Teaching as Leading: Valuing the Veteran in All of Us

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of my wife were primary motivators in my choice to integrate; I also know that my experience with Nasr helped keep me from self-insulation because I saw firsthand the tragedy that can result from isolation. Nonetheless, I do believe that the absence of a mini-community of veterans sustained that decision, and I hope that my experiences can inform decisions about ways to help veteran students successfully integrate into our community.

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Teaching as Leading
Valuing the Veteran in All of Us

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As a recent veteran, I consider welcoming student veterans into the academic community to be a privilege and a personal responsibility. As a professor, I have learned that acknowledging the presence of veterans in my American literature classroom helps to reveal for all students the range of cognate situations that wartime experiences can illuminate. Where my seemingly disparate roles of veteran and professor overlap, I have discovered a dynamic space for teaching, scholarly exploration, and personal reintegration that renews my conviction of the academic vocation’s social significance. For instance, during a discussion in a survey class of an early American captivity narrative by Mary Rowlandson, I pointed out the important role of “praying Indians” (converts) as cultural intermediaries between colonial American and Native American communities. Not only were these converts embodiments of cultural mixing in their dress, values, and beliefs, but they often also served as translators whose loyalty and reliability were questioned by both sides in negotiations. To bring some of the awkwardness of these interactions home, I asked if any students had similar experiences with a translator they didn’t entirely trust. Unexpectedly, a normally quiet student in back raised his hand. I knew this student was a former Marine because he had approached
me in the third week of class to ask about my desert combat boots. He said
yes, he had experienced this situation in Iraq working with a “terp” (Arab
linguist) to interview village tribal elders in al-Anbar province during the
early days of what came to be known as the Anbar Awakening. This veteran’s
anecdote, almost the only verbal contribution he made during the term, per-
fectedly illustrated the tense connections within Rowlandson’s text between
her and the “praying Indians” she encountered, and it brought both the war
in Iraq and the historically distant war on the eastern seaboard much closer
to our classroom.

This student veteran’s willingness to contribute his insight stemmed,
I believe, from an unusual point of connection (my boots) that I believe can
be orchestrated by nonveteran faculty members if they have the motivation
to do so. Small signs of welcome and understanding are valued by student
veterans who are often cagy and adept at surreptitiously reading the social
and political signs we project in our syllabi, conversation, and demeanor.
Faculty initiative in shaping the classroom environment to be congenial
to veterans is particularly important because veterans often fly under the
radar in class—having learned the value of camouflage during their military
career—and rarely make an issue of the way the classroom accommodates or
rubs against their military sensibilities. Observing student veterans on my
campus has pushed me to work harder to understand myself as a professor
and a recent veteran, and in this essay I hope to provide a bridge for other aca-
demics interested in exploring the mindset of growing numbers of veterans
in US universities and colleges. Though I sometimes feel like Rowlandson’s
“praying Indians,” I more frequently enjoy the access my dual status affords.
From what I have seen since 2004 when I completed a PhD in American
literature, joined the US Navy Reserve, and started a full-time teaching job,
there is more common ground between military and university culture than
might be expected.

During my first years as a professor, I worked to understand the con-
nections between academic life and the concerns for justice, peace, and equity
that had led me to join the military in my mid-thirties. As a junior faculty
member, I was also learning how to embrace my role as an educator in the
grand tradition of the humanities. In the classroom, I learned to subordinate
the transmission of expert knowledge to more holistic efforts to facilitate the
formation of students as scholars and citizens. Yet at this point I, like many
academics, had an understanding of the value of the humanities that was
ethereal, both idealized and difficult to articulate to anxious, career-driven
students who yearned for a stronger connection to transcendent ideals but
who had few if any models of people for whom those ideals were both practical and apparent.

As I groped toward greater significance and effectiveness as a teacher, the trope of the veteran frequently came to mind as a figure who combines knowledge and action, values and valor, in a way that disarms popular disparagements of idealism’s efficacy. When I became a veteran myself upon returning from Afghanistan in 2009, I was determined to see just how far I could go in motivating student engagement and transformation by welcoming and acknowledging the veteran in me and the veterans in my classes. I had no doubt that being a professor made me a better officer during my time in Afghanistan. It remained to be discovered if my time in Afghanistan had made me a better professor. Over the past three years of experimentation and self-discovery, I have come to believe that my identity as a veteran reinforces my efforts to be a better and more integrated teacher. Consequently, I think that many professors will benefit from understanding some points of connection between military and academic life and learning how to accommodate veterans in the classroom, not so much because it is just and wise to account for this growing and distinct student population, but rather because doing so will make us better teachers for all students and perhaps better able to articulate the values of the academy beyond our embattled and misrepresented ivory towers.

