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Writing with Veterans in a Community Writing Group

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Abstract: This article provides an analysis of the growing phenomenon of community writing groups for military veterans. Drawing on the scholarship on literacy studies, community literacy, and veterans' writing groups, the author profiles three veterans' writing groups and provides strategies for starting up, conducting, and sustaining such groups. The article also addresses the common questions, assumptions, and public perceptions that are currently circulating about these groups and the possible role, function, and purpose of writing in veterans' lives.

In the wake of the Global War on Terror, writing groups and workshops for military veterans have sprung up around the country. In addition to national projects such as Warrior Writers [http://www.warriorwriters.org/home.html] ("About Us"), the Veterans' Writing Project [http://veteranswriting.org/] ("What We Do"), and the National Endowment for the Humanities Project entitled Operation Homecoming [http://www.nea.gov/national/homecoming/] ("National Initiatives"), college writing faculty and military veterans have formed veterans' writing groups that meet at colleges and universities, public libraries, and community centers. These writing groups serve as "literacy sponsors," which Deborah Brandt refers to as "agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and advantage by it in some way" (166). While individual groups vary in content, scope, genres, instructional techniques, and motivations—whether veterans are pursuing writing for artistic, historical, or therapeutic reasons or some combination thereof—the chief goal is the same: encouraging veterans to write and reflect about their military and war-time experiences.

Unlike the college writing courses that many of us teach, community-oriented veterans' writing groups do not usually issue grades, credits, degrees, or certificates proving completion. Writers are not required to take part—they *choose* and are often *compelled* to be there through a desire to share their stories with fellow veterans and with a general public increasingly out of touch with the sacrifices of military service. Drawing on the scholarship on literacy studies, community literacy, and the literature on veterans' writing groups, I provide profiles of three veterans' writing groups and offer strategies for starting up, conducting, and sustaining such groups. I also address common questions, assumptions, and public perceptions currently circulating about such groups and the possible role, function, and purpose of writing in veterans' lives. Along the way, I address my own experiences co-leading a community writing group for veterans at Syracuse University, a private university in the northeast.

The Uses of Literacy among Military Veterans

Community-based writing groups for veterans exhibit many of the features of community literacy work. As Elenore Long argues, community literacy is organized around the question "*how it is that ordinary people go public*" (5; emphasis in original). Community literacy involves ordinary people engaged in literacy work aimed at

local publics "that are situated in time and place" and between "private and institutional lives" (Long 5). Deploying the logic of community literacy scholarship, we might ask of these groups: How do veterans' writing groups sponsor literacy among military veterans? What role do universities or other sponsoring organizations play in shaping the work of veterans' writing groups? How do these writers go public with their experiences about military service (Long 6)?

In spite of differences between and among groups, a common literacy backdrop among groups is the historical literacy sponsorship role that the US military played in troops' lives. In "Drafting U.S. Literacy," Deborah Brandt notes that during World War II, literacy became an imperative within the armed forces since a key part of military strategy was not only fighting but also "superior knowledge and speedy communication" (485). Different communication and warfare-related technologies were made available during WWII—"[e]verything from computers to sonar, radar, insecticides, and nuclear power" (Brandt 485). Literacy went from being regarded as a "nineteenth century moral imperative"—an "attribute of a 'good' individual—to an individual 'good,' a resource or raw material vital to national security and global competition. In the process, literacy was turned into something extractable, something rentable, and thereby worthy of rational investment" (Brandt 485). During WWII, the US military launched one of the "largest programs of adult basic literacy in history" aimed at military pre-inductees who performed below the required level of literacy (Brandt 486). This basic literacy training was so successful that the majority of pre-inductees (80%) who underwent the training went on to "basic training within two months" (Brandt 487); researchers have noted that many of these troops "would continue their schooling after the war and enjoyed improved life outcomes" (Brandt 487).

During WWII, military standards for literacy changed six times and continued to change after that in response to different challenges and conditions. Troops had to "read instructions or technical manuals" and often "had to compute or record accurate data for interpretation by others" (Brandt 498). In addition, military personnel, based on rank and duties, were engaged in various forms of record keeping, report writing, memo writing, and communiqués, both written and oral. Communication had to be coordinated and managed, and new technologies had to be mastered and taught, thus "[l]iteracy standards were in need of constant recalibration, as each new phase of the war could inflate or deflate the value of existing skills, inflate or deflate the effectiveness of existing induction policies and instructional efforts" (Brandt 498). Literacy sponsorship and instruction were, in short, moving targets in the military then, as they continue to be now.

