

TOPcast Episode 15: It's More About the Social than the Media

TOM From the Center for Distributed Learning at the University of Central Florida, I'm Tom Cavanagh.

KELVIN And I'm Kelvin Thompson.

TOM And you are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast.

KELVIN That's awesome! Hi Tom.

TOM I'm listening to it, too.

KELVIN Me, too!

TOM At this very moment!

KELVIN That's cool! It's, like, so meta.

TOM *(laughter)* It is meta. That's right. We are both creating and consuming at the same time.

KELVIN That's nice. Speaking of consuming...

TOM I'm quite thirsty. I wish somebody had some beverage for me to drink.

KELVIN Well, I can take care of that right now.

TOM Oh my gosh! What are the odds?

KELVIN Pretty good.

TOM Kelvin has coffee!

KELVIN The odds are pretty good.

TOM Awesome! So, Kelvin just poured me some mystery coffee out of the *Toy Story* thermos.

KELVIN It's my backup thermos. That's totally right.

TOM I love it.

KELVIN That's exactly right.

TOM Tastes like my childhood.

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM It's coffee just like Grandma used to make.

KELVIN *(laughter)* Cowboy coffee.

TOM *(laughter)* All right.

KELVIN So, what's the deal with the coffee?

TOM Yeah. What's in the Woody and Buzz thermos today?

KELVIN *(laughter)* So, this is some coffee from Aruba.

TOM Aruba?!

KELVIN Aruba. So it's a Smit & Dorlas Koffie. I tend to call, like, Dutch coffee from Aruba, but, you know, here's the reason we're drinking this. The reason we're drinking this is our good friend and colleague Aaron Hose—

TOM Yes! My favorite Aruban!

KELVIN That's right. Our lead video producer and one of our producers on TOPcast. Wave to the people, Aaron. See? He's waving—oh, he didn't even wave. He's like, "They can't see me. If only you would do video."

TOM He is behind your back making a gesture.

KELVIN Yeah, again? Again with the gesture. So, Aaron actually on his last trip to Aruba brought back this Smit & Dorlas coffee. He said, "See what you think about this stuff."

TOM Cheers, Aaron. Thank you.

KELVIN There it is. So I thought that's a good thing because it's got this personal, social connection through Aaron, and we're going to talk about personal connections and social elements today, so, there you go.

TOM All right.

KELVIN You like the coffee?

TOM I like it. It is excellent.

KELVIN Mhmm.

TOM Tastes like the tropical island of Aruba.

KELVIN That's right.

TOM So: personal and social.

KELVIN That's right.

TOM Nothing says sitting around drinking coffee like personal and social.

KELVIN Or nothing says personal and social like coffee.

TOM Right.

KELVIN At least not to me, anyway.

TOM *(laughter)* And interestingly enough, a podcast is a medium. So we're talking about personal and social and media.

KELVIN Yeah, there you go!

TOM Hmm, when I think of social and media, there's really only one person I think of.

KELVIN Who is that, Tom?

TOM Tanya Joosten, our good friend!

KELVIN Awesome! There you go!

TOM Yeah!

KELVIN If only we had her here.

TOM *(laughter)* If only. So, let me do a little bit of set-up for the home audience who may not know Tanya. So, while online discussion boards, synchronous web conferencing, and even text chats are just a few of the long-standing LMS-based tools used to foster student interaction online, as you know, many online faculty also explore third-party interaction tools that can be integrated within the LMS or even outside of the LMS. So today, we're going to consider the place of social media in online education while drinking Aruban coffee.

KELVIN Might need more coffee for that.

TOM So, Kelvin.

KELVIN Yes?

TOM A couple months ago, you had the good fortune to interview our friend Tanya Joosten, who is Director of eLearning Research and Development at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and you did this during the 2015 Online Learning Consortium International Conference here in lovely Orlando, Florida.

KELVIN Indeed.

TOM So, Tanya co-leads the Center for Distance Education and Technological Advancements, also known as DETA, also occasionally pronounced as “data”.

KELVIN That’s right.

TOM But she’s also quite well-known as an advocate and practitioner of social media in education. She’s also the author of the book *Social Media for Educators: Strategies and Best Practices* and is probably the most active Twitter person I know.

