

“The Military Taught Me Something about Writing”: How Student Veterans Complicate the Novice-to-Expert Continuum in First-year Composition

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Abstract: In this article, I summarize an interview-based, qualitative research study conducted with ten Marine student veterans on their experiences with college composition courses, focusing particularly on the how the participants’ previous interactions with teaching, learning, and writing in the Marine Corps have impacted their perceptions and expectations of teaching, learning, and writing in the first-year composition classroom. Specifically, I focus on the way in which relevant conclusions from the study regarding Marine student veterans’ prior rhetorical knowledge and experiences complicate the novice-to-expert paradigm at work in many first-year composition courses. The piece concludes with suggestions for repurposing this paradigm to one that encourages faculty to make room for prior rhetorical knowledge while identifying areas where student veterans may need support.

The novice-to-expert paradigm has become a useful way for articulating skill growth in a number of areas, including writing. Because “learning to write is a complex process, both individual and social, that takes place over time with continued practice and informed guidance,” many educators find that the novice-to-expert representation provides an accessible framework within which they can position and aid a writer’s progress (CWPA). Researchers in education, psychology, and composition studies have investigated what characteristics, habits, attitudes, or actions differentiate novice writers from expert or skilled writers (Carey, Flower, Hayes, Schriver, and Haas; Carroll; Dickson; Flower; Harris; Haswell; Hayes and Flower; McCutchen; Sommers and Saltz). Yet, by what name do we call someone who is not a novice and not yet an expert? Or rather, what language do we have to denote achievements along this continuum? My argument is not that we need taxonomy for the spaces between *novice* and *expert* but rather that the absence of such language reinforces, however unintentionally, a model of dichotomy rather than continuum. As Patricia A. Alexander pointed out more than twenty years ago, we are still unsure “when a novice is no longer a novice” (38). For some student populations, such as student veterans, the *novice* status presents challenges—both for student veterans and for composition instructors. Based on my qualitative study with Marine student veterans, I present findings suggesting these nontraditional students complicate the novice-to-expert paradigm as an approach to writer development in first-year composition.

The potential challenges for applying the novice-to-expert model to student veterans in first-year composition courses stem from the way in which first-year writers are expected to operate as new (almost) members of the community. Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz collected multiple artifacts from more than 400 students over four years and then discussed the novice-as-expert paradox from the perspective of the traditional undergraduate. They envisioned the first-year student as someone standing at the threshold between high school and college,

between adolescence and adulthood. Using a construction metaphor, Sommers and Saltz reveal the challenges such a paradox presents:

Freshmen are required to become master builders while they are still apprentices—to build as they become familiar with the materials and methods of construction. They are asked to develop expertise in new subjects and methodologies, while still learning how to handle the tools of these disciplines and decipher their user’s manuals. (131-32)

The expectations for first-year writers to produce papers that mimic expert writing while still attempting to use the discursal “tools” and navigate the “user’s manuals” are designed to fast track novice writers through their apprenticeship, an argument most poignantly made by David Bartholomae. While Sommers and Saltz acknowledge the importance instructor guidance and support play in a writer’s development, they place a greater emphasis on the students’ willingness to “accept themselves as novices” while “writing simultaneously as a novice and an expert” (133; 132).

Reconciling Knowledge and Prior Knowledge

Throughout the 1980s and ‘90s, emerging research on expertise prompted debates among two primary camps of composition scholars: those who supported cognitive models associated with learning and writing development and those who advocated for the application of social theories. As summarized by Michael Carter, those allied with cognitive rhetoric stressed the importance of learners gaining general knowledge which they could then apply strategically to virtually all writing contexts (Atlas; Flower; Flower and Hayes); whereas those who aligned with the growing social rhetoric movement asserted the importance of gaining domain-specific, local knowledge for gaining understanding of and participating in socially constructed discourse communities (Bizzell; Bruffee; Faigley). Many educators and composition scholars now recognize the limitations of these approaches when subscribed to separately and the potential for improving writer progress when combined (Bazerman; Beaufort, “Developmental”; Carter; Magnifico; Niemi). Charles Bazerman explains:

Skilled writers using the same language on the same topic take substantially different approaches, making different arguments with different information cast within different styles. . . . Thus, writing should be considered not only as a problem-solving process, as envisioned in the early stages of the cognitive psychology of writing . . . but also as a constructive process in which thought is transformed, formulated, and constituted as new knowledge. (92)

To guide students in their progression from novice to expert, then, educators need to create learning tasks that require students to make use of both general, procedural knowledge as well as domain-specific knowledge (Beaufort, “Developmental”; Magnifico; Niemi). Muriel Harris agrees: “We have to put together a description that accounts for differences in levels of ability and experience (from novice to expert), for differences in writing tasks, and also for differences in the as yet largely unexplored area of composing process differences among writers” (56). Harris’s appeal is one I invoke as we learn how the revising processes of Marine student veterans suggest a position that is neither novice nor expert.

