TOPcast Episode 19: The Multiple Roles of Instructional Designers

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

KELVIN   And I'm Kelvin Thompson.

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

KELVIN   Hey Tom.

TOM   Hey Kelvin. How's it going today?

KELVIN   It is wonderful. It's below zero outside since, you know, November is when we're recording this.

TOM   Are you talking about some strange Celsius?

KELVIN   Yeah, the Kelvin scale.

TOM   Yeah.

KELVIN   *(laughter)*

TOM   It's really nice out, but it's not zero.

KELVIN   We have a Canadian guest, and I said, "Isn't this great weather for you?" They said, "It's a little warm for us." *(laughter)* It's pleasant.

TOM   Yeah. Well, we've got kind of a special episode today, don't we?

KELVIN   A very special TOPcast.

TOM   A very special TOPcast. That's right, and as we always do when we have our special episodes, I assume we have some sort of very special beverage to share while we listen.

KELVIN   Oh yes. It's very special. You want to know what it is?

TOM   Surprise me.

KELVIN   Well, okay, so here's what I'm going to do for you. I'm just going to give you a hint.

TOM   Okay.

KELVIN   You'll have to guess. So, here's your hint. You ready?

TOM   Ready.

KELVIN   Why so tense, Tom?

TOM   *(laughter)* I assume decaf? I don't.

KELVIN   Yeah! So, what was that reference? You get the reference, right?

TOM   Isn't that an old commercial?

KELVIN   Yes! That's quite right. You remember that from your childhood?

TOM   Yeah.

KELVIN   So, father knows best. Marcus Welby. Robert Young. Always comes up to people asking about their tension level and he says, "You may be a little too jittery from drinking all that coffee." And then the person says, "Oh!" "You 'otta drink Sanka!" "I want real coffee! I don't want Sanka!" "Sanka is real coffee! It's 100% real coffee!"

TOM   *(laughter)*

KELVIN   So, he's always kind of a fatherly, patriarchal figure trying to calm everybody down, so I thought it would be appropriate because we're going to talk in a moment about a tension between roles with instructional designers and online education, so to resolve the tension, I brought us some instant decaf.

TOM   Wow. You can make a connection using anything, Kelvin.

KELVIN   Thanks.

TOM   Thank you for that creative *(laughter)* coffee connection.

KELVIN   Yeah.

TOM   I do drink decaf, though.

KELVIN   Do you?

TOM   Fairly regularly. A lot of people will say, "What's the point of that? It's like drinking non-alcoholic beer." But, I like it. Let me take my first sip here.

KELVIN   Yep. See how good it is. How does it compare with all the rest of the coffee I bring in?

TOM   That is delish!

KELVIN   *(laughter)* It's de-*caf*!

TOM   No, it's fine.

KELVIN   Yeah, it is.

TOM	Cool! Thank you! And hey, you brought me coffee. What else can I say? Thank you.
KELVIN	You're welcome.
TOM	So, we're going to be talking about a tension, huh? And because I looked ahead in our show notes, I know that we will be talking to a particular person about this.
KELVIN	Yes, indeed!
TOM	So, recently, we spoke with the one and only Dr. Katie Linder, and Katie is currently the director of research for Oregon State University's Ecampus. Formerly, she was the director for the Center for Teaching and Scholarly Excellence at Suffolk University. That's easy for me to say. Katie is very active as a scholar, a speaker, and—as we all know—a podcaster. Big fan of Katie and her podcast. You and I have written some stuff that is forthcoming in one of her edited collections.
KELVIN	That's true.
TOM	We had the opportunity to talk to her about instructional design, research, all kinds of stuff.
KELVIN	All kinds of stuff. So, I guess we'll cut to that conversation. We would not want to let anyone think that she's actually sitting here right here, right now, but the quality might be so good that you'd think that if we didn't tell you.
TOM	Yeah, that's true, because she's in her studio and we are in ours. It's sort of like Terry Gross and Fresh Air.
KELVIN	Just like that! So, we'll cut to the interview, and we'll come back after the interview's over.
	(music transition)
KELVIN	Well, thanks for joining us Katie. We're glad to have you here on TOPcast. Big fans of the Research in Action podcast.
KATIE	Woohoo!
KELVIN	That's right. So, we're glad to have you here.
KATIE	Thanks, guys. I'm so happy to join you.
KELVIN	So, we think that you might uniquely qualified to help us work through something that we're always trying to balance here. So, as online education professionals and working

with others in our field—both at UCF and elsewhere—especially instructional designers, faculty developers, [and those] kind of folks in the online space, we find that [for] the practice—the doing the job—and the scholarship that comes out of the field, balancing that stuff is really challenging. On the one hand, you can be, "Hey, we're just practitioners." On the other hand,…our instructional designers here at UCF are faculty and they have the promotion plan that emulates teaching faculty where there's a professional performance and scholarship and service kind of a thing (just like teaching, research, and service). So, I know your background in faculty development, [and] your current role as a researcher in online education. I think you might be able to help us work this through. Can you just maybe at first just react to that? What do you think of that tension? Am I just crazy that this is a tension?

