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Voicing the Veteran Experience: Oral History, Digital Storytelling, & Project-Based Pedagogy

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Storytelling has long been recognized as a powerful force in veteran communities, whether as a therapeutic “pathway to healing” for returning combat veterans¹ or as a tool for fostering public understanding and empathy across the military/civilian divide. Within this context, veterans have been a community of particular interest in the field of oral history, with veteran-focused initiatives ranging from the sweeping Veterans History Project through the U.S. Library of Congress to a proliferation of local efforts driven by schools and community groups in cities across the country.² Speaking to this potential, in this pedagogical essay, I will discuss my experience designing and teaching a special story-driven course called “Oral History and the Veteran Experience” with a group of student veterans at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Located at the point of intersection between the digital and public humanities, this course sought to engage student veterans in documenting and disseminating their own stories and the stories of celebrated local veterans through oral history interviews, documentary storytelling, and mobile and place-based media.

I designed this course around a series of three carefully scaffolded projects, in which students learned the fundamentals of oral history methodology and audio production through a hands-on, project-based approach: (1) a peer interview project, in which students planned and conducted an oral history interview with another student veteran in the class and then produced a short audio story using that interview as their material; (2) a group interview project with a Medal of Honor recipient from the New England region, culminating in an audio story on that veteran’s experience; and (3) a class-wide collaboration working to create a mobile audio storytelling walk of South Boston war memorials that incorporated the Medal of Honor stories into a tour of the urban landscape.³ In what follows, I will offer a detailed discussion of this course structure and design; I will share some examples of student work from the course and discuss some of the challenges and outcomes of the process; and I will offer reflections that gesture toward a few preliminary insights based on my experience, considering the broader potential of collaborative oral history and digital storytelling with student veterans and their communities. Ultimately, I hope my experience with this course might serve as a catalyst for others interested in exploring new approaches to public and participatory storytelling, both within the field of Veterans Studies and beyond.

Openings

As an urban public university with over 600 student veterans in its student body, UMass Boston is uniquely invested in creating opportunities to engage student veterans in conversations and activities around veterans’ issues. When university leaders learned that the Medal of Honor Society would be hosting its annual convention in Boston in 2015, they were eager to sign on as a local partner. My course was one of several initiatives to emerge out of a university-wide partnership with the Medal of Honor Society, seeking to raise public awareness around the organization’s convention and around the Medal of Honor more broadly. The course was unique in that it brought together a diverse group of undergraduates from across majors and programs—and from across all five branches of the U.S. military—

into a single veterans-only class. I worked closely with the UMass Boston Office of Veterans' Affairs to recruit students who might be interested in taking the course. I also enlisted my colleagues in helping me to identify and connect with student veterans in the English major.⁴ As a Special Topics offering, the course served as an elective credit, drawing a self-selecting group of students motivated by the opportunity to participate in the Medal of Honor convention, to contribute to a public project in support of veterans' issues, or to simply come together with other student veterans in a shared classroom-based experience.

Beyond the institutional impetus for its development, the course might be seen as a response to a broader call for writing teachers to attend to the distinctive needs and contributions of the new generation of military veterans who have flocked to college classrooms over the past decade. Addressing this phenomenon, Sue Doe and Lisa Langstraat's collection, *Generation Vet: Composition, Student Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University*, offers a thoughtful and wide-reaching discussion of "the implications of working with and learning from" this unique student population across a range of writing contexts.⁵ Many contributors to this volume consider the potential of veterans' writing to serve as a mode of action, both acting on the veteran writer and providing a critical route to agency and self-articulation. Notably, early conversations around the distinct potential of multimodal composition have also begun to surface at the margins of this scholarship—for example, Ashley Bender's work on the potential of YouTube to serve as a forum for veterans to "[develop] language and narrative space for [their] experience,"⁶ while connecting with complex publics comprised of both military servicepersons and civilian audiences.⁷ While most of the essays in this volume address the highly particular context of the first-year composition classroom, the conversation also stretches beyond the walls of the university to community-based writing settings, reflecting a broader interest in what Anne Ruggles Gere might call "composition's extracurriculum."⁸ As a university-based, credit-bearing course engaging a marginalized student community in public-facing, multimodal writing, my course sits somewhere at the intersection of these conversations. Building on the momentum they have generated, it offers an opening to further consider the potential of multimodal writing—and collaborative digital storytelling, in particular—to contribute additional avenues for complex action and narrative place-making among student veterans.

With its grounding in the practice of in-depth oral interviewing, the course also responds to trends in the interdisciplinary field of oral history: First, an interest in participatory approaches to what Michael Frisch has called "sharing authority"⁹ in community oral history and, concurrently, mounting excitement around the technological promise of digital formats and platforms. Since the turn of the millennium, public historians like Daniel Kerr¹⁰ and Alicia Rouverol¹¹ have laid the groundwork for "collaborative" approaches to oral history research, using community radio and live theater as forums to involve marginalized communities in the interpretation and presentation of their own stories. Meanwhile, figures like Frisch and others have begun to laud the so-called "digital revolution" in the field, for its potential to open up "whole new modes of publication and public access" to the voices and sources at the heart of oral history practice.¹² On the surface, these trends might seem to arise from radically different intellectual and political traditions, but, in fact, they share a common investment in the ethic of sharing itself—the desire to make the work of oral history, from collection to curation to dissemination, into an inclusive and "democratically sharable process."¹³ In designing this course, I imagined it as an opportunity to bring together these two separate but co-occurring conversations and to begin to imagine the possibilities for collaborative oral history and digital storytelling with veteran communities.

Foundations

In the early weeks of the course, I introduced students to oral history methods through readings, discussions, and hands-on activities around interview preparation and techniques. In addition to formal training using readings from Valerie Yow's guide, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, I invited the class to listen to a collection of oral history interviews with Vietnam veterans, which had been recorded by students like themselves over 40 years ago and which were held in our university library's archives¹⁴—the very archives where their own interviews would be stored and preserved at the end of the course. In our open-ended discussion of the Vietnam interviews, students noted both practical and emotional impressions, considering the methods of the student interviewers alongside of the stories and memories of the veteran narrators.¹⁵ In this sense, the experience offered concrete examples of what to do—and, at some points, what *not* to do—to engage a narrator in substantive storytelling and reflection. But more importantly, it helped to cultivate a sense of shared identity and purpose, connecting the students' own experiences as veterans to the experiences of those who came before them, while also situating their role as student interviewers in the context of a larger public history tradition.

Unit One: Peer Interview Project

This dual identification—as veteran-narrator and student-interviewer—was productive in building a foundation for the first major component of the course: the peer interview project. This project was designed with several goals in mind: to give students hands-on experience planning and conducting interviews in a relatively low-stakes environment; to build trust and understanding among the students in the course as a foundation for further collaborative work; and to validate the student veterans' own stories as worthy of being heard and preserved. Working in pairs, students were invited to plan and conduct oral history interviews with one another—interviews that would be preserved in the university archives (at the discretion of each student-narrator)¹⁶ and used as material for the creation of a short audio story later in the course. After discussing issues of power dynamics in the interviewer-narrator relationship,¹⁷ partners were assigned based on shared identifications around gender, race, and, in some cases, military branch—after attending to practical scheduling concerns around students' work and family commitments.

