

## Experiences with Military Online Learners: Toward a Mindful Practice

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### Abstract

Active military service members are increasing as constituents of online distance learning environments in America. For instructors, first-time engagement with military learners poses challenges and opportunities. This paper considers military learners through a framework of stereotype, labeling, and culture. It explores the use of stereotypes in new social engagements and provides a brief discussion of the cultural differences that military learners bring to the learning environment. It presents a small-scale phenomenological study of military learners' experiences in online courses, and suggests that their values and concerns do not differ significantly from non-military students. It concludes that, as with all learners, the most effective way of engaging with military students is for the instructor to be actively present, critically aware, and genuinely open. This approach, mindful practice, is presented as a strategy for exploring and developing a deeper understanding of the military learner. Suggestions for such practice are offered in the concluding section.

**Keywords:** cultural awareness, military culture, stereotyping, educational engagement, mindfulness

### Introduction

Increasingly, military service members are participating in distance learning environments. Currently, about one percent of all those enrolled in American colleges are active service members and three percent are veterans ([Radford & Weko, 2011](#)). Military participation has risen significantly due to a number of factors. First, the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2008 (Title V of the [Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2008](#)) came into effect in late 2009 and substantially increased tuition benefits for those who were on active service after September 10, 2001. Second, in the coming years, reductions in the U.S. military operational budget, continued weakness in the domestic economy, persistent high rates of unemployment, limited new job creation, and a desire for marketable qualifications on separation from the military will all be important in motivating those currently serving in the military to consider concurrently enrolling in higher education, particularly in online distance learning programs ([Radford, 2009](#)).

The military encourages college-program enrollment for its service members, recognizing that it contributes positively to operational performance, technical and managerial competence, service retention rates, and promotion possibilities ([Mehay & Pema, 2009](#)). Although military students often recount bureaucratic difficulties in dealing with tuition assistance programs – and although increasingly programs feature caps, limits on academic credits, and other restrictions – these benefits provide significant advantages for active service members, and current evidence suggests that the advantages far outweigh any administrative obstacles encountered ([Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010](#)).

For those in the military wishing to embark on higher education – whether during their service or afterwards – the move can be a complex cultural, social, and administrative process ([Griffin & Gilbert, 2012](#)). Yet, a recent study of 690 postsecondary institutions showed that only 37% had provided for such transitions, even though all confirmed a significant growth in military students since 2009. Only 47% offered faculty and staff any professional development training to deal with the military and although

"raising faculty and staff sensitivity to the unique issues faced by military and veteran students and their family members" was seen as a priority, only 54% had implemented such programs ([McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012](#), p. 48). While many colleges aspire to be "military friendly" in their administrative process ([Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009](#)), a pressing educational issue is helping distance learning faculty appreciate the culture of the military learner, so that they can create effective learning environments, increase student satisfaction, and reduce dropout rates.

From the author's personal experience, and the anecdotal evidence of many military students, some online faculty members first encounter the military learner through a fog of uncertainty: sometimes positive, sometimes negative. Certainly, in employment and other areas of education, former military service members and their dependents confront varying degrees of negative stereotyping ([Hairston, 2010](#); [Harrell & Berglass, 2012](#); [Zia Mian, 2011](#)). This paper, based on 9 years of working online with military learners, suggests that stereotyping – an intuitive and innocent way of approaching new social encounters – should first be recognized and then reassessed. A more informed understanding of cultural difference is required. One powerful way of increasing understanding is to actively engage with military learners: being open, remaining critically attentive, and practicing what is best described as mindfulness. In this paper, the working definition of mindfulness is that of Nhất Hạnh (1987): "for things to reveal themselves to us, we need to be ready to abandon our views about them" (p. 42).

This paper considers the active service member, who is enlisted in the military and also engaged in higher education. It does not consider veterans, who enter higher education after their service and who have a distinctive cluster of issues related to transitioning to college. The paper is structured around four elements: (1) a consideration of the intuitive assumption of stereotype, which may be positive or negative; (2) an exploration of military culture and its influence on the online learning environment; (3) a review of a small-scale phenomenological study in which military learners talk about themselves; and (4) a discussion of mindful practice as a learning strategy to develop a realistic and authentic understanding of the military learner. The final section contains suggestions aimed to encourage online instructors to explore a mindful approach in their practice.

