Connecting to Veterans in Public Speaking Courses

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In the fall of 2012, after Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) finished and as Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan began to wind down, a veteran I will call Arun (not his real name) struggled in my basic public speaking class. Arun worked hard, but had difficulties with things that surprised me. He really struggled to pick a topic he “cared about.” This difficulty seemed to demoralize him; he told me he wasn’t sure if college was right for him. Trying to be helpful, I asked him, “If you were president of the United States, what is the first policy you would want to change?” He explained to me, kindly, that he was not the commander-in-chief, wasn’t qualified for the job, and wasn’t even born in this country. I could see I needed to do a better job supporting him, so I tried to research pedagogy for veterans in public speaking classes and found nothing. Surprisingly, there was very little about pedagogy for veterans in general, so I started talking with Dr. N. Roost, a psychologist who works for the Veterans Administration Health Care System (VA). As a result of our collaboration, I changed how I worked with Arun, which seemed to improve his engagement and performance. My experience reflects the truth of Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell’s (2009) statement: “There is an urgent need to share best practices, to exchange ideas, and to conduct research that will provide campuses with the in-
formation needed to promote the academic achievement of veterans who are students” (p. 13); unfortunately, little has been done to answer their call for such exchanges.

Supporting veterans can help us better support students with diverse backgrounds in and out of the military. The principles of universal design for learning, outlined by Chickering & Gamson (1987), highlight the benefits that intentional pedagogy for students with learning disabilities often has for far more than the students for whom the changes were intended. Similarly, Walters (2010) states: “Impairment-specific accommodations also elided the benefits that nonimpaired audiences or users may reap from alternative modes” (p. 440). Likewise, examining courses with veterans’ needs in mind may benefit many students. This paper develops three of the qualities that Cornett-DeVito & Worley’s 2005 article found for competent instructional communication for students with learning disabilities: “willingly provide individualized instruction that meets student’s needs” (p. 321); “demonstrate knowledge about learning disabilities and accommodation” (p. 322), and be “alert to alternatives to assist student learning” (p. 323). Of course, it must be noted that veterans are a particularly diverse group, which cannot be reduced to only one demographic characteristic, and certainly the majority do not have learning disabilities. Many veterans require no accommodations to excel, but others may benefit from some awareness of common experiences veterans have faced. And of course, veterans are members of diverse co-cultures and cannot be defined down to a single characteristic. A veteran may be a first-genera-
tion college student who has English as a second language and identifies as a black Hispanic. A simple label may erase more than illuminate; as Hendrix, Jackson, & Warren (2003) argued: “When the multiple identities we bring to the classroom are not acknowledged and appreciated, this sense of invisibility is felt” (p. 178). However, the basic speech course may be a particularly fruitful forum for awareness and accommodations for veterans, because of the subject’s intrinsic challenges and the fact that many students take it early in their time on campus. (According to Humphrey [n.d.], veterans often have enough credits to skip first-year classes and thus miss orientation.) Introductory communication courses can serve as an important tool for veterans transitioning to civilian life and provide all students with critical communication skills.

Veterans have had more impetus to enroll in college upon reentry in recent years. The Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2008 doubled the educational support for veterans who served after September 11, 2001, including both living stipends and tuition. Since World War II and the introduction of the GI Bill, college has been a primary method of helping veterans reintegrate into society. In fact, support for education and health benefits have been the two primary ways the federal government has supported veterans during their reentry to civilian life (The White House, 2012). The United States budgeted $78 billion at the federal level for veteran educational expenses between 2009 and 2019 (Brown, 2009). Approximately 4% of all college students were veterans or active duty soldiers in 2007–2008 (Radford, 2011), and a 2010 survey found...
that 64.8% of all veterans “took college or university coursework leading to a bachelor or graduate degree” (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010, p. D-43). In 2013 an estimated one million active duty military members, veterans, and their families took college courses financed by federal funds (Dao, 2013).