**Ambiguity and Action: Leadership in the Literature Classroom**

Structurally speaking, effective pedagogy and military science are quite similar: we learn to state objectives simply, and practitioners exhibit creativity in adapting strategy to changing circumstances to achieve those objectives. See the hill, take the hill; see the scholar, become the scholar. The teacher and the soldier walk into their respective fields of action prepared either to drive resolutely and creatively toward a clearly understood goal or, less felicitously, to execute a preplanned course of action that grinds ahead without regard to the fog of war or student incomprehension, disinterest, or boredom. These characterizations are particularly apt for a teacher of literature. In her inspiring 2011 manifesto, *The Use and Abuse of Literature*, Marjorie Garber argues for the enduring value of literature as an inexhaustible reservoir of questions. Literary study, according to Garber, is defined more by its process of grappling with protean texts than any conclusive assertions drawn from a guided process of engaging with them: “Because no interpretation of literature is ‘final’ or ‘definitive,’ literary study, like literature, is a process rather than a product. . . . One of the defining characteristics of literature and literary
study is to open questions, not to close them” (259). While I agree with Garber’s assumptions regarding the inexhaustibility of literary texts, I frame the objectives of literary study in the face of that plenitude somewhat differently. I believe great literature imbibes in its essence the indecidability of human experience. The valuable legacy of literary scholarship’s long dalliance with postmodernism is our hangover of epistemological humility. I laud this humility. No great moral act was ever essayed without it. What I abhor, reject, and roundly abuse in my classrooms, however, is the naïveté that assumes indecidability is a “get-out-of-life-free” card, a defensible exemption from the choices that responsibility, love, and noble aspiration require and that, in time, thrust wisdom upon our unwilling shoulders. Indeed, in 2006 I explicitly addressed the dilemma of action in the face of moral ambiguity as I answered the question, “How could I, an educated person committed to justice, diversity, and peace, lend my abilities to the engines of war?” (Corley 2006; see also Corley 2012). My answer then as now rests in my conviction that no individual in a community stands apart from the culpable actions undertaken on behalf of the whole and that, as Ralph Waldo Emerson might say, while action without reflection is foolish, reflection without action is cruel.

No great life is lived in suspense. Likewise, no wise person is ignorant of the limits of his or her ability to know and do what is right. Yes, life and literature are full of questions. Careful study of literature can open our eyes to the profound complexity and nimble allusiveness of existence’s beautiful ambiguity. The transfixing moments of insight, passion, determination, sacrifice, heroism, creativity, murder, and love are but threads in a larger tapestry that we unravel when we refuse the burden of choice inherent in those moments. What I seek as a veteran in the classroom is a wide-eyed commitment to action in the face of ambiguity, the mingling of vinegar and myrrh that is wisdom’s sop on the path to an often misunderstood cross. The courage to face crucifixion is, after all, strengthened by an intellect that has considered and rejected other options. As a teacher, I delight in students who discover that their unthinking armor of postmodern cynicism can be hammered, forged, and cast anew into heroic humility that supports action without arrogant derision of other paths, interpretation without an absolutist denial of alternative views. The gravitas in acts of literary interpretation and choices of life direction lies in knowing other choices exist. In this landscape of literary study, the framing of arguments gains greater urgency. Student researchers do not seek in their sources for “evidence” to support preconceived theses; they look instead for signs of other travelers on a road of insight and discovery.
As the preceding paragraphs suggest, discussions in my classroom are rarely safe, comfortable, or predictable. They are, instead, proving grounds of new beliefs where literature is our sparring partner. Naturally, I do not require all of my students to speak in class—I think that is unreasonable and culturally biased. Some students, for reasons of personality, culture, or experience, are less inclined to draw attention to themselves. Instead, all my students write, and on average, one-third to one-half speak regularly in class. Even so, student feedback suggests that my classrooms create an environment where each student is accountable, alert, and focused on the pivots in discussion and analysis where she may be required to act, choose, or believe in ways she is not used to being challenged. To facilitate such an environment, my classroom persona is composed of the three \textit{hus} of teaching: humor, humility, and chutzpah. Living and teaching on the edge of propriety and beyond the shores of certainty, I often make mistakes. I apologize for breaches of decorum, for errors in syllabus construction, for oversights in classroom management. Oddly enough for a scholar, my classroom authority is not predicated on always being right, just as an officer need not always win the battle to be loved and followed by his squad. Instead, I believe I gain authority in my students’ lives by always pursuing insight and not letting fear, expectation, or lack of preparation stop me from asking the questions that will bring them along for the ride. The interrelations between the three \textit{hus} of my persona can sometimes create a minefield, but I have come to see that the \textit{hus} are also reinforcing practices that speak to me both as a veteran and as a teacher, as the following anecdote illustrates.

