

Using Oral Histories to Engage Multiple Audiences on the Topic of Student Veterans

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An instructional resource prepared for the 2016 NEH Summer Institute on Veterans in Society

Source Material:

<http://www.nunncenter.org/c2ky/2012/02/07/andrew-napier/>

Excerpts for NEH Institute Presentation:

- 7:13-10:46 (Interviewee describes a traumatic experience he had in Afghanistan)
- 18:55-21:03 (Interviewee describes transition to College)

Description/Goals:

- Engage multiple audiences on the topic of student veterans, veteran homecoming, veterans in society and bridging the civ-mil divide
- Find new ways to put oral histories to work in and beyond the classroom and the university
- Find new ways to start bridging the civ-mil divide
- Create set of teaching modules that a variety of users (teachers, student veteran service coordinators, advisors, student veteran groups, Green-Zone facilitators, RA's and student orientation leaders, academic advisors, etc.) can adapt to their own needs--and to their own oral history projects as well. Future users could adopt these modules wholesale including the Napier interview, or substitute alternative oral histories--even ones with students from their own schools, military family members, etc.-- and use the exercises we've sketched out here as jumping off points for new modules of their own creation.
- Provide Preliminary Bibliography/ Possible Sample Readings on four related topics:
 - Using Oral History
 - Veteran-Related Oral Histories
 - Scholarship on Student Veterans

Key Terms & Background: Preparing the Audience to View the Video:

- Source of Video: From Combat to Kentucky (C2Ky) is an ongoing oral history project being undertaken by the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries. It documents Kentucky's student veterans and their individual experiences during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Interviews focus on each veteran's military experience as well as their transition back into civilian life, particularly into higher education. They edit the interviews and give public access to both edited and full versions--really helpful to have them both do this legwork and make the full original available. [See <http://www.nunncenter.org/c2ky/> for more info. The text in this bullet point and the next one is largely quoted from their site.]
- Interview Subject: The subject of this interview, Andrew Napier, enlisted in the Army National Guard as a medic immediately after high school in June 2006 and deployed to Afghanistan.

- Interview Summary: In this interview, Napier discusses preparation for and deployment to Afghanistan, and the stress of being a medic. He also describes ambushes and identifying a KIA in detail while in Afghanistan. In addition, Napier discusses his association with the University of Kentucky VA office after coming home and its effectiveness in helping with his transition.
- Note re: Napier and Assumptions about Veteran Status: We chose the Napier interview because it served our needs so well as we created this module. We were pleased that certain details of his status--an Army National Guard Medic--worked against some stereotypical assumptions about who is a veteran. That said, we also noted that his status as a photogenic young white male also confirmed some of those stereotypes, and that fact seemed to us worth noting and perhaps discussing with the audiences for these modules in cases where users chose not to replace the Napier interview with alternatives.
- Trigger Warning: a trigger warning may be advisable for the graphic description of dead and wounded people and the effect that Napier's emotional distress might have on some audiences.
- Specialized /Military Vocabulary: may merit explanation before showing the full video in order to maximize audience engagement and comprehension::
 - In military diction, a "Hero Bird" is a helicopter dedicated to retrieving the dead from the battlefield
 - Depending on the audience, terms like "IBA," "National Guard," "Deployment," etc. may need to be defined before you show the video
- Background Note: Users of these modules who keep the Napier video but don't show all of it may find this piece of background information from the first section of the interview worth noting and sharing with their audience before viewing selected clips: when he first enlisted, Napier thought would stay in the military for life as a career, but mobilization changed his mind. "I would say I was questioning myself within the first week of being in country,"he notes, and suggests that something about seeing "how things really work" made him realize that a lifelong career in the military was not for him.