Acknowledging students’ prior knowledge in composition studies began with connections to reading (Perin, Keselman, and Monopoli; Rapp and van den Broek; Spires and Donley). Reading specialists and educational psychologists promote the importance of developing students’ reading abilities through comprehensive strategies that include encouraging connections to prior knowledge in order to tap into the reader’s superordinate cognitive

structure (Perin, Keselman, and Monopoli) and allow for more meaningful interaction with texts and improved motivation to read (Spires and Donley). More recently, composition scholars have also taken up prior knowledge, examining the role it plays in the transfer of writing skills from high school to first-year composition and from first-year composition into other academic writing locales (Beaufort, *College Writing*; Bergmann and Zapernick; McCutchen; Reiff and Bawarshi; Robertson, Taczak, Yancey; Robinson and Burton; Sommers and Saltz). In fact, prior knowledge and writing transfer have both made recent appearances in *Composition Forum*, and readers can familiarize themselves with the historical applications to composition studies with a reading of Liane Robertson, Kara Taczak, and Kathleen Blake Yancey's article, "[Notes toward a Theory of Prior Knowledge and Its Role in College Composers' Transfer of Knowledge and Practice](http://compositionforum.com/issue/26/prior-knowledge-transfer.php)" [<http://compositionforum.com/issue/26/prior-knowledge-transfer.php>]."

Prior knowledge also plays a role in composing processes. Citing work by Berninger and Swanson, Deborah McCutchen differentiates between two types of text production skills: *transcription* and *text generation*. Text generation in writing overlaps with the production of oral language, because both rely on "content selection, lexical retrieval, and syntactic processes"; transcription refers to the physical and cognitive actions of putting the text in written form and, as a result, relies on additional skill sets such as spelling and motor skills (54). The relationship between the cognitive processes that occur during oral language and those that eventually make their way into written form is an important one, as both rely on the speaker/writer's ability to form connections between prior knowledge (of content, of the literacy act, of audience) and the context of the current literacy task. According to McCutchen, "Skilled writers . . . hold considerable knowledge of discourse forms . . . and frequently have extensive topic knowledge" (58). Both types of prior knowledge—of general discourse forms and of domain-specific topics—are important to consider as we learn about the prior knowledge many student veterans bring with them into their composition classrooms.

Teaching and Learning in the Marine Corps

Service members undergo a professional military education within a complex organizational learning system, the primary goals of which are to impart skills, institutional policies, educational philosophies, and organizational culture to students using a systematic and transferable approach called the Systems Approach to Training (Reed, Bullis, Collins, and Paparone 47; *Systems Approach*). Involvement in such a complex educational system, even for a single enlistment period, can potentially influence how military students and student veterans perceive their own learning. Education in the Marine Corps, like other service branches, takes on several different delivery methods, although an emphasis on practical application is one central feature. Marine students are also encouraged to be critical, strategic, and reasoned thinkers; self-motivated; detail-oriented; and assertive, confident communicators in class (*Marine Corps Education*; Herrmann et al.). They are also expected to ask questions, participate actively, volunteer for leadership roles, and support struggling Marines (*Marine Corps Values*).

The teacher-learner relationship in the Corps contains its own hierarchy. The authority granted to the Marine instructor derives from both the specialized knowledge he or she has of the course material and the trust vested in his or her ability to teach it effectively. Authorized instructors complete a formal instructor school through the Marine Corps Training & Education Command's (TECOM) [Train the Trainer School \(T3S\)](http://www.t3s.marines.mil/) [<http://www.t3s.marines.mil/>]. This structured, sequential learning environment exists to ensure that every Marine at any duty station around the world receives knowledge in the same way and for the same purpose. The T3S courses teach Marine Corps pedagogy, including instructional methods and assessment measures, within the grander purpose of instilling Marine Corps values. For most professional military education programs, curriculum

and leadership development are intertwined (Reed, Bullis, Collins, and Papparone 56). The dual goals of Marine instructors, preparing *students* and preparing *leaders*, represent the core of Marine Corps education. A deeper understanding of the faith, trust, and respect placed in the Marines responsible for teaching other Marines helps to contextualize the seriousness of teaching and learning in the Corps and the ways in which Marine student veterans perceive themselves as learners.

