At Ease: Developing Veterans' Sense of Belonging in the College Classroom
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Abstract

Recent changes to university services address student veterans' abilities to complete their degrees, including programs that assist student veterans in finding a sense of belonging on campus. However, the need for student veterans to feel they belong in the *classroom* remains less a focus in scholarship. Incorporating semester-length peer groups into classes offers one pedagogical strategy for addressing this need. This article presents an autoethnographic study detailing my pedagogical process to develop and implement these peer groups and illustrates how these peer groups aided several student veterans in developing a sense of belonging in the classroom.

Keywords: Student Veterans; Pedagogy; Peer Groups; Belonging

Introduction

Years ago, I balked at the idea that student veterans struggled to transition to academic life. The student veterans in my core composition courses all shared traits that indicated they would succeed in academic life: mission focus — a determination to obtain their degree; punctuality — on time to class and with even the most minor assignments; initiative — seeking me out anytime they had questions, needed clarification, or needed guidance. I was convinced that veterans who became students could not fail in their educational endeavors. I made every effort to assist in their success in my class, offering them the opportunity to write about their military experience or to opt out, considering VA appointments excused absences, and keeping on hand information about our campus Veterans Affairs Office — should that information come up in a conference or conversation.

Not until Shay[1], one of my student veterans, suddenly stopped coming to class altogether did I recognize my own misunderstanding of the transition from military to academia. For weeks after she stopped coming to class, I questioned the circumstances surrounding her departure. Like many of my other student veterans, she was one of a few nontraditional students in her class. She chose a seat in the back of the classroom, isolating herself from her peers, like many of my other student veterans. She was a B student, though she opted out of participating in class discussion. She made no mention of Veterans Affairs appointments or medical needs, and she received no disability accommodations. I was at a loss; my student veterans were always model students, and I could not help questioning whether there was something in my pedagogical approach that drove her away. I had no way of knowing if she only stopped attending my class or if she stopped attending all her classes, though the Registrar's office assured me she did not withdraw from the university, and the Dean of Students' office assured me she was not on any form of medical or family leave. I contacted our campus Veterans Affairs Office and while they had no facts to assuage my guilt, they did assure me that her dropping out was probably related to transition problems. Veterans Affairs acknowledging the transition problem student veterans faced compelled me to further investigate these transition problems, so that I might not only correct my uninformed assumption about student veterans in higher education, but also so that I might locate the information necessary to assist student veterans in their transition.

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[1] All names in this article are pseudonyms.

The Student Veterans of America (SVA) 2017 National Veterans Education Success Tracker (NVEST) declares that 822,327 veterans attended college through September 2015, and of these 53.6% completed their degrees, and 18% are currently enrolled (SVA, 2017). These are promising statistics; however, these statistics also indicate that more than ¼ of veterans (28.4%) who enroll in college are no longer enrolled and left before completing their degree. There are many reasons student veterans abandon higher education, and many of these reasons are beyond the purview of their academic institution — the need to seek full time employment, the need to address medical or mental health issues, the need to attend to personal or family issues — to name a few. However, none of these issues were recorded as the reason Shay stopped coming to class; thus, she comes to represent a more intangible group of student veterans who do not complete their degree — student veterans who abandon their education because they cannot effectively transition to the academic setting.

These student veterans may not transition because of a lack of academic guidance during registration, or they may lack an awareness of campus services available to help them transition to higher education and succeed in their academic pursuits. Some student veterans might learn about these services but find the staff lacking in understanding the needs of the student veteran population. Still others might leave because they do not feel they belong in the academic community. I believe Shay left school for the latter reason. Isolating herself from her peers, both in the class physical and intellectual space, stymied her inclusion as a member of the academic community, specifically the classroom community.

Scholarship on student veterans' transitions, as detailed below, emphasizes the need for colleges and universities to create a community that includes student veterans and works to assist their transition to the university. However, the emphasis remains largely on assisting transitions to the *campus* community, with little attention to assisting student veterans in their transition to the *classroom* community where developing a sense of belonging is more crucial to academic success than developing a sense of belonging to the campus, especially given that student veterans often manage academic time with family and work obligations; therefore, they are less likely to become engaged with the campus. Accordingly, faculty members need strong pedagogical methods that can assist student veterans in developing a sense of belonging to the classroom, and we need, more than anything, effective cross-discipline pedagogical methods. The diversity of academic disciplines, the diversity of individual pedagogies, and the short duration of academic terms makes identifying cross-discipline strategies problematic; however, the semester-length peer groups presented in this paper offer a cross-discipline pedagogical method for fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom, and these peer groups prove successful in encouraging student veterans to actively work toward the sense of belonging that will assist their academic success.

Literature Review

Student veterans need to identify with the academic community to succeed in their academic endeavors. Developing a sense of belonging to the campus directly relates to persistence among first year students (Freeman, Anderson, and Jensen, 2007; Hogerty, Lynch-Saur, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992; Hoffman, Richmond & Salomone, 2002), and students who develop a sense of belonging to the university improve their self-perception of both social acceptance and academic ability (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). The environment of 4-year colleges and universities provides significant opportunities for traditional students to develop their sense of belonging through a variety of opportunities, from participating in social organizations and campus activities to participating in classes where the majority of students are of a similar age and background. However, this

environment does not necessarily aid nontraditional students, who often have job and family responsibilities, in developing their sense of belonging.

Student veterans not only face the same transition difficulties as their nontraditional classmates, but they might further be removed from developing a sense of belonging because of their military experience. Nontraditional student transition difficulties correspond to the transition issues Hart and Thompson (2013a) identify as common to student veterans and, as Grimes et al. (2011) emphasizes, many student veterans do not identify as veterans because they do not believe civilians understand their military status. Jenner (2017) expands on this connection, citing the common educational gap as one facet of a more complex transition related to identity, connecting nontraditional students and student veterans through their transition "from a previous career or from a full-time caretaker role," the foundation of their primary identity (para. 19). Student veterans struggle with developing a sense of belonging on campus more than their traditional peers who more readily bond through their "shared backgrounds, aspirations, and attitudes" (Meeuwisse, Severiens, and Ph Born, 2010, p. 532). Jenner further connects the transition difficulties of student veterans to those of underrepresented minority students, challenged with encountering and coping with instances of discrimination, harassment, and stereotyping.

