TOPcast Episode 21 – Accessibility: It's a Journey, Not a Destination

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

KELVIN   I'm Kelvin Thompson.

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

KELVIN   Hey Tom.

TOM   How are things today?

KELVIN   They're zenerific.

TOM   Zenerific? That's awesome. So, if you're new to TOPcast, you may not realize what you're in for.

KELVIN   *(laughter)* Oh boy. Buckle your seatbelts!

TOM   Buckle your seatbelts because you are in the presence of a true coffee expert.

KELVIN   Aww man…

TOM   And every episode, Kelvin shares a thematically selected cup of java, and I'm sure today is no exception.

KELVIN   Uh huh. That's true. It is thematically selected.

TOM   So, Kelvin, what's in the thermos?

KELVIN   Well, so today, Tom, we have a very carefully chosen coffee that I go back to again and again and again. I actually like this. It's got a nice taste to it, but it might be surprising to you and our listeners. So, this coffee, Tom, is—ready for this?

TOM   Ready.

KELVIN   Dunkin' Donuts.

TOM   Love Dunkin' Donuts coffee.

KELVIN   *(laughter)* So here's why. Here's why. So, I actually do like Dunkin' Donuts a lot. For a coffee that's already brewed for you and you go through the drive thru, it's actually a good cup of coffee, but you can find Dunkin' Donuts many, many places. Just like, I think, they're sort of—in some places—competitors with Starbucks. It's like, "Are you a Starbucks person or a Dunkin' Donuts person?" But, you know, you can find them everywhere, but also, it's very easy to get that cup of coffee whether you are driving up in the drive thru, whether you go into the store, whether you're stepping up out of the car, whether you're cruising up on your bike, whether you're in a chair and you got to go up a curb cut, whatever, it's easy to get into Dunkin' Donuts and get a cup of coffee.

TOM	Yeah.
KELVIN	It's very accessible coffee.
TOM	I pass three of them on taking my son to school in the morning. Literally, I pass three of them.
KELVIN	You should stop and have a cup of coffee sometime.
TOM	I should.
KELVIN	Maybe a donut.
TOM	*(laughter)* I probably would. I like it. I have had it before, and I like it.
KELVIN	That's right. Still good. So, I don't know if you can see a connection, because you know what we're talking about today, Tom.
TOM	I do.
KELVIN	What are we talking about?
TOM	It is easy to find and access a Dunkin' Donuts cup of coffee.
KELVIN	It's true.
TOM	So, we are talking about, not access, but accessibility.
KELVIN	Accessibility. We have talked about access in the iron triangle.
TOM	We have talked about the iron triangle, and that is one of the bars of the iron triangle, which is access, and I guess this is sort of a facet of that. I think that the spirit of that is really more about access to education kind of written large, but, you know, a piece of that—a facet of that—is access for a population of students who have, in many cases in the past, been disenfranchised or whom haven't had the ability to access education because of physical or learning or other disabilities. So, we're talking about accessibility in that sense for students who need an accommodation.
KELVIN	Yup. That is absolutely true. [Tom], you don't need to be told this but our listeners might not know that we are way passionate about this here.
TOM	*(laughter)* We are. Yeah.
KELVIN	It is very much a thing, as I'm sure it is in many, many places. I do find myself a little bit saddened sometimes when I have conversations with colleagues where the tone of the

conversation is one of compliance. Like, "Oh man. We're going to get sued." [They have] fear or something. We really undertake this because we see this as part of the job as online education professionals. We've got to be concerned about accessibility.

TOM   Right. Yeah, I totally agree. We've got a number of staff on the team here at the Center for Distributed Learning.

KELVIN   World class folks.

TOM   Yeah, they really care about this stuff and have become something of nationally recognized experts in it—doing webinars and keynotes and other kinds of outreach—and I have personally learned a lot from them.

KELVIN   Yes.

TOM   And yes, it I think that the proper place to start, as you say, is this is the right thing to do for students.

KELVIN   Yes.

TOM   And if you do the right thing for students then hopefully all of those compliance and legal things kind of fall into place.

KELVIN   That's right. No guarantees.

TOM   No.

KELVIN   We're not offering legal advice. *(laughter)*

TOM   No, we're not. Caveat. Yes, disclaimer. Fine print. Yeah. So, whatever we say, keep in mind that if you're listening to this: one, neither one of us is a lawyer or a compliance expert. We're just a couple of dudes who—

KELVIN   Are drinking a cup of coffee!

