

Feature

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**Lecturer of the Year:
 Mark Whitters' teaching
 abilities bring history to
 life for students**

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Mark Higbee has observed in a lot of classrooms over the years. So when the Eastern Michigan University professor visited full-time lecturer Mark Whitters' class on a fall day in 2009, he knew he was witnessing something special.

Whitters' lecture on ancient Rome hit that rare professorial sweet spot - rich in content, yet so engaging that it seemed more like a conversation with the class of 33 students. Almost every student in the class had a comment or a question. Rather than shutting down further questions, Whitters' responses drew more people into the discussion.

"I was struck by how fully and naturally his classroom style seemed to eliminate this distance between the expert and the students," Higbee said. "... He had created a class, long before I walked in, in which 30 undergraduates were seriously thinking about ancient Rome and how it changed over time."

Whitters is the winner of this year's Outstanding Teaching Award for Full-Time Lecturers. A reception in his honor will take place at University House April 20. Whitters will receive a \$1,000 check and a plaque.

"I'm humbled by the award and grateful to the many faculty members who put forward recommendations," said Whitters. "I'd love to pay it back, somehow. I almost feel a little guilty taking the money when funds are so short."

Whitters is an internationally respected scholar of Biblical studies and world history. But his gift as a teacher is his ability to bridge the distance between the expert and the newbie.

"(He) understands that effective learning depends upon the connection between expert and learner, rather than just upon the brilliance of the teacher," Higbee said.

Whitters has traveled extensively and studied abroad in Beirut, Lebanon. In addition, he received his doctorate in religious studies from the Catholic University of America; master's degrees in classical studies from the University of Michigan and in Semitics and Near Eastern Studies from the University of Minnesota; and his bachelor's degree in the classics from Grinnell College.

He speaks eight languages and reads seven; has published five articles in Biblical Studies journals; and co-edited "The Ancient World," part of the seven-volume *Encyclopedia of World History*



ENRICHING HISTORY: Mark Whitters, a history lecturer, addresses his History 101 Western Civilization class. Whitters was recently received Eastern Michigan University's Outstanding Teaching Award for Full-Time Lecturers. He will receive a plaque and a \$1,000 check.

"His specialty (in the history of biblical languages) makes him an indispensable instructor for the current Religious Studies Minor and the newly formed Jewish Studies," said Kate Mehuron, a history professor and department head.

Whitters teaches three history courses — "World Civilization," "Western Civilization" and "Comparative Study of Religion" — with a contagious passion for the material and an abiding willingness to meet students where they are. He's embraced a teaching format, originally brought to EMU by Higbee, called *Reacting to the Past*. The format uses a competitive role-playing game to bring history to life for students. Whitters even teaches an entire first-year world history course - History 179 - built around the format.

"The students own the class. And, in this day and age, that's what a lot of students need to experience — that they're a contributor to their own education," Whitters said. "It's this sense of being able to do their own research and draw their own conclusions."

Even more so than his regular classes, the "Reacting" pedagogy turns his classroom into a community of learners who depend on — and are enriched by — each other, with Whitters as an ally. If you're a contributor to EMU, he points out, you have a different kind of involvement than if you're a consumer of EMU.

Whitters, who lives in Detroit, has taught History 100 through extended programs at the EMU Detroit campus. There, he found the role-playing game helps urban teens dig into a subject that they might easily dismiss as dry and abstract.

That he does some of his best work in a community setting should come as no surprise. Whitters is himself a member of a religious community, an ecumenical brotherhood called *Servants of the Word*. The group focuses on living a simple, communal, celibate life and serving God by serving others.

When he's not teaching at EMU, he works as part of the *Street Team for Youth Works Detroit*, finding and funding minimum-wage jobs for 20-to-30 Detroit teens. Through his Catholic parish in Detroit, he's also started a racial dialogue group, *Men of Victory*. In addition, he's formed a discussion group for EMU faculty called the *Socratic Club*.

"I think (community is) something the system leaves out," he said. "We're so focused on goals and consumption and achievement and being on the fast track that we're totally consumed with the system. There's a need to humanize our lives. Relationships are important to me."

It shows. Students and faculty alike find Whitters' office a safe place to have a spiritual conversation in the otherwise secular world of a state university.

"The faculty here has been wonderfully supportive of my work in Detroit, and they've gone out of their way to open a niche for me," said Whitters, who began teaching at EMU in 2005 and was pleased and thankful to find colleagues who accepted him for who he is. "I didn't expect them to be so receptive to someone as committed as I am to religion. That wasn't the case, in such a concrete way, at other state universities where I've taught."