In spite of the large veteran presence on college campuses, minimal scholarship has addressed pedagogical techniques for working with veterans. (Exceptions include Roost & Roost [2014] on general pedagogical methods, Sinski [2012] on working with veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] and traumatic brain injury [TBI], and Singleton Dalton [2010] on strategies for teaching writing to veterans). Scholarship has focused primarily on defining veterans or developing veterans’ centers. (See, for example, the special issue of New Directions for Student Services: Creating a Veteran-Friendly Campus: Strategies for Transition and Success, with articles by Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell [2009], as well as Baechtold & De Sawal [2009], and also Rumann & Hamrick [2009], and Summerlot, Green, & Parker [2009]; see also Sargent [2009]; Burnett & Segoria, [2009]; and American Council on Education [2011].) As Abramson (2012) notes, no national statistics of veterans’ graduation rates exist. While blanket pathologizing of veterans would mask the range of aptitudes and mindsets they bring to the classroom and range of levels of combat they have experienced, certain psychological conditions have a much greater prevalence among veterans than among the general population. Broad statistics help capture the impact of these conditions. Additionally, all veterans have been exposed to military ap-
proaches to communicating; while the extent to which these approaches frame their thinking varies a good deal, understanding these approaches strengthens instructors’ ability to serve them.

This paper seeks to help ameliorate this relative dearth by reporting one instructor’s experience teaching introductory public speaking to veterans and the challenges faced. Specific issues many of my veteran students experienced revolve around alienation and connection, anxiety, language, and clarity of directions. Many veterans bring real-world experiences, maturity, and strong work ethics not necessarily prevalent in the traditional student population, but some seem to enter public speaking classes struggling to adjust to the college environment. In my experience, many students find public speaking intimidating, but it seems to present specific challenges to a number of veterans, for whom it intensifies a sense of alienation from their peers and triggers more extreme anxiety than most students experience. Some veterans seem to exhibit more difficulty meeting time requirements, speaking in an impromptu way, and following directions they find vague but most students find sufficiently specific. To explore these issues, this paper will describe some common reasons veterans experience these challenges and explore tools instructors might use to support veterans in college-level public speaking courses.
THE CHALLENGES VETERANS MAY FACE IN COLLEGE

This paper will talk about veterans in a general way without arguing that any experience or condition afflicts all veterans. Many veterans may have no need for the types of support this paper describes, but most instructors who work with veterans with any regularity will encounter needs these supports can fill among their veteran students.

Alienation

As a number of studies (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Lighthall, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010) report, the college environment can be alienating for veterans. Military culture typically renders them accustomed to a very clear order of command; standard operating procedures that cover almost all situations; real-world applications; immediate, embedded assessment; and close camaraderie with military brethren. The military trains its personnel to expect this, and, in deployment conditions, immerses them in it. College offers a very different environment.

Veterans tend to be older than average college students, generally matriculating between 23 and 27, and they are more likely to have spouses and children (Humphrey, n.d.). Widening the chasm, combat veterans typically have had to handle high-stakes missions unlike anything most other students have experienced, and the college social scene can seem trivial by comparison. Traumatic events worsen the sense of alienation (Herman, 1997; Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, 2009), and alienation from others is a symp-
tom of the PTSD that traumatic events can cause (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

PTSD and TBI are common conditions for veterans of OEF and OIF. The Congressional Budget Office (2012) found that 28% of veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan during 2004–2009 were diagnosed with PTSD, TBI, or both. Both correlate with deficits in working memory as well as deficits in sustained attention and initial learning (Vasterling, Duke, Brailey, Constans, Allain, & Sutker, 2002); reductions in processing speed (Nelson, Yoash-Gantz, Pickett, & Campbell, 2009); and other learning issues (Sinski, 2012). Further, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines PTSD very specifically (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), and the 28% figure does not capture many veterans with some but not all of the symptoms. The diagnosis those veterans may receive, “Anxiety Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified,” may correlate with some of the same challenges, but offer those veterans less support.

