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VOLUME C, ISSUE II

SEPTEMBER 18, 2020

Teaching behind a mask

An inside look at high school and college classrooms

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Beyond the masks, six-foot distance and foggy glasses, the world of higher education has been witness to many changes in a short period of time.

New mandates have plagued campuses as new school years begin, with administration on standby awaiting a signal that may shut universities down once again.

These changes in the classroom come as no surprise to many Ashland University professors.

Dr. Robert Cyders, co-chair of the department of teacher education at AU, has witnessed many new learning tools being introduced to schools. He worked at the Ohio Department of Education for eight years as a member of the School Improvement Diagnostic Review team.

Students that graduated this past spring wanting to teach had to wait to take the teaching exams and were given a new license - a single year license. This allows recent graduates to teach, but they are required to take the exams as soon as the license expires.

Teaching in the Schar Building of Education has been modified to teach students how to adapt to new challenges in the school systems. Professors also had to adjust to teaching in a new format.

"There are some things that you can't achieve in online instruction," Cyders said. "I never realized how much I tried to read the body language of my students, until I found myself trying to figure out 'did they get this concept that I've been teaching, or do I need to keep on going?'"

The lack of face-to-face communication also has brought upon new challenges for educators.

"Personally, I need that interaction with my students... I rely on facial expressions. Now, I have to be more overt with my students to make sure they understand the concept," he said.

Cyders said that schools have a unique opportunity right now.

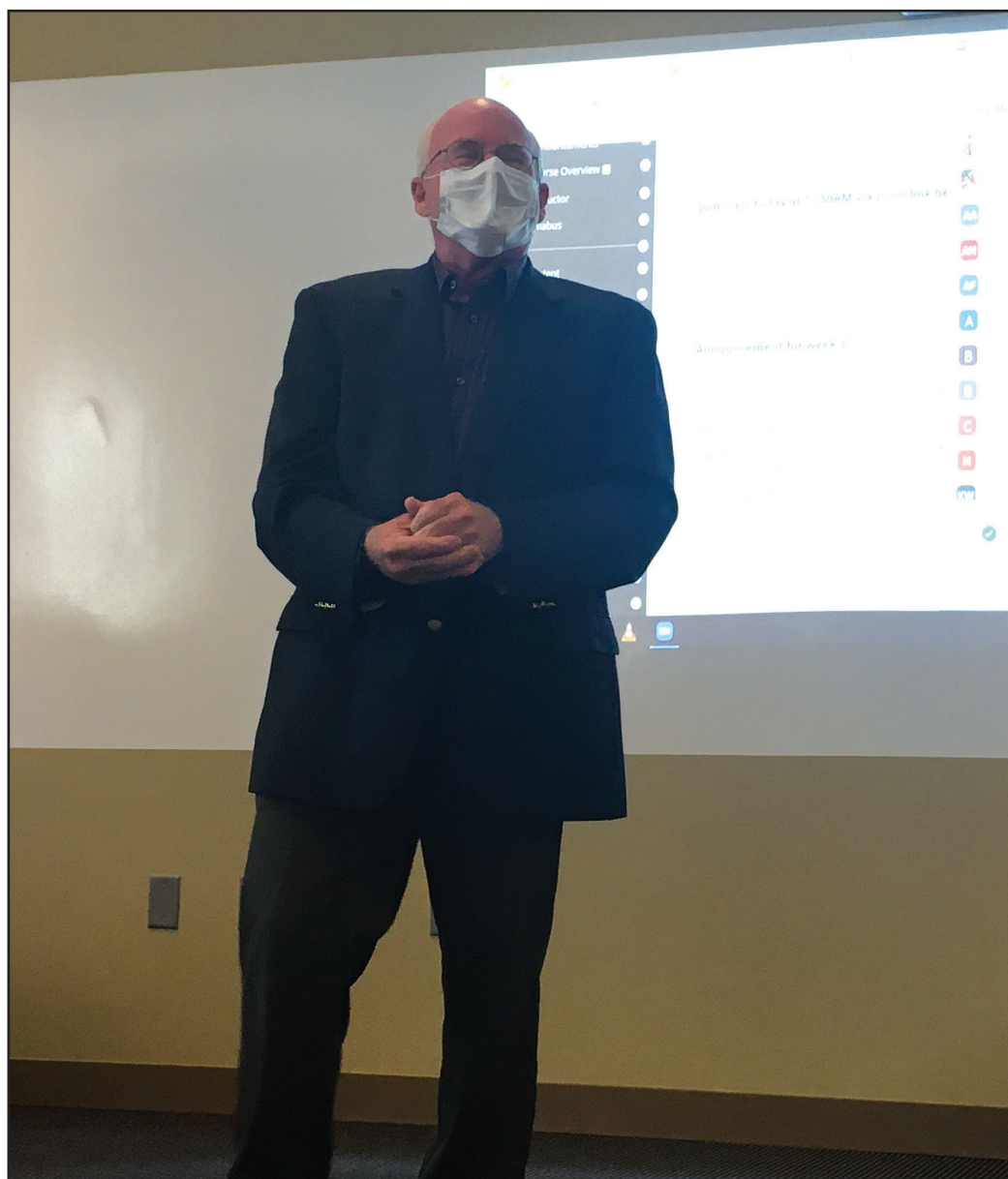
Education majors are now being encouraged by school districts to learn how to teach from an online format.

