Military Experience and the Arts: 
Bridging the Gap Between Military and Civilian Cultures 
Through Creative Expression and Scholarship

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Abstract
This paper considers the arts as a means of engaging veterans’ military experiences, to help in reframing trauma and helping veterans use their pasts to move into positive futures. The author provides motivations and background on the material and explains the role of the arts in expressing and rendering military experience, before moving into the theory and practice of the arts—especially writing—as a path to healing and acceptance.

Keywords: therapeutic writing; veteran studies; self-narration; higher education; privilege
Slide 1
- Welcome to the conference
- Congratulate the organizers
- Esteem fellow panel members

Slide 2
- Review outline
- Explain emphasis on MEA

Slide 3
- Click through

Slide 4
- Summarize military service
- Describe transition home
- Summarize degrees and coursework
  - Exposure to war literature with PTSD
  - Feminism and identity politics
  - Example of class with privilege exercise
- Teaching philosophy
  - Community Service
    - Group veterans and non-veterans together
    - Draw upon veteran experience
    - Convince non-veterans of impetus
    - Get them to learn by doing
  - Expressivist Composition
    - Inspired by James Pennebaker who says, “Translating important psychological events into words is uniquely human. Therapists and religious leaders have known this intuitively for generations” (165, “Writing about Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process”)
    - Explain fears and distinguish between therapy and therapeutic
    - Processing problem in experiences with VA
    - Writing is processing, and it is a natural part of human development.
    - And it is required in the classroom, job interviews, and daily life whether or not the topic is taboo or not
  - Research
    - How do war veterans, many who have been through a lot more trauma than me, manage to narrative their life experiences or express them through fiction or other creative mediums?
    - What are the natural processes involved?
    - How can I distill these processes for my student veterans and those we work with in Military Experience and the Arts
- Community Service
  - A lot of my course design and teaching falls under the community service category of my CV. Resources are limited. The need is great. I feel as if it is a calling.
Founded Military Experience and the Arts, which I will focus on in detail later, based on the needs presented in my classroom.

It is quickly evolving to an open-access education platform that teaches participants how to narrativize within a support community of fellow veteran authors and artists.

Slide 5
• It started at the first semester I stood in front of a classroom
• They asked me to teach them what had helped me succeed in the classroom.
• I created the Vet-Only Student Success Seminar
• Why is narrative making so important? Is it just an enthusiastic first year instructor’s pet project?
  • No. Being able to successfully discuss who you are and where you’ve been is a part of human development.
  • Being able to discuss your experiences objectively is necessary to succeed in college for student veterans.
• From that course sprang the journal of military experience
• [Pass around copies]

Slide 6
• From the JME and the Vet cohort course came the veterans studies program
• Why would my students opt to publish accounts of war and sacrifice so personal?
• Example of Micah sending his copy home and being able to discuss his postwar self for the first time
• They want to educate the larger public
• The Veterans Studies Program has two aims
  o Provide non-veterans with a multidisciplinary approach to understanding veterans issues
  o Provide veterans with the larger world surrounding their experiences, taking them out of the trenches of their past and into the present where they can find control over memory and the forces that shape identity
• I’m an adjunct. There’s not a lot they can do to me. I will gladly share any of these course syllabi and select assignments with anyone who asks. I WANT to see veterans studies programs spring up all over the country.
• For obvious reasons and because I will be looking for a full time job in about two years

Slide 7
• [Click through]

Slide 8
• I’ve opted to focus on the Military Experience and the Arts organization because it shows the purest example of the theories I draw upon in practice
• MEA began with the JME and exploded with last summer’s MEA Symposium
• Summarize symposium
• Now we have 5 projects [Summarize]
• Each is actively working with veterans and the larger military
• All volunteer, expert authors and educators on board dedicated to helping veterans transition and produce literary quality work
• Skills of veterans entering the workshops varies from published to first time authors
• All are treated the same
• Now for the theory that informs MEA’s work

Slide 9
• I like this example of David Jones because he describes the process of placing his war in parenthesis
  • His story is (A) bracketed off, (B) a deliberate act, and (C) situated within a greater set of parenthesis. (Talk about how bracketing happens at first, but then deliberately joins the selves)
• I also like it within the context of the painting submitted to the JME by Stephen McCall
• Stephen also submitted a poem about his friend committing suicide in the Navy
• I wonder if he was able to bracket off the experience and situate it within the anguish you see in this painting.
• We offer veterans a chance to wade back into the sea of confusing experience they bring with them in the military
• We provide them with the space in which to engage with those experiences at their own pace
• We equip them with the skills needed to shape those experiences into a narrative that fits within the greater set of parenthesis of their lives

Slide 10
• These experiences are not always easy to understand
• It can be difficult to understand your post-war self
• The post-war self comes home to a life created by and for someone else
• Brad Johnson illustrates this point in his story for the first JME
• Matthew Foley explores the political context of his memories through his art
• Community provides the safety in which to venture back and perform the work of self-narration

