“Virtual Learning: Under Pressure and Outside Concerns”

By Dr. Barbara Settles

In my long and varied extension and college teaching career there has always been some technology to master and support: demonstrations, film strips, slides, movie projectors, overhead slides and projectors, computer assisted presentations, and many different approaches to library textbook use and availability. Copying and sharing were huge steps forward. I have always enjoyed the direct communication in a reasonably decent classroom.

I came to teach and counsel on zoom/canvas propelled by the emerging COVID 19 Pandemic.
Luckily, after my family relationships class was held at the library on March 10, 2020, I walked back to my classroom file cabinet and took everything home for the semester. The next day they told us we would not have classes, we could not come to our offices except by appointment, and that the schedule would be changed with the next two weeks as a break.

We had many different instructions and shifting deadlines and schedules for the calendar.  I had been teaching using PowerPoints so I adjusted them.  I had not used canvas or zoom. My friends, family, and colleagues provided support. The most difficult problem was that the university was having trouble deciding on the calendar. For both my classes I created 3 completely different syllabi during the brief 2 weeks we had to convert. The vast amount of detail that a platform like canvas cries out to have decided was challenging. The lost classes and the need to trim back expectations for both myself and the students was exhausting. Nonetheless with the amazing help of my son operating at University of Florida I got up and running. There were tech problems, but they could be managed. The department gave me some assistantship help after the break for chatting with the students and some tech support. Many students finished, and some graduated and those who were behind completed in the summer. It was a real save!

Soon it became clear that fall would also be online. Looking back at both last semester and the start of this one, I see some advantages and opportunities. When you start as online everyone is on the same page. Communication is improved because less is done by e-mail and record keeping is clear.

I realized that using the discussion function allowed more relaxed and interesting involvement of the classes. The odd feeling that comes from looking at someone and the camera showing you looking away for them is not important with the written discussion function. The availability of all the course materials on site and the announcement functions is helpful. Students were able to prepare talks and presentations that were professional and made them feel competent. The ready availability of the lectures, the PowerPoints, etc., meant making up class was possible and could be expected. Accommodations appear to be relatively available. One class had a real time note taker for hearing impaired students. For the graduate course, it was clear how much being online was helpful in their busy schedules, saving commuting and making arrangements. I have begun to use the IT services more often. I see a long term likelihood that online and class in person will exist together and may be simultaneously offered.