

Examining the Motives for Veterans Writing Workshops: Is It Clinical, Political, Instructional, or All the Above?

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Abstract

This paper surveys some of the issues involved with forming a veterans writing group. There appear to be three reasons for starting a veterans writing group: therapy, politics, or instruction, and these intentions often merge. Through interviews with administrators and facilitators of veterans writing groups, I examine these motives in an attempt to show college English teachers the challenges they could face when they move beyond the instructional into the clinical or political.

Key words: veterans, writing workshop motives, teachers English

My chair suggested the idea of a veterans writing group to me after she read about similar workshops at other universities across the country. With her encouragement, Dr. Chris Anderson and I started one at Pittsburg State University in Kansas during the 2010 fall semester, and with the help of Lowell White and Daniele Cunningham, I'm trying it again this spring (2013) for the third time. In 2010, after promoting the workshop on campus and in the local Pittsburg paper, two older male Vietnam veterans and Ms. Cunningham, a creative writing graduate student at the time and an Iraqi/Afghanistan era veteran, showed up at our first meeting. Of the two Vietnam veterans, one, who I'll say more about later, never bothered to come again. The other veteran, who had stage-four cancer that he attributed to the herbicide Agent Orange used to defoliate the jungles of Vietnam, came to our second meeting, but tragically he died before our third. That left Chris, Daniele, and me. We tried to re-establish the workshop in the spring of 2011 but only Daniele remained interested. Daniele has since become one of our co-facilitators.

That spring semester I also applied for sabbatical in the fall so I could research creative writing workshops for veterans. Among other things, I wanted to find out how to boost our turnout. I proposed interviewing administrators and facilitators who ran workshops in other states (e.g., California, Hawaii, Michigan, and Kansas). I was able to interview three people in California, one in Michigan, and one in Kansas. (I ran out of money, so I couldn't go to Hawaii to interview Maxine Hong Kingston.) Basically, I asked my interviewees about attendance, promotion, and pedagogy. Although what I discovered about promotion and attendance was useful for what we tried to do this year, the more thought-provoking answers to my questions dealt with techniques, motives, and pedagogy.

There appear to be three main reasons people start veterans writing workshops:

1. to promote writing for therapy
2. to promote writing for a political agenda
3. to promote creative writing in a workshop setting

Of course, these intentions often merge. In my paper I'll examine these motives in an attempt to understand the problems English faculty at any college might face when they try to extend the borders of their discipline beyond the instructional into the clinical or political. And in my conclusion, I'll reveal what's happening (or not happening) in the group we started this year. As a Navy veteran of the Vietnam War, I jumped at the chance to start a veterans writing workshop. It appealed to me not only as a veteran and a writer but also as a way to fulfill part of my service obligations to the university and the Pittsburg community. Dr. Anderson, my colleague, was new faculty and specialized in creative writing and American literature. The service aspect appealed to him, too, and he had experience working with mentally ill patients, although we both agreed that we were not interested in promoting our workshop as therapy. My specialty is rhetoric and composition. Neither of us felt qualified to run a writing-as-therapy workshop. But we didn't discount the notion that creative writing, be it poetry, fiction, or creative non-fiction, might be therapeutically beneficial to the veterans who joined our group.

Writing as Therapy

Writing as therapy is well-established by academic researchers such as Gillie Boulton (1999, 2012) and James W. Pennebaker (1997, 2004) but it's not without its critics. According to Dr. Rick Lindskog, a psychologist at Pittsburg State, even talk therapy doesn't work for a lot of people who seek counseling. It may work for some, but Lindskog says there is simply no guarantee that one can talk or write her or his way into well-being. "There is research," he told me, "that even suggests people with Post Traumatic Stress could be harmed by pushing them to relive a traumatic event before they're able to handle it" (R.

Lindskog, personal communication, August 16, 2011). Many of the proponents for writing as therapy are themselves writers or poets, such as Fiona Sampson (1999, 2004), with little or no formal academic backgrounds in psychological counseling. Sampson, for example, is recommended reading for writing aides and volunteers at the Hospitalized Veterans Writing Project (HVWP).

