

*Strangers at the Table: Student Veterans, Writing Pedagogy, and Hospitality*  
in the College Composition Classroom

by  
Joanna Lin Want

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(English and Education)  
in the University of Michigan  
2016

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Anne Ruggles Gere, Co-Chair  
Associate Professor Megan Sweeney, Co-Chair  
Professor Petra Kuppers  
Assistant Professor Melanie Yergeau

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To Neil, Juliet, and Adelaide—

Let's write the next chapter together.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am immensely grateful to the many people who have supported me during my time in the Joint Ph.D. Program in English and Education (JPEE) and while I wrote this dissertation. I especially want to thank my committee members: Anne Ruggles Gere, Megan Sweeney, Petra Koppers, and Melanie Yergeau. They each offered me the gifts of their expertise, perspectives, and experiences in ways that pushed me to ask better questions and seek more complex answers. I have sat at Anne's seminar table as well as her dining room table many times and always come away from the experience enriched. I often speak of Anne's composition studies knowledge as encyclopedic, and having access to the breadth and depth of her knowledge helped me to situate my scholarship and find my own place in the field. Meg has shown me how intellectual rigor and compassion inform one another and also provided a model of impeccable research ethics. I am inspired by the beauty, courage, and depth of her writing and scholarship and grateful for the careful attention she has given to mine. Petra asked questions that were key in helping me to shape this study and get to the heart of its findings. Her stance of radical openness to the world, generosity to her students, and seamless weaving together of art, scholarship, activism, and pedagogy inspire me and give me hope. I first met Melanie through her bold and fearless writing, and her scholarship planted seeds that eventually took root in my work. I am grateful for her willingness to be a part of this project.

In addition to my committee, I have had the opportunity to work with many outstanding faculty members at the University of Michigan. I am particularly appreciative of Anne Curzan who served as co-chair of JPEE. Anne provided me with a model of intellectual passion, professional generosity, and teaching excellence that will last me a

career. Michael Bastedo introduced me to qualitative research methods and advised me during the pilot study that preceded this study. The knowledge I gained from him about study design and conducting interviews proved invaluable during my dissertation research.

Colleagues at other institutions have also influenced and encouraged my work. Kim Ballard served as an early mentor and modeled pedagogical hospitality before I had words to name it. D. Alexis Hart, Lisa Langstraat, Sue Doe, and Katt Blackwell-Starnes have enthusiastically welcomed emerging scholars into composition studies and veterans studies work, including me, and I thank them.

I had the great luck to enter the program with Danielle Lillge, Crystal Van Kooten, Christie Toth, and Melody Pugh who became not only colleagues, but also great friends. As my writing group members, Danielle and Crystal have shaped my work in immeasurable ways. My luck continued as Liz Homan, Justine Neiderhiser, Sarah Swofford, Becca Manery, and Ruth Anna Spooner became my adopted cohorts. Brett Griffiths showed me how the paths of motherhood, scholarship, and writing can intertwine and inform one another in lovely ways. I am grateful to JPEE alumnae Hannah Dickinson, Stephanie Moody, Heather Thomson-Bunn, Melody Pugh, and Sarah Swofford whose dissertations served as excellent models of qualitative research studies.

Thank you to Jeanie Laubenthal of JPEE who performs her duties with remarkable competence and unwavering kindness. Lisa Curtis, Bonnie Campbell, and Denise Looker made the English Department Writing Program a collegial and enjoyable place to work and teach. Senia Vasquez and Jan Burgess of the Department of English Language and Literature provided administrative support that made my life easier across many years.

My research has been supported by generous grants and fellowships from the Rackham Graduate School, the Joint Program in English and Education, and the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan. I am especially grateful to have been the 2016 recipient of the Linda Pinder Fellowship, which was generously instituted by JPEE alumnus Randall Pinder and his husband Paul Pearson.

I thank the individuals at Midwest University, my research site, who made this study possible and who distributed my call for participation. I am most grateful to the military students who answered that call and agreed to become participants in this study. Many former students have shaped me as a teacher and made me want to become a better one. That desire led me to research the writing classroom.

I am grateful to Angela Van Heest and the teachers at Bread & Roses for helping to take care of what is most precious to me, so that I could do work that is important to me. Juliet and Adelaide, you are the heart of my heart. Gina Mercurio-Brown provided friendship, encouragement and laughter when I needed it most. Dianne Litynski believed in this project and helped me to hear that still, small voice in the wilderness.

My parents, James and Monica Want, have taught me grit and gratitude for each day. In the time I have written this dissertation, they have both survived cancer and been loving, joyful grandparents to my two daughters. Their love has been the foundation for everything I have done, and their support along the way has meant everything. Thank you.

To my husband, Neil Chase, thank you for being my loyal book Sherpa and dearest companion. We climbed this mountain together.

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation contributes to a better understanding of Post-9/11 student veterans' academic experiences in the college composition classroom. I interviewed twenty-four student veteran informants enrolled at one four-year institution about their experiences as college writers, using *hospitality* as a conceptual framework to interpret their narratives. Hospitality is an orientation of openness to others and the practice of hosts receiving and welcoming guests. Viewing the classroom as a space where diverse individuals temporarily gather together, I outline the possibilities and limitations of hospitality as a guiding pedagogical framework in the composition classroom. Based on informant narratives, I theorize teachers as *hosts*, students as *guests*, and teachers and students as *strangers* who can mutually influence one another. I offer a model of the college composition classroom as a hospitable space, alternative to other models such as a *community of peers* or a *contact zone*, arguing that hospitality draws necessary attention to axes of difference operating among classroom participants and to the temporary nature of any specific class.

Study findings reveal that student veteran informants develop a strong professional *ethos* in the military, which they bring with them into the classroom. "Professionalism" serves as a category that participants use to mark their difference from other students and as a framework for orienting themselves to their schooling. Student veteran informants are focused on their future professional goals, and some struggle to find a connection between those goals and the curriculum in their college composition courses. I argue that dialogue between teachers and students about their respective teaching and learning goals and an explicit focus on transfer of learning in the

composition curriculum can help students to invest in and learn more from their college composition courses.

Study findings also show that informants do not view themselves as *peers* with other students, suggesting the need to revise current theorizations of collaborative learning and activities, such as peer review, for *all* students, not just student veterans. I contend that conceptualizing students as *strangers* to one another, rather than *peers*, highlights how central the recognition and negotiation of difference is to a truly collaborative and hospitable classroom.

## CHAPTER 1

### FINDING A PLACE AT THE TABLE: A STUDY OF STUDENT VETERANS' EXPERIENCES IN THE COLLEGE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

We are all at once both insiders and outsiders.

–Joseph Harris, *A Teaching Subject*

Hospitality so often begins with a table. A table both literal and figurative. A table invites certain kinds of questions: *Who has a place here? Who is fed and who is left hungry? What are the rules and rituals?* The table carries with it all of the cultural codes and expectations that govern everyday interactions but often go unexamined by those to whom they have become familiar.

The table is also a powerful and ubiquitous image in the space of the writing classroom. Rarely do college teachers choose the rooms in which they will teach. I can recall the delight I've felt upon peeking into an assigned room with a large conference table and also how I've cringed upon seeing a room with long rows of tables screwed to the floor, all facing the front of the room. At first, these considerations might seem superficial, but I've found that spatial configurations can have a real impact on the tenor of a course. In part, this is so because they concretize some of the less visible, yet consequential, dynamics in the classroom, such as how power and authority are

circulating (or not) and how individuals are positioned to speak to one another or remain silent.

The space I have become most accustomed to teaching in is a classroom filled with chairs with kidney-shaped attached desks, the ones that leave the left-handed students hunting around the room hoping there's one made especially for them. At the beginning of many composition class periods, you can hear the high-pitched scraping of chair legs against the floor as teachers direct students to gather in a circle instead of rows. I, too, have done this in an effort to get students to talk more with one another, instead of just directing their comments to me as I sit at the front of the room. This image of a large circle of desks illustrates what has remained a central concern in composition studies scholarship: how to mitigate overbearing teacherly authority. In this circular configuration, students can see one another as they speak and, often, the teacher also sits in one of these smaller desks, effectively eliminating a "head of the table" seat. Smaller circles of students working in peer review groups illustrate a related concern, which is how to position students as audience members for one another's work and lessen the focus on teachers as the primary audience for student writing.

However, these awkward desks, gathered together in the absence of a shared table, also make visible one of the predominant tensions at work in the writing classroom: the push and pull between the individualizing and communalizing aspects of writing and writing instruction. Students usually write assignments as individuals, but most writing teachers hope that students will learn to understand the rhetorical realities of writing, which are brought to life by the awareness of an audience. This desire for students to experience writing as rhetorical has led to the prevalence of collaborative learning

practices such as peer review. Thus, in order to be successful in most contemporary writing classrooms, students must learn to move with the push and pull of acting both independently and collaboratively with their fellow students.

Hospitality is an orientation of openness to the other and the practice of hosts receiving and welcoming guests. Viewing the classroom as a place where diverse individuals with both aligning and competing desires gather together at a table—or desks pushed together, as the case may be—I seek to understand the possibilities and limitations of hospitality as a guiding pedagogical framework with practical implications in the postsecondary writing classroom. In order to investigate the possibilities and limitations for hospitality as a pedagogical practice, I conducted a qualitative interview study with twenty-four student veteran<sup>1</sup> informants who were enrolled as undergraduates at a single four-year institution, Midwest University.<sup>2</sup> In order to be eligible for participation in this study, informants had to be undergraduate student veterans (or active military) who had completed their first-year writing requirement at Midwest University or another institution. In this study, I utilized hospitality as a framework for study design, research practice, and analysis. Therefore, hospitality served as both the means and the end of my research.

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<sup>1</sup> In this study I have chosen to use the terms “student veterans” and “military students.” I have done so because this study includes a few participants who are active military, in the Reserves or National Guard. “Military student” is a more inclusive term, but “student veteran” is the more common term in both the literature and in practice, and it is sometimes used to include both students who are active military and veterans. One advantage of the term “military student” is that it helps to work against the assumption of a neat timeline that proceeds from high school to military service to college studies, even though this is indeed often the case among participants. Still, as some participants in this study show, the academic timelines and trajectories of military students is varied and sometimes complicated, with some beginning their academic studies while still in the military, some beginning college and then joining the military before returning to their studies, and those whose college careers are interrupted by one or more deployments.

<sup>2</sup> Institutional pseudonym.

I look to military students—those who are either veterans or currently active members of the Armed Forces—as one group of students who can help to illuminate hospitality as a pedagogical practice. I do not view student veterans as necessarily “more different” than other students; this study could be repeated with other groups of students, and those perspectives would also enrich our understanding of hospitality in pedagogical spaces. Nonetheless, I believe that military students, most of whom have been out of school for a period of years and, in the interim, gained distinct experiences that are unfamiliar to most citizens, have unique perspectives on the culture and functioning of first-year writing classrooms.

The student veteran participants in this study, many of them returning from war-zone deployments, are looking to higher education as a place to begin a new chapter in their lives. The transitions they describe out of the military and into full-time schooling can be exciting, but also quite challenging. What participants describe missing most about the military, even those who were anxious to leave it, is the camaraderie. By contrast, most participants experience school as an individual, sometimes lonely, endeavor. One informant, Terrence, a veteran of the Marines and Afghanistan War, likens the transition to being a soldier one week and the next week having to become “an astronomer.” But what he underscores as particularly disorienting about that transition to college is that all of a sudden “you’re not supposed to care about anyone but yourself.”

At the heart of this project is my desire to understand what makes a classroom a welcoming place for a diverse range of students with varied backgrounds, as well as a place where learning feels not just like an individual project, but a social one where differences between individuals are enriching rather than isolating. To connect the

practice of hospitality to the process of learning, as I do in this project, is to argue that learning is a relational endeavor and that certain kinds of learning are only possible through the exchange of perspectives and ideas with others, particularly others who interrupt, challenge, or change the way we understand and inhabit the world.

A study of student veterans with a focus on their experiences in their first-year writing classrooms is timely. American institutions of higher education are experiencing the largest influx of veterans since World War II.<sup>3</sup> In her 2010 Chair's Address to the Conference on College Composition, Marilyn Valentino asks how this influx of veterans affects the "ecology of our classes" (368) and reminds writing teachers that they are often a "first point of contact" (368) for student veterans entering college. Composition scholars D. Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson have characterized the need for faculty, administration, and writing programs to serve this new generation of student veterans as an "ethical obligation,"<sup>4</sup> but their research shows that few writing teachers or writing programs are actually equipped with the awareness and training to effectively do so. Understandably, much of the earliest scholarship on post-9/11 student veterans emerged from the field of higher education and student affairs, and early "on the ground" responses to the new influx of veterans on U.S. campuses were focused on essential logistics such as the coordination of G.I. Bill benefits. What has been missing is a more pedagogically focused response to the presence of student veterans in the classroom, and I seek to help fill that gap through this study.

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<sup>3</sup>The Chronicle of Higher Education reported that the number of veterans increased from about 35,000 to more than 500,000 between the period from 2009-2011 (Doe and Langstraat 1).

<sup>4</sup> Hart and Thompson take up Valentino's characterization of the need for writing teachers to "react responsibly" to narratives of war trauma as an "ethical obligation" and apply that ethical obligation more broadly to the work of serving veterans in writing programs.



The implications of this study are aimed primarily at writing teachers and scholars, but they also extend to university administrators who are interested in academically supporting the military students and veterans on their campuses. Ultimately, though, I analyze participants' accounts of their experiences not only to better understand student veterans' particular experiences in the college writing classroom, but also to understand how postsecondary writing pedagogy might become more hospitable for *all* students. I analyze veteran status as one axis of difference operating in the classroom, but I recognize that veterans and other students bring all kinds of differences with them. A hospitable pedagogy, then, anticipates a diversity of students who bring a variety of life experiences and gifts to the classroom. I believe that looking closely at one demographic of students and the way that a particular difference they bring to the classroom—in this case, veteran status—affects their educational experience can help us to more broadly consider how to welcome a diversity of students into the shared work of the writing classroom.

### **Hospitality as Conceptual Framework**

Quite often, contemporary hospitality is thought of in commercial terms related to the provision of food, drink, and accommodation. Indeed, the majority of academic publications on the topic are related to the hospitality industry and emerge from business and management publications. But over the past fifteen years, under the auspices of “hospitality studies,” disparate academic disciplines have reinvigorated conversations about the applications and implications of hospitality in a variety of contexts.<sup>5</sup> At its core,

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<sup>5</sup> Even fields with longstanding engagement with the concept of hospitality, such as tourism studies and anthropology, have in recent years begun to revisit hospitality in light of this growing interdisciplinary

hospitality is about relationships in specific contexts and temporary situations, whether it is the relationship of the state to the asylum seeker, patient to doctor, tourist to resident host, or teacher to student. Situating myself within the field of composition studies, I focus on classroom relationships between teachers and students and between students and other students in the context of the college composition classroom.

Because hospitality as a framework attends to both philosophy and praxis, it is well-matched for taking up many of the disciplinary concerns in composition studies, a field with a history of simultaneously attending to the concrete practices of teaching and the philosophical and ethical implications of those practices. Composition scholars Janis Haswell, Richard Haswell, and Glenn Blalock warn of the temptation to see hospitality as just another “literary analogy” for writing instruction. Instead, they contend that “hospitality *literally* can be performed in writing classrooms” (708-709, emphasis added), thereby recognizing what critical theorist Judith Still refers to as the physical, embodied practice of hospitality.

Still breaks the overarching practice of hospitality down into two broad categories: “the political domain of laws and rights” and “a socially situated moral code” (*Derrida and Hospitality* 5). The political domain of laws and rights concerns hospitality as it applies to nation-states in relation to other nation-states, and nation-states in relation to individuals. More relevant to my framework, the socially situated moral code applies

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interest (O’Gorman; Canda and da Col ). For a review of recent academic literature on hospitality, see Lynch, Germann Molz, McIntosh, Lugosi, and Lashley (2011). While noting that the majority of academic publications on hospitality still emerge from business and management, Lynch et al. draw on research from a broad array of academic disciplines including, among others, history, anthropology, science and technology studies, and cultural studies. In light of this broad review, they assert, “Certainly, we now have enough insights to recognize a variety of motives and ethical positions in relation to hospitality provision.” Like much of the new hospitality studies literature, theological ethics literature also addresses the practice of hospitality outside of a commercial framework. For example, Christian ethicist Christine D. Pohl traces hospitality throughout the larger Christian tradition, including its contemporary manifestations in such places as Catholic Worker houses and L’Arche communities.

to hospitality as it is practiced on a more intimate scale between individuals and groups of individuals. Still conceptualizes a tri-fold code that attends to the embodied, affective, and economic elements of hospitality:

- 1) *Physical, embodied practice*, which is made up of a “series of gestures” and “the labour these entail”
- 2) *Affective structure*, which refers to the intention and emotions with which the gestures are carried out
- 3) *Economic regulation*, which covers “any requirement for giving without return, or for reciprocity, or for rights and duties” (*Derrida and Hospitality*
- 5)

Still’s code has helped me in my analysis of informants’ narratives to recognize all of these elements of hospitality—labor, emotion, and economics—as intimately intertwined with one another. Given that students pay tuition to attend college, the realm of postsecondary education is inherently economic, yet it is also woven through with other kinds of relational and affective exchanges. As such, higher education cannot and should not be understood in terms of either purely economic or purely emotional exchanges.

However, many hospitality studies scholars would not characterize a clear economic agreement such as paying tuition in order to be educated as genuine hospitality. Lynch et al. conceptualize hospitality as “operating on a continuum with commercial hospitality at one end, ulterior-motives hospitality a bit further along, reciprocal hospitality somewhere in the middle and genuine altruistic hospitality at the other end” (11). For them, the purest forms of hospitality—altruistic hospitality—operate on the far end of the spectrum where nothing is expected of the guest in return for what is offered

by the host. But while Still equally acknowledges the primacy of intentions (namely, whether or not they are genuine), she cautions against “flattening out” the economic dimension of hospitality into a clear continuum, with commercial exchange on one end and altruism on the other (*Derrida and Hospitality* 16). Instead, she argues for a more nuanced differentiation among forms of exchange, including their non-economic elements. For example, an “altruistic” host on the far end of Lynch et al.’s continuum might be viewed as giving without receiving, but Still would urge a recognition of the possible presence of “affective payback.” In that case, the host may not be receiving anything monetarily or materially, but they<sup>6</sup> might be receiving a psychological or emotional benefit in return for what is given. Still also introduces other complexities into the consideration of hospitable economic exchange, such as time and indirect repayment. For example, one might expect to be paid back, but not immediately, or there may be an expectation that something offered will be returned in kind, but not directly to the original host, which Still calls “indirect social exchange” (see Still, *Derrida and Hospitality* 16-18).

The nuanced understanding of exchange that Still’s code of hospitality offers is useful for theorizing hospitality in the classroom. Her framework has helped me to be attentive to the many kinds of educational exchange that occur and how those exchanges are often framed and influenced by the larger economy of the university. For example, while students pay tuition to their institution and teachers are paid by their institution, no money is directly exchanged between students and teachers. Thus, teacher/student relationships are influenced but far from being determined by economic exchange. Other

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout my writing, I will at times intentionally use “they” and “their” as singular, gender-neutral pronouns.

kinds of exchange that require a nuanced understanding frequently occur in the classroom. For example, a student may be motivated to build a relationship with an instructor for the purpose of gaining a future recommendation letter, but they are also genuinely interested in learning from that teacher; or, a teacher might make pedagogical decisions with end-of-semester teaching evaluations in mind, but they are also genuinely motivated to make choices that support students' learning. An understanding of hospitality that conceptualizes labor, emotion, and economic exchange as intimately intertwined moves one away from an insistence on a "pure" form of hospitality and toward the recognition of the realistic, complicated, but nonetheless genuine possibilities for hospitality in the classroom.

In my conceptual framework, I have also leaned on Still's engagement with Jacques Derrida's theorizations of hospitality. Seriously considering the possibility of practicing hospitality means starting with an acknowledgement of its impossibility, a paradox best expressed by Derrida's *law* and *laws* of hospitality. The *law* of hospitality is absolute, unconditional welcome to the stranger, foreigner, or Other. Everything is given, but nothing is asked in return, not even a name. However, in a circular way, this unconditional welcome becomes impossible. If, for example, a host offers their house completely to their guest, they are no longer in possession of a space in which to offer hospitality and, therefore, no longer capable of welcome, at least in the traditional construction of hospitality, which is often premised on proprietary conceptualizations of the host. The *law* of hospitality, then, serves as the hyperbolic precursor of the necessarily conditioned and limited *laws* of hospitality. While Derrida characterizes the

law as hierarchically “above” the laws, he explains that the law and laws exist in a symbiotic relationship:

But even while keeping itself above the laws of hospitality, *the* unconditional law of hospitality needs the laws, it *requires* them. This demand is constitutive. It wouldn't be effectively unconditional, the law, if it didn't *have to become* effective, concrete, determined, if that were not its being as having-to-be. It would risk being abstract, utopian, illusory, and so turning over into its opposite. In order to be what it is, *the* law thus needs the laws, which, however, deny it, or at any rate threaten it, sometimes corrupt or pervert it. And must always be able to do this. (79, emphasis in original)

Thus, Derrida marries the utopian to the practical, and he does so in a way that does not lament the impossibility of the utopic. For Derrida, the law is meaningless without the ability to be corrupted by actual practice, at which time it becomes the laws of hospitality. In turn, the laws of hospitality require the inspirational and aspirational impetus provided by the law; without it, they would cease to be hospitality at all (79).

The law of hospitality, by its very impossibility, pushes one to ask questions about what *is* possible.

### *Hosts and Guests*

One cannot consider the possibilities for practicing hospitality in the college classroom without attending to the most prominent yet fraught constructs that hospitality has to offer: *host* and *guest*. Most notably, these terms draw attention to power and positioning in relationships that are quite often asymmetrical. Postcolonial theorist Pheng

Cheah boldly summarizes the entire enterprise of hospitality as “primarily a demonstration of the power of the host” (57). And feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray contends that while ancient forms of hospitality were premised on reciprocity, contemporary hospitality “has gradually come to be considered as a sort of charity toward someone who is in want” (43). Paired, Cheah and Irigaray paint a rather dubious picture of hospitality: a powerful host vis-à-vis a pitiable guest. If I thought this were the only scenario the practice of hospitality offers, I would not be utilizing hospitality as a conceptual framework or pursuing this project at all. And yet, it is important to recognize that hospitality is not an unqualified good in all cases. Unlike the term *community*, which, Raymond Williams argues, seems to lack any opposing terms (76), many scholars identify the opposite of *hospitality* as *hostility* (Haswell, Haswell, and Blalock; Jacobs; Lynch et al.; Minkinen; Nouwen; Introna and Brigham). Hospitality is inherently risky for both host and guest, and the possibility of hospitality morphing into hostility is ever present. Beyond the threat of hostility, unwanted obligation, unreasonable labor expectations, and conflict over finite resources can all crop up in the practice of hospitality.

Whether or not the practice of hospitality is welcoming and ethical, as I hope it to be, depends a great deal on the quality of the relationship between hosts and guests. Still calls hospitality a “structure with no fixed content,” explaining, “offering someone a glass of water or a bed for the night, is *or is not* hospitality depending on the *relation* between the one offering and the other accepting or refusing” (*Derrida and Hospitality* 11, emphasis in original). One can use Still’s code to consider the nature of the exchange and the intention with which concrete gestures—a glass of water, a bed, or perhaps a

meal—are offered and whether or not they will be received as hospitable. Consider, for example, soup kitchens that require guests to pray or read the Bible before receiving a meal, while others provide a meal to their guests without any such requirement. Indeed, both soup kitchens have provided their guests with the same material thing, but the requirements of the exchange affect the quality and dynamic of the relationship between hosts and guests and, likely, the degree to which the gesture is interpreted as hospitable or not by some individuals.

In my conceptual framework, I have chosen to cast teachers as *hosts* and students as *guests*. This casting into distinct roles raises legitimate questions about power and positioning, but I think it most accurately reflects teacher and student roles and responsibilities. A host is responsible for preparing a space—for setting the table—and then for “holding space,” by which I mean helping to create an environment that enables guests to interact with greater ease and openness. In my envisioning, hosts *and* guests have something to offer one another. Students are guests in the sense that their “stay” at the college is intended to be temporary; their time in school is meant to prepare them for moving on in the future, even as it has value in the moment. But if we are to imagine students in a guest-like role, then it is necessary to rehabilitate the *guest* role from always being on the receiving end of charity to being a temporary and situational role with equal dignity, if not equal power, to that of a *host*.

Other scholars have chosen to assign *host* and *guest* roles to teachers and students more fluidly. For example, in their envisioning of “transformative hospitality,” Haswell, Haswell, and Blalock describe a hospitable classroom as “a site where student guest/host and teacher host/guest meet, and in the spirit of John B. Bennett’s ‘collegium,’ neither



seek to isolate themselves nor to assimilate others” (721).<sup>7</sup> As the terms “student guest/host” and “teacher host/guest” demonstrate, Haswell, Haswell, and Blalock assert that hosts and guests, students and teachers, can “swap roles” (716-717). What makes this interchange of roles possible is an underlying equality. As they envision it, a writing course that were to embody the principles of hospitality “would encourage teachers to accept and treat students as *arrivants*, therefore unknowns, therefore as equals in dignity, privilege and value, therefore as ethically free of any objective or mission of the course for the length of the course” (716). I take these theorists’ starting point of radical equality in terms of dignity, regardless of role or task, as crucial to the possibility of a pedagogical hospitality that is not to become primarily an exercise of the host’s power. But I am not convinced that this radical equality in terms of dignity makes possible the kind of ethical freedom they envision. What would it look like and what would the consequences be if students were to exercise this freedom and reject course objectives? Would they fail the course, or would the hospitable teacher be obliged to offer alternative objectives? Instead, I think it is crucial to keep in mind the unequal power relationships that traditional educational situations construct, in large part because of how evaluation is positioned at the center of teacher-student interactions. Maintaining teachers as *hosts* and students as *guests* is perhaps not as radical a move as interchangeability, but I believe it is more attuned to the roles and responsibilities of each party. Nonetheless, I recognize the

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<sup>7</sup> Hospitality has been taken up, though not widely, in the field of education. Higher education scholar John B. Bennett, while still drawing on Catholic priest and writer Henri Nouwen, whose book *Reaching Out* is often cited in recent scholarship on hospitality and education, provides a secular lineage for what he calls “intellectual hospitality.” Bennett advocates the practice of intellectual hospitality in the academy, building his argument on Michael Oakeshott’s metaphor of scholarship as “conversation.” Bennet also proposes a model of the academy based on hospitality that is envisioned as interdependence, which he calls “the collegium.” He explains, “The collegium as social covenant is the basic relational community wherein members are linked by a common promise to attend to one another in joint pursuit of the common good” (32).

importance of thinking of host-guest roles and the power differences that accompany them as temporary and situational, not fundamental or essential.