In 2010, as the focus of my dissertation, I conducted a small, qualitative, interview-based research study in order to learn directly from Marine student-veterans themselves about their teaching, learning, and writing experiences in college composition. I grew up in an Air Force family and married into the Marine Corps, so I developed a professional interest in what had already made such an impact on my personal life and identity. With a husband about to retire and complete his undergraduate degree program, I was especially interested in how student-veterans' college writing experiences might be impacted by the previous experiences they had while serving as active duty Marines. During a six-month period, I had the opportunity to speak with twelve Marine veterans (eleven men and one woman), all of whom were formerly enlisted personnel from a variety of Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs). {1 [#footnote1]} The participants served between four and twelve years as active duty Marines in the Corps. They represented nine four-year institutions, public and private, from five states across western, Midwestern, and southeastern parts of the United States. Ten of the student-veterans were enrolled in college at the time of their interviews, while two of them had graduated with the last year. {2 [#footnote2]} The interview transcripts were analyzed using a blind review process; emergent themes were extracted, grouped, and coded.

Findings: The Prior Knowledge of Marine Student Veterans

From the literature reviewed earlier, we can conclude that within the novice-to-expert representation of student progress, experts have collected a wider depth and breadth of strategic and domain-specific knowledge and, more importantly, can organize their knowledge in such a way that makes it more immediately accessible when faced with new learning tasks. When we consider the applicability of prior knowledge within the context of my study on the experiences and perceptions of Marine student veterans, in college broadly and in composition specifically, a question arises. Do Marine student veterans demonstrate an awareness of prior literacy experiences and the applicability of these experiences to college-level reading and writing tasks?

One conclusion drawn from my interviews indicates most Marine student veterans (MSVs) are aware of the ways in which they have evolved as writers. This self-awareness was demonstrated by the Marine student veterans' ability to (1) make connections between previous and current literacy habits or environments without explicit prompt from the interviewer, (2) identify salient points of difference, (3) determine the origin of the changes they identified, and (4) connect those prior experiences and the changes that have occurred to current successes or failures—what Robertson, Taczak, and Yancey refer to as “critical incidents”—in college-level literacy tasks. The MSVs I interviewed made connections between prior rhetorical knowledge and current writing contexts across four primary areas: topic selection, writer identity, individual writing style, and shared stylistic features between military and academic writing.

In some instances, study participants talked about the usefulness of their prior knowledge and experiences in the Marine Corps and how those influenced topic selection during their college-level writing tasks. Ivan, a 23 year-old former infantryman in just the second semester of his engineering program, mentioned the value of his military knowledge to his college courses. Ivan revealed, “A couple things I’ve written here have been about the military,” and that while he found himself more motivated to write because he had experience with his topic, he

also noticed some gaps in the way he was approaching his topic. {3 [#footnote3]} Working with his instructor, Ivan learned to revise his approach in light of his new audience, a particularly effective variable of the rhetorical situation that can be used to bridge general and domain-specific knowledge (Magnifico). No longer was Ivan writing to other Marines who shared the same prior knowledge; he was writing for an audience far less familiar with military jargon and one that lacked what he considered a basic understanding of military knowledge.

Half of the Marine student veterans I interviewed provided comparisons when describing their current identities as writers. In some cases, the MSVs compared the way they approached, perceived, or produced writing in high school to the way they did so as college students. In these instances, the MSVs attributed the changes to what they experienced or learned as producers or consumers of military writing. In other cases, they compared their current writing selves directly to their writing selves in the military.

When reflecting on their roles as writers in college, my study participants often used high school as a basis for comparison, as it was the last formal educational environment they experienced that most closely resembled college. When asked how he would describe himself as a writer, Andrew—who used to train Iraqi and Afghan security forces during his combat tours—began by explaining how he has improved as a writer as compared to high school. He recalled:

In high school or even before, I would write a piece and . . . I would write to fit the criteria. And . . . it wasn't a personality; it was just writing to finish the piece. And now, I feel . . . I can dive myself into a piece and put my personality in it, regardless of what the subject is. It's not so much what I have to be interested in or not interested in, I can find something that speaks to me in whatever subject and be able to write that and articulate myself a lot more . . . effectively than I had previously.

Rather than providing a description of his current state as a writer, Andrew outlined a literacy journey that began in high school, travelled through the Marine Corps, and has now taken him into college. Thomas, a 28 year-old Chicago native and son of two academics, also relived his journey as a writer from high school through the Marine Corps and into college. Like Andrew, Thomas credits the Marine Corps with instilling in him productive habits and a stronger motivation to work harder at perfecting his writing. Thomas explained: "When I'm writing something[,] . . . I think about how to do it, and I look it up, and I use the book—which never would have happened before I was in the military, but now I . . . look and see how to write sentences and try to do all that." With the motivation to seek out materials that will help him polish his structure, sentences, or stylistic features, Thomas appears to take a more active role in his writing than he did before the Marine Corps.