At the same time that the military was engaged in a massive institutional literacy sponsorship effort, service members were avidly engaged in self-sponsored literacy. Military personnel were reading and writing on their own time, producing varied forms and genres: letters to family and friends, journals, poetry, plays, nonfiction and fiction, spoofs, songs, and other texts. Mail call was a call to invention as troops eagerly awaited news from home and often wrote letters rhetorically couched to minimize worry among family and loved ones. Letter writing troops also faced the rhetorical constraint of military censors who did not want troops to reveal their strategic mission, location, or position; many letters came to recipients with blacked out sections, rendering sentences and paragraphs meaningless.

Many veterans and their families have saved war-time correspondence, posting, publishing, and sharing it with family members and comrades, with correspondence often serving as a key resource for historians writing military history. With the advent of other information communication technologies such as computers, the Internet, cell phones, and helmet cameras, deployed troops are now composing emails, blogging (mil-blogging), posting status updates and photos from the field on Facebook, and creating videos without facing the snail mail communication delay that was so common for earlier generations of military personnel, although strategic

information black-outs are still commonplace on military bases and also on forward operating bases (FOBs) in war zones. Many veterans have created long literacy trails, ones that they might not even recognize as such until they return to these personal archives as sources of information and anchors for writing later in life. For many veterans, these personal archives become central anchors for launching new writing initiatives or collaborative writing projects with other veterans or civilians. Even as the Internet affords many opportunities for veterans to interact with one another and share stories, face-to-face community writing groups have become key sites for continuing and repurposing a long literacy trajectory begun in military service—one that veteran writers engage in for their own purposes, aims, and audiences.

Community Writing Group Profiles

To address the work of community-oriented veterans' writing groups, I provide brief profiles of three ongoing community writing groups: the Black Hills Veterans Writing Group founded in 2005 in Rapid City, South Dakota; the Bay Area Veterans Writing Group, which was founded in 1993 by acclaimed novelist Maxine Hong Kingston; and the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group, a group at Syracuse University that my colleague Ivy Kleinbart and I co-founded in 2010. My focus on site-specific community programs, as noted earlier, is connected to an interest in community literacy where sustained, long-term bonds have the potential to be built in a specific community or geographic locale. I also have chosen these three groups based on their established track records and the availability of interviews, articles, and web materials reflecting on the groups' purposes, meanings, and operations.

Black Hills Veterans Writing Group

One of the most visible veterans' writing groups on the web, the Black Hills Veterans Writing Group [http://www.battlestory.org/] was founded by two Vietnam veterans: Brad Morgan, a retired English Professor at the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, and Dean Muehlberg, author of the book *REMF: War Stories*, a book about his service in Vietnam. The writing group, which meets on the second Saturday of each month and usually at the Rapid City Public Library, started up as a way for retired faculty who fought in WWII to preserve their memories; thus, university faculty proved to be central in setting up and serving as initial literacy sponsors. Muehlberg notes that "[w]e wanted to help veterans record their memories of their military service to keep those things from being lost" (qtd. in Hill).

The initial cohort of WWII veterans created a strong exigency for group members, which is evoked in the group's motto: "What I remember should not be erased from human memory. . . . I must write. . . . I must write now" ("Welcome"). Morgan comments further in a radio interview that veterans, especially older ones, should not put off writing about their military experiences; if they don't tell their stories, someone else will, and possibly someone who won't get that story right (Morgan).

Over the ensuing years, the group has become more intergenerational, with members who have served in all major conflicts and branches of the service, "from World War II, the Cold War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan" (Hill). According to Morgan, group meetings emphasize reading, writing, and discussion: "Writing is definitely an important part of our mission, but we talk a lot about books too, and encourage people to read the memoirs of others" (qtd. in Hill). Each meeting of the Black Hills Veterans' Group features an individual veteran presenting an account of some aspect of his or her military service: "Our meetings represent the act of coming together and speaking as a way of recollecting, sometimes jogging memories," says Morgan (qtd. in Hill). One group member's recollection may fire remembrance in another,

offers Muehlberg, and "it occurs to them that they have something to add to the discussion, a memory to preserve" (qtd. in Hill).

What members write about varies according to their specific aims and purposes. Most members write "first-hand accounts" ("What We Write"), including memoirs, military histories, book reviews, or editorials. Others have chosen to write "vignettes, poems, short stories, with members collaborating with each other and telling stories to each other ("About Us"). The website indexes group members' stories by era and military conflict, emphasizing military history from the standpoint of those who served, with members even debating the veracity of accounts of specific battles. For many of the group members, telling the story of military service from a first-hand perspective is imperative as "book-level history often fails to represent the 'foxhole' or direct experience as they remember it" ("About Us"). Group members who are featured at monthly meetings are urged to share their technical literacy and specialized knowledge of weapons, aircraft, equipment, battles, command structures, day-to-day routines, as well as the larger arc of military campaigns. For instance, in his piece "Berlin Airlift [http://www.battlestory.org/index.php?p=1_16_CHUCK-CHILDS-USAF-]," drawn from his twenty-two-page booklet *Flying on the Berlin Air Lift: Salvation of a City*, 89-year-old Army Air Corps pilot Chuck Childs offers engaging details about flying C-54s into Berlin. Readers learn about Childs's missions, cargo (human and otherwise), reactions from civilians, ground crew members, Soviet Air Force harassment of planes over East Germany, and pilot living conditions (Childs). Readers leave his account feeling more informed about an individual pilot's perspective and with a renewed respect for the magnitude of the Berlin Airlift, as "every three minutes a fully loaded C-54 landed": "We flew, slept, flew and slept, because we had to get food into those people" (qtd. in Rusch).