However, there are liabilities in the less fluid casting of roles, one of which is the tendency to see *hosts* as domestic and situated and *guests* as foreign and mobile. For example, educational philosopher Ruyu Hung takes up the terms *host* and *guest* for teacher and student, respectively, without much hesitation, casting the teacher as the known and situated host who awaits unknown student-strangers each year: “As a host, the teacher is always waiting for the stranger. New students, whose faces are unknown to the teacher, whose language or accent is foreign, and thus who are in this sense strangers, arrive every year” (91). For Hung, students are the strangers who arrive at the teacher-host’s door. But it is important to remember that the teacher is as much of a stranger to students as students are strangers to their teacher. Although Hung does not explicitly say so, her discussion of hospitality seems to concern elementary and secondary students, rather than post-secondary students, which I think makes a difference. It is easy to view a teacher who teaches at the same school, and even in the same classroom, as the known, situated host. But given the labor landscape of the American college and university, it is not as easy to imagine an instructor as the situated host, especially when so many first-year writing courses are taught by contingent faculty who are in perpetual motion among teaching sites. Therefore, in order to construct a workable conceptualization of hospitality in the college classroom, it is necessary to imagine *both* teacher-host and student-guest as mobile strangers, coming together temporarily and then dispersing again in separate directions. A conceptualization of host-guest relationships that emphasizes all parties’ mobility serves to work against the idea that the guest’s central task is one of assimilation

to the host. Despite an asymmetry in power, teacher-hosts and student-guests can and do influence each other in valuable ways.

In order to conceptualize teachers as mobile strangers who nonetheless take on the role and responsibilities of *host*, it is also necessary to re-think the idea of space and ownership in relationship to hospitality. In “Hospitableness: A Neglected Virtue,” philosopher Nancy E. Snow argues that “hospitableness” as a virtue can be “construed as making people feel welcome in one’s *own* world,” an idea she roots in liberal individualism, or it can be construed as “welcoming others into lives and worlds that are *shared*,” an idea she roots in Buddhism (3, emphasis in original). It is this latter idea of performing welcome *without owning the space* in which guests are welcomed that is most fitting to a model of hospitality in the college classroom. Snow argues that a *host*, or one who acts hospitably, must still legitimately occupy the role of host, but that this role need not be premised on the host owning property that is charitably distributed to others. To illustrate her point, Snow offers the example of a renowned monk who, without property, either offers or withholds access to knowledge, teaching, and learning (11).

As sanctioned by an official role as the instructor of record, a writing teacher legitimately occupies the role of host, and also, one assumes, has something of value to teach and share with students. The key to writing teachers being hospitable in the ways that Snow describes is that they are committed to a *shared* classroom. Quite literally, teachers do not own their classroom—though the extent to which they represent the university, which does own it, is a legitimate question. Nor do teachers own the knowledge that is to be shared and generated in partnership with their students. If we can start with the premises that a host does not own the space in which hospitality is

practiced, but shares it; that a host does not have to act out of charity, but can act out of an interest in mutual exchange and benefit for all; and that a host can be changed as much by a guest as a guest is changed by a host, then the groundwork is laid for a teacher-host, student-guest relationship in which hospitality can flourish.

*Genre, Hospitality, and Writing Pedagogy*

This research study is not just about college classrooms and pedagogy generally, but about college composition classrooms and writing pedagogy specifically. In order to make conceptual connections between hospitality and writing pedagogy, I have drawn upon genre theory, especially Rhetorical Genre Studies. Because student veterans come to college having experienced an extensive immersion in the organizational culture of the military, including its cultures of textual production, it is especially important for me to utilize a theory of writing that accounts for the interaction between the individual writer and the social contexts and rhetorical situations in which they write. Rather than understanding genres simply as text types or classifications, I take up theorizations of genres as “forms of cultural knowledge that conceptually frame and mediate how we understand and typically act within various situations” (Bawarshi and Reiff 4). Genres both enable and constrain action in a particular situation. And, genres are reflexively linked to the rhetorical situations that give rise to them and in which they are used.

The shift to understanding genre as more than a means of classification based on externally identifiable features was catalyzed by Carolyn Miller’s revolutionary article “Genre as Social Action.” Miller lays out a framework for understanding genre as typified rhetorical action within recurrent situations, and it is clear that she foresaw the pedagogical implications of her redefinition, noting in her conclusion that for students,

“genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community” (165). Knowing how to decipher and use a genre, then, means having the cultural knowledge that will enable one to act in a particular recurring rhetorical situation.

In making conceptual connections among hospitality, genre theory, and pedagogy, however, I am forced to negotiate tensions between the temporary exchange between two parties (host and guest) who remain distinct, which I see as a defining feature of hospitality, and the idea that learning genres can serve as a more permanent means of becoming initiated and assimilated into a discourse community. Genre theorist Charles Bazerman actually uses the language of hospitality to explain teachers’ role in helping students to navigate the “discursive landscapes” of academia. Bazerman writes:

In our role as teachers we constantly welcome strangers into the discursive landscapes we value. But places that are familiar and important to us may not appear intelligible or hospitable to students we try to bring into our worlds. Students, bringing their own road maps of familiar communicative places and desires, would benefit from signs posted by those familiar with the new academic landscape. However, guideposts are only there when we construct them, are only useful if others know how to read them, and will only be used if they point toward destinations students see as worth going toward. (Bazerman 19)

From a hospitality perspective, Bazerman highlights several important points. First, students come to the classroom with their “own road maps of familiar communicative places and desires.” Students are not blank slates awaiting academic inscription; they come to the classroom with their own rich histories of experience and communication

and their own educational aspirations. This insight is applicable to all students, but it is especially relevant in conceptualizing military students whose “road maps” have included a considerable amount of time in a military workplace and, as I discuss in Chapter Three, whose educational desires are often quite focused on their future professional careers. Second, Bazerman rightly points out that without explicit instruction, new “discursive landscapes” may be indecipherable, and therefore inhospitable, to students for whom they are unfamiliar.

Furthermore, Bazerman calls attention to the mismatch of values between teachers and students that may occur in the classroom. Students may not find the “places” that are important to teachers valuable, and this difference in valuing must be recognized as a precursor to truly welcoming students into the classroom. Recognizing students as already “well-traveled” in particular genres and discourses, as Bazerman does, helps to work against a pedagogical framework that positions teachers as expert hosts whose job it is to initiate or assimilate novice student-guests into their own discourse communities. Compositionist Corinne Hinton claims that the Marine veterans she studied complicate the prevalent novice-to-expert model of instruction in first-year writing classrooms. Hinton argues that student veterans “occupy the same type of liminal space as other adult learners who have acquired expert status in some domain-specific areas but, in starting or returning to college, find themselves in a novice position.” Based on her study’s findings, Hinton contends that while Marine student veterans “may admit that their inexperience with college-level academic writing may make them novices, they still retain expertise in many other areas and, as such, have experiences, beliefs, and habits that are valuable in the composition classroom.” In other words, the balance between positioning students as

novices in one domain (academic writing), but not positioning them as novices in *all* domains, can be a tricky one. And those students, such as veterans, who come to the classroom with a great deal of expertise in particular domains outside of academia may chafe at being positioned as novices. Hinton concludes that composition faculty have an essential role to play in creating respectful learning environments that encourage student veterans to draw upon their previous experiences and knowledge in useful ways in the writing classroom.

It is essential, then, to conceptualize the hospitable classroom as a meeting place of strangers, teachers and students alike. Teachers and students both come bearing gifts, the exchange of which may result in mutual influence. Nonetheless, in the setup of the writing classroom, it is a given that teachers possess expertise with particular genres and are well-traveled in particular “discursive landscapes,” and that students may want or need access to these landscapes. I do not find it disparaging to students to acknowledge that their teachers possess greater expertise and experience in certain domains. Certainly, I believe many students, especially the military student participants in this study, would be quite upset and disappointed to find it the case otherwise. The key, however, is to avoid casting teachers wholly as insider experts and students wholly as outsider novices whose task is to assimilate to a given discourse. Recognizing that students participate and belong to many discourses, composition scholar Joseph Harris explains, “The task facing our students is not to leave one community in order to enter another, but to *reposition* themselves in relation to several continuous and conflicting discourses. Similarly, our goals as teachers need not be to initiate our students into the values and practices of some new community, but to offer them the chance to reflect critically on those discourses—of

home, school, world, the media and the like—to which they already belong” (142, emphasis in original). Harris’s view of students as *already* belonging and not in need of initiation seems is a point for positioning teachers and students in relationship to one another in a writing pedagogy that aims to be hospitable.

Drawing upon the theorizations of *genre* that emerge from Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) helps me to bridge the gap between a view of students as novices whose prescribed task is to assimilate into the communicative norms of a particular discourse community and an acknowledgement and respect for students as distinct individuals with agency and desires. Composition studies scholar Melanie Yergeau has criticized theories of discourse communities for their tendency to “render their users passive,” but she suggests that genre theory offers a more agentic and human view of writers in relationship to the discourses they use. Genre theorists Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff explain that “[b]eyond being responsive to the dynamics of change and the variation within recurrence, genres also need to be responsive to their users’ individually formed inclinations and dispositions (what Pierre Bourdieu calls ‘habitus’)—balancing individuals’ ‘own uniquely formed knowledge of the world’ with ‘socially induced perceptions of commonality’” (Berkenkotter and Huckin 481, qtd. in Bawarshi and Reiff 79). According to this view of genre, the individual is situated within patterns and places of commonality but is not overcome by or passive to them. The implication of this theory of genre in relationship to writing pedagogy and hospitality is that one can imagine welcoming students into unfamiliar “discursive landscapes” without an expectation that they will necessarily need or want to reside in these landscapes. The pedagogical task for teachers, then, is not to bring students into “our worlds,” but to work toward cultivating a



shared world where a diversity of forms of knowledge, expertise, and experience is exchanged.

## Study Overview

### ROUGH DRAFTS

Students pull chairs together in rough approximations of circles scattering themselves about the room. Somehow I have become the teacher, though I've yet to give up daydreaming. My eyes drift to the windows overlooking patches of brown grass and a parking lot. Slate gray sky, the backdrop to countless winter days in Michigan. I am waiting for the next scene—spring—but this act goes on forever. My handwriting on the board still frightens me, the way words become foreign and temporary, as if they were written by someone else. I cannot spell in front of the class, I am better at listening. Today, I erase remnants of what's come before, algebraic equations and grammatical parsing left from the day's earlier math and foreign language classes, my hands taking on the dusty residue of chalk, the smell of schooling.

I hear one student ask another, "So, this is really true? You were in the war?" And then his reply, "I'm only here because I got shot." Standing up, he lifts his shirt to expose his back. Then looking over his shoulder, points to his side, "See. There, there, and there." I don't say anything, but I look too. From this angle, I cannot see the scars, or perhaps I have erased them. This is the man who is teaching me mathematics in English class. He tells me, "I am two hundred percent disabled." As a child, I learned fractions, how all the parts have to equal the whole. But now, he tells me, all the parts add up to more than one. As if there are two selves now, the one who left for war, and the one who returned. The one who, during the day, writes the paper we are reading now and the one at night who dreams—then after, cannot sleep—of what he has written.

The teaching moment I write about in "Rough Drafts" occurred on a peer review day in a college composition course I was teaching in 2008, a time when many institutions of higher education were still in the early stages of considering how to

support increasing numbers of military students on their campuses. It is a moment that speaks to how classrooms become temporary gathering places of people with diverse backgrounds and experiences, about how the walls of the classroom are not barriers against the “real world.” This student, Andrew,<sup>8</sup> had been in the military since graduating from high school and was severely injured during a tour in Iraq. He had planned to make the military his career, but now, unable to do so, had started his first semester of college. The “math” I write about in the poem is a reference to Andrew’s way of explaining to me the VA’s complicated determinations of his combat-related disabilities, which included Posttraumatic Stress (PTS). Andrew wrote about his military experience that semester, although he didn’t write as much about the actual war as he did about the stories that came afterward, which, of course, are war stories, too. I remember him writing reflective process notes about how it was good to write about his experiences, but then it sometimes evoked nightmares afterward. Although I do not require students to write about intimate personal experience, Andrew seemed to want to do so and took up many of his writing assignments as opportunities to write about his life as a soldier. However, midway through the semester, Andrew abruptly stopped coming to class and eventually withdrew from the university. And while he was no longer a student in my classroom, his brief presence there set to work the early questions that led to this study: Had I been a good teacher to Andrew? Was there was something else I might have done to be helpful? Why do student veterans experience the writing classroom as a welcoming or unwelcoming place?

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<sup>8</sup> All students, study participants, and any instructors they reference are referred to by pseudonyms.

Of course, those questions have developed and changed over the intervening years as I have met many more military students in the classroom and through my research. As I look back now on that teaching moment as well as the poem I wrote about it, several things strike me. For one, I notice how Andrew and the issues he faced that semester fit many of the expectations of veterans reinforced by public discourse and highlighted by much of the academic literature.<sup>9</sup> That is to say, Andrew was a combat veteran with injuries including at least one of the two “signature wounds” of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, PTS and traumatic brain injury (TBI). Additionally, he came to college shortly after separating from the Army and took his composition course during his first semester at the university, meaning that he was actively transitioning from military life and culture to that of the academic and civilian world. And, finally, Andrew chose to write about his military and war experiences in his academic writing assignments, which is an issue that

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<sup>9</sup> This literature identifies and addresses important issues relevant to student veterans such as transitioning to school after deployment (DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell; Rumann and Hamrick), creating “military-friendly” institutions (Brown and Gross), understanding the experiences of student veterans with disabilities acquired during war deployments (Glover-Graf, Miller, and Freeman), and relating to nonveteran peers (DiRamio, et al., Glover-Graf, et al., Rumann and Hamrick). Although limited, this literature is valuable because much of it is qualitative and, through interviews and focus groups, draws upon the articulated perspectives of student veterans themselves. Although the higher education and student affairs literature on student veterans addresses tension among student veterans and their peers in the classroom, only a small amount literature to date provides detailed accounts of student veterans’ academic experiences in classrooms of any kind, let alone writing classrooms. A recent and significant contribution to this literature is *Generation Vet* (Doe and Laangstraat), a collection of essays specifically addressing student-veterans in the composition classroom. In addition to this academic literature, important sources of information about student veterans can be found in reports issued by private organizations such as the Center for American Progress’ “Easing the Transition from Combat to Classroom” and the RAND Corporation’s “Military Veterans’ Experiences Using the Post-9/11 GI Bill and Pursuing Postsecondary Education.” The former report takes a critical look at the term “veteran friendly” and proposes a tool that academic institutions can use to self-assess the degree to which they are succeeding in supporting veterans on their campuses. The RAND report, which focuses on student veterans’ utilization of educational benefits, also draws on original qualitative research in the form of surveys, interviews, and focus groups conducted with multiple stakeholders beyond just student veterans, including representatives of organizations such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Student Veterans of America (SVA). The 2010 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), an annual survey of first-year and senior undergraduates at baccalaureate-granting institutions, was the first NSSE survey to differentiate between and compare data on veteran and nonveteran students.

has received attention in the writing studies literature about student veterans (Burdick, Leonhardy, Wallace).

The participants recruited for this study represent a somewhat broader spectrum of who military students are than is often highlighted in public discourse and even in the academic literature: not all are combat veterans, not all chose to write about their military experiences in their first-year writing courses, not all were actively transitioning from the military. However, as diverse as my study participants are, they are strikingly similar in how they place career-focused goals above others. In *How College Works*, a ten-year longitudinal study of students at a single institution, authors Daniel F. Chambliss and Christopher G. Takacs found that the first and primary challenge for first-year college students is to “successfully enter the social world of college, most importantly by finding friends. Failing that, little else matters” (3). Chambliss and Takacs argue that at least for traditional-age students at a residential college, satisfactory friendships are a “*prerequisite* for learning” (4, emphasis in original). Without friends, they contend, students are unlikely to invest in the larger academic agenda of their college career.

However, the military students in this study differ significantly in their orientation to school from the traditional-age students Chambliss and Takacs studied. Informants in this study, many of whom describe the military as the place where they “grew up,” have already established their central social connections—often partners, children, and longtime friends. My study informants are primarily looking to acquire professional skills and credentials in pursuit of future jobs, not friends. In addition, many study participants try to focus as much as possible on the professor and course content while placing fellow students into the background of their academic experiences.

By contrast, what has become mainstream pedagogy in the composition classroom emphasizes peer-to-peer relationships through the wide use of collaborative learning practices such as peer review. The field has paid particular attention to teachers' authority and ways to de-center that power in order to empower students, resulting in scholarship that has been essential to moving writing pedagogy away from authoritarian models and practices. Composition scholars, then, often envision the classroom as a community of peers. As a member of this community, the teacher becomes a fellow learner and writer, albeit a more experienced one. In short, the main currents of composition studies literature have treated teacherly authority as a negative entity to be dismantled and diminished (Lunsford). Teachers often attempt to accomplish this dismantling by leaning heavily on collaborative, peer-to-peer pedagogies in the classroom. But study participants' focus on relationships and interactions with their teachers over those with fellow students prompts a reconsideration of the universality of the "community of peers" model for composition classrooms.

### **The Problem: Envisioning Composition Classrooms as Communities**

There is much to appreciate about the idea of a classroom functioning as a community. And one need not look very far into the composition studies literature to find the term "community" in use, whether scholars are referring to a "classroom community," the larger "academic community," or a "discourse community." I certainly used the word *community* on my syllabus and in my talk about teaching for many years without much thought. It is a word that evokes connotations of cooperation, collaboration, safety, and goodwill, all qualities that many teachers, myself included,

would like to cultivate in their classrooms. But as Joseph Harris, one of composition studies' most prominent critics of the concept of community, has argued, it is the "sense of like-mindedness and warmth that makes community at once such an appealing and limiting concept" (144). One limitation of conceptualizing the classroom as a community is that it can serve to downplay the reality of difference and discomfort among students in the classroom. Moreover, when "community" is invoked not casually, but more formally within the framework of discourse community theory, it has the potential to position students as passive recipients of an already established and clearly delineated academic discourse, rather than as agentic writers participating in multiple, overlapping, and ever changing discourses (Harris, Trimbur, Yergeau). In other words, it becomes too easy to cast students wholly as outsiders while casting some imagined, academic "we" wholly as insiders (Harris).

Community can also too easily become a utopic abstraction, rather than a description of a specific group of people who exist in a local, material reality. Harris writes that most of the communities to which

theorists refer exist at a vague remove from actual experience: The University, The Profession, The Discipline, The Academic Discourse Community. They are all quite literally utopias—nowheres, metacommunities—tied to no particular time or place, and thus oddly free of many of the tensions, discontinuities, and conflicts in the sorts of talk and writing that go on every day in the classrooms and departments of an actual university. (136)

Certainly, utopic kinds of imagining can be valuable, especially as they reflect aspirations for how we want to live and be in relationship to others. But concepts that become too abstract and utopic can also draw attention away from the details of practice and the actual experiences of students and teachers in particular times and places. We need to ask not only if it is desirable to envision classrooms as communities, but also if it is in sync with practical realities, and therefore even possible. For example, “community” can indicate not only like-mindedness and shared values, but also continuity. Yet college courses are marked by their short-lived nature; individuals meet for just a couple hours a week for several weeks. And on a larger scale, the undergraduate curriculum sets students up to be constant travelers between classrooms and subject matter, for the most part favoring broad exposure over sustained depth. These are not conditions conducive to the establishment of classroom communities.

Of course, several scholars have already recognized the pedagogical limitations of “community.” One notable alternative to the community model, and its tendency to downplay difference and conflict, is Mary Louise Pratt’s “contact zone,” which she defines as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (34). Applying this concept to the classroom, Pratt recounts teaching an introductory-level college course with a culturally diverse reading list and a curriculum in which “[n]o one was excluded, and no one was safe” (39). Rather than the homogenous inclusion of community, the inclusion in Pratt’s heterogeneous contact zone was one in which no one escaped “the experience, for example, of hearing their culture discussed and objectified in ways that

horrified them” (40). Replacing the classroom in which only some students experience the marginalization and objectification of their culture, Pratt describes a classroom in which everyone’s cultural identity is “on the line” (39). The consensus of community is exchanged for the struggle of the contact zone. However, acknowledging the lack of safety that can result from contact zone pedagogy, Pratt also advocates the maintenance of “safe houses,” which she defines as “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogenous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression” (40). In the context of the university, she offers “ethnic or women’s studies” as examples of safe houses (40).

Pratt’s conceptualization of the classroom as a contact zone has enriched pedagogical conversations over the past two decades, and much is owed to Pratt’s acknowledgement of difference, willingness to tolerate discomfort, and impulse to dismantle cultural dominance, whether found in the canon or classroom discussions. But there remains the problem that contact zone pedagogy still relies on communities, or “safe houses,” existing at the periphery of the academy as spaces of retreat. Somehow, Pratt imagines these spaces as escaping problems of hierarchy and conflict. However, envisioning ethnic or women’s studies as safe houses denies the heterogeneity of the scholars, teachers, and students who make up these fields of study and their classrooms. No classroom, no matter the discipline or curriculum, can function in the utopic manner Pratt describes. A related problem is that Pratt’s contact zone model acknowledges cultural heterogeneity in the classroom space but not within students themselves. The way in which she discusses students and “their culture” seems to suggest that students’



cultural identities are singular. Furthermore, on a practical level, it is worth noting that even if safe houses could function in the way Pratt describes, not all students have access to them.

Harris, who commends Pratt's conceptualizing of the classroom as a place where multiple discourses and cultures can interact, still contends that "something is missing from a view of teaching that suggests we simply need to bring people out of their various 'safe houses' and into a 'contact zone,' and that is a sense of how to make such a meeting of difference less like a battle and more like a negotiation" (165). Community and contact zone pedagogy grow out of respective impulses to address significant pedagogical issues: the importance of interpersonal connection, in the case of community-oriented pedagogy, and the need to acknowledge difference and diversity, in the case of contact zone pedagogy. But neither model provides a framework for the *negotiation* of difference in the classroom space. Like any framework applied to pedagogy, hospitality also has its limitations, but its recognition of difference, or "strangeness," and the centrality of exchange make it a more promising model for envisioning the classroom as a place where the negotiation of difference is at the heart of shared classroom labor.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODS

Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me,  
why should you not speak to me?  
And why should I not speak to you?

—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

#### **Role of the Researcher & Research Site**

I wait somewhat anxiously in the library's rotunda looking at the clock, hoping I will recognize the first participant in my study and, more so, that he will indeed show up. While I wait, I double-check that my recorder is working and that I have my notebook, a copy of my interview protocol, and a Consent to Participate in a Research Study form (Appendices A and B). Paper-clipped to the consent form is a small white bank envelope containing two twenty dollar bills and a ten, which I will present to the participant before the interview begins, something I soon learn provokes a variety of minor reactions, but mostly surprise. Participants aren't surprised about the money per se, as compensation is clearly spelled out on the call for participation (Appendix C), but they seem to be surprised that I give it to them *before* they've answered a single question and not at the end of the interview. In response to their surprise, I underscore that the monetary compensation is not only a gesture of my appreciation for their time, but also that it is still theirs to keep even if they choose not to finish—or even start—the interview. Giving

them this information is just one of the ways I emphasize that their participation is entirely voluntary throughout the interview and the duration of the study. However, as I reach across the table to hand her the envelope, one participant says, “Oh I thought this would come through the financial aid office or something. You’re with the school, right? Wait, who are you again?”

It’s a good question, and I’m glad she’s asking it directly because I see why it’s not entirely clear. This study was not conducted at my home institution, but at Midwest University (MU),<sup>10</sup> a Midwestern public research university enrolling close to 25,000 students, undergraduate and graduate combined.<sup>11</sup> Since the *MilitaryTimes* began ranking four-year institutions, MU has consistently appeared in the “Best for Vets: Colleges” list. I selected MU as a research site because of its sizeable undergraduate military student population and because the institution was welcoming to me as a guest researcher on its campus. My study was reviewed and approved for local data collection by the MU Institutional Review Board (IRB), in addition to being previously reviewed and granted “Exempt” status by the IRB at my home institution, University of Michigan. On the call for participation in a research study, I introduce myself briefly as “a writing teacher and a doctoral candidate in the Joint Program for English & Education at the University of Michigan.”

Of course, I am many more things than a writing teacher and a doctoral candidate. I am a woman, a mother, and the wife of a pre-9/11 Navy veteran, but not a veteran

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<sup>10</sup> Midwest University, or MU, is the pseudonym I will use to refer to the study site.

<sup>11</sup> In the fall of 2013, undergraduates comprised about 80% of total enrolled students. Nearly 90% of enrolled students are categorized as in-state. Nearly 20% of the total student body are categorized as Minority. 7% of the total student body are categorized as International students. In the fall of 2013, the average GPA for entering freshman was 3.37 and 37% of entering freshman were in the top 25% of their high school class.

myself. And I am someone who protested the Iraq War, an experience that prompted an interest in the men and women who went on to serve in Iraq and Afghanistan, and other locations around the world, while my daily life, like that of the majority of Americans, remained very much insulated from the wars. It was a few years after the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), or the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, respectively, when I actually began to meet some of the individuals who had served in these wars. I met them as students in the composition courses I taught and as clients in the Writing Center where I worked. Some of these student veterans shared their military experiences during class discussions, and others wrote about them in course assignments. A couple years later, during my doctoral studies at the University of Michigan, the interest I'd had in these students and their college experiences began to resurface, prompting me to conduct a small pre-dissertation pilot study in the fall of 2011 in which I interviewed six military students about their experiences in their college writing courses. Five of these pilot study participants were enrolled at a community college near MU; one student was enrolled at MU, where all of the interviews in the current study took place.

My early questions about military students and writing pedagogy took shape in these pilot study interviews. One pilot study participant, Nathan, with whom I've kept in occasional contact, helped me begin to consider my positionality as a researcher, particularly the fact that I am not a veteran myself. He helped prepare me to better answer the question, "Wait, who are you again?" Nathan served two tours in Iraq as an infantryman in the U.S. Army, receiving a Purple Heart on his first tour. At the time of his interview, he was in his late twenties and studying to be a secondary school art

teacher. In the following passage, Nathan talks with me specifically about my role as a researcher, addressing directly my position as someone who is not a veteran:

I think what you're doing is one of those rather difficult things because you're trying to get in, and there is a big difference in a lot of us. And there could be resistance, and you might not be getting the full picture...And that's one of those hard things for people who come back. They see these [educational] benefits and a lot of times they go untouched because it's hard. I know a lot of veterans don't know that there's a support system [at this school]. And then, when they're approached by somebody who's like, "I want to do a study on veterans..." "What, you want to make us lab rats?"...I mean, it's one of those hard things. There's resentment there. There's that sense of pride that we have, or that we don't have, and there's that anger there, and it's really hard to overcome.

Nathan's words make me cautious about making claims about understanding participants' experiences because what he says is true; I cannot fully understand his experiences or get "the full picture," as he puts it. I have never been in the military, or to Iraq, or in a combat zone, as he has. But as I progressed in my research in the current study, I came to better understand the skepticism mixed with wariness that Nathan warned me some veterans might feel toward researchers, especially civilian researchers. My conversations with study informants illuminated how a significant part of the experience of being a veteran is contending with other people's ideas about who veterans are, often based on misconceptions about the military or sensationalized popular discourses about veterans.

