

Veterans as Adult Learners in Composition Courses

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Abstract: Considering veterans in the context of research on adult and nontraditional students in college writing classes, this article proposes Malcolm Knowles's six principles for adult learning as an asset-based heuristic for investigating how writing programs and writing teachers might build upon existing resources to support veteran students.

As veterans return to college, institutions often ask, "What are we/they missing and what do we/they need?" This deficit approach means support for veterans is dependent upon obtaining specialized knowledge, instruction, funding, and resources. In addition, "Trainings that focus on the deficits of student veterans likely perpetuate already established stereotypes of the 'veteran'" (Hart and Thompson 4). In contrast, when institutions ask "What do we/they have and what works?" and, thereby, take an asset-based approach, they may find that they already have much of the knowledge and resources they need to support veterans. This is true because, as nontraditional, adult students, veterans are in the mainstream: "[i]n 2007-08, some 85% of military undergraduates were aged 24 or older" (Radford v). With 73% of today's college students classified as nontraditional and 40% older than 24 (Choy 1-3, "Table 191"), veterans join the majority of students on college campuses who are likely to be more mature, motivated, and experienced than the "traditional" 18-year-old student (Branker; Burnett and Segoria; Gann; Morreale; Rumann and Hamrick). Yet, in a nationwide study of student veterans, Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson found that

[c]ampus trainings about student veterans tend to be based on a deficit model. . . . Further, the trainings generally fail to make connections between veterans and other student groups. For instance, many of the transition issues that are reported by veterans parallel in significant ways the transition many nontraditional students face when making the move from careers back to college, suggesting the possibility that some of the transitional issues are less about their status as veterans and more about their status as adult learners. (4)

Recognizing the connections between veterans and other adult learners, we propose Malcolm Knowles's six principles for adult learning as an asset-based heuristic for investigating how writing programs and writing teachers might build upon existing resources to support veteran students. We are concerned that claims that "student-veterans are inherently different from other students" (Gann 216) are premised on the assumption that other students are "the traditionally-aged student body" (Gann 214). This assumption makes invisible the preponderance of nontraditional adult students in college writing classes and obscures research on adult learning that has taken place since the 1920s. In fact, "military veteran students are very similar to non-traditional students" (Morreale 138).

The question of how to best serve veterans who return to college is not a new one. The arrival of World War II veterans on college campuses brought attention to and resulted in a flowering of research on how to teach adults

24 and older. Rather than approaching the rising adult student population as a problem, Malcolm Knowles posed a set of principles by which teachers and adult learners could work together to explore and make meaning of the students' numerous personal and professional experiences. Drawing upon work by Eduard Lindeman (who was heavily influenced by the progressive, student-centered approach to education of John Dewey), Knowles brought the term "andragogy" from Europe to the United States in 1968 to distinguish the teaching and learning of adults from pedagogy, the teaching of children (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 36, 57). Knowles's six principles of andragogy are as follows:

1. *Need to know* – adults prefer to know what, how, and why they are learning.
2. *Readiness to learn* – adults return to school because they have specific knowledge and skills they want or need to learn to solve problems, address challenge or otherwise make things happen in their lives.
3. *Orientation to learning* – adults are focused on learning for doing much more than learning for knowing.
4. *Motivated* – adults are generally more internally than externally motivated.
5. *Self-direction* – adults see themselves as and desire to be self-directing.
6. *Experienced* – the many life experiences of adults are a resource for and sometimes a potential barrier to learning.

(Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 63-67)

In 1989, Robert Sommer stressed the need to think intentionally about adult learners and highlighted the common ground between andragogy and student-centered, process-based composition pedagogy. More recently, Michelle Navarre Cleary summarized findings in adult learning and composition as they apply to adult students in college writing classes ("What WPAs").

