

BOOK REVIEW

Review: *Writing Programs, Veterans Studies, and the Post-9/11 University: A Field Guide*

D. Alexis Hart & Roger Thompson | National Council of Teachers of English, 2020 | pp. 178 ISBN: 978-0814175057

Luciana Herman

University of Texas at El Paso, US
lmherman@miners.utep.edu

This review carefully examines D. Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson's March 2020 published book entitled: *Writing programs, veterans studies, and the post-9/11 university: A Field guide*. The author of this review touches on the overall themes of the volume, gives insight into each chapter's contents, and concludes with an evaluation of the book as it stands within the field of Veterans Studies.

Keywords: Veterans Studies; book review; higher education; university; post-9/11; veterans

As a field, Veterans Studies is young but promising. Nestled nicely in the broader garden of Writing Studies, Veterans Studies has rooted and continues to flourish through the help of budding scholarship. Most recently on the scene is D. Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson's *Writing Programs, Veterans Studies, and the Post-9/11 University: A Field Guide* (2020). With its cheerful play on the field guide genre, historical account of the GI Bill in higher education, and its discussion of the chasm between the civilian and military worlds, Hart and Thompson's book plants itself as an important resource for educators and administrators looking for an introductory exploration into the field of Veterans Studies, or those needing to pointedly research how their own institutions fit into the realm of the field.

Released in early March 2020, this book is new but may quickly establish itself as a necessary introductory read for orientation to Veterans Studies. Hart and Thompson endeavor to "build an initial architecture of the field" (p. xx) and "broaden our approaches to studying veterans' experiences" (p. xxiv), while "demonstrat[ing] the continued need to investigate issues attendant on the combat experience, including trauma and moral injury" (p. xxvi). The authors, while setting some lofty goals for the book, concede that they cannot and will neither attempt to include every facet of the field, nor put forth "this volume as the definitive discussion of the thousands of initiatives across the country that address veterans and higher education" (p. xxxii). With that caveat, the authors offer a clearer understanding of the

project's scope, as well as make a special note for their readers to more closely consult the volume's bibliography for further query.

In the introduction, Hart and Thompson stratify higher education (namely classrooms) into three tiers: veteran-friendly, veteran-focused, and veteran-only. In so doing, the authors are able to disburse resource ideas by level, thereby widening their reach to the audience and naming types of classes their teacher-audience may have at their colleges. Given that this book appeals to educators and administrators in higher education, this delineation among veteran-included classrooms is important because it reveals the range in which veterans engage with and are invited into the educational process. Additionally, the authors make repeated mention of their aims for the volume and explain how the audience can use it to introduce themselves to some of the foundational concepts in this nascent field.

The first chapter, "Writing (Veterans) Studies," makes the case for Veterans Studies' (VS) inclusion under the Writing Studies (WS) umbrella. These pages include the impetus and genesis for the field, recording that it began about 15-years-ago roughly coinciding with the emergence of student veterans in higher education under institution of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Hart and Thompson take the reader through a historiography of VS's foundation built through several conferences, partnerships with standing initiatives, endowments, and lines of scholastic inquiry. In addition to substantiating through the community, the authors call out some of the

founding members of the field by name and their work in establishing VS within WS. The next part of the chapter works to define central terms like “veteran” and “trauma” before offering three guiding principles for situating veterans in WS. The guiding principles are: “Veteran Demographics Affect Campus Culture and Writing Classrooms,” “Veterans are Writers,” and “Not All Institutions or Writing Programs Need a Systemic Response to Student Veterans.” The authors use these tenets to guide the organization of the text, beginning with a historic view and moving to suggested practical application. The closing of each chapter, beginning with the first, includes “Implementation Questions” that provide readers reflective and probing questions for inquiry to help administrators and instructors survey their current programs, or give them food for thought as they attempt to found a writing program that seeks to include student veterans.

Beginning with the history of the American GI Bill, the second chapter lays out the impetus behind and goals of veteran education. This section includes categorizations of military service, the complex notions of identity among veteran sub-groups, how the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) applies to disabled veterans, and ways to “codify veteran education as employment” (p. 23). The authors explain that given the GI Bill’s initial mission of “get to work” (p. 27), affording service members with a post-secondary education became the means behind achieving upward social mobility predicated on the notion of the American Dream. The model changed to “education-as-job-training” to entice veterans to use the funding for college and not just for vocations (p. 29). Writing Program Administrators (WPA) began to work on initiatives to help students move through their college careers and attain the skills that would help them in their professions upon completion. Through their chronological reporting, Hart and Thompson establish the history of veteran education prior to moving forward with their guide on how to effectively meet the needs of this student population. This chapter also includes “Principles for Framing Writing as Vocational Affordance for Veterans” where the authors respond to the “vocational framework” of the GI Bill and endeavor to conceptualize how educators and administrators can structure writing environments (i.e., classrooms, programs, etc.) to help veterans’ writing meet the communication demands of the workplace.