Students began the interview planning process by writing letters to their interview partners describing their feelings leading up to the interview and then laying out the topics they were and were not comfortable addressing in their interview. Student interviewers used these letters, alongside of general biographical questionnaires, in order to build personalized interview guides to structure their conversations. Because the peer interview was a required component of the course (we discussed this on the first day of class), it was important to me that students felt a sense of agency within the boundaries of the project and an ability to approach their interview in a way they felt comfortable with. During this stage of the process, I made sure that students understood that they were free to limit the focus of their interview to any aspect of their memory or experience, whether or not they wanted to explicitly discuss their time in the military, and I encouraged students who were nervous about telling their stories to talk with me about their concerns.¹⁸ Still, the pre-interview letter was an important part of the process, serving as a kind of contract or mutual understanding between the student interview partners.

The interviews ran, on average, between one and two hours in length and were recorded on digital audio recorders in quiet rooms around campus. Following the interviews,

the students produced timecoded interview logs and prepared Deed of Gift forms for depositing the interview in the university library archives. Because of their shared background as military veterans, the student interviewers benefitted from a certain “insider”¹⁹ status, which encouraged candid conversations and, in some cases, a certain degree of camaraderie between interviewer and narrator. At the same time, this insider status tended to complicate the nature of the conversation, as they sometimes skipped over important clarifying questions or took for granted a shared knowledge base that a civilian audience might not possess.²⁰ My own status as an outsider turned out to be useful to some extent, enabling me to play the fool in a sense (often without trying) and to raise questions about unfamiliar acronyms or other potential points of confusion. Following the interview process, students produced written reflections on their experiences, both as interviewers and as narrators, and, as a class, we reflected on the challenges of communicating complex life experiences—particularly to an audience of outsiders beyond the class who might not share a common base of knowledge, experience, or values. Because their interviews were created not simply as a class exercise but as public documents for the university’s archives, the inherent tension between the student-veteran interviewer and the future general-public listener/researcher opened up valuable space for nuanced conversations about audience and rhetorical context alongside of the typical questions of narrative, memory, and performance that oral history invokes.

The second component of the peer interview unit asked students to take the recording of the interview they had conducted and create a non-narrated “audio short,” capturing some key element of their partner’s experience in a focused, three- to four-minute story. This project was intended to introduce students to principles of documentary storytelling while providing them with technical foundations in the audio editing software²¹ through hands-on, project-based learning. Rather than presuming the need for technical mastery, this project allowed students to learn by doing, combining practical skill-acquisition with creative and conceptual thinking. Leading up to this activity, we listened to several radio stories produced from audio diaries or interviews with veterans,²² using them as the basis for conversations about both the craft and the ethics of documentary storytelling. Extending this conversation, we also read about the relationship between oral history and what Andrea Gustavson calls “documentary memory”—as exemplified by the crafted “essence narrative” of Studs Terkel’s *The Good War*.²³ Reading selections from Terkel’s book alongside of Gustavson’s analysis encouraged students to consider the features and limitations of narrative, as well as the forms of responsibility inherent to the act of representing another person’s life as a story—particularly in context of war and trauma.

Ultimately, though, it was through the students’ own work with their partners’ interviews in the audio editing process that they really began to feel these dilemmas hit home. As an illustration of this challenge, I share a clip from a student audio short titled “What Happened at Camp Bucca,” where a student veteran of the U.S. Air Force reflects on his experience as a guard at a detention facility at Camp Bucca in southern Iraq. Click the box below to hear the audio file. Transcript of the audio is provided in Appendix A.



mp3 file "Bucca"

As veterans interviewing veterans, the students shared a keen awareness of the complexity of translating their experiences into words in the first place, let alone communicating the sometimes-traumatic nature of those experiences to an outside audience—a challenge expressed eloquently through the deliberate use of narrative silence at the end of this clip. And because the assignment asked students to compose a story using *only* the narrator's voice, without the benefit of added background or context, many discovered this pitfall for themselves, as they struggled to piece together a story that made sense using only the material at hand.

One of the major challenges this project presented was the difficulty of condensing an in-depth life narrative into a three-minute audio story without reducing the complexity and nuance of the narrator's experience. The tight time constraints forced students to make tough decisions about what to include, what to cut out, and how to arrange the pieces to produce meaning. And, at times, their attempts to condense and combine disparate portions of the interview under a common theme produced unintended consequences that counteracted the effect they had set out to achieve. For example, another audio story generated a lively class debate, as students worked through their impressions of how the story represented the narrator's experience as an active duty soldier in the Army National Guard. Click the box below for a clip from that story. A transcript of the audio file can be found in Appendix B.



mp3 file "National Guard"

After we listened to this piece in class, the student whose voice was featured expressed concern that the story failed to present his work in a serious light and perpetuated stereotypes about the National Guard as inferior or frivolous. The student who produced the story had an opportunity to explain the decisions he made and the intentions behind them, and to respond to his partner's concerns. We took this point of contention as an opportunity to open a larger conversation about *how* the story might be working to produce this effect—for example, through the use of pop culture artifacts and the juxtaposition of heroic sentiments against more day-to-day activities. Conversations like this one were vital in fostering an atmosphere of dialogue among the students in the class, as well as a critical eye toward questions of ethics and representation that they would carry forward into the work that followed.

Unit Two: Medal of Honor Interview Project

Building on their experience with the peer interview project and related audio shorts, the students were then assigned to groups for a second interview project with celebrated local veterans who had received the Medal of Honor for extraordinary bravery in combat. Working closely with the university's Office of Veterans Affairs and Office of Community Relations, we were able to connect with five Medal of Honor recipients who had ties to the New England region: Staff Sergeant Ryan Pitts (War in Afghanistan), Colonel Jack Jacobs (Vietnam War), Colonel Harvey Barnum (Vietnam War), Captain Thomas Kelley (Vietnam War), and Captain Thomas Hudner (Korean War). After doing background research on their narrators, the students prepared interview guides and conducted interviews,²⁴ drawing lessons from the experiences they had had, both as interviewers and as narrators, in the peer interview project. As the students reflected back on the course, they frequently cited this project as the most powerful work they'd undertaken. As veterans themselves, the students understood the magnitude of the distinction that the Medal of Honor represented in a way

that a civilian might not. As a result, they were particularly honored—and, at times, particularly nervous—for the opportunity to interview these veterans and to share their stories with others.

After logging their interview tape, the students worked together in groups to produce non-narrated audio stories on the Medal of Honor recipients' lives, weaving together edited interview clips with music to produce roughly eight-minute narratives capturing these veterans' experiences. This project gave students the opportunity to build on the technical and creative skills they had begun to develop in their peer audio shorts while harnessing the collective talents of the group toward a common goal. On a logistical level, this project was probably the greatest source of frustration among some of the students in the class, given the close collaboration it required and the varying levels of technical skill and commitment that comes with group work of any kind. However, at this stage of the course, I noted a considerable growth in the students' abilities to imagine and compose a story that could capture the listener's attention, move through a series of interlinked anecdotes and reflections, express a sense of change and movement, and cohere into a unified whole. And despite the struggle, most of the students seemed proud of the work they produced.

