

How Military Veteran Students Write: An Exploration of Writing Pedagogy Effectiveness

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Abstract

Through Post-911 GI Bill benefits, military veterans are flooding college admissions offices and writing classes at rates not seen since the World War II era. According to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, over 1 million veterans attended colleges and universities between 2009 and 2013; and 53.6 percent of veteran students using benefits applied them toward completing undergraduate work at a college or vocational/technical school ("Annual Benefits Report," 2011). Clearly, many writing instructors will likely encounter a military veteran in their classes in the near future. Unlike the majority of first-year and undergraduate writing students, these students bring with them deeply engrained professional training that starkly contrasts with current writing pedagogy.

Contemporary writing curricula teach and engage traditional students in communal writing practices focused on self-exploration and personal meaning-making. However, for the returning military veteran, these strategies may prove problematic. Through training in highly structured environments, they learn to do as instructed, not ask questions, and successfully complete the tasks assigned, with little room for error or personal adaptation. In an incredible culture shock, and in direct contrast with their previous superiors, writing instructors encourage these students to determine strategies that work based on personal preferences, actively avoiding prescriptive writing instruction and shunning the idea of presenting writing as a successive, inflexible process. College writing instructors, therefore, need to ask whether or not current writing pedagogy meets the needs of military veteran students and employs their professional training. Furthermore, what can instructors do to better assist these students as they transition from military to academic training? Thus, this substantial shift in the writing student profile presents an opportunity to re-evaluate current teaching strategies to determine approaches that will more directly tap in to these students' highly developed skills.

This paper responds to Hart and Thompson's call to action (2013) to writing programs and instructors to begin exploring their veteran populations. Seeking a better understanding of the military veteran student's unique training, this paper contrasts current military training materials with practices and approaches in the writing classroom. This paper addresses the assumption that entry-level writing students succeed in an environment where they are free to explore flexible writing strategies and methods, an assumption that may leave veteran students at a distinct disadvantage. The results of this analysis call into question the effectiveness of current writing pedagogy for this particular audience, suggesting rather a composition pedagogy that returns to cognitivist theories of composing (Flower, 1989; Flower & Hayes, 1981) and recognizes that these students have learned to succeed in very prescriptive, rigid environments. This paper suggests that it may benefit these students to learn the academic writing process through their prior frame of reference, rather than through the less structured one of current pedagogy. Expanding on an initial case study of one military veteran college writer, the ultimate goal of this research is to explore alternative, effective pedagogies that better intersect with the military training these students possess.

Keywords: student writing, military writing, student veterans, pedagogy

Introduction

College composition classrooms across the country are experiencing an influx of returning military veteran students at numbers not seen since the World War II era. In 1947, veterans accounted for nearly half of college admissions (“G.I. Bill’s History”). And while current figures have yet to reach these levels, through Post-911 GI Bill benefits, military veterans are once again flooding college admissions offices and entering first-year writing classes at incredible rates. It is, therefore, becoming increasingly clear that many composition instructors will likely encounter a military veteran in their classes in the near future. Unlike the majority of first-year writing students, these students bring with them deeply engrained professional training that starkly contrasts with current composition pedagogy. Thus, this substantial shift in the composition student profile presents an opportunity to re-evaluate current composition teaching strategies to determine approaches that will more directly tap in to these students’ highly developed skills.

Contemporary composition curricula is built to teach students with little experience how to engage in a communal writing practice through strategies focused on self-exploration and personal meaning-making. However, returning military veteran students come to the classroom from circumstances much different than the cohorts they are placed with. They have been trained in highly structured environments in which they learn to not ask questions, do as instructed with no room for personal adaptation, and successfully complete the tasks assigned. In an incredible culture shock, these students are then encouraged in their writing class to determine, based on their own preferences, strategies that work. Further, in direct contrast with their previous superiors, instructors actively avoid prescriptive writing training that presents the writing process as successive, inflexible stages that, if followed, may lead to the successful execution of composition. College composition instructors, therefore, need to ask whether or not current writing pedagogy meets the needs of military veteran students and employs their professional training. Furthermore, what can instructors do to better assist these students as they transition from military training to college composition training?