### **The Assumption and Consequence of Stereotype**

Online distance learning courses are sometimes designed by instructional specialists, with instructors required to facilitate a pre-structured environment. Sometimes, instructors must design the environment themselves. In either case, the effective online instructor must possess the subject matter expertise and andragogical knowledge to create and facilitate a responsive learning environment in which learning can take place ([Pecorino & Kincaid, 2007](#)). Part of creating and facilitating online learning environments is an appreciation of the participants who will use them, because the values and assumptions of participants significantly impact the instructor's ability to project social presence, facilitate dialogues, and select effective instructional strategies ([Shea, Vickers, & Hayes, 2010](#)). Yet, it has often been observed, "the instructional designer unconsciously assumes the learner is a lot more like himself or herself than they in reality are: they seriously underestimate how important the differences in context are" ([Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007](#), p. 212).

Assumptions, labels, and stereotypes are intuitively employed in making sense of new social or cultural situations: they operate as heuristics. "Sophisticated stereotypes" are unconsidered and innocently ascribed, and provide a sense of structure and security by reducing "a complex culture to a shorthand description" ([Osland & Bird, 2000](#), p. 66). The initial use of stereotype is intuitive and understandable; however, its persistence is problematic because it degrades personhood, blocks deeper understanding, and perpetuates distance.

Stereotypes are "cognitive structures that incorporate a variety of features about social groups, including physical characteristics, attitudes, behavioral tendencies, and affect associations" ([Gadon & Johnson, 2009](#), p. 637). In processing information, two parallel cognitive systems operate. System 1 is fast, automatic, effortless, associative, and slow learning: *intuition*. There is a parallel cognitive system at work, but it is usually bypassed. System 2 is slower, controlled, requires effort, is governed by rules, and remains flexible: *reasoning* ([Kahneman, 2002](#)). System 1 analyzes information and arrives at rapid decisions via intuitive shortcuts: *heuristics*. Stereotyping is essentially a heuristic system designed to cope effectively (but not efficiently) with informational complexity and to produce decisions that appear as natural as they are unconsidered ([De Neys & Vanderputte, 2011](#); [Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994](#)). Stereotypes have considerable pragmatic value in decision making and generally remain anchored and

unchallenged, only revisited when they have repeatedly produced errors in predictions ([Epley & Gilovich, 2006](#)).

Stereotypes are useful short-term expedients, but they have unintended long-term consequences. For the instructor, these consequences are often seen in anticipated results and self-fulfilling prophecies. In their now-classic work, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) examined the Pygmalion Effect, where positive expectations based on biased stereotyping resulted in favored individuals performing better in organizational and educational contexts. Counterintuitively, superior performance actually resulted: positive anticipations held by their supervisors were communicated to protégés, motivating them to attain higher goals. The anticipatory loop was completed when the success of the protégé (or the student) confirmed the supervisor's (or the instructor's) earlier expectations ([Tierney & Farmer, 2004](#)). The reverse also occurs: the Golem Effect ([Babad, Inbar, & Rosenthal, 1982](#)). Here, negative bias anticipates poor performance. Expectations of poor performance are communicated to the individual, influencing subsequent behavior, and frequently resulting in the failure that had been predicted.

Both Pygmalion and Golem Effects are the unintended consequences of stereotyping, communication patterns, and behavioral reinforcement. Unchallenged stereotypes can have consequences and can produce real effects; however, they also undermine social relationships. They interfere with the demonstration of true ability, negate claims to authentic consideration, and diminish rights to unique personhood. Stereotypic attribution impacts the individual targeted, but it also limits and restricts the person making the attribution. Stereotypes are natural and intuitive, but they should be consciously identified and then abandoned. It is more effective and respectful to approach learners – whether military students or students of a differing culture – through a recognition and appreciation of their cultural difference.

### **Janusian Culture: The Double Sidedness of the Military Learner**

Cultural awareness is critical in distance online learning, particularly when learning environments include a high degree of cultural or ethnic diversity ([Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010](#); [Thomas, Mitchell, & Joseph, 2002](#); [Young, 2008](#)). Participants from different national cultures can be expected to have culturally-determined assumptions and attitudes towards power-distance, masculinity-femininity, individualism-collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980, [1986](#)). Cultural differences have a significant impact on many aspects of online distance learning, including the level and quality of online interaction (Wu & Teo, 2008; [Yang, Olesova, & Richardson, 2010](#)), and the ways in which instructors and learners develop online presence ([Keller, Lindh, Hrastinski, Casanovas, & Fernandez, 2009](#)).