Learning to write in the military often exposed perceived weaknesses in the participants' writing abilities. Andrew, for example, noticed, "I used to write the way that I would talk," a writing style too personalized, informal, and disconnected for a military style that demands objectivity and structure. During his writing development in the Marine Corps, Andrew learned "I need to be able to . . . have every single person who picks up this piece of paper completely understand what I need to do . . . and know exactly what I want to accomplish with whatever tasks that I'm trying to set forth." Andrew made the connection between learning the importance of clear writing in the military to his college-level literacy tasks in that "I need to be able to . . . have my message understood by more than just . . . one person . . . as well as the structure behind things." He also credited his prior literacy experiences in the Marine Corps with elevating his audience awareness and expanding his word choice. While writing to his friends and family from combat, Andrew reported having to be very selective about what he could and could not say to ensure he did not compromise operational security. By learning to find

“different ways of saying the exact same thing,” Andrew could tailor his writing to his audience and to his rhetorical contexts. He then connected these previous experiences to his college writing contexts: “I think . . . that aspect helps me with my professors, ‘cause when . . . I get to know a professor and what their grading style is, and what they look for in a writing, then I can figure out how to gear . . . my writing towards their expectations.”

When asked about how she would describe herself as a writer, Miriam expressed a relatively positive self-efficacy by cautiously admitting, “I think I’m a pretty good writer.” Directly after, Miriam immediately began explaining some of her challenges:

Right now, I’m kinda struggling with APA format interpretation from one teacher to the next. And unfortunately, the program that I’m in, I’m only with the professor for a month or two, and so, this professor reads the APA manual this way, and that professor reads the APA manual a different way. So . . . I’ve really learned to tailor my writing to what I think the professor wants.

Like Justin, Miriam has experienced some difficulty with the subjectivity of instructor expectations resulting in negative perceptions of faculty with regards to their abilities to maintain consistency. For Miriam, the challenge of negotiating multiple expectations for something as seemingly consistent as a formal, academic style like APA (the existence of a manual suggests there is one acceptable way closed to subjective interpretation) is confusing. In fact, Miriam made this connection herself when she discussed her writing experiences with official manuals in the Marine Corps during her time as an administrative clerk: “Something that was always, any sort of quote-unquote ‘correspondence’ had to comply with the correspondence manual, so that would be like your APA, MLA formats. . . . I think that was helpful for how to write in APA or MLA or whatever style the teacher is wanting.” Yet, the previous writing experiences she had in the Corps which she believed should have prepared her to understand this formulaic writing were met with the conflicting interpretations by her program instructors. Miriam identifies this as a struggle for her, knowing that each time she has to begin a new course within her nursing program a metaphorical reset button has to be set on her understanding of APA style. Like Justin, Miriam’s strategy to respond to these varying interpretations is to discern exactly what each instructor prefers and to write to those expectations.

Miriam and Justin were not the only Marine student veterans I interviewed who acknowledged having developed the skill of writing to their instructors’ expectations. Andrew, the former Sergeant and combat veteran, also conveyed his experiences with learning to negotiate multiple instructor expectations. Like Miriam, Andrew also suggested the same kinds of modeling and replicating activities were happening while he was learning the military style of writing. Using Marines who were familiar with and had mastered the military writing preferences as guides, Andrew began to understand what his staff non-commissioned officers (NCOs) expected. Andrew recalled the influence of a Master Sergeant for whom he worked: “I remember . . . I would write down what he was dictating to me in the beginning, and I think that’s probably where it started,” referring to his learning to understand the military discourse. Modeling acceptable discourse behaviors became one way in which Andrew adjusted to the new host (military) culture’s ways of communicating. And like Miriam, who admitted that part of her experiences in the administrative office involved learning to write from the perspective of Marines from multiple positions in the rank structure, Andrew also acquired knowledge of the subtle nuances that differentiate based on particular organizational factors. He said that in the military, he “was just finding different ways to articulate what [he] wanted to say” based on the demands of the rhetorical situation. Andrew was able to find an immediate use for this skill for his approach to academic writing in learning “how to gear my writing towards their [instructors’] expectations.” As a readjustment response, then, Andrew chooses to apply his previous skill set to a different rhetorical environment and finds it useful in order to address the frustrating ambiguity that often

accompanies an individual instructor's writing expectations. Bradley, the Liberal Studies major and former artillery Sergeant, conveyed readjustment experiences that echo those of Justin, Miriam, and Andrew:

It [the adjustment] wasn't too bad. I think the biggest challenge was the expectations of different people, depending on their own personal style which might disagree with yours. I've had teachers that were kind of like the military, where they told you exactly what they wanted from the paper, from the layout to such pattern to style to bibliography. And then I've had other teachers say, "Oh write what you want," but then outside to that it was kinda like they might have a certain set of expectations that they didn't articulate and so you might run into some conflict there.