Thus, members attending the meetings and also reading excerpts of group members' writings on the website receive an "immersion" experience in an individual military veteran's place in the larger span of military history The camaraderie and fellowship offered by the group is also apparent through group photos and written accounts of group meetings and demonstrated amply through website publications and archived audio files. The group has an official videographer and photographer to document group events. Group members who are ill or who have passed on are honored and remembered on the website as well.

The Black Hills Veterans Writing Group also serves as a literacy sponsor to both veterans and civilians who are interested in documenting military histories and veterans' oral histories. The website dispenses advice and instruction to veterans who want to write their stories as well as family members and the general public who wish to interview a veteran or engage in a writing project with one. Thus, the group plays a larger pedagogical and literacy-sponsor function in the greater Rapid City area, encouraging civilians and interested family members to document military service members' histories and recollections.

Bay Area Veterans' Writing Group, Maxine Hong Kingston

> Writing is something that one does essentially alone, so it has been great to have the Veterans' Writing Group to support this writer in both my outer process of writing and my inner process of reflecting on deep issues, especially the darker ones of being trained to kill. (Bliss)

Perhaps the most publicized and long-lived veterans' writing group in the nation is the one established by acclaimed novelist Maxine Hong Kingston [http://www.vowvop.org/]. In 1993, Kingston started a veterans' writing group in Northern California, currently meeting in Sebastopol, California. The group was inspired by Kingston's experiences with two brothers who served in Vietnam and by the spiritual community of Vietnamese

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh; Hanh has offered meditation and discussion workshops for both Vietnamese affected by the war and Vietnam veterans (McChesney). Kingston was also spurred to start the group or *sangha* (community) because of her own grief and trauma—a fire destroyed her home and along with it a nearly finished book manuscript entitled *The Fourth Book of Peace.* She draws on the experience of establishing the veterans' writing group in the rewrite of her lost book, which she entitles *The Fifth Book of Peace*. In a National Public radio interview with Robert McChesney, Kingston offers her reasons for starting the writing group: "What I wanted was a community of writers around me and they would be people who had been through war. And, so, then, we were all writing our war stories with a hope that one could go through war and arrive at peace" (Interview). The group's motto follows accordingly: "Tell the Truth. And So Make Peace."

In session for twenty years, the group meets on a quarterly basis for a day-long writing and meditation retreat, with approximately thirty veterans showing up for each meeting (Interview). Open to all veterans with a broad definition of what counts as veteran status, including military resisters, peace activists, war widows, war survivors, and anyone who calls themselves a veteran, this mix has, at times, created an uneasy dynamic, with harsh words about political differences being exchanged; however, Kingston finds that group members usually return after such exchanges (Interview).

Even with Kingston as a chief literacy sponsor—participants often refer to her as their "midwife" or "mother figure"—group members, both military veterans and non-veterans, take turns organizing and leading the sessions (Bonner). The retreat has a fairly standard format with time allotted for socializing, meals, meditation, writing, reading and feedback. A typical schedule along with group protocols are codified in a group manual written by group members and edited by Kingston entitled "How to Build Your Own Veteran Writers Group." Thus, the group sees itself as a literacy sponsor/seed influence for those who want to establish similar groups in different locations.

A typical schedule runs as follows:

- 9:00 – 9:30 Schmoozing
- 9:30 – 9:45 Meditation
- 9:45 – 11:00 Opening Circle
- 11:00 – 11:15 Writing Instructions
- 11:15 – 12:45 Writing in Community (in silence)
- 12:45 – 1:45 Lunch (first half in silence)
- 1:45 – 3:00 Reading
- 3:00 – 3:30 Walking Meditation
- 3:30 – 4:30 More reading and/or feedback
- 4:30 – 4:45 Announcements
- 4:45 – 5:00 Meditation (Kashtan)

The opening circle includes introductions of group members often focused around a particular question such as "What has been the focus of your writing since we last met?" (Kashtan). The group then begins consideration of the writing instructions for the day, which may "include a theme, or some poetry to reflect on and write about" (Kashtan). As noted on the sample schedule, though, participants are given the freedom to respond to suggested topics or pursue their own (Kashtan).