Module I: Using Veteran Oral Histories in Scholarly Research (Meredith Oyen)

Audience: Faculty and advanced graduate students

Learning objectives:

- [Unsaid: Expose faculty to existence of student veterans, introduce some of the issues involved, and pique interest in Greenzone training.]
- Identify the uses of oral history in the disciplines (including, but not limited to, history), learn best practices from other practitioners
- Discuss some of the strengths and weaknesses of using this kind of source, what raises it to the level of reliable source, introduce resources for creating communities that work on oral history projects

Discussion of the Napier Video:

- **Interview excerpt:** 5:20-12:55 “Day Four”
 - What contributions could this interview make to your fields? (Some basic examples and starting points follow.)
 - History: understanding the experience of war, the implications of policies, the bottom-up story about life on the ground during deployment
 - Psychology: analyzing coping strategies, the impact of combat-related trauma on newly deployed soldiers
 - Social work: identifying the traumas that inform veterans’ experiences upon return and transitioning into civilian life
 - English/Communications: how language (and silence) can be read to give more information than the surface narrative
 - Sociology: qualitative studies on the military-civilian divide, military linguistics, etc.
 - Public Policy: What is the government/public response to veterans dealing with combat experience
 - Medical Humanities and/or Med School:
 - Let’s look at some specific questions, and answer them in terms of your field:
 - Why does Napier stress that it was “day four”?
 - What language does he use to distance himself from the idea that the charred body was human?
 - What can we read from his silences about his experience of war?
- **Interview excerpt:** 20:04-20:40. “Sitting in the back fuming”
 - How does Napier describe his experience being in the classroom as a student veteran?
 - Why do you think he tells this story, what does he want people watching or listening to his interview to understand about his experience?

- What implications does the way he describes his classroom experience have for how we teach student veterans?

- **General Discussion:**
 - Who here already works with oral histories?
 - What is the benefit of this format – the oral history interview – over other forms of texts we all use in our research? What are the drawbacks?
 - How do our fields use this kind of research material?
 - What are the best practices for collecting and analyzing this material?
 - What resources exist at our university for supporting research creating and using oral histories?

Module II: Using Veteran Oral Histories in Green Zone Training (Meredith Oyen)

Audience: Faculty

Learning Objectives:

- Develop greater understanding of the student veteran experience on our campus
- Learn about the demographics of our student veteran population
- Identify the challenges returning veterans face transitioning to college as well as the contributions they make to our classrooms
- Learn more about student services on campus to which you can refer student veterans who require additional resources

Discussion of the Napier Video:

- Previewing discussion
 - Have you had vets in class before?
 - If you did (and knew it), did you make any assumptions about them?
- Interview excerpt: 18:25-22:40 “A big step”
 - According to the speaker, what sets him apart from the other students?
 - What has challenged him about starting school at this point, and how does he compare to the other kids in his class?
 - Has anyone had a student in class that sat in the back, silent, maybe looking annoyed like Napier describes in this interview? To what did you attribute it? Could there be other explanations, as in this case?
- Interview excerpt: 25:26-29:00 “Mind wanders so much”
 - What kinds of challenges does Napier report having in class and at home?
 - How would these issues (focus, short term memory problems, sleep deprivation) affect his ability to do well in school?
 - What kinds of resources on campus could help students like Napier with his transition to college?
 - What could you do to help him succeed in your class?
- Vets in the classroom
 - What kinds of advantages do student veterans bring to a classroom learning environment? What can they contribute?
 - More mature, eager to learn, leadership and focus
 - What kinds of challenges might veterans face in class?
 - Being different or feeling isolated, family struggles that bleed over into study time, financial and certification challenges in getting tuition and books paid, sometimes injuries (physical or psychological) that make commitment to studying hard to maintain

- If you encounter a student veteran who needs some help to succeed, what do you do?
- Run through scenarios, campus resources

Module III: Using Oral History in an Undergraduate Sociology of War and Peace Class (Louis Hicks):

Audience: Undergraduate students

Questions relate to the book in the course, Theodore Caplow and Louis Hicks, *Systems of War and Peace*, 2nd Ed., University Press of America, 2002.

Learning Objectives:

1. Identify manifestations of the “civilian-military” divide.
2. Identify differences between military and civilian etiquette.
3. Trace connections between the large institutions of armed services and higher education.

Discussion of the Napier Video:

- How does the interview illustrate our question: What is the relation of war to education, especially in the modern West?
- How does the interview relate to our question: What is military etiquette? What does it do? (That is, how does he experience the difference between military etiquette and his civilian classroom?)
- How does his language illustrate our question: How do military organizations modify normal linguistic practices?
- How does this interview relate to our question: How do modern military personnel typically see civilians?