National cultural differences are significant, but are they comparable with differences between military and non-military learners? To consider this, it is necessary to examine the culture in which military learners are embedded and the extent to which they bring that cultural perspective to the online learning environment.

Military organizations, like all large social groupings, have distinctive cultures that communicate values to novices. Lang's (1965) classic analysis of the military drew attention to organizational-structural issues: emphasis on communal living, control over all aspects of the member's life, rigid hierarchical command structure, and unidirectional downward flows of authority, communication, and directives. This structurally oriented representation captures many of the deep-rooted assumptions and attitudes towards the legitimacy of power in military contexts. This culture is crucial for maintaining operational effectiveness in military contexts, and becomes deeply ingrained in service members.

[Soeters, Winslow, and Weibull \(2006\)](#), considering military and paramilitary organizations in different countries, conclude that although an identifiable supra-national military culture did exist, military organizations *also* displayed cultures that were in many ways similar to those of local non-military organizations. They suggest that military service members simultaneously belong to *two different* cultures, and have the ability to differentiate and act appropriately in each. One culture, evident in "hot situations" such as battle or open hostilities, is militaristic and represents a supra-national culture concerned primarily with what has termed "the management of violence," a phrase attributed to Harold Lasswell (Huntington, 1957, p. 11). The second culture, evident in "cold situations" such as in barracks or during training exercises, is similar to that found in local non-military organizations. It is this second culture – similar in most respects to non-military learners – that seems most evident in online learning environments.

Although the predominant cultural disposition of military online learners is similar to non-military peers, military service and culture do impinge through factors such as frequent moves and relocations, sudden deployment, and unannounced training exercises. [Hall \(2011\)](#) acknowledges that "the psychological issues of secrecy, stoicism and denial add a layer of difficulty and possibly confusion ... [for the non-military] who may see the world from a place of openness, fairness, and egalitarianism" (p. 16). The new online instructor will become aware of the stresses, isolation, concerns, uncertainties, and fractured work-world that many military learners experience.

The author's recent e-mail correspondence reveals glimpses of the parallel world in which the military learner lives, of which most of us have little experience. A soldier sends an e-mail apologizing for her lack of participation in an online learning course. Her base, in Afghanistan, had been under a communication blackout for several days. Members of her unit had been killed in action, and it was feared that an inadvertent e-mail, or social media posting, would alert relatives before they had been officially informed of their loss. In her e-mail she recognizes with fortitude that she is a soldier, and also that she is a college student wanting to complete her course. She notes in passing that her base is subjected to nightly IDF (indirect fire). She is concerned about incoming fire – and about incomplete assignments. Such e-mails are neither unique nor uncommon.

Military spouses and dependents are not actively involved in military activities, however, "a common saying in the military is that when one person joins, the whole family serves ... military families may often be in the background of public discourse on the military, but they are critical to its success" ([Park, 2011](#), p. 65). [Kelty, Kleykamp, and Segal \(2010\)](#) explain that "the military recruits individuals but retains families ... family members are important stakeholders affected by military policies and culture" (p. 192). An online learner might not actually be an active service member but a military spouse or dependent. It should be realized that, although not recruited, they also "serve" and confront many of the same issues as the active service member.

The Janusian formulation of culture suggests that a distinctive military culture is only seen dimly in the "cold situation" of the online classroom. But it will be seen: in personal correspondence, in the plethora of military acronyms, in references to core military values, in the stylistic deference in addressing those of a higher rank (including the instructor), and in the ubiquitous "V/R" (very respectfully) that ends e-mails and online conference posts. However, although useful to recognize, these fragments do not constitute the essence of the learner. Military learners cannot be understood as representatives of a specific cultural system; rather, they are better understood as authentic individuals, set within a number of different cultural contexts, but not uniquely defined by any one of them.

### **A Phenomenological Perspective**

The following phenomenological study was conducted to produce "descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" (Patton, 1990, p. 71). [Groenewald \(2004\)](#), considering a phenomenological approach to research, argues that "to arrive at certainty, anything outside immediate experience must be ignored, and in this way the external world is reduced to the contents of personal consciousness ... realities are thus treated as pure 'phenomena' and the only absolute data from where to begin" (p. 4).

Students who were active members of the U.S. military were asked about their online learning experiences in courses (Management and Organizational Design). The survey posed open-ended questions that allowed the respondent to describe his or her experience. Students were informed that the survey was voluntary, anonymous, and that non-participation would not influence the final grade. The survey was administered electronically in the third week of a ten-week course session and appropriate ethical consideration was given to soliciting, analyzing, storing, and disseminating information. Sampling was not random, but opportunistic and convenient: it was limited to students who were declared business administration majors and participating in the author's online courses. The sample size was small, but was considered statistically appropriate; however, because of the sampling method and size, results cannot be generalized to a wider college population.