Additionally, the age difference between nontraditional students and their traditional peers causes transition problems (Branker, 2009; Center for American Progress (CAP), 2012; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008), which can lead nontraditional students to isolate themselves from their peers. Student veterans may perceive this age gap as an indicator they are behind in their studies (CAP, 2012), and their unfamiliarity with the academic community may stymie their ability to locate and use academic services that could assist in refreshing their skills (Wyner, 2014). Student veterans may confront none or all of these transition difficulties as they begin their academic career, and if left unaddressed, any or all of these transitions may increase a university's student veteran's attrition rate.

Colleges and universities recognize these transition difficulties and are working to ease the transition difficulties and better foster a sense of belonging to the university. Student veteran transition researchers address many ways administrators, faculty, and staff can adapt programs that specifically address the transition difficulties of student veterans. Best practices discussed in research include the training of advisors to work specifically with student veterans (Branker, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011; Spencer, 2016), development of a universal design system to reintegrate disabled student veterans (Branker, 2009; Burnett & Segoris, 2009), and creating veteran orientations to assist student veterans in identifying, locating, and using academic services (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008, O'Herrin, 2011; Ryan et al., 2011). Researchers urge administrators to train faculty and staff to understand and address classroom needs specific to student veterans (Burnett & Segoris, 2009; CAP, 2012; DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Hart & Thompson, 2013a; Runman & Hamrick, 2009), and they encourage administrators to create a veteran center that brings together these academic services in a single location (CAP, 2012; Elliott et al., 2011). Hart and Thompson (2013a) encourage hiring student veterans to work in targeted academic services such as the campus writing center. These recommendations assist student veterans with transition difficulties, which can foster a sense of belonging among student veterans; administrators should implement specific ways to further this sense of belonging.

Researchers emphasize that providing opportunities for developing peer relationships assists student veterans' sense of belonging to the university (Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002), and they urge creating student veteran groups to facilitate these peer relationships. Student veteran organizations are highly encouraged (CAP, 2012; DiRamio et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2011), but some researchers recommend more targeted veteran organizations. Elliott, Gonzalez, and Larsen (2011)

encourage schools to create a social group specifically for student veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress, and Burnett and Segoris (2009) encourage a similar group for disabled student veterans. Veteran mentors, either fellow students or faculty and staff members who are also veterans, are recommended as a means of both furthering sense of belonging among student veterans and assisting with transition issues (Burnett & Segoris, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott et al., 2011; O'Herrin, 2011; Ryan et al., 2010). More colleges and universities are striving to create veteran-friendly campuses, and the changes recommended above assist colleges and universities in making strategic decisions about how to best assist student veterans in their academic transition and feeling they belong on the college campus.

Programs designed to assist student veterans in developing a sense of belonging on campus are a significant step forward for improving retention; however, student veterans spend the majority of their time in the classroom, thus developing a sense of belonging to the classroom is imperative to their success. Freeman, Anderson, and Jensen's (2007) study of 238 freshmen supports this need for a sense of belonging to the classroom; their respondents asserted that when they feel they belong to the class, "they feel more confident of accomplishing their academic goals in that class, their reason for participating in class discussions and activities are more likely to reflect their personal interest in learning and mastering the materials presented, and they perceive the class as important and useful" (p. 216). The study connects students' sense of belonging to both the classroom climate and the sense of social acceptance from their peers, emphasizing that both social acceptance and sense of belonging are more difficult for students beyond the age of traditional college students.

Further, some student veterans avoid developing peer relationships in order to focus on their academics, further hindering their ability to find social acceptance and the resulting sense of belonging (Meeuwisse et al. 2010, Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Yet, age gaps and isolationist tendencies are not the only obstacles to student veterans developing a sense of belonging in the classroom. Jones (2013) emphasizes the role of the classroom atmosphere in keeping student veterans at a distance from the class, citing what student veterans "perceive as a lack of respect for faculty members" (p. 10). Such a lack of respect comes from the academic classroom that allows for "students leaving in the middle of class, packing up early, not doing their in-class assignments" (Jones, 2013, p. 10) Entering the class with a keen sense of their academic mission, student veterans are reluctant to seek social acceptance from those who do not appear to share their respect for the faculty member and the learning environment. How, then, do we address the need for student veterans to find a sense of belonging in the classroom when they perceive such impassable gaps between themselves and their peers?

Faculty are beginning to work toward assisting student veterans in transitioning to the classroom, but pedagogies that consider both the transition and ways to foster sense of belonging still need to be developed. Hart and Thompson (2013a) advocate for including a syllabus statement that "communicates the classroom as a safe space" for student veterans, which can encourage student veterans to become more active in the class and improve their chances of developing a sense of belonging. However, as Wilkes (2017) argues, including such a syllabus statement requires significant planning on the part of the faculty member. Faculty members with a lack of experience with the military must consider educating themselves about military culture prior to including such a statement in the syllabus. Otherwise student veterans may perceive the faculty member as insincere.

Researchers also understand the need for assignments to consider student veterans as their audience. Composition researchers suggest the need to consider writing assignments that consider student veterans as writers (Hart & Thompson, 2013a) and allow for student veterans to write to authentic audiences (Cleary & Wozniak, 2013). These considerations work toward helping student

veterans feel safe in the classroom and improving their transition from solider to student, but these changes do not necessarily aid student veterans in feeling that they belong in the class.