KELVIN That’s true.

TOM The only tweetup I ever went to was organized by Tanya Joosten.

KELVIN Well, that’s saying something.

TOM Yeah. Yeah. Well, for her, it was probably one of three that day. For me, it was like, “Wow! I’m at a tweetup!”

KELVIN *(laughter)* “How did I get here?”

TOM Yeah!

KELVIN “And how do I get out of it?”

TOM No, it was great. She’s really an expert in this space.

KELVIN That’s true.

TOM Any comments on the interview before we press play?

KELVIN No, it’s a good interview. I enjoy talking to Tanya always. She’s a very bright, capable person. She’s kind of been one of my role models in the whole social media in education area. I love talking to Tanya about social media.

TOM All right. So, let’s go back in time, and let’s listen to your conversation with Tanya.

(music transition)

KELVIN Tanya, it’s great to have you join us for a TOPcast episode, and I think I’m particularly excited because, as you know, I dig the whole social media thing in education, and as long as I’ve known you, and I think even longer—as long as I’ve known *of* you—you’ve

been a bit of a social media maven, if you will, and you've quite literally written the book on the subject a couple years ago.

TANYA *(laughter)* I have.

KELVIN Maybe let me just start with that. How did you get into this whole social media thing? What drew you to this?

TANYA Yeah, it's really interesting. My background is in communication—specifically communication technology—so I've always been researching and teaching on communication technology and how that affects our lives. In particular, my research and teaching interests have focused more about communication technology and organizations, and communication technology and interpersonal relationships, and so it was really fun moving forward when social media started to become more popular—or previously, what we more prominently probably called social networking. I was just interested in how this new technology was helping us connect with our families and connect in our personal relationships and then how it was helping connect, you know, in our networks within organizations, and then obviously being in higher ed, I was very interested in not only how are students using this socially but then how does this impact my classroom? How does this change the way I teach? How does this change the way I connect with my students? And so, I'm always thinking about different communication technologies and how those technologies are affecting our communication processes and our different social processes, but then obviously in particular this became, you know, so popular. How are we using Facebook and Twitter and those sorts of things to connect with our students? Because these are the technologies that they were using outside of the classroom.

And so, I actually had different organizations reach out to me. So, Educause had reached out to me and asked me to facilitate a discussion on social networking, and at the time, I wasn't officially using it in my classroom. I had done some research with my students to understand a little bit about what social media they were using, how they were using the social media, whether or not in what ways, too, that we could use social media in the classroom, and this actually resulted in *The Chronicle* article, "Teens Don't Tweet". I think that was in 2009, because, yes, the teens and the folks who were in college at the time were not necessarily using Twitter. It didn't mean as a communication technology that it didn't have the characteristics that could potentially increase learning in the classroom and the connection that I had with my students.

So Educause had asked me to give a talk, and we had all come together—a bunch of us—in a room—I think we were in Denver—talking about using social networking. It was really interesting. We all were able to sort of identify the characteristics of social media and how we can use that, too, in our classrooms to connect with our students, how we could use it to help our students gain new literacy skills and so forth, but nobody actually was using any social media in their classroom—any of the new social media.

Now, folks know from my book that I will argue social media has sort of been around for decades, even when you go back to the 60s and 70s in telecommunications, we talk about AOL or early blogging and those sorts of things, so, social media per say is not

new. You know, media is just mediums in which we communicate. And so, although we have these new, fun PR spin terms like social networking and social media, I was really like, “How can we use the new tools that our students are already familiar using to connect with them?”

So I felt like we needed to start doing some pilots. We needed to start actually testing these in the classroom, understanding how we can take, you know, advantage of these media characteristics to overcome some of the challenges we were having in the classroom, and I know for me, I was teaching fully online and staying connected with my students—having that presence with my students that I have in my face-to-face class—is always a challenge, as I’m sure it is for every online instructor. You know, how do we stay connected? How do you know I’m a human? How can we have that rich and authentic communication that we have in the face-to-face environment?