In what follows, we review the implications of each of Knowles's principles for teaching composition to veterans, demonstrating how research on veteran students aligns with that on adult students. In addition to research on adult learning and veterans, we include in this paper quotes from eight anonymous veterans who participated in one of two focus groups we held in October 2012. We held these focus groups so that we might put the voices and insights of current veteran students in dialogue with those of adult learning theorists. The seven men and one woman in these focus groups self-identified as veterans who had completed at least one college writing class since returning to school. [1](#) ^[#footnote1]

Need to Know

While students of all ages like to know what they are learning, why they are learning it, and how the learning is going to take place, adults have less patience with and are more likely than younger students to opt out of learning that does not answer these questions: "Consequently, one of the new aphorisms in adult education is that the first task of facilitating learning is to help the learners become aware of the *need to know*" (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 163). While most adult students come to composition classes appreciating the importance of clear writing, they often do not understand how or why they need to know how to write academic essays. Likewise, veterans can be confounded by the differences between military and academic writing expectations. As one veteran put it, "For college, there is no clear 'do this, go home, you're done'" (qtd. in Rumann and Hamrick

441). Like many adults who return to school after years of business writing, veterans with whom we spoke saw academic writing as full of so many extra words:

In the military you are used to writing just straight, blunt, short and concise, like to the point . . . and you might get a prompt and you'll answer it in like half a page . . . but the essay will require that you make like a five-page paper and you feel like you answered it in a page, so it's what are all the fillers, like what else am I supposed to be writing? I got to my point already, so how do I elaborate?

Addressing the reasons for this “filler” as well as ways to go about developing and supporting claims will gain buy-in from adult students and save teachers from reading and responding to repetitive, wordy papers.

Well-planned courses with clear guidelines are also important for veterans for practical reasons. Adult students are often trying to balance schoolwork with career and personal responsibilities. If they know well in advance when schoolwork will be due, they can better arrange their time. Knowing what is expected of them also allows veterans the opportunity to anticipate potential problems, reducing anxiety and giving them a sense of control. They prefer clear communication about their teachers' expectations and the components of their courses via instruments like rubrics or syllabi (Dalton 49). Marilyn Valentino gives the example of a veteran who was “happy to be forewarned” that a section of composition required viewing of the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (171). Concerned that the screaming in the movie would be “an emotional trigger,” the student simply enrolled in a different section of the course (Valentino 171). The veterans in our focus groups agreed that “the teachers that actually go through the syllabus with you and then actually hold themselves accountable and hold everyone in the class accountable to the syllabus, those seem to work a lot better.”

Readiness to Learn

Knowles argues that adult students return to school ready to learn because they are seeking knowledge and skills to address specific life goals: “Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations. An especially rich source of *readiness to learn* is the developmental tasks associated with moving from one developmental stage to the next” (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 65). This claim is supported by “studies on participation . . . [which] indicate that participation is clearly linked to adults' roles of worker; family member; and so on, lending support to the assumption that the readiness of an adult to learn is closely linked to the developmental tasks of his or her social roles” (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner 92). In other words, adults are most open to learning when they are experiencing changes in their cognitive and intellectual development, physical capabilities or social roles (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner 298-324).

As they transition from the military to the academy, veterans are well poised to be ready to learn. Corey Rumann and Florence Hamrick suggest that returning to college is an important transition point for veterans that invokes “individual changes as well as emerging and contested senses of self” (434). In response to the idea of a veteran cohort model in college, one veteran “expressed concern that that type of model ‘would be a crutch. It would not help the transition that much. I think about a motto we used in the Marine Corps, “adapt and overcome.” I think [the model] would enable veterans to not adapt”” (Gann 225). Rumann and Hamrick reported that, “Experiences in both military and academic cultures provided respondents with a sort of bi-cultural literacy in which they adapted and functioned successfully in both cultures. Although they noted differences between college and the military, respondents emphasized reconciling the two as a key part of identity renegotiation” (450).

With this renegotiation comes a readiness to learn that can arise from practical needs, such as getting a job that pays a living wage, to more abstract needs, like personal fulfillment. For example, one veteran stressed his desire for an education because “I know what is out in real life. . . . Because I worked long hours for small pay and I don’t want to go back to that so I figured I’d get my education.” Another veteran described herself as on a mission to “finish my bachelor’s degree and get a master’s in social work so that I can specifically work with veterans, military members, and their families.” Thus, authentic writing projects that are personally meaningful as well as goal-oriented can serve both adult and veteran students who have a multitude of reasons for returning to school and thus a variety of points of readiness.