The most significant pedagogical approach to assisting student veterans in both feeling safe in the classroom and finding a sense of belonging comes from the research and practice with creating veteran-only learning communities. O'Herrin (2011) advocates for learning communities designed for entering student veterans. She emphasizes that the classes help build community among participants, helping them to find their identity among their peers; however, she also stresses that the courses are not intended to isolate student veterans from their civilian peers. Keast (2008) and Hembrough (2017) offer their own experiences designing and implementing successful veteran-only composition courses for first-year students, addressing the need to assist student veterans in developing their sense of belonging at the most crucial point in their transition. In both cases, the learning communities were successful, which encourages more faculty to consider designing such courses to assist their own student veterans. Elliott, Gonzalez, and Larsen (2011) encourage universities to consider veteran-only learning communities specifically designed for student veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress. And Whitley, Tshudi, and Gieber (2013) recommend a similar learning community for student veterans with any mental health problems. McMenamin and Kurzynski (2016) propose a veteran-only transition course that emphasizes services and skills needed for a successful transition to academic pursuits.

Learning communities offer a strong pedagogical approach for assisting student veterans both in their transition to higher education and in developing a sense of belonging among their peers. However, these learning communities are not without problems. Hembrough emphasizes that these courses work best at large universities that can support a cohort of student veterans, specifically a cohort that takes several learning community courses together, and this leaves colleges with smaller student veteran populations unable to sustain the learning community, a concern Hart and Thompson (2013a) also address. Other concerns factor into the development of learning institutions when cohorts can sustain the enrollment, and universities must consider these concerns in context with their specific veteran and faculty population. Hart & Thompson (2013a) conclude that a lack of formal training for faculty leading veteran-only learning communities can cause problems for the enrolled students, especially if faculty are not familiar with military culture. Further, they caution faculty to consider the population of the cohort itself, specifically the differences among branch of service, officers and enlisted, combat and non-combat veterans, sexual orientation, and gender of the enrolled students. Faculty need to consider these nuances of military culture, and they further need

> to be aware of the fact that the machinist who served on a submarine for his entire tour of duty and the medic who cared for Marines who were seriously wounded in a firefight or roadside bombing are going to have had very different experiences even though they are both young men who were enlisted in the United Sates Navy. There may be a tension there, and it's a delicate balance. (Hart & Thompson, 2013b, para 40)

Learning communities are a promising pedagogical approach for assisting student veterans in developing a sense of belonging in the classroom; however, colleges and universities need pedagogical methods sustainable in all classes, without relying on trends in student veteran enrollment numbers.

Methods

The peer group evolutions traced through this article occurred over six semesters of teaching core courses; therefore, I present this research from an analytical autoethnographic methodology for the purpose of exploring how these semester-long peer groups foster a sense of classroom belonging among student veterans. Anderson (2006) lists five key components to an analytic autoethnography, and I adhere to these components throughout this article. First, the analytic autoethnography is an

ethnographic study with the researcher present as "a full member of the research group or setting" (Anderson, 2006 p. 375). I taught the courses discussed in this article and designed and revised the peer group structure, thus establishing myself not only as a full member of the community, but also as the only consistent member of the community.

Further, I began this study when the use of peer groups in my core courses demonstrated a noted improvement in the participation and self-inclusion of student veterans enrolled in the course, thus I situate myself as an Opportunistic Complete Member Researcher, which Anderson defines as a researcher whose "group membership precedes the decision to conduct research on the group" (2006, p. 379). Anderson's second and third components are that the researcher demonstrates "analytic reflexivity," and carries out a "dialogue with informants beyond the self" (2006, p. 378). Beginning spring 2015, when I formally implemented peer groups, I made certain to ask my student veterans for their reaction to the peer groups at several points during the semester, making notes of these responses and reflecting on the responses when I revised the group structure. Anderson's final components are a "narrative visibility of the researcher's self" and a "commitment to theoretical analysis" (2006, p. 378), both of which are the aim of this paper, especially considering that analytical autoethnography can be used "persuasively to encourage readers to commit to certain lines of action" (2006, p. 382). The goal of this paper is to persuade other educators to implement the semester-long peer group into their core courses. I recognize that this autoethnography focuses on my individual experiences while making more generalized claims about the benefits of the peer group, and therefore, my narrative and conclusions should be considered along with the educator's own pedagogical approaches and experiences with student veterans in their specific courses.

What follows in this article traces the creation and revision of semester-length peer groups through three nonconsecutive semesters and illustrates the ways in which these peer groups fostered a sense of belonging to the classroom for student-veterans enrolled in my core courses during these semesters. I begin with the student veteran group that inspired the peer group development. Next, I illustrate how the flexible peer group fostered a sense of belonging for Andrea, an Army veteran, and how observing Andrea's leadership in her peer group led me to revise the peer group structure to include a specified peer leader. Then, I illustrate how Boyd, a Navy veteran and peer group leader, drew from his military leadership experiences to lead his peer group and how this leadership led to Boyd's sense of belonging to the class. I use specific instances of student veterans as illustrations in this article; however, these are not the only successful student veterans to find their sense of belonging through the peer group. I observed a noticeable increase in student veterans' class participation since I implemented the peer groups, compared to student veterans enrolled in my core courses where peer groups were not implemented. The increased participation directly connected to their sense of belonging first to their peer group and, eventually, to the full class.