As an example, the clip below is from one of the groups' stories, featuring Captain Thomas Hudner, a Navy veteran who received the Medal of Honor for his service in the Korean War. Captain Hudner was 90 years old at the time of his interview. Transcription of the audio is provided in Appendix C.



mp3 file "Hudner"

The piece goes on to tell the story of Captain Hudner's experience crash-landing his plane in an attempt to save the life of his wingman, Ensign Jesse Brown, the first African American Navy pilot. While the story appears to be a fluid and seamless account of Captain Hudner's experience, in fact, it is the result of significant compositional decision-making and labor. Indeed, all of the audio stories required students to make nuanced choices about how to select, rearrange, and piece together different segments of an informal oral narrative into a well-paced and polished final product. This process generated significant discussion, not only about the technical and aesthetic craft of audio storytelling, but also the responsibility and rhetorical purposes behind the crafted narratives.

Given their identities as veterans—some of whom were in combat while deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan—the students readily acknowledged the distance between the “official story” of an event and the considerably messier, on-the-ground experience. While many of them used their own experience as a way to make sense of this disjunction, the tension also sparked productive and at times contentious debate around the question of *heroism*: the question of how to use the relative breadth and depth of the oral history interview to move past any tight, well-rehearsed narrative that these decorated veterans had likely told many times before and to get at the more nuanced and more human side of the experience. Here is a clip from the opening of an audio story featuring retired Navy Captain Thomas Kelley that I think reflects this possibility. (For Transcript see Appendix D).



mp3 file "Kelley"

The story goes on to present the harrowing events that earned Captain Kelly the Medal of Honor for his actions as lieutenant in command of a river assault division in the Vietnam War. However, rather than start the piece with this relatively familiar public account, the group opted to open with a lighthearted anecdote about his encounter with President Richard Nixon, aiming to capture Captain Kelley's sense of humor and to offer a fuller picture of the man behind the medal. Indeed, each of the Medal of Honor audio stories features a highly distinctive tone and focus, speaking both to the individuality of the narrators and to the diverse perspectives and investments of the student veterans who produced their stories.

Unit Three: South Boston Medal of Honor Walk

In the final component of the course, the students worked to integrate their Medal of Honor audio stories into a collaborative public art project: a mobile, app-based audio walk of South Boston war memorials. Beginning with an optional field trip to chart out the walk, this project required students to conduct background research on the memorials and other relevant sites, to script and record narration guiding the audience along the route, and to create conceptual links between the veterans' stories and the spaces of memory and memorialization that the listener would encounter along the way. Using a mobile walking tour app called VoiceMap (<http://voicemap.me>), the project allows listeners to download the walk to their smart phones and follow a series of verbal prompts along the route, with audio tracks automatically triggered by the phone's GPS at each point of interest. Figure 1 below shows the interface of the app.

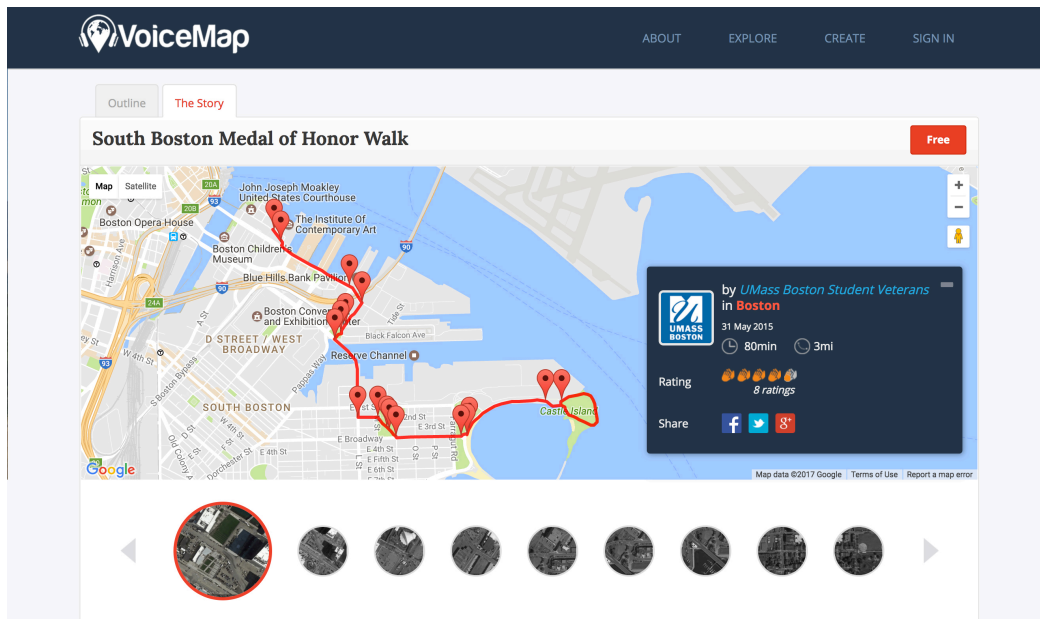


Fig. 1. South Boston Medal of Honor Walk on VoiceMap app. Anderson screenshot.

The roughly 70-minute walk leads from the site of the Massachusetts Iraq and Afghanistan Fallen Heroes Memorial (then under construction) in Seaport Square Park; past the former site of the South Boston Army Base and Naval Annex on the Commonwealth Flats; to the South Boston Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Medal of Honor Park; and, finally, to the South Boston Korean War Memorial on the tip of Castle Island. Along the way, the listener hears from all of the student veterans involved in the project, as they narrate the walk, provide context for the sites, and introduce the audio stories of the five Medal of Honor recipients.

This project was an exciting way to connect the students' work to a listening public while integrating the voices of prominent local veterans into the fabric of the city's public memory.

The South Boston Medal of Honor Walk was officially launched in conjunction with the Medal of Honor Convention, hosted in Boston in 2015,²⁵ but it remains available as an enduring (digital) fixture in the city, accessible via the VoiceMap app or online at <http://voicemap.me/tour/boston/south-boston-medal-of-honor-walk>. If you find yourself in Boston, please take the time to listen and comment on the walk. The students worked very hard to produce this work, and we would love to see it continue to make an impact.

Reflections

In hindsight, this course was an incredibly ambitious undertaking, particularly as a first-year Assistant Professor struggling to get to know a new institution and a new city. I came to this project with a background in community-based storytelling and media production,²⁶ which was instrumental in my ability to take on the challenge that this course presented: I knew how to create an environment for groups of people to get together and tell their stories. However, prior to developing the course, I had little personal or professional connection to the military, aside from a few weeks as a guest instructor with The Red Badge Project, a storytelling workshop program established to serve the Warrior Transition Battalion out of Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Coming into the class, I knew just enough about "the veteran experience" to realize how little I really knew, and the decision to take on this project was more than a little intimidating. My strategy for bridging the gap was, first and foremost, to be clear about what I had to bring to the table—expertise in oral history, audio production, and collaborative storytelling—and, more importantly, about the obvious limitations of my knowledge and experience. I approached the course, quite openly, as an opportunity to learn from the student veterans as much as to teach them, and, in the end, I think this sense of reciprocity was a big part of what made our collaboration work.

