

Military Veterans as Intercultural Educators

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Abstract

Recently there has been a shift in the language teaching community to organize and better teach culture competency. The current focus does not include many who might be good candidates and leaders for teaching cultural competency in the world language classroom. Military veterans tend to be overlooked for their skills and their application of these skills in the classroom. The majority of Americans assume they understand veteran's experiences and opinions on world cultures. Sadly, this is a short-sided assumption that could potentially discount a great resource for education. Student diversity and the need for global cultural competency are rapidly changing in classrooms. Military training, coupled with the real-world experience of military veterans, could serve as a great attribute for increasing effective approaches to intercultural aspects in the classroom.

Keywords: Educational Leadership, Veteran Studies, Intercultural, Communication.

1. Introduction

The educational systems in the United States has a reputation for preparing students to be independent and capable (Altbach 2015). The contemporary global systems and global interconnectedness now require students to have immediate civic and intercultural comprehensions. The once important task of creating a free thinking student is now rendered as incomplete. The current climate of education demands for students to understand, empathize, and solve questions from viewpoints outside of their own enculturation (Abdallah-Preteille, 2006). Many students lack exposure to the world around them for differing reasons. Educators experienced and competence in a variety of cultures should be made available to meet student's critical soft skill deficiency. Even some of the most proficient students are lacking in intercultural knowledge that is needed for today's globalized demands.

In recent years the United States military has been combining lessons learned, research and area experts to bestow great attention to learning of global competence (Schnell, 2013). Their efforts involve a focus on intercultural training and sending troops to areas where they are gaining multi-cultural knowledge from real life experiences and application. This practical and real world application could allow military veterans with teacher training to be a sensible resolution to the evolving global needs of our emerging leaders. With a need to fill a void in the educational system and chance to re-purpose the intercultural soft skills of military veterans the intention of this paper is an academic exploration. This exploration is in understanding why and how military veterans can contribute to global, intercultural learning while filling a need for educators in the United States.

2. The Demand for teachers

Presently, the United States is experiencing a heavy teacher turnover that is leaving many school districts in need of educators. These staffing challenges can easily be mended if one is willing to look outside of the traditionally trained teacher parameters. Secretary Arne Duncan provided insight and highlighted the urgency of finding educators when he said,

".... During the next four years we could lose a third of our veteran teachers and school leaders to retirement and attrition. By 2014, just five short years from now, the U.S. Department of Education projects that up to one million new teaching positions will be filled by new teachers.

These major demographic shifts mean that teaching is going to be a booming profession in the years ahead—with school districts nationwide, making up to 200,000 new, first-time hires annually. Our ability to attract, and more importantly retain, great talent over the next five years will shape public education for the next 30 years—it is truly a once-in-a-generation opportunity(Troops to Teachers, nod.).

Early and unexpected career changes by newly graduated educators are an emerging new difficulty in the field of education. This trend has been growing over a decade and has been referred to as a *national crisis*(Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008). Boe et al. also point out in their study that almost 40% of teachers are leaving the profession in the first five years. This twofold problem with the mass exodus out of education creates a strain on the education system and educational stakeholders. Incidentally, this need in the national education system is roughly aligned with men and women transitioning from the military to civilian careers as a result of ending conflicts, military downsizing, and normal occupational attrition. While not all transitioning service members would want to teach, military veterans can be a capable demographic with intercultural experience.

3. Military Veterans Filling the Current Need For Teachers

Military veterans, both classic teacher training or via alternative certification, could significantly impact the critical teacher shortage. Veterans could call upon the uses of their educational assistance bills to help fund their new education career. For many veterans the G. I. Bill has been cited a way to scale the ladder of opportunity in the United States. One often mentioned aspect is that the G.I. Bill provided the ability to go to college when the opportunity would have not been fiscally possible otherwise. The Rand corporation (2008) numbers service members since 2001 at 2.5 million, a demographic that could make a transition to civilian life as needs abroad change for service members. Military service members often gain a unique skill set while training and being deployed, veterans may learn a host of skills with direct and indirect battlefield applications. These skills are hard to transition and transfer when returning to civilian life.