Following chapter 2, readers are introduced to the first of two “Writing/Practices” sections, the first delving into “Student Voices/Writing Genres.” This part of the book acts as a depiction of how some student veterans “negotiate rhetorical genres” through the inclusion of student writing samples (p. 37). This section creatively helps writing teacher readers explore genres for assignments that they could use in their classes. Some of the examples include: a Veterans Day speech, a research paper on trauma, and email correspondence. After the examples, the authors provide “examples of military writing guidance and genres to draw attention to

some of the shared rhetorical strategies and conventions” inherent in military writing (p. 49). Specifically, the authors draw on examples from Air Force communication with respect to purpose and audience (policy memos, after action reports, and funding requests), playing nicely into the next chapter that covers knowledge transfer.

Chapter 3, entitled “Transferring Veteran Knowledge,” works to outline veterans’ transition to college and the power structures/struggles at play. The transition from service life to the college classroom includes myriad steps and layers of engagement. Throughout the chapter, transition is couched not only in terms of service life to academic life, but also from 2-year to 4-year institutions, examining the feelings of alienation and isolation student veterans experience as well as the cycle of transition (“moving in, moving through, moving out”). Here, the authors make the claim that the culture of higher education needs to foster connections between military and civilian life: drawing parallels and working with an asset-based (rather than a deficiency-based) model. They also make a clear distinction between transition and transfer, placing an emphasis on transfer defined by Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak (2014) as learning by “building upon previous foundations and applying previous systems to novel situations” (74). The chapter wraps up with the “Transfer Principles For Student Veterans in the Writing Classroom” centering on lowering the stakes of student veteran writing and helping student veterans recognize audience-focused genres.

Calling on the strata distinction from earlier, the fourth chapter focuses on “Veteran-Informed Classrooms” through the exploration of “veterans-only,” “veteran-focused,” and “veteran-friendly” courses. The authors’ aim here is to help faculty members navigate veteran spaces while concurrently establishing the spaces of their classrooms. Again, several principles are included, yet the principles integrated in this chapter are more geared toward teaching practice than pedagogical theory. For example, the first principle offers Katt Blackwell-Starnes’ plausible syllabus statement for faculty to include in an effort to “indicat[e] an awareness of the complexities of being a student veteran” (p. 91). Including such a statement in the policies and procedures section of the syllabus helps instructors establish their cognition of student veterans’ needs, while extending a helping hand for student veterans who may feel uncomfortable outwardly identifying as such. Next, the authors urge the reader to “Follow Darren Keast’s Advice and Encourage Veterans to ‘Contribute Their Own Expertise to Class Discussions’” (p. 91). In this way, faculty can help mitigate the underlying student veterans’ feelings of isolation and alienation, while facilitating the transfer mentioned in the previous chapter.

The last chapter containing theoretical content revolves around “Engaging Veteran Trauma.” At the outset, the authors take care to identify genres where faculty might encounter the most instances of trauma disclosure: the personal essay and journal entries. Additionally, they

make reference to several types of trauma (i.e., PTSD, TBI, Military Sexual Violence, war trauma, etc.), and offer that this is a difficult topic for all students, not just veterans. However, the authors note that writing about trauma is a key component to therapeutically dealing with it, thus developing the legitimacy of VS within WS. As student veterans enter First-Year Composition (FYC), they may be introduced to expressive writing for the first time since experiencing trauma. If/when they disclose, the authors argue that it is imperative not to grade or evaluate that writing. Rather, meeting the content with un-evaluative feedback is a safer and better course of action. Choosing to disengage in writing evaluation comes with inevitable moral and ethical quandaries for the instructor. The authors suggest that writing faculty reframe personal narrative assignments in the FYC classroom as artifacts. Doing so can bridge the gap between the veteran's prior experience and his/her education. Hart and Thompson carefully craft "Principles for Writing Faculty Responding to War Trauma" to help instructors and administrators navigate this difficult space.

