



Institute for the Humanities: Connecting Schoolteachers with MSU Resources, Helping History Come Alive

By Sarah Nicholas

“History never ends. It’s expanding every day,” said Michael J. Bossetta, a McComb High School teacher who enhanced his classroom atmosphere after taking advantage of free workshops offered by MSU’s Institute for the Humanities.

Seeking to make history relevant to today’s students, Bossetta attended “America Responds to Crisis: Comparing the Alien and Sedition Acts of the late 1700s to the Cold War,” a 2019 workshop designed for American and European history teachers. The workshop was led by MSU faculty members Judy Ridner, professor of history, and Davide Orsini, assistant professor of history.

Sparking a group discussion in his classroom connecting “false, scandalous information found on Instagram and Facebook” with how the U.S. Constitution

has stood the test of time, Bossetta said the workshop “showed how something from a long time ago was relevant now,” connecting it to the border-crisis issue today.

“The workshop was presented in a great way to give background to this current issue,” Bossetta said of the event that provided him connections between the past and present which he uses today in his classroom. “We must learn from our history so we can move forward.”

Noticing his students were “attached to their phones,” the U.S. history teacher said social media is one of his biggest challenges in teaching because students “don’t always see how distant things can be relevant today,” and that too many students think “if they see it in print, it is true—but anyone can write anything.”

The Institute for the Humanities, an

outreach unit of MSU’s College of Arts and Sciences, is advancing education across the state by providing continuing education units, or CEUs, for primary and secondary teachers, connecting educators statewide with university faculty to enhance classroom content.

MSU faculty donate their time, leading free workshops that include lectures, group discussions, packets of curriculum material and the option to pay for .6 CEU credit hours.

“These workshops cover a topic from history that has modern resonance, or that teachers might find speaking to today’s headlines,” said Julia Osman, institute director and associate professor of history. “When we hosted the Civil War workshop, there was a lot of discussion in the state and country about the controversies over Confederate



Michael J. Bossetta



Carl Gregory

statues and the state flag, so Dr. Andy Lang’s workshop included reliable sources on those controversies and ways to talk about them with students.”

“We don’t charge anything for the workshops,” Osman said, noting they are open to teachers of all levels. “We immerse primary and secondary teachers directly in conversation with professors who are content specialists. Not only do workshop leaders teach history at the college level, but they are experts in the topics we discuss.”

“These workshops also allow teachers to grasp how historians understand and use the curriculum,” said Osman. “The Institute for the Humanities, teachers and professors are on the same page—we are all trying to help our students navigate the material and the skill sets they need to succeed.”

Osman said last year’s “America Responds to Crisis” workshop, with lectures on the Alien and Sedition

Acts and the Cold War, “spoke to today’s concerns about fake news and immigration, and it helped teachers find ways of making events from decades or centuries past immediately relevant and interesting to their students.”

“The conversational style allows teachers to ask questions about anything from teaching issues to content curiosities, and sometimes other teachers in the workshops will share their experiences and success,” Osman said. “The professors leading these workshops also get to hear about the challenges and triumphs from the teachers.”

Bossetta said collaborating with teachers from other areas of the state and discussing universal issues such as “rigor, testing and policy,” helps him strengthen his skills, which benefits his students. “We want to make sure that the students have every possible opportunity to succeed.”

Before entering the field of education, Bossetta spent 28 years as a New Orleans police officer. He retired at the age of 47 and decided to get his teaching degree. After Katrina forced a relocation to Mississippi, Bossetta began teaching in McComb. He said he finds his age to be a benefit in teaching social studies, especially with topics like the Civil Rights movement, which he experienced first-hand.

For Carl Gregory, a U.S. History teacher at Byhalia Middle School in Marshall County, attending Lang’s “Teaching the Civil War” came just in time for his class unit on the war.

Gregory said he knows textbooks can be out-of-date and students work best when working with primary sources, so attending the workshop helped him cover the topic in a relevant way.

“There is not enough time to cover all the material I want to,” Gregory said, who wishes he could spend more time on politics in U.S. history.

“One of the great things about the

Institute for the Humanities workshop is the sources we’re given,” Gregory said, noting he likes the lists of trusted, reliable websites and sources the presenters provide. “It is so informative. I feel like I am having a discussion with people that share the same passion for history.”

Through his teaching career, Gregory said he “gets to mold the minds of the future.”

“I teach my students to look at everything from multiple perspectives,” he said.

“The atmosphere is prone to learning, so informative, and the speakers clearly know what they are talking about,” Gregory added. “There is a lot of open discussion so you can share ideas with fellow educators and historians. The topics fit into current events.”

The Institute for the Humanities is planning more workshops to extend this outreach to English teachers.

“The teacher response to our workshops has been so overwhelmingly positive, we are trying to build on that success and generate more workshops to further support teachers in their challenging and crucial roles in our state,” Osman said.

For more information on the Institute for the Humanities and to view upcoming CEU opportunities, visit www.ih.msstate.edu.

The Institute for the Humanities promotes research, scholarship and creative performances in the humanistic disciplines and raises their visibility, both within Mississippi State University and the wider community. The Institute’s activities also include sponsorship of the distinguished lecture series, support for faculty research initiatives and public outreach through scholarship and innovative teaching.