



Humanities =

“Veterans and the Power of Conversation”

EPISODE DESCRIPTION

How can reflective conversations help veterans open up and share their experiences? In this episode, two conversation programs are creating spaces where veterans can reflect on their service and find connection through dialogue. Humanities Texas’ Veterans’ Voices program brings veterans and members of the public together to read and discuss literary excerpts related to war and service. Michigan Humanities’ Same Mission. Many Stories. program used WWII museum objects to spark conversation among women veterans. Transcripts, photos, and related content available at statehumanities.org/podcast.

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

[Theme music plays]

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class; it's just an opportunity to actually come and talk about these things in that kind of lower pressure environment,

Hannah Hethmon (Narration): *You're listening to Humanities =, a podcast about real individuals, organizations, and communities making a real difference through the humanities.*

I'm your host Hannah Hethmon.

Humanities = is a production of the Federation of State Humanities Councils.

In this episode, we're learning about two programs making space for veterans to reflect on their experiences in small groups. In Texas, short excerpts of literature serve as the catalyst for conversations between veterans and nonveterans; in Michigan, museum artifacts from WWII are used to spark discussion among women veterans.

We'll start in Texas, where Humanities Texas hosts reading groups for veterans, their family and friends, and other interested civilians. After training facilitators to guide the conversations, Humanities Texas partners with sites around the state to host five to six-week series of public programs. Participants can attend all sessions or just join once, and there's no advance reading or preparation required.

To learn more about Veterans' Voices and its impact on Texans, I spoke to Melissa Huber, Director of Programs and Communication at Humanities Texas. Melissa has worked at Humanities Texas for nearly 18 years, 12 of which she's spent running their Veterans' Voices program alongside her colleagues.

Melissa Huber:

A typical program starts with participants breaking into small groups, anywhere from eight to 10 people typically, and reading selected texts out loud together. We follow a reading model that's called "reading in the round." So, each person reads one or two lines in succession around in the circle.

The excerpts are quite varied and include both classic and contemporary texts about military service, war, and return to civilian life. And then after the readings, the discussion leaders ask participants to react to the texts and they guide the group in facilitated conversations that explore how the texts relate to their own experiences and sort of what they found and responded to as they were reading.

Hannah Hethmon:

So why did Humanities Texas decide to start a reading group for veterans and community members? What need did you see out there and why did you feel like a humanities organization rather than a university or a community center was the right group to address it?

Melissa:

Yeah, so at the core of Veterans' Voices is the idea that humanities-based discussion can provide a context and be a catalyst for communication, and in Texas, we have a significant veteran population. You know, more than one base, lots of communities that are very veteran-centered. So, this was an audience that we really wanted to reach more effectively. The program that we run now originally started as a collaboration with a program called Texas Veterans' Voices. Texas Veterans' Voices was founded by the late Paul Woodruff, who was a professor of philosophy and classics at the University of Texas at Austin.

And Paul was a Vietnam veteran himself who struggled with readjustment when he returned from Vietnam and found a kind of solace in the *Odyssey*, which he says he read three times just in the first year that he was back. So that was something that was always on his mind. And he joined with a UT doctoral student, Johnny Meyer, who was a former Army Ranger, and they partnered on creating this reading and discussion program for returning veterans to reflect on their own military experiences.

So, Johnny and Paul were hosting kind of one-off programs locally in Austin, which is where Humanities Texas is based. But we serve the entire state—like all of the other state humanities councils. So, we started working with them in 2013, but the value and the impact of the program was evident very early on, and we were really interested in exploring how we could expand the program to other parts of the state. So, with that early guidance from Paul and Johnny and then with support from two Dialogues on the Experience of War grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, we were able to expand Veterans' Voices. I think we're up to seven communities across Texas now. And now it's considered one of our core programs.

Hannah:

I think that leads us well into a question about the readings and talking more about the texts. So, can you tell me more about the types of text people are reading? And you talked about this reading round. I'd like to hear more about that too, this approach, like how you read it sentence by sentence and why.

Melissa:

At each session, there's a reading set that has about nine to ten excerpts from a range of texts, a range of genres and periods of world history. There's fiction, plays, poetry, first-person narratives, and we're covering conflicts from the Trojan War up to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. So, we're looking for readings that appeal or can appeal to a more general audience, an audience that maybe hasn't experienced these texts before.