Orientation to Learning

To illustrate the idea of adults being task- or problem- rather than subject-centered in their orientation to learning, Knowles explains the writing courses for adults that developed in the 1950s:

For many years, it was the practice of universities to offer late afternoon or evening courses for adults that were exactly the same courses taught to teenagers in the day. Then, in the 1950s, the evening programs changed. A course titled “Composition I” in the day program became “Writing Better Business Letters” in the evening program. . . . While students in “Composition I” still memorized rules of grammar, students in “Writing Better Business Letters” immediately began writing business letters and then extracted principles of grammatical writing from an analysis of what they had written. (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 66-67)

In other words, writing courses for adults should focus on writing for authentic audiences to achieve real and meaningful goals. For adults, these audiences and goals are often outside the academy, such as learning how to improve the clarity of their sentences in emails or writing a proposal for changing the vacation policy at work. Similarly, Kelly Singleton Dalton argues that veterans are used to completing tasks and missions to achieve authentic, real-world goals (27). Rumann and Hamrick suggest that veterans often experience “transpositions of student and servicemember approaches and behaviors from one environment into the other” (450). Building off of this experience as an asset, rather than approaching it as a drawback, instructors can create opportunities for authentic, real-world writing for the benefit of adult learners—whether veterans or not.

Motivated

Those who teach adults almost always remark upon their strong motivation. The veterans in our focus groups agreed that they were more motivated now than their younger selves and were more motivated than younger college students overall. Knowles argues that adults “are responsive to some external motivators (better jobs, promotions, higher salaries, and the like), but the most potent motivators are internal pressures (the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life, and the like)” (67). In the military, veterans learn “the importance of keeping busy and staying active as ways to reinforce their motivations and goal orientations” (Rumann and Hamrick 443), which can translate into a motivation to return to school once the busyness and task-oriented nature of the military is no longer a major part of their lives. Cathleen Morreale found that “combat exposure and military experience were not the variables most strongly related to academic motivation and academic self-concept” (124). Instead, factors veterans share with other nontraditional students, namely prior schooling, being first-generation college students, and socio-economic status were key factors in their academic motivation and self concept (Morreale 123-24).

Be they external or internal, the pressures that motivate adult students can also overwhelm and isolate them. They can be swamped by the need to work, care for children or parents, and protect self-esteem that is wrapped up in their ability to succeed in school, a place where many adult students feel like outsiders. Sarah Gann reports that veterans can feel “essentially alone in the university” (221). As one veteran said, “I never had to write like I have to write here. It was somewhat foreign to me.” Veterans can feel an “increased pressure to pursue academics and life and work goals—intensified by realizations that they now [trail] their former college peers academically and in some cases with respect to relationships” (Rumann and Hamrick 452). These feelings of being outsiders in the university and of being behind their peers are common among adult students. Comparing themselves to students who come to college straight from high school, the veterans we spoke with agreed with each other that “writing is kind of like a perishable skill and it’s pretty rusty in that department since veterans have been out of school for a while.” Several described their writing as lacking: “it was like 7th grade,” “definitely on a lower par,” and “wow, my writing really sucks compared to my peers at the university level.” Explicit instruction, low-stakes writing, frequent feedback, and models and templates can help make expectations clear and reduce the anxiety about writing that these veterans share with many adult students (Navarre Cleary, “Anxiety” 371).

Self-Direction

Knowles distinguishes between self-direction as “self-teaching” and as “personal autonomy.” An example of self-teaching is when a homeowner, having decided to build a deck, watches some instructional videos and buys a book on deck construction so that she can build her own deck. An example of personal autonomy is when this homeowner chooses between self-teaching, taking a course on deck construction, or watching the workman she hired build it for her. Knowles argues that the fact that

an adult learner may choose not to be self-directed, for whatever reason, does not invalidate the core principle that adults, and adults in the United States in particular, have a self-concept of being independent. In fact, it is having the freedom to choose their learning strategy that is critical. It is the sense of personal autonomy, not self-teaching, that seems to be the most important for adults.

(Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 187)

Veterans demonstrate this autonomy by taking opportunities to be co-creators of their educational experience and by developing a step-by-step plan for achieving their goals (Gann 213; Branker 62).

Adults and veterans may choose a very prescriptive learning experience when, for example, they are just beginning to learn something new, when they are particularly busy, or when they are anxious about learning. The veterans in our focus groups wanted to choose their own paper topics, but, because they felt unsure of how to write for school, they wanted clear and detailed directions. For veterans who are used to detailed directions, models may be particularly valuable. One veteran explained: “I do well with models, and templates, and examples. If you could show me an example of how something is done, then I can work better with that than just expecting me to come up with it out of my head when it’s something I’m not familiar with.” Many adult students echo this veteran’s request for models as they seek to navigate the “truly dizzying array of writing assignments and teacher expectations about them” that students encounter “from their first semester to their last” (Herrington and Curtis 387).