And so, we started piloting at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2010, I think it was? Yeah. Just a very small pilot. A few of my fellow colleagues and I had identified some—what we thought were— pedagogically sound ways to use Facebook and Twitter in the classroom to better connect with our students. Some research I had done had shown me actually that students really wanted frequent communication with their instructors. Not one student said they did not need frequent communication with their instructor to learn. It is interesting that some of them felt they didn’t need quality communication. There was a few of those. But, you know, the students weren’t necessarily showing up for my virtual office hours, and they weren’t always responding to emails, and I feel a few of them were drifting off into cyberspace, and I really wanted to connect with those students to make sure they were engaged in the class. And so, then we found from the use of a Facebook fan page and through Twitter that that was able to happen. The students loved it. You know, we had 97% mutual strongly agree satisfaction with using social media in these ways in the classroom. And so, that’s sort of the birth of it. That’s sort of where it all started.

And the book came because I actually went to Wiley Publishing and said, “Hey. Do you have a book on this? Because I want to know more.” And they didn’t. (*laughter*) And so then we started talking about maybe there needs to be a book on this, and, you know, what information can we provide to other instructors across the country—and across the world—to understand how we can take advantage of these new communication technologies to meet our pedagogical goals in our classroom.

KELVIN So, I can imagine the answer to this question, but I’ll ask it anyway.

TANYA Okay. (*laughter*)

KELVIN What kind of reactions have you received from other teaching faculty? And I can imagine that those would kind of bifurcate a little bit, but either in response to when you’ve presented or done workshops or in response to the book or even if you’re just engaging in dialogue and the topic comes up and they don’t really know a whole lot about, you know, your background in this and you put it up, what kind of reactions are you getting from just the general teaching faculty?

TANYA

Yeah. I think... So, there's a, you know—quickly, if I could categorize the reactions—I think there's the people that are like me and like you that we can see the affordances of these different social media and communication technologies in helping us enhance our classrooms. So, a lot of people come to my workshops or my presentations or my talks, and it's like, "I get it. I know that this could really help my students learn more. It can help me be more connected with my students and all of that good stuff." And they're very enthusiastic. We do have some folks that come very hesitant: "Why would I use this social technology in my classroom? This is a social technology. This is students' personal life." And it tends to come more from folks and from teaching faculty who have not—or don't—have a really true authentic experience in social media. Like, they haven't tried it themselves too much. They haven't gotten on Twitter or social media. They're not blogging. So they don't really understand, one, the characteristics of the technology yet, or do they understand, you know, the behavior and the unintended positive consequences that you can have from using technology. So, that's one of the first things that I always encourage folks to do is get in and use it. Try it out. You know, I step into these things very hesitant. I went into Twitter and left, and then I went into Twitter again and I left, and I was thinking, "What is this?" I didn't get it at all. It took me a very long time and some great mentors—like Shannon Ritter from Penn State—to really guide my use of it and understand the benefits of it. Now I think Twitter is, like, the most amazing thing ever because I can connect with professional colleagues all over the world and have discussions about topics at a national and global level that, you know, I could never do within my institution.

I think then we do have other folks that come from very much the dystopian view that, you know, "Technology is not necessarily a good thing, and maybe we shouldn't be using it in the classroom." And always in those views, I'm a very data-driven person. I'm very focused on research. And I'm sort of like, "Well, when you look at the research, this is really something we need to be taking seriously. This is increasing student satisfaction. It's greatly increasing their perceptions of their performance in the classroom and their actual student success." And so, when we look at the data from, you know, semesters before when we didn't use social media to semesters when we did use social media, we're seeing statistically significant increases in student performance based on grades or student success—whatever you want to call it. You know, the survey research designs that we've implemented show students' satisfaction and their perceptions of learning and the perception of performance are super high, and obviously those models that we've built are because social media allows us to increase the student interactivity, not only student to student but student to instructor. And that's helping us improve student outcomes. So, how can you look at the data and say, "No, I'm not interested in this"? So, yeah.

KELVIN

I'm assuming that, like me, you sometimes run across the mindset—and I guess from faculty colleagues as well as administrative colleagues that it's, I guess, what some of us would maybe pejoratively refer to as the "walled garden" mindset. Right? "Well, it should be institutionally supported and authenticate login, the LMS. All that kind of stuff. And the social media, social networking, web 2.0—whatever kind of buzz word you want to put around it—is all kind of outside or semipermeable within." What kind of pushback

have you seen there? And what kind of constructive dialogues have you had as you had that engagement?