I was also incredibly fortunate to have the opportunity to work with an ambitious and talented English MA student, Caleb Nelson—himself a veteran of the US Navy—who happened to have some previous experience in audio production. Caleb proved to be the ideal companion on this journey, providing one-on-one support to students both inside and outside of class, while helping me to understand the dynamics beneath the surface of our day-to-day interactions and to trouble-shoot when challenges arose. Given his personal interest in storytelling and veterans issues (he is an aspiring writer and a leader in the local Warrior Writers chapter at UMass Boston), Caleb became actively involved in the work of the class alongside of the other student veterans, participating at every stage from the peer interview project to the South Boston Medal of Honor walk. As a nod to the invaluable perspective he offered, both as a co-teacher and a dedicated co-participant with the other student veterans, I have invited Caleb to contribute some of his own reflections on his experience. In addition to sharing what the class meant to him, Caleb shares the details of his military service and what led him to participate in the course:

For me, leaving the Navy meant more than leaving some of the best friends (and also the biggest assholes) I've known. I rejected an identity.

My leap into civilian life at 22, after 4 years on active duty, felt violent. I'd passed through the gauntlet, got off an eight-month cruise through the Persian Gulf, and then, in a way, broke my oath. I abandoned the chain of command that trained and molded

me, and also implicitly thumbed my nose at the lifestyle of my Chief (who stuck by me at Captain's Mast).

I left amid discouraging language, severing ties, throwing out or giving away old uniform items, trudging through the big base in Norfolk, Virginia for a week of Taps Class before terminal leave. It felt like part of me died. Even the separation guidebook title, "From Navy Blue to Corporate Grey," was unreadably depressing.

Moments after I gassed up my car for the last time at the NEX in June, 2008, driving along the fence past the runways, past the strip club, back to my apartment in Virginia Beach, windows open, still wind burned from the flight deck, listening to Modest Mouse, "Bukowski," or something like that, as jets took off above me, the anticipation and excitement for a whole new future dissolved. It felt foreboding.

It felt a little like graduating from college, with a sense of uncertainty mixed with freedom, but with added baggage. The little bits of war-related action I gathered were second or third hand, so identifying as a warrior felt insincere. I left that competitive lifestyle behind to participate in a more loving society. Distributing chaos and destruction in Iraq—revenge essentially—had begun to seem counter-productive and selfish.

For my last months on the USS Truman, and walking down the gangplank, I imagined I'd fertilize my mind in college and planned an ambitious future. I applied to universities the fall before, and when I disembarked, I'd collected seven rejections, but one acceptance from my hometown, at UMass Boston.

I chose a path well-traveled, slipping from military life at the end of my contract to move back to my mom's, and with flags flapping in my rear view, I wondered how this path would make a difference. With a grip of money from a combination of cruise and selling back my excess leave, with more dollars than I'd ever had at one time, this freewheeling realization crawled around in my gut, I could sleep now for days without anyone knocking down my door.

Leaving the Navy was a mini rebellion, sticking it to "the man" who'd crafted me into a cog in America's military industrial complex. I got to be an Aviation Electrician's Mate, trained on some glorious machines, F/A-18 Cs and Es. I'd hit the ports of Marseilles, Naples, Rhodes and Abu Dhabi. I'd discovered that Iran exerts control in the Strait of Hormuz, and a few of the sticky details of a sea passage. Life in the rough can be fun.

I left the biggest gang in the world, and rolled out into a public university, where I quickly discovered that few students cared for the military. Sure, people paid lip service to "veterans," whatever they are, but for the most part my classmates seemed resentful if I brought up my experiences in class.

I felt isolated, and a little dumb for being complicit in an 'imperialist' war. It was a

selfish game I played, and I ought to know the reason we invaded Iraq, in the words of Noam Chomsky, "It's the oil stupid!"

For four years, I'd been bombarded with insecurities from my shipmates about life outside the military. There are no jobs, I was told, and even if I got out with an honorable discharge I would be lucky to find work flipping burgers.

Self-doubt is one of the most difficult things about leaving the military, even when you don't get kicked out. A lot of decent people get dishonorably discharged, mostly related to drugs, DUIs or fornication, and to hear Chiefs talk about those Shitbags, they might as well have gone to jail as to have made a mistake and failed in government service. With an honorable discharge, I joined the masses just slightly behind my peers in college.

Fear of integrating into a job market where you have to sell yourself, and reach out to take what you want, keeps some folks on the 20-year retirement track. Civilians can't wait around for new orders, or command transfers. The path to advancement is not as clearly marked.

It's impossible to deserve the praise that people express on Veterans Day and so forth. For me, the Navy was a job, and an exciting job. I got to do things, and see things that very few people do and see. It was a thrill. Even though I hate the idea of killing people, and the fact that I provided material aid to bombing Iraqi cities does not make me proud, I do not regret the experience. I did nothing heroic, and I benefited greatly. I got to see how the U.S. exerts military force first hand, and I was compensated with several years of freedom to pursue my passions with relative abandon, and no college debt.

I liked UMass so much I stuck around for an MA in Creative Writing. In my last semester, I joined Erin Anderson's class as a TA. There I met and helped interview a Medal of Honor recipient. This rekindled that awe and sense of respect and duty that inspired me to join the military in the first place.

I also got the chance to feel what it's like to be interviewed, and to hear things I said on the record, edited into a story by one of my classmates. It gave me a forum to think about how I discuss my brief time in the military, and to rub elbows with people from all different branches of military service. It broadened my perspective, and made me feel a little less selfish. It also checked my boasts. It's easy to get carried away in the mystique of the military, and act entitled.

The class offered a structured space to reminisce, to reconnect with the jargon, and feel less like a dupe. I felt nostalgic and grateful for my experiences, but it also reminded me of how I left. It boosted my respect for those people, some of my friends, that stuck around to make a military career.

There's a thought experiment from the era of the World Wars, a century ago, reflecting a time when participating in war was a duty, not a choice: a youngster who

wants to serve in a war has a terminally ill mother, and so he must choose between staying home to care for mom, or joining the war to gain honor and accolades. What is the righteous choice? These days, a fraction of our country can make a war while more than half can hate it. So, the honor of serving in the military is brittle, and it breaks sometimes in civilian conversation.

In the interest of building an American society, our military does some fine work. But we can get carried away with ourselves and indulge by exerting unnecessary power, forgetting that every action creates a reaction. People that participate in that military culture of honor, where duty and symbolism trump pain and fear, can be harsh and rude with grievances. Living outside of a hierarchy, where success is based on straightforward tests of might and will, is tough. It takes ingenuity to succeed as a civilian.

Connecting with other veterans toward the end of my college career, helped me process my military memories. I realized that I hadn't let anyone down by leaving. I left because I dislike living under a dictatorship, where my well-being matters in the context of the group, everything I did was scrutinized down to the length of my hair and clothing choice.

The oral history class appealed to my interest in building digital media. It inspired me creatively, and the discussions that the work in class created made me think about what's is valuable in military service, and what's not. I got to hear a Marine talk down on the stateside duties of a guy in the National Guard, heard a little about what it's like to navigate a Coast Guard cutter, and discovered my own pride in the one deployment I completed.

By hearing stories from guys who had been through the thick of fighting, the Medal of Honor recipients we interviewed like Ryan Pitts who talked with reverence about his air support, I reflected on sacrifice. I spent a few good years on some incredible experiences, and I could have given much more. It's tough to cut through legends and clichés, and war stories are hard to tell because it seems impossible that anyone else might understand.

-- Caleb Nelson

Caleb's account is not necessarily representative of the experiences of all the student veterans in the class, some of whom struggled with the high demands of the project-based collaboration, even as they may have appreciated the opportunity to be involved. Nonetheless, I am heartened by his words, which leave me feeling as if this experiment were worthwhile.