Between the last "body" chapter and the conclusion, Hart and Thompson offer the second set of "Writing/Practices." In this section, four practical examples appear: a writing syllabus, a "Military Officer's Philosophy of Writing," a "Student Veteran Teacher's Philosophy of Education," and "Heuristics for WPAs and Writing Faculty Working with Veteran Populations." While some of these examples fall within the scope of the volume, others do not. For example, Hart and Thompson reserve much of the space of this book to discuss veterans in undergraduate writing courses, yet the syllabus they include as a pedagogical model comes from a graduate program that functions as a "reading intensive elective." Sadly, there are only two writing components of that course (a notebook and the course paper) amassing a mere 20% of the overall grade. The seminar format for this course is not suitable for undergraduate implementation, which is the overarching theme of the theory and practice behind this book. Additionally, it remains unclear how teacher-readers are meant to use this syllabus in the practice of their own classrooms.

Likewise, though the "Military Officer's Philosophy of Writing" is promising as an example, the quality of the reprinting renders it almost illegible because of the lack of clarity and size of the text. Originally featured in *Infantry Magazine*, CPT Daniel Shell's philosophy touts that "writing instruction should be a central part of military training" (p. 113). Moving from CPT Shell's philosophy, the next tool offered is a philosophy of education. Tony Albright (a student veteran) shared his teaching philosophy during his tenure as a graduate instructor and PhD student in Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture at North Dakota State University. Albright includes lofty goals in his statement; however, he provides few actionable plans for implementation. He seems to make a clear break from his military training in asserting his belief "that my students should be taught to be free-thinking"

rather than just rule abiding (p. 116). Unfortunately, his argument that "the classroom should not be comfortable. It should be a place where students are challenged and held accountable for complacency" (p. 116) seems to foster opposition to Hart and Thompson's theme of acceptance for student veterans. Though these ideals do not have to be oppositional, taken out of context, this section of Albright's statement could prove problematic for instructors who view his call for accountability and intellectual challenge as contradictory to Hart and Thompson's call for the creation of a safe and welcoming space for student veterans.

The fourth and final example takes the form of "Heuristics for WPAs and Writing Faculty Working with Veteran Populations." Its layout occupies a question and answer format covering broad themes and issues. It ends with insisting on professional development opportunities for both faculty and administrators in order to best support those who have served. While offering guidelines for consideration, Hart and Thompson allow WPAs space to toil with what might work best in their programs without prescribing concrete best practices. The authors seem to shy away from command-style guidance so as not to confine WPAs and to open space to mediate environments based on the needs of specific student veteran populations.

The conclusion of the volume recaptures the common threads running throughout and cements the book in the conversation of WS through its careful interweaving of the student veteran population as a significant part of higher education, specifically FYC classrooms. The authors touch on the parallels between military promotion and educational and professional development, while also emphasizing the asset based model of veterans' experiences in the classroom. Hart and Thompson end with referencing Sue Doe and Lisa Langstraat's (2014) *Generation Vet*, a volume featuring both Hart and Thompson's writing, as well as fellow Veterans Studies experts Corrine Hinton and Cathleen Morreale's work. Doing so provides a viable link between this book and the already established conversation in the field.

With a critical eye, the reader may notice that Hart and Thompson take creative license with the field guide genre, which is typically brought into the field to help distinguish objects from each other. Conversely, field manuals contain standard operating procedures (SOP) for problem solving by offering operational, instrumental techniques. If the reader is looking for somewhere to start identifying key components of VS, then this book serves its purpose as a field guide. If the reader requires a manual with theory and proven practical application strategies, this will not suffice. In truth, the book reads more as an academic monograph that plays with the field guide genre, rather than operating as a guide itself.

While this book may prove a good place to start when considering the implementation of student-veterans to one's writing classroom, faculty and administrators alike should compile additional resources if they want to more

completely understand the picture of veterans in the (their) classroom. However, the upside to this resource is that it enables scholars new to the incorporation of VS to WS to fill in knowledge gaps, offers strategies, and provides research on best practices for veterans in higher education. The bibliography offers fertile ground for additional research and while Hart and Thompson's book may not be "the" volume on Veterans Studies, it is certainly a place to start.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Herman, L. (2020). Review: *Writing Programs, Veterans Studies, and the Post-9/11 University: A Field Guide*. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 6(1), pp. 226–229. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i1.179>

Submitted: 15 April 2020

Accepted: 27 May 2020

Published: 16 July 2020

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