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"Learning Shock" and Student Veterans: Bridging the Learning Environments of the Military and the Academy

Mark Blaauw-Hara

Abstract: In this article, I provide an overview of student veterans' experiences learning in the military, from the ways the armed forces operate as a community of practice to how they build the competence of their service-members through application of andragogical principles. I then contrast the learning environment of the military to that of college, highlighting areas of overlap and disconnect. Finally, I provide suggestions for how we in the academy—and specifically those of us involved with writing studies—can help student veterans connect the two learning environments and, hopefully, increase their chances of success at college.

A number of scholars have argued that we have an ethical obligation to examine how our practices in writing instruction might help or hinder student veterans (Hart and Thompson; Valentino). These arguments have resulted in significant interest in student veterans' experiences in writing and learning, as is demonstrated by special issues in a number of journals (including *Composition Forum*) and the excellent new edited collection, *Generation Vet: Composition, Student-Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University* (Doe and Langstraat). A key finding in this growing body of research is that student veterans have had a richer experience writing in the military than many faculty assume (Hadlock; Hadlock and Doe; Hinton, "Front and Center," "The Military"; Mallory and Downs). However, their ability to fluidly transfer their writing skills to the classroom is complicated by the fact that the writing they did in the military was bound up in the larger practices and learning environment of the armed forces. They know, for example, how to write an effective evaluation of a subordinate, but they may have trouble abstracting the skills of clarity, directness, and evidence and applying them to academic writing because the military and academic environments are so different.

In essence, student veterans can experience disruption as they transition from one learning environment to another that is similar to culture shock. In a conversation about this transition, Louise Wetherbee Phelps termed this "learning shock," a phrase I think encapsulates the disorientation student veterans sometimes experience as they enter college. As with culture shock, learning shock implies a past experience that is disconnected from the present and, at times, at cross-purposes with it. Frequently, higher education seems to treat student veterans as though they come from a vacuum as far as learning is concerned—as though the time they spent between high school and college was a caesura during which learning did not happen. This viewpoint is incorrect.

Success in the military is predicated on an aptitude for learning, and, moreover, by the ability to internalize and apply knowledge in diverse, often high-stress situations. However, the learning environment and the theoretical underpinnings of the military do not mesh exactly with those in academia. When student veterans transition poorly from one learning environment to the other, their difficulties should be viewed not in terms of lack, but of disconnect: they do not lack ability or experience learning new skills and information, but the way they are accustomed to doing so may not immediately connect with how they are asked to do it in college. To improve this transition, the first step is for us to understand and value the learning environments from which they come. Such an understanding may lead us to re-examine some of our curricular choices in writing classes in terms of how well they connect to the learning environments with which our student veterans are more familiar. Additionally, we can help student veterans examine those same connections. Supporting them as they develop a metacognitive understanding of how they learn and what they have learned in the military may increase their ability to transfer their military knowledge to the academic context, since metacognition has long been seen as an integral component to knowledge transfer (Brent; Perkins and Salomon).

In this article, I incorporate two primary theoretical lenses: communities of practice and adult learning theory, or andragogy. Integrating current scholarship with student-veteran perspectives from a small set of collective instrumental case studies, I connect these theoretical frames with veterans' experiences learning in the military, from the ways the armed forces function as communities of practice to how they incorporate andragogy to build the critical thinking skills of service-members. I then contrast the learning environment of the military to that of college, highlighting both areas of convergence, where military experience may support student veterans' transition, and areas of disconnect that may contribute to feelings of frustration and possible disorientation (i.e., "learning shock"). Finally, I provide suggestions for how we in the academy—and specifically those of us involved with writing studies—can help student veterans connect the two learning environments and, hopefully, increase their chances of success at college.

Brief Description of Methodology

I am an English faculty member and WPA at a small community college. As part of a larger project, in 2014-15 I interviewed six student veterans who had attended my school about their transition to college and how their military experience affected that transition. These student veterans had served in several different branches of the armed forces—Alan and Brian (Army), Logan (Navy), Derek (Air Force), and Mike (Coast Guard)—and they participated in IRB-approved surveys and semi-structured interviews that helped me understand their experiences transitioning to the college writing environment (Appendix 1 and Appendix 2). I coded the surveys and interview transcripts according to grounded-theory methodologies suggested by Kathy Charmaz, proceeding through initial and focused coding to better understand the experiences of my participant group as a whole.