It would be a mistake to assume that all veteran students suffer from such ailments, but it is useful to be conscious of such ailments in seeking to serve the needs of veterans. Even Vasterling et. al’s (2006) finding that simply having been deployed to Iraq (even after accounting for the effects of head injury, stress, and depression) leads to neuropsychological deficits in paying sustained attention and learning verbally does not imply all veterans suffer from these difficulties, not least because veteran status does not equal a hist-
tory of deployment. The question of how many veteran students have PTSD, TBI, or an anxiety disorder related to combat service is beyond the scope of this paper, and knowing this information remains beyond the need of an instructor teaching a course in public speaking. However, Walters (2010) reported that among all students with disabilities many don’t self-report: “Directors of Student Disability Services at two major universities estimate that only half of students with disabilities report their disabilities and note that students with disabilities often forgo accommodations for which they are eligible because they believe their instructors will treat them differently” (p. 427). Likewise, Church (2009) found that “Many veterans are not self-disclosing and currently not utilizing the traditional service models existing on campuses for students with disabilities” (p. 43). Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) document that underreporting is common among veterans coping with PTSD, as many military veterans (especially women) are reluctant to receive help for fear of appearing weak, and current understandings of TBI may be inappropriately narrow (Lighthall, 2012). Lighthall’s (2012) formulation that veterans with PTSD or TBI have an injury, from which they may recover, and not a mental illness, is useful in framing attitudes.

**The Fractured Support Network**

While the United States theoretically supports veterans with various reentry programs, veterans return to a fractured support network with long waits at the VA and insufficient reentry support for civilian employment (Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, 2012).
America, 2012). OEF and OIF combat veterans experience higher unemployment than the general population; in 2013, veterans who served after 2001 had an unemployment rate of 9.0% (with female veterans facing a 9.6% unemployment rate), compared to 7.2% for the population at large (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). The college matriculation rate in part reflects these statistics, as some veterans probably pursue college as a means to get a civilian job. Suicide rates among active-duty and military veterans are also statistically significant: veterans comprise 7% of the United States population, but commit at least 22% of all suicides (Kemp & Bossarte, 2013, p. 15). (Because the military status of 23% of suicides was unknown, the rate may be even higher.) Furthermore, a veteran currently receiving support from the VA healthcare system “tries to commit suicide about once every half-hour, on average” (Stewart, 2012). The gaps in the VA healthcare system have been widely documented, but there are problems with educational opportunities are well. Recent changes have focused on counseling and veterans’ centers, but few pedagogical techniques have been examined.

**PROPOSED ACCOMMODATIONS FOR VETERANS IN BASIC SPEECH COURSES**

The issues that some veterans face, combined with the large numbers of veterans enrolled in college, means professors may want to consider how to best support this population. To that end, I offer recommendations around issues of 1) alienation and connec-
Alienation and Connection

Public speaking may exacerbate the problem of alienation many veterans experience in two ways: assignments that expect disclosure of personal information, and student speeches that have an anti-military bias. Professors may want to consider not requiring personal disclosure to address many veterans’ disinclination for this, and consciously build a supportive classroom environment to address both issues.

Professors may see the invitation to share personal experience as an opportunity to be honored for service, but veterans may shrink from being treated as different from their peers. A quarter of a century after Ellsworth’s (1989) influential article “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy,” few professors would call on a black student to speak on behalf of all black students, but sharing a personal experience of time in Afghanistan feels different. However, veterans may shrink from disclosure that would highlight their differences. Boodman (2011) describes the isolation veterans experience when well-meaning faculty members expect them to have special insight into foreign policy; sharing personal experience gained in a war zone can be a similarly isolating experience. As Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman (2009) note, soldiers limit self-disclosure even to family and life partners for a variety of reasons; this context makes self-disclosure with a public audience more complicated. I therefore recommend avoiding pushing veterans to share per-
Like many of the suggestions this paper makes in relation to veterans, this accommodation may address students who are not veterans. Any student may draw largely on experiences the majority of his or her peers do not share—some identities that make this likely include people of color, immigrants, LGBT students, and formerly incarcerated students. While faculty may be less likely to assume that peers will meet such experiences with veneration, other markers of distance may affect such students. While the military tradition and injunction against self-disclosure have a smaller effect on non-veterans (though members of military families may feel some of their effects), other students can have less-specific reasons to find self-disclosure complicated. However, as outlined above, veterans disproportionately experience other challenges that affect their performance, and this may make them more vulnerable to negative consequences from an assignment that pushes them past their comfort zone.