First Observations: Small Groups and Sense of Belonging

Early in spring 2014, I introduced a semester-long group project to my sophomore British Literature students, a project that required the students to work in groups of three or four to complete an in-depth written project around a significant, historical piece of literature not covered during the course. By the time the project was introduced, students in the class were already clustering together, excepting the three nontraditional students who isolated themselves from all other class members, each choosing a seat alone in the back of the classroom. Two of these nontraditional students, Patrick and Daniel, identified themselves early in the semester as student veterans. The third, Ian, identified himself only as a nontraditional student. With other students locating groups with their friends in class, Patrick, Daniel, and Ian begrudgingly came together as a group of outsiders forced to work together. I allotted a full class period for the groups to choose their

literary pieces. During this group activity, Daniel, Ian, and Patrick also discussed their background. Ian, learning that Patrick and Daniel were Marine Corps and Army veterans, respectively, disclosed his own status as an Army veteran, and this common connection formed a bond among the group. Soon, they were sitting together in class, and Patrick would notify me when Daniel was missing class due to a VA appointment, unaware Daniel previously discussed the absence with me. When one member of the group missed class, the other members of the group made certain he received notes from the missed class. Daniel missed multiple days of class during the semester as he met with several VA specialists to prepare for back surgery, and he likely would have failed the class due to the lack of material he missed, were it not for the assistance of his group. Prior to the group formation, none of the student veterans took part in class discussions; however, as they began to bond, their participation increased significantly.

During one class, Patrick engaged in a heated dialogue with another classmate over an interpretation of a poem. Neither had a deep connection to the poem, but both were invested in their interpretation. When class ended, Andrew asked Patrick what he was thinking arguing with her, pointing out she was an Honors student. Patrick responded that he knew his group "had his back" and he wanted her to understand that his "real world perspective" was just as valid as her "book perspective." This exchange showed a significant change in the approach of my student veterans to class discussions in my core courses, particularly class discussions where they had no personal connection to the work or topic. I started paying closer attention to this group of student veterans, uncertain if I was seeing the personality of one student or the result of their loosely formed group.

This class was not the first where I taught multiple student veterans; however, it was the first class I taught where the student veterans came together and assisted each other. In prior classes, both the mission-focused nature of student veterans and their isolationist tendencies prevented them from connecting with their peers, even when these peers were also student veterans. I watched the student veteran group come together, beyond the scope of the required group project, to support each other in ways their peers were not, though the other groups formed from existing friendships. Prior to this semester, the group projects I incorporated were short-term assignments given in the latter half of the semester and due within six weeks of the assignment, and in none of these group projects did students work together beyond the scope of the group project. In fact, for some group projects, getting the students to work together was incredibly difficult. In this British Literature course, all the groups worked together through the duration of the semester, but no other group came together to assist each other in the way the student veterans did. I decided to use the student veteran group as a model for creating semester-length peer groups with the notion that a more formal peer group would create stronger groups for group projects, but also with the hope that student veterans in my courses could use the peer groups to form bonds similar to that of Daniel, Patrick, and Ian, bonds that would improve their chances at successfully transitioning into higher education.

Designing the Peer Group

The peer group design emerged from both my observations of Daniel, Patrick and Ian's peer group, and from the emerging scholarship on student veteran transitions and veteran-only learning communities. I knew my university could not sustain a veteran-only learning community, but I appreciated the benefits to creating peer-to-peer relationships that learning communities offered. I also recognized in Daniel, Patrick, and Ian's group a very informal micro-learning community, and I believed such a community would complement my teaching style and benefit student veterans enrolled in my class. Leonhardy (2009) encourages the use of small groups for student veterans, as they "facilitate class discussions, which allows [veterans] to establish in-group relationships and non-veterans to ask questions — questions that some students deeply long to have answered" (p. 346). I

recognized these in-group relationships from Daniel, Patrick, and Ian's group, and I hypothesized that making such groups a formal part of my courses would help student veterans to better integrate into the class through in-group relationships where they might first find a sense of belonging to the group. I further hypothesized that developing a sense of belonging to the peer group could lead to more participation in full-class discussion, as I observed with Patrick, which in turn would lead to a sense of belonging to the class as a whole. Thus, I began devising semester-length peer groups for my fall 2014 course. I created the peer group in three stages, first identifying and revising class activities to include peer group activities, then planning the time management and persistence of peer groups throughout the semester, and finally creating a syllabus statement to alert students to the peer groups at the start of the course.

Identifying and Revising Class Activities

I designed the peer group by first identifying specific course activities where peer groups could work together consistently throughout the semester. I planned for three specific, recurring areas of peer group work for the semester: group discussions, writing workshops, and peer reviews. I selected these course activities because they were already integral to the class, and I believed they would succeed as peer group activities.

Class discussions are a consistent activity in my courses, and I incorporate these discussions as a pedagogical approach to teaching students how to discuss relevant course material, make connections between their ideas and the ideas of others, and to maintain an open mind about diverse perspectives that arise in these discussions. Unfortunately, students are often reluctant to share their thoughts on the discussion topic with the entire class. I hypothesized that students would more readily share their ideas with their peer group, and I anticipated the peer group discussions would provide students an opportunity to discuss their ideas with classmates with whom they worked regularly, thus providing a chance for all students to have their voice *heard* by their peer group, an opportunity not always possible in larger class discussions, especially for students more reluctant to participate in these discussions.

Writing workshops are another integral part of my writing courses, and I revised the structure of these workshops to create peer group workshops rather than having students work alone, isolated from assistance and feedback. Prior to incorporating the peer group, writing workshops already maintained a specific structure. In these workshops, I introduce a writing technique to the class, we practice several examples as a full class, and then students work on their own to apply the technique to their current writing assignment. I revised the application component of writing workshops, creating a peer group activity where group members ensure each member of the group understands the technique and can apply that technique to their current writing assignment.

Finally, I revised the peer review requirement of my courses to keep students working with their peer group. Students provide more thorough and honest feedback to a peer when they are confident in their relationship with the peer and when they are confident their ideas and opinions are respected by the peer writer, and I hypothesized increased confidence through continued interaction with the same group of students in other low stakes activities, such as the peer group discussions or workshops. The structure of the peer review remained the same, but rather than anonymous or random distribution of student papers, the students circulated their drafts among their peer group members.