KATIE   I think this is actually such an important point that you've raised because this is actually a big part of why Ecampus at Oregon State—which is where I currently work—started the research unit that I direct. The leadership here at OSU Ecampus felt like they needed to be contributing more back to the literature, and they have a well-established online education program, a significant amount of students going through it each term, a real range of disciplines, a really robust program, and they have a quality program. We've been ranked in the top ten in the nation for the last two years, but there was not a lot of research going on for exactly the reasons that you're talking about. The balance is really difficult, and one of the things that I've found is just you need a champion for that research. You need someone who's job is to think about the kinds of things that we need to be prioritizing, and that was one of the first things that I did when I came in to the research unit here was really start talking with the leadership about there are so many things we could be researching. What do we need to narrow it down to? What are the areas that we feel are our strengths? And I think that for distance education research in particular, that's a huge challenge because there are so many areas you could contribute to. Sometimes it's really hard to pick the one that you really want to make your niche in terms of your research contribution.

TOM   So, would you say that it's more important for you in your current role to generate original research and contribute it to the various discourse communities and/or bring research from the literature in the field into your current practice at Oregon State so that it informs what you're doing? Are you kind of feeling like you have to do both the input and output sides of those things?

KATIE   That's a really great question. So, I actually think the latter of what you just mentioned—of bringing the research in—is something that we were already doing. We were really looking at teaching in a very scholarly way. We engaged the Quality Matters assessment to make sure that our courses are designed very well, and our instructional designers are very well trained and are engaging in conferences and looking at the literature, so it wasn't really about bringing it in. It was definitely about creating more output in terms of research outcomes, but the other piece of my work is really supporting faculty, as well. So, I do conduct original research out of the unit, but I also help faculty to conduct research on online and teaching and learning and particularly faculty that that is not their

area. So, in the same way that we help faculty with just scholarship of teaching and learning, that's part of my role, and we have some fellowships that we fund through the research unit to support faculty to do that work, and I've run some workshops on research designed to help train them. But I think that's also a large piece: helping people to see the gaps and the questions that we're still trying to answer. And in some of those cases, I am providing more research literature to those faculty who may have questions about their discipline in particular, and about the distance education research that's happened in physics, for example. So, there's a little bit of that, but I would definitely say the focus of the research unit is definitely more on conducting that original research and making sure that it fits within the priorities of what we're doing here at Ecampus.

KELVIN   Now just to follow up on that, you mentioned your instructional designers there at OSU Ecampus. Now…are they already very practiced in conducting their own original research or are you in a scaffolding role? Does it depend on the individual? Are you advancing the agenda? Are they advancing the agenda?

TOM   Or are you working almost exclusively with faculty?

KELVIN   Yeah.

KATIE   Great questions. So, right now I work almost exclusively with faculty, and the instructional designers, [it] kind of depends on the project. So if I'm working on something…like, for example, we're looking at putting together a project right now that's doing some research on all our long-term faculty that have taught for us, and we have about 150 faculty who have taught for ten years or more online for Ecampus, and this is something we're just kind of interested in exploring, and there's a lot of things that we could explore, and so this is an area where I'm really going to be working with various people from Ecampus and some people from our Teaching Across the Curriculum program and other areas (our Center for Teaching and Learning) and our instructional designers to help shape and guide the research questions that might help us to develop that project. So, I often see our instructional designers and other members of our leadership team and other components of Ecampus (our student support representatives and folks like that) as just collaborators. They're helping to inform me about the kinds of things that might go into the research design side of what we're trying to do, but I do work a lot with faculty, as well, and just kind of supporting them and trying to get them the resources they need, and sometimes that's just data. They need me to work or kind of liaise with our data analysts to get the information they need from an institutional perspective, so I can play that role as well. I would say, though, this is an area that I'm also interested in looking into more which is the professional development and kind of research literacy and research capacity of instructional designers, and I think that that this area (just instructional designer research and instructional designers as a population that's being studied) is something that's happening more and more now because we're starting to realize the importance of their role, and there was a recent report that came out (a nice study giving some foundational information about that that I'd be happy to send and have you link in the show notes). But, you know, I think that that's an area that I would like to

explore more. What is the kind of research training that instructional designers are getting? Because they are on the ground. They're working directly with faculty and if they have that knowledge, all the better. They can do some great work.