In this article, I use comments and perspectives from my participant group to ground and expand upon other current scholarship that explores how student veterans make the transition to college. Certainly, my study has several limitations, most notably that the group is small and all male. Both of these limitations were a result of who volunteered to participate: since I work at a small school and the total number of student veterans is low, I was unable to find a larger range of participants. Accordingly, this should be viewed as a pilot study—hopefully one that lays the groundwork for other scholars to build upon. However, despite the limited sample, what my participants said connects strongly with other, broader research on student veterans. Additionally, I feature interview and survey data in this piece because I think it is important to include student-veteran voices, when possible, in scholarship that focuses on the group. In this way, those of us (such as myself) who have not served in the military can be more confident that our scholarship remains connected to the actual experiences of student veterans.

The Learning Environments of the Military and the Academy

Connecting with Communities

When a student veteran enrolls in college, moving from the military to the academic sphere, he or she transitions between communities with different purposes, ways of learning and thinking, and methods of signifying membership. Lave and Wenger's concept of communities of practice (CoPs) provides one useful theoretical frame to help understand this shift. According to their formulation, a CoP is a group of individuals who engage in common practices, and these practices define the group (for example, one of Lave and Wenger's study groups was midwives, who practice midwifery). These groups contain practitioners who are at different stages of mastery, which correspond to different identities. For example, new members often fall into the apprentice role, learning the practices of the community from more experienced members. Gradually, as the apprentices gain skill and knowledge, they move toward full participation, eventually becoming masters themselves and instructing newer members.

In the military, new recruits go through a highly codified basic-training program in which they learn key practices of the military community and their specific branch of the service; as they continue their service and progress up the ranks, performing more complex tasks and supervising others, they learn more about the profession and become more crucial participants. For those service-members who enlist in their late teens—common among undergraduate student veterans—military service comes at a key formative period of late adolescence, often when young adults are struggling to establish identities separate from their families. The military can provide a new family, and with it, a new identity. One of my study participants, Alan, said that "everything [was] different" as a result of his time in the military. Another participant, Derek, characterized his military service as changing his life. To some extent this is no surprise, since changing one's life is exactly what the military sets out to do (Doe and Doe).

A major part of this change has to do with forging not only a personal but a communal identity: as a veteran cited by

Rumann and Hamrick says, "'You become attached [to the soldiers in your unit]—they truly are your family'" (446). Other researchers, such as Morrow and Hart, highlight the military's priority on building a cohesive team. As Derek said, "In the military you go through your training programs, [and] whether it's aircraft maintenance school or it's Special Forces school or noncommissioned officer school, everything is done as a team. Nothing accomplished is ever done alone or individually." The emphasis on forging a cohesive team certainly makes sense. Most military service-members will deploy as teams and carry out their work on the battlefield as teams; it is crucial for them to be able to work well with others. Accordingly, the military emphasizes teamwork and community not just on the battlefield, but, as Derek points out, throughout training.

This emphasis on a personal identity that is tied to the community meshes extremely well with the CoP framework. Etienne Wenger writes that "identity reflects a complex relationship between the social and the personal. Learning is a social becoming" ("The Career of a Concept" 182). He notes that as we grow to identify with a given community, "our engagement [...] is rarely effective without some degree of alignment with the context" of the community (184). Wenger also argues that a central component of community membership is accountability: in order to be respected and contributing members of a CoP, we need to understand the history and goals of the community and contribute in ways that are consistent with them.

Military writing serves as a microcosm of the larger military CoP and follows a pattern that is very consistent with the CoP framework. New participants write little, often only log entries and similar short, highly structured artifacts. As enlisted men and women are promoted, their writing expands, now including evaluations of subordinates, incident reports, memos, and the like. Officers write still more. Most of the writing has a specific format that, as Hadlock notes, serves to make the writing quickly and easily understood by other members of the military community. All formal military writing—regardless of whether it is a log entry produced by a private, a counseling report produced by a sergeant, or a memorandum produced by an officer—is an important contribution to the military enterprise.