A centerpiece of the day-long workshop involves a ninety-minute session "Writing in Community," where group members write on their own. The meeting is then taken up with the opportunity for group members to share their writing in small groups or a larger group. Feedback sessions are often geared around how the writing affected the reader rather than providing specific critique or suggestions (Kashtan). Another focal point is Buddhist-inspired meditation. The initial meditation exercise is a silent meditation of anywhere from 5 to 15 minutes to "center" participants and connect them with breathing exercises that prepare them for the day ahead (Kashtan). A later walking meditation session in the afternoon provides an opportunity for group members to walk in silence (indoors or outdoors) and reflect on the meeting, the words of others, and the surroundings. It also provides an opportunity for veterans to experience walking differently, not the tension and danger of "walking point" as many have experienced it in military training and battle, but that of meditative walking in community. Veteran writer Shepherd Bliss captures his sense of it: "For a brief moment I leave present time and go back some forty years to my basic training. I recall being trained to walk the point and lead an armed platoon into battle, which (fortunately) I never did. But that regimented march fades as this free-form saunter replaces it in my body." The closing meditation ends the day with a period of sitting meditation, which provides a chance for writers to regroup before dispersing (Kashtan). The group's focus on a combination of meditation and writing has made it distinctive and has sparked other veterans' writing groups to include meditation.

Writing produced in group meetings is archived in a downloadable PDF called the *Veterans' Writing Quarterly* [http://www.vowvop.org/quarterly.php]. In addition, the group has published *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*, an edited anthology featuring essays, memoirs, poems, and fiction by eighty writers, all of whom have participated in the writing group. A piece by Vietnam veteran and psychotherapist William Larsen represents the searching quality of these pieces. Larsen recounts a recent visit he made to a medical clinic in Vietnam where he sees a pile of prosthetic legs. Through a conversation with a Vietnamese doctor, he realizes that there are still 3.5 million land mines planted in the Vietnamese countryside and that 25,000 Vietnamese a year have their legs blown off by land mines set by troops on both sides of the conflict. The piece ends with the following dialogue between Larsen and the Vietnamese doctor at the clinic:

> "But then . . . the war. It . . . it isn't over," I stammered. "The war is still going on."
> "Of course," he sighed, shrugging his shoulders in the resigned manner I had come to recognize as being very Vietnamese. The doctor reached again for the paper, shaking his head as he studied the numbers. Crumpling the note, he tossed it into a waste can near the door. "War always go on."
> Then the young doctor pushed back his chair, rose, and met my eyes one last time. "So many more to lose." (256)

Larsen's piece represents the complexity of warfare—its ongoing real effects on civilians as well as the psychological wounds that are still fresh in veterans who fought forty plus years ago. Larsen's piece also represents how Kingston's writing group helps veterans come to terms with the consequences and losses of warfare. Writing, contends Kingston, allows veterans to speak truths, to "write the unspeakable": "Processing chaos through story and poem, the writer shapes and forms experience, and thereby, I believe, changes the past and remakes the existing world. The writer becomes a new person after every story, every poem; and if the art is

very good, perhaps the reader is changed, too" (1-2). Kingston further explains the motivation for veterans to write:

> As Odysseus,{1 [#footnote1]} the archetypical warrior, made his way home, he narrated his journey—setting off to war, waging the long war, coming home—to listener after listener. The story grew until, finally home, he could tell the whole tale and become whole. We tell stories and we listen to stories in order to live. To stay conscious. To connect one with another. To understand consequences. To keep history. To rebuild civilization. (1)

Writing, then, in Kingston's words, allows veterans to find ways to connect with each other and their chosen publics, understand the consequences of war, "keep" or preserve history, and rebuild their lives after war within a community of other veterans.

Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group

The Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group, founded in 2010 by my colleague Ivy Kleinbart and me at Syracuse University, focuses on nonfiction writing for military veterans in the greater Syracuse region, an area chock full of military installations, including the Fort Drum Army Base, home of the 10th Mountain Division; the Rome, NY, Research Site of the Air Force Research Laboratory and the Eastern Air Defense Sector (EADS) of the North American Air Defense Command (NORAD), as well as Hancock Field Air National Guard Base, home of the 174th Attack Wing, which trains pilots and maintains and flies the controversial MQ-9 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) or "Reaper" Drones regionally, nationally, and globally. Syracuse is also home to the upstate region's Veterans Administration (VA) Medical Center.