TANYA You know, that's so interesting in, you know, we all talk about this a lot: this whole shift in higher education with technology. You know, traditionally, we're so... So in online learning, when I think of online learning in the 90s, it was, you know, professors and faculty developing courses on websites that they created: out in the open, out in the public, and using email as primary discussion and email lists as the primary interactivity tool that we would use. And I actually... Communication technology was—of course, in the mid-90s that I took at UWM—online that was built this way, and I thought this is so amazing that we can learn this way. And I felt like I learned so much more than sort of sitting in the classroom. And then we had this shift where the institutions wanted to control everything. We started having enterprise technology systems put everything in an LMS. You know, "We're going to administer it. We're going to make things secure." And I think we're seeing the shift now in society where we're going back to this whole openness movement. So, I want people to see what we're doing. I want everyone to see our work, what advantage this is for students to learn how to use social tools that they're potentially going to be using in their future professions, to understand how to critically select those tools, to understand the characteristics of those tools, and how they're going to facilitate their professional processes. I mean, they're building these 21st century literacy skills, understanding their digital identity and how that is perceived by so many people professionally and beyond. So, these are things that it's not a question of we can't have the wall anymore that keeps students out of these because these are the technologies they are using in their organizations. And we're just seeing a shift in technology altogether. These are not just technologies that are enterprise technologies owned by a post-secondary or higher ed institution or by a corporation. Corporations in and of themselves are learning that we have to use these off-the-shelf, you know, technologies to connect with our clients, our customers, to do business better and more efficiently, and it's just a shift in the whole technology paradigm in our country and how we consume technology. And so, those are things that we need to prepare our students for.

KELVIN That's excellent. Good insight. As we wrap this conversation up, I'm struck by, again whatever buzz phrase we want to use—social media, social networking—social is there, right? And so many of us have been around. We use terms like social constructivism, social learning theory, and so forth. The social part. And there's certainly a trend right now—personalized learning, adaptive learning—and the accent is on the individual, which, you know, is great in so many ways in terms of flexibility and so forth, but I wonder from where you sit, because you're... Clearly, communication—which would imply at least two parties—is really a part of the mix, so I'm curious: how do you see this all playing out? What do you think the role of the social is versus the personalization? Can these coexist? Are we looking at a fork in the road? How does this play out in your view?

TANYA Yeah, I think it's so connected. I mean, obviously, I'm a social scientist so I have a certain view when I come to my practice—whether that be research or teaching—and I

think it's all really connected, and I think if you look at the research starting in the late 60s and the 70s and the 80s and coming forward, we... This is exactly where we're supposed to be, and personalization is really focused more on the social. We talk about personalization. A piece of it that we tend to forget—and in to adaptive fits into that as well, adaptive learning—but it's about students being able to get what they want when they want it. They want to receive communication. They want to receive content. They want to receive feedback at a pace that they want to be able to control. So, we need to come up with customized pathways that provide this to students. We need students to be getting information on what they need to be learning, receiving information on how they're learning—good or bad—so that they can make improvements in that and actually move forward. And so, I think that the personalization is really the fact that we are actually developing a social system for students in which to learn that they can have more control of. And so, I think that's very indicative of how we're seeing this transformation of technology in our country. Because it's not “I own it. I control it. You only have this set number of characteristics or functions.” Now there's millions of apps and millions of social technologies, and what we're seeing in the classroom is that students are understanding, “If my life in general can be this way, why can't my education be this way?” And rightly so, that is what the research has been telling us for decades that it needs to be. We need to connect students with other students, with the instructor. We need to be providing them timely feedback on what they're learning and what they're not learning so that they can make adjustments. We need to think about how they consume information and in what ways we should be designing the information for them to consume in a way that it's affecting their cognitive, their behavioral, and their effective domains.

KELVIN That's awesome. Thanks so much for taking the time to share your insights with us and for joining us for a TOPcast episode.

TANYA Yeah, thanks for having me.

(music transition)

TOM So that was great, Kelvin. I always enjoy listening to Tanya, and I was always learn something whenever—

KELVIN And occasionally me.

