

(Becoming) At Ease: A First-Year Writing Class on a Military Post

Ann Shivers-McNair

I approached the checkpoint for entering the military post, my driver's license in one hand and, in the other, a printed map of the post with directions to the building that housed the Education Center, where I had an appointment with the director of education. After a few wrong turns, I saw the building's street sign:

OFFICE OF THE
INSPECTOR GENERAL
EQUAL OPPORTUNITY OFFICE
"EDUCATION CENTER"
SUICIDE PREVENTION

The building's exterior was spare and identical to nearly all the other barracks-style structures on the post. The inside was spare, too, with a notable exception: military- and education-themed posters, fliers, and signs covered the walls, bookshelves, and a few of the tables in the classroom/meeting space. And one unembellished sign—referring to the Uniform Military Code of Justice and prominently posted above the dry-erase board at the front of the space and thus visible from every point, including the doorway—read:

Cheating is punishable under UMCJ law.

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That summer, my university had formalized a partnership with the military post and agreed to offer three first-year, general education courses—English, math, and psychology—at the military post on weeknight evenings that fall. And to compete with for-profit institutions offering soldiers free textbooks, my university followed suit. When I met with the education director and his assistant, I immediately sensed their enthusiasm for the partnership. I didn't know, though, how I'd be received by the soldiers who signed up for English 101.

Though I'd worked with and conducted research on soldiers in my on-campus classes for the past two years, I knew that teaching on the military post would be different. And I had a hunch that a key difference would be the construction of my ethos. I knew it can be difficult for any university instructor, regardless of rank or age or gender, to bridge the palpable gap between academic culture and military culture. With the university's support, then, I asked two student-veterans with whom I'd been working to serve as peer tutors for my class at the military post. I knew their ethos as both experienced soldiers *and* experienced students would be as important as my own. Because I'd expected a full class, I was surprised when only four students registered, and I worried that my peer tutors would be seen as unnecessary. But from the moment they strode through the door before me on the first day of class and assured the students that I was soldier-friendly, these two peer tutors played a vital role in establishing my own ethos with the soldiers and, more importantly, embodying for them the connection between university life and military life.

In fact, all of us—instructor, peer tutors, and student-soldiers—began working to define and create a space for ourselves in a situation and location where purposes collided head-on. It was a classroom, but also a meeting room and a hallway to the offices in the back of the building. It was a university class, but the space was unquestionably military: as the aforementioned sign forbidding cheating suggests, the rules of the classroom were ultimately subject to the rules of the military. The university hoped these soldiers would eventually become full-time students; the soldiers were interested in promotion points (toward which classes from accredited institutions count) and career paths that may or may not lead them to a four-year university degree. The soldiers in the class were students, but they were soldiers first, and their responsibilities sometimes made them be late or miss class entirely. Given the nature of my position, I was an authority, but I was an outsider to the military culture in the classroom.

And yet it happened: we created our own space. The key to defining our space, it turned out, was to negotiate the role of externally defined ethos, to

always understand and acknowledge rank and difference (military and otherwise) but also to consciously set this aside and collaborate as writers. I'm not sure I would have been able to articulate this without the help of one of the peer tutors, who sat down with me at the end of the semester and reflected on the course with me. This peer tutor, a Navy veteran and current ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) and National Guard member, pointed out that our regular group workshops of students' drafts visibly destabilized military rank in the space. He explained that, true to military convention, the higher-ranking soldiers tended to sit behind the lower-ranking soldiers in the classroom. But in workshops, we turned our chairs inward to form a circle, and each writer stood up at the front of the classroom to read his or her draft aloud and gave verbal and written comments to his or her classmates. Rank didn't disappear, but neither did it prescribe, and the student-soldiers gradually adopted the culture of workshop in all classroom interactions.

Never was this more clear than in our class discussions on the role of women in the military—a topic the student-soldiers selected for their argument essays at the end of the semester. The only female student in the class was also a private and the lowest-ranking soldier in the class, and at the beginning of the semester she was tentative. In those later discussions, however, she was bold. She openly favored women's right to compete for combat roles, even when all of her male classmates disagreed with her, and her remarkable essay offered a cogent and nuanced articulation of the socially constructed nature of the debate. She attributed this articulation to constructive conversations with her male classmates and colleagues, with whom she felt empowered to discuss the issue. She described both this process and her argument to an audience of her higher-ranking classmates and a general who was observing (and occasionally interacting in) our class one day. In perhaps the most significant negotiation that happened in that strange space, she found a way to position herself strategically, rhetorically, and unapologetically as a student and as a soldier.

Ann Shivers-McNair

Ann Shivers-McNair is a doctoral student in language and rhetoric and an assistant director of the Expository Writing Program at the University of Washington. Formerly, she was a composition instructor and basic writing coordinator at the University of Southern Mississippi.