One way to conceive of military veterans' transition to college is to view it as a shift between two communities of practice. Supporting veterans' transition, then, would involve exploring the ways in which the two CoPs are similar and different, how both function, and how the different qualities of the two CoPs might lead to some amount of "learning shock" as veterans make that transition. In the context of academia, a rich body of work exists that focuses on supporting communities of practice among faculty and graduate students within disciplines, which is logical since those individuals are already members of a clearly defined disciplinary community with similar interests and goals. (For some examples, see Crede, Borrego, and McNair on engineering grads, or Valentine on English graduate students in the writing center.) However, research on undergraduates is more sparse. Commonly, scholars who have tackled this issue focus on some sort of capstone project undertaken by juniors or seniors that is specifically designed to prepare them for their disciplinary workplace—for example, a major senior project in an architectural design studio (Morton), a final-year group project meant to simulate an information-technology consultancy (Fearon, McLaughlin, and Eng), or a senior capstone design project in an engineering school in which the students develop and test an actual product (Dannels).

The effectiveness of these efforts to build academic communities of practice is mixed. The most common challenge reported is that the students perceive the CoPs as artificial, more closely tied to school than to their disciplines or eventual workplaces. The scholars I cite above do not argue that the CoP framework will not work in school; however, it seems reasonable to extrapolate that if students who are on the verge of graduation have difficulty seeing their schoolwork as directly tied to their disciplinary community of practice, this difficulty would be even more pronounced among students at the beginning of their college careers.

Indeed, Lave and Wenger intentionally steered clear of a focus on schooling in their foundational text. They write that schooling and the CoP framework are not necessarily incompatible, but that the learning that is expected to happen in school is often too generalized and abstract to mesh well with their theory of learning. Lave and Wenger view learning as highly situated and occurring in a specific context; while they acknowledge that learning happens in schools, they raise questions about the connections between schools and the communities that originate the knowledge/practices that schools purport to teach. In other words, their concerns are similar to those of current scholars who critique our ability to teach academic discourse in writing classes: if discourses are situated, we can only teach an approximation of them when we remove them from their disciplinary context.

This argument is debatable: some scholars argue that there are clear, teachable patterns across academic disciplines (Thonney; Wolfe), while others maintain that such patterns, if they indeed exist, are too general to be of much use to students (Downs and Wardle; Wardle). There is merit to both arguments; as Johns articulates, CoPs can be thought of in terms of levels: "Academics" might be a top-level community, with "Humanities" as a sub-level community, "Literary Critic" as a sub-level of that, and so on (Johns 58). The genre characteristics of community written discourse would get more specialized as one moved deeper in the sub-levels, but there would still be closer parallels between, say, a literary critic and a historian (both sub-communities of humanities) than there would be

between a literary critic and a heart surgeon.

Still, applying the CoP framework to undergraduate education is complex, and these complexities stand out all the more when one considers how clear-cut the military CoP is. None of this means that the CoP framework is not helpful; rather, it can help explain some of the differences between the military and college learning environments and provide a partial reason why student veterans may feel disoriented when they enter college. Their roles are less clear than in the military, as are the practices that gain them respect and community membership. This does not mean that college does not have accepted roles and practices, but that they are less easily apprehended by new students who have spent years in a far different community. An understanding of potential disconnects between the two communities suggests classroom interventions—for example, metacognitive writing assignments that encourage student veterans to explore the ways they learned, wrote, and acted in the military, coupled with explicit discussion of college roles and practices. I suggest several such interventions later in this article.

Understanding Andragogy

In addition to communities of practice, another theoretical framework that is useful to contrast the learning environments of the military and academy is adult learning theory, or andragogy. The study of andragogy relies in large part on the work of Malcolm Knowles, who argues for the following six principles of andragogy: the need to know, the learner's self-concept, the role of learners' experiences, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson). I will not go into depth on each of these principles here, mostly because they have been written about in other articles (including Navarre Cleary and Wozniak's excellent application of andragogy to student veterans, published in this journal). However, one will note that several of these principles are similar and center on the acknowledgement and incorporation of adults' prior experience and felt needs into the curriculum. As Knowles, Holton, and Swanson write, "for many kinds of learning, the richest resources for learning reside in the adult learners themselves" (66). Additionally, they stress that the best-designed learning environments give adults a significant amount of self-direction and enable them to pursue the specific knowledge they need to know at the time they need to know it.