During my second quarter back from Afghanistan, a student complained about how nervousness was affecting her research presentation in class. With a quip faster than my internal filters, I retorted, “Hey, at least we’re not shooting at you.” Given the many school shootings that have traumatized our country, this was an explosive remark, but the atmosphere following my words was hard to read. Despite knowing that recently deployed veterans can exhibit a number of traits that correlate with but do not equate to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), I was surprised by how candidly I addressed my student as though she were one of my colleagues in arms. The literature on PTSD tells us that when coping mechanisms effective on the battlefield fail to reach their mark in civilian spheres, they become obtrusive. Dark humor involving guns and imminent death, for instance, was a very effective coping mechanism on the battlefield. The college classroom, however, is engaged in a different fight. Despite the solidarity I expressed with the student as one who had felt and overcome fear, I sensed as a professor that I
had stepped over a line of propriety (indeed, my wife thought I would lose my job when I told her about the incident), so I apologized in my next communication to the class: “I would also like to apologize for my humor in response to the comment today that some people find me intimidating . . . Though I’ve been back in the States for eight months now, my thoughts and my humor sometimes stray back to my time in uniform, and that was unfortunate today. I am very sorry to those who were unsettled.”

Apologies like this are the price I pay for not quashing those aspects of my personality that others find intimidating. Apologies, and the ways of teaching that make the need for them inevitable, are also ways I model courage for my students. As a teacher, I see value in being both loved and feared, Mr. Rogers and Machiavelli, because I want the best for my students and know well that strength is often discovered in moments when fear and affirmation combine. Alli Kirkham,4 one of the students who received my apology, responded this way:

I just wanted to let you know that even when you’re intimidating (maybe especially when you’re intimidating) you’re still the best and most challenging professor I’ve had in the course of my college career. I really respect that you don’t coddle your seniors like some professors seem to. . . . Intimidating as you may be, it’s never actually scared me out of speaking in class—just prompted me to work harder and articulate better, and I know several students who feel the same way. Anyway, what it comes down to is stay scary—we need it. (e-mail to the author 26 February 2010)

Alli’s remarks express an important distinction between the fear that comes from cruelty and that which comes from respect. While the former is indefensible, the latter derives from our students’ apprehension that our authority as teachers is earned, merited, and available to them if they also have the dedication to achieve it. What students articulate as fear is often an unfamiliar respect that I make use of in calling them to discover their better selves. Before I became a veteran, I exerted authority more fitfully because I could not yet articulate the relationship between productive fear and learning. Now I see that when students take courage in the face of fear, they progress toward genuine learning and a lifestyle that values growth through understanding over stagnation in safety.

“Love Is the Unfamiliar Name”: Formation in the Literature Classroom

Honesty, authenticity, and empowering accountability—I was committed to these teaching methods long before I became a veteran and saw their rel-
evance in a new light. When I first read Parker J. Palmer’s The Courage to Teach (1998), I felt his words expressed deep commitments I had already made in the prehistory of my formation as a teacher. In particular, I found his emphasis on the necessary congruity between a teacher’s examined inner life and his ethical behavior in the classroom to be an insightful explanation of why guilt and anxiety sometimes subverted my performance as a teacher. Palmer’s belief that teachers should reveal their humanness and limitations in the classroom has merged in my mind with the practice of a more recent teaching mentor, Jane Tompkins, whose A Life in School (1996) has given me constructive models of ways to let our human weight be felt in the classroom in place of the vanity and competitiveness our intellectual drives sometimes lead us toward. When I read Ken Bain’s authoritative What the Best College Teachers Do (2004) in my first year on the tenure track, I rejoiced in its simple explanations and familiar exhortations. Bain’s qualitative study gave me greater confidence that calling students to high standards was a mark of respect paid to their potential and that over time students would respond to this challenge.