Time Management and Peer Group Consistency

I planned for time limits and frequency of the activities so that students would comprehend the importance I placed on peer group activities. For student veterans specifically, I wanted to stress the importance of the peer group to the overall course so that they would come to view these interactions as part of their overall mission, not an obstacle to completing the mission. Thus, I designed peer groups to work together during each class period, but I knew that the same amount of time would not work for the different types of peer group activities. I previously allotted 20 minutes for full class discussions, but when I integrated peer groups, I reduced the allotted time to 15 minutes following a five minute peer discussion; I anticipated adjusting the specific timing as I determined that students needed more or less time in either the peer group or the full class discussion.

Writing workshops and peer reviews already had time allowances from previous semesters, and I kept these times consistent because they worked for my pedagogical approach to teaching writing. As previously discussed, writing workshops maintain a specific structure that allows time for students to apply the workshop materials to their own work. I plan a 15-minute minimum for the application portion of the workshop, though I allow for more time when the workshop focuses on more in-depth writing techniques. Rather than changing the time for the workshops, I changed the structure of the application component, dividing the time into a minimum of 10 minutes for students to apply the technique and five minutes for students to receive feedback from their peer group members. This structure allowed for peer groups to begin working with giving and receiving peer feedback on small, low stakes work prior to offering feedback in the full draft peer review sessions. Full draft peer review also maintained the original time frame, with a full day of class devoted to students providing feedback to their peer group members. Prior to integrating peer groups, students completed anonymous peer reviews of two other students' work in one class meeting, and this time frame worked efficiently for the task; therefore, I kept the time frame, but I altered the structure to have students provide feedback to members of their peer group.

Peer groups needed consistent interaction, and this needed specific planning to allow for groups to work together each class meeting but not in such a way that group activities monopolize the class time. I planned writing workshops for once or twice a week, depending on the writing assignment, maintaining the successful schedule I used in previous semesters, and I maintained my peer review schedule to occur at the end of each writing assignment. Therefore, I planned peer group discussions and class discussions to take place during each class meeting that did not contain a writing workshop or peer review. This planning allowed for students to work with their peer group each day, allowing ample time for both instruction and peer group bonding.

Preparing for Peer Groups

I added a statement to my syllabus to alert students to the use of the peer group from the first class meeting, though peer groups would not form until the third week of class. I intended the statement to alert students to the peer groups and encourage them to meet their classmates early to make decisions about group members. For fall 2014, the statement read as follows:

> This course includes a significant amount of group work, and I facilitate this group work through the inclusion of semester-length peer groups. During week 3 of the course, you will form peer groups of 3-4 students, and you will work with the same peer group throughout the semester. I encourage you, during the first 2 weeks of class, to get to know as many of your peers as possible to ensure you can choose peer group members you can work with daily. (Blackwell-Starnes, 2014)

I anticipated some students would already know at least one person in the class, whether from a shared social group, sports team, another shared course, of from an arrangement made during registration; however, I knew most students, especially in core courses, would enter the course

without knowing any of their classmates, thus committing to a semester-long peer group would seem a daunting endeavor. For this reason, alerting students to the use of peer groups in the syllabus and discussing the peer groups during the first weeks of class would better prepare all students and encourage student veterans to meet their classmates and inspect cues from them as they do from their instructor and syllabus (Mallory & Downs, 2014). Students getting to know their peers during the first weeks of class would be imperative to facilitating successful peer groups, and I planned for several opportunities for students to meet and work with their peers through the first two weeks of the class.

I launched the peer groups in fall 2014, using the structure discussed here. The peer group structure succeeded in building greater cohesion and stronger relationships among group members during this first iteration; however, the pilot class contained no student veterans, so no opportunity arose to observe student veterans in this semester. The following semester, spring 2015, I made minor revisions to the first week of class activities and repeated the peer group, and this semester was my first opportunity to observe the effect of the peer group on a student veteran.

Belonging Through Acceptance: Andrea and the Nontraditional Peer Group

In spring 2015, I expanded the first week of class introduction activities to further students' abilities to meet and work with more classmates, offering one well-defined opportunity at the end of each class day during the first two weeks. Each day, I reiterated the purpose of these activities and the peer group they would form. I provided each student with a checklist of names for each student in the class at the start of the second class meeting to facilitate meeting as many peers as possible. During these first two weeks, I allotted 10 minutes during each class period to meeting classmates, using a variety of icebreakers to help students connect with peers who share similar interests, such as sports, majors, or hobbies, and I incorporated other icebreakers that help students connect with peers who share similar backgrounds, such as having a full-time job, family, or pets.

I devoted the start of the third week of class to establishing peer groups. I provided students the first half of class for finalizing peer groups, and I encouraged those peer groups to find a place in the classroom where they would sit together, as I believed proximity would assist in building better relationships among peer group. Peer group members then exchanged contact information and decided on a specific means of group communication. I assigned a collaborative activity for the end of this class meeting so that group members received an early opportunity to work together on a low-stakes activity prior to their first class discussion, which would take place the following class meeting.

One of the peer groups that formed during this third week consisted of Bekka, LaVonda, and Andrea, three nontraditional students. Andrea immediately stood out among her peer group as she took charge of the group immediately. As previously discussed, the peer group structure required group members to acquire contact information for their peer group members, and Andrea not only collected this information for her group, but also used this information to establish a group text message prior to the end of the first peer group meeting. She started the message with the intent of keeping the group on task outside class. During her first conference, I asked Andrea about the circumstances that led her to take charge so soon, and she explained that she worried that the group would forget materials because of family and work responsibilities outside class, and if that happened, she would lose workshop points. She further explained that creating the group text assisted her with staying on task for the class and gave her "a sense of purpose in the group" (Andrea, personal communication, October 8, 2014).