Slide 11
• Jonathan Shay knows this after working with Vietnam era veterans for decades
• [Read slide]
• Explain illumination work
• Repatriating shards of a fragmented identity—as Foley did in his Illumination piece—is the name of the game
• Understanding this work, discussing it with those brave enough to do it, and entering into a dialogue with the veteran population is our job

Slide 12
• Creative expression, the type we do in our workshops and mentorship through the JME, brings veterans together
• But there are a lot of non-veterans who work with our staff
• The veterans are equally pleased to work with them
• Sometimes it provides a better sense of objectivity for reading their works
• If they can make their points to those who haven’t seen what they’ve seen, they succeed
• [Read slide]
• The work doesn’t end when the vet tells his or her story
• It ends when the story is heard, accepted, and discussed by society as a whole

Slide 13
• The discussion that is most meaningful to me deals with the inability to emotionally experience
  war and other traumatic experiences
• [Explain the paradox of trauma]
• The symptoms of PTSD, I think, as do others, are attempts by the mind to put the veteran back in the physiological and intellectual state of mind that was experienced in combat
• Emotionally, what needs to follow is an experiencing of the traumatic event
• Not a RE-experiencing
• The narrative allows for this work to take place

Slide 14
• As we begin work with our third volume this summer it is important to remember the range of disciplines who can enter the conversation
• Everything from literature to neuroscience, from history to biology
• This is why the VTS program is interdisciplinary
• As Ami Blue says in the introduction to our last scholarly production
• The artwork in this picture, from veteran artist Jessica Dittbenner, is so complex that it invites multiple disciplines
  o The mind of the war veteran looking back
  o The psychology of a child in a warzone
  o The sociological norms and influences upon the child who throws rocks
  o The historical context
  o How the veteran views the issue after understanding the bigger picture

Slide 15
• [Click through]

Slide 16
• In this last section I want to dig a little further into the theory and practice informing this work of self-narration and acceptance
• [Click through slide]

Slide 17
• I am careful to use the word healing
• I have written pretty extensively about my experiences from both creative and scholarly perspectives
• I still deal daily with the symptoms of PTSD
• What we can provide, I think, is control, understanding, and tools for contextualizing the aftereffects of war
• This may or may not be healing
• What I do know is that, if we purport to serve the veteran population through the arts, we have the following duties
• [Read slide]
• Discuss Tif Holmes’s work
Slide 18
- Writing and healing is not knew
- Jonathan Shay famously draws upon the same processes in Greek Literature
- All therapies currently employed by the VA encourage some sort of narrativization of experiences
- But I firmly believe they’re not doing right and, after 7 years of little help form them aside form the introduction of addictive psychotropic drugs into my system, I’m not going to bite my tongue on it anymore
- They’re too overloaded with patients
- They’re skipping the processing part of therapy
- According to Baeger and McAdams, here is how it works
  - Their research, as does the research of others, shows quantifiable outcomes
  - Is writing therapy? Probably. Are college teachers and those without medical degrees going to be slapped with fines for practicing without a license when they assign personal essays or prompts that require students—vets included—to draw upon their life experiences to think critically?
  - I doubt it.
- Anton Kris says there are some things we need to be aware of
  - [Read slide, explain how insecure veterans asked to talk about these things—as they are inadvertently every day—feel]
  - Again, it is a natural part of child development, as Paul John Eakin says, to engage in the autobiographical imperative,“ or a compulsion to record life events. As children “we learn to tell stories about ourselves, and this training proves to be crucial to the success of our lives as adults, for our recognition by others as normal individuals depends on our ability to perform the work of self-narration” (Living Autobiographically, 152).

Slide 19
- Travis, you run a volunteer organization that is specifically focused on creative writing and the arts. How is this useful to academia?
- Why don’t we offer creative writing cohorts to veterans? We know they can provide transformative experiences that will help the participants on a variety of levels
- Incorporate creative writing—along with access to veteran resources—into other courses
- Create veterans studies programs that specifically explains the rationales to non-veterans entering in the VA Health Care career system
- We must learn acceptance
  - We cannot ignore the words of those who’ve served
  - It’s not about accusing those who didn’t serve
  - It’s about welcoming back those who did
  - It’s about creating a community that begins in with the veterans themselves and ends with those veterans rejoining humanity as a whole

Slide 20
- [Do you have any questions?]
Author
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Travis Martin served in Iraq as a sergeant in the 51st Transportation Company. Travis teaches at EKU and is a PhD student at the University of Kentucky researching nineteenth and twentieth century war memoirs. He holds an MA in English from Eastern Kentucky University where he founded a Veteran Studies program that offers a certificate/minor. Most recently, he founded the Military Experience and the Arts Symposium, bringing together more than 100 veterans and volunteers and providing service men and women therapeutic outlets for creative expression.
Military Experience and the Arts

Bridging the Gap Between Military and Civilian Cultures Through Creative Expression and Scholarship