But while Nathan highlights the difficulty of civilians understanding veterans, he also expresses a real longing for greater understanding between veterans like himself and civilians like me. At one point in his initial interview, he remarks, “I want that connection with just the random stranger.” Nathan, and other participants, have taught me that although I must examine the extent of my understanding, there is a great need—and often desire—for connection and increased understanding across lines of difference, especially between veterans and civilians. I have been deeply persuaded by Phil Klay—a Marine veteran, Iraq War veteran, and author—who asserts that “veterans need an audience that is both receptive and critical. Believing war is beyond words is an abrogation of responsibility—it lets civilians off the hook from trying to understand, and veterans off the hook from needing to explain. You don’t honor someone by telling them, ‘I can never imagine what you’ve been through.’” While trying to understand war experience is not the focus of this study, it is of course a salient part of many participants’ experiences and, therefore, a part of this study.

As such, my research has required that I engage with participants’ descriptions of experiences I will never understand, but must, as Klay argues, try to imagine, most notably those experiences that are war-related. This attempt on my part to be an audience that is both “receptive and critical” and to listen *with* imagination has sometimes felt risky and, at times, made me hesitant to respond in ways that could appear to overstep the limits of what I can understand first-hand as a civilian. As a civilian who respects and values the work of military service members, but who is also deeply troubled by the state of ongoing war that has become the norm of the United States since 9/11, I was undoubtedly more receptive to participants who reflect on their wartime service in ways

that illuminate the moral complexities and internal conflict that often accompanies participation in war. However, I recognize and honor that responses to war, including the taking of life, which is both implicit and explicit in the endeavors of the military, are manifold, deeply personal, and resistant to easy articulation. One participant, describing his deployment to Afghanistan, recalled, “We got into a firefight one time, and we ended up killing like four Taliban guys. To us, it was a normal day, and it just went by. We didn’t end up talking about it again.” As a researcher and listener, I have allowed myself to be critical of the conditions that create “normal” days such as this one, but not to be judgmental of the informant who shared this experience with me.

As a civilian researcher, and simply as a human being with all of my particular experiences and attributes, I have tried to embrace the unique ways that I can be both a “receptive and critical” audience for participants. On the one hand, I cannot fully understand many aspects of participants’ experiences without firsthand knowledge of military experience. But on the other hand, *not* sharing a similar set of experiences and assumptions with study participants can also be advantageous because it prompted me, when appropriate, to solicit more detailed explanations and descriptions from participants and to continuously seek in-the-moment clarification throughout interview conversations.

## **Study Participants**

### *Participant Recruitment*

This study involves thirty semi-structured interviews conducted during the summer of 2013 with twenty-four military student participants at Midwest University. Any student who was an undergraduate, had served or was currently serving in the U.S. Armed Forces, and had also completed their first-year writing requirement (FYWR) was

eligible to participate.<sup>12</sup> I purposely kept recruitment parameters broad in order to capture a varied portrait of the backgrounds and experiences of students who fall under the umbrella category of “military student.” As a result, this study includes students who are very early in their college careers through those who have just graduated;<sup>13</sup> those who are actively transitioning from the military, or still serving, and those who separated from the military many years ago; individuals who are combat veterans and those who are not, as well as individuals whose service puts them in the grey area of such a distinction; students for whom disability plays a major role in their academic undertakings and those for whom it does not; writers who relish the opportunity to write about their military experience and those for whom it just doesn’t seem important to write about in an academic context. All study participants are or were enlisted as members of the military; two participants have active contracts with the military; all others are veterans.

While the total number of participants in this study is relatively small, the group is nonetheless large enough to illustrate the diversity of attributes and experiences among students who can be categorized as military students. Beyond the basic recruitment characteristics they share in common, many differences exist among the participants, including the branches in which they served, length of time served, the kind of job they performed in the military, the number and nature of their deployments, where and how they completed their FYWR, the number of institutions they have attended, the kind of students they describe themselves as being in high school, their majors, whether or not they have partners and children, and the geographic regions they are from and in which they have lived and served.

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<sup>12</sup> Members of ROTC were not eligible to participate.

<sup>13</sup> All study participants were working toward or had just completed their first bachelor’s degree.



The call for participation in this study was distributed by e-mail on my behalf by the MU Veterans Office. I also posted flyers in locations on campus such as the student activities center and outside the school’s designated Veterans’ Lounge. Additionally, I e-mailed current MU FYW instructors asking if they would pass the call along to former students. However, all of the responses to the call for participation originated from the e-mail sent out through the Veterans Office listserv.

Potential participants were asked to contact me, the researcher, via phone, text, or e-mail to express interest. I then sent participants a brief survey via SurveyMonkey to collect basic demographic information (see table 1) and to confirm eligibility. A few interested participants were excluded because they did not meet the eligibility criteria: they were graduate students, rather than undergraduates, or they had not yet taken a FYW course. There is no doubt that I would have learned a lot from all of these interested participants, but in an effort to maintain the focus of my study, I adhered to the two basic eligibility requirements: undergraduate status and having completed a FYW course.

Because participants were asked to discuss their experience in their FYW course in detail, I favored individuals who had most recently taken their FYWR over those who had taken it more than four years ago (see table 2). Because of this study’s focus on academic experience in FYW classrooms, I excluded a few interested participants because it had been such a long time (a decade or more) since they had completed their FYWR.

Table 1  
Participant Demographic Information

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age (at time of interview)	Racial Self-Identification	Military Branch	Years of Military Service
Aaron	Male	23	White	Army (Rangers)	2008-2012
Adam	Male	26	White	Army National Guard	2005-2011
Adrienne	Female	32	White	Navy	1999-2006

Alex	Male	26	White	Air National Guard	2006-2012
Ben	Male	35	White	Marines	1999-2008
Bryan	Male	28	White	Army	2003-2009
Davin	Male	24	African American	Army	2010-2013
Evan	Male	26	White	Marines	2006-2010
Gabe	Male	26	White/Hispanic	Navy	2005-2009
Jillian	Female	22	White	Army Reserves ROTC/SMP	2010-present
Ian	Male	23	White	Navy	2008-2012
Jackson	Male	26	White	Marines	2005-2010
Jacob	Male	26	White	Army	2005-2008 (medically retired)
Jared	Male	25	White	Navy (Seabees)	2007-2012
Jason	Male	29	Native American	Navy/Army National Guard	2002-2012
Laura	Female	21	White	Army Reserves	2010-present
Madelyn	Female	23	White	Army National Guard	2007-2013
Matthew	Male	25	White	Navy	2006-2012
Micah	Male	26	White	Army	2009-2013
Nicholas	Male	25	White	Marines	2006-2012
Sam	Male	27	White/Native American	Marines	2004-2009
Sean	Male	29	White	Navy	2002-2007
Terrence	Male	26	White	Marines	2005-2010
Travis	Male	23	White	Army National Guard	2008-2012

However, in order to capture the varied and often non-continuous paths that many military students take in completing their college studies, I made a few exceptions to this general rule of favoring participants who had most recently taken their FYW requirement. For example, one participant, Alex, began college as a traditional-age student in 2005, the year during which he completed his FYWR. After his freshman year, he enlisted in the Air National Guard and served two deployments, one in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. At the time of Alex's interview, he was preparing for his final semesters as an undergraduate art major. Another exception was Micah, who took his FYW course in the fall of 2006 at a two-year college when he was a dual-enrolled high school student. Following high school graduation, Micah worked for a few years and then joined the Army, where he served from 2009-2013. As a final example, late in the course of this

study, I invited Ben to participate; he was a veteran who had served in the Marines from 1999-2008 and had completed his FYWR as a traditional-age college student at a four-year institution in 1996. I invited him to participate because I noticed that it is common for military students to have varied and non-continuous college trajectories, and I wanted to capture that journey in depth with at least one participant.

Table 2  
Participant Academic Information

Participant (Pseudonym)	Academic Major	Point in College Career <sup>14</sup>	Semester FYWR Was Completed	Method of Completing FYRW	Institution Where FYRW Was Completed	Total # of Institutions Attended
Aaron	Pre-Med	Early	Summer 2012	Classroom	4-year, MU	1
Adam	Biomedical Sciences	Newly Graduated	Fall 2009	Classroom	4-year, MU	1
Adrienne	General Studies	Late	Fall 2008	Classroom	2-year	2
Alex	Graphic Design	Late	Fall 2005	Classroom	2-year	3
Ben	Secondary Education-Social Studies	Late	Fall 1996	Classroom	4-year	3
Bryan	Engineering <sup>15</sup>	Middle	Summer 2009	Classroom	2-year	4
Davin	Economics & Spanish	Late	Fall 2006	Classroom	4-year	2
Evan	Secondary Education-Social Studies	Late	Fall 2010	Classroom	2-year	2
Gabe	Computer Science	Middle	Fall 2012	Classroom	4-year, MU	1
Jillian	Criminal Justice	Middle	Fall 2011	Classroom	4-year, MU	1
Ian	Economics	Early	Spring 2013	Classroom	4-year, MU	1
Jackson	Accounting	Late	Fall 2010	Classroom	2-year	2
Jacob	Criminal Justice	Late	Fall 2010	Classroom	2-year	3
Jared	Political Science	Middle	Fall 2012	Classroom	4-year, MU	1
Jason	Engineering	Middle	Spring 2012	Online	2-year	2
Laura	Psychology	Middle	2010	Classroom	High School	2
Madelyn	Undecided	Early	Fall 2012	Classroom	4-year, MU	1
Matthew	Engineering	Early	Fall 2011	Online	4-year	2
Micah	Accounting & Finance	Early	Fall 2006	Classroom	2-year	2
Nicholas	Economics	Newly Graduated	Spring 2011	Online	2-year	4
Sam	Liberal Studies	Late	Fall 2009	Classroom	4-year, MU	1
Sean	Nursing	Late	Spring 2009	Classroom	2-year	2

<sup>14</sup> Because military students' college trajectories often included pauses in study, due to deployments or for other reasons, and because some military students begin earning college credits while still in enlisted, I found it more useful to categorize students generally as "early," "middle," or "late" in their college careers, rather than to use the typical credits/class designators freshman, sophomore, junior, senior. If students were in their first year of study on a college campus, I categorized them as "early," and if they were planning to graduate within a year of academic study I categorized them as "late." The remaining participants were categorized as "middle."

<sup>15</sup> Participant's actual major changed to a more general major to avoid identifying research site and protect this student's anonymity.

Terrence	Communications & International Studies	Early	Fall 2012	Classroom	4-year, MU	1
Travis	Engineering	Early	Spring 2012	Classroom	2-year	2

*Participant Demographics*

I collected basic, self-reported demographic and academic information from all participants, including age, race, length and branch of military service, the semester the FYWR was completed and where, and academic major (if declared). The majority of participants in this study are White males in their twenties (see Table 1). Demographic statistics about the gender, race, and age of the total military student population at MU are not available, so I cannot compare my study sample to the larger body of military students on campus. However, I can make some comparisons to Active Duty U.S. Armed Forces in order to gauge the representativeness of my study sample compared to the military as a whole.

In general, the participants in this study are reflective of the Active Duty U.S. Armed Forces in terms of gender and age, but the participants are less racially diverse than the Active Duty U.S. Armed Forces. The *2013 Demographics Profile of the Military Community*, published by the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, reports that women comprise 14.9% of the total Active Duty force (iii). In this study, four participants out of twenty-four, or 16.7%, are women, slightly higher than the total Active Duty force. The *2013 Demographics Profile* also reports that 30.7% of Active Duty members “identify themselves as a minority (i.e., Black or African American, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander,

multi-racial, or other/unknown)” (iii).<sup>16</sup> In my study, four participants, or 16.7%, identify themselves as a minority race or ethnicity, which is a much lower percentage than that of the total Active Duty force. Of the enlisted Active Duty personnel, 49.4% are 25 years old or younger; 22.5% are 26-30 years old; and 13.7% are 31-35 years old (iv). Of the participants in my study, all of whom were or are enlisted personnel, 37.5% are 25 years old or younger; 54.2% are 26-30 years old; and 8.3% are 31-35 years old. Given that most study participants are veterans, it makes sense that as a whole they are slightly older than the Active Duty force, with the majority falling into the 26-30 years old category.

### **Study Design & Data Collection**

#### *Hospitality and Semi-Structured Interviews*

All aspects of this project have been informed by my understanding of hospitality, and this is especially true of my study design and research methods. I tried especially hard to create an interview space that was hospitable to informants. Therefore, it was important to me to conduct all thirty interviews with participants as sit-down, face-to-face interviews on the MU campus. I wanted the interviews to feel as much like conversations with an interested listener as possible, and I believe the face-to-face format helped me to quickly establish a personable working rapport with participants. Semi-structured interviews provide an ideal format to capture informants’ interpretations of their experiences and, moreover, to prompt their elaboration on and clarification of their interpretations.

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<sup>16</sup> The 2013 *Demographic Profile* also notes that “To conform to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) directives, Hispanic is not considered a minority race designation and is analyzed separately as an ethnicity. Overall, 11.2 percent of the DoD Active Duty force is of Hispanic ethnicity” (iv).

Semi-structured interviews are also well-suited for striking a hospitable balance between critical investigation and respect for participants' privacy and the integrity of their personal boundaries. Janice Haswell, Richard Haswell, and Glenn Blalock, who broadly delineate three categories of hospitality, say the following of what they categorize as *nomadic hospitality*: "Traditionally it is forbidden for the host to ask any questions of the guest, not even the guest's name" (Haswell, Haswell, and Blalock 713). Obviously, I conducted an interview study, which is all about asking questions, and I asked for more information than informants' names, but I tried in some way to honor the spirit of respect and restraint captured in this traditional rule of hospitality. For example, I purposely limited the personal and demographic information I directly solicited from participants either through surveys or within the interview itself. For example, I did not ask participants whether or not they were combat veterans, although I did ask about their jobs in the military, and I did not ask whether or not participants had service-related injuries or disabilities. Many participants chose to share this information when it seemed relevant to our discussion, but out of respect for their privacy, I wanted them to raise potentially sensitive subjects themselves. I also wanted to avoid making assumptions about who veterans are and what their experiences have been. I hoped that participants would bring forth the aspects of their experience, sensitive or not, that they find relevant to their college studies. The semi-structured interview format offers participants opportunities to shape the conversation and to control the amount and kinds of information they wish to share, while at the same time a basic interview protocol makes cross-comparison and analysis of data possible.

I tried to frame interviews as dialogues between myself and study participants, so that participants would feel in control over their degree of disclosure during interviews and feel comfortable asking me questions as well. To this end, at the beginning of each interview, I let participants know that they could ask me questions at any point during the interview, and I offered to answer any questions they might have about the study. Several participants took me up on this offer. After explaining the purpose of my study, one participant, satisfied with my explanation, said, “OK, well I was going to get up and walk out if I didn’t like it.” I certainly believed him. Additionally, as I reviewed the Consent to Participate in a Research Study form with participants before the interview, I emphasized that they could decline to answer any questions I posed, and that they could stop the interview at any time, both of which would have no effect on their full compensation for participation, which they had already secured.

Combined, the following two examples illustrate how participants and I both worked to manage the interview space. In the following quotation, Jared, a Navy veteran who served in Afghanistan, is in the process of discussing a personal narrative assignment from his FYW course in which he wrote about an alarming event rumored to have occurred on his base during his deployment to Afghanistan. In discussing this assignment, Jared said to me, “But I mean this isn’t the kind of thing that keeps me up at night. I mean, like I said, those things I don’t really want to get into.” Jared was comfortable discussing the event he wrote about in his assignment, but he clearly set a boundary indicating that there were other events he would not discuss, and I respected that boundary. On the other end of the spectrum, Bryan, an Army veteran who was deployed to Iraq, said to me at the beginning of his interview, “I didn’t have a bad

experience or anything, so you can ask any question. It wasn't like I was infantry—I was aviation. It was different, so.” In Bryan's comments, one can see that participants were also doing work to manage the interview space; specifically, Bryan was trying to set me at ease and giving me permission to inquire into his military background. Bryan's comments also illustrate the acute awareness many veterans have of the stock narratives and stereotypes that circulate in popular discourse about veterans, such as that they are “ticking time bombs.”<sup>17</sup>

Early in the study, near the end of each interview, I began asking participants about their motivation for participating in this research. I quickly learned that several participants had participated in other research about veterans. Anecdotally, the coordinator of the MU Veterans Office told me that part of her job involves screening the many requests she receives to distribute calls for research participation to the student veterans on her e-mail listserv. By far, the strongest motivation informants cite for participating in research on veterans is the desire to help other veterans. This desire to help other veterans was indeed the concern of the participant who told me he was going to walk out if he wasn't satisfied with my justification for the study.

However, some participants expressed a sort of research fatigue stemming from a variety of factors. One participant, Nicholas, had become increasingly discerning about the kind of research he would participate in based on his distaste for what he'd experienced as a pathologizing research stance toward veterans. When I asked Nicholas why he had decided to participate in this study, this is what he told me:

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of an example of this stereotype, see: <http://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/5813/usatoday-perpetuates-erroneous-%E2%80%9Cticking-bomb%E2%80%9D-view-of-veterans/>



Well, like I was saying, I get the veterans e-mails. I just discard, discard, and discard them...One of the things is that you're not an agency. You're a student working for something on your own that may or may not help—hopefully helps—veterans...Like I said, that you are a student, a person, not an agency. I mean we get called all the time. The first year and a half out of the military-, I still get calls periodically now. But the first year and a half out, every six weeks would be a call from some different agency asking me, essentially, if I was crazy or not. Like, *How was I dealing with the civilian world? Is my mind right? Have I thought about doing odd things to animals and babies?* It's like, "No, I'm fine." So you're not an agency or some committee or some board. It was great. So that's really why...it was a person.

As this quotation illustrates, Nicholas only agreed to participate in this study because it was being conducted by *a person*, rather than some distant agency. An in-person interview, though brief, provides an opportunity for a face-to-face encounter that has the potential to have intrinsic value for both parties—in effect, to be hospitable—instead of simply being a transaction of information, an experience with which Nicholas had become frustrated.

I believe hospitable research, in addition to being ethical, must attempt to provide some kind of intrinsic value to participants. Hospitable research should provide some form of value to participants from the actual experience of participation and not only from what will come later, through analysis of data and publication, or some other means. It was my hope and intention to provide this kind of value by cultivating a space in which

informants could exercise control over their privacy and personal boundaries, while also sharing their experiences with an interested, non-judgmental listener.

I made a few notable adjustments to my study design very early in the study. At the outset of my research, I had planned to focus solely on participants' academic experience in their FYW courses. However, given that participants were at a variety of points in their college careers, it made sense to expand my inquiry to include significant academic writing experiences in any course, though particularly in upper-level writing courses in a participant's major. In my study findings, I still maintain a focus on FYW instruction and experience, but I also collected data about writing experiences beyond this course. For participants later in their college career, I often inquired about the extent to which their FYW course had prepared them for later academic writing tasks.

Another adjustment I made to my proposed study design, based on a greater than expected response from interested participants, was to include more participants, about double what I had originally proposed. Including as many interested participants as possible seemed to me not only the most hospitable choice, but also one that would allow me to capture a more illustrative and in-depth portrait of the student veteran population at MU. Originally, I had planned to include a smaller number of participants and to interview them all twice; the second interview was intended to be a text-based interview where participants would bring samples of their academic writing to discuss. Instead, I chose to include a larger number of participants but not to interview all of them a second time. As a result of this change, I asked most participants to bring academic writing samples<sup>18</sup> to their first and only interview, and we discussed them in concert with their

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<sup>18</sup> I asked students to bring assignments from their FYW courses and/or any other texts that they deemed significant in any of their other college courses. One participant also brought non-academic, creative

overall academic experience. Participants referred to their written work in order to ground their memory and to help them provide concrete, detailed examples of past writing assignments and experiences.

Out of twenty-four total participants, I interviewed a sub-set of six participants a second time: Sam, Matthew, Alex, Adam, Caleb, and Terrence (see Appendix D). I invited an additional three participants for second interviews, including one of the female participants, but two did not respond to these invitations and one participant was prevented from participating in a second interview because of scheduling conflicts. Sam and Matthew were very early participants in this study, and I scheduled two interviews with them based on my original study design. I invited the four subsequent participants to participate in a second interview based on mutual interest and availability. I invited participants for a second interview in cases where a single interview simply did not seem to provide adequate time to cover the entire interview protocol and when participants expressed a strong interest in talking more about their experiences.

### *Participant Compensation*

Participants in this study were compensated \$50 per interview. While I believe that hospitably designed research should attempt to make informants' participation intrinsically valuable, for me this does not preclude monetarily compensating informants. I believe that offering monetary compensation for participation helped to make recruitment of participants more successful. However, several participants mentioned that they would have participated even if there had been no compensation. And those who cited compensation as a primary motivator to participate still said that they also wanted to

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writing samples that he had completed during his deployment in Afghanistan because they were a significant part of his writing life.

help other veterans. Adam, an Army National Guard veteran who had previously participated in veteran-related research, explains how his desire to help, the value he places on his own and others' time, and monetary compensation culminated in his choice to participate in this study. Beginning by speaking of previous research experiences, he says:

My problem is I would sit down and they would have a two hundred [item] questionnaire, one to five bubbles. I'm sitting there trying to be nice for like the first twenty bubbles...And I just don't-, me helping people like that, that's not helping. That's just wasting my time and their time. And I've never actually been a part of-, usually it's just like questionnaires and stuff. And they just want me to sit down, and I'm just so sick of it. And questionnaires quite frankly don't do anybody justice...So when I saw the money, it wasn't-, 50 bucks isn't that much to me. It's nice, I'll go buy a couple groceries and stuff, especially right now that's important in my life. But it's that, to me, not knowing what I was getting into at all, it was, "We care about this research." It showed an investment into it.

Adam interpreted participant compensation as a sign of respect for the value of his time. And, like Nicholas, he had also become more discerning about the kinds of research in which he participated. Adam felt that talking to a person, rather than filling out a questionnaire, was more likely to do him "justice" as a person. Survey research may be advantageous in trying to understand large and diverse populations such as veterans, but participants such as Nicholas and Adam expressed frustration and fatigue with this kind of "faceless" research that nonetheless inquired into intimate details of their personal

experience as veterans. Qualitative research that takes place face-to-face provides a greater opportunity to offer intrinsic value to research participants. Especially for veterans, who may be wary of being met with pre-conceived ideas about who they are and what they have experienced, a semi-structured interview offers a space in which complex and nuanced descriptions can take form.

### **Data Analysis**

As I analyzed the data collected for this project, I drew on elements of the interpretive process of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss; Corbin and Strauss). Roy Suddaby stresses that grounded theory is not appropriate for all research questions but is “most suited to understand the process by which actors construct meaning out of intersubjective experience” (634). As this project is focused on student veterans’ perceptions of experience, including their interactions with teachers and fellow students in writing classrooms, elements of grounded theory—namely memoing and coding—were appropriate for the project.

Because grounded theory was developed as a research method intended to generate theory in a more organic manner based on emerging patterns in the data and sensitive to the meaning social actors themselves make in particular social settings, it is sometimes misinterpreted as a method requiring that researchers approach analysis as “blank slates” with no agendas or preconceived ideas of their own (Suddaby). However, approaching analysis in such a way is not only impossible, but also impractical. Given that the goal of my research project is to generate a theory and practice of hospitality appropriate for writing pedagogy, I was sensitive to data relevant to my conceptual

framework; most notably, I paid careful attention to how participants described interactions between themselves and their fellow students and teachers. However, I was mindful not to let hospitality constructs overpower other themes in the data. As Corbin and Strauss underscore, coding “means putting aside preconceived notions about what the researcher expects to find in the research, and letting the data and interpretation of it guide analysis” (160). As a guard against imposing my own concepts too heavily on the data, I tried to utilize *in-vivo* codes, or “concepts using the actual words of research participants rather than being named by the analyst” (Corbin and Strauss 65), whenever possible.

All study interviews, which averaged sixty-minutes each in length, were recorded and then transcribed verbatim (see Appendix D). As the researcher, I transcribed six of the thirty interviews. I chose to transcribe my earliest interviews in order to evaluate the interview protocol and my interviewing technique. For the purposes of speed and efficiency, the remaining interviews were transcribed by a professional, third-party transcription service.

My data analysis process began with reading transcripts and writing reflective, comparative memos for each one. Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss explain that memos (and diagrams) “begin as rather rudimentary representations of thought and grow in complexity, density, clarity, and accuracy as the research progresses” (118). The initial memoing process allowed me to capture a portrait of each participant, highlight potentially relevant data from each interview, and begin the process of constant comparison among and between participants and interviews.

Following my initial reading of transcripts and writing of memos, I began open coding transcripts. Coding is the process of organizing, reducing, and, ultimately, interpreting qualitative data. I completed open coding of the data with the aid of qualitative coding software.<sup>19</sup> To be clear, none of the coding for this project was automated in any way; instead, the coding software served an organizational purpose in managing a large body of data. The purpose of open coding was to determine the kinds and variety of data captured, to begin to discern themes across transcripts, and to form rudimentary conceptual categories. I began open coding without a pre-determined codebook and with the intention of developing sensitivity to *in-vivo* codes and prominent themes. In my transition from open to axial coding, I developed a codebook, based on both my conceptual framework and my heightened awareness of the prominent themes emerging in the data, which I continued to refine throughout the coding process (see Appendix E). For example, the code “Economics and Education” reflects my attention to Judith Still’s socially situated moral code for hospitality, which identifies “economic regulation” as an important aspect of hospitality (*Derrida and Hospitality* 5). But this code also reflects the strong emphasis I heard participants place on the economic factors influencing their educational experience. I heightened my attention to the other two aspects of Still’s code of hospitality—“physical, embodied practice” and “affective structure”—through the codes “Interactions with Peers in Writing Classrooms” and “Interactions with Writing Teachers,” along with their respective sub-codes related to “concrete” and “qualitative” descriptions of these interactions. So, for example, if a participant described the procedures for peer review in her first-year writing class, I

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<sup>19</sup> I used Dedoose Qualitative and Mixed Method Software.

coded that piece of data as a “concrete description” of an interaction with peers (physical, embodied practice). But if she also described her emotions attached to participating in peer review—such as embarrassment, frustration, or satisfaction—I also coded that piece of data as a “qualitative description” of an interaction with peers (affective structure). Other significant codes that emerged, such as “Professional Identity,” were unexpected and arose entirely from my analysis of the data.

Certainly, given the same set of data, a researcher other than myself would have different emphases and nuances in their analysis. Educational researcher and theorist Peter Smagorinsky explains that

by creating categories in sets and levels, a researcher manifests not only a theory but the principles within that theory and their relations to one another. In that sense, coding establishes the researcher’s subjectivity in relation to the data and the framework through which data are interpreted. From this perspective, the codes are not static or hegemonic but rather serve to explicate the stance and interpretive approach that the researcher brings to the data. (399)

Smagorinsky importantly draws attention to the researcher’s subjectivity in the course of coding not as a source of unreliability, but rather as a reality of how theory is “manifested” through interpretation. Even to begin with, another researcher would have collected a different data set, as the transcripts are records of my personal interactions with participants and reflect my interests and sensitivities to particular kinds of issues and information.



For example, my own subjectivity as a writing teacher made me particularly interested in how participants described and reflected on their interactions with their teachers. My desire to create a hospitable space in my own classroom, and to help other teachers do the same, primed me to pay particular attention to instances where participants credited an individual teacher with a positive or negative classroom experience. Initially, however, this focus on teachers served as a blind spot for me, obscuring the complex ecology of classrooms and the numerous variables and conditions—including students' own dispositions and willingness to engage in classroom activities that are at odds with their expectations—that ultimately create hospitable spaces and experiences. Cultivating a researcher stance that draws on my background as a writing teacher but is not subsumed by it has required continual self-reflection and reiterative analysis of the data over time.

