

Doe, Sue, and Lisa Langstraat, eds. *Generation Vet: Composition, Student Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University*. Logan, UT: Utah State Press, 2014. 242 pages. \$24 eBook/ \$29.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0 87421-941-8. Print.

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Generation Vet: Composition, Student Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University is the first scholarly monograph to articulate best practices for teaching writing to student veterans who have enrolled in colleges and universities since the post-9/11 GI Bill went into effect in 2009. Before the publication of *Generation Vet* on Veterans' Day 2014, composition scholars writing about student veterans shared their work in themed issues of journals, conference presentations and workshops, theses and dissertations. Previous scholarship is widely dispersed in a variety of formats, but may provide helpful additional resources for readers who wish to learn more.¹

The editors and contributors of *Generation Vet* step into the gap between growing numbers of students and absence of professional development to argue that "Composition studies can offer great insights into the pedagogical, rhetorical, and programmatic implications of working with student veterans" (3). The book includes twelve chapters and an introduction that contextualizes veterans' issues. In the introduction, the editors review composition's relationship with veterans from previous wars, historicize the GI Bills,² present statistical data about the demographics of veterans and about student veterans' academic preparation,³ and raise awareness about ethics, finances and teaching in the military/civilian gap.

The book is divided into three sections. Part one, "Beyond the Military-Civilian Divide: Understanding Veterans," considers the classroom as a contact zone where competing values and practices meet and make meaning. Part two, "Veterans and Public Audiences," discusses factors outside of classrooms that influence

how and why veterans compose. Part three, “Veteran-Friendly Composition Practices,” explores programmatic and pedagogical strategies for teaching writing to veterans. The strength of the collection is its development of several themes across chapters: correcting stereotypes and stigmas about veterans, exploring implications for practice by understanding military experiences, and establishing places for teamwork and collaboration in curricular and extracurricular writing contexts.

The contributors’ methods, terminology, and theoretical backgrounds vary widely, but many employ and return to key concepts and informing themes, creating a cohesive collection that provides background, resources, and recommendations for best practices to writing teachers. None of the contributors suggests to readers that the problems resulting from the rise in student veterans’ pursuit of higher education have uncomplicated solutions, but many are optimistic about the future.

Correcting Stereotypes and Stigmas

The title of the book itself, *Generation Vet*, invites readers to negotiate contradictory perceptions of veterans. *Time* magazine dubbed veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan the next “greatest generation” in a 2011 cover story that favorably highlighted veterans’ entrepreneurship and altruism. A competing portrait of veterans was presented in *Generation Kill*, Evan Wright’s memoir about the 2003 invasion of Iraq that became a popular HBO miniseries in 2008. This text showed Marines as aggressive and destructive. Neither the historical trope nor the killer trope fully captures the experience of student veterans, but keeping both images in mind and negotiating the heroic and monstrous prepares readers to recognize ambiguities and pay attention to context.

Since only one-half of one percent of the US population is serving in the military and seven percent are veterans, the military-civilian divide is worthy of attention when discussing stereotypes, which often arise from media portrayals of veterans. Langstraat and Doe proffer hope that writing classes can offer a space to investigate the ideological differences that inform these

tropes, representations and portrayals, offering both opportunity and challenge. The chapters in *Generation Vet* present helpful resources to capitalize on opportunities and ameliorate challenges.

In their chapter, “I Have To Speak Out’: Writing with Veterans in a Community Writing Group,” Eileen Schell and Ivy Kleinbart name the dichotomy in terms mixing the sacred and secular—Savior and Rambo. As they argue, externally imposed narrative tropes are incomplete, which is another reason for veterans to author their own stories and address public audiences with their experiences of war. Tara Wood, in “Signature Wounds: Marking and Medicalizing Post-9/11 Veterans,” reviews an argument that claims veterans are rhetorically constructed as Homeric heroes or ticking time bombs, archetypes Wood relates to “supercrip” and “invalid” narratives in disability studies, both of which limit ability to speak and be heard. Wood questions whether those “marked” by mental illness (for example, the signature wounds Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder/PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury/TBI) are recognized as fully human beings capable of rhetorical agency.

Wood’s essay challenged me to consider how a revised understanding of PTSD and TBI could have benefited CJ, a student of Lynda De La Ysla’s who was suspended until he could provide documentation attesting to his mental health and about whom she writes in “Faculty as First Responders: Willing but Unprepared.” The administrators who suspended CJ were working from a medicalized understanding of PTSD, placing the burden of “overcoming” the disability on the student. Consistent with TBI symptoms listed by Wood, De La Ysla reports that CJ needed face-to-face clarification on most assignments. He did not return to her college. In response, De La Ysla worked with her campus and community to develop and publicize resources for student veterans. I anticipate that Wood’s critique of existing models of PTSD/TBI will positively influence WPAs and teachers who interact with students who are learning and experiencing signature wounds.