This paper responds to a call to action from composition scholars and researchers D. Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson who recently published the white paper “‘An Ethical Obligation’: Promising Practices for Student Veterans in College Writing Classrooms”. This report, funded by a 2011 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) grant, recommended that writing programs and instructors at two- and four-year institutions begin exploring their veteran populations in the composition classroom. Seeking to begin that exploration through a better understanding of the unique training of military veteran students, both involving writing and not, this paper analyzes current military training materials, comparing them to student writing practices in the classroom. This paper will call into question the effectiveness of current composition pedagogy for this particular audience. The results of this analysis will suggest integrating current composition pedagogy with past cognitivist theories of composing to provide alternative, effective pedagogies that better intersect with the military training these students possess.

Understanding the Enrollment Landscape

To better understand the significance of returning military veteran student populations requires a comprehensive view of the effects of these incoming students on recent college enrollment statistics. According to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, over 1 million veterans attended colleges and universities between 2009 and 2013 (“Annual Benefits Report”, 2011). Additionally, there were ten times the numbers of students using Post 9-11 Bill benefits in 2011 than in 2009, growing from under 50,000 in 2009 to over 500,000 in 2011. Furthermore, 53.6% of veteran students using benefits

applied them toward completing undergraduate work at a college or vocational/technical school (“Annual Benefits Report”, 2011).

In 2011 in the Indiana, Kentucky and Ohio tri-state area alone, there were over 46,000 students using their military education benefits to attend college (“Annual Benefits Report”, 2011). The University of Cincinnati (UC) reported about 1,200 enrolled military veterans in 2012 (3.2% of total undergraduate enrollment), second in the state to The Ohio State University. Northern Kentucky University (NKU), the institution this case study student attends, reports about 500 military veteran students, approximately 3.7% of their undergraduate enrollment. To provide some perspective on the magnitude of these percentages, UC’s military veteran student enrollment is nearly equal to that of Asian students (3%) and higher than that of Hispanics (2.5%). NKU also reports a higher enrollment of military veteran students than both their Asian (1%) and Hispanic (2%) enrollments. While these statistics reflect military veteran students as representative of yet another minority population, their significance among overall enrollment totals illustrate that it is important for instructors to acknowledge that the military veteran student population will affect the interpretation of the general first-year writing student profile.

Addressing Winds of Change

Maxine Hairston wrote in her text “The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing”, that sometimes fields experience a phenomena and resulting irregularities. “When enough anomalies accumulate to make a substantial number of scientists in the field question whether the traditional paradigm can solve many of the serious problems that face them, a few innovative thinkers will devise a new model” (76). These statistics hint that the field of composition is facing one of the moments Hairston describes. And, this would not be the first time the field of composition has undertaken a fundamental change in its pedagogical stance to better address the needs of emerging student populations. In the 1980s, facing open enrollment policies, and in large part due to the work of Mina Shaughnessy and her massive research on about 4,000 entrance exam essays of basic writers, it became clear that the students composition instructors would increasingly encounter no longer fit the mold of the typical first-year writing student. Shaughnessy started noticing that her students were “...strangers in academia, unacquainted with the rules and rituals of college life, unprepared for the sorts of tasks teachers were about to assign them” (3) and that her course designs no longer attended to these students’ needs. As more of these students and the need for adapted pedagogy emerged, the composition field began to focus less on the grammatical incorrectness of a student’s writing (a battle that is rarely won) and more on how students engage in the writing process. Ultimately, composition theory began focusing less on *the product of writing classes*, the mechanical correctness of one’s writing, and more on *the individualized process* a student moves through to reach the final product. As a field, we are again witnessing such a fluctuation in our traditional composition student profile, and it requires our attention as scholars, theorists and instructors to ensure our practices are reflective of these unique composition students.