I do not claim that my interpretations of data are universal, but rather that they are valid based on my subjective understanding of and engagement with my interpretive framework. To this end, I have tried to be transparent about my recruitment and data collection methods, and my coding and interpretive processes, so that one may see how I have come to the interpretations I present in my findings (see Appendices A-F). During open and axial coding, I continued to write new memos and add to existing memos in order to help me compare and reflect upon data across participants and to record and build on new insights. I also continued to read transcripts comparatively in their whole form in order to remain familiar with individual participants' narratives. Once I had completed coding, I began what Robert S. Weiss calls "local integration," or interpreting—through review, organization, and summary—large groups of excerpts

drawn from across transcripts and housed under particular codes (157). The process of local integration led to the organization, shaping, and writing of this study's major findings chapters, which focus on military students' identities and orientation to school, and their interactions with fellow students and teachers in the writing classroom.

Writing itself has played an essential role in my data analysis process, as I have found that in the process of writing, one does so much more than present pre-determined findings. It is in the process of writing that I not only meet organizational and stylistic challenges, but also meet ethical and interpretive choices as I consider how my own words will shape readers' conclusions about student veterans and their educational and life experiences.<sup>20</sup> As I analyzed transcripts and began writing my analyses, I was keenly aware of D. Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson's findings that most campus "trainings about student veterans tend to be based on a deficit model" (4). It was and remains my express desire *not* to present portraits of student veterans that reinforce such deficit models.

However, I also became aware in my writing process that accompanying my desire to contribute to assets-based approaches to working with student veterans was a hesitancy to represent my informants except in the ways that I found most positive. For example, in early drafts I hesitated to fully represent many participants' aversion to collaborative pedagogies, in part because as they recounted them, some participants described their fellow students in ways I found dismissive. I was wary of portraying

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<sup>20</sup> In my presentation of excerpts from these transcripts, I have made efforts to maintain their spoken quality, while also making them clear and accessible in written form. As such, I have only very lightly edited excerpts by adding punctuation in order to clearly present and preserve units of thought and intended meaning. I have on occasion inserted words in brackets if a referent is ambiguous. To indicate a pause in speech I have used a single dash (-); as with lengthy literary quotations, I have used ellipses to indicate the omission of some text; and, on minimal occasions, I have deleted conversational markers such as "um" or "you know."

student veterans as uncooperative or inadvertently suggesting that they are a “problem” for teachers to manage in the composition classroom. Ultimately, though, I came to believe that it was essential to fully represent my participants’ points-of-view and to provide space on the page for them to be complex human beings, not idealized individuals shaped to my own sense of what is “positive.” So, for example, I tried to include data that illustrated some of the emotion with which some informants expressed their distaste for peer review and even their fellow students, such as when one participant remarked, “I don’t relate to anything with the traditional student. Like the 18, 19, 21 year olds who mom and dad’s paying for college. I just don’t talk to them, want nothing to do with them.” In the end, I came to see engaging critically, but not judgmentally, with participants’ ideas as a sign of respect and a means of treating them as theorists of and authorities on their own experience.<sup>21</sup> In so doing, I clarified my responsibility as a researcher and writer, which is to represent to the best of my ability my informants’ words and meanings, whether or not I find their ideas “negative” or “positive.” In this project, I have privileged participants’ subjective interpretations of their own experiences, but I have also chosen to engage with them by putting their voices into conversation with existing scholarship, theory, and my own analytical point-of-view.

As I have continued my analysis of the data across many months—which is another way of saying that although the interviews are over, the conversations continue—I am humbled by the hospitality I received from my study participants who invited me, a stranger, to share in a portion of their stories, both academic and personal. I am grateful for their candor, generosity, and the time they offered to me, all of which have made this

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<sup>21</sup> This is an idea that I owe to literature scholar and ethnographer Megan Sweeney whose scholarship in *Reading Is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women’s Prisons* has served for me as a model of ethical, respectful, and critical engagement with research participants.

project possible. I share in their hope that this project will help writing teachers and the student veterans whom many will meet in their classrooms.

## CHAPTER 3

### TOWARD A SHARED CLASSROOM: LISTENING TO STUDENT VETERANS' EDUCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL GOALS

Without the act of listening, hospitality remains an impossibility.

–Dale Jacobs, “The Audacity of Hospitality”

Multiple participants use the phrase “check in the box” to describe their FYW course, by which they mean that the course meant little more to them than the fulfillment of an imposed requirement. As a writing teacher myself, I admit that I was disappointed to hear the repetition of the phrase, as I hope that students will find value and meaning in learning about and practicing writing. But what participants have shown me is that such a desire for students’ personal investment in the course must begin with a better understanding of what is meaningful and of value to students themselves, a more detailed and nuanced understanding of what they hope to make possible for themselves and why.

Composition studies and veterans studies scholars have reported that veterans approach obtaining a college degree as another “mission” (Doe and Langstraat; Hart and Thompson), but only one informant in this study, Micah, uses mission-oriented language to describe the pursuit of his college degree; he refers to college as his “next tour of duty.” Instead, informants widely use the language of work to describe themselves and their approach to school. Indeed, many informants describe themselves as “professionals”

and describe school as a “job.” Veterans’ transition from the military to college has been widely characterized as a transition from soldier to student, but my research shows that an even more accurate characterization of this transition, at least for the participants in this study, is *professional soldier* to *professional student*. Professionalism, then, works as a bridging concept between participants’ military backgrounds, their current academic endeavors, and their hopes for their futures.

The maxim to “meet students where they are” has more or less become a pedagogical cliché, but it is one that deserves real and careful attention in relationship to hospitality. If writing teachers are to meet military students “where they are” and help them to find a meaningful purpose in their FYW course, then it is necessary to take seriously the concerns that many will have about professional preparation. For some military students, until the question is addressed of whether the course curriculum and instruction relate to their pragmatic, professional goals, they may not be able to attend to the other concerns that teachers wish to advance.

Except for students still active in the military, student veterans are no longer engaged in the military profession that, for most, became central to their identity (Doe and Doe). Many study informants describe the loss of profession that accompanies their separation from the military as a profound personal loss, and several research participants leave open the possibility of returning to the military, in large part because they miss its mission-focused and team-oriented work. What informants carry forward with them into the academy, then, is the professional *ethos* they developed in the military. Even informants who are anxious to leave their military identity behind nonetheless carry

forward into the classroom a professional ethos that they associate with their military work experience.

The strong professional ethos that study participants possess, coupled with the absence of a current profession, positions many student veteran informants to, one, approach school *as* a job, and, two, insist upon what they consider a practical curriculum that will serve them in obtaining and succeeding in a new profession. Economic factors, such as the desire to make good on the educational benefits they have earned at a high personal cost, and having a family or financial obligations such as a mortgage, also add to student veteran informants' strong focus on their pragmatic, professional goals. As such, many informants struggle to find the exigency in the required general curriculum and, more specifically, in their FYW courses.

In this chapter, I argue that conceptualizing teachers and students as *strangers* to one another is essential in the hospitable classroom, as it reminds writing teachers that their teaching objectives may be no more obvious to students than students' educational goals are to them. Conceptualizing teachers and students as strangers highlights the need for them to become acquainted with each other in relationship to the work they hope to accomplish together. If teachers invite students to express their educational aims and teachers make a vigorous case for their own, both parties will be more likely to foster an exchange that results in a respectful understanding of the differences between those respective goals, as well as areas of overlap and shared concern. This exchange requires dialogue, of which listening is a fundamental component. Dialogue about goals is essential to the hospitable classroom in which teacher and students are positioned to influence one another, yet maintain their own distinct goals and desires. The kind of

hospitality I am advocating, built on this kind of exchange, would help to cultivate a “shared” classroom.

My understanding of a shared classroom—one in which individuals are distinct, but mutually influential—is grounded in critical theorist Judith Still’s and feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray’s theories of hospitality. In her essay “Sharing the World: Luce Irigaray and the Hospitality of Difference,” Still, whom I quote at length below, explicates Irigaray’s theory of hospitality, particularly Irigaray’s insistence upon the host’s and guest’s respective fidelity to themselves, even as they construct a shared world. Still writes that, according to Irigaray,

we should be faithful to our own manner of dwelling—and yet be willing to be changed by encounter. This fidelity is a precondition for welcoming the other, and, if possible, for going beyond traditional hospitality which reserves a space for the guest in the place where we live, but assumes that the good guest will not transform our world or our horizon. In other words a true welcome, for Luce Irigaray, implies the possibility of constructing a new and third world as a result of my world’s meeting with that of the other—whoever that other might be. We do not attempt to meet the other’s needs (even though that alone is of course preferable to a ‘closed door’ policy), for we attempt to consider what it might mean to *share* the world. (“Sharing the World” 41-42, emphasis in original)

The kind of hospitality that Still, through Irigaray, outlines is not one of initiation or conversion, but rather of mutual influence. The conceptual ideas of space and thresholds are essential in this model of hospitality, for without thresholds to separate individuals



and maintain the space between them, the act of welcome is impossible. In Irigaray's theory of hospitality, host and guest remain faithful to themselves and their "own manner of dwelling," but their encounter opens up the possibility of each party being changed by the other.

What might it look like for teachers and students to share the classroom, to remain faithful to their own manner of dwelling while constructing a shared classroom in which mutual influence is a possibility? As *hosts*, teachers ultimately set the course agenda and provide a framework for classroom interaction.<sup>22</sup> But students, as *guests*, bring fresh perspectives, new ideas, and a diversity of life experiences to the classroom; as Janis Haswell, Richard Haswell, and Glenn Blalock contend, "the guest opens up (or 'clears out,' as Rumi puts it) the host's world with the news of the unfamiliar, usually by means of stories and accounts" (712). One would hope and expect that teachers listening to those stories and accounts—and how they relate to students' educational goals—will be influenced by them. Indeed, the responsibilities of design and assessment that are required of teachers make for asymmetrical power relationships between teachers and students, and if one thinks only in terms of compelling particular behaviors or actions, then "influence" could seem to be an almost euphemistic term. But to think of influence more broadly as the ability to have an effect on another person, then, yes, students can absolutely influence their teachers and vice versa. The question that follows is: in what respects do teachers and students, who begin as strangers, need to become acquainted in order to mutually influence each other and work toward a shared and hospitable classroom?

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<sup>22</sup> I am aware, however, that writing instructors are working under different conditions that dictate the degree to which they are able to set their own curriculum, agendas, and activities.

Study informants suggest that better understanding students' own educational goals is essential if first-year writing teachers are to help them invest in the course as more than a simple requirement to be checked off. For most informants, the goals they bring to their first-year writing course are pragmatic and career-focused. However, outside of writing courses that specifically take up professional writing, writing teachers may not be attuned to or interested in students' professional goals. Jeff Smith, a communications scholar and composition teacher, argues that writing teachers have grossly failed in their duty to appreciate students' career-focused aims and adjust their curricula accordingly, a failing he deems an ethical one (317). For some teachers, however, students' career-focused goals may appear to be too closely linked to the very capitalist societal structures that they hope to prompt students to critique. Russel K. Durst points out that since the "social turn" in composition studies, when many curricula became focused on social and political injustices in capitalist culture and were designed to foster critical consciousness in students, teachers have sometimes dismissed students' pragmatic, career-focused goals "as an irritant" (Durst 171). Student veterans, who come to the FYW classroom with an explicit focus on their professional goals, then, may have difficulty recognizing a connection between their own goals and what they are learning about writing in their FYW courses, an experience that could potentially leave them feeling that they are not fully welcome in the classroom.

However, it is challenging to determine how to help students recognize the connection (if there is one) between their career-related goals and the learning objectives in their FYW course without making professional writing the subject of the FYW curriculum. In response to Smith's suggestion that teachers accommodate students'

pragmatic, professional concerns, some writing scholars have argued that students might be better served by teachers instead complicating the idea that a college degree necessarily delivers an “interesting, secure, high-paying” career (Flanagan 211). For example, David Flanagan resists reinforcing the myth that the United States “is a meritocracy that always rewards native intelligence and hard work,” observing that the “potential benefits of a college education are many, but the promise of a ‘good career’ is the least certain of them all” (212). Instead, Flanagan argues, “We should be asking ourselves how we can best provide our students with the real, though intangible, benefits of education: critical intelligence and knowledge of themselves and the world they live in” (212). But composition scholar Gwen Gorzelsky argues that if writing teachers reject students’ “goals of developing professional selves,” then they effectively destroy “the space for substantive intellectual-practical negotiation between teacher and student in favor of an inherently authoritarian relation in which the teacher mandates which goals and self-understandings are eligible pursuits” (214). If, as I argue, striving for mutual influence among all classroom participants is central to the practice of hospitality in the classroom, then negotiation must supersede either outright accommodation or resistance to student goals that may be out of alignment with teachers’ course objectives.

An essential part of that negotiation would be for writing teachers to listen for the differences and the overlap between students’ goals and those outlined in the FYW curricula they teach. Still acknowledges that sharing “the world,” or even just the classroom, is incredibly difficult. However, she offers a crucial first step: listening. Still explains,

For the challenge [of sharing the world] to be met, the first step might be to listen to others, and to hear what they have to say. This insight is a particularly important one for those in education, which is of course a form of hospitality; instead of assuming as academics (teachers, administrators or managers) that our only role is to instruct and demonstrate—which is a form of repetition of the same—we may need to learn how to listen. Returning to the initial precondition of fidelity to the self, listening does not mean being overwhelmed by others or fusing with them, but rather the beginning of a dialogue in which both can speak and both can remain silent and breathe. (“Sharing the World” 42)

Listening is the practice that maintains space between individuals and yet opens the door to mutual influence and negotiation. Because hospitality is relational, its practice requires the kind of listening Krista Ratcliffe has defined as “rhetorical listening” (see Ratcliffe 17-46). Ratcliffe explains that “rhetorical listeners might best invert the term *understanding* and define it as *standing under*, that is, consciously standing under discourses that surround us and others while consciously acknowledging all our particular—and very fluid—standpoints” (28). Identifying our own standpoints, even as we allow discourses to “wash over, through, and around us” (Ratcliffe 28) is what prevents “the absorbing of the guest into the host’s world,” which Haswell, Haswell, and Blalock warn can be the outcome of hospitality gone awry (711). Listening first for difference, of subject positions and goals, and then for common concerns lays the groundwork for mutual understanding and influence in the shared classroom.

In my own attempts to practice hospitable research, I have listened deeply and carefully to informants' narratives about their experiences in the FYW classroom, in what follows I present findings that provide insight into the educational goals and expectations that military student informants bring to the college composition classroom. Using a hospitality framework, I consider how writing teachers can welcome student veterans who come to the classroom with a professional ethos, but without ceding the FYW curriculum entirely to professional writing tasks and concerns. Indeed, informant narratives suggest that asking students to take up writing tasks that they would *not* take up on their own—offering something new—is an important part of education and of a pedagogical hospitality that frames students as learners rather than consumers. Based on participant narratives, I argue that a promising and productive way to frame military student informants' pragmatic focus in the writing classroom is as an insistence on transfer of learning. Such a framing provides common ground between students' professional concerns and those of writing teachers and the broader field of composition studies.

### **Listening to Military Students' Pragmatic, Professional Goals**

Military students were expected to develop professional selves in the military, and, for many, their sense of themselves as professionals has become central to their identity. Professionalization is a central formation process during service members' time in the military. The U.S. Army's "Soldier's Creed," which is taught to all enlisted soldiers during basic training, even states, "I am an expert and I am a professional" ("Soldier's Creed"). But study informants from all branches of the military express a

similar professional understanding of their military service. Most participants express pride in their military service and cite reasons for enlistment that are sometimes idealistic—patriotism, a sense of duty, or family history—yet they simultaneously frame their service in terms of employment. As Sam, a former Marine and Iraq War veteran, remarked about his military career, “To me it was a job that I did. It was a profession that I was proud of. I felt that I was good at it. It required technical expertise and intelligence and specialized skills. That’s how I thought of it.” Bryan, an Iraq War veteran who worked in aviation maintenance in the Army, reports that gaining professional experience was actually one of the motivating factors for his enlistment. When I asked Bryan why he joined the Army, he responded, “I would have had to get into a lot of financial debt to go to college. And basically it was the motivation for college and then just the opportunity to put that on your resume. I went into like sort of a professional job, so that translates well into the civilian world.” Student veterans develop a sense of themselves as professionals because of the professional duties they performed in the military, but the sense of professionalism they carry forward into the classroom has as much or more to do with the kind of person they think of themselves being as it does with the actual job they performed.

In their article “Residence Time and Military Workplace Literacies,” composition scholar Sue Doe and William W. Doe, III (LTC, US Army, Ret.) characterize the intensive induction processes of the military (basic training) and subsequent ongoing training as leaving “a lasting imprint” and becoming “central to the identity” of individuals who experience it. That “lasting imprint” follows veterans into the classroom as a professional ethos. Ian, a Navy veteran who was eager to shed his military identity

once he was in college, nonetheless conceded that his military experience continues to influence him in “a whole bunch of ways,” explaining, “Well, it helps you take your life seriously, and you have good manners, and you’re a professional person.” For Ian, being a “professional person” is more about the kind of person he thinks of himself as being—serious and well-mannered—than about the particular job he performed in the military.

When military student informants in my study began college, they maintained a strong sense of themselves as “professionals,” but many also experienced the loss of the previous identity that was tied to a specific job in the military and its attendant responsibilities. What these veterans carry forward is their professional ethos, but without the actual job. For some student veterans, school becomes the job to which they apply that professional ethos. In many cases, “professionalism” functions for informants as shorthand for other more specific characteristics, such as maturity, seriousness of purpose, depth of experience, and possessing a strong work ethic. Speaking of his fellow student veterans, Jared comments, “For the most part, I see a lot of discipline and work ethic. They finally got a shot—the right to come here—and they’re going to make something of themselves. And they’re going to enjoy their time here and do a good job.” Matthew’s approach to school is reflective of the discipline and work ethic that Jared describes. Matthew explains, “I just take my schooling as a job. This is my job, the Navy is paying for this. Obviously, you have to get good grades, or you pay out of your pocket. But the Navy’s paying for this. This is my job. From in the morning to at night, this is what I do.” Matthew notes that sometimes fellow students are surprised by his focused approach to school—namely, that he studies in the evenings and on weekends instead of going out—but a lot of other military students can relate: “They understand, they put

their time into this. They sacrificed four years, maybe more, plus a hundred dollars a month, and [the military] gives you all your school. So they know what they've put into it, all their hard work, you know, the stuff they've had to go through.” For Matthew, school is in many ways a continuation of his job in the military; he still sees himself as being paid by the Navy through the G.I. Bill, and he chooses to structure his time in a way similar to how he did while he was enlisted, down to working out on his lunch hour. Even though the nature of the work is different, Matthew applies to his schoolwork the same professional work ethic and ethos he developed in the military.

Of course, school is merely a temporary job for these participants. What they are really focused on is gaining the skills and credentials that will allow them to gain a new civilian profession. When the areas of expertise that veterans developed in the military do not translate to the civilian world in straightforward ways, veterans may be even more inclined to approach their schooling as professional re-training. Nicholas explains,

I was an infantryman, so I didn't really have a tangible skill set to give back to the civilian world. I mean, you can be a cop or a security guard. It was just training for combat appointments, that type of thing... It wasn't being a mechanic. It wasn't the electrician. It wasn't learning the skills—I mean, I learned a skill set, but it was very much geared toward what was going on overseas as far as engagement with whoever it was that day, that kind of thing. That's what we did.

Nicholas points out how in some military jobs, individuals develop a trade that is easily translated to civilian employment, whereas the skills he gained as an infantryman were specifically for the purposes of engaging in warfare. Of course, that's not to say that he



and other infantrymen did not develop skills and competencies that would be valuable in civilian work contexts—they most likely did—just that the translation is not direct, which compounds some veterans’ feeling that they must now seize the opportunity in school to gain skills that will help to establish them in the civilian world. The fact that some veterans come to school feeling like professionals but know that they need a new skill set to enter a new profession increases their desire for an explicitly practical curriculum.

Indeed, for some participants, college is solely a means to a desired professional end, but others find themselves broadly and intellectually invested in their education, while still ultimately making decisions based on professional goals. Micah, a double-major in Accounting and Finance, states, “My goal here now is that I know that I need to be able to financially support a family... It’s not that I want to go crunch numbers all day because that’s my passion, but I know that’s a means to that end. So that’s what I want to do.” Likewise, Jackson, who is intellectually captivated by the study of economic theory, says, “[Economics] is something I really enjoy, but it’s not something I’m gonna do for a living.” In contrast, Terrence, who says he would not be attending college if a degree were not a requirement for the job he hopes to attain, explains, “I try my best, and I actually try in these classes. Not because all of a sudden I’m severely interested in my education. That actually takes a backseat. I care more because it will lead up to the job I’m trying to get, and the higher GPA you get, especially with federal agencies, the more they start to look at you.” These participants may all be making choices that prioritize their career goals, but one can see that there is some variation in their approach to school. For some participants, such as Terrence, many aspects of school are simply requirements on the way to a bigger goal. But for others, such as Jackson, the intellectual explorations

that may not be directly applicable to their future careers are a welcome part of their college journey.

Military students are certainly not alone in bringing pragmatic, career-focused goals to the college classroom, but some factors unique to military students intensify their focus on pragmatic goals and future career possibilities. Student veterans utilizing G.I. Bill benefits have paid for their education with years of service and, often, sacrifice. Having paid a high price for their education, they come to school with hopes that what their education can deliver in the future will be equal to what they have already expended to earn it. Indeed, for many participants, earning future educational benefits was chief among their reasons for enlistment in the military. As Matthew, the oldest of seven children, said simply of his motivation to enlist in the Navy for educational benefits, “I knew there was no other way.”

Even if participants did not originally intend to go to college when they enlisted, many now see their service as the price they have paid for their education. Jacob, a disabled Army veteran who spent a year in a rehabilitation hospital following an injury during his deployment in Iraq, says, “I mean, college, I didn’t ever want to go to college. That’s why I joined the Army. And, well, it didn’t work out.” Adam, an Army National Guard veteran who also did not originally intend to go to college either, was seriously injured by an IED during his first of two tours in Iraq. He states bluntly, “I had to bleed for my education to get it paid for.” The sense that the benefits of college should equal the personal sacrifice already expended may be especially high for combat veterans like Jacob and Adam.

Furthermore, one cannot underestimate the extent to which some veterans experience their separation from the military as a loss of identity and purpose, whether that separation is due to medical retirement, as it was for Jacob, or because they have simply reached the end of their contracts. Even if they have mixed feelings about their military service, the feeling of loss can be quite intense. “I think, once in a while, like, if I wasn’t ever in the military, things would have been different,” Jacob reflects. “But at the same time, I am a veteran now. I did serve. I wanted to serve for a lifetime when they took away my rucksack and gave me a cane. It was like, ‘Yeah, you’re not here anymore.’” For veterans such as Jacob, going to college represents a new beginning and a chance to re-establish one’s identity, with implications that are both personal and professional. Given the primacy of student veteran informants’ professional identities, making the composition classroom a hospitable space for them means acknowledging and making space for their professional goals. To take seriously veterans’ professional goals, then, is to appreciate the extent to which building a new career also means building a new life.

The pressure to make good on the one-time shot to build a new career, made possible by G.I. Bill benefits, can be motivating to participants, but also anxiety-producing. Aaron, a former Army Ranger, expresses the pressure he feels to succeed in college this way:

[School] isn't a game—I guess I associate it with a game for some of the younger kids. For the summer they get to go home. They're going to go home to their parents. I'm going home to a place where I pay a mortgage, and I understand the consequences of failing here. My family depends on

me graduating and moving on and getting a better career. And if not, I have a mortgage and all these other bills that they're not going to accept, 'Well, I had a lot of fun.'

For Aaron, the specter of failing at school brings up many of the same anxieties that one would associate with losing a job—not being able to pay bills or losing one's home—to some extent, because Aaron, and other participants, are conceptualizing school *as* a job. But the fear of academic failure, and the professional limitations that would follow it, are also related to a number of economic factors that are intensified by military service and the G.I. Bill. Veterans using the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill have 36 months of benefits; if they fail to earn a degree in that amount of time, they must pay out of pocket in order to finish.<sup>23</sup> Some student veterans also feel the less concrete pressure to make school “worth” the effort expended to earn those 36 months of benefits. And, finally, as Aaron voices, many veterans are supporting families, and the pressure to succeed—academically, professionally, and economically—is intensified because one's success, or failure, directly affects others.<sup>24</sup>

For student veteran participants, part of the drive to succeed also comes in the form of a sense of urgency to get through school as quickly as possible in order to begin working in the civilian world. Most student veterans begin college at least four or more years older than their traditional-age counterparts, and many feel behind before they even begin. Compounding that feeling of urgency is uncertainty about whether civilian employers will value their work experience in the military. Micah, a 26-year-old Army and Afghanistan War veteran, explains his drive to succeed and sense of urgency this

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<sup>23</sup> For a full explanation of Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits see: [http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/post911\\_gibill.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/post911_gibill.asp)

<sup>24</sup> According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 47% of student veterans have families.

way: “I’m going to be 30 by the time I’m out. And I know that it looks weird, I think, to an employer trying to hire a 30-year-old fresh out of college. So I want to make sure that I have a good resume and can say I graduated quickly and with honors and a double major.” Despite the fact that he could point to his time in the military to account for his age difference, and despite the fact that his military job required intensive writing and high-level strategic capabilities, Micah feels pressure to be exceedingly successful in college in order to be attractive to employers upon graduation, given his age and limited civilian work experience.

Sean, a Navy veteran and nursing student expresses a similar sense of being behind in life, even though he is older than most of his fellow students because he was employed by the Navy before beginning college. Expressing frustration with his career trajectory, Sean explains,

It kind of drives me crazy that I’m almost 30 years old and I don’t have a degree yet and I’m not working in my degree field yet. And I just feel like the Navy was a waste, but I know it wasn’t, because it helped me grow up and figure out what I wanted to do. And I needed to go to college, but just a lot of life events happened that kind of held me back. And every once in a while I get disappointed about it, just because I feel like I should be further ahead in life than where I’m at.

Once again, if one listens closely to study participants’ talk about their career goals, one can hear that their career goals have a great deal to do with how they feel about themselves and their lives. To acknowledge and respect student veterans’ career goals in the context of the classroom is, to some degree, a means of acknowledging and respecting

them and their life trajectories, which seems essential in a hospitable classroom. Their career goals are not simply related to a desire for economic stability or mobility, though that is often a significant aspect of their professional aspirations. Because so few civilians have a connection to the military as a means of understanding what military service entails, many veterans, like Micah and Sean, are concerned that their military experience will not be valued by employers, adding to their sense of urgency to get through school and begin working in their civilian career fields.