Although I knew that my experiences as a veteran had only reinforced values I held as a teacher, I was nevertheless surprised by responses to a survey I gave in the spring of 2012 asking students how they saw my identity as a veteran affecting classroom dynamics. Despite many of them having the vantage point of several classes with me, none of the students answered the question directly, choosing instead to speak in general terms about what my teaching meant to them and how it related to what they experienced in other classrooms. Reading their responses, I was both disappointed and relieved. Being a veteran is part of my background, but I do not believe it defines me. That happened before I spent a year deployed to Afghanistan, and studying literature is part of what led me to war in the first place. To be sure, my time in the military has increased the vocabulary and experience base I use to engage students in the real-world implications of in-class discussions, but the addition of F-bombs and smart bombs to my argot has been a mixed blessing, one I fight more frequently than embrace, especially in courses like the Bible as Literature. Thus I took anticlimactic comfort in the disinterest my students had in linking my classroom persona to military experiences.

Despite this lacuna in their feedback, I saw traces of their thoughts on the subject. Several chose to emphasize how I am a fair grader and a passionate teacher. Those are things students care about. Military culture probably fosters more candor in evaluation than does academe because there is more structure surrounding the aftermath of assessment. On the battlefield, a close
working relationship is maintained after difficult feedback and the recipient is expected to improve—indeed, is relied upon to do so—since he or she remains an essential contributor to mission success. While the concept of a learning community that values all members is commonly cited on campus, its reality is rare. As a result, I have to step over a few additional boundaries when giving candid feedback in academe so that it is psychologically and emotionally evident that I am calling a student to a higher standard—personally and individually—and not just speaking the truth in a way that hurts. In spite of its hierarchical structure, the military is a deeply egalitarian society, as is appropriate given the country we are drawn from and that we defend, and the bonds between leader and led are forged from mutual respect and trust. The university world is also, to our students’ eyes, extremely hierarchical, and we who teach at its apex must make extra efforts to impress upon students our respect for their individuality and accountability. Properly introduced and maintained, clear and rigorous standards can unify a class in a shared pursuit of knowledge. As the hoopla over Simon Cowell’s candid judgments on *American Idol* a few years ago suggests, students crave truth, especially when there is a purpose behind it and a vision of their potential development.

One evaluation from Mariano Prieto, an undergraduate who took four courses from me, moved me deeply and affirmed that efforts to merge the sensibilities of a military officer with the responsibilities of a professor could bear fruit:

You are by far the instructor I respect the most and regard highest. . . . I’ve learned more from you in 4 classes than I have in 5 years of higher education. My first class with you went horribly wrong and I got what I deserved; the second and third improved because of that. Your style of teaching . . . is only as effective as it is because you carry in yourself the values and the effort that you require from us. I’ve talked with other students about this topic and we all agree that you are one of the professors for whom we’d rather not eat or sleep than be unprepared. Perhaps your personality was shaped by the military background you carry, perhaps it came from an earlier stage. . . . I am glad that you are as strict as you are because I have learned by your reproof. (29 May 2012)

I believe that Mariano and other students are responding positively to a teacher’s focused observation and mentorship of them as individuals, not as interchangeable members of a class. Although this is a value espoused by many teachers, it is enshrined within the military as a crucial component of esprit
de corps and leadership. Mariano also emphasizes the importance of teachers embodying “the values and the effort” they require from students. I often discuss my current research in class and describe how course assignments relate to my professional activities so that students see how I am engaged in the work I require of them. I may share an abstract submitted to a conference on a novel assigned in the class or post on a course website sections of a draft journal article relevant to a class discussion. These professional connections are matched by personal confidences revealing how course readings are woven into my life, such as the difficulty I had in reading Edward Taylor’s “Upon Wedlock, and Death of Children” after a season of loss in my family, or the dramatic conviction I bring to classroom performances of Walt Whitman’s “The Wound-Dresser.” Holding followers to the same standard as leaders is a staple of military culture that affirms the mutual benefit of the course of action demanded. Mutual commitment to high standards is how respect and trust are earned, and faculty members learning to accommodate veterans in their classrooms would do well to remember it.