We're grouping them in ways where the texts are hopefully speaking to one another across time and circumstance. An example of that would be we include an excerpt from the *Odyssey* from the perspective of Odysseus' wife in the same set as a poem called "Drones" by Amalie Flynn. And both are very, obviously very different time periods, hundreds of years apart, but both speak to the experience of returning to home and what that's like with the loved ones that you're returning to. They're loosely tied themes because we really want the participants to bring their own experiences and interpretations to those conversations.

There are a lot of familiar works like the *Odyssey*, like *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, *Redeployment* by Phil Klay, but there are also less well-known selections. One of those is a play called *The Recruiting Officer*, which is written by a playwright named George Farquhar, who was himself at one point a recruiting officer. This was a very popular play in the first half of the [18th] century.

Hannah:

I heard recruiting officer, I just kind of assumed, you know, army recruitment. But yeah, go ahead. All right, interesting.

Melissa:

Exactly, yeah, so yeah, so that right there, I think tells you why this ends up being a successful piece because it has surprising resonance with contemporary readers. You know in the veteran experience, almost everyone has a story about their recruitment or about a recruiting officer. And so, here's this kind of now obscure play that ends up being one of the most popular readings in the set when the time comes.

Every new discussion series brings some new comments, some new perspective that surprises us. We think we've heard it all and then someone will read a piece we've read 50 times and have a completely different perspective on it, point out something new and you can be like, my gosh, yeah, that was in front of me the whole time.

Hannah:

So, participants are coming in, they don't read the material ahead, they can just kind of show up at the door and they're sitting down and they have these excerpts, and tell me more about that reading structure of how they go around and read them in a circle.

Melissa:

We call it reading in the round. And you sit down, there's a kind of brief introduction. Don't spend a whole lot of time on intros and just get into the readings. And each person reads a sentence or two around in a circle. And we move through all of the texts at the beginning of the

conversation, at the beginning of the session all together out loud. And this is important to how the facilitated conversation then takes shape. We don't send out the readings in advance because we want participants to be experiencing the readings together for the first time, which kind of helps build this group familiarity before you get into discussion, a sort of common ground that everybody is launching from. So, this this particular kind of model is a bit unique in this way. Kind of doing the reading in the round gives everybody a voice. Everybody is participating, and it kind of makes everybody a bit more comfortable by the time you get into discussion. You've already used your voice in some way.

Hannah:

Hmm. Just sort of using your vocal cords, right? Warming up, putting your voice into the space. You've already kind of put your foot in the door to say more about it. And so, let's talk more about a facilitated conversation. And it's actually something a lot of humanities councils do training on for different types of groups and people. So, what is a facilitated conversation? How is it different from other types of conversation? Like, why is this something you'd need to be trained on?

Melissa:

The way that our facilitated conversations work...again they've already gone through the readings together. We give them a little bit of time just to kind of collect their thoughts and make a few notes, but then the discussion leaders start out by asking participants to react to the texts. It's a very kind of broad, open-ended approach to getting the conversation started. This allows participants to guide the conversations themselves.

But generally, they're asking questions like, what stood out most to you in the set of readings? Or what was a moment that surprised you? What themes did you notice? And one of my favorites is, did you disagree with anything that you read in the text? And you get your 45 minutes into a conversation and you throw that one out there. That one's a fun one.

Hannah:

And those kinds of questions seem like they're just more welcoming and accessible. I'm assuming that even though you're holding these events often at educational institutions, people are coming in with a variety of kinds of education and reading experience.

Melissa:

Right, that's exactly right.

Hannah:

Yeah. And so, speaking of participants, why is it important to include non-veterans? What is the value of having people who do and don't have that direct experience of military service?

Melissa:

Yeah, this was a very important part of Veterans' Voices to Johnny and Paul. And on the veteran to veteran level, we want to foster connection between veterans. We want to help them reveal kind of the shared nature of experiences that often feel unique or isolating, and to see in these texts that these are experiences that have been shared for thousands of years. So that's that is still a very important part of the program. But by including non-veterans, we hope that discussions kind of then provide an avenue for veterans to articulate their experiences to people outside of the veteran community, which can include the family that they live with at home, that they may not have the words or have the reference point to help articulate that for their families or their friends.

And several of our readings attend to the experiences of non-veterans, particularly family—spouses or families of veterans. A lot of the feedback that we get is often about having one of their family members participate in the group with them and kind of opening up conversation in a way they hadn't before.

Hannah:

So yeah, so I'd like to hear more stories and examples if you have it from the reading groups to kind of get a bit more concrete picture. Maybe some of your favorite moments or anecdotes that you've been doing this for a while that stand out and show why it matters.