The pressure participants feel to succeed in school is multi-faceted, and though the expectation of economic mobility tied to the completion of a degree is a centrally motivating factor in their education, the desire for economic mobility does not tell the whole story. “[It’s] that gun to the head feeling that I have to get through school now,” says Ben, a 35-year-old former Marine and Iraq War veteran whose enrollment in college has been punctuated by war-time deployments and other non-military work. Ben explains, “I’ve been out and seen and done the things that you can do without having gone to school. And it’s not going to work for the rest of my life.” At times, Ben has struggled academically in college, but he is now succeeding in his upper-level courses, and he feels confident that he will finally graduate. I asked Ben what was different about this time in school, and he replied, “I’m married now. I kind of have the whole experience, family experience...Having [my son] here, in school, working with him on his school, kind of makes it more important to me, I guess...I want him to see that college is the way to go. So, a lot of it has to do with showing him. Just the fact that I’m much more grown up now. And I think that last time over in Iraq, and things that have happened since then, had a big influence on maturing me.” Ben describes his second

deployment to Iraq as a traumatic, heavy combat tour during which several members of his unit were killed in action. When he came home, he decided it was finally time to bring his military career to a close and begin a new profession that would not require him to leave his son for an extended period of time again.

Ben is now preparing to become a high school history teacher and is looking forward to work that will be meaningful to him and also bring about economic stability for his family. In Ben's narrative, one sees that economic mobility is a central motivator for completing his education, as doing so will open up a new line of work for him. However, Ben's motivations are also personal, related both to his time in the military and to his family, particularly the desire to be a role model for his son. Ben applies the professional ethos he developed as a Marine to his schoolwork, saying that school is "like a job" for him. But his desire to become a teacher also grew out of his professional responsibilities in the military. Describing his teaching responsibilities in the Marine Corps, Ben recalls,

I was actually kind of the expert within my battalion, which was about 2,000 people. I was the guy that had to teach that class to all those people. So, I guess that was a part of it, when I realized, "Hey, I'm getting kind of good at this teaching thing." That was a big part of it. Like I said, I ended up being the guy who did a lot of training of the Iraqi military. Again, a lot of teaching, sitting down with them.

For Ben, his sense of being a professional is related to both the ethos he developed in the Marines and to the actual job he performed, which included teaching other soldiers. Participants in my study are looking toward the future and seeking to become qualified

for careers that will ensure economic mobility, yet as Ben and others illustrate, they are also processing the past, whether trying to translate military work experience into the civilian world, or carrying the weight of war experiences and loss with them into daily life. Understanding the complex connections that “career goals” have to participants’ lives—to their identities, their families, and their hopes for the future—underscores the importance of teachers listening to those goals if student veterans are to feel welcomed and invested in their composition courses, in other words, if they are to experience the composition classroom as a hospitable space.

### **Designing a Hospitable First-Year Writing Curriculum**

Military student study participants were unable to invest in their FYW course unless they were able to recognize that what was being taught there would also be relevant and applicable in future contexts, especially professional ones, a phenomenon that is not unique to student veterans (Bergmann and Zepernick). Many study participants came to their first-year writing courses expecting a skills-based curriculum, which they believed would be the means to becoming a more “professional” writer. For example, when I asked Matthew what he was expecting from his English 101 composition course, he replied, “I was like, ‘Okay, writing is gonna be writing. It’s going to be writing your papers; it’s gonna be about grammar and spelling and what words to use.’” Matthew—who described his approach to writing in the military and in school as “professional”—equates clear and correct writing with professionalism, and his goal is to become an increasingly professional writer.



Well aware that fluency and correctness in writing are highly valued in the professional world, these participants desire the confidence that comes with being able to deliver competent, error-free writing in a professional setting. For them, a “practical” curriculum is largely a skills-based curriculum. As such, these participants highlight the mismatch between some students’ theories of writing as skills-based and their teachers’ theories of writing as a complex, social activity, a mismatch which can lead to a gap between students’ curricular expectations and teachers’ curricular choices and requirements. The most productive bridge I see between my study participants’ professionally-related educational desires and many writing teachers’ existing pedagogical goals is the concern about transfer of writing knowledge and practice from the FYW course into other contexts. The student veteran participants in my study are not simply open to a curriculum geared toward transfer of writing knowledge and practice, they insist upon it.

In 2007, writing studies scholar Elizabeth Wardle called attention to the widespread assumption that first-year composition “should and will provide students with knowledge and skills that can transfer to writing tasks in other courses and contexts” vis-à-vis the relative lack of scholarly engagement with questions of *if* and *how* transfer of writing knowledge and skills actually happens (Wardle 65). Since then, composition scholars have taken up the question of transfer with increasing urgency and frequency; indeed, the field’s *raison d’être* is in many ways dependent upon transforming implicit assumptions about transfer into empirical knowledge of transfer. And while the question of transfer is a persistent one that is in many ways difficult to research, what composition scholars have come to agree on in the last decade is that if we want students to transfer

the knowledge and skills they learn in FYW, then we have to explicitly teach for transfer (Yancey, Robertson, Taczak).

The next question that logically presents itself is *what* to teach in a curriculum geared toward transfer of learning. Compositionist and genre theorist Anis Bawarshi argues that as teachers of FWY, “we cannot possibly initiate our students into the various disciplinary genres of the university, let alone the various professional genres they will encounter outside the university. We have neither the time nor the expertise to do so. What we can do, however, is teach our students how to become more rhetorically astute and agile” (165). Bawarshi contends that while there are limits to the number and kind of genres that can actually be taught in a FYW course, teaching students *how* to analyze and position themselves within genres is a transferrable skill, and the one we should most seek to develop in students in FYW courses. According to Bawarshi’s argument, then, it matters less *which* genres are taught in FYW and more *how* they are they are taught and contextualized. In a curriculum intended to prepare students to transfer their learning, contextualizing assignments as opportunities to learn how to analyze and position oneself within an unfamiliar genre would be a key learning task.

However, to make the case to professionally-minded students that studying non-professional genres could actually help one to become a better professional writer can be quite a challenge. Adam, a biological sciences major, illustrates just how important the pedagogical framing of assignments is for helping students to find the exigency in their FYW course. Adam expresses strong disappointment with his first-year writing course because he did not find it to have any relationship to his career goal of becoming a Physician’s Assistant (PA). In explaining how he moved from never even thinking about

college during high school to making it his primary goal to become a PA, Adam, an Iraq War and Army National Guard veteran, recounts three major events during his first deployment: one of his best friends in his unit was severely wounded by an IED, he took part in his first firefight, and then he himself was hit by an IED. He remembers his growing disillusionment with being a soldier as these events unfolded:

When I was over there a lot of things happened...I fired my weapon for the first time in combat, and that was a huge confliction for me. Because I realized there's nothing worse than harming another human being, and war is so tragic. And I came to the realization that when you spend your entire life wanting to be something and you finally become it, what do you do when you realize that that's probably the worst thing in the world? You know, I wanted to be a soldier my entire life, but then you're hurting people. You know, any joy out of the occupation that you had is gone. So very conflicted, very angry...very upset at God and everything, you know. I was looking for a fight still too. I was very upset at the insurgents and everything. And that's when I was hit by an IED, an improvised explosive device, and I was wounded in action. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I was able to stay and continue out the rest of my tour.

Speaking of the inner conflict his participation in the war caused him, Adam described his injuries as not only physical, but also spiritual and emotional. Since he was a child, Adam had wanted to become a soldier, but actually assuming that profession brought with it a complex of emotions, including guilt. He recalls, "I sat down and said, 'Alright, how do I help people for the rest of my life?' And I chose that I wanted to be a medical

provider. And that's when I decided I was going to be a physician's assistant, and I talked to several universities...And I applied when I was over [in Iraq] for when I got back. ” Since then, Adam's entire academic focus has been on achieving his professional goal of becoming a PA. And, as such, he weighs the worth of all his academic work, including his writing courses, through the lens of that goal.

Recalling his FYW courses, Adam describes writing assignments that were literary and creative in nature and characterizes them as tailored for students who were becoming English majors, rather than as assignments designed to help students going in a wide array of academic and professional directions. In other words, he did not recognize the potential for transfer from his FYW course to future writing situations. Adam draws attention to one of the barriers to students making a more direct connection between their FYW assignments, their own goals, and the writing situations they anticipate in the future, which is that so many FYW courses are housed in English departments. Adam and other participants often referred to their FYW course as their “English class,” and it became apparent to me that some informants see FYW as a disciplinary continuation of their high school English courses that were mostly literary in nature. Therefore, how the learning students are doing in that course is relevant to their own interests and how it might prepare them to write in future contexts is not as clear to them as it could be.

Adam's intense professional focus translated to a desire for skills-based writing instruction in his writing courses, a desire which was fulfilled in his Basic Writing course, but not in his FYW course. Comparing the two courses, he says, “I was there in English 101 putting the checkmark in the box for the university, whereas I cared more in the Basic Writing class because I was actually learning stuff that I thought was going to

help me professionally. I felt like it was important.” He continues, “The things that we were working on in Basic Writing were basic things, skills that are important and also things that are professional. Like I remember doing memos in that class, for example, which is huge...And in my English 101 class, that was not the case.” When I asked Adam what he wished he had gained in his FYW course, he referred to the writing demands of his current internship, which he was completing at the time of his interview, saying, “I think what I would have really gotten a lot more from it was if it was more professional-based, working from there, you know, memos, e-mails. E-mailing is, for example, one of the harder things I struggle with.” In other words, Adam wishes that all of the assignments in his FYW course had been related to professional genres.

However, even as one of the most professionally-focused participants in this study, Adam partially concedes that he found some value in personal writing assignments in his college courses, suggesting that even the most pragmatic, professionally-focused students may be open to seeing the value in assignments that are not directly related to professional writing concerns, even if they would not have elected to do them on their own. I asked Adam, “Did you feel like you learned anything or got anything out of it that was useful to you when you did those kind of assignments, when you were drawing on your life experience?” He replied,

It’s a hard one to answer. I’m probably going to say, yes. And the reason I’m leaning more toward yes than no-, first of all, me sharing those experiences in the classroom and everything-, great for other people who want to learn about it or whatever. That’s not why I went to college, to share these personal experiences. Obviously, I was paying for these

classes. But there's that hard healing process going on. I saw a lot of horrible things...And after my first deployment I had a lot of hate and a lot of anger. And finding forgiveness was hard—*really hard*—it took a long, long time.

While at first Adam only seems to concede that other students may have learned something from what he shared in the classroom, he then partially acknowledges that the personal writing he did as he worked through his post-deployment emotions and the process of healing after experiencing war had some value for him as well. Indeed, given the strong economic framework in which Adam places his education and time, his feelings are still mixed about whether or not those personal writing assignments merited a place in his college curriculum. Nonetheless, in his answer to my question, he expresses an acknowledgement of the multiple affordances of writing, that it can have a useful connection to one's emotions and even to the difficult process of healing. What is absent, however, is a sense that any of the writing he did in his FYW course could help him to better understand writing in a way that would be applicable to his future writing endeavors.

### **Conclusion**

My interviews with participants helped me to better understand “where they were coming from” as they came to college and some of the factors that contributed to their interpretations of their experiences in their first-year writing classrooms. The college classroom is a liminal space situated between students' pasts and futures. And “meeting students where they are” means meeting them in that liminality, recognizing that the

classroom is a space to be passed through, and that many students are already looking past it. As Gorzelsky argues, if teachers reject students' goals of developing "professional selves," then the result will be that students for whom professionalization is a very important goal, as it is for the informants in this study, will see the work of the FYW classroom as unimportant or irrelevant to them (214) and as a place not welcoming to them and what they value.

Study participants' narratives suggest that a hospitably designed FYW course curriculum offers room to write about a variety of content in various genres, *as long as* students understand that those assignments are connected to the larger enterprise of learning to position oneself in unfamiliar genres and transfer their learning beyond the FYW course and into other contexts. However, without that understanding, FYW is likely to remain a box to be checked on students' way to the coursework and learning they deem relevant to their own goals.

As I see it, the goal of teachers soliciting and attempting to better understand students' educational goals while making a case for their own course objectives is not for all parties to come to agreement, or for teachers to necessarily make sweeping revisions of their course curricula to be geared toward future professional writing tasks, as Smith argues they should. Instead, it is the voicing, listening to, and negotiation of those points-of-view that I believe is essential for making shared concerns more visible to both parties. Further, the process of dialogue itself communicates an interest in and a valuing of students' goals and, therefore, of students themselves, which is so important if a classroom is to become a hospitable space. If we, as writing teachers, begin our courses by thinking of our students as strangers to us, and we to them, then we can more clearly

recognize the need to make evident the rationale behind our instructional choices and to solicit students' educational goals in order to better understand them and our students. Listening for the mismatch *and* the overlap between our respective classroom goals can make the dialogue between teachers and students more effective, make instruction and evaluation more transparent, and create a greater opportunity for students to invest in the course, even if their initial curricular expectations are not met. And it is students' own investment in their education that lays the groundwork for learning.

Supporting students in becoming more competent and confident writers, professional and otherwise, may well involve complicating students' stated goals and asking them to partake in activities they would not have chosen themselves. It is important, however, for students to understand the pedagogical rationale for *why* they are being asked to engage in tasks they would not have chosen for themselves. Of course, even if teachers present a clear rationale for why the writing tasks they assign are important, students may not agree, but presenting such a rationale is an important step toward students and teachers engaging in a dialogue about their respective goals and values. Further, if teachers are explicitly teaching for transfer, this dialogue presents an occasion to help students better recognize the relevance of what they are currently learning to future writing tasks and contexts. By engaging in dialogue with students about their educational goals and desires, writing teachers make a move toward sharing the classroom and help to orient the work therein not just toward the future, but also to the present, which is the only place where teacher and student, host and guests, can truly meet one another where they are.



## CHAPTER 4

### READING STRANGERS, READING DIFFERENCE: A LOOK AT PEER REVIEW THROUGH THE LENS OF HOSPITALITY

Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.

—Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”

In their article “Rethinking Diversity: Axes of Difference in the Writing Classroom,” Beverly J. Moss and Keith Walters discuss “axes of difference” including age, language, sex/gender, and sexual orientation. They contend that “how we teach—our assumptions as well as our actions reflect the extent to which we accommodate diversity, whether we use it as an integral part of learning, merely acknowledge it, or, perhaps, at worst, teach to an ideal student who may bear little resemblance to those who actually occupy the seats in our classrooms” (421). While Moss and Walters peripherally address how axes of difference may affect students’ interactions with one another, by and large their emphasis is on how student diversity intersects with teacher authority. Composition studies has paid a great deal of attention to teachers’ power and positioning vis-à-vis their students, but we have yet to give adequate attention to how differences among students themselves play out in the writing classroom.

Over the past three decades, collaborative, non-hierarchical, student-to-student pedagogies, reflected in such activities as peer review, have become the norm, rather than the exception, in the college composition classroom. The relative lack of attention to student-to-student dynamics in the composition classroom despite the prevalence of collaborative pedagogies is in part a result of theories of collaboration that emphasize students as similar to one another and different from their teachers.<sup>25</sup> But military student study participants rather forcefully challenge the universality of that common sense understanding of classroom relationships. As I discussed in the previous chapter, military student participants bring a strong professional ethos into the college classroom, and they invoke their professionalism as a difference between themselves and traditional-age students. As professional adults, student veteran participants are more ready to align themselves with their instructors than with fellow students. As one participant remarked, “Instead of gravitating towards students, I mean, I honestly find myself constantly gravitating more towards faculty members just because I have more in common with them.” Or, as another participant commented emphatically, “I don’t relate to anything with the traditional student. Like the 18, 19, 21 year olds who mom and dad’s paying for college. I just don’t talk to them, want nothing to do with them.” Military student participants, then, upend the usual way of understanding peer review as an activity that

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<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Bruffee theorizes that based on students’ relationship to one another as peers, the writing classroom can approximate the functioning of the future discourse communities in which students will write. In his highly influential 1984 article, “Collaboration and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” Bruffee provides a more theoretical justification for collaborative learning, arguing that collaborative learning practices such as peer review enact and make more visible to students the social context, or community, in which academic and professional writing takes place. Building on Richard Rorty’s metaphor of knowledge production as conversation, Bruffee explains, “Besides providing a particular kind of conversation, collaborative learning also provides a particular kind of social context for conversation, a particular kind of community—a community of status equals: peers” (642).

allows students to share their writing with an audience comprised of those who are more similar to themselves than their teacher.

Conceptualizing the work of the writing classroom as occurring within a community of “peers” downplays differences among students and under-recognizes just how challenging it can be to enact peer review as a truly collaborative endeavor. The term “peer” and its related term “peer group” are most often used to emphasize similarity. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines a “peer” as “a person who equals another in natural gifts, ability, or achievements; the equal in any respect of a person or thing,” and as “a member of the same age group or social set; a contemporary.” The *OED*’s definition for “peer group” is “a group of people, esp. adolescents, of the same age, social status, or interests.” These definitions emphasize equality and sameness, be it in age, status, or interests. In composition studies, blanket and under-examined use of the term “peer” to refer to students in the same classroom likewise serves to diminish the shape, texture, and potential meaning of differences among students.

Based on their differences, students bring unique points-of-view to the table that, if truly exchanged, can enrich and influence one another. If we in composition studies were to conceptualize fellow students in the classroom as *strangers who temporarily gather in a shared space* rather than as “people whose status and assumptions approximate the writer’s own” (Bruffee 552), then the enriching potential of difference in the classroom could be better realized, a realization that is key to creating a hospitable space. However, gathering with strangers also presents real challenges to the open exchange of ideas and perspectives, among them surface politeness that prohibits substantive conversation, as well as potential dismissiveness and misunderstanding.

Conceptualizing peer review within a hospitality framework casts it as a gathering of strangers at a shared table; the question is to what extent those strangers will influence one another and leave the table having learned something from one another. The pedagogical task, as I imagine it in a hospitable classroom, is to help students become *strangers who mutually influence each other* in enriching ways, rather than strangers who are simply polite, indifferent, or, less often, hostile to one another.

In this chapter, I present a close look at how one type of difference—veteran status—is negotiated among students in the composition classroom. I find that the relevance and meaning participants ascribe to their veteran status and the meaning and relevance they believe it has for others is fluid; sometimes it becomes central to classroom interactions and, at other times, it is unimportant. Composition studies scholar Stephanie Kerschbaum proposes understanding differences as “rhetorically negotiated” and as something other than fixed and stable categories that can be understood in predictable ways (“Avoiding the Difference Fixation” 619). She explains, “When marking difference rhetors and audiences alike display and respond to markers of difference, those rhetorical cues that signal the presence of difference between two or more participants” (“Avoiding the Difference Fixation” 619). In other words, depending on the specific social and rhetorical situation and the specific interlocutors involved, different markers of difference will come to the fore and become meaningful, while others will fade into the background or not be marked at all. Kerschbaum calls this phenomenon *marking difference*, and it provides a useful framework for understanding how veteran or military status has fluid relevance and meaning for study participants as they navigate classroom interactions. Military or veteran status is one difference that

participants bring to the classroom—one among many, of course—and this study shows that it is a difference that participants become adept at negotiating rhetorically.

However, it would be a mistake to single out student veterans as somehow unique in being different from other students, a move that would only reinscribe a sense of sameness onto all other students. The data I present in this chapter relates specifically to military students, but I argue that military student participants provide a broader opportunity to reconsider assumptions of similarity among all students vis-à-vis collaborative learning in the writing classroom. Looking at collaborative learning practices, namely peer review, through the lens of hospitality highlights difference among *strangers*, rather than similarity among *peers*, and in so doing draws greater attention to the significant challenges of peer review as well as its enriching potential.

### **Marking Veteran Status as a Difference in the Classroom**

In this study, I was interested in whether or not participants experienced their status as veterans or members of the military as significant in their interactions with other students, especially during peer review in their FYW writing classrooms. Participants are, in general, carefully weighing when and how to disclose their veteran status. Most participants seem to agree that there should be a specific reason for disclosing their military background. Nicholas, a former Marine and Iraq War veteran, generally sought to avoid calling attention to his veteran status in discussions in his college courses, explaining, “I don’t say anything about it in class. Like, I do not seek out to find a time in that hour and fifteen minutes or so, *When can I drop this and how soon can I drop this?* I’ve gone whole semesters without anyone knowing. They don’t need to know. There’s

no reason for me to just bring that out.” In fact, several informants expressed disdain for any veteran who goes out of their way to talk about their military background without an express purpose for doing so.

However, participants report that the disclosure of their veteran status often does come about through writing assignments, even if they are generally private about their military background, simply because many college writing assignments ask them to draw on personal knowledge and experience. Evan, a former Marine and Iraq War veteran, said that his FYW papers were “usually based off of something from the military because it’s all I ever knew.” Nicholas reported that *if* he discloses his veteran status in the classroom, he usually does so through writing. Speaking of past disclosures, he said, “Usually, it’s a paper, if I have a good topic for it. And again, it’s not my go-to topic either. If it works, it works. If it doesn’t, it doesn’t.” And it is not always through personal narrative writing assignments that participants disclose veteran status. For example, Travis, a veteran of the Army National Guard and Iraq War, was asked to write a “procedural how-to” paper for the first assignment in his FYW course, and he chose to write about how to assemble and disassemble a military weapon, thereby disclosing his veteran status to his teacher and peer review partners, but without actually having written anything about his personal experiences in the military.

Based on the attention given to personal disclosure of traumatic war-related narratives in the literature on student veterans (Burdick, Holladay, Leonhardy, Wallace, De La Ysla, Valentino), when I began this study, I expected to hear more study informants relate narratives about the risk and possible repercussions of sharing personal writing with fellow students, especially personal writing about military experience. But to

my surprise, the feelings of exposure or vulnerability that study participants say peer review can raise are not necessarily attached more to personal genres of writing than to other genres. Instead, participants show me that the act of sharing writing itself often feels very personal, even if the genre of writing is not. “Embarrassing,” “self-conscious,” “awkward,” “nerve-wracking,” and “exposing” are all words participants use to describe their experiences of peer review. But these feelings arose because informants were sharing their writing with strangers, not because they were necessarily sharing writing about their lives.

According to study participants, age and “experience” are markers of difference related to veteran status that frequently come to the fore in their classroom interactions with other students. Most student veterans are four or more years older than their traditional-age counterparts, depending on how long they were in the military and if there were gaps in the time between their separation from the military and their college enrollment. Several participants comment on how age becomes a factor in classroom interactions not only with younger students, but also with other “non-traditional” students in their courses. Evan, now an Education major, explains that the older students in his major courses with whom he usually prefers to work do not always recognize him as a fellow non-traditional student unless he discloses his veteran status to them: “There’s not usually too many 25 or 26 year-old undergraduates that I’ve met who would be considered ‘non-traditional.’...Usually they’re 30’s or 40’s...Those people I get along great with...But even then for them, they’ll only kind of talk to me—when they find out I’m 26—when they find out, ‘Oh hey, you’re a veteran? Okay, you’re an adult.” By contrast, he reports that his veteran status seemed to have little meaning or relevance

during peer review in his FYW course, commenting, “At some point, when we had peer review, yeah, I mean, [other students] would figure it out. But I don’t think anything was ever said about it, or anything. Nobody really cared.” As one can see in the comparison of these two classroom situations, in one instance Evan’s status as a veteran was relevant to him and others—it seemed to mark him as an adult to other students—while in the other it was not.

In keeping with Kerschbaum’s assertion that marking difference is a rhetorically negotiated process, Adrienne, a Navy veteran who travelled extensively as part of her Navy career, relates that it was when she had to talk in class that she most noticed differences of age and experience between herself and other students. Adrienne found transferring from a community college to a four-year university difficult socially. Whereas at the community college her classes had been filled with a mixture of traditional and non-traditional students, once she arrived at the university, she felt a much greater distance from the mostly traditional-age students in her courses. Speaking of her experience thus far at Midwest University (MU), Adrienne says,

I really have not liked Midwest University. I think it’s because I’m older, and I have so much experience in the world and just doing different things and being everywhere. And a lot of the people are young and just straight out of high school and we don’t relate. So I really had a hard time when I had to go to classes and talk, and I had such different views from what other people had. But I’ve been through so many things that they never have. They don’t even know they haven’t experienced so much. So I had a really hard time with that, and I really enjoyed online classes.



Adrienne grew tired of trying to negotiate those differences of age and experience between herself and other students, so she began to avoid registering for face-to-face courses whenever possible. She said that in online courses, she could share her thoughts through online posts to discussions forums, a rhetorical situation in which she found her differences in age and experience not to be troublesome.

Age is a marker of difference that student veteran informants speak of frequently when describing interactions with fellow students, and they often speak of age in qualitative terms. For example, many of my informants express feeling more mature than their actual age as a result of their military experience. As Jared, a former Navy Seabee and Afghanistan War veteran, comments, “I guess I feel like I’m more mature than some other people my age, like I have more experiences than they do.” This sentiment was especially prevalent among participants who are combat veterans or have been deployed to combat zones; they speak of how war has aged and matured them. Sam, a Marine and Iraq War veteran who was nearing graduation at the time of his interview, relays how he views the experience of war as singular, and in particular classroom discussions, he finds himself drawing on that experience:

Most of my peers were obviously younger. I was a non-traditional student, twenty-three years old. Most of my peers were eighteen years old, nineteen years old. And that’s not that it’s an insult to them or anything, but they haven’t been through things that I’ve been through within five years that most people don’t go through in several lifetimes, having been in combat and being around the world...I think it’s the difference-, just in being grounded and not being grounded in real world experience. You

know, you study anthropology and political science and violence and government, and I've seen those things and some people haven't. And once again not to knock them, not to say they might not even be right, more right than me about certain things, but I'd say that kind of set things apart.

Sam sees his combat experience in Iraq as a difference that provides him with a unique kind of credibility in certain class discussions. However, Sam, who spoke highly of his fellow students, is still willing to entertain other points of view not based on first-hand experience. But for many study participants, including Sam, "real world experience" functions as a form of credibility privileged above others and one they usually find lacking in other students. So it is not simply their older age that student veterans see as a difference between themselves and other students, but the nature of that experience, which for many participants is related to their experiences of war.

As several participants show, disclosure of veteran status can act as either a bridge or a barrier to building relationships with other students that are supportive of learning. For some participants, their sense of being "experienced" as it relates to war can become as much of a liability as an asset in the classroom. I couldn't help but cringe when, on occasion, participants told me that other students had asked if they had killed somebody. Although only a few participants reported other students asking them this question, the fact that it does happen helps one to understand why rhetorically negotiating the disclosure of veteran status in the classroom can be complex and sensitive and, further, why peer review, as a site of close student-to-student interaction, can prompt feelings of uneasiness in military student participants.

Disclosure of veteran status can happen through writing, as participants draw on their experience to fulfill assignment requirements, or it can happen in the verbal interactions surrounding the sharing of writing, which may or may not be related to the actual content of the writing at all. As study participants Jacob and Adam highlight, the rhetorical negotiation of veteran status as a difference is ongoing, as the relevance and meaning of their veteran status shifts depending on the classroom situation. The extent to which student veterans anticipate positive, negative, or neutral responses to that disclosure affects the depth at which they are willing to interact with fellow students.

Jacob, an Army and Iraq War veteran, provides a description of the process of rhetorical negotiation he engages in when another student finds out he is a combat veteran. Namely, Jacob attempts to assess the source and degree of “sincerity” of other students’ interest in his military background before deciding what he will talk about. He recounts,

Some people ask, some people ask-, like, I was in combat, I did see action and stuff because I was a combat engineer. And the first question when people find out that you were in combat is always, “Did you kill somebody?” And that’s just one of the ones where you want to stop talking to them because, I mean, I’ve got PTSD...A lot of people say “thank you.” But everybody I think just says thank you because it’s a nice thing to say. But you hear it so much that it’s just, *Do they really mean it?* Or, *are they actually being sincere?* . . .But a majority of people aren’t really sincere about it. They just want to hear if you’ve actually blown

stuff up or killed anybody, and it's just stuff honestly we don't want to talk about it.