Persyn and Polson point out that adult learning theory has influenced the military's approach to training for many years. They provide examples that span literacy training during the Revolutionary War through modern training in critical thinking and problem-solving. As they note, many of the military's educational practices explicitly draw from adult learning theory, incorporating self-directed learning, experiential education, and real-life situations. Urging military educators to adopt adult-learning principles more fully, Carolyn Saunders argues that "we can implement an andragogical approach that is backed up by solid research that found that self-directed learning is the natural mode for adults, that adult students do possess the characteristics assumed in the andragogical model, and that learning does increase when this model is used" (42). As Blaise Cornell-d'Echert, Jr., writes,

> If one of the new realities of 21st-century warfare is that everyone must think, preparation should offer military personnel of all ranks opportunity to practice thinking. This is all about problem solving. [...] However, the reality of military performance is that military personnel receive and conduct missions. These missions are a series of problems that require solutions. Rarely are these missions a series of orchestrated tasks arranged in a logical sequence for careful monitoring by an outside observer. Fundamentally, military personnel are problem solvers. (21)

Like Saunders, Cornell-d'Echert argues that a strong connection to adult learning theory can help the military prepare its service-members to carry out their tasks and reach their potential as learners and service-members.

Similarly, Zacharakis and Van Der Werff emphasize how the conscious incorporation of adult-learning principles can help the military build critical-thinking capabilities in its ranks. For example, when writing about the Marine Corps' integration of critical-thinking preparation at all levels of training, Zacharakis and Van Der Werff state that "the goal is to develop a learning organization that is made of educated critical thinkers. All marines are expected to make a contribution to the team, not just with their ability to fire a rifle or follow orders but also through the ability to think, self-regulate their emotions, and take responsibility for their and the team's actions" (95). Hadlock and Doe point out that "the military has put more focus on decision making and agency at the individual and team level than ever before, and responsibility resides less and less exclusively in the senior leader" (79). Similarly, the Army Learning Concept for 2015 emphasizes the need "to develop higher-order thinking skills for all soldiers, ensuring they are prepared for the dynamic, complex, and ambiguous operational environments likely to face them in future conflicts" (Zacharakis and Van Der Werff 11). In short, the military expects that service-members at all levels will be able to contribute to the welfare and success of the organization with their brains, not just with their brawn.

Those of us in composition studies have long understood that writing can be a vital practice for encouraging

individual thought and critical thinking, as well as for making sense of complex ideas. We also know that writing is a useful heuristic for problem-solving. All of these are consistent with the military's andragogical emphasis, and perhaps surprisingly to those of us in the academy, the military incorporates a substantial amount of reading and writing (Hadlock; Hinton, "The Military). All of my participants wrote regularly in the military, and as they advanced in rank, the writing they did increased in complexity. One example of specialized writing my participants learned is "counseling reports," or evaluations of their subordinates. As Brian described them,

> The idea behind it is to inform the soldier, to go over their career and what they were doing and what they need to work on, whether it's their military bearing, if they weren't being courteous or saying "Yes, sir" or "No, sergeant." Or standing at parade rest when they're speaking to higher ranking NCOs or sergeants. Or how they were doing on physical fitness. You want to take a soldier, say, "This is what I see of you. This is what happened. This is what we need to work on. And this is what will help your career in the Army." So the idea behind it is to create success in the soldiers.

As my participants emphasized, good counseling reports required an analysis of their subordinates' strengths and weaknesses, their fit in the service branch, and how best to articulate these qualities within the genre constraints of the report. Another way to look at counseling reports is that they were designed to encourage targeted learning in subordinates, learning that took prior experience, motivation, and the learners' self-concept into account—they were andragogical tools themselves.

