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Writing From Experience

Military veterans are not your average storytellers. For these individuals who have witnessed the kinds of things most writers only imagine, the narrative process offers a means of not only revisiting and representing their experiences, but also conceptualizing them in a different way.

That was the idea behind the UC Veterans Summer Writing Workshop convened by UC Santa Barbara's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center (IHC). All 10 UC campuses were represented in the program that gave participants an opportunity to produce original work and engage with other veterans in the UC system.

The five-day workshop culminated in a public event that brought together the UCSB administrators and members of the Santa Barbara community, local veterans' organizations and others interested in learning about the experiences of veterans, many of whom served during the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In all, 26 veterans participated, representing every branch of the U.S. military except the Coast Guard.

"What was striking to every instructor — and we had three workshops going at once, two of which were team-taught — was the rapidity with which each class coalesced into a writing community," said Susan Derwin, director of the IHC and a professor of comparative literature.

"I think that bonds of trust were able to develop because the participants went into the workshop space with every intention of being forthcoming and engaged," she

continued. “They treated one another with respect and honesty.”

Derwin added that in the session she facilitated with Tom Helscher, a former writing instructor at the University of Virginia and now a psychoanalyst who works with returning veterans, the students evolved from offering supportive, if slightly restrained, responses, to expressing rigorous, creative and focused critique. “But they never lost sight of the purpose of the writings,” she said, “which was to create personal, insightful narratives that brought the writer closer to his or her own experience while allowing readers to enter into those experiences as well.

“The bonds of trust deepened, empathy increased between students with vastly different experiences of the military and mutual respect remained unwavering,” Derwin continued.

She noted that as the veterans opened up and wrote about increasingly difficult and painful experiences, their writing shifted. Those whose stories had been fragmented began to construct more cohesive narratives, and others who had felt reticent at the outset were writing more directly by the workshop’s end.

“Masks — such as that of the comedian — dropped and vulnerabilities were exposed,” said Derwin. “The writings they produced were quite powerful and moving. Most wrote non-fictional narratives, but some wrote poems or fiction based upon real experiences.”

The UC Veterans Summer Writing Workshop is an outgrowth of a similar program for UCSB veterans and military dependents begun by Derwin in 2011. That workshop is offered every term, with some students electing to write during the summer months as well.

The UC-wide event follows UC President Janet Napolitano’s announcement in 2014 of the formation of an advisory group to recommend ways to support veterans in the areas of financial aid, campus life and housing. According to Derwin, the summer writing workshop adds an important academic component to the list of practical supports by providing student veterans with an expressive tool that has been proven to be a valuable resource for returning service members seeking to integrate their military experiences into their larger life narratives.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.