Here, Jacob notes the effects of what the Pew Research Center has called the “military-civilian gap,” the fact that less than one-half of one percent of the general American population has been on active military duty in the decade of war following September 11, 2001 (Pew Research Center 2), meaning that direct knowledge of the military and military culture is not common. Veteran status is a difference that relatively few people understand first-hand (or even second-hand through family members or close friends), and Jacob's description of other students' reactions to discovering his veteran status illustrates the gamut of responses, from the clichéd to the truly insensitive. To disclose one's veteran status, then, is to be always ready to field a variety of questions and responses from others, some of which are likely to be based on stereotypes of the military.

Adam, an Army National Guard and Iraq War veteran, also discusses the impact that this question can have on combat veterans like himself, *as well as* on non-combat veterans. Adam makes plain how emotions become part of the process of rhetorically negotiating veteran status with fellow students:

There's, quite frankly, some very highly inappropriate questions to ask. The big one that really upsets me is, “Have you ever killed anybody?” I get very emotional, very upset when those questions are asked...Myself, I've seen combat, but most soldiers—it takes about ten soldiers to support one fighting soldier...So when somebody asks that question, it's like, *Why would you ask that?* How are you going to think about that person no

matter how they respond? If they say, *yes*, what are you going to do, call them a murderer? Pat them on the back? Think highly of them? That's horrible. You're going to thank somebody for killing somebody? Human death is tragic. It's part of war. Sometimes civilians, sometimes the enemy, sometimes the worst of people, even Bin Laden. It's sad. Am I sad that Bin Laden's dead? Like, no. I don't feel sad about that at all. But I feel sad for the soldier that had to kill him. You know, it's just very tragic and it really affects the human mind. And what's the opposite of that. *No*? Are you going to judge the soldier because he didn't kill somebody? So from that aspect, I just think that's horrible. So sometimes questions really affect me.

Adam's description of fielding this intrusive question points to the stereotypes and misperceptions that some individuals have of the military, namely that every soldier is a "fighting soldier." Although Adam is a combat soldier himself, he is sensitive to the fact that for *any* soldier, no matter what their job entailed in the military, this question creates a no-win situation, as it is equally offensive to be either impressed or disappointed by the answer.

The anticipation of this question and the need to manage and respond to civilian stereotypes of soldiers and the military could create a motivation for veterans to avoid disclosing their veteran status in the classroom or from interacting too closely with other students. Yet, rather than avoiding interaction, what more informants describe is trying to discern the "open-mindedness" of their interlocutors. When Adam finds other students to be "open-minded," he describes interactions in which mutual influence and learning

become possible through the act of listening among students with different backgrounds, experiences, and opinions, which is exactly what one would hope for in a hospitable classroom. For example, Adam reports that there are instances in which he finds other students to be genuinely interested in his military background, and during these conversations, his veteran status, as a difference, serves as a bridge with other students. He recounts,

A lot of those conversations go really well. And I'm very open about it, and I can talk a little more about personal things as long as the other person is open-minded. And then I learned that the more close-minded people are, I really do not like having those conversations. I hate them. It makes me feel uncomfortable, sometimes really emotional, especially when people are trying to have opinions about something they don't know anything about. And those [instances] are when it's very closed...It really depends on who I'm talking to and how they hold themselves, and being respectful. And when I say "respectful" that doesn't mean having the same opinions as me, but being open-minded and listening and taking into account. Because as I said, honestly, I don't know everything, and that's how we all help learn and co-exist together is by listening.

Adam elucidates the extent to which his perception of other students changes the way he feels about disclosing his veteran status in the classroom. He describes trying to discern if fellow students are willing to engage in open-minded, respectful listening. It is significant that the purpose of this listening for Adam is not to come to consensus, but to come to an understanding of one another that creates tolerance and promotes learning. In essence,

what Adam describes is an appreciation for the times he has experienced being on the receiving end of what Krista Ratcliffe defines as “rhetorical listening” (see Ratcliffe 17-46). In these instances, the difference in standpoints between himself and another were still apparent, but there was also open-mindedness and “taking into account” in the exchange. Indeed, differences between students are the potential beginning of learning, if they are recognized and approached with respect and openness.

### **Discomfort and Difference in Peer Review**

Instructors, but not usually fellow students, are central to the professional and economic frameworks that participants use to conceive of their education: instructors have a professional obligation to teach, and military student participants have paid to receive the benefit of their instructors’ teaching and expertise. For some participants, receiving academic help or feedback from someone in authority, like a professor—someone whose *job* it is to help—lessens some of the discomfort that can accompany seeking that help. And, by virtue of their position, teachers are trusted, to some degree at least, whereas fellow students are unknowns. As Bryan, an Army and Iraq War veteran said, “In effect, like, this is an English 101 class. How far can I trust these people’s opinions?”

Most study informants come to the college classroom primed to focus on their teachers, but the pedagogical structures of most contemporary composition classrooms prioritize student-to-student interaction. Indeed, all participants report participating in some form of peer review in their FYW classroom. As I discussed peer review with participants, I found that they had mostly experienced peer review as an exercise in

technical correction, rather than as an intellectual exchange with their classmates. In some instances, keeping conversations focused on mechanical errors, rather than content, served as a way for participants to deflect some of the discomfort and vulnerability that would likely accompany more substantive engagement with fellow students.

Reflecting a trust in teachers and a relative wariness of fellow students, several participants partially or outright reject peer review as a useful classroom activity. Davin, an Army veteran who emphatically declares that he “hated” peer review in his freshman writing seminar, seems to reject peer review based on a mixture of personal vulnerability and pride:

I don't want people to see my writing, I really don't...Only the professor can see my writing because it means so much to me. I don't want to just give it to-, I don't want to give it to the next person and just have them think that they know what I want to say and, like, correct it. Like, they can look for grammatical errors, that's fine. I always accept those, of course.

But, you know, you can't tell me that what I'm writing isn't sufficient.

Davin was one study participant who preferred to keep peer review interactions at the surface-level of his writing because he only trusted his teacher to respond to its content. Like several other informants, Davin describes a dyadic view of the classroom, viewing the professor as the primary audience for his writing. Davin also points to one of the underlying threats of peer review—students telling one another what is insufficient about their writing and, by extension, what is insufficient about one another as writers.

Even though peer review is theorized as a collaborative activity among students, it can instead become an exercise in which students focus on their teacher rather than one



another. Terrence, a former Marine and Afghanistan War veteran, also rejected peer review as a useful activity in his FYW course, but not because he felt vulnerable with his classmates. Terrence simply felt that the teacher was the only person with adequate expertise to provide substantive feedback on student writing. He explains,

I mean, you can point out grammar mistakes, sure, but for the big things, like if something wasn't structured the way she wanted it, we don't know that. So we could do grammar, that's easy, but to know the actual structure and the content and guidelines, along with the writing, only she could really do that. So to me, I felt like it was a big waste of our time.

Here, Terrence also speaks to the pervasive influence that evaluation has on peer review; ultimately, the teacher will assess students' final drafts and so the teacher can in some cases remain the primary audience for students' writing even in peer review. As Terrence illustrates, students do not necessarily recognize one another as individual readers with unique perspectives and responses to one another's writing, as they would if peer review were truly realized as a collaborative activity.

One difference among students that informants frequently identify as important is "writing ability," which they see as determining whether they or others are good peer review partners. Jason, a Navy and Army National Guard veteran who served in the Iraq War, and Matthew, a Navy veteran, describe their feedback to other students as mostly hovering around technical comments because they believed that they lacked the writing expertise to provide more substantive feedback. Jason and Matthew echo Terrence's concern that students are not expert enough to provide feedback to one another, although they do not outright reject peer review. Jason describes his experience of peer review in

his FYW course in these terms: “I didn’t have a lot of advice to give personally because I didn’t understand it very well. But there was always, ‘You know, this sentence seems really long or this thought needs more exploration,’ or stuff like that...I wasn’t good with punctuation and structure.” Matthew, a Navy veteran, was also not sure how helpful he could be to other students during peer review; he explains, “This is 101 and 102, so it’s not my strong suit. Mainly I’d say, ‘It’s good, but I have a few suggestions. ‘Hey, maybe you should use this word instead of this word. Hey, should there be a comma here?’...Stuff like that.” Both Jason and Matthew fail to recognize that they could have valuable responses to offer fellow students, based on their particular perspectives, even if writing is not their “strong suit.” When students discuss the content of one another’s writing, in addition to its form and mechanics, there is a much richer opportunity to exchange perspectives and mutually influence each other.

Many informants conceptualize peer review as a kind of “stand-in grading,” second best, of course, to what the teacher would provide, once again illustrating how closely peer review is tied to final evaluation by the teacher. Rather than acting as peers to one another and offering feedback that would be an alternative to what the teacher would provide, these participants are actually trying to approximate the teacher’s feedback. Jared illustrates this conceptualization of peer review: “We went through and graded each other, so to speak. Like, we go through and point out problems in that person’s grammar or in their sentence structure or ways they could clean it up or write it better.” Laura, an active member of the Army Reserves, describes something similar in her descriptions of peer review in her FYW course: “We would do suggestions [about] how we think it would sound better, correct spelling, correct grammar, make comments

like, ‘I really like this,’ or ‘This is a great sentence,’ or ‘This is like a weak conclusion, maybe try this,’ you know. We would grade it so we were the professor, kind of.” If students understand evaluation criteria as corresponding to principles of effective writing, and not simply as the arbitrary preferences of their teacher, then this approximation of the teacher’s point-of-view could be a positive development in students’ ability to assess their own and others’ writing. But if participants *only* think of peer review as approximating the viewpoint of the teacher, then students miss out on the *particular* perspectives and feedback of their fellow students, the appreciation of which might lead to mutual influence and true collaboration. Overall, participants tend to paint peer review as an exercise in “cleaning up” drafts before turning them in to the teacher, who often remains the primary audience for their writing throughout all stages of the writing process, including peer review.

Gabe, a 26-year old Navy veteran, was an exception among study participants in the warmth with which he described his interactions with fellow students, but his experience illustrates how even when the social relationships among students are warm and open, moving past surface correction can be difficult. Of all the participants in this study, Gabe perhaps comes closest to relating to his classmates as “peers.” He wanted to experience school in the way that many traditional-age students do, as an immersive academic *and* social experience. Gabe recounts making friends with traditional-age students in his courses, actively seeking out non-veteran friends, and even joining the marching band for a semester; he simply doesn’t describe the social distance from traditional-age students that so many other participants do.

And yet, despite the social connection Gabe felt with his fellow students, he describes peer review in his FYW course as rarely extending into substantive conversation about writing. Explaining his disappointment with peer review, Gabe recalls,

I never really got anything out of any of the peer editing...Like, "Oh you missed this small grammatical error." Because that's all they really cared about or focused on...That's not important because when it gets typed up and they re-read it and edit it, it will get fixed. What's important is, *Is it interesting? Does it have a voice? What can you do to actually fix these things and help these things?* The majority of peer editing was just, "Gabe, you used the wrong 'there.'" Oh, I'm glad you enjoyed my four-page personal story I wrote.

For Gabe, the barriers to engaging with content during peer review seem to have more to do with how his fellow students conceptualized the purpose of peer review than with their social relations. Certainly, the goal so many participants, and seemingly other students as well, have of creating increasingly error-free writing is a good one; there is nothing wrong with a technical aspect to peer review. However, as Gabe expresses, an opportunity for a deeper exchange of ideas and perspectives is clearly missed when peer review conversations do not extend beyond correction. Gabe's goals for peer review were different than his peer review partners' goals, which prevented him from moving beyond peer review as an exercise in correction.

### *Communication Norms as Difference*

Collectively, participants' experiences highlight just how difficult it is for students to move beyond surface editing and into substantive conversation that could lead to mutual influence and learning during peer review. The social politeness that is a usual means of interacting with strangers, as well as a way to "smooth over" differences rather than engage them, may very well contribute to this difficulty. Several informants point out how communication norms in the military require direct communication with team members, of which overt correction is one feature, whereas communication norms in the classroom, as they experience them, are more indirect. Discussing his transition out of the military and into college, Jackson, a Marine veteran, makes a very pointed comparison between giving feedback to younger Marines as they learned to write a particular military genre, which he jokingly calls a "glorified instructional manual," and giving feedback to fellow students during peer review in his writing course during his first semester of college. Jackson characterizes giving direct feedback and correction in a military context as a means of helping someone learn how to do something correctly. He explains that mistakes are inevitable in the learning process, which is why you need ongoing practice and overt correction. Speaking of correcting subordinates in their process of learning to write a military genre, Jackson says, "It's fine if they have something wrong with it. You know, like, 'No, dumbass, do it this way.' You know, just show them what's wrong. 'This is how you fix it. Go fix it.'"

As is not surprising, Jackson quickly learned to adjust his communication in civilian contexts, including his FYW classroom, though he recounts a few slip-ups. "I had to be very sensitive to everyone else's feelings and stuff," he recalls, discussing the

moderated approach he took to giving feedback during peer review. For Jackson, being “sensitive” to others’ feelings also means being less pointed and direct in his comments to them. Making a connection between his veteran identity and the communication norms he became accustomed to in the military, Jackson ties his transition out of the military directly to rhetorical interactions, as he adjusted his communication to civilian, academic audiences and norms.

As several informants describe it, communication style is a facet of veteran identity and a difference that sometimes becomes apparent in veterans’ interactions with civilian students in the college classroom. Terrence notices major differences in communication styles and norms inside and outside the military. In the Marines, he says, “That’s one thing we always harp on is always constant communication with each other. I mean, whether it’s in a combat zone or whether it’s back here.” In the military, he explains, “You’re taught to say what comes to mind. Like, you know, be civil about it, but you’re still taught that first thing... You get to the point to where after many years, it’s just natural.” Terrence’s comments pertain to the constant communication that is expected among a team of Marines, a style of communication that emphasizes directness over delicacy. But outside the military, he has found that people can easily take offense if you just say the first thing that “comes to mind.” Jackson and Terrence describe communication in the military among people who are very familiar with one another and who work in teams that may have high-stakes tasks to carry out together; misunderstandings could be disastrous, and to avoid them, a particularly direct style of communication is required. But in the classroom, students act as individuals more than they do as teams, the stakes are lower, and there may well be a social penalty should one

offend a classmate, all of which contribute to a more indirect style of communication becoming the classroom norm and substantive engagement about writing content becoming less likely.

### **Writing for an Audience of Strangers**

I believe that the affordances of strangers working together in a temporary situation, as is the case in the classroom, are greater than the inevitable challenges that such a situation brings about. In some of the classroom situations my research participants discussed, the very presence of fellow students *as* strangers made participants more aware than they otherwise would have been that they were, in fact, writing for an audience. This audience awareness was something they described as becoming internalized and becoming a motivating factor during their independent composing process. Knowing that they would eventually share their writing had benefits for participants, even if the actual conversation that took place during the sharing was not particularly substantive. In this way, some participants' descriptions of peer review bear out a key feature of the theoretical justification established for its use in the FYW classroom, which is that by sharing their writing, students can better understand its rhetorical nature (Bruffee). However, it is more the discomfort of writing for other people who are unfamiliar and different from themselves—an audience of *strangers*—rather than the comfort of writing for those with whom they were familiar and similar—an audience of *peers*—that brought about this rhetorical realization for study participants.

Jared and Jacob, an Army and Iraq War veteran, have similar things to say about the motivational effect of writing for an audience in their FYW courses. Both Jared and

Jacob wrote for their anticipated audience of fellow students, a fact that raised the stakes for them and increased the amount of effort and attention they gave to their work. In Jacob's writing course, randomly selected students were asked to read their papers out loud to the class, which had the effect of being both motivating and a little stressful. Jacob says, "A couple papers I'm like, 'I don't know if we have to read them out loud or anything, so I'll just write them even better.' And if I know it's just my professor, I'll be like, 'I know how he's going to grade the paper, so I'll write it the way he's going to grade it.' And so I don't put as much effort into it." In this instance, awareness of his eventual audience of fellow students pushed Jacob to consider more in the composing process than just the assignment requirements.

The military student participants in this study view their professors as authoritative subject matter experts, and with that authority comes a certain amount of trust in their professors. The effect of that trust, for some participants, is that turning in papers to the professor feels like a more private, lower-stakes exchange, whereas sharing work with fellow students feels like a more public, higher-stakes exchange. For some informants, such as Jared, sharing their writing with a group of people who did *not* know them well was a positive experience. Jared recounts,

I was imagining the students in the classroom, actually, for all my papers. These are the people I'm going to be reading to, so essentially, they are my audience, and the professor...It made me pay more attention to what I was doing. Like, 'I better do a good job because people are going to hear this. It's not just going to be between me and the professor.' So that motivated me to do a good job and really pay attention to what I'm doing.



Jared describes the internalization of audience awareness that peer review can bring about; still, since it was a school writing assignment, the professor, as evaluator, is always a part of that audience. What both Jacob and Jared show is that the possibility of “losing face” in front of fellow students is a real and felt factor in peer review for some participants and is as motivating, or perhaps more so, than “losing points” on one’s grade.

However, although writing for an audience of strangers can feel “nerve-wracking” or “exposing,” it can also provide a particular kind of writerly freedom and affirmation, two affordances that both Jared and Jillian—who participates in the military’s Simultaneous Membership Program (SMP) as an active member of the Army Reserves and MU’s ROTC program—illustrate, respectively. Jared explains how an audience of strangers created a unique opportunity for him to write about an experience in Afghanistan that he had not previously shared with those close to him. Describing a personal writing assignment in his FYW course, Jared recounts,

So one paper she had us do was on memory. So we took a particular memory from our life, and we analyzed it and broke it down...I wrote about an experience in Afghanistan that I had that changed my way of thinking about life. And that experience was-, we would always get rocket attacked, and different mortars would attack our base. And I heard a rumor that this woman—because you have to get on the ground immediately—we have an alarm system. So when it senses that rocket, you have about two seconds to get down. Well, apparently, this woman who was a civilian contractor didn’t get down on the ground. And she was ... it was a dud mortar, but it decapitated her. She wasn’t able to get down fast enough.

And I really just-, I just thought, “Wow that’s so intense. I feel so bad. That’s so terrifying.”...I mean it was one of those moments—like one of the billion—and it was so unfortunate. So I kind of analyzed that, and I talked about it.

I was interested in what factors Jared took into account in deciding to write about this memory, knowing it would be shared with his classmates. When I asked Jared to elaborate on his writing process, he recalled, “Well, at first I did a quick rough draft. I wrote down what I wanted to say. Then I really kind of thought over, ‘Okay, do I really want to be this open?’ And I thought, ‘Yeah, it’d be therapeutic for me.’” He continued, “I thought about I don’t know how many opportunities I’m going to get to kind of take something from the heart and put it out there. And I thought, ‘Well, here’s a good opportunity for me. I’m going to do that.’” One can see in Jared’s description of his writing process that he made a very deliberate decision about what to share in his writing and with whom. In addition to whatever objectives his teacher may have had for the assignment, he also took it up with a “therapeutic” purpose in mind.

The fact that Jared was writing for his classmates, an audience of strangers, provided Jared with the freedom to “take something from the heart and put it out there.” I was surprised to learn from Jared that this piece of writing was the only paper from his FYW course that he did *not* share with his wife. He said simply, “I just felt she didn’t need to know that.” Yet somehow he felt comfortable sharing this assignment quite openly with his class, illustrating how an audience of *strangers* can, on some occasions, create a space that makes sharing one’s writing more possible than it would be with an audience of familiars. Peer review gathers together a temporary, embodied audience,

which creates a particular kind of space for a writer, one that can be both uncomfortable and freeing.

When Jared shared his assignment with the class, he got almost no response. He remembers, “Nobody said anything... Yeah, there was silence in the room... You could kind of tell everybody’s facial expressions. Everybody was just kind of like-, felt a little depressed about it. So I was kind of like, ‘Well, I feel better I got it out.’” But Jared spoke about the experience of composing and sharing this piece of writing in very positive ways, despite the meager reaction he got from his fellow students. Even though his classmates’ reactions were minimal, their presence—and the fact that they were strangers—constituted a real audience with whom Jared could share his writing. Jared was not looking for an audience that could relate to what he wrote about, as perhaps an audience of fellow veterans could have done, but one that could simply receive his writing, which points to the importance of listening in the hospitable classroom and to the affordances of strangers gathered in a temporary space and situation. In Jared’s experience, the ephemerality of a classroom audience provided a sense of freedom to share that a more permanent audience might not have provided.

While audience response was not necessarily important to Jared, Jillian describes the power of affirming feedback and response in peer review. Rather than providing a space for disclosure, her fellow students and professor offered Jillian a form of validation she didn’t think she could have received from friends and family. Speaking of receiving positive feedback on her writing in English 101 from her classmates and teacher, whom she refers to as “strangers,” Jillian says,

Well, seeing how they were complete strangers, I guess kind of like the same with Professor Young, I was like, “Okay I can actually accept this comment now.”...Friends and family, they’re supposed to encourage you, I guess. But complete strangers being like, “Dude, this was really awesome,” I was, “Oh, I can actually accept this compliment, instead of just being like, *nah*.”

For Jillian, the experience of sharing her writing with strangers reinforced her identity as an effective writer. Writing for an audience of strangers is the task of a publishing author, and Jillian experienced a taste of the affirmation that publishing one’s work to an audience of strangers can have. As some participants illustrate, writing for an audience of strangers can raise the stakes and motivate some students to work harder in the writing process; in turn, reading and being read by strangers can create a space in which to exchange ideas and be affirmed in ways that might not be possible with familiars or those with whom one expects to have a long-term connection.

Analyzing military or veteran status as one kind of difference that study participants bring to the classroom shows how students’ recognition of difference in themselves or others has a powerful effect on how they interact with fellow students. The findings in this chapter illustrate how informants make rhetorically-astute and ongoing decisions about disclosure of their veteran or military status in student-to-student interactions and in their writing. Peer review combines writing and student-to-student interaction, and it is a complex activity that has technical, intellectual, and relational components. In peer review, teachers ask students to assume the authority to give feedback *and* the humility to receive it. As participants’ accounts of peer review

illustrate, it is not an easy balancing act, and the challenges to moving beyond simply proofreading and editing are great. Maintaining conversations at the surface-level of writing can serve as a means of avoiding the discomfort of openly recognizing and responding to difference in strangers, thereby allowing students to side-step potential conflict and shield themselves from unwanted disclosure or scrutiny. According to participants' descriptions, peer review rarely hits the target of being a truly collaborative exercise grounded in intellectually engaging conversation among peers. Nonetheless, it is encouraging that some participants benefited from having a real audience to write for, that they internalized a sense of audience awareness, and that some, such as Jillian, even gained a new sense of confidence as a writer because of peer review. Indeed, despite the challenges of enacting peer review as truly collaborative, these participants show that peer review is a classroom site rich with the *potential* for mutual influence among strangers to occur, making it worthy of ongoing attention and theorization in the hospitable classroom.

## CHAPTER 5

### IMPLICATIONS: PEDAGOGICAL HOSPITALITY IN THE COLLEGE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Anything that comes across my email where it's for a veteran, and I think it can help in some way, for future people coming to school, I usually take part in it. –Evan

It sounded interesting. And certainly just being able to participate and help, I figured, well, why not? You know, maybe my perspective is worth sharing. –Alex

It's nice to share my experience... That's sort of why I did it. And it was like, hey, I could help somebody out. I don't know how you're going to use it, and hopefully it's to do some good. –Bryan

I thought you were trying to get the actual emotional side of military students adapting to school. And I love helping. I thought I had a lot to say, and it'd be good to add. –Gabe

I think you're on to something. I hope it helps, not just with military students, I hope it helps with other students. –Jason

I'm here for you, but I appreciate you interviewing me, getting my thoughts... Hopefully this study helps instructors and other people learn. –Matthew

It's nice to know that there are people that want to do interviews with veterans to learn how they feel about school. So I think I've participated in almost anything that's veteran-related. –Jacob

I think it's cool that I guess I can help maybe. I don't know if this is for veterans or the teachers, but in a way it's helping somebody. –Travis

I love to write, and I think I've always been pretty good at it. And I like talking to strangers. –Laura

I hope I have said something to help you in your research. –Adam

Perhaps it will come as no surprise that when I asked student veteran study participants at the end of their interviews, “What motivated you to take part in this study?” many of them named a desire to help others—future students veterans, other students, teachers, and me. The above sampling of their responses to my question about participation illustrates just how prevalent the desire to help others is among participants; many of them name that same desire to help others, to make a difference, as a central reason they enlisted in the military. They also name a desire just to be heard as a reason for their participation in this study. At the closing of our interviews, several participants made a comment similar to the one made by Adam, who said, “I hope I have said something to help you in your research.” Yes, you have. And I have tried to hear you. You have said so many things that helped me, and this project is my attempt to make good on your desire to help and your willingness to share your perspectives and experiences as veterans and military students. There is no doubt that your perspectives are worth sharing.

My study is situated at the crossroads of composition studies, veteran studies, and hospitality studies, and it contributes primarily to two nascent but growing bodies of composition studies literature: that concerning post-9/11 student veterans (Cleary and Wozniak, Doe and Langstraat, Hadlock, Hinton, Holladay, Leonhardy, Hart and Thompson) and that concerning hospitality (Haswell, Haswell, and Blalock; Haswell and Haswell, Heard, Jacobs, and Grabow). While several scholars have explored student veterans’ institutional transition from the military to colleges or universities, relatively little research has described in detail student veterans’ academic experiences in college classrooms. My study sheds light on a portion of those academic experiences—those

related to writing and first-year writing courses, in particular—providing the groundwork for a pedagogical response to the “largest influx of a unique student group since WWII” (Doe and Langstraat 1-2).

However, my aim in this project has also been to analyze participants’ narratives in order to contribute to a theory of hospitality that is appropriate and responsive to the broader conditions of the college composition classroom. Although other composition studies scholars have theorized hospitality as a model for writing pedagogy (Haswell, Haswell, and Blalock; Haswell and Haswell) and for related work such as writing program administration and writing center pedagogy (Grabow), this study is the first to empirically investigate the possibility of a pedagogical hospitality, and the first to do so by privileging student perspectives. The implications of this study, then, break down along two lines: first, those that are veteran-specific, and, second, those that stem from analyzing student veterans’ experiences as a means for understanding hospitality more broadly in the context of the composition classroom. As compositionist Galen Leonhardy, writing about his own experiences of teaching veterans, reminds me, “[G]ood pedagogy in the composition classroom is good pedagogy for all students” (344-345).

### **Key Findings**

This study contextualizes informants’ experiences of being a veteran within the context of the first-year writing classroom, with a particular focus on the ways informants describe their classroom interactions and relationships with fellow students and teachers. Informants see themselves as professionals, and “professionalism” serves as a category that military student participants use to mark their difference from other students,



particularly with traditional-age students. Informants use “professionalism” as a sort of shorthand for a bundle of more specific characteristics, such as maturity, seriousness of purpose, depth of experience, focus or drive, possessing a strong work ethic, attention to detail and deadlines, and an ability to work with others. During interviews, informants often found occasion to invoke their professionalism in contrast to other students’ lack of it.