Most family, school, and work situations in civil society simply do not require the life saving battlefield skills required to survive combat. However, potential employers do appreciate certain veteran traits such as leadership skills, attention to detail, and time management. However, most employers overlook the soft skills and impeccable communication abilities of the well trained veteran. Operating in an environment like the military means constantly striving for high level of professionalism - especially when it comes to being equitable among its intercultural interactions. Fine tuning this type of skill is invaluable to the success of a mission, as well as improved safety of the military personnel. These well honed skills could easily be transferred to the students of the current global markets by military veteran as teachers.

4. Future Teachers and Military Veterans as Future Teachers

Currently there are approximately 223,534 students who enroll in study abroad programs, which is only a fraction of the total 21.8 million students attending American colleges and universities (McMurtrie, 2007). This means traditionally trained, future educators are less likely to have had personal, real world, multicultural experiences obtained while living and working abroad. Granted, one can surround themselves with others of various backgrounds on campus, but they will not truly grasp the experience of being out of their natural element and comfort zone. Mixes of experiences are needed to understand the global climate and to better engage and exchange with others. The multicultural experience both within ones' own country and abroad helps complete a picture of the international world of neo-liberal economics. Military veterans have a high potential for having these experiences before they start their teacher training at a university.

For example, the troop makeup of the United States military is a sample of what the rest of the country looks like and sounds like. The Department of Defense has referred to this sample by calling the military branches a successful representations of diversity (MLDC Final Report, n.d.). Armed force members can be in contact with colleagues that represent all fifty states, many foreign countries, and a host of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds from day one, until the end of their service. Personal interaction, work requirements, and work demands call for all parties involved to strive for mutual understanding and common goals. Mutual understanding is the first step in which a former service member can model and educate what it takes to work in a diverse environment. It has been the researcher's experience that students appreciate life experiences and lived scenarios to further illustrate and reinforce learning. During times of both conflict and peace military members find themselves overseas on some type of deployment or stationing (Lowe, Adams, Browne, & Hinkle, 2012). There exists a mix of location and duration based on a military members' occupational specialty, branch of service, and service requirements.

With bases on every continent, naval cruises, and the mix of deployments, contact with other cultures is seemingly inevitable. During these experiences service members often times work along, work with, and work for local populations. This is the same type of situations that educators today need to prepare students to live and work toward. The contexts might be different, but the intercultural goals should be the same. Many multi-national companies are seeking workers outside of the United States because the average American candidate lacks the multidimensional and multicultural experiences these companies seek (Gough, Langevang, Owusu, 2013). The unique life experiences that military veterans possess could render this population much more knowledgeable and empathic toward others. Their experiences might also provide the self-confidence and security in their own cultural identity that are apparent when one has achieved intercultural competence. The mastering of the real world, intercultural competence is one of the attributes a military veteran educator has over the educator coming from a university only background. The assumption is that if the educator is confident, has used this skill in their own life, then the students will also have a higher level of mastery. Students mastering intercultural skills can then apply these skills to any lifestyle or field of study they choose.

5. Intercultural Training for Today's Military

The current climate in the military and resources available are ever changing and improving. Over the past decade the Military has been changing the approach toward educating troops about cultural knowledge. Focus on integration of intercultural interaction ensures success in troop assimilation on deployments. A mixture of conflict management, peacekeeping roles, and humanitarian assistance has been the testing and learning ground for the military. Schnell (2013) writes that the focus of the Army is to support and assist others, and limit intervention. Schnell's words alone paint objectives for the military that can only be achieved through the mastery and application of intercultural competence in every multinational situation. The military understands that there must be local approaches to culture and there is no room for assumption when trying for the best possible interaction. There is no mold for learning culture and applying the learning universally. "The cookie-cutter approach to incorporating culture in operational planning for humanitarian and other peacetime operations is too simplistic... (Varhola & Varhola, 2006)." This knowledge is directly in line with the should be on the minds of classroom educator. In this regard the military's goals could be seen as a tandem with an educational program that is globally focused.