### **Results**

All 160 registered students in five course sections of *Management and Organizational Design* were invited to participate if they self-identified as active military service members. Thirty-six usable surveys were recovered. Since the population included class members who were not on active military duty, and

since the precise number of active military members was unknown, an overall response rate cannot be determined. The sample profile is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Respondents' prior online course experience, military service completed on entering the course, and anticipated remaining service until separating from the military (N = 36)*

	Mean	Mode
Online course experience prior to the survey	4.7 courses	2.0 courses
Military service completed at the time of survey	12.2 years	10.0 years
Anticipated remaining service until separation from military	5.8 years	10.0 years

Responses were examined "for the themes common to most or all ... as well as the individual variations" (Hycner, 1985, p. 292). Emerging themes were identified, along with dissenting or unique voices. Samples of actual responses are reproduced to illustrate central aspects of the emerging themes and alternative opinions.

*Question 1: Why are you taking this online course?*

Most frequently (15 respondents) learners reported that the course was taken to complete graduation requirements. Two other emergent themes were that the course was taken for personal satisfaction (8), or because it was seen as providing utility on separation from the military (8).

*"To continue my education – I feel that I have lost too much time and want to accomplish the educational goals I should have many, many years ago."*

*"[The] military community is positive and this college seems to have representatives everywhere."*

*"No one in my family has done it [graduated] before in the generations of my sisters and brothers ... to set an example for the children that I hope to have one day."*

*Question 2: What are the benefits of a college education for someone in the military?*

The most frequent response (18) was a perception that college education was a pathway to promotion within the military. A significant number of respondents (8) indicated that college education could be brought to bear on their current military duties, and the same number (8) thought that higher education and qualifications would have utility after separation from the service.

*"The obvious benefit of a college education is that it can help with professional development, improve writing and computer skills, as well as an opportunity for promotion points ... Soldiers are given special preference for certain jobs and a college education sets an applicant apart from his or her peers."*

*"[The benefits include] promotion opportunity, increased knowledge, free education, officer opportunities, better job opportunities outside of the Military."*

*"Knowledge is power no matter where, but in the military one of the requirements to become an officer is a 4-year degree."*

*"It is beneficial when the degree being pursued matches the job being performed. I am a Career Counselor a.k.a. Retention and manage the Human Resources in a Battalion."*

*"Greater responsibility and more promotion opportunities"*

*Question 3: How supportive is the military in your studies?*

An overwhelming number (32) said that the military was very supportive in helping them participate in educational studies. A few (4) thought the military was not supportive in this regard; however, most felt that it was more an attitude of their commanding officer rather than military policy.

*"It very much depends on the command – the command I'm attached to right now encourages members to take as many college classes as possible. My chain of command also has no issue with me doing homework during hours so long as my work is complete."*

*"Moderately [supportive] – the mission has to come first."*

*"When you mention school as a reason for not going on TDY [temporary duty], or deployment, you are looked on as a complainer who is trying to get out of something."*

*"The military has always been supportive; however, the ultimate supporter is your first line supervisor and platoon sergeant."*

*Question 4: What instructor difficulties have you encountered in distance learning?*

A majority of respondents (26) reported that they had not experienced problems or difficulties with their online instructors. It should be kept in mind that these respondents had *only* taken online courses with the college in which they were currently enrolled. The college has a 50-year involvement with the U.S. military and is widely recognized for its "military friendliness." Respondents' prior experience was thus with online faculty accustomed to working with military learners. Although online distance learning faculty received no explicit training in working with the military, these results suggest that the faculty members encountered by participants had constructive exposure to, and engagement with, active military members. When difficulties had been encountered, they related to limited academic feedback (4), assignment scheduling (3), and grading (3).

*"I have been lucky for the most part with teachers always online and ready to help ... this semester however ... [she was] only on line once a week. Some teachers, like her, seem to use DL as a way to escape from the students; that sounds harsh but I certainly feel that way."*

*"The most difficult thing ... instructor is not willing to let your make up work."*

*"I have found most instructors are dedicated to our success. Even so, I don't think that the real deal, face-to-face will ever be replaced."*

*"I have some instructors not really understand that I was on base in Iraq and Afghanistan for a week and had no Internet or the connection was too slow."*

*Question 5: What technical difficulties have you encountered in distance learning?*

Almost half (17) reported that they had experienced no significant difficulties, but a similar number (14) had experiences technical issues such as computer availability and Internet access during deployment.