Several informants shed light on why military students may have reason, at least initially, to be wary of the student-to-student interactions that accompany small group work in the classroom. Some informants cite experiences of intrusive questions from other students about their military background, while others relate more benign interactions in which fellow students reveal their stereotypes about the military. “Sometimes, depending on the person, there's a little bit of, like, the lip curl,” says Laura, a member of the Army Reserves, recounting instances of disclosing her status as an active member of the military to other students. “You know, like, ‘Oh, way to be a part of the machine, like, way to not be an individual.’ It depends on the person.”

Laura’s sense that “it depends on the person” is an approach that many participants adopt for interacting with other students; many describe trying to gauge the sincerity and “openness” of their classroom interlocutors as they make decisions about disclosure of their military background. Some informants describe themselves as “open” people, an attribute that they link to their exposure to other cultures during their military service and to having worked closely with a diversity of other service members. However, unlike their team members in the military with whom they became familiar, fellow students are unknowns. Some fellow students may be “open” to veterans, while

others may be hostile. Yet, my research shows that the military student informants in this study are more concerned about students whom they deem immature or not as serious about school than about students who may be hostile toward, or simply ignorant of, the military.<sup>26</sup>

In any case, study informants place fellow students at the periphery of their educational experience. Because most informants have already established social connections outside of school, such as partners, children, and long-time friends, they are not concerned about making friends in the classroom, and they see the purpose of interactions with other students as primarily social, rather than educational, at least in general education courses. Instead, study participants describe focusing on the teacher as the nexus of learning in the classroom. They view the teacher as a subject matter expert and a professional whose job it is to teach them. The professional framework within which they place their relationship to the teacher also helps to ease the discomfort that some participants feel in seeking academic help.

Informants grant teachers a certain amount of trust by virtue of their credentials and professional position that they do not grant to fellow students. Therefore, research participants are often skeptical of the student-to-student pedagogies, such as peer review, so often employed in the FYW classroom. Nonetheless, despite the fact that research participants rarely describe peer review in their FYW courses as extending to conversations beyond mechanical errors and organizational suggestions, some do highlight how peer review made them more aware of the rhetorical nature of writing,

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<sup>26</sup> This finding, that participants rarely experienced direct hostility toward the military, is likely related to institutional climate. Most informants describe Midwest University (MU) and the region of the state in which it is located as “military friendly.” Some hypothesized that other schools or geographic locations might not be as military friendly as they have found MU.

suggesting that even when peer review conversations are not as substantive as teachers might hope, peer review can still serve an important purpose in the writing process. Perhaps most importantly, peer review helped study informants to orient themselves in relationship to an audience during the writing process, providing some of them with both the motivation and the rewards that sharing writing with an audience can provide.

The FYW course is likely one of the smaller classroom settings that students will experience in their early college career, which sets up both pedagogical opportunities and challenges. The opportunity is that the FYW classroom is likely to be a space in which students work more closely with fellow students and their writing teacher and, consequently, know and are known by one another more intimately than in other classroom settings. A challenge of this more intimate setting, though, is the discomfort of disclosure that can occur among students. Writing and sharing writing create the occasion for personal disclosure, which is why writing teachers and scholars have so long debated the appropriateness of personal writing assignments in composition courses. In their two-year study of military veterans in college writing classrooms, D. Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson found that the “personal essay, in various forms, continues to be a mainstay of first-year writing classrooms,” a finding they deem “noteworthy...because such essays likely facilitate, whether wittingly or not, disclosure of veteran status” (4).

As such, the debate about personal writing in the FYW classroom has received fresh attention from writing studies scholars who are engaged in work with Post-9/11 veterans, in large part because of the potential for student disclosure of trauma through war-related narratives and the dilemma of instructor response to it (Burdick, Holladay, Leonhardy, Wallace, De La Ysla, Valentino).

Given the attention to personal writing and veterans in the literature, perhaps one of the greatest surprises to me in my research study is that participants had mostly positive things to say about their experiences with personal writing assignments. They knew ahead of time that they would have to share their writing with others and chose carefully what to write about (and not write about). Several informants reported being happy to have the opportunity to do personal writing, a kind of writing that if it were not required for school, they would not take the time to do on their own. When participants described sharing writing—any kind of writing—as “embarrassing,” “self-conscious,” “awkward,” “nerve-wracking,” and “exposing,” these feelings were not more attached to personal writing assignments than to other assignments. What study informants have shown me quite clearly is that the act of sharing writing feels personal, no matter what the genre of writing is. And, just as importantly, their reports of peer review in their FYW courses underscore just how difficult it is for peer review to really be enacted as a collaborative exercise that moves past discussion of surface errors and into the more substantive territory of content. As study participants describe their experiences of peer review, surface politeness often supersedes substantive engagement with other students and their writing, making peer review more of an exercise in correction than collaboration.

## **Implications**

### *Hospitality Theory and the Writing Classroom*

Pedagogical hospitality has both theoretical and practical implications. The practice of hospitality begins as an intention and is followed by practice that awaits

response, but ultimately, the results of those intentional practices cannot be determined ahead of time. However, not all scholars agree that hospitality can or should be made practical for writing instruction. Fearing that the radical nature of hospitality will be co-opted and diminished by the discourses of value and utility that circumscribe college writing instruction, composition scholar Matthew Heard argues that the field of composition studies should maintain hospitality as a radical, aspirational theory but not attempt to translate it into practice. Heard explains, “Immersed in questions of value and practice, I yearn for concepts such as hospitality that draw me away towards possibilities that *have* no value and that do *not* fit an economy of management...my worry here is that by moving hospitality into the economy of value that structures our practical work as writing scholars, we stand to contain and manage all aspects of hospitality that do not fit into the current matrix of composition practice” (325, emphasis in original). Heard instead urges the field to consider a “pedagogy of generosity” (318) and preserve hospitality as an ethical and impractical ideal. Generosity, Heard argues, can be measured and practiced and is therefore compatible with the economies of value tied to writing instruction.

Generosity is a crucial component of hospitality, but as a stand-alone concept, it does not encompass the fullness of what hospitality translated into practice can offer. Generosity captures the outward-flowing gestures of hospitality. But, alone, generosity does not account for the receptive gestures of hospitality, the willingness of hosts and guests to be changed and challenged by each other by making space for what is other, strange, and sometimes uncomfortable. In essence, generosity does not capture the bi-directional exchange between host and guest, teacher and students. In addition, taking up

critical theorist Judith Still's theorization of hospitality, which includes the economic as an essential element, I would argue that hospitality, rather than being corrupted by contexts in which economies of value and utility loom large, is even more necessary within them. *Because*, as Heard rightly points out, writing instruction is so inundated with pressures to justify its utility and economic value—to students, institutions, and stakeholders in a capitalist culture—the practice of hospitality can serve as an aspirational, ethical center that provides a framework for our work. Guided within this framework, we as writing teachers and scholars can attempt to ride that edge between the pragmatic limitations of our work and the risky, untamed aspects of hospitality that come about when we meet others, to the best of our ability, with generosity and openness.

What I hear in Heard's argument is an attempt to make a distinction between what Derrida characterizes as the *law* and *laws* of hospitality, which I discussed in more detail in Chapter One. As Derrida conceives of them, the *law* of hospitality is absolute, unconditional welcome, hospitality as a radical requirement to welcome the stranger, whereas the *laws* are the concrete, conditional practices of hospitality. As I understand it, Heard's argument is equivalent to saying that the *law* of hospitality should be preserved without being corrupted by its conversion into *laws*. But Derrida sees it differently: what gives power to the *law* is its inevitable relationship to the *laws*. Derrida contends, "It wouldn't be effectively unconditional, the law, if it didn't *have to become* effective, concrete, determined, if that were not its being as having-to-be" (79, emphasis in the original). In other words, according to Derrida, the fact that the *actual* practice of hospitality inevitably becomes conditional and imperfect in a paradoxical way preserves and sustains the unconditional ideal of hospitality. No doubt, pedagogical hospitality falls

into the conditional realm of the *laws* of hospitality, and Heard is right to warn us about how the administrative demands for outcomes and results could much too easily domesticate hospitality. Nonetheless, the *laws* maintain their relationship to the *law*; together, they push one to ask what *is* possible within the concrete limits in which we find ourselves teaching.

The essential starting point within a model of pedagogical hospitality is that all classroom participants meet one another as *strangers*. As teachers, we do not begin a course knowing our students' goals or backgrounds. The construct of *stranger* serves as a respectful starting place of "not knowing" and a reminder that difference in the classroom is not necessarily visible or voiced. Orienting to one another as strangers emphasizes the need for teachers and students to become acquainted with one another in relationship to the work they hope to accomplish together. Kerschbaum's theory of "marking difference," the idea that the relevance and meaning of difference is dynamic, not static, and that its meaning is rhetorically and interactionally negotiated, is in line with an orientation to all classroom participants as *strangers*; indeed, we cannot know which differences will become relevant or the meaning they will have to particular interlocutors except within particular situations. As research participants show collectively, in some classroom situations their status as veterans or active members of the military is salient, while at other times it hardly seems to matter; in some cases, it serves as a bridge with other students, and in other cases, it serves as a barrier.

Recognizing and negotiating difference provides the necessary starting points for practicing hospitality. Luce Irigaray insists on the need to maintain two subjects who remain faithful to their own manners of being and dwelling in the practice of hospitality;

it is actually their separateness that also allows them to build a shared world (Still, “Sharing the World” 41). In the classroom, the practice of hospitality is in many ways about the kind of shared world we hope to cultivate. Hospitality requires the attempt to foster a space with adequate safety to allow individuals to reveal and respond to one another’s differences, but such an attempt also requires a vigilance to the unequal risks and consequences of disclosure that accompany various kinds of difference.

Relationships of asymmetrical power and positioning are a given in the classroom, not just among teachers vis-à-vis their students, but also among students themselves. Yet a space of gathered strangers is also potentially a space of invention and even transformation. Interacting with strangers presents the possibility of (re)inventing ourselves and our ways of being with others. As some participants show, strangers sharing the world—or just a table—in some cases, offers writers a unique kind of creative and intellectual freedom.

In my view, *stranger* is the most important theoretical construct a model of pedagogical hospitality has to offer, but *host* and *guest* also have conceptual value. One way of understanding military student participants’ focus on teachers is that they are looking for a *host*, a trusted point of contact in the classroom. Student veteran participants underscore that relationships with teachers are important to them and that teachers can have a positive impact on them and their education. And while we as writing teachers and scholars should always be attentive to the inherent asymmetry of power in teacher-student relationships, we should not be so wary of the misuse of power that we miss instances where teachers deploying their subject matter expertise and using their authority to set and influence classroom conditions can aid student learning and



contribute to an environment that is more welcoming than it might otherwise be. The tendency in composition studies has been to view teacherly authority with suspicion and as an entity to be dismantled (Lunsford), but the construct of *host* offers some possibilities for re-orienting ourselves to a more positive relationship to teacher authority, one in which teacher authority remains always in connection to student agency. As hosts, teachers use their authority to set conditions ahead of time and cultivate a space in which guests can interact with greater depth and ease.

Hospitality takes place within temporary configurations, and conceptualizing the FYW classroom as a temporary transitional space draws attention to the need to better understand where students are coming from, their writing backgrounds, and their future goals. Conceptualizing students as *guests* draws attention to their mobility. The educational narratives of the research participants in this study are marked by a high degree of mobility; more than half of my study participants have attended two or more institutions. Some service members have the opportunity to begin taking college courses, often online, while they are still enlisted. Many veterans also begin or continue their college education at a two-year college or on-line college before transferring to a four-year institution like Midwest University. Orienting to students as guests recognizes this mobility and the temporary, transitional nature of the college composition classroom.

A pedagogy of hospitality, which strives for mutual influence among hosts and guests in a temporary situation rather than initiation into a permanent community, is responsive to students' mobility. But in order to build upon students' prior knowledge and experiences and understand the direction of their future goals, teacher-student dialogue is critical. Teachers soliciting and listening rhetorically to students' educational

goals is essential in a classroom that teachers strive to make hospitable. In order to better understand students' goals, teachers can solicit this information in a variety of ways. Individual conferences are an ideal site to begin this dialogue, and asking students to share their expectations and goals for the course is a generative first in-class writing assignment. However, given the difference in power between teacher and students, some students may not feel comfortable voicing the ways in which their own goals are not in alignment with those of the course or the teacher. Providing opportunities throughout the semester for anonymous feedback and questions about particular assignments, textual materials, and course procedures, such as class discussion and peer review, can help teachers to gain insight into students' goals and experiences in the course.

Teachers should also make a point of sharing their pedagogical rationales for each assignment and for the course as a whole. Many of my study participants referred to their first-year writing course as their "English class," which is logical given that many writing courses are housed in the English department, as is the case at Midwest University. However, it was clear to me that some informants see their first-year writing course as a continuation of their high school English courses and do not make a disciplinary distinction between "English" and "writing." Therefore, some students may not understand that the first-year writing course is not the equivalent of an Introduction to English Studies courses. Teachers making this distinction more clearly can help students to better understand how the work of the writing course could apply to future writing contexts, an understanding that might lead to greater student investment in the course.

### *Course Design and Curriculum*

Because first-year writing is maintained as a universal requirement at so many colleges and universities, it is especially appropriate to think about the practice of hospitality in the course, for the very fact that so many students will pass through the space of the FYW course at the outset of their college career. As a universal requirement, the course can function as a welcoming entrance to the university or an intimidating barrier. For some study participants, though, their FYW course functioned as neither—it was simply a requirement to be gotten through. As hosts, teachers set classroom conditions that offer new possibilities for their students. One of the most significant pedagogical issues that informants highlight is the need for teachers, in their roles as hosts, to actively invite students into the work of the course and make a persuasive case for its utility. Participants illustrate how crucial it is for students to understand the pedagogical rationale for the course and the tasks they are being required to do, if they are to find the exigency of the FYW requirement.

Most military student participants were primarily interested in how the course would prepare them for their future careers. If we are to take up the idea of “mutual influence” in relationship to student veterans and hospitable curriculum design, we must consider how to acknowledge and respond to the pragmatic career-focused goals that many of them (and other students) will bring to the classroom. At the same time, it is necessary to reflect on what kind of influence we, as writing teachers, hope to have on our students. For students who come to the classroom expecting a skills-based curriculum because they believe it will best prepare them for professional writing, one influence a teacher might hope to have is to push students toward an expansion of their ideas about

what constitutes adequate preparation for professional writing, which is to say toward a more complex theory of writing.

Inviting students to express professional goals and asking them to investigate how writing can help them to achieve and carry out those goals is likely to engage veterans, and other students as well. However, I think it would be a mistake to make too large a pivot toward professional preparation in the FYW curriculum. Certainly, not all students will be exclusively interested in a professionally-focused curriculum, and informants did find value in assignments that were not expressly related to professional preparation. Teachers as hosts should listen to students' own desires for the curriculum, but it is also their role to offer something new beyond students' express desires; otherwise, students become positioned merely as consumers. To encourage students to move beyond their initial desires and, at times, to create discomfort can be productive and necessary in the learning process. Ultimately, in their role as hosts, teachers will have to make decisions about what to teach and how to evaluate the assignments they design. Making the rationale behind those instructional choices explicit is a sign of respect to students and helps them to understand the purpose of the tasks they are being asked to complete.

One way to understand student veterans' focus on professional goals and their desire for what they consider a practical curriculum is as an insistence upon transfer of learning from the FYW course to future writing contexts. Moreover, a FYW curriculum that explicitly primes students for the transfer of learning provides a common ground between many writing teachers' pedagogical goals and students' professionally-focused goals, which have not always been well-received by instructors (Durst). While this study

does not investigate if or how transfer occurred in informants' trajectories, my findings suggest that making transfer an explicit goal of the FYW curriculum could provide a productive means of aligning student and teacher concerns and desires.

Nonetheless, even though student veteran study participants express a strong desire for transfer, they, like other students, are likely to require prompting in order to recognize how previous learning could transfer into the FYW course and how current learning might transfer out of the course into future contexts. For example, previous research shows that military students may discount or not even recognize their textual production in the military as writing (Hadlock, Hadlock and Doe). Composition scholar Erin Hadlock contends that to “recognize a student-veteran’s prior knowledge, through their experiences with past writing, is to focus on the individual talents and skills that one has, rather than focus on just the identity of *veteran*” (89, emphasis in original), and she argues that *genre* is a powerful conceptual tool to help veterans recognize and build on their previous writing experience in the military.

A curriculum that incorporates the study of genre, then, provides one means of teaching for transfer without limiting the course curriculum to professional writing genres. Ann M. Johns argues that for teachers who take a genre studies approach to instruction, their “major responsibility is to help students to become genre theorists in the true sense: to destabilize their often simplistic and sterile theories of texts and enrich their views of the complexity of text processing, negotiation, and production within communities of practice” (240). As Johns explains, the theory behind engaging students in genre study is that it can help them to develop a more complex theory of writing and

that by studying *some* genres in detail, they can approach a better and more complex understanding of how *all* texts work.

Indeed, even personal writing assignments, which for some informants provided a meaningful and satisfying occasion to share their life experiences with others, can be integrated into a curriculum that uses *rhetorical situation* and *genre* as concepts that connect writing across contexts, professional and otherwise. Teaching genres of personal writing in a way that prompts students to consider their rhetorical nature helps to connect personal writing genres conceptually to other writing genres in the course, and it also aids students in making informed and thoughtful choices about disclosure through writing. While we in composition studies often think of personal writing as an inward-looking activity, I argue that it is crucial to frame personal writing assignments as equally outward-looking. In other words, when students are writing about personal experiences for an assignment, especially those of a potentially sensitive nature, it is even more important for those assignments to be instructionally framed in ways that highlight their rhetorical nature, that is, as pieces of writing that are destined for an audience.

Although some participants describe how personal writing assignments had personal meaning for them, I don't think writing teachers should design assignments with the express purpose of aiding students in processing events in their personal lives. However, we can reasonably anticipate that some students will take up academic assignments with personal investments, and we can welcome them to do so as a means of recognizing students as whole people with a variety of life roles, rich backgrounds, and hopes that extend into the future. Furthermore, we can frame "personal writing" in the same ways that we do other assignments, as occasions to share writing for a particular

purpose with a particular audience and as yet another occasion for our students to become “genre theorists.”

Asking students to engage in reflection about their theories of writing would be an important component in helping them to become genre theorists. Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak note that while asking students to engage in reflective activities in FYW courses is now common practice, the use of reflection is not often adequately theoretical in nature. They explain,

Students are often—perhaps typically—asked to provide an account of process or to compose a “reflective argument” in which they cite their own work as evidence that they have met program outcomes. They are not asked to engage in another kind of reflection, what we might call big-picture thinking, in which they consider how writing in one setting is both different from and similar to the writing in another, or where they theorize writing so as to create a framework for future writing situations. (4)

Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak argue that helping students to develop their own framework, “one organizing what they have learned about writing through remixing prior knowledge, new theory, and new practice that will support their moving forward to new contexts, where through ‘retrieval and application’ of prior knowledge they can write anew” (137), is a cornerstone of a pedagogy geared toward transfer.

My research illustrates how some participants enter college with a strong desire to succeed in future professional writing situations, but without a developed sense of what it would take to adapt to and succeed in those professional writing situations. Some informants speak of writing in ways that demonstrate a skills-based understanding of

writing, and they sometimes equate “professional” writing simply with correctness and a command of Standard Written English. A pedagogy that pushes students to develop a more complex understanding of writing and build a durable framework to draw upon in future writing contexts would be responsive to students’ desire to succeed in professional settings, but it would also challenge them to stretch their understanding of what is required to do so. To hospitably challenge students in this way is to meet them where they are when they enter the classroom, with whatever theories of writing they hold and with an eye toward prompting them to draw on the prior experiences and knowledge they bring with them. In other words, we as writing teachers recognize the FYW classroom as a temporary stop in students’ trajectory as writers, but one in which we hope to offer them something of value in the moment as well as on their path forward.

#### *Hospitality and Peer Review*

Literacy scholars Eric J. Paulson, Jonathan Alexander, and Sonya Armstrong describe peer review as “one of the most widely used” but “pedagogically vexed” pedagogical practices in first-year composition courses (304). My informants’ narratives show us that part of what makes peer review so vexing is that we in composition studies have not adequately taken into account the significance of differences in students’ interactions with one another and how those differences can make substantive engagement between readers and writers challenging. At the same time, we have not fully taken advantage of the enriching potential of these differences, their potential to result in mutual influence and learning among students who are different from one another.

So how might writing teachers take steps to make peer review more collaborative than corrective? In part, I think the answer lies in recognizing that peer review is an



activity that requires a great deal of advanced skills and that we have to devote substantial classroom time and resources to preparing students to do it well. Military student participant narratives point to a potentially positive, more overt, and necessary role for teachers in positioning students to influence one another and to recognize difference as central to their subject positions as both readers and writers. Teachers cannot prevent students from asking one another intrusive questions or dismissing one another because of differences in age or perceived lack of experience; they cannot control how students will relate to one another or if they will ultimately value one another's perspectives and experiences. Nonetheless, teachers can have quite a bit of influence on student interaction in their role as designers of classroom tasks and activities. I propose that in the role of *host*, teachers set classroom conditions that will help to foster collaboration that leads to mutual influence and learning among students.

To start, teachers can begin by prefacing peer review with a rationale for why working with other students creates possibilities for learning from each other that would not come about if students were to simply write for themselves and the teacher. For veterans and other students, making the case that peer review is preparation for future workplace collaboration may be particularly appealing, although I would not want to limit appeals for the value of peer review to its future professional benefit. Jared, a Navy and Afghanistan War veteran who found sharing a personal memory assignment with his classmates to be "therapeutic," still places peer review into a professional framework. He recalls,

At the beginning, I know there was a lot of moans and groans from the other students. They didn't really want to share. They wanted to stay in

their little bubble. But I understand the reason for it, and personally I was all for it. I mean their goal is to get you to communicate with each other.

When you get out in the workforce, you're going to have to talk to people you never talked to before and work with them.

Jared demonstrates that students are willing to entertain more than one purpose for an activity; he understands peer review as having both professional and personal benefits. And, according to his description, he was more willing to engage in peer review than his classmates, which I note simply to emphasize that the challenges that accompany peer review are not unique to veterans.

Kenneth Bruffee originally theorized peer review as an exercise in building consensus, but composition studies scholar John Trimbur offers an alternative way of thinking about collaborative learning that is built on interactions related to difference. While still affirming the “value of civility and consensus,” in his article “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning,” Trimbur argues that consensus must be defined in relationship to a “rhetoric of dissensus” (610). In other words, in Trimbur’s view, the consensus we should encourage students to seek in the classroom is not one that necessarily leads to a shared interpretation or evaluation, though at times it may. Instead, working collaboratively, students might attempt to come to consensus about why their interpretations vary. Rather than “let’s agree to disagree,” Trimbur’s definition of consensus in relationship to dissensus might be paraphrased as, “let’s agree about *why* we disagree.” He explains that the “consensus that we ask students to reach in the collaborative classroom will be based not so much on collective agreements as on collective explanations of how people differ, where their differences come from, and

whether they can live and work together with these differences” (Trimbur 610).

Trimbur’s imagining of collaborative work suggests people not necessarily working *out* their differences until they reach consensus, but working *with* their differences so that they can continue to interact and be in dialogue with one another (615).

Participants’ narratives suggest, however, that conversations that engage in a rhetoric of dissensus will not be easy ones to have. If teachers want students to recognize the qualitative benefits of exchanging writing and ideas with those who are different from themselves, then they will likely need to take an active role in raising the issue of difference as central, rather than ancillary, to the course curriculum. Such a curricular and instructional move would demand connecting the recognition of, reflection on, and response to one’s own and others’ subject positions as readers and writers to the rhetorical tasks, civic responsibilities, and personal opportunities associated with being a writer. Indeed, any classroom site or activity where differences between students are marked contains within it the potential for hostility *or* hospitality. One can see how hospitality in the writing classroom is a matter of calibration between discomfort and comfort, familiarity and difference. Without some degree of comfort and familiarity in the classroom, it is difficult for students to take the initial risks necessary for exchange and response. And yet, a degree of discomfort is often necessary to bring about experiences of change, growth, and learning.

Teachers, as hosts, can make efforts to welcome students into the classroom, but the greater goal in a shared and collaborative classroom is to help students welcome and influence one another. As a site of close interaction between students where differences are often marked, peer review provides the opportunity for students themselves to

translate hospitality from a metaphor into an actual practice of offering, reception, and exchange in the composition classroom.

### *Mentoring*

My research shows that military student participants come to college classrooms primed to focus on teachers. However, time and labor issues prevent individual teachers from mentoring very many students, even if they want to do so. Rather than leaving mentoring relationships to chance, universities who want to better serve veterans academically and socially would do well to set up formal mentoring programs that would pair interested professors and instructors with student veterans. Creating opportunities for veterans to have informal access, perhaps in groups, to professors in particular disciplines that interest them would serve the dual purpose of educating student veterans about particular majors (what they entail, careers associated with them, research taking place in those disciplines, etc.) and creating connections with professors and instructors outside of the classroom. Hart and Thompson, citing a study by the Student Veterans of America (SVA), report that 30-40% of student veterans do not complete their post-secondary programs and that 28% of first-year students at four-year institutions and 44% of first-year students at two-year colleges do not return for a second year. Formal mentoring programs could help to establish important academic and social connections for veterans, support institutions' retention and degree completion goals for their students, and provide an additional means of offering hospitality to student veterans.

## **Directions for Future Research**

The broad parameters I set for inclusion in this study—undergraduate military students who had completed their first-year writing requirement at any institution—allowed me to include a wide swath of study participants at various points in their undergraduate careers. Although twenty-four participants is not a large sample size, it is nonetheless large enough to capture a great deal of the variation in the military student population on college campuses (see Table 1 in Chapter 2). The strength of this study is that it provides insight into broad patterns of perception and expectation across the student veteran population on one college campus. My study adds to an understanding of how military students perceive the first-year writing classroom and their college experiences.

Future research about military students' experiences as college writers that is longitudinal and ethnographic in nature would complement and extend this study. Longitudinal research would provide a better understanding of the issue of transfer of writing practice and knowledge as it applies to military students' transition to college and from the FYW course to other writing courses in college and beyond. Studies of prior learning and knowledge could seek to uncover the theories of writing that military students bring to college and what elements of those theories can be attributed to military culture and practice and which elements have other origins. In addition, anecdotally, study participants who are late in their college careers tend to view their upper-level writing courses more favorably than their FYW course in terms of their learning about writing. A sub-set of this longitudinal research, then, could focus on veterans' writing in their disciplines. Ethnographic methods such as textual collection and observation paired

with interviews across a college career would yield more information about veterans' changing practices and theories of writing across their college careers.

This study draws on participants' descriptions and recollections of their peer review and classroom experiences. Building on research such as the kind Stephanie Kerschbaum has conducted (see *A New Rhetoric of Difference*), ethnographic research of peer review that specifically focuses on veterans and includes classroom observation, textual collection, and interviews would add depth and detail to our understanding of student-to-student dynamics during classroom activities intended to be collaborative. For example, we should continue to seek a better understanding of the effects of disclosure and difference among students as they read and respond to one another's writing. More broadly, study of how particular assignments position students in relationship to one another would complement research about peer review. As my research has shown, the field of writing studies would particularly benefit from theorizing how personal disclosure and difference work in relationship to assignments that are *not* personal narratives.