Being self-directed does not necessarily mean, however, that adult students will always have their work done well and on time. The veterans we spoke with talked about being mission focused and “coming from a very, very structured and disciplined team,” but they could not agree on whether they were more disciplined than other

students. Here is a typical exchange on this topic:

Veteran 1: I think the discipline is like if you get a group of veterans together and they got an objective they're all gonna come together and solve that objective so.

Veteran 2: Most of the time.

Veteran 1: Well, yea. There's problems sometimes, right.

Several gave examples of waiting until the last minute to write their papers. One said, "It's just the way life works. I don't think we're any different than regular students in that department." Many of these veterans were overcommitted. They explained that they got work done for teachers who held them accountable, but for more lenient teachers they "don't worry [since the more lenient teacher] will let us turn it in whenever, so I'm going to do her paper last." In other words, veterans are like many overcommitted adults who "survive by triaging" (Navarre Cleary, "What WPAs" 122).

Experienced

Adult learning theory gives an enthusiastic "yes" to the often-asked question "Should we invite veterans to write about their experiences, knowing that doing so may open up difficult topics?" In fact, writing from experience, voicing their opinions, and sharing their ideas in the college environment are all imperative for veterans in transition (Dalton 29; Burnett and Segoria 55). Rumann and Harwick support the "educational value of out-of-class experiences in fostering and reinforcing learning" and an opportunity to "explore systematic options for recognizing experiential or independent learning with academic credit" (451). Together, these "validate out-of-class learning and help offset academic delays caused by activations and deployments" (Rumann and Harwick 451).

However (and this is a big however), veterans or any other adult student should not be required or feel compelled to write about any particular experience, be it something that might open up a traumatic experience such as "what did you do in the war?" or something that seems more harmless such as "what did you do last summer?" Adult learning theorists agree with Valentino that we should "give options on topics or readings, so veterans don't feel they have to write about war or combat" (Valentino 174). As Galen Leonhardy says, "allowing for inclusion and providing freedom of choice in writing topics produces less resistance in veterans and non-veterans alike" (350). Like many adults, the veterans in our focus group valued being able to pick their own topics and write about their own interests and experiences: "Well what I've discovered is it's much easier to write about subjects I have personal interest in, things I care about." Hart and Thompson recommend that "instructors who craft personal essay assignments provide options for student writers. While many student veterans may seek opportunities to discuss their service, others may need to have space to reinvent themselves as students, as civilians, or as members of a new community" (12).

Experience is widely seen as key to learning and development for adults, "appreciating and taking into consideration the prior knowledge and experience of learners has become a basic assumption of our practice as educators of adults" (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner 27). Adult educators from a variety of perspectives (constructivist, situated learning, psychoanalytic, critical cultural, complexity theory) all privilege the role of experience in learning (184-85). For example, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy begins with the experiences of the learners that then become the subject of critical reflection "through problem-posing and dialogue with other

learners” with the goal of social transformation (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner 141).

Rather than shy away from challenging experiences, several adult education theorists see such experiences and critical reflection on those experiences as key to transformational learning that can effect deep and lasting change. Peter Jarvis, Jack Mezirow, and Stephen Brookfield identify in particular experiences that do not fit with what the learner already knows or understands as having the potential to effect deep learning that allows the learner to transform him or herself. Jarvis argues that learning begins with “disjuncture between biography (all that a person is at a particular point in time) and experience—an incident the person is unprepared to handle” (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner 100). Mezirow finds transformative change happening most often through the experience of “a disorienting dilemma, that . . . a person experiences as a crisis. This crisis cannot be resolved through the application of previous problem-solving strategies” (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner 135-36). Stephen Brookfield describes a process precipitated by “some unexpected happening [that] prompts a sense of inner discomfort and perplexity” (Brookfield 25) followed by reflection that leads finally to “integrat[ing] new ways of thinking” into life (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner 146).

Knowles on Four Ways Adult Experience Impacts Learning

Experience can be both positive and negative for students. Knowles distinguishes “four means by which adults’ experiences impact learning[:] 1. Create a wider range of individual differences. 2. Provide a rich resource for learning. 3. Create biases that can inhibit or shape new learning. 4. Provide grounding for adults’ self-identity” (188).