Melissa:

Yeah, so one that comes to mind always right away is actually a personal experience with my dad.

My dad is a Vietnam veteran, and he at the time was living out of state, but he came to visit and I had to go work a program in College Station and said, you know, you want to drive with me? And he said, yeah, I'll go with you, but I'm not going to participate.

We had been talking about it more in my family over the last few years, but for the first four decades, it was just not something that we talked about at all in my family. So, he said, yeah, I'll come, but I'm not gonna participate. And said, okay, yeah, that's fine. That's fine, come with. So, while we're preparing, and people start to show up and he said, well, maybe I'll, maybe I'll go in the room, you know, and I'll read, but I just, I'm not going to participate in the conversation part. Sure, sure. You know, okay, Pop, go for it. We don't sit in the rooms with them all the time because we want them to feel like they're not being monitored or, know, they can have their

open conversations. But I was sitting right outside of the room that my dad was in and I could hear him very clearly talking throughout the conversation.

And so, when we got out and on the ride home, he just couldn't stop talking about it, and it was a very different experience than he expected, and he became a real fan and advocate of it. And what was interesting was that he had been, he was part of a Purple Heart group, and they were having challenges kind of bridging the age divide with veterans. So, you know, he's in his seventies and then you have these generations of younger vets who just didn't identify. And it turned out that the group discussion that he was in was made up almost half and half of Vietnam veterans and then younger veterans and that the majority of their conversation was sort of this discussing their experiences and the differences, but then also the similarities that they'd had. And so, he found it very valuable and going back and communicating with these younger veterans that they were trying to engage.

Hannah:

Wow, that's really meaningful. And it's kind of amazing that, you know, you're talking about four decades of not wanting to talk about something and insisting that he wasn't going to talk about it, but that something in those readings, even after all that time of a practice, a habit of not speaking, you know, allowed him to talk about some aspect of it and have that that experience and feel that that kind of openness, at least in that moment. So that's really incredible.

Melissa:

Something that we talk a lot about is the barriers to entry to any kind of veterans programming and a lot of preconceived ideas that someone like my dad has around therapy or expectations in a classroom. So, we're always having to be clear that Veterans' Voices, it's not therapy, it's not a class, there's no pass fail, there's nothing really on the line. You know, it's just an opportunity to actually come and talk about these things in that kind of lower pressure environment.

It's something we see throughout. If we can get people in the door, typically they're saying, when's the next one? Can we do another series in the spring?

Hannah:

Wow, well, I think that's a good place to end. Thank you so much for sharing and I look forward to keeping up with the program and seeing how it grows.

[Theme music transition]

Hannah (Narration):

Our second story is about Same Mission.Many Stories., a program from Michigan Humanities designed to serve women veterans. Like the Texas program, Same Mission.Many Stories. was a

response to the National Endowment for the Humanities' Dialogues on the Experience of War grant program, which ran from 2015-2025. While Humanities Texas uses text to spark discussion, Michigan Humanities looked to museums and museum objects as they designed a program for women veterans where they could speak openly about their experiences with their peers.

To learn more about how this program came to be and how's it's evolving to serve even more veterans, I spoke to Jennifer Rupp, President and CEO of Michigan Humanities.

Jennifer:

When we first applied for this grant through the National Endowment for the Humanities, way back in 2019, we had originally designed this program to be centered around literature and documentaries that really focused on women's roles in combat. Well, we all know what happened in 2020. The program got put on hold. When we reinvigorated it in 2021, of course, the landscape had changed.

And so, we kind of took another look at this program and said, how can we bring women veterans together, create a safe space, really engage with our public humanities partners with this? And that's how we landed on having reflective community conversations in museums at universities that had strong, robust veterans' programs.

So, we trained students and veterans to facilitate these reflective conversations. And then we brought groups of women veterans together in museums that housed World War II artifacts. And so, during these conversations, we would center the reflection on a museum artifact that was fairly neutral. So, it would be a sculpture of an eagle or a World War II medal or something like that. So, something neutral, but still something tied to their military service and really created a safe space for these women to have dialogue. And the one thing that we really learned with this program as these women went through is that what we thought they would want to talk about was not at all what they wanted to talk about. And we found, you know, very early on in the program, we were pivoting, we were bringing in more support for them because the conversations very much revolved around their experience in the military from a sexual trauma standpoint. And not so much about transitioning from the front line to home again, some of those common themes that you hear when people talk about female or women veterans. And so a lot of the conversations built trust in that community and kind of coming out of those conversations, a lot of women went back to the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency and said, I have spoken to people about things that I have never spoken about before, and now I'm ready to come to you and these are the services that I need.