Like other participants, Bradley chooses to articulate his challenges with college writing in the context of his previous experiences with military instructors. As a basis for comparison, Bradley found instructors who were "kind of like the military" to be more direct and clear with their writing expectations. And those instructors who were not as clear seemed, in Bradley's opinion, deceptive in how they provided information to students, resulting in "conflict" between the student and the instructor.

Bradley also demonstrated an awareness of how his previous writing experiences in the Marine Corps have affected his current approach to college writing. For Bradley, the two writing styles—although vastly different from one another—complement one another:

I think they fuse together pretty nice, 'cause . . . I think with military writing, you get to the point. Some of the things that I've read from other people is kinda like, 'Why am I reading this?' . . . But at the same time, you . . . elevate the military writing to not be so direct, kind of like a conversation. So, I . . . like my papers to sound . . . kind of like a conversation that is leading somewhere and try to get the reader to be a part of that conversation as opposed to military style telling you: this is what it is, this is what you're gonna think about it.

Bradley's summary of his approach to writing in college stems from what he learned by writing in the military. Rather than separating the two discourse communities, Bradley has seen how particular features of both can work cooperatively.

Document understandability is an important feature that crosses both the academic and military discourse communities. This necessity for clarity, as Andrew explained, is accomplished both in the words one uses as well as the document's structure. Ivan also identified some cross-fertilization of discursal features between military and academic writing when he mentioned the value of order writing. Ivan hypothesized, "Order writing is probably very beneficial . . . you just need to communicate the information in an organized manner. Which, a lot of the . . . simple homework assignments, they ask you to have it in sort of a certain format and . . . they are similar to the way I grew used to writing." Miriam, who served nearly ten years in the Marine Corps, also discovered the usefulness of military writing features in college-writing contexts, particularly in the sciences. As a nursing student, Miriam says that she has noticed a difference between academic writing generally and writing in her discipline. She explained: "In my experience, writing an English paper is like saying as . . . much as you can possibly say and filling up the pages. When you're writing science stuff, you definitely just *bam, bam, bam, bam, bam*, conclusion, done. And so, I learned how to do that without using too many words." To Miriam, previous experiences with writing for clarity, precision, and brevity in the Marine Corps have the most applicability to writing in the sciences, disciplines that emphasize accuracy, clarity, and a predictable structure. Much of the writing produced in the military is, as Bradley reminds us, "action-oriented" and requires individuals to understand what needs to be done in support of the actions called for in the piece of writing. Not only is Miriam

in a position to make connections between military writing and writing in the sciences, she also connects this to “writing an English paper,” which we can probably attribute to writing that is produced in composition or English courses or perhaps even to other disciplines that favor the kinds of discursive features Miriam identifies.

When asked to summarize their composing processes from the time they are given an assignment to the time they submit it to an instructor, nearly all of the Marine student veterans I interviewed explicitly mentioned the incorporation of revision into their personal processes. I attempted to make it clear to the participants that I was interested in the reality of how they composed, not the way they thought they should be composing in order to reduce the likelihood of artificiality. What they gave me, however, was an unadulterated peek into their composing processes—nearly all of which accounted for revising in some way. David, a 26 year-old former infantry Sergeant, said that even though he tries not to waste his time by spending a lot of time rewriting, he incorporates revision into his initial writing process. He explained:

I try to do it correct right off the bat, and then—so that’s another reason why it takes me a long time [to write], ‘cause I’m constantly second guessing something and fixing it—once it’s out, I’ll go and re-read it just to make sure I didn’t . . . not only for typos but for syntax, you know, making sure everything makes sense.

David’s desire to compose a “correct” paper from the start was not an uncommon desire among the study participants. Several of the Marines I interviewed mentioned a desire to be “strategic” in their approaches to writing and revising, avoiding any unnecessary waste of time or energy, something to which Marines are sensitive (Bradley, Ivan, Miriam, Samuel, Stephen). Miriam, for example, said that when she revises, she’s very deliberate in her approach, “because . . . I figured out I’m not making it better, I’m just making it different, and that’s not a good use of my time.” The goal of achieving a near-perfect paper the first time is not, I would argue, a rejection of revising. In fact, the study participants acknowledged that even when they “try to get it right the first time,” they may still need to go back and revise because of flaws in their writing (Ivan). Ivan, for example, acknowledged that “the first time I write it, I jump around a lot” so revising becomes an opportunity to “put things in the right area” along with sentence-level corrections.