Bonnie Selting also observes problematic stereotypes that limit peers' abilities to listen to veterans in "The Value of Service Learning for Student-Veterans: Transitioning to Academic Cultures through Writing and Experiential Learning." Although the Vietnam War ended in 1975, years before any of Selting's traditionally-aged students were born, they associated the term "veteran" with Vietnam era images when many middle and upper class individuals avoided the draft and many who served belonged to minorities or groups with less cultural capital. At least one student reported feeling "removed" from veterans, pitying them, and finding them frightening.

Other stereotypes that contributors challenge include conservative veterans leery of liberal professors (Langstrat and Doe; Hart and Morrow), learning things "barney style" or dumbed down to the lowest common denominator (Hinton), and lack of agency (Hadlock and Doe). These authors reveal the limits of deficit-laden stereotypes through narrative, qualitative, and quantitative data. The multivocal and diverse arguments and perspectives in *Generation Vet* challenge readers to negotiate contradictory perceptions of veterans and make meaning from the incongruities.

Implications for Practice—Using Military Service for Academic Success

In the opening chapter of *Generation Vet*, Hart and Morrow offer guidelines for practice repeated and inflected throughout the book. They advise compositionists to cultivate trust, provide feedback, provide clear rationales, encourage critical consciousness, use repetition and imitation, get expert help when necessary, and capitalize on teamwork and leadership (43-47). Cultivating trust is key to the extracurricular writing groups facilitated by Schell and Klenbart and Karen Springsteen ("Closer to Home: Veterans' Workshops and the Materiality of Writing"), that bridge civilian and military gaps. Thompson's contribution on respecting silence as a response to war, "Recognizing Silence:

Composition, Writing, and the Ethical Space for War,” also reminds us of the importance of respecting student boundaries.

Early in the collection, Erin Hadlock and Sue Doe (“Not Just ‘Yes Sir, No Sir’: How Genre and Agency Interact in Student-Veteran Writing”) explain that many of the student veterans they interviewed felt that the writing they did in the military was meaningful and urgent; in contrast, academic writing sometimes felt empty. Corinne Hinton (“‘Front and Center’: Marine Student-Veterans, Collaboration, and the Writing Center”) observed the same problem but hypothesized that veterans’ comfort and familiarity with military discourse interfered with understanding the purpose of academic discourse.

Contributors discuss many ways to provide exigency and purpose for academic writing. In “A New Mission: Veteran-Led Learning Communities in the Basic Writing Classroom,” Ann Shivers-McNair recounts a time when a student in a veterans’ basic writing cohort infused his writing with meaning by composing a proposal for college administrators, an audience outside of class with power to improve student veterans’ situation on campus. Likewise, Bonnie Selting advocates for service learning because it provides opportunities for veterans to use military experiences and dispositions to serve the community and apply their writing skills in practical ways. Ashly Bender also positions audience as essential to creating meaning for composers in “Exploring Student-Veteran Expectations about Composing: Motivations, Purposes, and the Influence of Trauma on Composing Practices.”

Provide Feedback

The authors of all twelve chapters emphasize praise and ongoing feedback loops. For example, Hart and Morrow indicate that frequent feedback and sincerity tell a veteran that praise has been earned. Hinton reviews veterans’ desire for directness and clarity from professors, a call echoed throughout the book. De La Ysla speaks about the importance of face-to-face communication with a student coping with TBI, which is consistent with Wood’s

discussion. Hart and Morrow ask us to be aware of the power of comments. Schell and Kleinbart, Springsteen, and Thompson talk about the importance of listening and witnessing texts in extracurricular contexts.

Encourage Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness partially means interrogating power structures, which applies to discourse norms as well as institutions. As Schell and Kleinbart and Springsteen relate, many of the participating veteran writers use the opportunity to investigate power and agency. Hart and Morrow, Mallory and Downs, and Hadlock and Doe use different data sets to argue that direct instruction on academic discourse, its purposes, and its differences from military discourse may ameliorate perceived conflicts and enhance student transition.

Repetition and Imitation

Further, many contributors argue for the benefits of model or example texts and templates. Hart and Morrow discuss the value of repetition and imitation for military learners. Hinton explains processes of teaching and learning in the Marine Corps, which reinforces the idea that student veterans value model texts. For those instructors who are concerned that models will be copied too closely and limit students' development of independent thought, Bender's suggestion to use templates and remixes seems like a promising direction, offering structure for spontaneity.