In college, we frequently encourage in-depth examination of difficult issues through reading, writing, and group conversation. The military does this as well. Logan still had several training documents from a Navy "Pride and Professionalism Workshop" from 2008, and they contain training scenarios in which participants were asked to problem-solve communication conflicts. For example, the Trainee Guide asks participants to break up into small groups and discuss the following scenario:

> A work center supervisor reprimands an Airman because the Airman did not complete a task the supervisor assigned him. The Airman begins to defend himself, but the supervisor cuts him off with, "I don't want any excuses! Just get back in there and get to work. And from now on do what I tell you *when* I tell you." Later, the work center supervisor's own supervisor approaches her and says, "Sorry for pulling Airman _____ off the job yesterday, but I really needed him." (*Trainee Guide* 84)

The guide then asks groups to write responses to a series of questions about what specific aspects of communication broke down in the scenario and how the problems might be resolved. After the trainees compose their answers, they are asked to report back to the larger group, which then discusses responses from all the small groups. The instructor guide, which Logan also provided, emphasizes that "there are no absolutely right or wrong answers here. There are a number of problems in this scenario. The important thing is to get the trainees to think about the scenario, communication, and how breakdowns in communication can lead to conflict" (*U.S. Navy Pride and Professionalism* 1.3.10). These instructions underscore how the actual learning environment in the military is much richer than the popular reductive portrayals of drill instructors barking orders and enlisted men and women being instructed to shoot, not think.

Despite the parallels between how learning is encouraged in the military and academic environments, andragogical principles are more haphazardly applied in college. Few college courses are really designed with adult learners in mind. Instead, they are structured to teach traditional-age students who are characterized (sometimes implicitly) as novices. This characterization is obviously erroneous when applied to veterans, who have a great amount of experience learning and applying new knowledge, and indeed a great amount of life experience that is useful in college. Yet the curriculum in most undergraduate college classes does not tend to build upon students' prior experience, nor does it tend to be flexible enough to allow students to follow their individual interests or pursue what they want to know when they want to learn it.

Like the military, we in college want to encourage critical thought, individual initiative, and on-going growth and learning. Employing andragogical principles—building on learners' prior experiences, being alert for how we can provide learning opportunities when learners are ready for them, increasing learners' motivation—is one way we can do so. As I detail below, an awareness of andragogy leads to classroom interventions that encourage student veterans to connect college to their life goals and prior knowledge, and hopefully to harness their intrinsic motivation to succeed.

Lessening Learning Shock: Specific Recommendations

It is likely that many student veterans will find the transition to college somewhat jarring no matter what we do. The

academy is, in many ways, an odd and idiosyncratic community, and all students need to adapt and adjust as they enter it. However, a more informed understanding of the learning environment student veterans are used to from their military experience can help us develop interventions to ease their transition. I provide several recommendations for writing teachers below.

Exploring Community and Identity

As I noted earlier, veterans come from a sharply defined community of practice, and it is difficult to replicate such a community in college. However, we can (and should) examine the ways we understand community in writing classes. A number of studies have found that student veterans tend to be frustrated by their civilian peers, mostly because of what they perceive as the civilians' lack of work ethic, unreliability, and superfluous concerns (Persky and Oliver; Wheeler). This frustration came through in my interviews. For example, Logan described sitting in the library doing homework and getting increasingly frustrated at a nearby conversation between two other students about the television show *The Voice*.

> Logan: I couldn't believe how upset I was getting about how stupid the whole conversation was. They went on for an hour about this. I didn't have a very intense military career, I had a very enjoyable fun time out there, you know. But I'm just thinking of all the people out there who are risking their lives and stuff so people can be sitting around talking about Christina Aguilera until the ends of the earth, the types of pants she's wearing. It was a little aggravating.

Joseph described group-work as "sometimes a social nightmare" because he thought that the other members of his group "wonder[ed] why your career track is starting later at college, which generates a hurdle that has to be overcome in most situations before a person can feel comfortable with you." Derek noted that in the military, he had become accustomed to people following through in group-work. However, in college, "I don't know how many times...like endlessly my classmates [said], 'OK, I'll meet you at 2:00,' and we've got a final the next day. We're counting on each other to get through this stuff together, and they don't show up."

Comments such as these argue that we should think about the type of community we want to develop in our writing courses. Veterans enter college with a different understanding of community and one's role within it than do traditional college students. They respect leadership and preparedness, and they are accustomed to clear directives. Explicit discussions of classroom community and everyone's responsibilities within it would likely be helpful to student veterans (and probably traditional students as well). Veterans are also accustomed to being held accountable for how well they meet the demands of the community and how well they support its other members. We should feel comfortable giving them such feedback.