This sense of purpose, however, did not assist Andrea in developing a sense of belonging to the group immediately; in fact, during the first weeks of workshopping their first writing assignment, Andrea continued to serve as a leader for the group—facilitating, not participating. She continued to

lead discussions and assisted her peers in selecting a paper topic and developing content for their paper; however, she did not offer her own paper for workshop material. I conferenced again with Andrea, concerned she did not have a paper topic, which was untrue, though her chosen topic did not align with the assignment. She admitted she knew the topic was not perfect, and she confessed she chose the topic because she did not like discussing her personal life with people she barely knew, saying they always "asked the wrong questions" (Andrea, personal communication, October 22, 2014). Andrea left the conference still reluctant to change her paper topic, and she attended the first group peer review two weeks later without a paper, a decision that altered the group dynamic and clearly defined Andrea's role in her peer group.

Bekka and LaVonda did not believe that Andrea forgot to bring her paper to class, citing Andrea's text reminder from that very morning. Andrea soon admitted that she did not forget the paper, rather she knew the paper was not sufficient for the assignment and did not want to waste her peer members' time. LaVonda expressed relief at this confession, explaining that she relied on Andrea to help her remember what was due because she was still adjusting to college, and Bekka agreed with this sentiment. Andrea's subsequent actions revealed that she heard her peer group's comments, but took away from them a different meaning — she gave herself a purpose in the peer group by electing to take a leadership role in the group and the group expected specific things from their leader. Having her peers recognize her purpose in the group immediately changed Andrea's perception of her peer group, her place in that group, and her sense of belonging to the group.

The implied leadership expectation motivated Andrea that same day, and for the first time, she took an active role in the peer review. Andrea's group discussed Bekka's paper, which developed the argument that financial aid should develop a more sophisticated means of determining family contribution, focusing on Bekka's decision to postpone college until her family contribution did not include her parents' salaries. The peer group also discussed LaVonda's paper, which developed an argument that high schools need to offer more vocational programs for students who are not positive they want to attend college. The topic built on LaVonda's personal narrative of working full-time for several years at a fast food restaurant because her high school offered no vocational training and she was uncertain she wanted to attend college. The similar theme for the two papers came from the group's brainstorming activities, where Andrea did not discuss her own need for college finances; however, during the peer review discussion of LaVonda's paper, Andrea disclosed that she postponed college because of financial need and further disclosed that this financial need partially motivated her decision to join the Army. Bekka and LaVonda both responded positively to Andrea's military disclosure, expressing a belief that she was smart in deciding to use the military to finance her education and that she was brave for making the sacrifice. They also encouraged Andrea to use that decision to write about something related to the military and financial aid. Andrea refused because she was not interested in the topic, and she turned the group's attention back to discussing LaVonda's paper, again using her leadership skills to keep the group on task. Once the group finished LaVonda's peer review, Andrea, for the first time during the paper workshops, turned the discussion to her own work, expressing the idea of changing her topic to opening all military jobs to female soldiers, a topic receiving significant attention at the time. Her peer group supported the topic and helped Andrea brainstorm the paper by spending the remainder of the class discussing the topic.

Andrea spoke with me to discuss her paper topic after class, disclosing her military status to me at that time. During our conversation, she elaborated on how she reached this topic, and I asked specifically about her decision to not disclose her military service during the original brainstorming for the assignment. She explained that she was reluctant to disclose her service to strangers, but her peer group bonded during the previous weeks "because we needed each other" (Andrea, personal communication, November 3, 2014). The timing and rationale for her disclosure led me to further

question her, and she admitted that only when LaVonda expressed the need for the group text did Andrea realize the group needed her as much as she needed them; therefore, when the peer group returned to the financial aid discussion, she felt more confident discussing her own financial aid. Andrea added that she only disclosed her military service because she "finally felt comfortable contributing to the conversation," hoping that because the peer group members were also nontraditional students, they would understand her decision (Andrea, personal communication, November 3, 2014).

Andrea's peer group emphasizes the ways in which small group relationships develop through constant interaction. The peer group provided Andrea an opportunity to work closely with only two members of a 25-person class, proving what researchers emphasize as the benefit to small group relationships in the course — the opportunity for students to develop peer relationships that lead to an ability to develop a sense of belonging (Freeman et al. 2007; Hoffman et al.2002; Leonhardy 2009). For Andrea, reliance on and use of her military leadership skills assisted her in finding her place among the peer group members, and she only opened up to her peer group members when she recognized that these leadership skills made her a genuine part of the peer group. Andrea's sense of belonging demonstrates how the support of the peer group and the sense of belonging to the peer group can encourage student veterans to become more active in the class.

Revising the Peer Group

I revised the peer group structure for my fall 2016 course to include a specified peer leader for each group and specific responsibilities for the peer leader. The peer leader role emerged from my observations of Andrea's interactions with her peer group and recent scholarship. Sean Morrow and Alexis Hart (2014) highlight that student veterans assume leadership roles in their classes because "the value of leadership and teamwork is ingrained in veterans from their first day of basic training" (p. 43), and this value of leadership continues throughout their military career and into their civilian life. Further support for the move to include peer group leaders comes from Branker (2009), who encourages "opportunities that allow student veterans to develop, or continue to develop, leadership skills of integrity so as to enable positive action, accountability, and personal development" (p. 65). Andrea assumed a leadership role in her peer group without hesitation, leading her peer group during class discussions and workshops, reminding her peers of upcoming deadlines and class needs, notifying me when her peers would be absent or tardy to class. Her leadership skills became more a catalyst for fostering a sense of belonging among her peer leaders than the shared nontraditional status, and her group expected her to hold herself accountable, which directly led to her personal development. Returning to my notes from the spring 2014 British Literature group project, I recognized a pattern with Patrick, Daniel, and Ian's peer group, a group comprised completely of student veterans. Each group member had prior leadership experience through their military experience; however, both Daniel and Ian deferred the group leadership to Patrick. In this grouping, Patrick consistently kept me updated on Daniel's missed classes and took the responsibility for submitting the final group project prior to the deadline.