Presentation by Travis L. Martin
Order of March

1. Motivations & Background
   • Vet-Only Student Success Seminar
   • Veterans Studies

2. Military Experience and the Arts
   1. Military Experience
   2. The Arts
   3. Bridging the Gap
   4. Creative Expression
   5. Scholarship

3. Theory & Practice
   1. Healing?
   2. Healing? (Cont.)
   3. Acceptance
   4. How to Apply This?

4. Questions

This acrylic painting by veteran artist Steve Beales entitled “Hope and Fear” was published in the second volume of *The Journal of Military Experience*. 
Part 1: Motivations & Background
Motivations

- Service
- Education
- Pedagogy
- Research
- Community Service
Vet-Only Student Success Seminar

- 3 credit-hour course
- Required for those with developmental needs
- Vet-cohort is optional
- Combines:
  - Basic orientation to college life/resources
  - Exposure to veterans resources (VA, Vet Center, VSO’s, student veteran organization)
  - Study skill refreshers and research techniques
  - Narrative making

Student veterans from the first vet-only student success seminar cohort saluting the colors during the Remembrance Day National Roll Call on November 11, 2010.
Veterans Studies

VTS 200 – Introduction to Veterans Studies

Relational
CDF
PSY
SOC
SWK 440

Institutional
HIS
POL
MSL
PLS 375

Cultural
BEM
ENG
WGS 304

One Course in Each Dimension

Elective
Relational

Elective
Environmental

Elective
Cultural

One Additional Course

VTS 400 – Issues in Veterans Studies

Inter-Departmental Certificate & Associates of General Studies Concentration

Minor
Part 2: Military Experience & the Arts
Military Experience and the Arts

JME

THE VETERANS' PTSD PROJECT

The Blue Falcon
A Journal of Military Fiction

BLUE STREAK
A Journal of Military Poetry
This writing is called ‘In Parenthesis’ because I have written it in a kind of space between—I don’t know between quite what—but as you turn aside to do something ... the war itself was a parenthesis—how glad we thought we were to step outside its brackets at the end of ‘18—and also because our curious type of existence here is altogether in parenthesis (xv).

—David Jones, In Parenthesis (1937)
Experience

“While you fight and suffer and struggle, you are also changing, becoming someone totally different. The harsh and violent realities of war force you to change. Emotions are an inconvenience—they distract you—making you feel and think instead of react. A distracted soldier is a dead soldier.”

—Brad Johnson, The Journal of Military Experience, Vol. 1
The Arts

“The answer does not lie in something that is new or expensive, or once is said, surprising: it lies in community. Vietnam veterans came home alone. The most significant community for a combat veteran is that of his surviving comrades” (33).

—Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*

*The Illumination* process art piece in Fall 2010
Bridging the Gap

“The personal essay asks students to begin a journey into themselves, but the journey will take them ultimately out of themselves and back to a community which can reestablish our common humanity” (198).

—Marian MacCurdy, “From Trauma to Writing: A Theoretical Model for Practical Use”
“Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (91-92).

—Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*
Scholarship

“These scholars, diverse in their experiences and interests, come together here in testimony to the work they do in the real world and to their commitment to translating those realities into textual expression. Though they have never met and though their intentions were different at the outset, they share a tone of optimism about the future of the relationship between the Humanities and our armed forces” (164-65)

— Ami Blue, Scholarship Editor for The Journal of Military Experience, Vol. 2
Part 3: Theory and Practice
Healing?

- We must break down the barriers to expression veterans face so that they may:
  - Organize the fragments of memory associated with traumatic events
  - Reunify fragmented identities that emerges after taking off the uniform
  - Relate their experiences in socially appropriate and meaningful ways to friends, family, and co-workers.
  - Situates where you’ve been with who you are and where you want to go

Veteran artist Tif Holmes’s work illustrates often illustrates the plight of veterans suffering from the invisible wounds of war and the politicization of their image.
Healing? (cont.)

Coherent narratives:

1. Situate the narrative in time, space, and personal context
2. Display elements of an episode system: initiating event, internal response, attempt, consequence
3. Provide accounts of the emotional significance of the story to the speaker
4. Imparts info coherently and within the context the larger life narrative (Baeger and McAdams 74-75)

Vietnam veteran James Hackbarth was one of the more engaged and grateful participants to find community at last summer’s MEA Symposium.
Acceptance

“Attention to punitive unconscious self-criticism soon leads the analyst to recognize that neutrality requires more than silent acceptance, for in the presence of punitive unconscious self-criticism, the analyst's silence is experienced as confirmation of the self-critical attitude” (615)

—Anton O. Kris, “Helping Patients by Analyzing Self-Criticism”
How to apply this?

• Create narrative making opportunities:
  • In existing courses
  • In new courses and academic programs where possible

• Practice acceptance:
  • Through scholarly consideration of the works presented
  • Through dialogue with the veteran authors and artists

• Collaborate, don’t isolate
Questions