TOM   Are drinking a cup of coffee and trying to do the right thing. And, two, at some point—I don't know at what point you're listening to this—it could be that laws, rules, and things have changed.

KELVIN   That's right.

TOM   Things change all the time, and so it may be something's changed, so, you know... Look up the latest information before you take any action. But I guess that the plan for today is to just talk a little bit about what we do here.

KELVIN   Yes.

TOM   Not that it is perfect. Not that it's the model, but it's something that we've taken a few years to develop.

KELVIN   Yes, and continue to work at.

TOM   And continue to work, and it's still evolving, but it's working a lot better now than it was in the past.

KELVIN   Yeah.

TOM   And that is not to say that there isn't great work being done elsewhere.

KELVIN   Because there indeed is. We talk to colleagues all over the place and [say], "Oh! That's great. That's a great idea. That's a great tool. That's a great committee structure. That's a great workflow process." Whatever. Things we can learn from.

TOM   Absolutely, and we do. So, we are aware that other schools are doing some amazing things in this space, and we learn from them every day. I think the limitations of the time that we've self-imposed on ourselves for an episode precludes us being able to kind of explore all of those in detail. Maybe we will in the future, but right now, we were just going to talk a little personally about what we do here at UCF and see if maybe that has some benefit for others.

KELVIN   And I guess what maybe has the broadest applicability—maybe I'll start with this—is to say that we'll share an organizing framework that we come back to again and again as we do our work related to accessibility here, and that—if you're listening—maybe you'll find this framework applicable and then, as we talk about the specific tools, concepts, and processes—maybe your context will vary a little bit—maybe the model itself will be useful. So, I'll throw this out there. It's what, you know, I like to call the Parthenon, right? So, we started really revitalizing our…We've been working on accessibility for as long as I've been here—18 years at UCF—but a few years ago, we really [felt] like, "Okay! Let's tighten up our belt, and let's really make sure that we're working on some stuff." [Tom,] you were involved in some cross-institutional efforts. "Okay. What are we doing?" And as I got really more directly involved, I laid out—this is how simple I am— this simple, rudimentary, childlike drawing/model [with] just three columns and an overarching roof, if you can kind of see this—we'll put a link to it in the show notes— and a floor. So, there's like a roof, a floor, and three columns, so I call it the Parthenon because that's about as much of a Parthenon as I can draw, and it's like, well, accessibility is a lot of things. A lot of people just go with basic compliance, and so, certainly dealing with accommodations—right here and right now—the immediate accommodation needs for a particular student in a particular course in a particular semester? That's a thing, but that's not the whole thing. As all good instructional designers, we know that Universal Design for Learning principles. That's a thing, and for

years, we've woven that into the fabric of our faculty development programs: UDL. Right? So, that's important, but then—we've seen this a lot—kind of the middle column is, "Yeah, you did a good job designing that online course with UDL in mind at the beginning, but things happen over time." You know? "Oooh, let me add that video in" and "Oooh, here's a cool graphic" or "Oooh, let me just make this—" and things sprawl, and maybe it's not quite what you wanted it to be back at the beginning and so, how do you bridge the gap between what your good intentions are and what everybody needs before you actually have a student registered with your Student Accessibility Services office—or whatever you call it at your institution—is enrolled in a course. So, we have our accommodations pillar, our UDL pillar, and what we call our proactive pillar, and all of that is accessibility.

TOM   So, let me jump in a little bit, too.

KELVIN   Please do!

TOM   I remember drawing some of this on the whiteboard, too, back in the day.

KELVIN   We haven't gotten to the part that you added in there, too, which I think is very important.

TOM   Some of the thinking—Well, I agree with everything you say, and I think we are trying to do some of that. I think there's another layer, too, that I had in my mind when I was conceptualizing some of this back then. So, we have—and some of it was driven out of just, you know…We all like not sharing this with everybody.

KELVIN   Yeah, let's just keep it just between us.

TOM   Just between us.

KELVIN   *(laughter)*

TOM   So, a few years ago, we had a bit of a crisis. There was a course that needed to be accommodated. We had a student in there, and there was some content in the course that was not accessible.

KELVIN   Just that one.