While veterans may share the common experience of military service, they vary widely in their capacities, prior experiences, learning styles, current situations, and goals. For example, of the eight veterans in our focus groups, some had filled in forms, others wrote reports, and one apparently did no writing in the military; some had completed some community college classes before coming to the university, while this was the first college experience for others; some had strong writing instruction in high school, while others did not; one had participated in writing workshops for veterans, and others avoided writing. As Valentino points out, “I must stress at the outset that all veterans are not the same. Not all need or want special attention” (165). As a result, for veterans as for other adult students, learning about their individual strengths, challenges, and preferences as soon as possible through initial assignments like learning autobiographies, early conferences, and class discussions of prior writing experiences is vital for knowing how to adapt general principles like andragogy to the diverse students in our classes.

The veterans we interviewed agree with Knowles’s second point that their experiences are a “rich resource for learning” (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 188): “We bring life experience and enrich the classroom experience.” Morreale reports that veterans “have life experiences and maturity, which could provide them with skills and experience to aid them in navigating the transition to college” (135). Given this wealth of experience, Knowles argues that teachers should use strategies that leverage this resource:

For many kinds of learning, the richest resources for learning reside in the adult learners themselves. Hence, the emphasis in adult education is on experiential techniques—techniques such as group discussions, simulation exercises, problem solving activities, case methods, and laboratory methods instead of transmittal techniques. Also, greater emphasis is placed on peer-helping activities. (64)

Veterans in our focus groups valued classes with these activities, comparing opportunities to discuss and

participate favorably to lecture classes: “both the veterans and adult students returning to school bring life experience into the classroom which essentially I think enrich the curriculum . . . [W]e’re not just giving one word answers, we’re elaborating on our opinions.” Teachers agree: “Many professors also remarked on the value of the varied cultural experiences and broader worldviews that veterans tend to bring to class discussions and writing assignments” (Hart and Thompson 4). Another veteran said, “I love participating in class.” While a third stressed how he liked classes in which students “participate or converse” as opposed to those in which students are “really just listening to [the] professor talk and talk and talk and we take notes.”

However, Knowles also points out that experience can hinder new learning:

As we accumulate experiences, we tend to develop mental habits, biases, and presuppositions that tend to cause us to close our minds to new ideas, fresh perceptions, and alternative ways of thinking. Accordingly, adult educators try to discover ways to help students examine their habits and biases and open their minds to new approaches. (65)

For example, the kinds of writing adults have done outside of school often shape their understanding of and approach to writing in school. The veterans in our focus groups brought experiences with writing in the military (keep it brief, stick to the facts, no analysis or interpretation) and assumptions about academic writing (it is overly wordy and unnecessarily long with lots of padding) that closely resembled the experiences and assumptions of many adults who return to school after writing in the business world. Veterans repeatedly described their military writing as “blunt” and “straightforward”: “Who, What, Where, and When in one sentence.” They were used to highly structured writing: “everything is structured when we do military writing . . . where you just fill in the blank.” Another veteran stated, “We comply with orders. You have to be direct with us. I wish I could write a ten-page research paper out of the blue, but I need more guidance. I’m used to short answers.” These students would benefit from help seeing both the differences (such as the need to develop support for claims) as well as the similarities (such as the value of concise wording) between their military and academic writing.

Finally, Knowles argues that experience is integral to an adult’s sense of identity: “To children, experience is something that happens to them; to adults, experience is who they are. The implication of this fact for adult education is that in any situation in which the participants’ experiences are ignored or devalued, adults will perceive this as rejecting not only their experiences, but rejecting themselves as persons” (65). Encouraging students to write about their prior learning experiences signals acceptance of who they are. Mary Kay Morrison asserts that when instructors “allow the students the authority that comes from the knowledge and experience they possess, the students will be empowered with the space and freedom to find their own voice” (33). When adults write to inform others of their knowledge, they have an authentic writing opportunity in which they can share their “expertise for a real purpose” (Hurlow 66). Elaine Fredericksen shows how having students share essays about their experiences also helps them connect with each other, reducing their sense of isolation (119-20). Moreover, because students’ prior learning experiences inform their current assumptions about academic writing, teachers who learn about these prior experiences can “address mismatches in expectations . . . and some probable causes of resistance and frustration” (Belzer 42). Alice Gillam recommends having students create “experience portfolios” at the start of a class in which they document their areas of expertise, review their writing experiences, and provide samples of their current writing (12-14). Such portfolios and similar assignments, like literacy narratives, inform teachers of students’ prior knowledge and help students recognize and gain authority from their experience.