We should also consider how and why we assign collaborative work more carefully. It seems clear that if we view our students overly simplistically and homogenize them into a group with relatively uniform experience, we will tend to assign collaborative work with the naive expectation that group interactions will somehow work themselves out naturally. This approach does a disservice to the variety present in all of our students, but it can be especially hard on our veterans. Highly structured expectations for collaborative work can help, since veterans are used to having group tasks with clear objectives. For example, if we assign peer response, we might consider also assigning specific roles within the group and clear objectives for what each group will accomplish.

Additionally, we need to remember that most student veterans will not be long-term members of the academic community in the same way that they were (and, in the case of those who continue to serve, still are) in the military. Their time in college is transitional. A key point to remember is that we are asking student veterans to become "student-like" rather than abandon their prior identities: we want them to connect to college and their professors and perform the student role well enough to succeed. As I have noted throughout this article, veterans share many things in common with other adult, non-traditional students, and a struggle to incorporate a student identity is a good example. As O'Donnell and Tobbell point out in their discussion of adult returning students,

> [I]n transition, the notion of identity is in the foreground because the new and strange practices force reconsideration of practice and therefore shifts in identity trajectories. The nature of the individual trajectory is constructed through the interaction of the past, present, and perhaps future aspirations of the student. [...N]on inclusionary practices in the HE institution may be in opposition to aspirations of educational success and serve to generate meanings that shape identity in a certain and not necessarily advantageous way. (315)

A central challenge to schools and faculty is to demystify educational practices so that veterans (and other non-traditional students) can more clearly see how they can participate productively in higher education.

Etienne Wenger has discussed the value of “brokering,” whereby more knowledgeable members of a community help new members learn the practices of the community. Wenger suggests that there are different ways to broker knowledge. Teachers of early-undergraduate writing courses can be seen as “boundary spanners” (235), whom Wenger characterizes as individuals who focus on one specific boundary between communities over a length of time—in this case, the boundary between the academic discourse community (such as it is) and the communities outside of it, such as the military. Wenger writes that brokering is “delicate [...] It requires enough legitimacy to be listened to and enough distance to bring something really new” (236). Student veterans come from a community in which legitimacy is, in large part, connoted by rank; in our case, we are likely to be viewed as legitimate because we are the acknowledged leaders of the course. Certainly we have enough distance from the military community to “bring something really new.” Still, though, even if we use our status as brokers to demystify writing in the academic sphere, student veterans may still have difficulty, because, as Wenger goes on to say, learning is not just intellectual—“it is also a matter of opening up our identities to other ways of being in the world” (239).

In conversations with student veterans, writing teachers can help them understand that a successful student identity is, to a large extent, a role they are performing. We must take care not to diminish the significance or importance of that role; however, it is still a role. As Burgess and Ivanič write, identity is

> not unitary or fixed but has multiple facets; is subject to tensions and contradictions; and is in a constant state of flux, varying from one time and one space to another. This multifaceted identity is constructed in the interaction between a person, others, and their sociocultural context. It includes the “self” that a person brings to the act of writing, the “self” she constructs through the act of writing, and the way in which the writer is perceived by the reader(s) of the writing. (232)

Several researchers have noted that writers align themselves with communities, consciously and unconsciously, as they compose; as Herrington and Curtis put it, college writers look for people, languages, genres, and practices “with which to shape a self to speak from. [...] Also important, as these students were developing the sense of a kindred group to speak *from*, they were simultaneously envisioning a group they spoke *for*, a group with whom they also shared an identity” (370-371).

In other words, writers perform identities that connect them to their discourse communities—what Roz Ivanič calls a writer’s “discoursal self.” As Ivanič points out, this is a *persona*, a role that students adopt to show membership. In Goffman’s terms, it is a performance. Scholars such as Donna LeCourt have explored identity performance in terms of working-class students who are concerned about leaving their home identities behind, arguing that the conception of identity as “always under construction, always being negotiated, and always felt and enacted in relation to other classes, discourses, and power structures” can help students become aware of how they continually construct their class identities (45). We can probably extrapolate this to student veterans—not only because many veterans at the community-college level come from working-class backgrounds, but because they are entering a community that seems to ask them to completely and immediately reshape themselves.