TOM You, yes. *(laughter)* I always enjoy listening to you as well, but I can do that anytime.

KELVIN And the less the better. *(laughter)*

TOM *(laughter)* Well, I want to personally thank Tanya for talking to you. Thanks for putting up with Kelvin, Tanya.

KELVIN And that's no small thing. That's no small thing.

TOM There were some things that you guys talked about that I thought were really interesting. Maybe one of them? Maybe I'll mention two. One was that the whole idea of social media is perhaps more about the social than the media, which I think makes a lot of sense. And then you both also talked about this idea of the "walled garden", of the learning management system being kind of an enclosed black box where all of the different interactions happen, but what I've found is that that isn't really the case anymore, and at least our experience here is that, you know, our LMS allows us to push notifications out to students according to their preferences into whatever social medium works for them—whether it's text or some social media application or whatever. It's taking the educational experience to where the students live. And you don't lose them, you engage them on the platform or through the medium that most works for them. I think that's all good.

KELVIN The other thing that... I think that's right. I think, you know—we've talked about this in another one of our episodes—about the, kind of, the evolving role of the LMS and how it has become more flexible over time, more open over time. It wasn't always like that, right? And it was more of a... Now it's maybe of—I might be stretching it to call it—a semipermeable membrane, but it was certainly more hard and fast before. So whether we're talking about widgeting in or LTI-ing in or something, there's certainly more options for connecting with the outside world formally in both ways: sending messages out to students, bringing content in to students, and so forth. So I think that's kind of a good place to be now, so, you're right. It's not a bad, evil black box anymore.

TOM No, and I feel like we've finally progressed past the point where we were a few years ago where I felt like I was in a lot of meetings with different people talking about, "What is our social media policy?" Or various webinars like, "Should students be allowed to use Facebook? What are the legal ramifications?" And I don't hear those so much anymore. It's so ubiquitous. You cannot... Control is an illusion, right? And how can you use it to enhance the experience and improve student success and all those other things? Instead of trying to figure out "What are the risks?", mitigate them as best you can, but ultimately you're not going to be able to stop students from using social media, so let's ride the wave on the surfboard the best we can.

KELVIN Yeah, so I guess, here's a question. Do you think that social media is for everyone in online education?

TOM Well, no. *(laughter)* I think it's for most people, and I think it's really hard to find somebody—especially somebody involved in online education either as an instructor or as a student—who doesn't have a social media presence, but, you know, there are exceptions. There are some faculty who just don't like it, who do like control. There are some students who may have very legitimate reasons for not being on social media. You know, I've got friends and relatives who are police officers who are not on social media, and I've had students who have said, "I can't be on this because I've got an ex-husband who's stalking me" or whatever. So, you know, I get it. And you have to think about all

of those scenarios, and those are legitimate, but for the most part if we're talking generalities, yeah, I think that social media is a really effective channel for engaging students.

KELVIN Yeah. I think that's right. Of course, I will give a shout out to, as you said, think things through: don't do dumb stuff with social media. There's a lot of things that you can do naively and dumbly that would be missteps, and you know, hey, read Tanya's book.

TOM Yeah!

KELVIN And engage! This is one of those areas where you've got to practice it a little bit yourself to understand it the most. So, I would never advocate for somebody to just start "doing social media" in your teaching and learning without having an engage of the, like, your own discourse community first.

TOM And at the risk of speaking for Tanya—which I would be very hesitant to do—but I would say hey, buy her book, and if you see her at a conference, she'd be happy to sign it for you.

KELVIN *(laughter)* For a nominal fee.

TOM No! I bet she'd sign it for free.

KELVIN Or a glass of wine.

TOM Or a glass of wine, yeah.

KELVIN She would probably do that. That's right. And on that note... So, I like what you said about the interaction part, and it's more about the social than the media and highlighting that, so interaction is... That's a perennial thing in online education, and so, that's something we should always be in pursuit of, and maybe—for a lot of people, as you say—social media is one way to foster that interaction. Is that fair?

TOM That is fair. I think that's probably a great place to wrap it up.

KELVIN Awesome.

TOM So, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

KELVIN I'm Kelvin.

TOM See you online.