Some Marine student veterans credited their experiences with writing in the military as a catalyst for embracing and integrating revising into their academic writing processes. In many ways, this relationship—between revising in military writing and revising in academic writing—connects to the previous findings regarding prior knowledge and experiences as an influence on perceptions of and active participation in college writing. For example, Andrew said he remembered revising “being such a hassle, thinking of high school.” He often asked himself, “Why do I have to keep doing these drafts?” Now, Andrew says, “I like being able to get corrections and fix things and go back and look at it,” a change he attributes to the way he learned to write in the military. He explained:

If I was going to draft a letter, when I worked for training, I would have to . . . write it down on a piece of paper and get it approved, starting at my level and going through every single [person in the] chain up to the Commanding Officer. . . . He would make sure everything was correct, and if it wasn’t, send it back to me. I’d do maybe four or five drafts for every piece of literature I wrote.

Bradley echoed this process when he wrote counseling sheets (somewhat equivalent to civilian job performance reviews). After handing his counseling sheet over to his supervisor, Bradley said the supervisor would review it both for content and for clarity and then return it for revision. Andrew and Bradley were not the only MSVs to mention the revising process as it occurs in military writing. Stephen and Miriam also identified a link between the

way they learned to write in the military and the way they learned to write academically. The process of necessary revision in the military—that is, running a document through the chain of command for approval—had a purpose and a result in those contexts. When the MSVs saw the opportunity to replicate these experiences with purpose and for results in academic writing, the transition seemed appropriate and natural.

What was less natural, according to many of my study participants, was the lack of instructor input as a part of their revising processes along with an overwhelming frustration with peer revising. Central to revising written work in military contexts is receiving feedback from trusted, knowledgeable—sometimes senior—personnel. For Marine student veterans in the composition classroom, the feedback they value is generally provided by the instructor rather than other students. Recall that in the teacher-learner relationship in the military, the instructor is considered a subject matter expert (SME) and the learner's role is to seek counsel during the learning process from the SME. This may explain some of the negative experiences the participants reported regarding the quantity and quality of feedback they received from instructors.

In response to frustration they felt because of grades they received on papers early in their college experiences, many of the Marine student veterans I interviewed had learned that writing success was directly linked to their abilities to write to the instructor's expectations. At the same time, these revisions (in style or in content) were not always reflective of what the writers wanted to achieve. Most of the veterans described faculty as inconsistent, based on the negative experiences they endured because of poorly constructed assignments, a lack of models or guides to follow, or an instructor's apparent subjectivity when grading. Thomas, for example, expressed his irritation with faculty whose instructions to students do not ultimately coincide with their expectations:

You think it's supposed to be one way—or one of several ways—but it's up to the interpretation of . . . the instructor. . . . So it's like the book says to do it like this, but the teacher's grading it, and they're not using the book to grade it. . . . Either *this* is what you wanted, or *that* was what you wanted. And it's like, this is what we [the teachers] want, and we [the students] do it exactly this way, and we handed it in, and they wanted a whole other idea. So, they were like, "This is wrong" (even though I told you to do it that way).

Coming from a military educational system built around specific expectations that are followed, by both instructors and students, and clear, objective assessment methods, the subjectivity inherent in disciplines like composition become constant sources of frustration for veterans.

Clearly defined expectations for the writing that faculty expect students to produce was correlative to the Marine student veterans' positive perceptions of composition faculty whereas ambiguity or subjectivity were often correlated with negative perceptions. Consider the way in which Justin, also a veteran early into his degree program, described his method for approaching writing assignments:

I find that if . . . the professor gives an example of what they want, I'm really good at spitting them right back at them, because it's exactly what they want. At first, I took on writing as trying to like, you know, tell them what *I* want to tell them. Tell them what *I* think is interesting, but professors don't really want to hear that. They want to hear what they want to hear, so you just gotta try to figure out the best of what they want to hear and then tell it to them.

Justin's cynicism for composition faculty who "don't really want to hear" what students have to say is met with a compensatory strategy of adapting and overcoming, something with which all Marines are familiar. Justin admits his strategy is more effective when the teacher provides him with a specific model or guide to follow, a strategy

he has carried over from his enlistment. Many Marines learn to write during their time in the Corps through exposure to existing materials and following acceptable models, and Justin is no different from other Marines student veterans I interviewed like Miriam.

Discussion & Implications

In her master's thesis on how composition pedagogy can be adapted to meet the needs of student veterans, Kelly Singleton Dalton argues, "It seems likely that student-veterans will be readily able to accept their status as novices, since the culture of military training and learning to which they will be accustomed functions universally as a cycle of novice-to-expert in concert with the crawl-walk-run pedagogy" (29). However, this demand may be a difficult one for student veterans to meet. Their educational experiences from the military require novices ("boots") to learn from and respect their Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), reference official publications or manuals, apply their learning under the supervision of more senior personnel, willingly accept constructive criticism for erring, and receive certification or approval for completing the task, course, or school from those granted the authority to do so. Thus, falsely taking on the role of an expert before being officially deemed so is an action and a mindset with which many Marine student veterans would be uncomfortable, as it flies in the face of the Corps' cultural values.