Educators are able to reshape how the learning format looks because they had the ability to test both online and in-person classes. Teachers are able to take the good parts of the two, and re-work those aspects into a new and improved format.

"The change has been good in that it has forced us to discover things about ourselves that we didn't think we knew," Cyders said.

Paul Hyman, chair of the biology and toxicology department, believes that the majors and minors within Kettering adapted well to a newer form of learning — online.

"Last semester I was teaching microbiology, which is a major



CHRISTINE JENKINSON

Dr. David Aune wearing a mask while teaching 'Understanding Islam' in Dauch 105.

lab course. There was no way," he said. "For the most part [last semester] I just abandoned the lab."

Luckily, the course was frontloaded, and most of the hands-on labs were done in the beginning before COVID-19 concerns struck the classrooms.

During spring break, the professors and students were informed they would not be going back to campus. Hyman said that the test scores were not as poor as he expected.

Most science-based classes were able to switch to hybrid classes with little issue.

Reuse of equipment is more of a contamination issue for classes like biology and chemistry, but professors of science have found ways to work around that and still maintain safe distancing.

One answer has been to split classes in half. This method means one portion of the class will meet in-person one day and the other will work online, and vice-versa.

Alternating face-to-face classes is showing to be a successful method of teaching for lab professors since no classroom can fit all the students while respecting social distancing.

"In one class we have several students who are virtual which I am co-teaching with another professor," Hyman said. "For my class, I've taken out one of the standard days in one class and replaced it with a narrated powerpoint. In some ways there are advantages to Zoom, scheduling is easier now because there's two different ways to do it - in-person and online."

These changes in class structure are happening in other areas on campus as well.

"I think what people are going to find is that they now have new tools and ways of doing things, some of them may incorporate them into teaching and others just won't like them at all."

But what does class look like outside of AU?

Back in March, high schools would have been filled with teenagers anxiously awaiting spring break crowding around textbooks and computer screens hurrying to finish final assignments before a

week of freedom.

Students leaned against teachers' desks, whispered secrets into each other's ears and shared drinks at lunch with friends. Then, the unthinkable happened.

A haunting feeling took over the empty desks and abandoned rooms while panic set in among the teachers.

According to Kelly Swearingen, English 9 and journalism teacher at Ashland High School, the teachers were left with a 16-hour notice to switch their entire in-person curriculum to an online format.

"I can't imagine being in that



AVAERIE FITZGERALD

Students in Adjunct professor Jim Hurguy's Digital Media Technology class communicate after being divided into two separate rooms of CFA to accommodate social-distancing rules.

position as a first year teacher," she said. "That would have been the most stressful experience."

With little to no training, these teachers adjusted to the virtual world in order to finish out the 2019-2020 school year.

However, there was more time for preparation this year. Teachers were given three weeks of professional development to help prepare them for the new circumstances.

Students who did not feel comfortable returning in person were given the option of taking classes online.

The teachers had to learn how to communicate and teach through online portals such as Google Classroom and Canvas while providing the same quality of learning as they would have during a normal year.

"I do appreciate that Ashland is trying to allow students to come to school and get an education, whether it is online or in person, because it is important and I'm glad the students that didn't feel comfortable coming to school at least have an option," Swearingen said.

Unfortunately, training did not prepare the teachers for the difficulty of communicating with a mask on.

"One thing I did not anticipate and was surprised to see though in these few days back is how difficult it was going to be to project while wearing a mask," she said. "I did not expect or anticipate that at all. When I get home my throat is a little more scratchy than it normally is and I almost feel like I'm losing my voice because I'm having to talk twice as loud."

In order to combat the spread of COVID, the schools have taken many precautions and made changes to provide a safer environment for learning.

The hallways and sidewalks have one way traffic patterns, masks are required along with six-foot social distancing, plexiglass was installed in classrooms and cafeterias, sanitizing is required after each class period, hand sanitizer mounts have been placed on walls and temperature checks are also required for the students.

Schedules have been changed from a typical seven period day to block scheduling in order to reduce the number of exchanges between classes.

Ashland High School is splitting lunch into two locations so students have more space to spread out.

These changes have proven to be a challenge for the staff and students, especially for Angela Spreng, Loudonville High School band director, whose way of instructing took careful planning.

During the initial lock-down in March, Spreng was facing the challenges of Zoom teaching.

"I do not like it," she said. "As a band teacher, it is very difficult to teach a kid how to play an instrument when you can't be right there next to them."

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