TOM   Yeah, just one. Well, there was one that made it to the provost's office, so let's just say that. And so, we had to kind of scramble and do what we needed to do—which we did—and it was a bit of a fire drill, and it forced us to take a step back and say, "Okay"—and not just us as the Center for Distributed Learning or Student Accessibility office, but sort of as an institution—and say, "What do we really need?"
        We ended up, after that, hiring a new position and a leadership position in the Student Accessibility office, and all of that was good. We learned from it, and we corrected, but

that was the immediate need. The fire drill. And then…Okay, so that course is done. But what about the next course that the student has to take? So, in addition to trying to have some foresight into the content and how to make that accessible, there's also [the question of] what are the next three courses the student has to take? Can we get out ahead of that? I know students. Just because they need accommodation doesn't mean they don't behave like students. They change their minds, and they drop classes and everything else, but you can at least have a path that you can start working on, and then of course the ideal is the UDL (Universal Design for Learning) and try to build all that into the process, because it gets so much more expensive the closer you get to that fire drill—that immediate need—that, for the same amount of effort, you could have built it in at the front. Maybe for less effort and less expense and a lot less stress on everybody.

KELVIN   Yeah, and that's all exactly right, and that gets to what I call the floor in the Parthenon, which is really your floor. So, you might talk about that a little bit. Our faculty centric versus services centric kind of dimension to this.

TOM   Yeah, so if we look at the far-right side of this Parthenon where it's the immediate need, that fire drill, that "Oh my gosh. I just got a letter. I've got a student in my class, and I need to have my videos captioned" or something. It's not the faculty member that's going to be doing that.

KELVIN   Yeah.

TOM   It's the central support unit that's going to be doing that. So, we end up dropping everything and captioning or working with somebody to caption it, and it becomes a very centralized support, services-centric kind of solution, but the further left you move on that Parthenon, the more it becomes—because our model is faculty build their courses with our support— it becomes more faculty mindset, faculty-driven, faculty-centric, as it says on the chart, kind of an effort, so building in Universal Design practices into your course is just a good thing to do.

KELVIN   Yeah.

TOM   And it's something that faculty can do without a whole lot of help from us except in certain technical situations. So, if they want captions in their course, great. Give us a couple of weeks. We can do it. Don't come in and say, "I need this by Thursday or else I'm going to be out of compliance."

KELVIN   That's right. No, and I think that's a very important dimension to add in, but—Okay, so, here's where I play devil's advocate for a second, because I think this is a challenge. Because that makes total sense, right? That it makes sense to be more strategic, to be more UDL-oriented, to periodically try to be proactive and so forth, to move towards before being right there, as you say, in the house is on fire. That's the reason the fire drill was pulled, because there's actual flames. You know, things are *(scream)*. Those accommodation things are going on and people are running around frantically. It makes

sense to be more strategic and be more UDL, but if I'm a faculty member teaching a course, perhaps it's more strategic for me to go, "Hmmm. So, what you're saying is…"

TOM   *(laughter)* "I just have to wait until I'm out of compliance."

KELVIN *(laughter)* There it is!

TOM   Yeah. Well, I don't ascribe that sort of nefarious cleverness to our faculty. I think most faculty want to do the right thing. 99.9% of them. I don't see anybody…Frankly, I'll just say this. I'm not worried about that problem. We've got a good relationship with our faculty. They want to do the right thing, and it's a question of informing them ahead of time so they understand, because sometimes if they haven't encountered this, it's just new.

KELVIN It's absolutely right.

TOM   And the other thing is trying to make it easy for them. So, I think a bigger risk is—and unfortunately I've seen this—it's like, "Alright, I'm just going to take the videos out of my course."

KELVIN Yes.

TOM   That's not good!

KELVIN So, unpack that for a second. What's that thought process?

TOM   It's a sort of path of least resistance. "I don't have time to make these accommodations in this piece of media"—or whatever it is—"and I know I have to have equal for everybody, so I'm just going to take it out for everybody."

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM   And that, I think, does a disservice to everybody. It does a disservice to the quality of the course, and what I'd rather have is a proactive relationship with the faculty so that we don't have to have that kind of a decision, so that we can be building in good practices from the beginning. Start talking to us at the beginning of the semester, the semester before you deliver the course. We have plenty of time that we can help, you know, give you the support that you need, whatever it might be. Whether it's developing a different kind of assessment or coming up with captions or whatever it is, because we've kind of seen it all, and I think most of the faculty—once you kind of have that conversation with them—they're totally on board.

KELVIN Yeah, I think you make an excellent point there, and I think you're right. That's the reason that we've [added] in UDL principles into our faculty development is to bring up that baseline awareness to make sure that people know what the issues are. I'll throw this

little factoid in. You know, we try to be data-based in our decision-making around here, and through—I should give a shout out. We've talked about our world class instructional designers who focus on this. Our UCF colleagues Kathleen Bastedo, Nancy Swenson, John Raible, in particular. John worked with one of our developers [to help build] what we call our executive information system to actually pull institutional data and in general—the EIS, as we call it— aggregates institutional data and allows us to see patterns and make decisions related to online education.