From these two groups, I hypothesized that incorporating a more formal chain of command among peer group members could further assist student veterans in developing a sense of belonging to the class. I revised the syllabus statement for the course to include preliminary information about the peer leader role, taking my cue from the observations of Mallory and Downs (2014) that "veterans are fine readers of rhetorical situations, and from the opening moments of class, they are inspecting cues amidst syllabi and instructor demeanor, language and responses to see where they fit and what is expected and allowed" (p. 63). I intended the revised statement to signal to student veterans that they might find their place in the peer leader role. The revised syllabus statement reads:

> This course includes a significant amount of group work, and I facilitate this group work through the inclusion of semester-length peer groups. During week 3 of the course, you will form peer groups of 3-4 students, and you will work with the same peer group throughout the semester. Each peer group has a designated leader, chosen by the peer group members, and the peer leader has specific responsibilities for group management. I encourage you, during the first 2 weeks of class, to get to know as many of your peers as possible to ensure you can choose peer group members you can work with daily. (Blackwell-Starnes, 2016)

I also planned a discussion of specific aspects of the peer leader position during the first class days to make clear expectations for the peer leader role, expanding on the rhetorical cues included in the syllabus, and stressing the responsibility of the role to all students.

Belonging through Leadership: Boyd and the Provisional Peer Group

The peer leader role became a formal component of the peer group in fall 2016. I discussed the peer group and the role of the peer leader during the first class meeting, and I constantly reiterated the need for a responsible peer leader. I discussed these roles early to prevent students from opting into peer leadership on a whim and so that student veterans in the class could identify early the leadership role they could pursue in the course. I explained the peer group dynamic, emphasizing that group members would follow the peer leader's directions during group activities and stressing that group members would contact their peer leader in case of an absence or tardy. I reiterated the duties of the peer leader to keep the group on task during group activities, to relay absences or tardies to me, and to ensure absent group members received class notes. I also acknowledged that conflicts can arise in peer groups, and I informed students that any problems with another member of the peer group should be addressed by the peer leader, but any problems that arise with the peer leader should be brought to my attention.

The emphasis on the peer leader role led one student veteran, Boyd, to choose the peer leader role for his peer group. Boyd's peer group included three other students, Demarcus, Jeffrey, and Tiana, and all the group members were initially reluctant to participate in the peer group. Excepting Boyd, all members of the peer group were attending the university on a provisional enrollment program that required the student to successfully complete full-time course work during the first year of college before receiving full admission. Each provisional student disclosed their status during peer group discussions where each peer group elected their peer leader. Boyd volunteered for the peer leader role without disclosing his military service, explaining to me later that he volunteered because he wanted to succeed in the class and perceived the peer leader position as part of his success. As the peer group worked toward their first assignment, Boyd learned that his group members were hoping to succeed in college but anticipating an impending failure. The peer leader position established only a few requirements for the peer leader position, and Boyd met with me to clarify the limits of this role, explaining that he wanted to do all he could to help his peer members succeed. When I cautioned him to not let that desire impede his own success, he disclosed his military experience and cited leadership experiences during his service as evidence he could balance the additional responsibility (Boyd, personal communication, September 26, 2016). I agreed to the proposed changes to his leadership role, with two caveats: the group members must be receptive to his assistance and the group must not violate any course or university policies.

Boyd set to work initiating a group text that he used to remind his peer group of homework and materials needed for the next class. Within a week, I noted a change in the group's preparedness, and I was impressed when all members of the group showed up with a full draft for their first peer review. I commended Boyd on his leadership skills and the group on their improvements. The group preparedness continued through the next paper, and a clear respect for Boyd emerged. Much like

Andrea, this respect for leadership increased participation in the peer group, and Boyd demonstrated a sense of belonging to the peer group. However, where Andrea's sense of belonging to the peer group encouraged her to participate more with the larger class discussions, Boyd remained reticent to participate in these discussions. At a later conference, Boyd connected this reticence to a lack of sense of belonging, stating "it wasn't that I didn't feel confident in my ideas or knowledge. I just did not feel like I fit in with the class. Everybody else was 18 and just out of high school, and I'm not. I thought they wouldn't listen to what I had to say because I wasn't one of them, so I kept my thoughts to my peer group" (Boyd, personal communication, November 28, 2016). When asked, he explained that he participated with his peer group because he was the peer leader and participation was important: "it was my responsibility to keep the group on task and doing well. It's like being a squad leader. If you're going to be a leader, you have to lead by example. So, I led our peer discussions, and we eventually came together [as a peer group]" (Boyd, personal communication, November 16, 2016). Boyd developed his sense of belonging to the peer group through his leadership skills, and these leadership skills later assisted him in finding a sense of belonging among the larger class.

Boyd's leadership skills became a model to other peer leaders when we spent part of a class period setting up midterm conferences. This modeling encouraged Boyd's participation in the larger class, eventually cultivating his sense of belonging to the class. As we prepared to set up conferences, Boyd asked permission to text Jeffrey, who was absent from class. In his request, he explained that he wanted to try to get Jeffrey a time that worked for his schedule, so Jeffrey would not have to schedule a conference with only a few options. I granted him permission, and immediately two other peer leaders asked for the same permission. Boyd's modeling of problem solving skills was unintentional—his solution came from his military leadership experience and training to anticipate and solve problems; nevertheless, the subsequent requests from other peer leaders emphasized that Boyd's leadership skills were not only appreciated by his peer group but also helpful to other peer leaders in the class, reinforcing that skills learned in military leadership roles could be useful beyond his small peer group and these skills assisted other students in improving their own leadership skills.

