

## “Virtual”

By Silvia Colchens

It is March 2020, the beginning of COVID, and we received word that spring break would be extended by two days. A few days later we were told that the college would not reopen until the end of the semester. We were asked to convert our instruction into virtual format starting the Wednesday after spring break.

I was a chemistry instructor at a Community College and I knew next to nothing about virtual instruction.

During that same time, a family member passed away in Germany with a funeral scheduled three days later. Due to the just enforced lockdown, the service was done using ZOOM. Ironically, this was the first time in more than 30 years that I was able to attend a family gathering.

From that experience I understood that if ZOOM could bridge a gap over 5,000 miles, it would also work for virtual instruction. I spent spring break learning about technology using the devices and software that were available to me at home.

For the lectures I needed to use power points, annotate them with some sort of pen, and make eye contact with my students, all at the same time.

For the labs I needed a video camera to show molecules and experimental setups. My job was to provide at-home experiments that can be done with what is available, are safe, and leave no hazardous waste.

At times I would feel overwhelmed and frustrated if it were not for the weekly check-in with colleagues via ZOOM just to say Hi. We helped each other out with technology questions to keep our classes running smoothly.

I spent two years teaching virtually. There are many benefits for our students (e.g. less driving time, flexibility, recorded lecture, and on-the-go collaborations). I loved the pioneer spirit of the time. There was no guidance. There was no answer in the back of the book. Students and faculty had to figure it out in real time and became peers in the process.

As time went on, and COVID lingered far longer than expected, I began to feel stale. Despite the many advances we made in virtual instruction, each day felt more of the same. I also felt some sort of personal fatigue and understood that I needed a break from the long hours spent sitting in front of the computer. I took mini breaks for self-care, early morning walks, yoga, and started baking, a creative activity with goodies to share with family and friends.

I also missed the personal connection with my students that is present in on-campus labs and lectures. If someone asked me for a letter of recommendation, I would have a hard time describing that person's character, team work, work ethics and more, all of which are so important to being accepted into an advanced program of study, or hired by an employer.

I began to incorporate more open-ended questions, group discussion topics and end-of semester capstone projects, giving students and myself more opportunities to explore and interact, getting to know each other better.

Looking back, I am very grateful for the opportunity for virtual instruction during COVID times. What started out as an overwhelming technical project evolved into opportunities and also brought new instructional challenges.

Having learned valuable lessons, I hope to be able to make future contributions in digital storytelling about chemistry, people, and society.