Looking back on this course two years on, there are so many things I wish I had known or wish I had thought to do differently. Some of these are logistical: For example, I would have liked to take more time with some of the initial instruction in the audio editing software, which required more time in-class than I felt able to commit. (To be fair, this dilemma was not helped by the nine feet of snow that blanketed the city during the first month of the course, a disruption that we spent the rest of the semester digging ourselves out of.) Others lessons were structural—for example, I might rethink my lofty expectations around

what we could feasibly accomplish in a single semester, given the many different places that the students were coming from. But if I were to teach a course like this again, the biggest change I would make would be to find ways of creating dialogue between the student veterans' own experiences and those of the decorated war heroes who they interviewed in the second half of the course. Because of time limitations and institutional pressures around the final form of the public art project, the audio walk presented the stories of the five Medal of Honor recipients in isolation, with the students' own stories feeling more like a step along the way in the process. And while the opportunity to interview these Medal recipients was the most exciting part of the course for many of the students involved, for me, it was the student veterans' own stories—as stories that too often go unheard and untold—that made the work we did together feel so important.

With this in mind, looking back, there are also a lot of things I'm really proud of and things I would most definitely do again, if given the chance. The peer interview project, in particular, felt like a hugely important part of the process, not only for building interview skills through hands-on experience, but also for building relationships among a diverse group of student veterans whose differences were often more palpable than the things they had in common. On top of the obvious differences in age, gender, race, class, ethnicity, geography, and sexuality that they brought to the class, the nature of the students' military experience also varied widely (as did their feelings about this experience) depending on the branch in which they served, their motivations for joining, and whether or not—and to where and in what capacity—they had been deployed. In this sense, the opportunity to listen the students' stories also made a big difference in my own ability to relate to each of them individually, on their own terms. I left the class feeling incredibly privileged to have gotten to know, if only briefly, 15 fascinating, complex, and inspiring students, veterans, and fellow human beings who I may never have otherwise had the opportunity to meet. And, thanks to them, I left the class—which I had titled "Oral History and the Veteran Experience"—with a newfound appreciation for the extent to which any notion of "*the* veteran experience," in the singular, might not even exist. In the end, this course was imperfect, but I'm extremely proud of what these students accomplished within the structure I created for them. If nothing else, I hope our experience might offer a spark of inspiration for others who are looking for new ways of engaging veterans—or other communities—in collectively shaping and sharing their own stories.

**Erin R. Anderson, Assistant Professor,
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Notes

¹ Robert M. Wilson, Susan Leary, Matthew Mitchell, and Daniel Ritchie offer a powerful examination of these possibilities in their article, "Military Veterans Sharing First-Person Stories on War and Homecoming: A Pathway to Social Engagement, Personal Healing, and Public Understanding of Veterans' Issues" (*Smith College Studies In Social Work*, 79:392–432, 2009).

² Veteran Voices of Pittsburgh is one such project operating locally in my community, as a veteran-run nonprofit organization with a strong online presence:

<http://veteranvoicesofpittsburgh.com>

³ By beginning with smaller-scale, lower-stakes projects in the early part of the semester, I hoped to encourage students to build the skills and confidence that they would need to take on increasingly complex and collaborative work as the semester developed, ultimately working toward a collective, public-facing project.

⁴ This effort yielded a couple of English majors in their final year of study, who contributed valuable creative and critical leadership to the group. It also helped me to connect with my graduate Teaching Assistant, Caleb Nelson—an aspiring writer and Navy veteran with experience in audio production—who was an invaluable asset to the course.

⁵ Sue Doe and Lisa Langstraat, "Introduction." *Generation Vet: Composition, Student Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University*, ed. Sue Doe and Lisa Langstraat, (Logan: Utah State University, 2014), 2.

⁶ Ashley Bender, "Exploring Student-Veteran Expectations about Composing: Motivations, Purposes, and the Influence of Trauma on Composing Practices." *Generation Vet: Composition, Student Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University*, ed. Sue Doe and Lisa Langstraat, (Logan: Utah State University, 2014), 177.

⁷ Ibid., 179.

⁸ Anne Ruggles Gere, "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition," *College Composition and Communication* 45, no. 1 (1994), 79.

⁹ Michael Frisch, "Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process," *The Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003).

¹⁰ Daniel Kerr, "'We Know What the Problem Is': Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom up." *The Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003).

¹¹ Alicia J. Rouverol, "Collaborative Oral History in a Correctional Setting: Promise and Pitfalls," *The Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003).

¹² Michael Frisch, "Oral History and the Digital Revolution: Toward a Post-Documentary Sensibility," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 113.

¹³ Ibid., 113.

¹⁴ The collection, titled "Oral history interviews of Vietnam veterans, tapes and transcripts, 1974-1975 and 1986" is held in the Healy Library Archives at the University of Massachusetts Boston. The collection includes anonymous interviews with local Vietnam veterans, conducted by UMass Boston students in Professor David Hunt's history research methods classes, as well as additional taped interviews conducted by Professor Hunt on a trip to Vietnam in 1986.

¹⁵ "Narrator" is currently the preferred terminology to refer to the interview subject in oral history, affording them more agency than the more passive term "interviewee" and acknowledging their integral role in the co-constructed narrative that the interview produces.

¹⁶ While a couple of the students opted to place restrictions on their interviews (for example, anonymity or a hold on access until an established date), all of them ultimately decided to donate their interviews to the university archives, knowing that this was an optional component of the course.

¹⁷ Valerie Yow's chapter, "Interpersonal Relations in the Interview" was a good starting point for this conversation. See Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai's 1991 collection, *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, for an extended account of power relations in oral history.

¹⁸ While a couple of students requested to avoid any direct discussion of their military experience in their letters to their peer interviewers, when they actually sat down to participate in their interviews, both students ultimately decided to open up and share those memories—and in both cases, they reported feeling good about the experience after the fact.

¹⁹ Mary A. Larson, "Research and Design Strategies," in *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*, ed. Leslie Roy Ballard and Thomas L. Charlton, (Lanham: AltaMira, 2007), 112.

²⁰ Ibid., 113.

²¹ We used Adobe Audition as the editing software for this course, which students had access to in the lab classroom and through open lab time after hours. Audacity is a free, open-source, cross-platform alternative, which I have used with success in other courses.

²² Among these were "God of War" by Scott Carrier (*This American Life*, Episode 96: "Pinned By History," 1998), "The Vietnam Tapes of Lance Corporal Michael A. Baronowski" by Christina Egloff with Jay Allison (*Lost and Found Sound*, 2000), and selected audio shorts by Kevin Farkas from the Veteran Voices of Pittsburgh online archive.

²³ Andrea Gustavson, "From 'Observer to Activist': Documentary Memory, Oral History, and Studs Terkel's 'Essence' Narratives," *Journal of American Studies* 46, no. 1 (2012): 116.

²⁴ Four of the interviews were conducted in a recording studio on campus (two via phone connections to narrators living out of state) through a partnership with WUMB radio. The fifth interview was conducted on-site at the narrator's home in a nearby town to accommodate his limited mobility.

²⁵ As part of UMass Boston's partnership with the Medal of Honor Society, I was invited to take a group of student veterans from my course to the Convention. This was an exciting experience for all of us, and a wonderful opportunity to reconnect after the semester ended and to celebrate our work together.