Following midterm conferences, Boyd began participating significantly more in full class discussions. He offered his input into class discussions, engaged in discussions with members of other peer groups, and submitted his own work-in-progress for a workshop where his work was read and critiqued by the entire class. This significant improvement seemed consistent with Boyd's personality, but inconsistent with his class participation prior to midterm conferences. I discussed this change at the end of the semester, and once again, Boyd attributed his participation to his leadership skills and to the response his request received from other peer leaders:

> They were following my lead, and that mattered. Starting college when you're 24 is weird; you don't feel like you belong in the same room as a group of 18 year-old kids. I didn't talk in class because I felt like I was intruding on their place. But when they took my idea for setting up conferences and copied it, I felt like maybe I did have a place. I didn't really know, at first. I just told myself that they saw me as a leader, and when you're in college, leaders aren't the ones who are quiet and don't participate in class. I was really uncomfortable [in class discussions] at first. I still felt like I was intruding, but then other students started responding to what I was saying. It got easier after that. I started to feel like I really did belong in the classroom with them. (Boyd, personal communication, November 28, 2016)

Boyd's line of thinking emphasizes the peer group leadership role as a significant factor in fostering his sense of belonging in the classroom. Boyd's peer group did not bond in the way Andrea's peer group did, and I hypothesize that the significant differences in backgrounds prevented their bonding; however, much like Andrea, Boyd used his military leadership skills to create a specific role and a specific space in the course. The fact that Boyd emphasized the optics of leaders as the impetus for

his participation speaks to the possibility for the leadership role to serve as a catalyst for helping student veterans find their sense of belonging in the classroom.

The peer group chain of command offered Boyd a consistent leadership role in the classroom with a clear sense of duties, thus aiding his sense of belonging as well as easing the transition into the academic environment. Leading the peer group furthered Boyd's sense of belonging as he gained confidence through the peer group. Freeman, Anderson, and Jensen's (2007) research shows that sense of belonging increases student confidence in their work, and my experiences with the semester-length peer group shows that, for student veterans, improved confidence in leadership roles also improves sense of belonging in the classroom. Veterans are often the students with the most leadership experience and other peer leaders can turn to the student veteran's example for their own leadership, usually without verbalizing this turn, but in ways immediately apparent to both the student veteran and the instructor. Such leadership examples come from small problems, such as a group member not arriving with his peer review draft or a peer leader working to keep a group on task. When other peer leaders follow the example of the student veteran peer leader, they bolster the student veteran's confidence and further his sense of belonging in the classroom.

Facilitating Belonging without Disclosure

I designed the peer groups in this paper with a specific focus on fostering a sense of belonging among student veterans enrolled in my core courses; however, I designed these peer groups as a consistent addition to my courses without specifically targeting student veterans in order to allow for student veterans to choose not to disclose their military identity. Previous experience with student veterans and recent scholarship on student veteran disclosure in the classroom motivated this decision. Grimes et al. (2011), stress that many student veterans do not identify as more than non-traditional students because they do not believe their peers and faculty understand the complexities of their veteran status. Morrow and Hart (2014) offer a more detailed explanation for the decision not to disclose veteran status:

> Some veterans want to keep their status private because they feel as if they have spent enough time being defined by their uniforms and the chance to (re)enter a college classroom simply as another student is a welcome relief. For these students, the desire to receive external acknowledgement or attention is minimized by the fact that they either do not want to relive what they have been through or they are sufficiently confident about what they achieved during their service and consider college to be their next challenge, their next mission, with no need to dwell on their past experiences. (p. 36)

Student veterans do not always disclose their veteran status in the classroom and are not always readily identifiable as veterans; however, they are identifiable and do identify as nontraditional students. The similarities of these struggles and the difficulty to finding sense of belonging highlights the role peer groups hold in assisting both student populations in overcoming transition struggles, regardless of the student veteran's decision to disclose their status.

Incorporating peer groups into the classroom does not privilege student veterans with better accommodations than their peers, but rather assists them in finding a sense of belonging in the class just as it assists civilian nontraditional students. Semester-length peer groups also increase bonding among traditional students, particularly those who might otherwise not form new relationships with classmates on their own. The peer group proved significantly beneficial to both Andrea and Boyd, and even the more informal peer group assisted Patrick, Daniel, and Ian in gaining a sense of belonging in the classroom, but the peer group also aided each of their peer group members as well. Bekka and LaVonda, both nontraditional students, increased their participation in class as the semester progressed and they become more confident among their traditional peers, thus illustrating

the similarity between non-traditional and student veteran transition issues Hart and Thompson (2013a) emphasize. Demarcus, Jeffrey, and Tiana, though traditional students, also began the semester lacking a sense of belonging to the classroom, a repercussion of their provisional admission, itself a repercussion of not receiving adequate college preparation in high school; however, Boyd's leadership and encouragement not only improved their academic preparedness, but also helped each of them gain a sense of belonging to the class via the peer group. I emphasize this broader sense of belonging among both traditional and nontraditional students to encourage incorporating semester-length peer groups without requiring student veterans to disclose their military status, but with the knowledge that the peer group significantly improves the student veteran's sense of belonging to the academic classroom.

Conclusion

Student veterans leave higher education prior to obtaining their degrees for a variety of reasons, not all of which instructors and administrators can control. Efforts on the campus level to assist student veterans in the transition to the academic environment and finding their sense of belonging on campus are crucial to reducing the attrition rates of student veterans who do not feel the academic environment is right for them. However, such work to help student veterans find their sense of belonging so that they can succeed in college is just as crucial in the classroom. Incorporating semester-length peer groups with regular contact encourages student veterans to reach out to their peers and integrate themselves into a small group, which assists them in developing a sense of belonging in the academic classroom. The familiar structure of the peer group allows student veterans to ease into the individual classroom setting, but it also places them in constant contact with peer group members with whom they will interact throughout the semester, thus preventing them from isolating themselves from their classmates and furthering their ability to transition into academic life. Small peer groups provide opportunities for student veterans to become acquainted with their peer members before disclosing their veteran status or choosing to continue in the class identified only as a nontraditional student. Further, student veterans who perceive maturity gaps between themselves and their traditional peers can create peer groups that include other nontraditional students or traditional students who demonstrate maturity and commitment to the course during the first weeks of class. In these small peer groups, student veterans often make academic connections with their peers that facilitate better discussions and improve academic participation.

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