Syracuse University, where our group meets and where we teach, also has a rich military tradition, welcoming many troops after WWII and currently welcoming in the neighborhood of 300 student veterans along with a Veterans' Resource Center [http://veterans.syr.edu/] started in 2009 and the Institute for Veterans and Military Families [http://vets.syr.edu/], a national research and policy center for military service members and their families (Institute). One area, however, that seemed to be lacking in engaging veterans in our community was working with them around the arts, specifically with writing.

To encourage veterans in the Syracuse area to engage with each other as writers, my group co-leader Ivy Kleinbart and I co-founded the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group [http://wrt.syr.edu/syrvetwriters/]. As literacy sponsors for a veterans' writing group, we are both civilians and academics with varied connections to military life. Kleinbart is a poet and writing instructor with an MFA and MA in English, whereas I have a nonfiction writing background and a PhD in Rhetoric and Writing. Both of us opposed and protested the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan even as we were supportive of troops who were sent off to fight in those wars. Ivy comes from a family where her immediate family members did not serve in the military while I come from a family of military veterans; my father was drafted and served in the Air Force during the Cold War and my maternal uncle Brady Lane Smith served for 26 months as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam. Brady returned from war with severe PTSD and injuries that plagued him until his death at age 68. Even though I have not served, members of my family have, and those experiences acquainted me with the sacrifices of troops and military families—sacrifices that often go unnoticed by the larger US public. In initially setting up the group, I was motivated by a need to foster discussions about the consequences of warfare and the costs paid by our troops, their families, and by the civilians they interacted with on the ground in war zones.

Our inaugural event for the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group was to invite Captain Shannon Meehan and Roger Thompson, authors of *Beyond Duty*, a searingly honest Iraq war memoir, for a reading at our university. Their February 2010 reading drew a variety of veterans and employees of the local VA Medical Center. Our first Veterans' Writing Group meeting followed just a few weeks after the Meehan-Thompson reading.

Since scheduling that initial meeting, we have met once a month on Saturdays in the Syracuse University Writing Center to workshop group members' drafts of nonfiction accounts of life in and out of the military. Veterans of all ages, branches of the military, and conflicts are welcome at our meetings. Participants have included veterans who have served in wars ranging from the Korean War to Vietnam to Desert Storm to more current conflicts, including Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Some writing group members are university alumni; some are student veterans at Syracuse University or nearby campuses. Other members have no ties to the university but were simply drawn to the writing group. Of late, our group has also attracted active duty troops from Fort Drum as well as members of the National Guard and the Naval Reserves, and we are currently working with civilian staff at Fort Drum to help set up a writing group on the base.

For that first meeting in March of 2010, the group started out small, with four group members initially attending, but our sessions have grown to 12-18 group members regularly attending. Our monthly meetings center around learning and modeling techniques of nonfiction writing (character development, dialogue, scene writing, and reflection), drafting work, sharing stories, offering feedback to other group members, and polishing and preparing work for publication on our group website [http://wrt.syr.edu/syrvetwriters/] or in other venues. To inspire writing, we hand out two or three writing prompts per month, many of them sparked by writing workshop discussions or current events. Writers are free to respond to those prompts or create their own.

In group meetings, both my co-leader and I emphasize the idea that writing provides veterans with an outlet for self-exploration of military service as well as an opportunity to write in ways that might educate the public about military life. We do not define writing group members' purposes or aims for writing; however, as rhetoric and writing teachers, we are interested in actively exploring our group members' intended audiences and purposes. We ask: Why should veterans write? What perspectives and experiences can they/we bring to the larger public dialogue about the meaning and nature of military experiences? Who are the audiences that they/we want to address? How can they/we as a group engage the public in a searching and honest dialogue about their experiences, both costs and consequences, with military service and war?

From the very start of the group, Ivy and I agreed that members should be able to share their writing with each other without the pressure of going public outside the group. We advise new members to listen at group sessions until they feel comfortable sharing their work; many group members also share their writing with us privately, using us as "sounding boards" before sharing a piece with the group. As writers become more comfortable with their work and develop strong pieces, we work with them to edit and polish their pieces for publication or other purposes.

Initially, when our group was smaller, our sessions focused on large writing group workshops where members read their writing out loud without distributing copies to group members. We emphasized active listening and notetaking, encouraging group members to provide comments and suggestions for revision. As our group has grown, we have begun to work in small group workshops, asking members to send in their manuscripts in advance so we can make and distribute copies for the workshops. In small group workshops, the writer reads the piece once while others listen and take notes before providing verbal feedback, returning the manuscript with written comments and notes. Ivy and I also often follow up via email with more in-depth comments and

suggestions. The quality and depth of the feedback from group members has improved with this new process.