Module IV: Using Oral Histories in Undergraduate Lit. of War Class (Hilary Lithgow):

Audience: civilian undergraduates [could be adapted to a classroom including student veterans]

Learning Objectives:

- Increase civilian understanding of student veterans' experiences and some aspects of what it's like to transition to college
- Help civilian students make connections with student veterans and start to bridge the civilian-military divide
- Help civilian students realize that what they understand about military experience from their readings in a lit. of war class can help them start to understand some aspects of student veterans' experiences that they might not otherwise (silence, resort to humor, body language, cost of dehumanizing another person, etc.)
- Show students that their literary interpretive skills can help them interpret and understand everyday language and experience, not just literary texts
- Encourage students to engage with oral history as a literary text or performance, while also challenging them to push beyond the limits of literary criticism to other forms of qualitative humanities inquiry
- Expose students to the possibilities for oral histories as research sources across the disciplines (humanities, psych, hist, soci, medicine) as well as beyond the scholarly world (policy research, student services, outreach and advocacy)

Sample Discussion Questions for 3- Minute Excerpt from Napier Interview:

prepare students with some of the information in the "Key Terms and Background" section above, then ask them to consider and make notes about the following questions as they watch the video from 4:08-7:02:

1. What if any connections do you see between the literature we've read so far this semester and this video clip?
2. Is there anything your reading helps you see or understand about it that you might not see or understand otherwise?
3. Does this interview add anything new to or help you understand anything about our reading that you'd not understood before?
4. What surprises you about what this student veteran has to say about his military experience and transition to college?
5. Is there anything you'd want to ask him or even other student veterans at your school after having watched this video that you mightn't thought of asking before?
6. What does this interview suggest about what it means to "tell a true war story"? Is such telling easy? Hard? Why so?
7. As you watch the interview, notice at what points the interviewee makes eye contact with the interviewer and at what points he looks down or away. Can you see any

patterns or make any guesses about why he might or might not make eye contact at particular points in the interview?

8. What sense can you make of the times during which the speaker in this video pauses for extended amounts of time and the movements he makes with his body?
9. What if anything are you able to see or understand or guess about this person's experience from watching this video that wouldn't be as clear in a written transcript?
10. Given your answer to #7 above, what (initial) ideas do you have about the potential value for multimedia oral histories as a research resource for scholars like yourselves studying war, veterans and military experience? Do you think it has value as a historical resource? For literary scholars? Why or why not? [A chance to open up a larger discussion re: qualitative vs. quantitative research, ethnography as a genre and research resource, etc.]

Key Questions to consider in class discussion of 4:08-7:02 excerpt:

- 4:08-4:50: what do you make of the interviewee's laugh when the interviewer asks him at what point he decided against making the military a career? Is this a funny question? An embarrassing one? Why so?
- 6:21- 7:02: When describing the two wounded service members who emerge from the first helicopter, Napier offers a very different description of the second person as compared to the first. Overall, what do you make of this difference and his description of the second person?
- Starting at 6:25 Napier says "The other one...You know...[pause]You know, your eye fixates on it, it's just like, uh, you see a soldier in fatigues, and, uh, he had, he had lost his legs, and you know, we're standing there and, you know, it's like I said, it's day 4, and I'm like "Holy Shit!" like they're just right in the open, carrying him out and they like got the tourniquets and he's just, you know, wailing on this stretcher..."
 - In his description of this second casualty, Napier shifts from the first person into second person voice ("Your eye fixates..."). Why might someone switch from first to second person at a particular point in a story? What guesses can you make about why Napier makes this change here? Do you think it's deliberate or unconscious? Does the answer to this question matter to your understanding of the story he's telling?
 - What do you think the "it" refers to in the opening of this statement? Why?
 - What does the fact that it's his fourth day have to do with the story he's telling here? What do you think he's trying to convey to the interviewer by repeating this point at this particular moment?
 - What do you make of the phrase "they're just right in the open"? Why wouldn't they be out in the open, given that they're unloading a helicopter? If there's nothing surprising about this fact, why is Napier commenting on it? What is conveyed to you by his choice of words here?
 - What do you make of Napier's choice of words to describe the sound the wounded soldier is making? What does the word "wailing" convey or connote to you? What purpose or goal might Napier have in choosing this particular word?

- What expressions do you see on Napier's face as he prepares to describe the second person at 6:36? What intuitions do you have about the possible significance of Napier's long pause here? What's happening?
- At 7:02 what changes do you see in Napier's voice and body position? Do you see any possible significance for this shift at this particular point in his narrative?

