connecting the classroom material with the larger community.

Since most of the students who attend CCAC live and work in Western Pennsylvania, they have more at stake in decisions that affect that region. Although the college is set in urban Pittsburgh, the students are from very diverse backgrounds, including suburban settings. Therefore it was important to choose an issue that could affect them either directly or indirectly. As mentioned above, I chose the debate over whether or not Marcellus Shale drilling should be allowed in Western Pennsylvania. Stakeholders attached to this issue included environmentalists, hunters, fishermen and women, labor unions, municipalities, school districts and many others. Of course the veterans were among these stakeholders, along with the rest of

the students. Just like in the military, the students were able to see themselves as being part of something larger than themselves.

The Marcellus Shale debate was beginning when I first designed the course, so I was able to squeeze two semesters and one summer session out of this important issue before it was clear that drilling/fracking was indeed going to take place in the state. The following year, the op-eds I had used in the course had become dated, and conversations about fracking had shifted in other directions. However, I do believe a local connection can be made to any larger national conversation that is taking place. Other topics for my classes included *Weapons on College Campuses in Pennsylvania* and the *Rising Costs of Pennsylvania Colleges*. An idea I have for a future class is the arguments/discussions of Syrian refugees being relocated to the local area.

2. Engaging credible multimodal sources – To help situate students in the topic and a range of sources, I provided op-eds, film trailers, industry commercials, political speeches, and website links on hydrofracking, including a dramatic production about the Marcellus Shale debate that was produced by the Program for Deliberative Democracy. Initially, my reasoning for doing nearly all of the research to set up the topic was to allow students to concentrate on improving their writing. Many students placed in English 101 had gone years without being in an English classroom, and their writing needed considerable attention. In addition, as community college students, their school work was balanced with full-time jobs and raising families. Since teaching those initial classes, I have involved the students in assembling reading materials, asking each student to find one source to share with the whole class.

Despite my efforts to remain “neutral” and balance sources on the topic, one of my students pointed out that a majority of the newspaper sources used for the course were from what was considered by some as the city’s liberal leaning paper. I remedied that concern in subsequent classes by providing equal amounts of sources from the city’s other newspaper.

3. Creating scaffolded assignments: The students were required to complete four major writing assignments and to give a group

presentation, moving from summarizing to analyzing to arguing to contributing to a group presentation.

- **A Summary:** students summarized a number of distinct arguments and synthesized these articles into a coherent discussion of an issue and problem. Reading and summarizing opposing arguments deepens students' knowledge about the issue.
- **An Argument Analysis:** students explained, in their own words, another writer's argument. I introduced the students to Toulmin's Model of Argumentation, Aristotle's three appeals, and Lloyd Bitzer's "Rhetorical Situation" so that they would have a framework and a vocabulary with which to analyze the texts. This also provided them with a starting point from which to write their own arguments. I expected the students to have difficulty with the language, vocabulary, and concepts of Bitzer's article which many of them did. But I wanted to use the essay as the starting point for students to begin thinking about writing as a way of affecting decisions.
- **A Conversation Contribution:** students drew from the course readings and class discussions to write their own argument that contributed to the Marcellus Shale debate. By this time in the course, they were fully immersed in the conversations and wrote very compelling papers drawing from multiple sources. Some of these were the best essays I had read in a first semester writing course. As Rose noted in his research, veterans can grasp academic concepts and theories when they are used to analyze real-life situations outside of the classroom.
- **Entering the Conversation – group presentation:** Each student was placed into a group and tasked with developing a strategy for where and how to offer their contribution to the larger community conversation.

The first two major assignments are “scripted,” meaning I am very specific in telling the students what I want to see in their written assignments. This format helps veterans, in particular, to ease into the discourse community. Angie Mallory and Doug Downs write that “in military discourse everything is scripted: how beds are made, pots are cleaned, missiles are loaded on airplanes: what an off-duty enlisted soldier does when meeting an off-duty officer in an off-base supermarket” (59). These military scripts remove any ambiguity about what is expected from the military member.

