

Communication Professors Adjust to Teaching Remotely

by Jilleen Barrett

As anyone majoring in communication at Manhattan College has witnessed, the education that the communication department has to offer has been significantly affected by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. With almost every professor working remotely, communication with students has definitely not been normal.

This was stated no better than in an email sent in by the head of the department, Michael Grabowski, Ph.D.

“This year has been like no other in my over 20 years of teaching, and I was teaching in Manhattan during 9/11,” Grabowski said.

Grabowski, who is now in his second year of being the head of the department after being an associate professor teaching the media production concentration, is one of the professors who chose to work from home this semester. He describes how he and the other professors spent the summer preparing to teach remotely.

“We spent the summer reviewing the growing field of research about online learning and attended workshops on best practices,” Grabowski said. “It certainly is better to plan a course for a particular mode than starting off one way and suddenly switching without knowing when or whether we can go back.”

Additionally, he describes how he’s become accustomed to working outside of the small campus, such that he’s lengthened his days and redefined what his daily tasks are.

“Setting up learning management systems, managing digital technologies, and solving problems from a distance takes time, and I often find myself working from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. on this,” he said. “Scholarship and research have had to take a back seat while we work through this crisis.”

Michael Plugh, Ph.D., spoke about how he feels the strictly online way of communication and teaching has made his life and work much more hectic.

“The truth of the matter is that makes [my job] much more chaotic because you’ve got so much information that you’re either expecting people to send to you, or that you’re communicating back to them, and after a while, it just gets to be completely overwhelming,” Plugh said.

Rebecca Kern, Ph.D., feels the same way. Kern is an associate professor teaching media theory and research, and advertising classes this semester. She plans to continue teaching remotely next semester while advising Lotus Magazine and the Manhattan chapter of the American Advertising Federation.

“The most difficult part of my job this semester has been preparing on-screen learning modules,” Kern said. “Not much has made my job easier; it’s definitely more work.”



While all the professors in the department are trying their best to make this semester run smoothly, Plugh explained the importance of teaching and learning in a classroom environment.

“Remote teaching is a completely different thing from the teaching that most people have been trained to do – Michael Plugh

“Remote teaching is a completely different thing from the teaching that most people have been trained to do and there’s a big mistake that I think teachers everywhere are making,” Plugh said. “They want to take the things that they do, and put them into this environment, into the digital environment...

and it doesn’t really work that way. The classroom is its own unique space [and] this is not the same as that.”

He also describes that the classroom is not only a place for learning, but a space for students to connect with their professors and each other in a way that Google Meet cannot offer.

“I enjoy all the spontaneous moments in classrooms where suddenly you laugh together or something funny happens or there’s a mistake and somebody catches you,” Plugh said. “You realize everybody’s paying attention and there’s all kinds of really good, dynamic fun. Whether you’re a kindergartener or a senior in college, that experience is such an important part of our lives and we begin to realize it more as we miss it.”

Grabowski cites a similar feeling of disconnect between professors and students because of the divide created by screens.

“When a professor is coming across a computer screen, it’s much easier for students to imagine they are watching a TV show rather than participating in a class,” he said. “We have to create moments to engage students in activities that breakthrough that passive stance.”

He, like many professors, feel this lack of communication and connection is made much worse when students choose not to put their cameras on during class.

“We understand that not every student can turn their camera on, given the environments they are in,” Grabowski said. “I have several students who have to attend class in their bathroom because it is the only room in their family’s home in which they can have quiet. But it is difficult for a professor to be staring at pictures on a screen, or worse, a single letter, instead of peoples’ faces. It feels more like presenting in front of a television camera to an imagined audience than connecting with our very real students on the other end of the internet connection.”

“It feels more like presenting in front of a television camera to an imagined audience than connecting with our very real students– Michael Grabowski

Thom Gencarelli, Ph.D., feels it is not only his job to create a new environment where students can continue to learn, but also to give his students the education they paid for when they chose Manhattan College. He is especially concerned about this when it comes to his television production class and tried to teach it in person, but was persuaded to put his personal health first.

“When I knew I was assigned the [studio television production] class this semester, I said to our chair and to the dean, ‘I want to teach my other classes remotely. But I want to come into campus to teach that class on-premises,’ and I was talked out of it,” Gencarelli said. “That’s what I wanted to do and thought I needed to do and it was kind of weird to be told that I couldn’t.”

He is, however, appreciative that there was the option to teach remotely even if he did not want to for all of his classes. He describes how the arrival of technology has transformed the educational system and gave students at Manhattan the ability to learn via the internet.

“Thank God we have this [technology] now,” Gencarelli said. “Because if we didn’t, what would we have as an alternative? What would you be doing? Your education would be on hold.”

As for the spring semester, no one knows what the future of education at Manhattan holds.

“I can’t speak to what’s going to happen with respect to classes in the spring,” Gencarelli said. “But it is looking more and more like it’s going to be a continuation of this.”