The HVWP's mission, according to their website, "is to encourage veterans to write, through the coordinated efforts" of the aides and volunteers. "HVWP's therapeutic writing program," the mission statement continues, "is designed to acknowledge veteran's experiences and build self-esteem through creative expression and possible publication." Publication is made possible through *Veterans' Voices*, published exclusively by HVWP for patients in "VA medical centers across the United States of America" ("Mission of the Hospitalized Writing Project," 2004). You have to be a VA patient to be a part of this writing project. The aides go through a VA orientation, but no formal psychological training is required to work with the patients. I travelled to Shawnee, Kansas, to interview Pris Chansky, Administrative Manager of HVWP and a former newspaper owner and journalist. "A lot of our writers are suffering from PTSD," she told me "and of course they write about that." Pris gave me several copies of their magazine, *Veterans' Voices* to read. The magazine was strictly for VA patients, as Pris told me, "anxious to tell the world who they are and what they think and feel. This mental exercise becomes as important as physical therapy for those involved in the project" (personal communication, August 31, 2011). The type of writing as therapy done by the HVWP seems very close to what Mark Robinson (2000) calls "simplistic versions of therapeutic writing, where the initial 'writing out' is given primacy over re-writing, editing and structuring" (p. 80). At Pris' invitation, I also attended the Veterans' Pen Celebration (October 29, 2011) honoring three veterans who had been published in *Veteran's Voices*. The veterans, a woman, abused domestically by her husband and sexually by her military superiors, and two men who suffered from serious mental illnesses, shared briefly about their lives and their interests in writing but never read what they wrote for the magazine.

Dr. Kathryn Adams, a Professor of English and Coordinator of the Writing Center at Moorpark College in Moorpark, California, holds a master degree in clinical psychology and creative writing and a doctorate in education and works to make her veterans workshop a safe place for sharing. She allows both veterans and family members of current vets to attend her workshop, which is a counseling group approach combined with what sounds similar to the prewriting techniques of D. Gordon Rohman (1965), who once advocated, among other things, the use of meditation before writing. Dr. Adams doesn't like to give direct prompts for writing; instead, she uses guided imagery and asks group members to meditate, quiet their minds, and then focus on a comfortable place: "Sometimes the writing will be based on the guided imagery exercise and sometimes it will be used to allow thoughts to come to the surface." Participants do some writing in class or they can bring something they wrote outside of class to read. They are encouraged to share their work with the rest of the group. She uses Peter Elbow's workshop techniques (1973), so participants are not allowed to criticize each other's work. They're only allowed to ask questions about a piece. Dr. Adams told me her veterans don't have to write about war or trauma, but this technique often leads them to focus on it (personal communication, August 24, 2011). With a degree in clinical psych, she's qualified to be both a counselor and a writing facilitator in her workshop. Unfortunately, most English faculty, are not counselors.

Sandy Brown, who ran a Box Factory for the Arts workshop for veterans using the Amherst Writers and Artists (AWA) method in St. Joseph, Michigan. According to its website, AWA's "philosophy is a simple one: every person is a writer, and every writer deserves a safe environment in which to experiment, learn, and develop craft" ("The AWA Method"). Their pedagogy, adapted from Elbow's expressivist writing theory, is used specifically in writing workshops for prisoners, low-income folk, and veterans. Her workshop could be seen as a bridge between writing as therapy and writing workshops with overt

political agendas. “The healing aspect is in the act of writing, but the focus is always on the writing,” Sandy told me. “Even in creative non-fiction, the narrator is always talked about as if it’s a fiction. So if you’ve got someone who’s looking for writing as therapy, then my kind of workshop is not going to appeal to them.”

Sandy’s interest in the writer as community activist led her to the MFA program at Antioch University in Los Angeles, which emphasizes the writer as an agent of change in their community. Her first semester at Antioch she was assigned Jonathan Shay’s *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994), about combat trauma in Vietnam. In the book, Shay talks about the importance of narrative, being able to tell your story to someone who is non-judgmental and willing to experience the emotions to help those suffering from combat trauma. It sounded a lot like the AWA method to Sandy, and it was the seed for her interest in a veterans writing workshop.