For instance, my first assignment was designed to both ease the students into and to provide a rhetorical approach to writing. The purpose of the first writing assignment was to ground the assignment in context in order achieve “rhetorical clarity” which means that students should be able to know the “subject, audience, purpose, and form of their work” (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 33). The format of the following assignment is derived from Duerden, Garland, and Helfers’s “Profile assignment:”

Major Assignment# 1: Critical Situation: You have just received a phone call from your elderly relative. Several people have knocked on her door asking her for a donation and to sign a petition to keep “some sort of drillers” out the area. She refused to sign the petition, but she wants you to gather information about Marcellus Shale and explain why this is issue “is such a big deal with folks.” All of her neighbors are talking about it.

Solution: In an internet search you discover an Op-Ed in the Pittsburgh Post Gazette titled “The bottom line on Marcellus Shale” <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/09200/984698-109.stm>. With this article as your primary source, you decide to write a summary of the arguments connected to Marcellus Shale drilling.

Purpose: Your purpose in this paper is to inform your relative about the current debate on Marcellus Shale drilling and the issues involved in the discussion.

Audience: Your audience is your relative and her neighbors that

may read the document. Since you are writing for audience, you may have to define unfamiliar terms regarding Marcellus Shale

Constraints: Be sure to consult our textbook/handout on summarizing.

Students in the class may have had family members or friends who faced this kind of scenario. In fact, I had one student whose grandfather received an offer from a drilling company to drill on his land. It is this type of citizen stakeholder I wanted my students to have in mind when completing this writing assignment.

Another significant component of my course was group work. In the military, one often thinks in terms of unit goals and not in terms of individual achievement. Therefore I agree with numerous rhetoric and composition scholars who argue it is important to have group work in the classroom. Galen Leonhardy notes the importance for veteran students as well. He observes that “Small groups seem to facilitate class discussions, which allow veterans to establish in-group relationships and non-veterans to ask questions—questions that some students deeply long to have answered” (346). Group work not only encourages veterans to interact with their classmates in a productive manner, it also helps them to learn from other writers.

I accomplish group work in three ways. First I have students read each other's drafts before the final assignment is due. On establishing peer editing groups, Leonhardy notes small groups can offer additional support to veterans by allowing them “to have their work read, quite often for the first time” (346). This small group activity is not unfamiliar to veterans in their former military lives. Study groups are often used by service members when preparing for military tests such as promotion exams or service related tests. Peer editing groups also give students insight into each other's ideas on the civic issue. One student wrote, “I read in someone's essay, something that I had never even considered; if Pennsylvania drills more it could create enough natural gas to sell to other countries and possibly use the proceeds to decrease the national debt.” This comment shows how peer editing can also serve as an informal deliberative forum.

Second, I introduce the students to collaborative planning as defined by Linda Flower in *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing* - which helps them become aware of themselves as writers and situate writing as a problem-solving activity (Flower). Collaborative planning is done in the early stages of writing their long essays to stimulate their metacognitive awareness as writers and to guide their planning process. To create this awareness, a writer can use what I call a M.A.P. (metacognitive awareness planning) checklist. The checklist is a list of questions designed to stimulate a writer's thinking about what he or she plans to do as they are writing the essay. Some questions may include

What will be the most interesting part of the essay?

What are my assumptions about this project?

What are my expectations for this assignment?

The idea for checklists stemmed from my time in Navy flight school where we had to memorize and use various checklists when starting, operating, and shutting down a naval aircraft. These checklists were not simply step-by-step procedures to be followed without thinking; but rather, these checklists helped aviators to remember how the aircraft operates and how its system functions. Accordingly, a pilot could handle an emergency procedure much more accurately because his or her mind has already been "primed" when going through these checklists during the pre-flight brief and aircraft start up. Although writing an essay is not the same as flying a multi-million dollar aircraft, the premise is the same: having a checklist to help the writer plan her or his task. Many veterans would be familiar with using checklists. This sort of assignment that provides specific questions for student to ask each other offers a way to stimulate conversation between civilian and vet that concentrates on the assignment at hand while simultaneously establishing a classroom relationship between veteran and civilian.