In line with Cornett-DeVito and Worley’s (2005) injunction to find alternatives to assist student learning, which may help serve both veteran students and more introverted non-veterans, it can be useful to offer alternative assignments in lieu of personal stories, if sharing personal information is not necessary for course goals. I continue to use personal stories as the first, low-stakes assignment of the semester, but I’ve begun to offer additional options for all students. My goals for the first assignment are to create a positive speaking experience, make sure students understand outlining, and allow students to practice extempora-
neous presentation. I have found that the personal story is the easiest for the majority of students, but alternatives (like an introduction of a person the student admires, or a researched presentation of what happened on a student's birthday) can accomplish the same goals. This option can benefit other students who prefer not to make personal disclosures and still accomplishes the course goals for that assignment.

Other measures will help create an inclusive environment. Frisby & Martin (2010) conclude that “an instructor’s behavior dictates the type of learning environment that is constructed, the type of relationships that bloom, and the academic outcomes that students achieve” (p. 160). While camaraderie with other students also supports participation (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010), the link with the professor may be more important for those veterans who feel alienated from other students. Cornett-DeVito and Worley (2005) have found that building “rapport and listening empathetically” is especially important for students with learning disabilities who “are particularly aware of whether teachers seek to develop rapport with them, listen to them, and respect them” (p. 322). Research suggests that similar attention to rapport may be important for veterans. For example, veterans are generally older than traditional students, which Fritschner (2000) found correlates with caring more about what their instructors think than what their peers think.

Another key aspect of creating an inclusive environment for veterans is to address the fact that comments made about the wars may alienate veterans (Elliott et al., 2011). Speeches about foreign policy
since 9/11 can affect veterans differently from other students. Generally professors want to create a safe environment for all their students while respecting their students' views. Current views on appropriate student speech vary. Dougherty (2009) argues that expression that is of a “current political or social issue” and not “poisonous’ to the learning environment” must be protected (p. 20). Giroux & Giroux (2004) argue, “It is the task of radical educators to secure not only a space for free inquiry and dissent—especially in times of global crisis . . . [but also] to open up rather than close down our classrooms to dialogue and debate over those contemporary issues and hot-button topics that most concern our students” (pp. 50–51). This approach probably applies to more professors than identify as radical educators. Balancing these goals, I review audience analysis throughout the semester, emphasizing the diversity of our classroom audience and naming specific groups, including veterans, which students must respect. Like offering alternatives to personal disclosure, this suggestion can serve students with a variety of identities, but students may be less likely to recognize the possibility that blanket statements about soldiers could offend veterans than, for example, the divisive nature of stereotypes based on gender. I reiterate this issue throughout the semester. When students select a topic that might be incendiary, especially involving the Iraq War, I remind them that they must respect all members of their audience and focus on specific behavior they believe should change, not group affiliation. I believe this has helped to create a more open classroom environment for all, and while I have heard students give speeches against predator
drones or military recruitment on high-school campuses (and against an Islamic community center in lower Manhattan, and legalization of gay marriage), the final speeches have been more specific with their concerns and focused on specific behavior rather than demographic identification, hopefully balancing an inclusive learning environment with individual students’ rights to express diverse views in an appropriate context.