*"I am in Kuwait, with that said the only difficulty I run into is the Internet connection."*

*"While deployed Internet connection constantly goes in and out ... unexpected missions ... duty at another forward operating base has no Internet ... long missions outside the wire with no chance to complete assignments on time."*

*"Since I am deployed, I sometimes have delays with my books (even when I order them weeks in advance) ... additionally connectivity can be a problem."*

*"TDY [temporary duty] and the unwillingness of professor to deviate from intended submission dates."*

*Question 6: What should online instructors realize about the military learner?*

About a third of respondents (11) thought their online instructors, who taught with a military friendly institution, had a good understanding of what it meant to be a military learner. These respondents did not think it necessary to provide instructors with additional information. A major emerging theme (19), however, was that instructors needed to be more aware of the time and participation constraints imposed by military service, especially when the learner was deployed.

*"Most have already realized that not all military learners are available to participate, but instructors have tried to make it work."*

*"[Military learners] work HARD, very hard. They have no time yet they find it. They have no energy left at the end of the day, yet they find energy."*

*"Sometimes completing the mission takes precedence over homework."*

*"I don't like us to be considered special, but depending on the mission our hours can be quite long and we frequently travel."*

*"We are not normal/ average students ... we have a lot going on ... we have to worry about being physically harmed, especially in deployed locations."*

*"Some of us might be a bit slower because of the length of time spent away from school since graduating [from] HS [high school], but we're committed on trying to make it to the next level."*

### **Mindful Practice: Discussion and Suggestions**

These findings indicate that most military learners surveyed had found their online distance courses to be constructive and positive learning experiences. They also suggest that the concerns and preoccupations of military learners are not dissimilar to those of non-military students. However, these findings relate to a "military friendly" college that has a great deal of experience with the military learner. In other contexts, where faculty might have little experience in dealing with military learners, it is unclear how constructive or positive learning experiences would have been. So, what can be done to ensure that all military learners have a successful experience? How might online instructors approach military learners on their first encounter?

There is often confusion, sometimes contention, and generally little agreement as to how mindfulness is best defined, operationalized, or practiced ([Chiesa & Malinowski, 2011](#)). Although redolent of Eastern philosophy and Buddhist worldviews (Gunaratana, 2002), in the West mindfulness has been seen as both a life orientation and a therapeutic practice ([Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006](#)). In this paper, mindfulness is understood as a pragmatic way of exploring teaching and learning through purposeful attention to the immediate present, and an instructor-orientation marked by curiosity, openness, and acceptance ([Brown & Ryan, 2004](#); [Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007](#)). As such, mindfulness is relevant when working with all students. It may be particularly useful when encountering military learners for the first time, especially if the instructor is unsure of what to expect.

Mindfulness is "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). This requires engaging learners with purposeful intent, caring attention, and openness that are all "interwoven aspects of a single cyclic *process* and occur simultaneously ... mindfulness *is* this moment-to-moment process" ([Shapiro et al., 2006](#), p. 376, emphasis in original). This process recognizes the instructor's partial understanding of the military learner and demonstrates an interest in learning more. It signals interest in cultural structures that might impact the process of knowledge creation. Mindful practice incorporates a growing awareness of the military learner acquired over time, but it does not focus on a historical past; instead, it focuses on the present. In trying to do so, the following suggestions might be useful:

- *Presence in the present.* Mindful instructors make social and cognitive presence apparent in the online environment. They participate actively in online conferences and discussions, signaling that the shared knowledge and experience of learners are important. Military learners often have difficulty participating in online discussions and it is important to demonstrate that although instructors also have constraints, they believe in the value of ongoing dialogue. At a deeper level, if the instructor is not present, then neither is the learner. Social presence online can range from a simple detection of another person's presence to a belief that the other can be engaged, socially and behaviorally. To be present is to be willing to initiate and respond to such engagement.
- *Awareness of what is said and unsaid.* Mindful instructors live in the present and are sensitive to the unarticulated story behind communications. A soldier writes that there has been a death in the family and that she has to go home to attend to affairs. Mindful instructors move behind the narrative. They ask, and discover that the soldier in question is deployed half-a-world away and faces both the pain of grieving and the arduous task of patching together military flights to reach home. This inevitably impacts the ability to fully engage in the online course. Langer (1997) explains that when we are mindful we purposefully "view a situation from several perspectives ... see information presented in the situation as novel ... attend to the context in which we perceive the information ... [and] create new categories through which this information may be understood" (p. 111).
- *Resisting judgment and inference.* Military learners come with all of the fears and concerns of civilian learners, only more so. A former student was a controller of forward air strikes in combat situations. Daily he was confronted with the danger of inadvertently initiating friendly fire and causing collateral damage. Yet, he confided that he was fearful of submitting an assignment