²⁶ For example, I coordinated literary arts workshops for homeless patrons of the Seattle Public Library; facilitated a participatory oral history project in a low-income neighborhood in Worcester, Massachusetts; and piloted a series of blogging workshops for homeless street paper vendors at *Real Change News* in Seattle.

Appendix A: Transcript of Bucca

[Islamic music]

[Music ends]

[Male voice] Like the doors were thrown open wide, there was just blood on the sand. Everywhere! This mortar was like a great equalizer that hit because at that point it didn't matter who you were. [laughs] It didn't matter what, ya know, flag you wore on your shoulder, or if you wore yellow. You were just like pulling people out of the compound, like rendering first-aid alongside ya know another ah another Iraqi guy. After that crazy day, I was just; I was afraid after that.

[Music returns] [Sound of mortar falling and man's voice saying, "who. Damnnn!"]

[Male speaker's voice returns] And then it was just, we had nothing. Yeah, we got mortared but nothing, nothing happened like that. But that was the craziest thing to ever happen at Camp Bucca anyway [laughs].

I pepper sprayed one guy while I was there. Just one. He had an attitude maybe he was in the wrong place when he got picked up. Maybe, I don't know what his issue was but, I was like [changes voice inflection] 'do you understand me?' I'm going to spray you with this if you do not sit down.' And he wouldn't even sit down. [says something in Arabic then laughs]

He wouldn't do it.

I was just [makes noise with mouth, maybe to indicate spraying noise?] lost, lost and screamed so much but I tried not to get frustrated with them. *I tried*. But we were there for six and a half seven months. And just monotonous. Ya know there's only so many compound switches you can do a day; there's only so many [frustrated long sigh].

[End]

Appendix B: Transcript of National Guard

[Male voice] Watch *Transformers*, watch *The Avenger's* movie, the first thing they do? Call the National Guard and all those soldiers that you see are the National—they say it! And I, ever since then I'm like [gasp] and my face lights up and I'm like 'Ah that's me!'

[Sounds from movie]

So, giant robots and aliens and super villains come through and the National Guard is who they call. And um for the two blizzards we extracted ah fire hydrants out of snowbanks that plows had just been piling snow on that tower over six feet. As with Juno we had snowfall continuously to accumulate over six feet tall and with the plows it goes eight to ten feet into the air on a standard sidewalk or certain cul-de-sacs. And we'd just plow through just ice that's been layer upon layered of melting and freezing and melting and freezing to get fire hydrants out or to clear out pathways for emergency rooms and fire departments and things like that for emergency personnel. We get posted out in front of grocery stores to direct traffic 'cus people see our uniform and calm down and respect the authority of the uniform and just go with it. Captain American in the, the first *Avenger* movie said it best [movie clip plays. Male actor's voice says: "I don't want to kill anyone. I don't like bullies."]

[End]

Appendix C: Transcript Hudner

[Acoustic guitar music]

[Older male voice speaks] Well I think the first time I was really aware of the fact we were at war was seeing these ah sort of blips outside. And it took a while to realize that these were real live bullets and ah shells. And fortunately, nobody was, nobody was hit at all on the first couple of flights we made. But um, we learned quite quickly how dangerous it could be. The intensiveness of what we were doing made us very tired. I can still remember coming back from one flight. We were told to go up to one of the empty ready rooms. In there they had some alcohol waiting for us. I can remember falling asleep almost immediately because of the effect that alcohol had under the conditions we were living and fighting.

[End]

Appendix D: Transcript of Kelley

[Male voice] The President went around to each person and he'd ah, he'd ah stand in front of you and somebody would read you a citation and he'd take the metal and put it around your neck. Then he'd shake your hand and he'd, he'd make small-talk. In my case, he said ah, 'where ya from?'

And I said, 'ah, Boston, Sir.'

And he said, 'oh, do you eat ah, baked beans every night?'

And I said, 'No Sir, only on Saturday.'

And he said, 'hmm.'

And he walked on to the next guy.

[End]

ORAL HISTORY AND THE VETERAN EXPERIENCE

UMass Boston | | English 380-02 | | Spring 2015 | | Tu/Th 12:30-1:45pm

Prof. Erin Anderson

erin.anderson@umb.edu

Office: Wheatley-6-074

Hours: Tu/Th 2-3:30pm or by appt.

Teaching Assistant: Caleb Nelson

OVERVIEW

This course invites student veterans to participate in a semester-long exploration of oral history, documentary, and audio storytelling. Students will read, listen to, watch and discuss seminal works in the history of oral history—from Studs Terkel’s *The Good War* to award-winning radio documentaries and transmedia projects—which have sought to document and disseminate the stories of U.S. war veterans. Through discussions and reflective writing, students will take up challenging questions about narrative, representation, and the relationship between personal and public memory. The course will provide students with a hands-on introduction to oral history methods—including preparing, recording, and transcribing interviews—as well as the craft of editing oral history materials into documentary narratives in textual and audio forms. Students will have the opportunity to share their own stories and to learn from the experiences of prominent local veterans through hands-on interviewing and storytelling projects, culminating in a collaborative public art initiative carried out in conjunction with the Medal of Honor Convention, to be held in Boston in September 2015.

Course Goals

- To build a basic familiarity with the methods, ethics, and debates of oral history, as a contribution to the historical record and a platform for documentary storytelling.
- To gain practical experience planning, conducting, transcribing, and editing oral history interviews with your peers and Medal of Honor recipients.
- To develop a critical understanding of the complexities of translating personal memories of traumatic events into public documents and narratives.
- To consider the formal, structural, and stylistic features of audio documentary and to learn to apply them to your own practice in audio storytelling.
- To contribute to the development of a public-facing audio storytelling project on the Medal of Honor for a mobile storytelling app.

Course Website

The syllabus, schedule, assignments, and resources are posted online on the course website. I will announce any changes to the schedule in class. If you’re absent, it is your responsibility to ask a peer or check the website.

A Note on Care

This is a unique course in that it brings together a diverse group of students who share a common experience, as veterans of the U.S. armed forces, and gives a space for this experience to be discussed, expressed, and explored. Because of the potentially sensitive and emotionally charged nature of the course content, it is important that we work together as a class to foster an atmosphere of mutual respect, understanding, and care—to create a space in which all students feel safe contributing their experiences and perspectives without fear of judgment, silencing, or ridicule. While diverse viewpoints are encouraged, personal attacks on students' political, religious, or social beliefs will not be tolerated.

Throughout the semester, we will be engaging with difficult texts and topics, which some students may find upsetting. If you ever feel the need to step outside during one of these discussions, either for a short time or for the rest of the class session, you may always do so without academic penalty. (You will, however, be responsible for any material you miss. If you do leave the room for a significant time, please arrange to get notes from another student or see me individually.) If you ever wish to discuss your personal reactions to this material—with the class, with me, or with the course TA—I would welcome such discussion as an appropriate part of our work in the course.

MATERIALS

Required Texts

The Good War: An Oral History of World War II, by Studs Terkel (New Press, 1997)

All additional reading, listening, and viewing materials are posted on the course website as PDFs or links from the schedule. You will be provided with a password to access all works with copyright restrictions.

Hardware

Please bring the following with you to every class:

- A set of headphones or earbuds to work with on the lab computers during class. (You may borrow a set from the Adaptive Computing Lab if you do not have them).
- A USB flash drive (16G+) for working on projects, backing up files, etc.