Given the link between experiences and identity, inviting adults to write about their experiences is not without

risk, whether those adults are veterans or not: “the potential for growth is often matched by a potential for disorientation. [Developmental c]hanges . . . can mean ruptures in learners’ home lives, estrangement from their communities, and alienation in their workplace” (Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler 327). Acknowledging the challenges of writing about experiences, providing a diverse collection of examples, and giving students plenty of options so that they never feel coerced to write about any particular experience helps create a supportive and safe learning environment in which students can control the extent to which they explore challenging experiences such as military service in wartime or reintegrating into the civilian culture after a period of military service.

Two Ways Veterans’ Experiences Can Support Learning in Writing Classes

In addition to these four general ways experiences can influence learning that Knowles has identified, our focus groups surfaced two possible ways in which veterans’ experiences in particular might be leveraged to support their learning in writing classes. Namely, the veterans in these groups shared the experience of being immersed as adults in a distinctive discourse community with a shared culture, and they shared largely positive experiences with an explicit orientation toward collaboration.

Leonhardy describes veterans as engaging in “banter,” which he describes as “playful and sometimes competitive, although most often good-humored, exchange of jesting. . . . Banter itself is one of the rhetorical conventions used by service members to communicate serious issues while leavening emotional intensity” (344). The veterans in our focus groups, which were led by a veteran, regularly engaged in banter that was clearly playful and filled with military jargon that left the two nonveteran researchers lost. This banter was possible because, although these veterans came from different branches of the military, each with its own jargon, they had in common immersion in the larger military community. This community was shaped by shared language and shared experiences that allowed veterans to talk to each other with more ease and shared understanding than with others:

Veteran 1: We speak the same language. . . . I guess there’s a certain connectivity, there’s a certain camaraderie that exists once you put on that uniform and it doesn’t matter what branch of service you’re in . . . [;] of course we all have our different specific lingos, and we’ve all been to different places and had different experiences, but in some way, there’s that common bond.

Veteran 2: It definitely comes with, you’ve all shared common experiences and so you might not have all been in the same place at the same time doing the same thing, but you all kinda understand when they start telling a story they don’t have to go and fill in all the details. . . . [Y]ou understand when they start telling the story about the background before somebody else from the outside would be like why is that important? What does this story have to do with anything?

Veteran 1: Because they [the other vets] are going to understand! And I know they’re going to understand and I don’t have to explain the whys.

Writing instructors can remind veterans who are struggling with the “foreignness” of academic writing that they have already become proficient in specialized discourse communities. In fact, one of the veterans made this point, “communication is essential in the military, and every branch of service, so, we have a set standard of how we communicate with each other and then we come into the school. . . . We just gotta adopt the new standard.” Through his experience in the military, this student has already learned that he can move from the periphery to

become an active member of an apparently exclusive discourse community.

As the above exchange makes clear, the veterans with whom we spoke demonstrated a deep sense of camaraderie and orientation toward collaboration. As one said, “we have a sense of camaraderie.” Another veteran noted that, “There’s something about the group dynamic that motivates and encourages us to relate our experiences to each other because we speak the same language.” Writing teachers can use veterans’ collaborative inclination both to support veterans in their classes and to value veterans by letting them model or lead collaboration in the classroom.

One of the veterans in the second focus group happened to be taking a class, Writing Together, that combined the community writing workshop approach of Freirian-inspired popular education with academic writing instruction. Students in this course wrote brief narratives during workshops and then mined these narratives for topics to develop into academic essays. In choosing the stories she shared with the group and developed further, this student was able to be self-directing. In writing about her experiences for an audience that included nonveterans, she found an authentic audience within her classroom and a purpose she believed in:

[W]e would be able to share our stories just on whatever level we would like to give greater insight and give them a better idea of what it feels like, or what it is like to function in the world as a veteran . . . what it’s like to serve, and what that means to us, and I believe that’s valuable to be able to convey that to non-veterans. . . . Because when we take off our uniforms, we go back to the community. So we’re all members of the same community, and the more we understand each other, the better we can function together as a community, as a society.