An article from Occupational Outlook Quarterly quotes Paul Farman as saying "We care a lot about understanding and bridging cultural differences, because it allows us to build a positive relationship (Cultural Awareness in the Military, 2012)". Again, this sentiment is no different than what people in corporations, government workers, and Non-Government worker are being required to have knowledge of while directly or indirectly serving the world market (Abdallah-Preteille, 2006). This learning and the real world application are proof positive that cultural learning is a vital need in the United States. The military is facing the same global demands as the public and private sectors. The closeness of societies and the world demand is requiring more cohesive societies fostered by cultural capability (Schnell, 2013). To illustrate a more recent intercultural pitfall, it is important that we look to East Africa. Operations in East Africa were met with technical, tactical and cultural approaches from Iraq. No training prior to deployment lead to a strain of time and financial resources. "The lack of regional training and overall expertise also prevents U.S. forces from adequately integrating into foreign societies (Varhola & Varhola, 2006)." Because this deployment was viewed as being unsuccessful, the U.S. military realized that cultural learning had to happen with specific intent.

In the past few years, this lesson has been applied and proper cultural training is being incorporated into service members' initial training. The operations in East Africa serve as a reminder to both the military and education sectors that there is a real need to transfer and apply intercultural competencies to better provide future opportunities and achievements on personal and organizational levels. Military veterans can offer solutions for incorporating the mastery of intercultural competencies. Perhaps, this can come from organizational examples military veterans might be familiar with. For example, the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland is responsible for training officers for both the Navy and Marine Corps in four years. The majority of curriculum hours are in science and math that are taken regardless of academic major. The demanding classes equal to be about 18 hours per semester. During this time, students are expected complete an athletic activity every day, participate in sports, clubs, and learn military ethos (Yu, Disher, & Phillips, 2010). Even with this demanding schedule, the Naval Academy also has built in cultural learning.

The core curriculum has been infused with global-education elements. Classes were restructured with regional, cultural emphasis. Elective classes were also added an expanding repertoire of classes to enhance cultural learning. Language and culture are closely intertwined and in need of each other (Barac & Bialystok 2012). The Naval Academy realizes this aspect of culture and offers both major and minor programs in various languages. Language selection ranges from the typical Romance languages to languages that are critical to the United States security. Both paths are strenuous an focus on fluency and cultural competency (Yu et al., 2010). The Army has taken a slightly different approach to improving multicultural and intercultural demands. Instead of integrating these new items into an existing curriculum, they have created a specialty program. Army's Culture and Foreign Language Directorate that was established in 2010 (Schnell, 2013). This program is advised by 15 culture and foreign language advisors (CFLAs) who have linguistic and regional expertise. The emphasis in this program is on developing cross-cultural competences for Army agencies, joint agencies, and other services. The Army has experienced the benefit of educating troops who are more culturally proficient. After receiving training in this program, individuals report that they are able to think in the terms of the local population and fit in beyond physical acclimation. Veterans as teachers can offer the feedback and curriculum ideas based not only off any research they are conducting, but also add to the research in a first person qualitative manner. A program that included multiple language and cultural advisors could explore applications and collaborations in all other subject areas.

6. Conclusion

Dr. Watson The chair of Linguistics and Language Acquisition in the Center for Language, Cultures, and Regional Studies at the United States Military Academy at West Point, writes that intercultural interactions must take place in an awareness, relevant transferable manner that is applicable in a general cultural context(2010). By his words, the outline for training troops in intercultural knowledge should be aligned with those we are sharing with our students in the civilian classroom. Upon leaving the military world, non transferable combat skills can now be traded for soft skill applications in the civilian and academic world. Veterans possess a wealth of intercultural experience and have firsthand knowledge of how sensitivity to this can impact relationships.

Military veterans are returning to civilian life in large numbers. Meanwhile, the educational system in the United States continues to suffer a teacher shortage and unemployment rates remain high. Military veterans as educators bring invaluable intercultural experiences and skill sets to those they teach. Their large numbers and access to alternative certifications provide a solution to filling the growing educator void. Filling this void can also guide students toward global skills sets and intercultural skills that are in high demand. Thusly, military veterans in education roles can provide future generations what is required in a virtually connected world while helping replenish the ranks of a shrinking profession. Future conversation and research for incentives, recruitment, and policy should be explored with military veterans in mind. The benefits of this population can open many possibilities and potential for improving aspects of intercultural understanding in the educational system.

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