Alleviating Anxiety

An inclusive environment is a strong foundation in any classroom, but a speech course may require more support for those veterans with anxiety issues; therefore, I recommend treating anxiety with care. One way I do this, in addition to naming groups that should be respected, is, on the first day, immediately after naming protected groups, I invite anyone who needs additional help or is having communication apprehension to meet with me privately. Since I’ve started doing this, more students who served in the military have come to talk to me about their needs, including those that stem from diagnoses such as PTSD and TBI.

While I have found no studies examining any possible link between PTSD and communication apprehension (and, of course, not all veterans have PTSD), there is enough crossover that it deserves further research to address the needs of those veterans who suffer from it. Etkin & Wagner (2007) show that PTSD shares some key neurological structures with Social Anxiety Disorder, especially “greater activity than matched comparison subjects in the amygdala and insula, structures linked to negative emotional re-
Supporting Student Veterans in the Basic Course 155

Hofmann, Litz, & Weathers (2003) found that Vietnam veterans with PTSD experience higher rates of social anxiety, while Zayfert, DeViva, & Hofmann (2005) reported that 43% of people diagnosed with PTSD had social phobia. Bodie’s (2010) survey demonstrates that social anxiety is closely linked to public speaking anxiety. Hyper-arousal, increased anxiety, and avoiding situations likely to trigger anxiety and negative thoughts are hallmarks of PTSD. Avoidance of crowded social environments is the most common of the “markedly diminished interest in (pre-traumatic) activities” (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). Hyper-vigilance can lead to greater anxiety for veterans experiencing it, exaggerating potential threats in social environments. The comments of Dr. N. Roost based on his experience at the Portland, Oregon, VA are suggestive: “because the autonomic nervous system is over-roused, these environments [public speaking classrooms] become anxiety-provoking and often trigger panic attacks” (personal communication, July 13, 2013).

If a veteran asks for something that doesn’t affect the goals of the course, it is worth experimenting to see if the request can be met, without demanding justification. For example, if a professor has assigned seating, veterans may prefer to sit at the back of the room, so they don’t have to be aware of people coming from behind, and some may prefer clear aisles that make evacuation easy. This may simply be a result of retaining certain habits from their role in the service, but it is an easy request to accommodate. Other requests may include avoiding completely blacking out a room, or giving students a warning when this is about
to happen. Some veterans may want to avoid the sounds of explosions or flashing lights, even in a recording, or PowerPoint presentations with images of guns or violence. Giving a warning before something that may trigger anxiety, as well as permission to leave the classroom if experiencing anxiety or panic, may help veterans who have an anxiety disorder, just as it can help any other student with an anxiety disorder. (See Sinski [2012] for classroom recommendations specifically for PTSD and TBI.)

I make accommodations for all students who seek me out to discuss communication apprehension. Finn, Sawyer, & Schrodt’s 2009 study found that repeated presentations to small, varied audiences reduced anxiety. For those veterans who struggle with PTSD, this can be even more important. Cognitive Processing Therapy, one of only three empirically supported treatments for PTSD for adults, identifies five areas that PTSD disturbs: trust, intimacy, safety, esteem, and power/control (see Monson, Schnurr, Resick, Friedman, Young-Xu, & Stevens 2006; and Resick & Schnicke, 1992), all of which may affect public speaking anxiety. In keeping also with Ellison et al.’s (2012) finding that veterans can benefit from additional time and help from faculty, I have a relaxed presentation schedule for students with enough apprehension to contact me. I offer those students a range of options: present their speech in my office first, then an empty classroom with just me, then with me and a few of their friends, before they present in class. As long as a student presents a speech for me by the due date, I don’t count it as late, even if he or she needs more practice to deal with the anxiety before presenting it.
to the class. (In practice, most students are comfortable doing their speech after one or two of these and nearly always prefer to present on their assigned day, after the pressure of the deadline has been lifted.) The section below on standard operating procedures and grading rubrics for veterans may also help those who experience significant anxiety to alleviate it; it’s also simply advisable for instructors to anticipate this anxiety, attribute it to its correct source, and treat the anxiety with respect.