The AWA method uses prompts or exercises to get people started. But they can ignore them if they want. All the writing is done in the workshop. They can read what they’ve written, but the other members can’t offer any suggestions for change or even ask questions. “They respond only to the strength of the piece,” Sandy said. “It’s the core of the AWA method.” At first, she used exercises directly related to grief. “The idea is,” she said, “if people have pain, that’s where their writing is going to go, regardless of what you give them.” But not every exercise she gave to the group was “write about your experience.” And now she wonders if that is why the group failed. “One of the reasons this group didn’t take off may have been the method,” Sandy said. “If the expectations were that people would come in and write about their service, then there may have been a disconnect.” I asked if she thought she was pushing them to write about their trauma, and she said, no, the prompts were more open-ended than that, but some may have preferred more direct prompts (personal communication, September 1, 2012). The workshop started with six people, but dwindled in attendance. The second meeting she had four people, two of whom were new. Then she only had two. Participants came and went, so there was *no sense of community*, a problem Dr. Adams also spoke of in my interview with her.

Writing as Political

Building a sense of community was important to most of the facilitators I interviewed, especially those who had an overt political agenda. Although I didn’t get a chance to interview Maxine Hong Kingston in Hawaii, I researched the *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace* website and picked up a copy of their collected works edited by Kingston. The emphasis on social justice in these groups revolves around the First Precept (“I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life”) and Kingston’s “enlarged” definition of *veteran*: “A veteran could be a woman; a veteran could be a deserter; a veteran could be a civilian who had served in war; a veteran could have been a member of a street gang; a veteran could be a survivor of domestic violence; a veteran could be a peace activist” (Kingston, n.d.). This pedagogy, like the AWA’s and Dr. Adam’s counseling approach, emphasizes Elbow’s workshop methods of meditation and non-critical feedback. Writing prompts are given, but people can write what they want. As admirable as Kingston’s motives are for advocating peace and making the term veteran more inclusive, I have concerns about the number of legitimate war veterans who would be interested in joining a writing workshop at our university in Pittsburg, Kansas, if I read them her First Precept. Further, expanding the definition beyond what it means to be a war veteran, or even a veteran’s family member, could work against building a sense of community in the workshop in my very conservative college town.

Victor Izuna, a poet and an undergraduate who started a veterans writing workshop at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, noticed that veterans were more willing to share something on paper

then they were to talk about their experiences. He believes that having a veteran run the meeting helps it to be more successful, because he or she can relate to the other veterans. “We build trust that way,” he said. Victor served as a combat Marine and fought in Nazaria, Iraq. In 2009, he attended the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences workshop one summer, and was encouraged by poet and Chair of the English Department, Camille Norton, to start his own veterans writing workshop. The William Joiner Center’s mission is “to serve veterans and all victims of war” and to analyze and debate the impact of war on society, the environment, and human beings (“About Us”). Paul Atwood, one of the founding members and now Interim Director, was a marine veteran who became active in the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War (“Meet the Staff”). Victor, who fell in love with the anti-war poems of Wilfred Owen, was deeply affected by the workshop he attended at the Center, but he doesn’t promote any obvious political or therapeutic agenda in his group. “Writing can be therapeutic,” he told me, “because there are psychological benefits. But the word is overused.” The vets read lots of war literature written by veterans, such as Tim O’Brien and Bruce Weigl. Visiting writers are invited to talk to the workshop. Participants spend an hour or two writing in the workshop. “This is what I don’t want to tell you” is one writing prompt he uses. And he encourages participants to keep journals. Victor said, “We encourage anyone to participate who wants to write about war, but only if they’ve been affected by the war, so mainly it’s veterans and their family members” (personal communication, July 28, 2011).

Writing as Instructional

The Writer’s Guild Foundations veterans writing workshops are for vets who want to be professional writers. Writing as therapy is never highlighted, and they have no political agenda. The Guild itself has no set pedagogy for the mentors. They may offer writing exercises, but typically the mentors, all professional writers who donate their time to the workshops, come with their own methods. Kevin Ott, Project Coordinator for the workshops, says, “Therapy is not the focus, but vets are encouraged to use the writing to work through their problems. One vet wrote a zombie movie about American soldiers in Iraq fighting zombies.” They get serious writers, but it’s not a networking process. Veterans come to be better writers so they might become screen or television writers. It’s actually a reciprocal arrangement. Participants get to work with pros, and the Guild gets realistic accounts of war experience, along with service nomenclature and details about what it’s like in a combat zone. The initial workshop only lasts for a weekend—50 vets and 25 mentors. If the veteran can pay for transportation to L.A., the Guild will take care of everything else. All participants have the opportunity to come back for ongoing monthly workshops, usually limited to those vets who are L.A. based. At the time of our interview Kevin told me they had two workshops going simultaneously that began in 2010 and 2011. They didn’t want to combine the two groups because they had their own dynamics, their own sense of community. The whole workshop lasts a year. Some participants make friends with mentors and get further help after the year is up (personal communication, August 2, 2011).