because of poor writing skills. A soldier in Afghanistan, whose first language was Spanish, said she had avoided a term paper because she had never written an extended report in English. Recognized, encouraged, and empowered by the instructor she finally submitted an excellent paper. She too had been fearful. Fear comes in many forms to all of us. The online learning environment should be a safe place, where people can express concerns that are relevant to creation of new knowledge. Mindful instructors move beyond assumptions, inferences, and judgments: they listen, encourage, and empower.

- *Accepting and being non-judgmental.* The mindful practitioner actively moves away from stereotype and understands the present moment. The overarching concern is a willingness to appreciate difference and to include it respectfully in the online community. There is an acceptance of not knowing in order to know; of not judging in order to understand. Although it might be convenient to identify "military learners" as a unique *group*, mindful instructors recognize it is better to approach unique *people* rather than to distance them by labels. They also know that we can express dislike or apathy in a single unconsidered word, but if "forced to describe the person in great detail, eventually there will be some quality we appreciate" (Langer, 1989, p. 66).
- *Being flexible and responsive.* Flexibility accentuates the ability to change in order to understand the present. Change always occurs, but especially for the military learner it can come suddenly and unexpectedly. Mindful instructors appreciate this and understand that flexibility means more than changing dates, granting extensions, or making exceptions. It is vital to recognize and maintain requirements that contribute to good educational outcomes, but it is also vital to acknowledge the unique circumstances of the learner. Mindful instructors know that flexibility necessitates revisiting the permanence of past structures and privileging the present. They realize that sometimes "we act like automatons ... programmed to act according to sense our behavior made in the past, rather than the present" (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000, p. 2). They develop academic policies that are tempered by trust, realistic expectations, and an accommodation for the learner's present situation.
- *Being empathetic rather than sympathetic.* Mindful online practitioners accept others, making a conscious effort to identify with them and acknowledge their unique lives without being judgmental. They recognize that empathy is a conscious concern that recognizes, appreciates, and empowers the other. It acknowledges the right to respectful distance, just as it appreciates the value of meaningful exchange. It does not impose solutions on perceived problems, or intrude on selfhood. Military learners are best recognized as individuals, but for that to happen they must be included in a dialogue where authentic listening occurs. Military learners neither need special favors nor demand differential treatment, but they are entitled to be understood as individuals, not representatives of something else.

Engaging in online learning environments with military learners poses challenges, but predominantly poses opportunities. One significant opportunity is that, rightly or wrongly, the military learner is often labeled as different. This challenges mindful instructors to examine their reactions to difference, providing an opportunity to explore personal, educational, and learning approaches to the unfamiliar. It compels an examination of attitudes towards otherness. It matters little if the difference turns out not to be so great, or the otherness not so alien. What does matter is that instructors are prompted to approach new learners in new ways, in more considered ways, and perhaps in more mindful ways. In that regard, first-time engagement with military learners is not different from encountering any new group of students, because mindful practice resides in the instructor and is not restricted to any specific group.

This study and its recommendations are not without their limits. More research is required to identify any distinctive culture that military learners bring to the online distance education experience and how this impacts teaching and learning. The current study was preliminary in nature and limited in scope. Research is also needed to explore the nature of mindful practice in online distance learning. Research might also examine whether such practice contributes to learning outcomes, helps build online communities, or leads to greater course satisfaction for both student and instructor.

In the coming years, military service members will constitute an increased percentage of enrollments at institutions of higher learning. For logistical reasons associated with their military engagement and deployment, the active service members will enroll in distance learning programs. That requires a change in the practice of college administrations and of online teaching faculty. Colleges need to increase training



for administrative and advisement staff in order to implement effective programs for those currently in the military and contemplating higher education. But, as indicated, statistics show that the response is slow. The online teaching faculty need not compound this problem. As military learners increasingly participate in distance learning environments, distance learning practitioners can take the initiative and become more sensitive to the real needs of these new learners, more aware of their contribution, and more mindful of their presence.

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