Software

We will be using Adobe Audition to edit interviews and produce audio stories for this class. Audition is installed on the computers in Mac Lab A and available for use during class and during open and supported lab hours (see Resources). If you would like to work on audio projects on your own computer outside of class, you can install a free 30-day trial version of Adobe Audition or purchase a monthly student subscription to Adobe Creative Cloud.

Web Accounts

In order to submit and share audio projects and post to the course blog, you need to sign up for free accounts with SoundCloud and WordPress (through your UMB student account).

POLICIES

Grading

Some assignments will be collected and assessed as check-plus, check or check-minus. Others will be scanned quickly in class for checks. The larger interview and storytelling projects will be given letter grades, which will be clearly announced. Whether letter-graded or checked, every assignment counts toward your final grade.

To qualify for an A or B in the course, you must have successfully completed 80% or more of all the homework, including both graded projects and checked assignments. Students who do not successfully complete 60% of the course assignments will not pass, regardless of their grades. (A check-minus does not count as successful completion.)

Final grades for students who have successfully completed at least 80% of all work will be computed in the usual way based on the scale below. Students complete 60-80% of the total work will be eligible for grades no higher than C+, based roughly on the scale below.

Participation in discussion and workshops	10%
Blog Posts	20%
Peer Interview Project (including Audio Short)	30%
Medal of Honor Storytelling Project	40%

I may choose to raise your final grade by one-third (e.g., B to B+) to recognize a pattern of exemplary improvement.

Attendance

Regular attendance in this class is essential. This policy is not all about you. Because this is a discussion- and workshop-based class, your peers' experience is directly affected by whether or not you show up on time, prepared, and ready to work. You are allowed **a maximum of four absences** during the semester. Any student with more than four absences (the equivalent of two weeks) should not expect to pass the course.

Please note that I take attendance at the beginning of each class session. If you develop a chronic pattern of lateness, I reserve the right to convert tardies to absences (3:1).

If you do miss a class, it is your responsibility to arrange for the day's assignments to be submitted on time, to get any assignments or class notes from a peer, and to check the online course schedule for changes.

Participation

As a collaborative, project-based class, your active participation is vital to every class session—and it represents a significant portion of your final grade for the course. Participation in this course consists of verbal contributions to discussions of assigned texts, as well as participation in small group work, presentations and workshops of student projects, and hands-on technology demos and project work sessions. If you have questions or concerns about your ability to participate in any of these areas, please talk with me.

Communication

Please feel free to stop by my office hours to discuss your work in the course. You do not need to schedule an appointment; simply knock on my door. If your schedule conflicts with my office hours, please email me or see me after class to make an appointment for a more convenient time.

Email is the best way to contact me, and it is the method that I will always use to contact students in the class. In order to keep up with class announcements (changes to the schedule, etc.) please check your UMB email account at least once a day. I will do my best to respond to all email inquiries within 24 hours.

Submitting Assignments

Because this is a project-based course, each of the assignments is designed to build on the last in a sequential progression, in order to set you up to successfully complete your individual projects and contribute to the collaborative group process. For this reason, it is essential that you keep up with the day-to-day work of the class so you don't fall behind or miss important steps along the way.

Assignments are due by the start of class on the due date unless otherwise noted. All formal assignments should be typed and proofread. The format for submitting assignments is noted on the schedule on the course website. Assignments submitted on time can be revised within 10 days for a new grade.

Late Work

I will accept two late assignments. No further late work will be accepted, except in the case of a documented emergency. No assignment will be accepted more than one week after the due date—except in the case of documented emergencies, where I can make exceptions. I do not give written feedback on late assignments, but you are welcome to come and see me during my office hours or by appointment to ask questions and discuss your work.

It is your responsibility to keep regular back-ups of all work on your USB drive. “The computer ate my files” is not an acceptable excuse for late or incomplete work. Absence from class *does not* excuse you from submitting your work on time.

Course Withdrawal

If you are falling too far behind or have missed too much in-class work due to tardiness or absence, I will advise you to withdraw from the course before the withdrawal deadline (on Wednesday, April 22nd). Doing so, however, is always at your discretion.

Incompletes

Incompletes are rarely offered, as they are reserved for students who are unable to complete a small portion of the course at the end of the term due to an extreme circumstance such as illness. Incompletes are not allowed to replace a significant amount of coursework or absences. If you are awarded an Incomplete, you must sign a contract with your instructor outlining the work to be done and work due dates. Although an INC automatically turns into an F after a year, your Incomplete work will typically be due before the year's end.

You'll find more information on the university's incomplete policy here:

http://www.umb.edu/registrar/academic_policies/incomplete_policy/

Techno-Etiquette

Please keep cell phones turned off and put away during class and refrain from using the lab computers or other devices for activities other than those required for your participation in the work at hand. This is a matter of basic courtesy. Please be respectful. If such distractions become a chronic problem, I reserve the right to mark you as absent from class.

Academic Honesty

Plagiarism is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. If you plagiarize, you will fail this course, and a report will be made to the Chair of the English Department. More serious academic sanctions such as suspension may also result. For more information on academic honesty at UMB, please see the Student Code of Conduct:

http://cdn.umb.edu/images/life_on_campus/Code_of_Conduct_5-14-14.pdf

Disability Accommodations

If you have a disability that may affect your performance in this class, you may obtain adaptation recommendations from the Ross Center for Disability Services (Campus Center UL-211 / 617-287-7430). <http://www.umb.edu/academics/vpass/disability/>

Other Services

If you need additional academic support, including tutoring, services are available through the Academic Support Program (Campus Center 1-1300 / 617-287-6550). For mental health services, contact the UHS Counseling Center at 617-287-5690.

COURSE PROJECTS

Blog Posts

Throughout the semester, you will be asked to write a series of **reflective blog posts** on a collaborative course blog, which respond to the assigned texts and open up questions and ideas for discussion. Each week, I will post a **prompt** on the blog, which invites you to consider the assigned texts through a particular lens and gives you a point of departure and focus for your writing.

In the final few weeks of the semester, the focus of your blog posts will shift toward **your own practice**—charting your progress on the Medal of Honor Storytelling Project, noting questions or challenges that have arisen, and offering insights gained along the way.

Blog posts should be at least **300 words** long, include an original **title**, be **tagged** with relevant keywords, and pose at least **one question** for further discussion. Please include embedded images, media, or links, as needed, and proofread your writing prior to submission. Blog posts are **due by 8am** on the day in which we discuss the assigned texts. You are encouraged to read and comment on other students' posts before coming to class.

Peer Interview Project

For this project, you will plan, conduct, and record an **oral history interview** with another student in the class, focusing on his or her personal memories and life experiences, including but not limited to his/her experience as a veteran. You will be matched up with a partner for this project, and each of you will interview the other.

In preparation for your interview, you will each be asked to produce a rough **Interview Guide**, or “menu” of potential interview questions and topics that you might like to cover in the interview. Prior to conducting the interview, you will be asked to write a **letter to your interview partner**, describing how you are feeling about being interviewed, what you would like to get out of it, and what topics (if any) you would prefer not to discuss.

The length of your interviews will vary, but you should aim to spend at least **one hour** on your conversation. Because the interview process can be physically and emotionally taxing, both for the interviewer and for the narrator, you may want to schedule your interviews on separate days to give yourselves time to rest and reflect.