Finally, future composition studies research could take up hospitality as a conceptual framework and also extend the theorization of pedagogical hospitality in the teaching of writing. As one example, ethnographies that investigate teachers' and students' respective goals in relationship to one another, while contextualizing the course curriculum within a writing program and an institution, would provide a more ecological understanding of the possibilities and limitations of pedagogical hospitality. Hart and Thompson report that “[t]wo-year and online colleges and universities appear to be providing most of the first-year writing courses for veterans” (3). Therefore, studying and

theorizing what hospitable digital writing instruction might entail seems particularly important, not just for veterans, but for the field as a whole.

### **Conclusion**

I designed this research project as an exercise in listening and dialogue, and the generosity of my informants, who were willing to share their stories and perspectives with me, a stranger, made this project possible. In the spirit of hospitality, with its dictum to make space for the other, I have chosen to close this study not with my own words, but with those of a participant whose story I find hopeful as well as illustrative of many of the educational issues that veterans encounter. Nicholas is one of two participants who had recently graduated at the time of their interviews, and his narrative<sup>27</sup> traces the trajectory of one veteran's college education. Nicholas's persistence and adaptability illuminate the strengths with which so many veterans meet the educational challenges they encounter. At the time of his interview, Nicholas was a 25-year old student veteran who had served two tours in Iraq in the Marine Infantry and had just graduated with a bachelor's degree in Economics. His narrative is an example of the mobility that marks many study participants' college careers; he began his college career while still an active Marine, attended two community colleges, and finished his degree at Midwest University. Nicholas's story also shows how his relationship to fellow students changed across the years and how those changes made a difference in his classroom experiences.

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<sup>27</sup> This narrative is drawn entirely from Nicholas's study interview, although it does not include the entirety of the interview. I have attempted to preserve some of its original oral nature, as well as Nicholas's thinking process, by including incomplete sentences or stops and re-starts within a sentence; these are indicated by a single dash. I have used ellipses to indicate places where I have omitted Nicholas's words, and I have omitted my own questions. In the minimal instances I added words, it was for the purpose of added clarity and coherence; any additions of words are in brackets. I have rearranged a few paragraphs in order to group similar information together, such as when Nicholas describes his first-year writing and Humanities courses. As in other parts of this dissertation, places and names have been changed.

In this narrative, Nicholas recounts his journey from ambitious high school student, to committed Marine, to college student who doubted his academic abilities, to graduating senior who found belonging on campus. It is my hope that with the practice of pedagogical hospitality in the college composition classroom, many more veterans will feel welcome and find a sense of belonging on their campuses.

### **“I Think I Belong On Campus”: Nicholas’s Path Through College**

I’ll start with high school. I enlisted in high school, my senior year I enlisted. As a student, I was definitely more geared towards going to college than joining the military. I had my heart set on Midwest State. I was an “A” student, did the IB program.<sup>28</sup>...So I was definitely geared towards college. I was actually writing in the school newspaper. I was Editor-in-Chief...I wanted to go [to college] for journalism. I went to two journalism camps at Midwest State. And actually wanted to join the military because while I was trying to write, I was trying to make the topics more serious, without just copying and pasting CNN.com articles for the newspaper. And that was in 2004, 2005, and I think that was during one of the second big surges in Iraq, so there was a lot of stuff coming out of that theater there. And so I realized—it kind of just dawned on me—I was 18, and rather than just write about everything that was going on, I felt like I needed to actually partake. So, really almost on a whim, I think I went in on Monday to the recruiter, and Wednesday I was in the state capitol to enlist. It was just, *wham bam, one, two*. So that was kind of the evolution from student to the military. It was quick. It took one flight and a bus ride to the depot. So it was pretty quick.

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<sup>28</sup> International Baccalaureate



I can almost kind of picture the time in boot camp. It was about three and a half months long. The first month and a half I was definitely still tied toward, *Ok, when this is over, I'm going to go to college. When this is over, I'm going to go to college.* I even asked the drill instructor what were some of the college benefits. And then he responded with, "What is your job, your MOS?" and I said, "Infantry." And he said, "You're not going to college." And he said a couple other things too, but you know. And then about a month and a half [later], I think the institutionalization of boot camp really sunk into me. And I realized, *This is what I'm going to be doing for at least the next four years. I might as well absorb it, really get into the role...* I mean, not give up [on going to college], 'cause later on down the road, my last six months in, I took a few college credits while I was still in the military. But for a big chunk I just pretty much relinquished that [idea]...took that coat off.

[My deployments have] put a different perspective on things for sure. That's an understatement, really. I guess something that's such a drastic shift-, I mean, even the military is one drastic shift. From just go with the flow, no real consequences, no one on you, to being in the military and switching to overseas and seeing a different culture, things that aren't so great to see, that type of thing. So I think taking all that home now, the interaction with people that haven't had that experience-, I don't want to say it's frustrating to interact with people. Luckily, the majority of people haven't had to go do anything like that. But I think you can very quickly realize the people who take that for granted, that they don't have to do anything like that, or that it's not on their front doorstep—and the people who do. And so, that's frustrating. I miss the military, I really do. My roommate's also a veteran...we both miss it. The grass is always greener on the

other side. But now that I'm on this side again, I want to go back into the military. And I was with the reserve unit for a while to try and get a little bit of it. But even that's different. There's something about being in it every single day, just 24/7 that I definitely miss, that camaraderie, the guys... You just really don't get that anywhere else. And so my roommate and I spent four years in the military together. We did everything together, and another four of us, so a total of six guys, this core team... It's a very close, connected group. And I think that's probably why I miss the military so much is because now I don't have the daily interaction with them. Yeah, that's definitely the thing I miss the most.

...It's kind of surprising how many people join the military and don't—even if they're going to get out after four years—don't go to college... So I think [my roommate] and I were on the same page that, *When this is over, we'll go to college*. And he knew from the get-go he was four and done—so one term and done, one enlistment, done. I was still on the fence in that last six months or so. So I didn't know if I was going to [go to college]. I had kind of absorbed the military so well and liked it so much that I thought, *I could do this for another 16 years plus*. But really it came back to-, I came back and said, *You're going to do this. You did this, now you've got to stop, and you need to go do college*... I had about six months left, [and] I took two courses at a community college. It was a satellite on base. And then I also did an EMT course to try and have more of a variety in classes because I knew enough about college in that there's just Gen Ed classes you have to take. So I just wanted to take a variety and just get some of those credits out of the way. And then once I was out I looked to just try and be an EMT paramedic. Firefighter is kind of a classic—I'm not putting it down—but it's kind of the

classic route for ex-military. But I was living in San Diego. I actually didn't move home. I wanted to stay out in San Diego, so I stayed in San Diego.

I tried that and I went to community college in California...Previously, when I [talked about] that disconnect between people, well, that was the most prevalent experience I've had of that. I mean it was 18, 19-year-olds driving Mercedes, driving all these really nice cars. I pull up in just a simple car. I'm thinking, *It took me four years and two deployments to pay for this thing. And your parents hand this to you.* And so that disconnect is there. I think in their minds there's nothing else going on but themselves. And so I was trying to go to class and trying to-, they were Gen Ed classes, and so I was just trying to get through them. And it really was the surrounding student body that I almost-, I just felt like, *I've just got to go. This just doesn't feel right.* So I just dropped all the classes. And I thought, *I'm just going to go home. I don't have the military anymore. I'm just trying to live in California, and it's not really jiving with my personality. I'm not really connecting with anyone outside of my roommate.* [He] was a veteran with me, but that just really wasn't enough.

So I just took six, seven months off...And then I went to community college once I'd been home here for a good six months. I took more Gen Ed classes, and then I realized I needed to kind of focus more. I didn't really have a focus; I was taking Gen Ed classes because I had this idea that maybe I wanted to just go to culinary school. I didn't know if the four-year degree process was really for me. It was kind of daunting, 'cause it was, at one point, I mean, it was right there on my doorstep. I remember at high school they had walk on admissions at all the local schools around here, because I'm from here...And so Midwest University was like, *Come on campus. We'll look at your*

*GPA, look at your classes, and we'll say you're approved. You can come to Midwest.*

And then based on my grades and everything else I'd done, I had won a scholarship to pay for a good chunk of Midwest to begin with. But I really felt like I needed to go overseas. So I just kind of left that alone.

But anyway, so I'm back in community college, and I don't really have a university plan, a four year plan going. So it was daunting to think that I had it, and now I don't. And it was hard to pick up kind of the process of going to school, going to class, no one is telling you that don't have to go, or you [do] have to go. If you don't want to go to class, you don't have to go to class. So that was different. I took the English 101 course online, and I took a Humanities course...English course was easy because it was freshman-level, *high school* freshman-level writing. When I submitted one of the papers, they put it into their college newspaper. It was a check in the box more than it was a step forward. And we had to do discussion boards, which I think is pretty common nowadays. You don't even know what student you're talking to, but you're reading their paper. I had to read a lot of papers that were just-, I mean, they were really bad. And that's not to be arrogant, but it-, just sometimes it's just like, *This person just needs help writing*, which is fine. I mean that's where they're at, no big deal. And that's what that class was for...As far as writing goes, it didn't get me anywhere. I just had to do it.

For writing, it was actually a History of Economics course—I had to write two term papers for that. And that killed, that was horrible...My professor for History of Econ was a really good writer. So he definitely had higher standards for writing...And I spent way too much time on my last term paper to get it right. I skipped math class to make sure that this thing was right. I spent 40, 50, 60 hours on it, something ridiculous. And I

got a B on it, and that wasn't too hot because I spent a lot of time on it. But he really did take those papers apart. So that's where I really learned a lot more about writing than the English 101, which is weird, right?

But in the Humanities course, there's a lot of writing in that. It was the Humanities course I took, which actually-, it was the class that said, *You still have something in you that is academic. You don't need to go to a technical school. You're still a decent writer. You can still formulate an idea, and thoughts, and express them. You don't need to necessarily leave that behind...* We had to do a project, last project for that class, and I actually thanked most of the people in that class. It was a small class. When I was done giving my project—it was a presentation—I thanked everybody just for kind of that fact, same with the professor, in that that was the [course] that just kind of caught the gear and kept it going.

[The Humanities course] was smaller. The people in the course were older. I think there were maybe only one or two true freshmen students. There was a working dad, a working mom. There was a National Guardsman, who I think was the working mom. The professor was very-, almost a Socratic seminar. He kind of ran it like that, so it was very vocal. It was just once a week too. But everyone came together. Not everyone was on the same page by any means, but they weren't in the clouds. I guess when I'm looking back that's how I would say it. They didn't-, nobody felt entitled, like back in the community college in California. I think people have been almost gripped by reality. They're older. We've seen some stuff. It doesn't have to be the same thing I've seen—or vice versa back on them—I haven't seen what they've seen. But they've at least experienced some stuff. I mean, I was sitting in a community college in California, and

nobody had experienced anything. I was sitting in a sociology class. That's the one that tipped me, right there. That was the one that just—I had enough. And they were talking about social disparity and the disenfranchisement of this group, and this group, and this group. And I was thinking, *You don't even know any of that. You haven't experienced any of that. I'm sorry, but I'm gonna take the leap out off the ledge here and say, 'You haven't experienced that. You're just too young.'* And that just irritated and frustrated me. So the Humanities class wasn't like that. *You're the mom who had to pay for daycare for her kid, and you're still in class.* Everybody just seemed more realistic, I guess. So what they brought to the class I could relate to... They were there for a reason. I think for everybody it was a check in the box, but it was a big check in the box, because half of us were trying to get on with a new life or new career.

So I was up at Central Valley Community College (CVCC), and I was just like, “I need to figure something out. I need to get into university... I need to put more pressure, I guess, on my studies than just taking these English 101 courses or whatnot at CVCC. So I did. The next semester I started here, and I just tried to pick up the pace really. I took three courses each summer term. And then switched my majors up a little bit. I went from English to Civil Engineering to Community Planning to Economics. And I didn't waste too much time. I never actually took any of the courses for any of those degrees. I was still doing Gen Eds, but I had to declare something... I was learning about each program. As I learned about it, and I thought, *Oh, that's great*, I just switched it. And then I kept learning about more, and I'd switch to the next one. I'd switch. So I really was like a pinball machine or something. I was just kind of funneling down to where I am now. That's really kind of how I got to where I am now, how I kind of picked my

degree...I think the reason I went to Civil Engineering at first is I thought they had a larger role in planning communities or developing communities. But then I realized I was just trying to figure out the tensile strength of concrete...So then I saw Community Planning, and the title alone says they're planning communities. Well, I started taking a few classes, and it was more zoning. And I already knew how to read maps from the military. It was more just how to zone and that kind of thing...I didn't have enough G.I. Bill for it. So I thought, *What do I have enough for, and what is close to this?* Well I already finished an Economics minor just by sleight of hand. And I liked all the courses, and I did well in them. And I realized that I could finish the undergrad in plenty of time and have leftover G.I. Bill if I just did that. So that's what I did. So I talked to a couple professors to get a feel for Economics, and it just seemed to fit. I'm going to the Masters program here at Midwest for Applied Economics.

[Nonetheless], I doubted [my academic side was still there]. I still doubt it now. I mean, not as much now because things are kind of going a little better than they were. But for most of [my undergraduate years], I doubted it. Last fall, I doubted it for sure. I was taking 19 credits, trying to get ahead again. And I quit work so I could focus on school—19 credits. I had 21—I dropped one class. It was too much...As I was saying before, most of the guys I served with, they aren't in college. Again, they are just kind of piecemealing their lives together. They're not blowing through school or jumping through the hoops and things of the university with their benefits. They're just finding the job that pays more than the last one. I mean, they're doing well. They're doing better than I am right now. But I still can see that I'll be able to jump ahead here soon. But seeing to the left and the right of you, you're like, *Oh, your buddies are doing*

*really well for themselves, and they're not going to school.* And so I just-, it's always a constant doubt. *What are you doing here?* kind of thing.

I took Communications 101 my last semester [of college]. It was a 101 class that fell through the cracks, and I didn't catch it. [In Communications 101] when we had to say our birthdates-, I'm not old by any means, but they're younger than my little brother. And there's a lot of time between [those ages] for things to go on—a lot of different experiences or whatnot. There's a gap I think, definitely. So anyway, surrounded by young—basically high schoolers—when I ended and when I started. When I started [college in California], it was like, *Sorry guys, didn't mean to be here. I can't stand your attitude about things.* This and that. I just kind of let them-, I mean it sounds weird to say that someone who just-, a veteran would let younger people just kind of crowd him out. That's probably what happened, for better or worse.

Now when I'm in the 101 class at Midwest finishing up, it was more, *Ok, guys, we're in this together. We don't really see eye to eye right now, but I'm definitely not letting you crowd me out.* I was definitely more vocal in the course—kind of took on maybe a little bit of a leadership role in keeping the class going. And there were a couple times I remember-, it was a [teaching assistant]. I think the TA was younger than I was—and that's even weird when your teacher is younger than you. And if she'd kind of lose control of the class or they would kind of miss the point of what she's trying to say, I would ask a question that more or less kind of put everything back on track. And it wasn't-, I'm not trying to take too much credit—it was just a couple times. I wouldn't have done that in California by any means. I mean, I dropped the course. I just wouldn't



say anything. I would just sit there and watch the clock, hope that class is done soon. That was it.

I don't think there's a barrier to school anymore as far as my ability to take a course and get something out of it and do at least decently well. I think I belong on campus. I belong on any campus I guess. I'm not trying to battle the surrounding student body. And I think that may be because I don't need to be a part of it, and that sounds bad. But what I'm trying to say? I don't know how exactly to say this without sounding really bad. I'm trying to-, I'm here for myself. I'm here to-, I have a goal in mind now...I mean, I'm on campus, and I'm not really worried about the peripheral kind of attitudes of people around me...I have a very clear goal in mind this time. So every class I take from now on is definitely a clear path towards something, whether it be my masters or doctorate...I feel like I belong on campus because I know what I'm doing. I know why I'm on campus. Versus I'm on campus, I'm looking around. When I started, I'm thinking, *What do I do? Should I even be here? I don't know what I'm doing. Why am I here? I don't know what I'm doing.* But now it's, yeah, I could walk onto a new campus and all those other logistical getting used to the campus kind of things will be there. But the fact that I know *why* I'm there is definitely I think the big take away.

APPENDIX A  
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Military Students & College Writing

Principal Investigator: Joanna Lin Want, Doctoral Candidate, University of Michigan

You are invited to participate in a research study about student veterans and college writing courses. If you agree to be a part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in up to two 60-minute audio-recorded interviews about your experiences as a military student and writer. You will also be asked to share and discuss some of your writing with the principal investigator.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to answer any of the interview questions or choose not to continue with any of the interviews for any reason. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the study.

Research participants will receive \$50 compensation for each interview. The possible benefits of participating in this study include the opportunity to reflect on your experiences as a military student and to contribute to research on writing instruction.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Michigan Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board and approved for data collection by the Midwest University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board.

The results of this study, which may include excerpts of your interviews and writing, will be submitted for the principal investigator's dissertation at the University of Michigan and may be presented at a conference or published in the future, but no information that would identify you will be included.

If you have questions about this research study, you may contact Joanna Lin Want at [jwant@umich.edu](mailto:jwant@umich.edu) and xxx-xxx-xxxx.

*I agree to participate in this study.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Guiding Questions for First Interview

1. I'm wondering if we could start by talking a little bit about your experiences before you enrolled at MU. Would you tell me about what motivated you to enlist in the military?
2. What was your job like in the military?
3. How have the places you've served affected your life?
4. What has it been like for you to be a veteran?
5. Would you walk me through the journey that brought you to being a student at Midwest University today?
6. How would you describe your relationships with other veterans at this school?
7. What has it been like for you to go to school here?
8. What were your hopes when you started college? What were your apprehensions?
9. How would you describe yourself as a student (both before you came to school here and at present)?
10. What was your experience of taking your first-year writing class(es) at X college like?
11. What kinds of writing did you do in your first-year writing class? What did you write about?
12. What kind of feedback did you receive from your instructor and other students?
13. What kinds of things did you read for the course?
14. How would you describe your relationship with your instructor?
15. How would you describe your relationship with other students in your class?
16. What affects your decision about whether or not to identify as a veteran in the classroom?
17. How would you describe yourself as a writer?
18. What other kinds of writing do you do? In what other courses have you had to do significant writing?
19. What kind of teaching methods work best for you? What kind of classroom atmosphere do you prefer?
20. Is there anything that you think is unique to the college experience of military students?
21. Is there anything else you would like to talk about today?
22. Are there questions you'd like to ask me?
23. Would you tell me a little bit about why you were interested in participating in this study?

APPENDIX C  
CALL FOR PARTICIPATION

**Study Title: Military Students & College Writing**

**Are you a veteran or active military student who has completed MU's first-year writing requirement?**

- If so, I need your help! I invite you to participate in a research study about military students' academic experiences in their college writing course. Whether or not you consider yourself a "good writer," I am interested in talking to you!

**What's in it for me?**

- **You will receive \$50 in compensation for each of the first and second interviews (total \$100 if you participate in both interviews).** Other benefits include the opportunity to reflect upon your experiences as a military student and to influence research that could contribute to improved writing instruction.

**What is the purpose of this study?**

- The purpose of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of military students' academic experiences in college writing classrooms and to use this understanding to develop college writing instruction.

**Who is eligible to participate?**

- *Undergraduate students who have served in any branch of the military (veterans) or who are currently serving in the military (for example, National Guard or Reserves) AND have completed the first-year writing requirement (ENGLISH 101 or equivalent) at MU or another institution are eligible to participate. Members of ROTC are not eligible to participate.*
- Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. Your identity will remain anonymous throughout the study.

**What will participation in this study involve, and how much time will it take?**

- **First Interview:** This interview will last about 60 minutes. We will have a conversation about your experience of being a military student and taking a college writing course. This interview is intended as a dialogue; you may choose to answer some questions and not others.
- **Second interview:** This interview will last about 60 minutes and will focus more specifically on you as a writer. I will ask you to share one or more texts with me ahead of time. During the interview we will discuss these texts, your writing process, and your experiences as a writer.

**Who is conducting this research?**

- My name is Joanna Want. I am a writing teacher and a doctoral candidate in the Joint Program for English & Education at the University of Michigan.

**What should I do if I am interested in participating?**

- **Please e-mail me, Joanna Want, at [jwant@umich.edu](mailto:jwant@umich.edu), or call/text me at xxx-xxx-xxxx. I would be happy to answer your questions by phone or e-mail.**
- This study has been approved for data collection at MU by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB).

APPENDIX D  
LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Participant (Pseudonym)	Length of First Interview	Length of Second Interview
Aaron	1:17	
Adam	1:19	1:12
Adrienne	1:00	
Alex	:59	1:12
Ben	1:05	
Bryan	1:09	
Davin	1:05	
Evan	1:04	
Gabe	1:10	
Jillian	1:06	
Ian	:55	
Jackson	:55	
Jacob	:58	1:06
Jared	:59	
Jason	1:11	
Laura	:57	
Madelyn	1:01	
Matthew	:50	1:00
Micah	1:05	
Nicholas	:58	
Sam	:54	1:03
Sean	1:21	
Terrence	:50	1:11
Travis	:47	

APPENDIX E  
FINAL CODEBOOK & CODE COUNTS

First-Year Writing (173)

FYW Writing Assignments (67)

Writing about Military Experience (16)

Upper-Level/Other Writing Courses (37)

Academic Identity (212)

Sources of Academic Confidence, Doubt, and Stress (51)

Writerly Self-Efficacy (29)

Academic Identity in HS (22)

Reasons for College Enrollment (14)

School as a “job” (12)

Professional Identity (103)

Military Job (68)

Professional Aspirations (33)

Non-military Work Experience (12)

Veteran/Military Identity (159)

Reasons for Military Enlistment (32)

Interactions with Peers in Writing Classrooms (89)

Concrete Descriptions of Interactions with Peers (49)

Qualitative Descriptions of Interactions with Peers (25)

Interactions with Teachers in Writing Classrooms (73)

Concrete Descriptions of Interactions with Writing Teachers (35)

Qualitative Descriptions of Interactions with Writing Teachers (30)

Peer Review (39)

Economics and Education (48)

G.I. Bill (21)

Reasons for Study Participation (19)

APPENDIX F  
SAMPLE TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

Excerpt of Interview with Aaron

Interviewer: So I was wondering if we could start maybe by-, if you could just sort of walk me through the journey that led you to being a student here at Midwest now.

Respondent: Okay. I always did well in high school, but I didn't really care. And it came to the point where I needed to make a decision as to what I was going to do after high school. College really scared me. So I joined the Army. I joined in my junior year of high school. I graduated high school. Two days later after my graduation I went to basic training. I enlisted as a combat medic. I went to Airborne school, Ranger school. And then I was assigned to an infantry unit in Italy. I lived in Italy. I deployed. I got injured during my deployment. And subsequently I was medically retired.

So I moved home. I have the G.I. bill. I figured I get paid to go to school. I'll try. Worst case scenario is I try and I fail. And at that point I at least know I tried.

And I did well in my first semester. Did a little bit better on second semester. I did really well in my last semester. And so I just kind of kept with it. And then I've been pushing myself a little bit ever since.

Interviewer: Great. So what was it that scared you about college back when you were 17?

Respondent: I didn't know what I wanted to do. I knew it wasn't going to be-, I knew it was going to be more of myself. And I didn't have the discipline or motivation to go at it. I hardly had the discipline to do it when I had someone standing over me telling me, "You need to do this." And I just-, it's such a wide range of subjects, and just the fear of the unknown.

And it's really kind of ironic, but to me going to war was a lot better choice. There was structure, whereas here, you know, the students can not come to class if they don't want. It was, going into the Army, I'm told what I'm going to do for every second of my life, down to what I'm going to eat that day.

So I think that's mainly what it was. I was scared of failing. I'm scared of coming here and failing.



Interviewer: So what was it like that first semester for you when you actually were starting college?

Respondent: English is my worst subject. By far it's the one subject I don't enjoy. I don't really understand it.

And so I started in the summer, second summer semester of 2012. And I took an art class and I took English 101. Because I figured, like I said, I can try, and if I fail, I fail. And so I figured I'd at least try the thing that I'm scared of the most, because that way if I fail it, like I said, I know that I did it then. And I had Dr. Harris, and he worked with me a lot. I spent a lot of time in his office hours. And we went over a lot of different things.

I mean it turned out I did well. But I was scared. I think the only difference between me then and me at 17 was simply the fact that the military taught me it's okay to be scared of things, but you need to at least try them. If there's an issue, take it on head on. It's the only way you get it solved. It's better to know that there's an issue and that I can't do something than to sit there and go, 'I don't know if I can do it.'

Interviewer: That's a great philosophy. So what did taking writing 'head on' look like for you?

Respondent: Lots of really, really late nights. I haven't spent or taken—this is my fourth semester here counting summer semester—and I haven't spent an all night doing an assignment since.

But that first class, that first writing, we wrote four essays and that was it. Granted, it was in the summer and so it was kind of compact, but I don't think there was a single one I didn't stay up until two a.m. working on several times. It wasn't like it was the night before. It was I would start writing and I wouldn't like it, so I'd delete it. I did fairly well on all of them except for one in particular. I don't remember what the topic was. But I just remember I got a failing grade on it.

And I was fortunate enough that in Dr. Harris's class you could for your final you could go and rewrite one of your papers for a better grade. And so that's what I did. And I got-, and I went and got feedback from him. He had a mandatory-, you had to meet with him at least once to talk about one of your papers. So I actually chose that one because I did poorly on it.

And he sat down and he-, you could tell he got frustrated with me. Because I remember it was something about *Goldilocks and the Three*

*Bears*. I was using it as an analogy. And he wanted me to spell out the entire story and not assume that everybody knows what the story is.

And I sat there and he's like, "Well what is the story?" "I'm like, well, it's..." He's like, "Okay, but *what* is it?" He wanted me to really spell it out I guess preschool style: "This is the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. This is what happened." It took us a good hour to get to that point where I comprehended what he wanted.

And then, like I said, I spent the next several nights rewriting papers. I'm fortunate that we have Word now, so it tells me if I misspell something or when I have horrible, horrible grammar or when I put commas or when I have seven sentences that should only be one sentence. But I mean, it's challenging.

Interviewer: So you had that conference with him. What was your relationship like with him throughout the semester?

Respondent: It was fairly good. I like to think with all of the professors I have a pretty good relationship. All the military, they've also taught you not to be afraid, to make yourself known, to let people know you, to get to know other people. That's how you learn. That's how you benefit is by forming partnerships with other people.

Who else is a better person to form a partnership with than the professor? Yes, you can find the smart kid in class, but he's the smart kid in class. He's not the professor.

So I mean we have a fairly good relationship. I feel that-, I mean of course he respected all the students fairly well, more than some profs do. But I feel that being a non-traditional student some professors don't give me the respect I feel like—I don't *deserve*—but as an older student, I'm not 18, 19 coming in. And I'm not here to party or have fun. I'm not going to blow off your class. I kind of want that respect back.

And there was never a question of that with him. So I mean I felt like we had a fairly good and open relationship. I could tell him, "You know, hey, you know, I had a problem with this." And he'd be more than willing to go, "Okay, well we don't have time to do it now. Stay after and we'll talk about it. And I can work you through **it**."

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