It is worth noting, however, that the profile of these students is significantly different than what Shaughnessy experienced with the rise in what would be labeled the “basic writing student”. While many of her students came to the classroom with little preparation or rigorous practices, military veteran students come with an excess of training and experience with rules and rituals. This is not to say that military veteran students effortlessly use these experiences in their reintegration and do not struggle with the transition to their new roles as academics and civilians. Research on military veteran writing and the transition to the classroom reveal that students often struggle with similar repatriation issues both inside and outside academia. For some, these issues are addressed through therapeutic writing opportunities. Projects including Warrior Writers, Veterans Writing, and Veterans’ Voices create environments for veterans to write about their personal, traumatic experiences as a way to cognitively

process Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and its complications. Large-scale national projects like these begin at the college level and are the results of initially small military veteran student writing projects. One of the most successful includes the Veterans Writing Project, a nonprofit created by Ron Capps at Eastern Kentucky University which provides workshops and publishes the journal *O-Dark-Thirty*. These communities, that include both civilians and soldiers, use writing as a source of therapy to provide an opportunity for military veteran students to not only write through their transition challenges but also provide a community, similar to their units, brigades and platoons, which veterans are suddenly lacking after active duty.

And this is not to say that the transition is always difficult or that military veteran students are unable to find a niche within academia that provides an avenue to use prior experience. The transition to academic life can also present significant opportunities for military veterans. Schlossberg et. al write that “college attendance can be a constructive and affirming element in the transition process” (8). For example, for many military students, college allows them to access additional training to further professionalize themselves within the civilian world in fields that address hardships that military veterans face. For example, military veteran students become majors in health-related professions (Schlossberg, 8) to address in large part, the many medical-related impacts of service both physical and mental. Others are able to enroll in engineering, medical, and computer programs to further their military specialization training. The attraction of military veteran students to fields requiring specialized writing skills means for technical writing instructors that effective pedagogies become increasingly more significant and timely.

Learning from Military Training Discourse

Regardless of the military veteran students program focus, many will be required to take first-year composition and technical writing. Therefore, to help in this particular facet of transition, instructors would benefit from first having a foundational understanding of the intense and grueling training these students experience in comparison to the training and language used in composition classrooms. A survey of military recruiting and training material also provides insights into the military’s discourse. These texts clearly highlight disconnects between military training and academic training. However, a careful review also illuminates areas of opportunity to better integrate the military learning strategies into writing classrooms.

The ethos

The ethos of all recruiting and training material, regardless of branch, focuses heavily on building and transforming recruits into someone they may not first believe they can be through powerful, highly structured conditions. For example, from the beginning, Navy recruits are told “your body and mind will have to adjust quickly to new rigors. You must memorize your chain of command, the general orders and rank recognition...Teamwork, self-discipline and attention to detail are the keys to successfully completing...your training” (“Recruit Training Command”). In the same vein, Army materials profess to transform recruits into leaders: “You’ll learn how to motivate and problem solve — to pursue goals with passion, to stand up to challenges, and lead and live with your strengths. You will learn to lead by example” (“Soldier Life”). It is important here to keep in mind the attention on problem-solving in this discourse, as it may reveal a crucial characteristic in considering new and more effective pedagogies. What is equally important to highlight here is the intensity of these statements. Within these materials, recruits and soldiers are repeatedly told they will undergo rigorous training and repetition. Both their minds and bodies are prepared for many battlefield. These students come to the classroom having undergone extreme training through drills that have been repeated and repeated for months and years.

Therefore, rather than adjusting teaching strategies to meet the needs of inexperienced writing students who lacked rigorous writing practices as Shaughnessy's research inspired, composition pedagogy must now consider how to best instruct highly trained, professionalized students who have undergone extremely demanding and reiterative exercises to learn to master skills.

The genres

Each branch of the military trains and operates based on extremely detailed, situation-specific manuals. It would be a time-consuming venture to perform an exhaustive exploration of all the branches manuals; but to gain a better understanding, it will be helpful to use one branches manual structure as an example. On the Army Publication Directorate website is a Product Map that contains six categories of publications, including Administrative, Medical, and Doctrine and Training to name a few. Within the Doctrine and Training section are 17 subcategories of manuals and guides. Under the "Active Field Manual" subcategory there are over 400 training manuals covering topics from food service specialists to aircraft powertrain repair to preventative dentistry.