Given the research on prior knowledge and text construction, we must acknowledge that a student's prior knowledge helps him or her to connect old and new experiences and information through scaffolding and to commit new knowledge more effectively to long-term working memory (McCutchen). Student veterans occupy the same type of liminal space as other adult learners who have acquired expert status in some domain-specific areas but, in starting or returning to college, find themselves in a novice position. The difference, I argue, between student veterans and general adult learner population is that we can better define, describe, and capture the kinds of learning experiences and expertise gained by student veterans—especially when we study particular services. From my research with Marine student veterans, we can conceptualize the learning experiences of this particular student population. We know, for example, that Marine student veterans often share common expectations with regards to their instructors. They often view instructors as subject matter experts who can demonstrate and explain the course material better than they can; they expect these experts to transfer their knowledge to the student Marines in a clear, direct, simple way (to ensure equitable learning regardless of the Marine's intelligence); and they expect clear, accomplishable, useful learning objectives that will be assessed objectively against criteria that have been shared with them ahead of time.

The Marine student veterans in this study shared many ways in which their previous experiences and knowledge with military writing assisted them in their academic writing development across the disciplines. A student who believes that his or her prior knowledge is valuable to current contexts is more likely to use those experiences or knowledge in the building of new knowledge but generally only when prompted or guided to do so (Pressley, et al.; Robinson and Burton). The Marine student veterans who were able to identify and then translate previous learning and rhetorical experiences from the military into academic writing contexts reported positive perceptions about that writing. Conversely, "By ignoring what veterans have learned in the military, our society essentially throws away the time and money invested into military training and experience that could be applied to . . . the civilian world" (Herrmann, Hopkins, Wilson, and Allen 68). Likewise, composition instructors and civilian students may miss valuable opportunities to learn from the unique and varied experiences and knowledge of student veterans and to input the fruits of those discussions into their own long-term working memories. As Liane Robertson and her colleagues Kara Taczak and Kathleen Blake Yancey recently proposed, composition instructors may also help students identify "absent prior knowledge and invite them to participate in creating

knowledge they will need.” In particular, student veterans might benefit from activities that work toward defining an audience, its needs and expectations, and what it will need the writer to do in order to ensure the reception of the writer’s message. Such activities that focus on the construction and role of the audience likewise bridge both cognitive and sociocultural approaches to writing development (Magnifico).

Recall the earlier metaphor Sommers and Saltz provided about first-year students who “are required to become master builders while they are still apprentices” when instructors ask them to produce as experts “while still learning how to handle the tools . . . and decipher their user’s manuals” (131-32). For novice student veteran writers, based on the results of this study, this metaphor may be taken more literally. Marine student veterans (and I would argue student veterans from most other service branches) are accustomed to socialization processes within a discourse community that rely significantly on standards established by “user’s manuals” and very specific “methods of construction,” and their learning of these standards and methods is bolstered by uses of modeling, intent supervision, and immediate feedback for corrective actions. The academic discourse community, despite Sommers and Saltz’s metaphor, is not nearly as structured or supervised. Hence, the study participants’ desire for clear instructor expectations, examples of completed assignments, and transparency with regard to evaluative criteria should not come as a surprise. Marine student veterans want the manuals and the tools to become “master builders,” but they expect their instructors *to lead them* in the process of moving from novice to expert, a desire that defies the student-centered, self-directed tradition of contemporary composition theory.

One specialized challenge for faculty working with student veteran writers lies with understanding their own roles as educators as student veteran writers negotiate a more complicated expert-to-notice-to-expert paradox. Sommers and Saltz suggest that facilitating this transition may start with helping freshmen student writers understand what being a *novice* means. They claim:

Being a novice . . . doesn’t mean waiting meekly for the future, nor does it mean breaking with the past. Rather, it involves adopting an open attitude to instruction and feedback, a willingness to experiment, whether in course selection or paper topics, and a faith that, with practice and guidance, the new expectations of college can be met. (134)

There is a weakness, however, in Sommers and Saltz’s assertion regarding the way in which first-year writers should consider their noviceness. They are asking a lot from first-year student veteran writers who bring a preexisting expertise into the composition classroom that complicates embracing a novice position: a wealth of educational and professional experiences, ingrained cultural values, and a strong collectivist identity. Based on data collected from my study participants, Marine student veterans would not find difficulty in “adopting an open attitude to instruction and feedback,” but they need to understand the reason for adopting such an attitude and the intended end results. They would not be uncomfortable with experimenting, but must have assurances that such experiments (even less than effective ones) would be welcomed by their instructors; thus far, the instructor’s reciprocity has gone unrealized for Marine student veterans like Justin who remarked, “Professors don’t really want to hear that. They want to hear what they want to hear.”