[Note to NEH Institute readers: My contribution to this group project is the basis for my individual project as well. The abstract and overview of that individual project will hopefully be shared and accessible in the same forum as this document. If not, and you'd like access, please email me at lithgow@email.unc.edu]

Module V: Transitions Course for Newly Enrolled Student Veterans (Andrew Boysen)

Audience: Student Veterans

Learning Objectives:

- Help student veterans make connections with each other
- Start to bridge the military-civilian divide by helping student veterans reflect on and talk in a group about their experiences and then start to think about the limits and possibilities of communicating about that experience with civilians
- Allow student veterans to compare their experiences with each other through a text rather than their own testimony (they can make connections between the video and their own experiences or just talk about what's in the video as they prefer).

General Considerations when Working in Student Service Capacity with a Student Veteran Audience:

- Maybe valuable and increase session effectiveness to have a veteran act as facilitator or co-facilitator for sessions with this audience
- Stress the importance of veterans' qua veterans' associations/connections/etc., but also the need to be open to meeting and connecting with non-veteran students for the full undergraduate experience.
- Veteran students should know that non-veteran students will probably not understand their experiences but that is an opportunity to learn about associations with civilian society generally.
- Veteran students should know about the resources to support them on campus including, *inter alia*, the "green space/zone," student veteran coordinator and organization (as applicable), GI Bill liaison (if different from the veteran coordinator), counseling and health services, "open door" policy for all of the above (big concept in the military), etc.
- Balance idealism and realism in discussing with veteran students what their own college experience could be compared with non-veteran students
- Stress the need for veterans to be responsible for their own college experience and success.

Discussion of the Napier Video:

- How do you relate to his deployment experience and why he joined the military? How is it similar or dissimilar to your own?
- How are his experiences in class and/or a college setting similar or different from your own?
- What are your experiences dealing with the VA and/or our school liaison and how could they be better? Are Napier's frustrations similar to your own, if any?

General Discussion Questions:

- Why, or do, you think anyone cares you served in the military?
- How do you feel about an expression of "Thank you for your service," and how do you react to it?

- What are the best ways to react to it?
- How do you think you can learn from older veterans about how to interact with society as a veteran?
- Do you think it is important to reach out to non-veteran students, and why?
- What do you feel are the best ways to interact with non-veteran students?
- Are you willing to try to take advantage of the helping opportunities available to you here (*i.e.* college, university, etc.)?
- How best can we help you?

Other Potential Audiences:

Dorm/Orientation Workshop:

Audience: Civilian Undergraduates interested in learning about student veterans:

Learning Objectives:

- Increase civilian understanding of student veterans' experiences and some aspects of what it's like to transition to college
- Help civilian students make connections with student veterans and, more broadly, start to bridge the military-civilian divide

Off-Campus Meet Up or Workshop (facilitated by student veteran group, VFW, etc.):

Audience: Student veterans and veterans in the communities (could adapt to include military-connected families)

Learning Objectives:

- Help student veterans make connections with each other and with veterans beyond campus and across generations
- Allow veterans of different generations to compare their experiences with each other through a text rather than their own testimony (they can make connections between the video and their own experiences or just talk about what's in the video as they prefer)

Workshop in Medical School

Audience: Scholars/students of medical humanities

Learning Objectives:

- Make scholars and students in the med school aware of student veteran population and specialized experiences which may be of special interest and value (if program includes self-identified veterans, they could co-facilitate the session)
- Expose scholars working in this area (probably already familiar with the value of oral histories for narrative medicine, etc.) to the experience of combat medics .

Preliminary Bibliography/ Possible Sample Readings

Resources for Using Oral History:

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Resources for Veteran-Related Oral History:

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Questions for the NEH Institute Audience:

1. What else can/should we do with these modules that we haven't thought of yet?
2. Are there other audiences for this type of module? Policy makers? The VA?
3. Do you see any problems or concerns that we should consider as we refine and use these modules? Do those of you who've worked with oral histories before see any special issues we should be aware of?
4. Is there anything specific in the clips we showed that jumped out as interesting or worth noting with regard to our Institute's larger interest in Veterans in Society and/or Veterans Studies?