**Language**

Military language prefers succinct, direct, clear, and often formulaic communications, expecting the same information delivered in the same way every time and urging short words and sentences; therefore I recommend a) avoiding penalizing veterans who give shorter speeches but have met all other requirements, b) emphasizing the importance of repetition and organizational statements for a civilian audience, and c) recognition of the impact of TBI on language retrieval when assigning impromptu and extemporaneous speeches.

A reason to avoid penalizing veterans for short speeches is that military training rewards such communication. The Army, which employs the most service people and has the greatest emphasis on succinct language, prefers written sentences that average 15 words in length with only 15% of the words having three or more syllables (U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, 2010), while the U.S. Department of Defense (2013) is slightly more lenient, calling for “short, simple words” and a sentence average of under 20
words. The Army prefers short words like “fear” to long words like “anxious,” regardless of the difference in nuance (Singleton Dalton, 2010). While most soldiers are not writing as part of their jobs, they are surrounded by language that reflects clear, simple, brief communication. This can make it more difficult for veterans to embrace academic rhetoric, but it can also provide a rich foundation for classroom discussions about the social implications of language.

King-Sears (2009) identifies “tolerance for error” as an essential principle of universal design for learning. However, communicating that tolerance may be equally important. Before I started making these changes, several of my veteran students did assignments late or didn’t finish them. A military background may make them assume that suggestions, like a time minimum, are actually requirements. Personally, I am more concerned about the quality of the argument and the evidence used to back it up than I am about the actual length of the speech. With a student who self-identifies as a veteran, I emphasize that the “suggested time” is a guideline for an average speech but doesn’t impact the grade if the speech meets all other requirements. This doesn’t affect course standardization, as I don’t automatically fail any student for a good speech that falls outside time requirements.

Further, I help veterans, like others who struggle to meet time requirements, to improve their short speeches through repetition, especially in preview statements and summaries. While most students need to work on transitions, this seems particularly important to veterans. A military audience often knows the structure of an address beforehand and does not
require this (Singleton Dalton, 2010); therefore, this basic skill can present particular challenges for veterans. Military communication is fairly concise because it follows pre-determined structures for specific purposes. It doesn't tend to develop nuance. Except for those serving in the highest levels of command (who earn college degrees before assuming active duty and are unlikely to enroll in a basic course after service), military communication rarely allows space for counter-arguments or contradictions. Civilian communication is more diverse; as a result, the audience may not know what to expect. Thus, organizational statements and clearer transitions are integral to communicating successfully in varied communication environments. Some veterans are very succinct in ways that can make it harder to aurally follow more sophisticated arguments. They may need more practice specifically on transitions and greater repetition to meet civilian communication expectations. Finally, because a civilian audience doesn't necessarily know the structure beforehand, it is important to reiterate the main points in organizational statements in a civilian speech.

When veterans have TBI, permitting shorter speeches and working on structure may be insufficient. Veterans with mild TBI are likely to have difficulty focusing and retrieving language. Lezak, Howieson, & Loring (2004) report that attention deficit disorder is the most common mild cognitive impairment for veterans with mild TBI, while Sohlberg & Mateer (2001) observed that those with mild TBI often had difficulty multi-tasking, but also with focusing attention and ignoring distractions. They also found verbal...
retrieval to be one of the slowest elements to recover. Murdoch (1990) found that TBI causes slow recall of language, terms, and names; mispronunciations; and misnaming. This can exacerbate anxiety around speaking in class that can lead to skipping classes. It may also make writing or impromptu speaking quickly or on the spot more difficult. As a result, impromptu speeches may be especially difficult for some veterans. In extreme cases, especially if a veteran has both TBI and PTSD, it may be worth considering giving veterans with anxiety issues advance notice of when impromptu speeches will occur and giving them a topic category early. Avoiding situations that produce anxiety is a common marker of PTSD, and it may be better to have a warning about impromptu speeches than have a student skip all classes. This obviously affects the standardization of the course delivery, but professors in extreme situations may have to balance providing “individualized instruction that meets student’s needs” (Cornett-DeVito & Worley, 2005, p. 321) with a completely standardized course.