One manual listed under this subcategory is the FM 6-99, "the U.S. Army's doctrinal library for report and message voice templates". Used to train soldiers how to communicate effectively internally and externally, this 233-page training manual "facilitates a common understanding of reporting and communicating throughout U.S. Army elements and it is the keystone manual for report and message formats" (xii). Used as an essential tool to understanding how to create written and verbal, this manual serves as a common guide for soldiers at all levels of the Army. The FM 6-99 contains over 150 different voicemail and report templates for soldier to follow to report information from weather reports to nuclear detonations to general administrative messages. However, what is most telling in the report is that the report states "soldiers or their units will not modify these formats unless authorized by the unit commander to allow for expanded critical information requirements" (xiii). Through documents like the FM 6-99, Army soldiers are indoctrinated to believe that to write content that is succinct and effective, they must strictly follow the template developed and provided to them. Individual adjustments to fit the writer's needs must first be vetted through the appropriate channels and then approved for use. It would not be surprising, then, if military veteran students had a difficult time adjusting to a classroom where they were instructed that writing was a strictly personal process. That effective delivery of content could be delivered via many different approaches. For someone who has been trained in a structured environment in every way, even in how to write content, the structure-less processes of the current composition classroom can be difficult to interpret and maneuver.

The Army is not the only branch that uses a very structured training methodology. The Marines' training document, "Marine Corp Order (MCO) 1553.1B" states, "Training is the conduct of instruction, discipline, or drill; the building in of information and procedures; and the progressive repetition of tasks- the product of which is skill development and proficiency". Terms such as "drill", "repetition", "tasks" and "proficiency" are commonplace in military discourse. Repeated drills teach recruits how to successfully complete tasks to become proficient in their job and posts, and ultimately, how to master skills. In the Navy, recruits are provided with a "Recruit Training Guide" that they keep with them throughout their training period. This guide contains "sheets" which serve specific purposes as the recruit learns each topic. For each topic, the recruit is tasked with understanding and studying at least one "Enabling Objective". To study these objectives, the recruit is provided with six different kinds of "sheets": outline, assignment, information, job, diagram and problem. Throughout the document, recruits are reminded that "step-by-step instructions" will help them "understand a system, piece of equipment, or topic". Recruits are to prepare for examinations by reading the six sheets for each task. For example, Outline Sheet 3-01-1 introduces the section on Uniform Code on Military Justice (UCMJ). The 10, multi-part Enabling Objectives include explaining several items such as the meanings of the

punitive articles (77 through 134); explaining the relationship between the Navy Core Values and the UCMJ; and explaining the rights service members have in accordance to the UCMJ (Articles 137, 138, and 139), all of which are explained in the 20 pages that follow the introduction. The importance of surveying these samples in detail is that they provide a glimpse of the structured learning environment from which military veteran students emerge. Having a clearer view of how recruits are previously taught skills helps writing instructors to better understand how these students might also approach their learning in this new environment.

For an additional insight into how military professionals are trained, it is worthwhile to examine a more universal genre: the operation order. This five-paragraph report, employed by the Marines, Army, and Navy, is used to relay technique information prior, during, and after missions and includes instructions on how to organize, sequence, and transmit information from leaders to subordinates. This document is meticulously organized with each paragraph addressing a specific function or purpose within the report. Military writers use branch-specific acronyms to ensure their report meets the necessary documentation requirements and addresses the required purposes. Whether commander or subordinate, military personnel of these three branches have come into contact with this documentation, one that has helped instill in them the concept of systematic, structured writing practices.

The SMEAC, the Marines' version of the "op order", helps to illustrate how these documents are used. The Marine op order "provides a means of directing and influencing your unit to synchronize actions toward accomplishing a mission" (TACT 3020, 1). In this document, "all five paragraphs work together to coordinate your resources into a plan on how you will reach the goal of mission" (1). Organized in paragraphs focused on situation, mission, execution, administration and logistics, and command and signal, this document teaches military personnel to write communications that are presented in "[a] short, simple order that conveys your will" and "is superior to a lengthy, complicated order. Standard order formats expedite understanding, communication, prevent omissions and facilitate ready reference" (1). The explanation of why Marines use the op order should spark some interest in composition instructors because we often explain the significance of learning to write a meaning essay to meet the same purposes: to effectively and efficiently communicate one's argument to a determined audience. The op order provides an interesting bridge between the military discourse community and that of the composition classroom. The similarities between the op order and the five-paragraph theme common to beginning composition courses presents an opportunity to view composing in college in very similar ways to methods of writing military students are already familiar with.