Despite the connections discussed here, the perceived gap between the university world and military life has sometimes been a source of discomfort for me. For the most part, my colleagues allow their personal experience with me to override beliefs they have about veterans. However, this is not always the case, and it is less true at academic conferences. An experience at a recent Modern Language Association annual convention suggests to me that we still have far to go before our profession is equipped to treat student veterans as fully and comprehensibly human. During a discussion that touched briefly on my deployment, one of my interlocutors raised what for him was an urgent question: “Well, you know, academe and the military are quite different. I mean, it’s not like you can order your students to do the reading, right? So how do you deal with this cultural difference in your classroom?” I was momentarily perplexed by the earnest confusion in the question. Was I to reassure this professor that my military experiences had not made me a power-mad martinet incapable of discerning the difference between the classroom and a Jack Nicholson film about the battlefield? Should I address the assumptions implicit in the question about the docility of soldiers and the arbitrary power of officers? Or was the question an opportunity to commiserate with the frustrations this colleague may have experienced in leading his own students toward intellectual commitment and growth? Though I was internally flabbergasted, I told him that my experiences in the military had poured new conviction into previously held principles. In particular, I pointed him toward
this insight from Palmer: “Power works from the outside in, but authority works from the inside out. . . . When teachers depend on the coercive powers of law or technique, they have no authority at all” (1998: 32–33).

On reflection, I see how the structure of my interlocutor’s question can be reversed to speak to the best practices necessary to accommodate growing numbers of veterans in our classrooms. Rather than exclusively accounting for the external features of military veterans, we can also consider the ongoing transformation of a “veteran” teacher within ourselves. From what I have seen of how students have responded to me as a teacher veteran, I believe that when we adapt ourselves to inspire student veterans we will reach many more besides. The values I have highlighted—welcoming all students; giving clear and direct feedback; approaching ourselves, our subjects, and our students with moral seriousness; teaching with integrity; relating our subject matter to everyday concerns; and holding all students to high standards—may seem like truisms in our trade, but implementing them consistently will go far in reducing the gap between military and academic culture. As we continue our commitment to teach all students with respect, veterans will find in our classrooms a new place to call home.

Notes
1. Marilynne Robinson (2012) approaches this question of literature’s intent from her vantage point as a successful author, and I have found her meditations on the autonomy of characters to be a profound articulation of the relationship between fictive and physical worlds.
2. In the rare situations where indecision (vice indecidability) is the point (such as the alternative lines given in Emily Dickinson’s fascicles), I look to Zhuangzi’s philosophy of wu wei (nonaction) for inspiration. When all others are convinced their choice is right, nonaction can require as much moral courage as action.
3. I quote this message as it was written, despite what I now see as evidence of hedging in the way I addressed my apology: “to those who were unsettled.” At the time of the event, I was able to recognize the need for an apology, even though I now believe I did not go far enough in disavowing the violent language and went too far in disclaiming the egalitarian context of my reaction. Fortunately, I was able to apologize in person to the student presenter, who, as it turned out, reveled by the end of the term in a newfound strength to face challenges in life and school.
4. Allison Leigh Kirkham, e-mail message to author, 26 February 2010. Name and content used by permission.
5. Equally important in my early years was learning that my pedagogy did not exist in a vacuum. Students experienced my classroom in comparison with others on my
campus, and my departmental colleagues were especially important contributors to the expectations and behavior of students in my classes. As a junior faculty member, I came to rely on several of them as mentors: Anne Simpson, Karen Russikoff, Edward Rocklin, Alison Baker, and Don Kraemer—all formidable scholars and beloved instructors who teach out of their ground of being and hold students to ennobling standards of performance.

6. Mariano Prieto, comment on course evaluation, 29 May 2012. Name and content used by permission.

Works Cited


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