We can help them understand that this is not actually the case. As Wenger notes, we are always members of multiple communities (“The Career of a Concept”). Sometimes those memberships conflict, but more frequently, we highlight different aspects of ourselves depending on what communities we are currently interacting with. Student veterans do not have to abandon their military identities to succeed in college; in fact, organizations such as the Student Veterans Association of America have shown that veterans can thrive in the college environment. Encouraging student veterans to examine their own identities through writing can help them understand how their military experience has shaped them and explore ways they can expand their connection to the college community.

My colleagues and I have had good results when we have asked student veterans to connect their military and academic identities by writing about military discourse for college audiences. For example, I encouraged an Army veteran to write about how to craft a SITREP, or Situation Report, and to work with civilian peers to expand and clarify his essay for a civilian audience. A colleague of mine asked one of her student veterans to write a discourse analysis of his branch of the military and contrast it to academic discourse. Similar writing assignments that ask student veterans to examine their military communicative patterns can help them explore their military “discoursal selves” and pave the way for an examination of potential academic discoursal selves they might present.

Integrating Adult Learning Theory

Improving faculty members’ familiarity with adult learning theory would benefit all students, but, as Navarre Cleary and Wozniak argued in this journal, it is especially important if we want to help student veterans. One reason is that, as I noted above, the military itself embraces adult learning theory, and doing so in college can reduce veterans’ learning shock. The field of adult learning theory is broad, but a good place to start is Malcolm Knowles’s six

principles of andragogy, listed earlier in this article. Of these six concepts, I would argue that writing teachers in particular should start with the need to know, the learners' self-concept, and the role of learners' experiences.

The first concept, the need to know, describes how adult learners are unlikely to take the teacher's word that something is important; instead, they want to know the potential benefits and drawbacks associated with learning the material. Knowles recommends that teachers incorporate simulations or scenarios that will let learners discover gaps between where they currently are with the material and where they want to be. To this, I would add that a wise course for writing teachers (and WPAs) would be to examine the curricula of their courses with an eye toward how they can demonstrate the usefulness of what they are teaching. Unfortunately, we too often ask students to trust that a given essay or assignment will pay off several years down the road; this can be especially hard for student veterans who are used to clear objectives. Because they are diligent, motivated students, they will probably do the work no matter what we tell them. However, if we can provide them with clear rationales for our assignments and requirements, we can tap into the well of intrinsic motivation that resides within many student veterans.

Secondly, the learners' self-concept is particularly important when we work with student veterans. The veterans in our classes have been accustomed to bearing a great deal of responsibility and, oftentimes, authority over others. They are expert sonar technicians, tank commanders, and aircraft mechanics, and many times they have been all over the world. We do them a great injustice when we treat them like eighteen-year-olds who are just leaving home for the first time. When possible, we should engage their maturity and experience by involving them in directing their own learning. For example, I suggested above that veterans respond well to direct feedback and clear expectations; when we give them, we can also lay out options for them to address any writing difficulties and work with them to develop their own plan to improve. We are the experts in writing, a fact they will readily acknowledge; however, they are the experts in how they learn, and we need to acknowledge that, as well.

Encouraging Connection through Mindful Abstraction

Knowles urges us to build on learners' experiences with our curriculum, and this seems particularly important with veterans. It also seems very attainable in most writing classes. For example, Mike talked about how he wrote almost twice as much as the requirement in an assignment on sexual harassment in the military, and that he "kind of had an advantage there over people in my class because none of them have been in the military." If student veterans have self-disclosed their veteran status in a course, we can ask if they mind being called on when course topics touch on the military or world events. We can encourage them to journal about their time in the military, or ask them to make connections between what they learned in the military and what they are learning in school. We can talk with them about how some of the habits they learned in service set them up well for college success and support their transfer of those skills. In short, we can demonstrate that their time in the military has value in the academic world.