TOM   I look at it almost every day.

KELVIN   It's great. It's full of charts and graphs. It's great, but John worked with one of our developers, Brandon Stull, to pull in what we've got—and it's not always the best data—related to accommodations, accessibility, and so forth, and so—This is attention-getting. You ready? We'll put something like this in the show notes. So, like you said, well, from that individual faculty "Oh this doesn't affect me" or "It's not going to affect me", "Let me roll the dice" kind of thing, that could be a mindset. "If I'm not aware of what the issue is…" This is attention-getting. So—I think this is from a recent semester if I remember correctly—the number is something like two or three percent of our complete student body are registered with the office of Student Accessibility Services. You know, we're a big institution. Two or three percent: that's still a lot of students. But, it's not 90%, right? And so, you can go, "Eh. Two or three percent? No big deal." It's still a big deal for those individuals, right? And we should comment that what we see in the literature—if you're following this thread—is that we know that many students who have disabilities of some sort do not register with such offices for various reasons. They don't want to self-disclose. So, that's an issue, too. But two or three percent? Eh. Well, what we've found pulling these data in with these charts is…Yeah, but if you look at the course sections across the institution, it's a big number. It's more like 40% of course sections in a given semester are touched by those students. So, two or three percent of students? Eh. But 40% of your course sections and something like 60% of faculty at the institution are teaching courses that include students who legally need these accommodations. So, it's in all of our best interest to give that dear point to do this right from the beginning and serve everybody well.

TOM   Yeah, that particular report in the EIS—the executive information system—is, I think, especially impressive. It pulls in data sources from three different university systems and aggregates it into one place, and it displays a listing of all the faculty—it protects student identity. There's no identifying information there—it brings in the faculty and each section they teach and the number of accommodations and the type of accommodations, and you can sort it by the term, by the modality. So, we are kind of responsible for online and blended courses here. We could sort it just for those and see what's coming up next term, and get in touch with those faculty and say, "Look, you've got these accommodations coming up. Let's look at your course." And, it's been really great in allowing us to do that middle pillar—the proactive needs. Then, if I think about the far-left pillar—the Universal Design for Learning—it's really important to enforce some standards, and faculty aren't always thrilled with that. So—I'll give one example—if we

produce a video for a faculty member, we generally require—I'll put that in air quotes so our podcast audience can see them—

KELVIN   I heard them.

TOM   We generally require that they come in with a script or a transcript…and this is something that's happened in the past. We have now got the ability to help them with that, but at the time, we didn't. It's a lot of work, especially if you're used to talking extemporaneously. We record somebody who's just kind of doing a mini-lecture, a ten-minute lecture, or something. It's hard to go back and caption that or transcript it, and we had a particular faculty member—I think it was a speech class—and she didn't want to do it, and I can totally understand why, because it's a lot of work. It wasn't that she didn't want to philosophically, she just was busy. And, she did, at great effort, we put the captions on the videos, and the very next semester, she had somebody who needed that exact accommodation. She became a believer from that point forward.

KELVIN   Yeah, it's like, "Wow! It affects me!"

TOM   Exactly! Because she recognized that she would have never been able to get those done in time to support that student had we not been proactive about it ahead of time. So, I think that was sort of a win-win, and it's an anecdote we can share with other faculty because it's a real story and it's something that they could face, as well.

KELVIN   Now, we've talked a lot about UDL and proactive, but to follow up on that: the actual immediate needs of accommodations in a particular term. We've worked really closely with our Student Accessibility Services office, and we've articulated a workflow with them for our online and blended courses at the institution. They have their own workflow for "traditional" face-to-face courses, but we work at that constantly. We're in constant contact, and we have a member of our staff who [runs] the existing process of, "Hey! You're going to teach a course next semester, and there's a student who needs an accommodation, and this is the kind of accommodation that they need!" We reach out and offer to help and make some recommendations and so forth and try to broker that and work up a punch list of what needs to happen. Back to your fire analogy, right? If it's "Woah! Pull out the fire hoses!" It's much better if we're not at that point, but we do that.

TOM   Well, I think we've got a really good partnership with that office, and it's a true partnership.

KELVIN   It is.

TOM   It's two ways, and it works great. Their scope is bigger than just online courses, but online courses—because of their nature—have a particular kind of accommodation set of issues that have to be addressed, and you chair/convene what you call the Big Picture Accessibility Group periodically. You want to say a few words about that?