The process

Beyond the rhetoric and use of specific military genres, close readings of military training materials also show a distinct methodology used to train recruits. One area of military training documents that may be beneficial to composition instructors is the heavy focus on teaching personnel how to use problem-solving skills. The "Army Training Strategy" document states, "Army training must present complex dilemmas forcing leaders to match tactical actions to operational and strategic objectives" (5). One document presents significant insight into how military students use these actions to complete tasks is the "Army Doctrine Reference Publication" (ADRP). This document, used to establish "a common frame of reference and language that commanders and staffs use for the exercise of mission command", breaks down a problem-solving, process-oriented approach composition instructors could use to help military students transfer their existing knowledge to learning the composition process. The ADRP "address[es] the specific tactics and procedures associated with planning, preparing, executing, and assessing operations" (v.) and instructs commanders to use four steps in applying the "operational process" to empower unit leaders to train their team: plan, prepare, execute, and assess (7). These

military operational steps should ring familiar to composition instructors as they mimic the steps we also use to compose. However, most composition instructors have little to no knowledge of this information. But, using more rigid strategies like these in writing classroom is not unheard of. Professional writing courses often explicitly train students to approach writing from an analytical, problem-solution based approach. Though not often a strategy employed in the composition classroom, a more “operational process” approach might prove beneficial to these students.

Knowing that all students come to the classroom with some pre-existing knowledge, instructors often try to convert course content into something they understand. The op-order presents one such opportunity. Even if instructors are working outside of the five-paragraph theme, they can still use some of the language and connections between the purposes of this military report and those in academic discourse to help students understand how paragraphs and essays should be structured. And while this approach contrasts starkly with the approaches many use in composition pedagogy today, self-exploratory writing; extensive freewriting and voice exercises; performative writing exercises (Perl, 1980; Elbow, 2012; Skinner-Linnenberg, 1997), the connection between this seemingly disparate worlds is found in commonalities among genres and purposes that can be better exploited in composition classrooms that really seek to meet the students in their own areas of prior expertise. The similarities between the goals of both military and academic genres can serve as guiding principles in adaptable writing pedagogy.

Considering Pedagogical Impacts

So, what can we as composition instructors gain from these insights into the military veteran student’s training and background? And, more importantly, how can this new information inform pedagogies to help us better train military veteran students in their writing practices? The main objective of reviewing these military materials was to provide composition instructors with insights on how we might adjust our classroom approaches to better fit within the training discourse these students have already learned to maneuver successfully. Reviewing the ethos, genres and processes of military discourse revealed two areas where opportunities exist to help students translate military training to academic training: process language and document organization.

I argue our current strategies as composition instructors do not best exploit the trained mind and skills of the military student writer. To address this gap, I urge composition instructors to return to the work from cognitive process theorists Flower and Hayes. In their text “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing”, Flower and Hayes posit that “The process of writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing” (366). I am reminded of military training language that states “The primary product of Army training is units and individuals prepared to execute operations through *decisive action*” (“ADRP 5, emphasis mine). The cognitive theory approach to writing has been largely dismissed in current writing pedagogy. Scholars have viewed cognitive theory as dismissing the social context of writing; stopping short of tapping in to the emotional elements of writing; and writing as part of a lived experience (Faigley, 1986; Brand, 1987; Brodkey, 1987). However, these interpretations of the cognitive theory of writing place it opposition to context-based writing. But, as, Flower argues, it does not have to and urges composition scholars to view cognitive theory in conversation with social writing theory, as “...a far more integrated theoretical vision which can explain how context cues cognition, which in its turn mediates and interprets the particular world that context provides” (Flower, 282). If we can view cognitive theory as a means to understanding and placing writing within a different context, we might find a meaningful intersection between military and composition learning strategies. Additionally, in their research on cognitive writing

processes among students, Flower and Hayes argue that writing processes are organized in a very “hierarchical” and “highly embedded” way, and that composing is “a goal-directed thinking process, guided by the writer’s own growing network of goals” (Flower and Hayes, 366). Because military students have spent several years being trained to work within a hierarchical structure to accomplish layered tasks, teaching composition through the cognitivist framework could prove beneficial for this cohort of students as they view writing processes in contexts that they already understand—ultimately making transfer a possibility.