In combining a supportive writing community in which students could share their stories and learn about both popular education and academic writing, this veteran found a place that allowed her to satisfy her need to know, her readiness to learn, her orientation to address a social need, her motivation to get the education she needed to move into a fulfilling career, her desire to write about what was important to her, and the opportunity to share and put to work her experiences.

Asset-Driven Questions to Ask Right Now

One veteran said that writing teachers “don’t need to know anything special about us,” while another said “they need to know that we’re adults who have experiences, we have more to reflect on than maybe the typical college student.” Given the alignment of Knowles’s principles, composition research, and veterans’ experiences, writing programs and teachers can take an asset-based approach to support veterans in their classrooms that does not require waiting for special training, funding, or resources. Using Knowles’s principles as a heuristic, we offer the following questions to help writing programs and teachers build upon what veterans bring to composition classes (see [Table 1](#) [#table1]).

Table 1. Knowles Principles as Heuristic for Investigating Existing Resources and Knowledge

	Questions for	
Principle	Writing Program	Writing Course

<p>1. Need to know</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is course information, ideally syllabi, available online before students register? • Do all syllabi clearly state learning objectives and provide course outlines with major due dates? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you make clear how what you are teaching is of value given students' prior writing experiences (whether in the military, the workplace or high school)? • Do you start each class session or online module by explaining what you will do and why? • Do you provide a detailed syllabus with a course outline? • Do you explain the purpose of each assignment?
<p>2. Readiness to learn</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do your writing courses help students solve problems, address challenges, or realize opportunities they care about? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do your assignments allow students to use writing to act in the world? • How do you help students who are "doers" to appreciate exploratory writing and be patient with the lack of efficiencies in the writing process?
<p>3. Orientation to learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does the writing that students do in your program move out of the classroom? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do students write for audiences other than you and to accomplish goals beyond those of getting a grade in your course? • Do students choose their own topics for papers? • Do students write to accomplish goals that are important to them?
<p>4. Motivated</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does your program balance between providing motivated students with enough challenge to engage them and enough support to keep them from becoming discouraged? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you learn about the goals motivating your students? Then, how do you connect your course goals, specific lessons, and assignments to these goals? • How do you help students see that they are not alone in being anxious about college in general and college

		composition in particular?
5. Self-Directing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you scaffold self-direction across your writing courses? • Have you considered directed self-placement as a way to allow students to make informed decisions about their education? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you allow students to make choices about what to write? • Do you provide clear and detailed directions, examples, models, coaching and other scaffolding? • Are you clear with students about what is and is not negotiable? • Do you engage students in co-creating their learning? For example, do you collaboratively develop assignments or rubrics with them? Do students help set agendas?
6. Experienced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What training do you provide teachers for when students reveal difficult experiences in their writing (whether these experiences happened in the military, in their neighborhoods or in their families)? • How does your program value the experiential knowledge nontraditional students bring with them to school? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you learn about and build from students' prior writing and learning experiences? • How do you learn about and build from the process knowledge students have developed based upon their prior experiences? • How might veterans' experiences of being immersed in specialized discourse communities and engaging in collaborative learning be a resource for themselves and others in your class? • How do you teach students to describe, analyze and reflect upon their experiences in their writing? • Do you really allow students to choose whether they want to write about difficult or private experiences or do you unintentionally compel them to do so because they want to write an A paper? • How do you help students explore their experiences without feeling their identity

		<p>is threatened?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you challenge students to think beyond their own experiences?
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This table demonstrates the questions stakeholders can ask of their existing resources and programs. At the programmatic level, writing program administrators can seek consistency in their offering of program information across courses and activities, authentic and self-directed writing opportunities, and attitudes and practices that support an experienced-based approach. At the course level, instructors can be mindful of their clarity, encouragement for exploring and reflecting upon personal experience and interests as topics, and openness about the differences among adult learners and traditional-aged college students. These questions, as informed by Knowles’s principles, offer a quick but rich way to initiate conversations, improve practice, and investigate existing resources and knowledge.

Notes

1. Each focus group discussed the following questions:

1. What have been your experiences with writing since returning to school? What has been easy? What has been hard?
2. How has your current experience with writing in school been similar to or different from your prior experience with writing for school?
3. How has your current experience with writing in school been similar to or different from your prior experiences writing outside of school?
4. What do you think writing teachers should know about veterans?
5. How do you think veterans are similar to and different from other returning adult students?

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