KELVIN   Sure! What we've found is—Because we do take this seriously, I think this is a good success story. Culturally, we take this so seriously, we found there's just a lot of stuff going on and to bring this organizing framework that we call the Parthenon under the umbrella or the roof of accessibility, there are three pillars we talked about. It gave us a way to [say,] "Hey let's all find out what we're doing individually and make sure that we're all pointed in the same direction." Certainly, we didn't expect to be working across purposes, but "Let's not duplicate effort, and let's look for what's missing right now." So, I think early on, of course, we're always going to need to continue to improve on the accommodations part and make that as efficient as possible and all.

TOM   There are some handoffs between the offices.

KELVIN   There are! That's right, and how can we improve that? Maybe there's more we can do on the proactive part. How do we facilitate that and encourage that? Maybe there's more that we can do in the UDL part. Maybe we can make it easier for faculty to do things themselves, and so, we've gotten to things like just a concrete thing. Our team of developers put together this LTI—Learning Tools Interoperability standard—in our learning management system that we call UDOIT, which is an accessibility checker.

TOM   Yeah, it's awesome. If you happen to be using the Canvas learning management system, there's no reason why you shouldn't be using UDOIT.

KELVIN   It's free!

TOM   It's free. It's available on GitHub. Maybe we'll put a link. It's really great. It's been adopted by a number of other schools and systems, and maybe even we could put a link to the—if it's still out there—the session that Jacob Bates did at InstructureCon. I think that's worth watching. It's not very long.

KELVIN   Yeah, the UDOIT daddy, Jacob Bates. That's just one case of many. So, we find that we need to get together like once a semester and [say], "Okay, let's make sure we're all on the same page. Where's there an opportunity to work with each other? How do we better communicate to our constituents?" And so forth. I guess…A couple things. One, you're never done. *(laughter)*

TOM   Yes, that is true.

KELVIN   And two—and I haven't said this. I usually can't talk about accessibility for five minutes without mentioning this, because our folks get tired of me saying this, and this may be controversial sounding, but here you go, Tom. You ready?

TOM   Ready.

KELVIN   There's no such thing as 100% accessible.

TOM   Well, I think that's true. I think that's a goal, and you strive for that, but it's hard.

KELVIN   That's right.

TOM   It's really hard. So, yeah. It's…What did you just say? It's a journey, not a destination.

KELVIN   Right. You keep working at it, and just because you've UDL'd a course from the beginning, don't think that you're not going to still have some work to do. If you've got a particular student with a particular set of abilities and needs in a course in a particular semester, don't think that you're not going to need to change something.

TOM   Yeah, and we want our faculty and our instructional designers and our media producers to be innovative, to push the envelope, and sometimes that presents accessibility challenges, and so, that's to your point that it's never 100% accessible. We don't want somebody to say, "I'm just going to do text on a screen because I know it's accessible." Well, that's not the point. We want it to be really good. We want it to be engaging.

KELVIN   For everybody!

TOM   For everybody! Exactly. In fact, that's some advantages to UDL. So, for example, if you just put captions on a video, that helps people who maybe don't speak English as a first language.

KELVIN   Yeah.

TOM   It's not an accessibility issue.

KELVIN   That's exactly right.

TOM   But it's something that helps everybody.

KELVIN   Yeah, the old thing of curb cuts. Curb cuts are not just for people in wheelchairs. They're good for strollers and for skateboards—because we have a lot of skateboarders around here.—or bicycles or whatever. Or those handles that make it really easy to carry in my three cups of coffee. So, we all benefit. So, I guess we need to wrap this up, but I will give a particular shout out. This episode's show notes will be replete with resources.

TOM   Yeah, we've got a bunch. I think we have a faculty seminar that we did on the subject. We can put that out there. Feel free to watch it.

KELVIN   All sorts of stuff. We've got articles. We've got stuff.

TOM   So, maybe, to land the plane here, it's a journey, not a process.

KELVIN   "Not a destination."

TOM   Sorry. It's a process, not a destination. It's a journey, not a destination. Get you metaphor right, Cavanagh.

KELVIN   That's right.

TOM   You strive for 100% accessible, recognizing that as long as you're pushing the envelope, you're probably always going to be striving for it, and that's okay, I think. At the end of the day, what's best for the student? And what's best for all students is sort of the mantra that we try to live by.

KELVIN   Working for this aspirational goal is the right thing to do. Period.

TOM   That's a great place to end it. Alright, so until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

KELVIN   I'm Kelvin.

TOM   See ya!