Finally, even extemporaneous speeches can be more difficult, as someone with TBI may struggle to find all the right words. Veterans with TBI or who have significant anxiety about word choice may need to combine elements of manuscript and extemporaneous presentations, using a far more extensive outline. I do require every student to deliver speeches using extemporaneous presentation, but for students who have significant difficulties with language retrieval, I make it clear that lack of eye contact can affect their grade but will not cause them to fail.
Of course, the accommodations that help veterans with TBI can be useful for other differently abled students, such as those who have attention deficit disorder unrelated to injury. Veterans also affected by the other challenges I’ve outlined here may have a greater need for these accommodations than such students, however. Instructors frequently encounter the question of when to push students to conform to standards they may find challenging to support their growth and development, and when such standards only set up a student to fail. Given the many challenges veterans face in the college environment, especially early in their college careers, many veterans may benefit from accommodation instead of unmitigated challenge.

**Standard Operating Procedure and Rubrics**

Generally speaking, military life is very open and specific about expectations; to address the challenges people face transitioning from this environment, I provide more structured assignments and make rubrics available when applicable. Comadena, Hunt, & Simonds (2007) found that instructor clarity is influential in student learning for all students. In my experience, this is even more important for veterans. Soldiers know what is expected in most situations. Academia, with its vastly different demands in different disciplines (and even within a single discipline) can seem unclear and confusing. Veteran students seem disproportionately to grow discouraged. Using tools that resemble military tools can alleviate soldiers’ anxiety. I developed this “Standard Operating Procedure” for Arun when he struggled with picking a topic:
Selecting a Topic: An Operating Procedure

Use what is useful; skip anything that feels like busy-work.

- Find the appropriate database for the discipline
  - Speak to either your professor or a librarian if you need help finding a database.
  - I recommended Opposing Viewpoints for brainstorming topics in the speech class.
- Read five (more or less) different topics that seem like they might be interesting. Just click on anything that catches your eye.
- For each topic, analyze:
  - How much information can I find?
  - How interested am I in this topic?
  - How much do I know about this topic?
- Are there one or two topics that I think I’d do a better job with? If not, rank each topic on
  - My interest,
  - My expertise,
  - Ease of acquiring information, and
  - Relevance to my audience
- If you have it narrowed down to two or three topics and none seem clearly ideal, talk to your professor about the strengths and weaknesses of each topic.

When I provided this procedure to Arun, he had a topic within a week and his generalized uncertainty faded. The tool seemed to make him much more confident about the class. I doubt I’ll use this specific rubric again, but I will be making operating procedures for
seemingly simple elements that perplex individual students.

Similarly, making copies of grading rubrics available to students may be very important for veterans. Seeing, for example, “Transition from introduction to body” and other clearly laid-out expectations for a speech may give veterans more confidence and focus. Booth-Butterfield’s (1986) finding that highly structured assignments increase participation of students with communication apprehension and decrease anxiety may be particularly useful for teaching veterans, who are already used to a more structured environment. Obviously, it’s important not to place more work on veterans when giving them structure—reviewing five topics before picking one, as the previous operating procedure suggested, must be clearly marked as optional.

To further align assignments with veterans’ needs, professors may want to articulate the applicability of assignments and give as immediate feedback as possible. The military embeds the applicability of information explicitly within any instruction and continually builds assessment into each learning unit. Explicitly addressing why information is important may better engage veterans and all students. Hazel, McMahon, and Schmidt’s (2011) analysis of immediate feedback to reduce filler words and M. Epstein, Lazarus, Calvano, Matthews, Hendel, B. Epstein, & Brosvic’s (2010) conclusion that immediate feedback on tests supports retention indicates that incorporating as timely a response as possible may be useful for non-veterans as well. To this end, I give students written comments the same period they present their
speeches. I do not give grades until I've had time to analyze their outlines and bibliography, but I simply take photos of the feedback sheets I give them before distribution for my use in assigning grades. Immediate feedback and clear evaluation can also make learning more predictable, and I have found most of my students are more engaged with the written feedback, reading it more carefully and asking for more clarifications, when they receive it that same day they give their speech.