Other authors discuss how the military influences classroom attitudes and preparations and explain military customs that influence personal conduct and dispositions, from punctuality to perseverance. Qualities and skills that on the surface seem unrelated to writing, like observation (Carroll qtd in Schell and Kleinbart 137), mission orientation (Mallory and Downs), exerting agency in writing (Hadlock and Doe) and respect for leadership (Hart and Morrow) can help prepare veteran writers to report accurately, seek and incorporate feedback and persevere—skills we cultivate as writers and celebrate in our students.

Leadership, Teamwork, and Collaboration

A dominant theme in this collection is the value of collaborative learning and teamwork for student veterans. Hart and Morrow connect this to veterans' work in collective units, which downplay individual accomplishments and emphasize collective success. The emphasis on leadership and responsibility is also vital to Shivers-McNair's program and Selting's proposal of a model of service learning.

Bender suggests mechanisms to transfer online self-sponsored collaborative composing into school-sponsored college composing. Shivers-McNair profiles a program that succeeds because veterans work with other veterans on writing that connects to lived experiences. Selting's proposal to engage veterans in service learning emphasizes the value of collaborative learning for student veterans. Hinton's emphasis on help-seeking behaviors through peers and the writing center repurposes one way of learning to write (mentoring from more experienced Marines) within a college appropriate context.

De La Ysla's account of reaching out to the community, Thompson's suggestions to look for partnerships and resources, Hart and Morrow's call to bring in experts, and Shivers-McNair's discussions with faculty and administrators all illustrate that community and collaboration are valuable not only for students but also for the composition professionals who serve and guide them.

I would also argue that this book itself exemplifies collaboration with experts. Of the seventeen authors, four are veterans or serving on active duty, three are military spouses, two are adult children of veterans, and all have worked with student veterans as composition professionals. Their synthesis of research, theory, and practice allows them to offer expertise that readers can use to guide their teaching of writing to veterans.

Conclusion

Generation Vet offers writing teachers opportunities to consider how to design learning contexts for student veterans. Both the strengths and limitations of *Generation Vet* are in its scope and multivocality. Contributors conducted research in many geographic regions in the United States, employing diverse methodologies and foraging from different scholarly disciplines for theory to illuminate challenges and opportunities.

Both two-year and four-year institutions are represented, but all schools discussed are “brick and mortar,” so treatment of online learning is underdeveloped. Bender’s study of self-sponsored online composing is valuable but does not look at academic writing instruction in online contexts. De La Ysla is the only representative of a two-year college, yet as we know from the 2009 *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* special issue (36.4), community colleges served significant numbers of veterans in higher education even before the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

There is also space for more research on veterans in basic composition courses, as Shivers-McNair and De La Ysla are the only contributors who address that context directly. The omission of student veterans in Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines programs and business/technical writing presents another opportunity for further research, as all of these subjects allow for greater probing of the role of prior knowledge and military rhetorical knowledge in completing college composing tasks, broadly defined.

The chapters of *Generation Vet* effectively develop as a cohesive collection by amplifying themes and suggestions for practice. I predict that the book will remain relevant for years, yet it should be considered an invitation to further research, not a final word on student veterans and teaching writing.

Notes

¹ D. Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson won a two-year grant from the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 2011. In 2013 they published a white

paper titled "Ethical Obligation: Promising Practices for Student Veterans in College Writing Classrooms." For resources in addition to *Generation Vet*, readers may also wish to consult *Teaching Writing in the Two-Year College* 36.4 (2009), a themed issue on veterans and teaching writing. Because this was published before the post-9/11 GI Bill, some contexts have changed significantly. Hart and Edwards edited issue 14.3 (2010) of *Kairos* on military literacy practices. *Composition Forum* launched a special issue on veterans in 2013, guest edited by Hart and Thompson. CCCC and WPA have offered workshops, panels, posters, and SIGs about writing with current, former, and future members of the military. Marilyn Valentino brought the issue to the forefront in her CCCC chair's address in 2010 and again as a featured speaker at WPA in 2012.

² Lisa Lebduska has published two articles delving into the effects of the 1944 and post-9/11 GI Bills, if readers are seeking more detailed information.

³ The American Council on Higher Education (ACE) has published several reports that provide more statistical data. *From Soldier to Student* (2009) and *From Soldier to Student II* (2012) are good starting points. The Department of Veterans' Affairs collects copious data, but those can be difficult to locate and process.

⁴ The military-civilian gap is covered in a 2011 report by the Pew Research Center. Langstraat and Doe's interpretation and application of this divide to the academic context of teaching writing is very helpful.

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