The final group work activity is that students are grouped together based on having the same position on the issue. Each group then develops a specific way to have their position on the issue enter the conversation outside of the classroom. They must give a presentation on the method of dissemination they choose for "entering the

conversation” on the issue. This assignment is often the most popular with the students, including the veterans. My students have developed Facebook pages, composed and submitted op-ed essays, developed informative videos, and actively participated in issue-specific blogs. One notable example was when a group opened a forum for discussion on the website GoMarcellusShale.com. One of the students attempted to open a critical-rational discussion on the drilling debate. However, other members of the site did not accept his “neutral” stance and accused the students of having an ulterior motive. In the excerpt below, R.I. was the student in my class:

Reply by **F.J.** on December 16, 2011 at 9:08pm

Wow my first reaction - smell bait + see troll = move on. Truly state your aim, R.I. I do not believe you are «looking for constructive criticism». You have a motive, why not be honest.

Reply by **R.I.** on December 17, 2011 at 2:50pm

I believe I did truly state my aim, F.J. I only want to stimulate critical thinking and rhetoric from my readers,» is my goal clearly stated. I am looking for constructive criticism but I have yet to receive any from any of my readers, your post included.

Reply by **F. J.** on December 17, 2011 at 4:11pm

You are not “stimulating critical thinking” you are looking to debate - huge difference. You have a point of view. State it clearly. Clearly state what **your** desires are with regard to your question. You are not fooling the majority here. Say what you really want!

You will convince no man of any one thing. You can only present them with facts and they choose to accept or reject them. State your facts, back them up and move forward.

What is your point with regard to fracking and do not repeat «to stimulate critical thinking», just say it.

If you cannot state I am for it or against, your play here is clear.

Good luck, may God bless you.

For this genre, the student did not present a “believable appearance” to the other members of the blog because he used academic discourse (Hauser 77). Although he wrote a persuasive piece in the class, he simply wanted to hear other perspectives from the blog participants. This student was not the only student to use academic discourse in the realm of social media. Other students cut and pasted large chunks of their essay to their Facebook walls. Because of these instances, I reemphasized, in subsequent classes, the importance of knowing your audience and of how writing style must be changed when using certain social media platforms.

What was more important with this group assignment was that the students were sharing their work outside of our classroom. This was often done with friends and family. Here is an excerpt of a student who gave his perspective on Marcellus Shale to a friend.

After writing my papers for this class on Marcellus Shale drilling, I am convinced that there are risks, and safety factors that surround the whole process. My friend from high school Josh works for Marcellus Shale...Since high school Josh has worked several different jobs. He opted not to go to college. He seemed very enthusiastic about the job he has with them...We sat for hours talking about his job, went back and forth about the good things and the bad things that come with drilling for Marcellus Shale gas. I tried to explain to him how it can harm the air we breathe, the water we drink, and how the process creates methane gas which is so bad for the environment. I even tried to sell him on the alternatives that are out there such as hydro-power, wind power and solar power. (S.M. reflection essay).

S.M. tries hard to persuade his friend to change his attitude about Marcellus Shale. He used what he learned in the class to argue a position. Even though the friend’s mind is not changed, S.M. is contributing to the larger conversation on Marcellus Shale.

I also believe this group assignment worked well for some veteran students in the course because they were grouped with students who held opinions similar to their own on the community issue, which could foster their willingness to participate in group activities. In addition, veterans could contribute to the success of the group by tapping their leadership and teamwork skills (Morrow and Hart 43). However one of my veteran students did not like this final group project at all. Unfortunately, he was placed in a group where some members failed to do their part. He wrote,

I think that this project was a good experience to end the semester with theoretically. The semester from start to finish evolves into expressing an opinion through a certain vehicle where people will be affected by your words. However, future projects like this should be handled by the teacher, not the group. This means that the teacher should designate a final decision-maker based on age, attendance, grade, and/or experience within each group. Immature and tardy idiots should not be able to share their ideas because they will not be there to follow through. It should be based on team cohesion, not the delusion of an individual who makes it sound real and enticing. And somewhat unexpectedly, I was the first to send an e-mail about our project when a member volunteered to gather and share everything prior to me doing it. There needs to be a strict, centralized management of the group in my opinion, but it was an excellent opportunity to finish. (M.K. reflective essay)

What is interesting about this essay is that this student was a stealth veteran and never revealed to me his veteran status. His use of words such as “team cohesion,” and “strict, centralized, management” indicated to me a military background—a suspicion that I would later confirm after the course was over.