This approach to a more integrated pedagogical approach is also discussed in texts by post-process scholars, those who encourage instructors to “promote the idea that *writing* stands for a radically complex network of phenomena” (*Relations, Locations, and Positions* 7). This text, while acknowledging the importance of the social aspects of writing, encourages instructors and graduate students not to dismiss the values of process-oriented writing. This collection of works by Post-process composition theorists encourages instructors not to disavow process-oriented teaching, but to consider the context in which these processes begin in order to develop teaching strategies that best address these contexts. For our purposes, considering context means not only considering the contexts in which students *will write* but also those in which they *previously wrote*. Knowing how learning and writing occurred within the military helps instructors to better present composing within a context in which military students understand and are able to transfer expertise.

This is not to say that composition should be individualistic in every way or that a more structured approach to writing is the solution for all writers. However, there is no reason why hierarchical, process-oriented strategies that include systematic problem-solving and analysis-based practices cannot also be included in the composition instructor’s pedagogical toolbox to address the needs of a specific cohort of students. While theories of writing processes serve as strong foundations on which to build practice, they can also sometimes hide the reality that we are teaching students who are not blank slates on which we can write our own methodologies. In some cases, our students come to our classrooms with prior training, experiences, and knowledge that can be used as a starting point and that can be adapted to help them succeed in a new context. Berthoff encourages instructors to use student’s experiences as starting points for exploring topics in writing (Berthoff, 1988). However, in terms of writing strategies, when these experiences conflict with our current pedagogical principles, we tend to dismiss them as viable options for learning the writing process. A more integrated, theoretical basis for teaching strategies, however, can allow these students to both use their previous knowledge and show them how to adapt these strategies for new contexts—an approach to adaptability that will easily align with military doctrine.

Conclusion

From current enrollment statistics, it is clear that military veteran students are a growing population on college campuses across the country. Because many of them will place into beginning composition courses, it would benefit all writing instructors to better understand these students and their backgrounds. Knowing that these students no longer fit the “model” composition student that our current pedagogies are designed for, we must stop to more fully explore who these new composition students are. How are they similar or different than our current students? What are their composing practices? In what ways can composition courses help these students succeed academically? In search of answers to these questions, this paper explored military discourse to find the ethos presented in different genres and sought a better understanding of military practices which might transfer to composition classrooms. After reviewing several sources of documentation, this paper has highlighted

practices that contrast significantly to current writing class practices. These strategies focus on training that exists within highly structured, hierarchical frameworks. Writing within the military serves to efficiently and consistently communicate messages between superiors and staff and among branches. These messages should be short and succinct and contain very targeted messages. Current pedagogy uses a writer-determined, process-oriented approach which focuses less on the final product and its technical correctness, avoids using a prescriptive composing methodology, and instills in writers that writing is a “one-size-does-not-fit-all” process. However, in doing so, this approach also fails to consider other more systematic strategies that may very well assist writers who experience has taught them that an ordered, strategic approach leads to success.

With military training as a backdrop, the main purpose of this paper is to illuminate for writing instructors the possibilities presented by a better understanding the military veteran student’s experiences. Discussing problem-solving based strategies, analytical tactics, and acknowledging prior experience allows writing instructors to really be committed to understanding that a student comes to the writing classroom with unique experiences that may very well be sources of knowledge that is applicable to many contexts. Including structured exercises and invention techniques that use genres with which military personnel are already familiar (the op order and timeline) allows military veteran students to more directly transfer knowledge from one area of gained expertise to one that is still developing. With a willingness to use the unique, structured, highly rigorous training these students bring to the classroom, an integrated approach would benefit not only military students, but others whose circumstances include this kind of preparation, as well. This paper seeks to serve as only a starting point from which further research and examples may lead to post-process pedagogies that meet the needs of a diverse student body that includes large numbers of military veteran students.

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