As the monthly meetings of the writing group provide members a space to do the work of narrating, processing, witnessing, and critiquing, they also provide opportunities for community building. We usually take a short break halfway through our small group sessions, and group members enjoy coffee, tea, breakfast items, and informal conversation. In those conversations, group members update each other on family life, classes they are taking, books they are reading, health issues, and other topics. Such verbal exchanges are crucial to a culture of openness and trust that galvanizes and sustains group participation. Over the years, group members have become more comfortable with each other and with us and will share more writing, often about difficult topics such as combat trauma/PTSD, Military Sexual Trauma (MST), relationships affected by war, sex and sexuality, and family and health challenges. Group members have written, over the years, nonfiction pieces that are meant to educate and inform the public about military life and the consequences of warfare, to testify to the long-term consequences of combat trauma in families and relationships, to create historical accounts of battles and military campaigns, and to provide accounts of the day-to-day happenings of military life and deployments. Sometimes the writings are humorous, as in a recent tongue-in-cheek account one group member wrote about his experiences being bussed to Naval boot camp and arriving to meet a fierce commanding officer who put one of the protesting recruits in his place.

In addition, many of our group members have aspirations to write fiction and poetry and are pursuing writing classes at the YMCA's Downtown Writers' Center in Syracuse or in writing courses at local colleges. Thus, our group is informed by other literacy endeavors that members are pursuing across the community. More recently, our group members have become involved in public readings, including an invitation to read at Syracuse Stage, our local professional theater, prior to the production of *An Iliad*, an adaptation of Homer's epic poem for the modern stage. Seven members of our group read their work to an audience of approximately 60 people. A second reading is scheduled at a local arts festival, and members of our group will be engaged in a reading at Fort Drum, where staff members are starting up a writing group for active-duty troops. Slowly, over time, the group has begun to "go public" with their work and engage in the kind of community literacy work that Elenore Long advocates.

Although one of the ways we have gone public is through readings, another way we have reached an interested public, as is the case with the other groups profiled, is through our group's website, http://wrt.syr.edu/syrvetwriters/ [http://wrt.syr.edu/syrvetwriters/], which contains general information about our group, our monthly writing assignments, and select group members' writings. Our website brings us frequent queries from the press, from veterans' organizations, and from individuals at other universities/colleges or community centers who want advice about how to start a writing group. This has led to dialogue with many individuals across the country about the purpose of veterans' writing groups and the philosophy behind our work.

As a writing group, we are still in process, growing our initiatives as well as looking forward to new partnerships. A few months ago, we started a monthly 30-minute open meditation session for veterans with our Syracuse University colleague Dr. Diane Grimes, a mindful communication expert. In addition, one of our group members started a social club for writing group members, and we have begun to involve group members in planning an annual fall writing retreat and an edited anthology of group members' writing.

Common Purpose

The three groups featured here, although different in scope and emphasis, share a common purpose: providing a space for veterans to engage in defining and representing their military experiences for themselves and for various publics, often through first-person writing. Each writing group profiled brings a different feature, format, and writing tradition—the Black Hills Group emphasizes historical accounts and individual military expertise and technical literacy; the Kingston group emphasizes writing as combined with meditation and Buddhist philosophy; and the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group emphasizes nonfiction writing and veterans defining their own rhetorical meanings and purposes for writing. At the same time, there is a tendency in the popular press to represent veterans' writing groups as mainly spaces for therapeutic writing, an important component of writing with veterans, but not the sole focus, as addressed in this next segment.

Veterans' Writing Groups: Assumptions and Myths

In *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*, Judith Barrington warns readers to watch out for the commonplace assumptions that writers are tortured, alcoholic, compulsive souls or that memoirists must either be famous or selfishly preoccupied with navel-gazing (153-54). There are, of course, parallel myths about veterans who write and veterans' writing groups worth considering—myths that connect strongly to larger cultural tropes about veterans. I analyze three myths that I have heard most frequently repeated.

Myth #1: Military veterans must find writing to be therapeutic, a way to exorcise inner demons. Writing is a great way to heal or even stop PTSD.

There is no shortage of news stories detailing how military veterans are finding relief from their "inner demons" and "healing" combat trauma through writing. The truth, however, about writing's therapeutic elements is more multifaceted and needs to be defined, not by the news media (although their opinions certainly matter), but by veterans in their own words. Writing's therapeutic value, of course, depends on the veteran writer and what purpose/aim he or she is pursuing. Whether or not it is safe or conducive to pursue therapeutic writing depends on a writing group's dynamics, leadership, and philosophy. It also may depend on whether or not the writing takes place in a clinical setting versus a non-clinical setting. The bottom line is that it is important for veteran writers to define their *own purposes* for writing—if a veteran finds writing to be therapeutic, that can be a very good outcome, but veterans' purposes and aims for writing are likely multiple. For instance, Travis Martin, an Iraq war veteran, founder of *The Journal of the Military Experience* [http://encompass.eku.edu/jme/], and a twentieth-century American literature graduate student at the University of Kentucky focusing on war and psychoanalytic trauma theory, offers the following reflections on the role of writing for him and his fellow service member Micah:

> I've gone through months of prolonged exposure therapy, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, cognitive behavioral therapy, prayers, and more medications than I care to admit. But I still cannot remember everything that happened. I've learned that the mind lies and memory is no guarantee of truth. Writing controls racing thoughts by situating them in time; it reorders traumatic events using logic. I remember that boy's smile clearly, just as I remember the moment when the blast turned that smile into a look of hatred and contempt that scarred my soul. It was putting those two things together that was difficult. Micah and I approached that day from two very different angles only to arrive at the same conclusion: War destroys who you were. But it leaves someone new in place. I, like my students, am still learning to view an entirely foreign world through the eyes of a new self. (34)

Writing can be a way to come to terms with a "new self" after military service—a way to gain perspective and a sense of order and control over that experience in narrative form, but writing can also mean more layers of the experience and contradictions are revealed to process and address. What is perhaps as powerful as the act of writing itself is writing *with* a community of veterans, being able to process and be listened to by other veterans, those who can understand and relate in a way that the larger society or family members may not be able to do (see Shay).

Given this complexity, it is important that the news media and the general public do not see writing as a simple "fix-it" strategy for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I have heard a few veterans express concern that expressive writing has been hyped as a "cure" for PTSD, a sort of "catch-all quick-fix," and many are suspicious of that "quick-fix" mentality. At the same time, there are studies and self-reports of writing's potential therapeutic effects for veterans as well as others suffering from trauma, and those insights should not be ignored. However, writing's effects must be presented in complex and multi-faceted ways, and veterans' own aims and purposes for writing must be paramount.

Myth #2: Only veterans can effectively lead writing groups for veterans.

It is certainly a desirable outcome to have a fellow veteran lead or co-lead a writing group, and, in many cases, writing groups *are* being led by veterans, as is evidenced in the example of the Black Hills Veterans Writing Group or in mixed civilian-veteran leadership models such as the Bay Area Veterans' Writing Group. Several benefits derive from veterans leading groups that sponsor the writing of other veterans: camaraderie, a shared vocabulary, and common military experiences of going through basic training, being stationed and deployed, serving and facing combat, and mustering out and reintegrating into society, although such experiences may vary based on the group leader's branch of service, rank, gender, race, and whether he or she served in war-time or peace-time.

At the same time, civilians also have a role to play in leading writing groups—we, after all, are a key audience that many veterans want to address. We may ask questions that help veterans explain their terms and experiences for a wider audience. At the same time, civilian leaders have to bridge the military-civilian divide: we have to ask questions, be active listeners, and challenge ourselves to learn more about military life through reading, discussion, and interaction with veterans. A military-civilian dialogue can be a beneficial experience. Perhaps the main credential to have in leading such a group is a knowledge of writing and the teaching of writing, an ability to listen carefully and give honest feedback, a passion for helping veterans tell their stories, and a familiarity with the long tradition of literature on military service.

Myth #3: The current generation of veterans returning from the Global War on Terror need writing groups more than any other generation.

There is an understandable urgency and commitment to re-integrating veterans recently returned and returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. These veterans are flocking to higher education on the current version of the GI Bill, seeking jobs, educational opportunities, and struggling with re-integration and health issues as well as catching up with families who have dealt with their repeated deployments. Many writing group leaders often feel understandably motivated to set up writing groups for recently returned cohorts of veterans; however, a rhetoric of immediacy can lead to lost opportunities for collaboration across the generations. Long-returned veterans often need writing as much as immediately returning veterans. In fact, they might need writing *more* since they are, in many cases, staring down their own mortality. Also, it is often assumed that older veterans may not be able to relate to younger veterans in a group setting; however, it's the case often that veterans really need and

value the reinforcement and bonding that comes from working across generations, benefitting from each other's knowledge, insights, struggles, and solutions. At the same time, group leaders and writing group members should be aware of the challenges of negotiating differences in intergenerational veterans' communities, for instance, the changing role of women in combat roles, and the presence of LGBT service members in the armed forces. There are also rivalries and tensions across branches of the service: officers versus enlisted service members, combat versus non-combat veterans, reservists versus full-time active duty personnel, and veterans who were drafted versus those who volunteered to serve. Where possible, groups should be inclusive of all veterans and, at the same time, be prepared for negotiating and addressing differences of opinion, perspective, and location.

Even as these three myths about veteran writing groups may pose challenges, there is no shortage of interest in setting up such groups. For those wishing to do so, I offer the following practical advice.

Starting up a Veterans' Writing Group

The key to initiating any community group is setting up a long-range working plan. The following questions and advice may be particularly helpful.