The final concern about defining the novice according to Sommers and Saltz is in the suggestion that novice student writers must have “faith,” a belief that they will meet college writing expectations as long as they “practice” and are open to “guidance.” Two flaws emerge from this supposition for Marine student veteran writers. First, Marine student veterans are quite accustomed to having “faith” or trust in other Marines to lead them in the right direction and having trust in their own knowledge and abilities to provide them with success. However, both a faith in others and faith in themselves must be built upon a strong foundation of respect; they

must respect their leaders and respect their own knowledge and abilities. Faith from Marine student veterans will not come blindly. Second, Sommers and Saltz acknowledge that novice student writers must be open to accepting guidance, which presupposes that instructors are always willing and able to provide such guidance. This is not to say that composition faculty are not knowledgeable, but the reality of the experiences of my study's participants suggests faculty are not always willing and able to provide the feedback that is necessary to help guide MSVs in their development from novice to expert academic writers. Consider, for example, Thomas's experience: "I'm sure I didn't get an A plus on every single paper I've written, so it would be nice to get that feedback and actually learn something. Because right now, I'm still thinking that paper I turned in was an A plus, but maybe it wasn't. Maybe I could have *learned*." Therefore, if composition faculty are to aid novice student writers in accepting what being a novice means, then we as faculty must be willing to accept our roles in their adoption of this definition, hold ourselves accountable to such standards, and understand when this definition may be interpreted differently based on the previous experiences of our student writers.

Respecting the previous composing experiences of traditional first-year student writers is important, but it is critical when working with Marine student veteran writers. Sommers and Saltz claim that those writers most willing to accept their roles as novices are more likely to experience greater gains in their development as writers than those who "resent the uncertainty and humility of being a novice" (134). In her thesis, Dalton suggests student veterans "will be readily able to accept their status as novices, since the culture of military training and learning to which they will be accustomed functions universally as a cycle of novice-to-expert" (29). Dalton's analysis of the military novice-to-expert cycle is accurate; however, what Dalton fails to consider is the way in which student veterans have now become experts in a variety of areas and the way in which a fundamental shift back to novice in the civilian-academic world (without the same kind of mutual respect-based, leader-led educational structure) may not be as easy to assume. My study's findings indicate that while Marine student veterans may admit that their inexperience with college-level academic writing may make them novices, they still retain expertise in many other areas and, as such, have experiences, beliefs, and habits that are valuable in the composition classroom. Sommers and Saltz assert, "Those freshmen who cling to their old habits and formulas . . . have a more difficult time adjusting to the demands of college writing." But as these findings illustrate, the habits and formulas Marine student veterans have acquired can be useful tools to aid in their readjustment process to academic writing. This study's findings reaffirm the multitude of significant and unique experiences Marine student veterans have to offer the composition classroom; however, they also reassert the important role that composition faculty have in creating a learning environment where student veterans can feel comfortable enough to share (or not share) their experiences and also in *respecting* the value of these experiences and perceptions, even if they make us uncomfortable or challenge our perceptions of writing or of higher education.

Recently, *Composition Forum* readers were treated to [a wonderful piece by Angela Rounsaville \[http://compositionforum.com/issue/26/selecting-genres-uptake.php\]](http://compositionforum.com/issue/26/selecting-genres-uptake.php), within which she advocates first-year composition as an opportunity to "teach to the high road transfer of writing-related knowledge." Rounsaville adopts David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon's explication of "high road" transfer as that which "involves the deliberate, mindful abstraction of knowledge, skills, or strategies from one context to be re-localized and successfully leveraged in another, distinct context," and, most importantly, recognizes and capitalizes on "the learner's role in actively seeking connections between prior knowledge and new learning encounters." I would extend Rounsaville's argument and insist that, especially for the sake of nontraditional learners like student veterans, composition instructors should be prepared to explicitly provide opportunities for veterans to make "high road" connections between their military educational, professional, and rhetorical experiences and those they will acquire as college students.

Notes

1. While men outnumbered women nine to one, a gender overrepresentation is proportionate to the current makeup of the Marine Corps. Currently, female enlisted personnel represent only seven percent of enlisted personnel (Department of Veterans Affairs). ([Return to text. \[#footnote1_ref\]](#))
2. Ultimately, two participants were excluded from my final study, as I determined during their interviews that they no longer met the inclusionary criteria. ([Return to text. \[#footnote2_ref\]](#))
3. All interview excerpts have been taken from my dissertation, "The Experiences of Marine Student Veterans in Undergraduate Composition Courses: A Phenomenological Study." ([Return to text. \[#footnote3_ref\]](#))

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