

# Hahn Teaches, Studies the Ways People Communicate

## Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“When I was in middle school, I joined the policy debate team, and I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed the research process, but I also enjoyed the ways we were taught to examine multiple opinions and to use what’s called ‘dissoi logoi,’ or the ability to examine standpoints that you don’t understand and to defend them so that you understand your own standpoint much better.”

That is how Dr. Allison Hahn, an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College, explains how she became interested in communication studies. This native of Oklahoma City received her bachelor’s degree from the University of Pittsburgh in Africana studies, anthropology and political science. She later received a Fulbright Fellowship to study at the National University of Mongolia, and went on to receive a master’s degree in international development and a doctorate in communication from the University of Pittsburgh.

These days we often hear about the importance of learning a second or third language. As someone who has gone through the process, Dr. Hahn has a very strong opinion. “I think it’s huge. I went to Mongolia because I was studying pastoral-nomadic communities, and there are large groups of them there. I got there not understanding any Mongolian whatsoever. Gradually, I learned Mongolian as an undergraduate and as a Fulbright student, and I led study-abroad programs there. But, in that period of not understanding the language and yet being surrounded by it all the time, I learned a level of compassion and also, I think, a level of non-verbal communication skills.”

For many of us, pastoral life sounds like a romantic concept, but there are many complexities behind that term. When asked about the differences between pastoral life in Mongolia versus other countries, Hahn says, “It’s different, and yet remarkably similar. It’s different because it’s definitely grounded in a geopolitical context that is specifically focused on the land and the type of environmental conflicts that they had in Mongolia.



Dr. Hahn at her office.

Photo by Gulinoz Javodova

But you have a community of people who are moving across the land, and they have a very good understanding of changes that are happening and are very determined to preserve that land. I think that is similar across all pastoralists communities throughout the land.”

Hahn continues, “I’ve been looking at the way that pastoralist communities use mobile technologies because they fit so well into their lifestyles. They can use solar panels to charge them, and they can use satellite grids to connect with the rest of the world. They’ve gone from being very remote communities, whom we can never encounter, to communities that we can call this evening and ask how their lives are going, but also ask about the difficulties they’re having.”

We know that millennials communicate almost exclusively via social media, so one wonders how social media have affected other areas of life, like scholarly research. “A few generations ago, you

could simply write whatever you wanted about a pastoralist community, and they would probably never find out. Now, however, I can simply call up somebody and ask: ‘What about this? What is your reflection? How has the community responded?’ That has changed my responsibility as a researcher; it has also helped me send my research back to communities that I’m writing about,” says Hahn.

In addition to her study of pastoral life, Hahn studies the art of debate. One wonders how much the very concept of political debate in these times has changed due to political acrimony. “That’s a fascinating question. In some ways, things have stayed remarkably the same. We’ve always had blinders for things that we don’t want to talk about or don’t want to see. Even when I was in high school and middle school, when the internet existed but was not nearly what it is now, you would have students that you had to push to consider the other side of the topic. They would say that they had firmly decided

and were not going to participate. The difficulty that we have now is that they think that, because there is so much information, they have a well-rounded view of what is happening in the world.”

This calls to mind the “Kitchen Debate” that took place in the 1950s between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev. Do Hahn and her colleagues teach students about famous debates in history? “We do. When the presidential debates were going on, we encouraged students to come and watch them, and we had questions and answers before and after.”

A more recent debate is about speakers being shut down on campuses when students feel threatened by the speakers’ opinions. What’s going on here? Hahn responds: “Most students claim they want to maintain their university as a space to have the discussions that they want to have, but they are opposed to bringing in people who represent alternative viewpoints. I think that’s one of the places where we really need to work harder in the arts and sciences—getting our students to understand that, even if you don’t agree with these people, listening to them still has a particular value, for no other reason than that your arguments against them will be far better after you listen to their speeches.”

On this note we can ask if we have failed as professionals in higher education. “I think so,” says Hahn. “As we move towards focusing only on education that immediately leads to a well-paying job, or focusing explicitly on science education without the communication side of it, we begin to get these types of divisions where students have frustrations that they are not fully able to express. Or where students don’t have the grounding in the arts and sciences that allows them talk about them in multiple different ways. They’ll be better able to participate in their communities and in their families if they go through this critical thinking in their education. It’s an element that we can always do better at.”

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