Veterans can benefit from guidance in project planning and using a day planner (Huckans, Pava-walla, Demadura, Kolessar, Seelye, Roost, Twamley, & Storzbach, 2010). While Huckans et al. (2010) specifically studied this accommodation in relation to veterans, most of the other research I have cited in this section relates to students more generally, which suggests that all of these accommodations can support various students who struggle in a basic public speaking course. Veterans’ need for them comes from a very specific source: the military environment that shapes their approach to accomplishing tasks, but other students may have similar needs.

**SUMMATION**

This paper has not sought to identify accommodations that exclusively benefit veterans. Indeed, few such exist, and I consider it a desirable feature that, as I believe to be true, many of the practices described here will benefit many students who struggle in basic public speaking courses. However, it has sought to (1) bring together a number of accommodations particu-
particularly suited to the challenges some (but, crucially, not all) veterans bring to basic public speaking courses, and (2) lay out the connection between these accommodations and challenges many (but not all) veterans face.

Further, this paper has not sought to create an exhaustive list of such accommodations, but only to begin a discussion. Ultimately, the most important thing may be to encourage student veterans to approach their professors and describe their needs. As faculty, we need to listen to what student veterans tell us. We also need to look for what is unsaid. Creating a safe classroom environment will encourage the veterans to contact faculty with any specific concerns or requests. It isn’t enough for campuses to set up a veterans’ center and expect that to meet all veterans’ needs. The GI Bill provides veterans with money for college but cannot provide all the support veterans often need to achieve their degrees. Few colleges even track the success of student veterans. It is incumbent on communication faculty to do their part to aid veterans, both by articulating their needs to other faculty and by identifying skills that translate to the civilian environment. We can better support veterans, both by valuing their strength and understanding some of the challenges many face. In light of this, building on my experience, I plan to support veterans in developing their own operating procedures for any area of class where more structure may be helpful. Guiding students as they transition from military to civilian life will be continually challenging, and I believe we need to rely on our intuition (until we have more research)
for balancing structure versus self-generated paths for each individual student.

**LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

The recommendations here are a preliminary beginning to what should become an ongoing and vigorous discussion. They developed out of my collaboration with a single psychologist who works at the VA and represent a professoriate of one, hardly a robust sampling. I have found the accommodations quite effective for their original purpose, generating more engagement from all students who self-identified as veterans. Furthermore, some non-veterans who have used resources I originally made available primarily for veterans (like looking at the rubrics online) have commented on the usefulness of the additional resources. However, more research is necessary. Group-work in classes with multiple veterans deserves further exploration. The military relies on significant trust and support within its community; that can be better harnessed within the academy. Existing scholarship indicates that veterans’ centers on campus are effective because they help veterans support each other through their academic careers. A cohort of veterans taking multiple classes with professors who are sensitive to military issues could help expand that support network into additional classes.

Additionally, I have worked only in a traditional public speaking course; future research could explore how to support veterans in online courses. Implementation across courses by multiple professors also deserves greater research. The only accommodation that
has been standardized at Hostos Community College, where I teach, is that all students have alternative assignments to personal stories. Some techniques, like making rubrics available online, would necessitate faculty agreeing on course rubrics, but the move toward greater consistency across all sections of general education courses and the increased expectations of regular assessment may make uniform rubrics more common. Examinations of how much structure is supportive and when it becomes burdensome could be useful. Finally, the neurological similarities between PTSD and social anxiety disorder, as well as the similarities between social anxiety disorder and communication apprehension, warrant an investigation of possible links between PTSD and communication anxiety.

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