Hannah:

Wow. And so, is this like a multi-session program that they're coming to? What's the kind of participation in that way?

Jennifer:

Yeah, so we did this on two different college campuses. Each campus had four reflective conversations. And so, it was pretty much the same group coming back, you know, those four times. And that's kind of where that trust is built and that camaraderie is built. We found through the program, we could have continued those conversations monthly indefinitely. There was that much value there. So, these were something and we also learned—and I think this is with any reflective conversation program—sometimes the parking lot conversations are just as important as the conversations that are happening through the facilitator.

Hannah:

And maybe it's a little obvious, but for those who are listening, how would you define a reflective conversation? What's the difference between a conversation, a regular conversation, and a reflective conversation?

Jennifer:

So, the reflective conversations, you come in knowing that there is not going to be a solution at the end. We are absolutely not there to solve a problem or answer questions. It is really about reflecting on your own experiences and opening yourself up to reflect on other people's journeys, histories, perspectives, and stories.

Hannah:

OK. And can you talk to me a bit about this idea of the museum objects? What do you think is the value, the uniqueness in having that as the center or the start for the conversation rather than a text? Or like you said, it might have been a film or even a personal memory.

Jennifer:

So, we found that when people go to museums, it already kind of puts you in a reflective space. But every artifact in a museum belonged to a person and it has its own story. And so, we find that people want to know more about that object. And they tend to ask questions a little bit more. They tend to reflect or internalize, know, do they have any stories or experiences that relate to the object or the person that held that object. Whereas if you're just reading a poem or you're reading a, you know, excerpt from a piece of literature, you're looking at a piece of art, it doesn't hold that same personal connection. Yes, it was written by an author, but holding something tangible or seeing something tangible that belonged to someone that experienced something that you experienced brings a different level of connection.

Hannah:

Talk to me a little bit more about partnering with the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency (the MVAA) and other institutions. One, what was it like working with Veterans Affairs, and why did you think it was necessary to make this kind of a multi-organization collaboration rather than just kind of keeping it in house and maybe that would be simpler.

Jennifer:

We had not done a lot of veterans programming in the past. And we're very intentional with our work when we go into communities that we engage with community partners. Conversations or any humanities project is always going to have more impact and more sustainability if it is led and really trusted by community and you can't get that trust by just inserting yourself in. And so we're always very cognizant that we want to partner with organizations, facilities, humanities partners that have built that trust in community. So, when we were looking around the state, we were looking at what...we knew we wanted it to be a student-centered program. So, what universities really had a robust veterans student support program, we knew that was going to be very important.

We also knew having support from these veterans' offices on campus were going to provide us with the social work support that we knew we were going to need. We are not trauma-informed. We don't have the expertise of that training, but we knew that was gonna be a very important piece of this program. And so, making sure that we had all of those partners lined up made sure that we were taking the very best care of our participants as we could.

MVAA came in a little bit later in the project. One of their employees was actually a participant of one of the programs. They, as an agency, were a little hesitant about partnering with us because, right, we weren't a trusted partner in the veteran space as far as they were concerned. And so, one of their employees came and experienced the conversation and immediately said, we have to partner with you. We have to do this on a statewide level. And that partnership is what started phase two of the project that we kicked off in 2024.

Hannah:

Tell me about phase two? What's this evolving into?

Jennifer:

So, phase two is another grant that was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This is a partnership between the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency and Michigan Humanities where we are training 21 MVAA employees across the state to be able to have these reflective conversations with special populations of veterans all around the state. So, this last conversation program that we had, phase one, reached about 300 veterans. We were able to do a statewide

conversation at the Women's Veterans Conference in 2023. And so, we thought, you know, if we can train MVAA employees on how to have these conversations, we are enriching their skill set, and we're also broadening how they collect data for the resources that they offer to veterans and also opening different doors for them to be able to communicate with veterans. So, in March of 2025, we had a training where we trained all of the MVAA employees on this conversation model, and then a week later, DOGE terminated the grant.

Michigan Humanities has paused that program because we don't have any money now to facilitate it, but I'm happy to say that MVAA has contacted us. They are still interested in doing the conversations, and this summer they have worked on deciding where those conversations were going to take place and then we're going to continue to help them develop themes, develop resources, and co-facilitate some of those programs as the year goes on.

Hannah:

What a shame. But I'm glad that the work is continuing in some way and that you had enough of a head start that they could see the value in this.