The term I like for these types of activities is "mindful abstraction," which I draw from research on transfer theory. Perkins and Salomon helpfully divide knowledge transfer into two general types: low-road, which addresses more automatic transfer of simple concepts, and high-road, which focuses on big-picture, complex knowledge. As Brent points out, much research on transfer suggests that asking students to mindfully abstract knowledge—in other words, think, write, and talk about what they have learned and how they might apply it in other contexts—can greatly improve students' ability to transfer knowledge. I think that a similar principle applies to learning contexts. As I noted earlier in this piece, enlisted service-members are asked to think critically, debate courses of action, and respond to complex scenarios. Many are also asked to read challenging texts and discuss them, and as they advance in rank, they are asked to write more as well. Asking them to mindfully abstract not just what they learned, but *how* they learned as well, is likely to increase their ability to make a strong transition to college. For example, a common essay in first-year composition is a process analysis. A former student—an Army veteran—wrote about how to disassemble and clean an M-16. Although the essay prompt did not ask him to explore how he had learned the skills he wrote about, it easily could have. The discourse analysis assignment my colleague used (referred to earlier in this piece) did ask students to describe a specialized non-academic discourse and explore how they had learned that discourse. In informal office conversations with my military veterans, I often ask them questions about what they learned to do in the military and how they learned to do it, and I help them connect the two spheres.

Much of the current work around first-year composition has focused on metacognition and knowledge transfer and could prove helpful. For example, a number of threshold concepts articulated in *Naming What We Know*, Adler-Kassner and Wardle's collaborative sourcebook for writing-studies threshold concepts, seem productive places to start. Several concepts listed in the book dovetail with what I have discussed in this article quite well, such as Writing Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity, Writing Speaks to Situations through Recognizable Forms, and Writing Is Linked to Identity. Also, Wardle and Downs's writing-about-writing curriculum and Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak's transfer curriculum both focus heavily on metacognition and ask students to explore their writing histories and processes. Even if we do not choose to adopt one of these curricula, asking student veterans to write and think about their

histories as writers and learners in the military can help them construct the beginnings of a bridge to the academic environment.

Conclusion

Student veterans frequently find the transition to college (and academic writing) jarring. A careful examination of the learning environment of the military and an honest appraisal of how well it meshes with that of the academy reveal some possible reasons why many veterans find the transition difficult. Such an examination also reveals ways in which the two learning environments may connect to one another. Returning to Wenger's concept of brokering, understanding these two learning environments can better help us broker the transition for veterans. Considering how our classroom practices can better build upon their prior knowledge and skills, as well as encouraging student veterans to write and talk about how and what they learned in the military, can help veterans connect to the college environment and be more successful in college writing.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Survey of Student Veterans

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. The questions on this survey are designed to give me a sense of the basics about you, your military service, and your goals for college writing (if you are a new student). Some questions are very basic and only require short answers; others are a bit more open-ended. On the latter, the more information you can give me, the better I will be able to understand your experience.

Please do not worry about grammar, complete sentences, etc. I am just interested in the information. You may skip questions you prefer not to answer.

1. What is your current age?
2. What is your gender?
3. How old were you when you enlisted in the military?
4. Why did you decide to enlist?
5. What branch of the military did you serve in, what was your length of service, and what is your current rank?
6. Are you still in service in some capacity? If so, could you provide details?
7. How do you think your military experience shaped your sense of identity? (In other words, do you see yourself any differently now that you have served in the military? If so, how?)
8. If you are a current college student, what degree do you hope to achieve? If you are a college graduate, what is your degree?
9. Why did you decide to go to college? Do you (or did you) feel like you belong in college? Do you (or did you) have any particular concerns about your likelihood of success?
10. If you are a current student, what classes are you taking the upcoming semester that involve writing (if any)? How do you feel about your chances to write successfully in those classes?

Appendix 2: Interview Questions for Student Veterans

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research. I'd like to ask you a set of questions about your history, your experience in the military and college, and your experiences with writing.

1. Could you describe your academic writing experiences closest to when you enlisted in the military?
2. POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP: For example, what types of things did you write in school, what types of writing did you like (if any), and what did you see as the purposes for school writing?
3. Can you please describe how you used writing in the military? This could include any training or formal education you received as well as the writing you did during your normal duties.
4. POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP: What was valued in that writing? How did you learn what made that writing effective? Why was it important that you followed those criteria?
5. Did you ever draw from your military experience during your time in college, either as a source for ideas or for writing skills? If so, can you describe the experience?
6. Do you think there are any strengths or challenges that are specific to veterans as they learn college writing?
7. POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP: Are there ways colleges or faculty could better support student veterans as a group as they learn college writing?

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