Not all of my veteran students felt the same way about the group assignment. As a rhetoric and composition scholar, I liked to believe that all my students would see this course as a training ground to develop their rhetorical skills before entering a larger community conversation; however, my student J.V., an Iraq war veteran, connected the course to a much more important purpose. His group

decided to construct a detailed letter to the editor to send to the local paper. J.V. writes,

I was reminded about through the submission process is that we live in a country where we can voice our opinions freely, without fear of being incarcerated or persecuted. Having been one who defended these freedoms and rights that this country had, it gave me a renewed gratitude and honor to have taken part in preserving these freedoms, such as something as simple as submitting a letter to an editor. Things that some can take for granted. Ultimately, it wasn't so much the fact that I believe I could make a difference through one essay sent to an editor of a newspaper. What meant most to me is the fact that I and any other citizen of America can send an essay to a newspaper or any other media outlet and freely share their opinion. (J.V. reflection essay)

J.V.'s essay captures the idea of how military service is an important part of citizenship and how civilians who are engaged in civic engagement are showing the greatest support to veterans.

CONCLUSION

Despite some of the drawbacks, I think this course achieved the goal of getting students, both civilians and veterans, working together on issues in their community through writing. In essence, they became *citizen-writers*. In *Pedagogy*, Charles Tryon argues that, "a composition class that nourishes citizenship should convey the connections between the classroom and the so-called real world, which seems to exist everywhere else" (128). More importantly, a citizenship writing course allows veterans, whether they are stealth veterans or not, to see a clear purpose for their academic work and to develop an understanding of how citizens can make decisions through inquiry.

I believe this course played to the strengths of veterans as well as to other non-traditional students because it allowed them to draw upon their life experiences in classroom discussions. Some of the traditional age students clearly benefitted from interacting with veterans and

non-traditional students. Veterans, like other students, will be more engaged in the class discussion and offer insightful information that will be more useful to the other students when they are encouraged to share their thoughts and opinions (Morrow and Hart; Leonhardy). For instance, one non veteran student wrote in her class reflection essay, “my peers came prepared and their perspectives were diverse. I think that stems from the fact that our class, as a whole, was an older group, which is true of most community college courses. I’ve always done better in situations where the maturity level is higher, which is something I rarely found in high school.” Veterans, like any other group, contribute to the diversity of the student body in ways that can benefit everyone in the class.

The course that I have laid out in this essay is a course rooted in my own experiences as a stealth veteran returning to school who wanted to make a stronger connection between academic discussions and important civic issues. I wanted to find a way to help bridge a very noticeable divide between civilian students and veterans who may have seen more of the “real world” than the traditional college student. Understandably, this citizenship approach to teaching writing may give the veterans in the classroom a slight advantage because of their experiences of serving in the military but, as one of my former student veterans shared, it also informs veterans as to how important that service is to their community.

Although I am not certain how this course would be received if taught by a non-veteran professor, if I were to speculate, I think a veteran would still appreciate both the theoretical and practical nature of the course -- a learning environment where, students become informed citizens and are able to speak or write about one particular issue and contribute to a larger conversation. I hope veterans leave the class more confident in their writing abilities and more respectful for their non-military classmates who are also expending considerable mental energy grappling with critical issues. The development of their argumentation skills will benefit veterans and non-veterans alike by helping them learn how to address issues outside of the classroom.

Ultimately, I believe a citizenship writing course is one way for student veterans and, more importantly, civilian students to discuss issues

larger than themselves. I hope that it begins the process of shrinking the military/civilian divide while simultaneously beginning the process of learning to be more effective citizen writers. Ideally, the hope is that students develop analytical and communicative strategies that would be available in their mental toolbox when they discover an issue they care strongly about. I accept that these are lofty goals. As military members, we need more civilians to be engaged in important issues because we are led by and follow the orders of civilians. Therefore, we must have critically informed civilians when it comes time again to decide when and where to send their military in to war. To me, that is the most important issue — citizens in a democracy must be able to analyze and critique information before allowing our representatives to send this nation's women and men off to war.

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