Jennifer:

Yes, when we called to let them know that the grant had been terminated, they said, we believe so much in this model and in this work, that it has to continue. They had no hesitation whatsoever that this had to continue.

Hannah:

So, looking back at the meetings and the programs that have happened so far, these 300 women that were served, can you talk more about that kind of that personal side of it? What stories, what moments, what type of conversations came out of that that really stick in your mind as representative of what happened in these spaces?

Jennifer:

Yeah, so, you know, because of the sensitive material that was covered in a lot of those conversations, we didn't record any of the conversations. We tried to keep things very confidential. But I do know that veterans shared with us that they talked about experiences and trauma in those conversation circles that they had never told anyone, not even their family. And that this program and these conversations set them on a healthier trajectory after where they didn't feel alone and isolated and helpless. So, I think, you know, while we didn't collect personal stories, because we wanted to be very careful that when we talked about the program that no one could say, they're talking about me. Right, because we created very trusting spaces. People were very, very vulnerable. But we did get testimonies from veterans that said, this absolutely changed my life and, in some cases, may have saved some.

Hannah:

Wow. What do you think made these spaces feel safe, feel trustable that they could open up in this way? I'm sure a lot of them had had other opportunities to talk.

Jennifer:

Yeah, a lot of them said it was because they were with other women veterans. But how the conversations are scaffolded is that you really spend the first two conversations getting to know one another. And it's on a level playing field. It's not talking about rank or experience or, you know, how you served or where you served. It was just connecting on a human level. And then as you became closer and built that trust, you then we started to open these conversations up to talk a little bit more about experiences.

And the one thing that has always struck me with these conversations—and it doesn't matter if we're talking about Michiganders' relationship with water or if we're talking about veteran experiences—is that people bond very quickly through this experience. The trust is built very quickly, and by the time they're in conversations three and four, they're extremely open and they're sharing things that they've never shared before. And then that builds this momentum that we didn't have the funding to continue in phase one, which is absolutely why we wanted to do phase two, because we saw that those participants were like, but I'm ready to talk more. I have more to share. I want to open up more.

I think that keeping the groups small, keeping them specific to a demographic that all had similar experiences, but then making sure to root those reflections in neutral museum objects that held stories. It was a safe neutral space. And so, I think just all of that really knit together an experience that allowed people to relax and trust in and open up.

Hannah:

And can you say a little bit more about how, when you discovered that there were needs about trauma and stuff like that, how did you kind of connect people, bring in any other services to make sure you were pointing people in the right direction to address the things that came up?

Jennifer:

Yeah, so that is where we absolutely leaned on our Veterans Affairs offices at the universities. And then we also had two scholars from the University of Michigan who were women's studies professors who were connected with people that could provide that social assistance or counseling assistance, and we actually had those people present at the conversation so that if at any time someone was like, nope, I can't do this, we always have a safe word in our reflective conversations people don't feel awkward or intimidated to say I have to take a timeout. So, we

always had someone there for support so that we were sure no one left a conversation with unanswered questions or feelings that, you know, they couldn't handle on their own.

Hannah:

Right, that seems important. So, we've talked about where phase two is going next, and that it's going serve more other demographics of veterans, not just women, different groups that maybe haven't had that space to talk with people who share their backgrounds. So beyond where the program is going, what insights and lessons has Michigan Humanities learned from this sort of new program that you'll use to inform your other services and programs to Michiganders in the future.

Jennifer:

So, the one thing that these conversation programs have taught me is that people want to talk. And I think right now in society, we have lost the art of conversation. I talk a lot...when people ask me, what is public humanities? I talk a lot about how, as we've built our neighborhoods, we have gone from front porches to back decks. You don't walk around your neighborhood anymore and see everyone sitting out on their front porch all evening. We're not having fence row conversations. People don't know their neighbors anymore. Our sense of community is a little bit different. And so, we're seeing how these reflective conversations can absolutely create spaces for civil discourse and they can be around any topic. So, you know, we're looking at designing programs that can create corporate culture changes.

Just getting people around a table and neutralizing that conversation and centering it on a poem or a piece of art or a museum artifact. You know, we can do this around books. We can do this, you know, to connect community foundations with their communities. I think this is a way that we can move forward and build trust in communities and get people talking again in a very low stakes kind of game, right?

Hannah:

Yeah. Well, thank you so much for sharing this program with me. And I was really excited to hear that it's going forward. I hadn't checked. I wanted to wait till the podcast to find out in real time. So, I'm really looking forward to seeing where this goes.

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