Following the interview, you will submit the complete **audio file** of the interview you conducted, followed by a time-coded **interview log** summarizing key topics. You will submit these along with the relevant administrative **paperwork**, including a biographical data sheet, a consent form, and a deed of gift form. With each student's permission, these materials will be donated to the Healy Library Archives, where they will be preserved for the historical record and made available for future researchers or members of the public—in accordance with any restrictions that he or she would like to place on access.

This project will culminate in the production of an **Audio Short** (3 to 4 minutes), in which you take up the recording of the interview you conducted and edit it into a concise “essence narrative” (à la Studs Terkel) in audio form. Responding to the models we discuss in class, your story should hone in on one or two specific elements of your partner’s story, which illuminate some larger theme of his or her experience. Leading up to this project, you will be given basic instruction in Adobe Audition audio editing software, including how to work with multiple tracks to include music or effects in your story.

Medal of Honor Storytelling Project

Our major focus in the second half of the course will be on a **collaborative oral history-based audio storytelling project**, in conjunction with the Medal of Honor Convention, to be held in Boston in September.

Working in small groups, you will prepare, conduct, and record an **oral history interview** with one of five Medal of Honor recipients with connections to the New England region. To prepare for the interview, you will produce a tailored Interview Guide based on independent research on your narrator’s life and the war in which he took part. As with the peer interview project, you will submit a complete **audio recording** of your interview along with the relevant **paperwork**, for inclusion in the Healy Library Archives collections.

As a class, we will plan and produce a cohesive series of audio stories, which will be compiled into a **mobile audio storytelling app** tied to major war memorials around the city of Boston—as well as a possible radio story for WUMB radio. Using the Medal of Honor interview recordings as your materials, you will work together to outline, script, edit, and mix a **multitrack audio story** that illuminates key elements of these veterans’ experience and achievements and situates that experience in a larger social or historical context. At the end of the semester, this collective project will be submitted for inclusion in a **university-wise public art initiative** around the Medal of Honor Convention.

This project is collaborative at its core. As a member of this class, you are expected to be involved at every stage of the process. At the end of the semester, you will fill out a confidential **self- and peer-assessment**, evaluating each group members’ contribution to the collective effort. The results of this assessment will account for 30% of your final grade for the project. You will submit this assessment along with a brief **written reflection**, which considers your experience in relation to the larger questions and topics of the class.

SCHEDULE

tentative and subject to change with advance notice

- T Jan 27 **Course Introduction | Screen: Documentary Film**
In Class: Watch *The Veterans' Breakfast Club*, Dir. Christopher Rolinson (2013, 30 min)
- Th Jan 29 **Discuss: What is Oral History?**
Read: Shopes, "What is Oral History?" (PDF); Thompson, "The Voice of the Past: Oral History" (PDF).
Due: Blog Post #1
- T Feb 3 **Archive Visit: Listening to Oral History** – Healy Library Archives
Read: Portelli, "A Dialogic Relationship: An Approach to Oral History"; Anderson and Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses"
- Th Feb 5 **Discuss: Dialogue and Ethics**
Read: Yow, Appendix C: "Principles and Standards of the Oral History Association" (PDF); listen to your interview in the Healy Archives
- T Feb 10 **Discuss: Preparing the Interview**
Read: Yow, Chapter 3 - "Preparation for the Interviewing Project" (PDF); Chapter 5 - "Legalities and Ethics" (PDF).
Due: Brainstorm a list of potential questions for your peer interview guide
- Th Feb 12 **Discuss: The Interview Encounter**
Watch: One full interview of your choice from Veteran Voices of Pittsburgh
Due: Blog Post #2
- T Feb 17 **Representing War**
Read: Terkel, *The Good War* (pp. 3-97)
Due: Blog Post #3
- Th Feb 19 **Conducting and Recording Interviews**
Read: Yow, Chapter 4 - "Interviewing Techniques"; Terkel/Parker, "Interviewing an Interviewer"
Due: Final Interview Guide for Peer Interview
- T Feb 24 **Editing and Representation**
Read: Gustavson, "From 'Observer to Activist': Documentary Memory, Oral History, and Studs Terkel's 'Essence Narratives'"
Re-read: Two stories of your choice from Terkel, *The Good War* (pp. 19-97)
Due: Blog Post #4

- Th Feb 26 **Audio Editing Basics**
 Watch: Adobe Audition tutorials (TBA)
 Bring your interview audio file on your USB drive
Due: Interview Recording and Paperwork for Peer Interview
- T Mar 3 **The Power of Voice**
 Read: McHugh, “The Power of Voice”
 Listen: Featured Audio Shorts from Veteran Voices of Pittsburgh – “Treat Them Well” (Barbara Duffy), “I’m Much Different Today” (Lewis Cooke), and “No Such Thing” (Rick Witherell)
Due: Blog Post #5
- Th Mar 5 **Interview Lessons and Reflections**
 Read: Yow, “‘Do I Like Them To Much?’ Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa”
 Listen: Return to your Peer Interview recording
Due: Interview Log and Reflection
- T Mar 10 **Multitrack Mixing**
 Watch: Adobe Audition tutorials (TBA)
Due: Roughcut of Audio Short (single dialogue track) in Adobe Audition
- Th Mar 12 **Workshop Audio Shorts**
Due: Audio Short
- Spring Break**
- T Mar 24 **Medal of Honor Interview Prep**
 Conduct independent research on your narrator and the war in which he took part and bring notes to class.
Due: Brainstorm additional questions for Medal of Honor Interview Guide
- Th Mar 26 **Oral History and Radio**
 Read: McHugh, “The Affective Power of Sound: Oral History on Radio”
Due: Conduct your Medal of Honor interview, as scheduled
- T Mar 31 **Telling Stories in Sound**
 Read: Kitchen Sisters, “Talking to Strangers”
 Listen: “The Vietnam Tapes of Lance Corporal Michael A. Baronowski,” by Christina Egloff with Jay Allison, *Lost and Found Sound* (2000, 23 min)
Due: Blog Post #6
- Th Apr 2 **Medal of Honor Interview Follow-up**
Due: Interview Recording and Paperwork for Medal of Honor Interview

- T Apr 7 **Place-Based Storytelling – Site Visits to Selected War Memorials (TBC)**
 Read: Barber, “Walking-Talking: Soundscapes, *Flâneurs*, and the Creation of Mobile Media Narratives”
Due: Archive of edited audio clips, indexed and tagged
- Th Apr 9 **Story Brainstorming and Planning**
 Listen: Selections from the Medal of Honor Clip Archive
Due: Blog Post #7
- T Apr 14 **Audio Story Work Day**
- Th Apr 16 **Scripting and Performing Narration**
 Read: Kern, *Sound Reporting* - “Writing for Broadcast” & “Reading on the Air”
Due: Story Outlines
- T Apr 21 **Audio Story Work Day**
- Th Apr 23 **Workshop Stories-in-Progress**
Due: Scripted Narrations
- T Apr 28 **Workshop Stories-in-Progress**
Due: Recorded Narrations
- Th Apr 30 **Audio Story Work Day – w/Caleb (Prof. Anderson at a conference)**
- T May 5 **Workshop Stories-in-Progress**
Due: Story Roughcuts
- Th May 7 **Audio Story Work Day**
- T May 12 **Workshop Final Audio Stories**
Due: Complete draft of Medal of Honor Audio Storytelling Project

Final Audio Storytelling Projects and Written Reflection (due date TBA)