- *Mission*: Why do you want to start the group? What is your goal?
- *Purpose*: Is there a need for the group? Are there other groups in your area similar or close to what you are planning? Could you collaborate or connect with an existing group instead of establishing your own?
- *Leadership*: Who will be involved in leading or co-leading the group? Veterans? Civilians? Care providers? What common knowledge base, materials, and working plans do group leaders need to have?
- *Funding*: How will you cover any expenses—refreshments, books, publication and printing costs—associated with your group? Group leaders may want to partner with local businesses, colleges/universities, or arts organizations to solicit sponsorship monies. Arts and humanities grants, especially those connected with encouraging the expressive arts among service members, can be a source of funding as well.
- *Group Size and Scope*: What will be the estimated or hoped-for size of your group? Will all veterans be included or only specific cohorts such as student veterans or veterans of particular wars/conflicts? Is the group open to supporters of veterans, including care providers and family members? As mentioned earlier, consider casting the widest possible net for your group and making it more inclusive than exclusive of potential members. Also consider gender and racial balance in setting up your group.
- *Resources*: What resources can you draw on to set up the group? Resources for curriculum planning and writing assignments are readily available in books and on the web. For example, Ron Capps, founder and leader of the Veterans Writing Project [http://veteranswriting.org/], offers a useful writing curriculum tailored to veteran writers in *Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story*. Operation Homecoming also offers a downloadable PDF [http://www.nea.gov/national/homecoming/guide.html] of its writing curriculum and sample writing assignments (Carroll and Peede). The assignments for the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group are publicly available for download at our web address [http://wrt.syr.edu/syrvetwriters/] if viewers click on the meeting link. In addition, group leaders should familiarize themselves with the literature on the long-term consequences and benefits of military service, including the significant body of research on medical and psychological effects associated with combat

such as PTSD (see Johnson, Shay, Tick) as well as Traumatic Brain Injury and Military Sexual Trauma, issues that group leaders are likely to encounter in their work with veterans.

- *Format*: How will you set up a productive format for group meetings? A given group format will depend, of course, on the purpose of the group and the writing genres emphasized. Some writing instructors teach classes or weekend workshops for military veterans that address specific content and lessons on technique; these workshops take place over the span of few days or weeks, whereas others set up community writing workshops that meet on a monthly or quarterly basis as enumerated in the three examples earlier. Consider a format that will work best for the needs and purposes of your group members.

- *Location*: Where will group meetings be located? Is the group's location, including meeting rooms, bathrooms, and parking, accessible to veterans with disabilities? Does your meeting location also include the possibility that group members can arrive via public transportation? If not, can you or the group members arrange a carpool to the location?

- *Notification and Communication*: How will you recruit new members and communicate with your group? Group leaders should make connections with local veterans' organizations: the nearest Veterans Administration Medical Center, the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars chapters in the area (VFW), Vietnam Veterans of America, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, Veterans for Peace, or other such organizations, including Student Veterans' Clubs at the universities and colleges in your area as well as local public libraries. Once you have communicated with interested parties, schedule a time for the first meeting, advertise it via flyers and listservs, and remain flexible about when group meetings can be held. To stay in touch with members, group leaders should establish a listserv, phone list, website and Facebook group. A website can also become a convenient publication platform for group members' work and a way to represent the group to potential members and larger publics.

- *Sustaining the Group and Leadership*: What is your plan for creating a sustainable group leadership structure? One suggestion to avoid burnout for leaders is to always be training new leadership—whether from within the group or by attracting outside or occasional guest leaders. Setting up a writing group means thinking about a schedule that is best for all group members, not necessarily a schedule that best meets the academic community's needs (see Mathieu), and it also means coming to terms with the idea that group members will come and go as see they fit—not as you or other group leaders see fit.

- *Support For Veterans*: How will your group connect with support resources for veterans? What organizations and groups will your group want to maintain ties or special associations with, and how might you include veterans in determining this?

Conclusion

As the Vietnamese doctor in Larsen's narrative indicates, war's effects do not end when the warring governments declare the war over; such effects are ongoing and very real for the veterans as well as the civilians who participated in or were affected by war. Veterans' writing groups work against the silence, denial, and forgetting our society exercises about the real human costs of war—consequences and experiences that we and others bear responsibility for as citizens of a nation that sent them to war. Community writing groups can be one site where veterans have an opportunity to make sure that others do not forget what war has wrought in their

lives or in the life of our nation.

Notes

1. The tale of Odysseus has inspired not only Kingston and her writing group but a whole generation of Vietnam veterans who have worked with Dr. Jonathan Shay, a psychotherapist, who has used the epic war story to narrate his two books on Vietnam veterans, explain the effects of PTSD, and undergird his therapeutic practice. (Return to text.) [#footnote1_ref]

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