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Veteran Writing Workshop Overview

Materials Needed

- Space for ~12 people, a facilitator, prompts, pen, and paper.
- Digital visual support is not necessary, but having prompts on a screen is nice.

Setting the Stage

- Workshop meets weekly for 2 hours in the evening.
- Two 25-minute writing sessions, with sharing and feedback after each.
- The facilitator shares a personal and vulnerable story first to set the tone.
- Silence is expected and accepted after heavy stories
- Participants can choose what to write—prompts are helpful but not necessary.

The Sharing and Feedback Process

- Participants respond to each other's pieces with compliments, and critiques are only given if requested
- One major 'rule': complements are welcome, and critiques are requested by the reader.

Publication Opportunities

- Participants' writing is published in an anthology, "Charlie Mike: An Anthology of Military Life," and distributed locally at reading events, libraries, and colleges.
- Public reading events are held in the community, allowing participants to share their stories with a general audience.

Model and Methods: Veterans Writing Workshop

The workshop under examination has a distinct simple structure that requires very few resources to facilitate. The required materials to effectively run the workshop are a space for ~12 people, a facilitator, prompts, pen, paper, and most importantly, participants. The research workshop generally meets one weekday every week for two hours in the evening (e.g., 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.). Participants sit down around either a conference-style table or individual desks in circular formation. For the research workshop, food—pizza's, burritos, sandwiches, etc.—were also included nightly due to the workshop taking place during dinnertime.

The initial workshop always begins with introductions. I ask people to share their name, affiliation with the service, and to share their favorite spot in nature—or some other easy and quick icebreaker. After the introductions, I will explain how the workshop flows. I explain that I will share two prompts at a time and participants can choose to “jump off the prompts or not.” I let participants know that by using one of the prompts, they often create more connection across stories when we share, but not to let that dictate what they choose to write.

There are two writing sessions, and each writing session lasts about 25 minutes. After each session, the group shares what was composed. I relay that there is absolutely no expectation to share, stating “that the important part is that you get your story out.” Veterans have historically been known for being tight-lipped about their experiences; however, in every workshop I have facilitated over the past 6 years, most participants share. I cannot recall a single workshop where a participant didn't share *something*.

One method I use to dispel anxiety around sharing, is that I share first during the initial workshop, unless a participant explicitly volunteers to go first. The piece that I share is always about my good friend PFC Robert J. Near who tragically took his own life during our deployment

to Afghanistan in 2010-2011. The events surrounding his death are horrible, and it took me many years and many workshops to come to terms with not only his actions and the actions of his superiors, but also my own inability to get closure. After Robert died, I was still on a mission in another part of the country and was unable to attend his funeral or memorial service. I had much to work through. I have found the initial vulnerability shown in sharing stories about Robert and his untimely passing helps others share their own vulnerable stories; it gives them permission to go to their own dark places.

After the first 25-minute writing session, and after I first share, we go around the room and participants respond to the piece with something they liked or something that resonated with them. The guidance I give for responding is that we should all try to respond to each piece read if possible. The way we respond follows a simple two-part rule: 1) compliments are welcome; 2) critiques are asked for by the reader. I now also inform participants that silence can and should be expected after a heavy story. This framing allows participants to get their stories out without the fear that others are going to pick apart their writing, allowing their focus to remain on the content. After compliments are given, I ask if anyone else would like to share, and we continue the process of sharing and responding. This takes, usually, about 30-45 minutes depending on the group and the topic of the conversations that follow the readings. We then do one more round of writing for ~25 minutes, and a final round of sharing.

In total, on average, two stories are composed for each participant per 2-hour workshop session. Sometimes participants will continue with one story throughout, but not often. Participants see four prompts during this time. The two rounds of writing and sharing are meant to allow writers to fall into the session, and to allow for the dialogue in the room and the other participants' stories to influence writers' second stories. This creates more opportunities for commiseration between participants as writing is more likely to center on similarly themed significant moments in life.

The veteran writing program, as it typically functions outside of this particular research workshop, also provides publishing opportunities in the form of public reading events held in local community venues and publishing two journals of participant writing, titled: *Charlie Mike: An Anthology of Military Life*. The journal is published and disseminated locally, as well as published online. Participation in these extra-workshop activities is another area to be explored in future research. The experience of holding a well-designed and edited book *with my words* printed inside can be extremely uplifting, satisfying, and, for a few veteran participants, unbelievable. The last public reading event held for participants of the program saw over 80 people attend. The venue was over capacity, with only 67 chairs in the room. Similar to the journal, witnessing the reaction of a crowd of community members listening to *my words*, reacting to *my story with me*, can be an incredibly powerful experience. Exploring these experiences, perhaps phenomenologically or thematically, could provide useful information on their efficacy as an additional support to veteran well-being.