Of all the three motives for starting a workshop, these last two examples, the Writers Guild and Victor’s approach, seemed the most practical for English Department faculty. Kevin even offered the best promotional advice I received. “Be aggressive,” he told me. “Use Twitter and Facebook. Make up flyers and send them to all the American Legion Posts. Contact the state commanders of the posts along with the Veterans of Foreign Wars and Amvets” (personal communication, August 2, 2011). Any pedagogical approach that adheres to writing as therapy seems ill advised for English professors, lecturers, or students who have no training in psychological counseling. Furthermore, motives related to political or therapeutic agendas can deemphasize the instructional aspects of the workshop atmosphere. And workshops that emphasize good feelings over constructive feedback for revision also seem to me

counterproductive to the important critical aspects of the writing process—for the writer and the reviewer of the writer’s work. After surveying two groups of writers—one made up of mental health support service users, and one made up of “plain old” poets—about the usefulness of writing for well-being, Mark Robinson discovered that whatever benefits the two groups gleaned from writing as therapy, “An interest in quality . . . was clearly integral to the process of writing and enhancing well-being,” as seen by the groups’ “high level of agreement” with the survey statement: “Rewriting and drafting helps me work out what I really meant to say” and their disagreement with “I never rewrite my poems or stories” (p. 82). This is not to say that the workshops using Elbows expressivist techniques won’t encourage revision; however, a workshop with a more critical approach to participant writing, perhaps one that uses Lev Vygotsky’s (1986) Zone of Proximal Development to good effect, might be more useful.

As far as workshops with a political agenda are concerned, one can argue, as my old postmodern graduate professors did, that every act of teaching is political. To deny being political is political in itself (à la Sartre’s old saw: choosing not to choose is still a choice). However, in our first attempt at starting a veterans writing group, I may have scared off the vet I mentioned at the beginning of my essay because of my own political biases. Of the two Vietnam veterans who showed up at our first meeting, one was an MP who served in Saigon during the war. He didn’t say much that first meeting, but the other vet, Mike, talked enough for both of them. Without prompting from anybody else in the room, Mike let us know exactly what he thought about Jane Fonda, or as he referred to her, “Hanoi Jane.”

“Most of my vet friends think she’s a traitor,” he said.

“Let’s stick with discussing writing,” I told Mike, “and try to stay clear of political discussions about the war.”

Later, I wondered if my rejoinder somehow had revealed my irritation with his comment. I had been about a mile off the coast of North Vietnam on the USS Hanson when Fonda made her ill-advised peace mission to in 1972. Most of the men on my ship were disgusted with her, but I secretly applauded her clumsy attempts to end a war that neither I nor most my shipmates really supported.

Mike didn’t show up at our next meeting or any of the others we had that spring. I would probably respond the same way if it happened again, but that’s what bothers me about even the hint of politics in our Pittsburg, Kansas, workshop. I don’t want it to get in the way of whatever instructional benefit group members might receive from the workshop. Unfortunately, our current meeting is not going well. Although we opened it up to the immediate family of veterans, and we promoted it aggressively, just as Kevin Ott advised, we only managed to draw two participants: Lisa, a self-described army brat who grew up on bases in America and Europe, and Sean, a psychology professor on our campus and former Marine who was involved in the first Iraqi war. Sean was the former faculty advisor for the now defunct student veterans club on campus. Apparently, returning veterans at our college are of the same ilk as Groucho Marx, who famously said, “I would never belong to any club that would have me as a member.” Even Sean hasn’t been to the last few meetings because of family and school obligations. Lisa is hanging in there, but unfortunately she’s not a veteran.

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