

This was an article I wrote for the Media, Film, and Journalism Studies department newsletter while I was in grad school at the University of Denver.

Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Renée Botta

By Ryan Kistler, Grad Student, Media & Public Communication

In her 15 years at DU, Dr. Renée Botta has filled multiple roles in the Media, Film, & Journalism department—including department chair and graduate director—and currently teaches a variety of communication classes in the department. The area of health communication is one of her specialties.

Dr. Botta graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with an undergraduate degree in journalism, and she quickly realized that her most passionate work involved health issues. “I found myself wanting to do the big investigative stuff,” she said. “There were a lot of these health issues that were super interesting to me, and I kept wanting to do all of these in-depth stories.” At the encouragement of an advisor who suggested that she attend grad school and begin research on health issues to discover the answers to her biggest questions, Botta went back to UW-Madison to study health communication.

Throughout her career, Dr. Botta has worked on health communication projects around the globe, and she brings this experience into the classroom. Focusing on real-life projects and campaigns, Dr. Botta translates the theory her students learn in the classroom into how practice looks in the real world. She explained, “It’s always important to think about how [theory and practice] mix. What are the constraints in the real world that make what we talk about not possible? It helps us to be more realistic.”

One of the ways she has been able to do this to a greater effect is to lead student trips to Kenya and Malawi. “I wish I could take more students on these travel courses,” she laments. Students have the opportunity to experience this communication work first-hand, and they get to see real-life examples of what they studied in the classroom.

One critical aspect of communication work to remember, Dr. Botta believes, is that perception is reality. “This is super important for us to recognize,” she said. “No matter what type of communication you do, no matter what field you go into, you will do yourself a huge favor if you recognize that.”

“If you are going to be a communicator, you have to understand that communication is about building mutual understanding,” she adds, and she believes one of the most important steps for communication is understanding and recognizing that everyone comes from different

backgrounds and perspectives. “We all have different lived experiences and different perspectives, and mine is no more valid than yours. If I can walk into a situation being ready for or being open to the idea that we’re going to have different perspectives on this—that is going to set us up for so much more.”

Dr. Botta enjoys the support she receives from DU due to its embrace of the teacher-scholar model, which emphasizes the importance of professors having a mixed and balanced focus on both research and teaching. “I really do appreciate DU,” she said. “At most universities, you are either heavily research focused and you’re supposed to blow off your teaching, or you are teaching focused and you’re supposed to blow off your research. And I just don’t think that those things are separate. I don’t think they can be, and I don’t think they should be.”

Right now, Botta’s strongest passions lie in the participatory work that she does with different communities. Health campaigns are often developed and put into action without any input from the community, which can lead to avoidable problems. Dr. Botta will travel next month to Prague to present a paper on this topic, which includes interviews of people she has worked with who feel like nobody listens to what they say. They experience a constant influx of different non-governmental organizations engaging in health communication work, she said, and these organizations come and go without making any lasting impact.

To solve that problem, Botta advocates for the participatory model of communication, focusing on understanding the community and empowering them to find solutions that work for themselves. “We are sending students into the real world with this theoretical knowledge, and they can help be that bridge between reality and best practices.”

On this idea of participatory work in health communication and translating that to the real world, Dr. Botta said “I’m constantly trying to figure out how to do this, how to get better at this. And that’s been really, really exciting.”