TOM   I think interestingly…Well, just as an aside, it sounds like the research group that you're responsible for at Oregon State is very analogous to our Research Initiative for Teaching Effectiveness here run by Chuck Dziuban and Patsy Moskal, and they do very similar work, and it's been enormously fruitful for us in our relationship with faculty and kind of growing the scholarship of teaching and learning around distance education. But I think it's also interesting for us (and I'm not sure if this is the sole reason but I think it certainly helps). Kelvin mentioned earlier that our instructional designers are considered faculty. They're non-instructional faculty, but they're faculty like research, clinical, or librarians might be, and as such, they have a research and scholarship expectation, and I think they generate more than a typical kind of course builder instructional designer might—not to downplay the value or skills required to do that. It just gives them an emphasis where they're measured on it. So, they're going to do it, and as a result, I think that we've had maybe a higher level of research generated by our instructional design team than maybe a typical instructional design team just because of that incentive structure that's built in.

KATIE   For sure.

KELVIN So, it's an interesting strategy, right? Have you seen that as you look at OSU or other institutions? What's your experience of seeing instructional designers who are professional staff versus framed as faculty, so to speak?

KATIE   Great question. I mean, I would say—I mean, in my experience—I have seen them less framed as faculty. That is not something that I think is common, but actually, that's interesting. I kind of wish we were recording this two weeks from now because next week I'm going to be chairing a panel of people who hire instructional designers and we're going to be talking about their role. *(laughter)* One of the things we're going to be talking about is how has their training and the needs, the skills, and the knowledge and the things that they're bringing to that position changed over time? I think that this is one of those areas that is changing. I think that we're seeing a real need for instructional designers to have those research kind of literacy skills and one of the things, too, that's really been kind of emerging—and I think instructional designers are right at the center of it—is design-based research and that's something…Actually, we've recorded an episode of that for the Research in Action podcast. That'll be coming out in the future. But that's really about iterating and researching in a way that's very quick and that has really practical applications, and I think because of that it makes it just perfect for instructional designers. So, I mean, I hope to see in the future some of those kind of incentive programs for instructional designers who want to be doing more research. I think that there's certainly folks I've met that are interested but they usually have quite a heavy load in terms of course design. If they're in a kind of a larger shop, even, there's just a lot that they're trying to produce, and it's a regular production kind of job just because of the way that our term structures work, so…

TOM   Yeah, I can see that. I think that it's helped here that some of the function of those instructional designers has been—at least that part of their jobs—almost an extension of what the Research Initiative for Teaching Effectiveness does because some of the most successful instructional designers who have done this kind of research are those who have a terminal degree, understand research, have been trained in it through graduate study, but then also partner with the faculty that they support to publish together about some of the things they're doing in online classes together. It benefits both of them. It kind of lightens the load for faculty to publish for tenure and promotion and other kinds of things. It helps the instructional designers. So, those kinds of partnerships and collaborations are an extension of the mission that you were describing that you have at Oregon State.

KATIE   Yeah, I think that…I mean, the other thing that's really interesting is there was a recent report that came out of MIT—I'm happy to share that with you too to link in the show notes—and one of the things that that report called for was more instructional design or technology expertise coming out of the faculty and people with terminal degrees helping to kind of design these courses and I think in part so that they would have a research perspective. And that was interesting to see that coming out and to see that role being highlighted, but also to be thinking about how that could come out of someone who maybe we would've thought about previously as just being a content expert, and I think there's also some question about is the role of faculty changing in terms of what they need to know about technology integration into the classroom, and those will be really important questions in the future.

KELVIN   One of the things that occurs to me in our conversation here is that regardless of whether an instructional designer is classified as a faculty member with that kind of a promotion plan or is professional staff, it's clear from this conversation to me that all instructional designers still need to have a more intimate relationship with the research process and probably increasingly are going to get drawn into that process in some role other than just a consumer—whether they're a collaborator, a participant, or a co-researcher in some way—and so I think that the tension will continue to increase between the core job of an instructional designer and this scholarship thing. So, I wonder…to me, it's analogous, Katie, to teaching faculty who have to balance research and service and teaching, and I know that you've talked about this on your podcast before. I wonder if you have any generalizable tips from that world that we might share with our instructional design and other online ed. professionals in our audience.

KATIE   Well I think…that's such an interesting question, and actually I think in some ways it's very different from that role because the first thing that came to my mind was this was an opportunity for collaboration which I think in the faculty sphere may not be an answer to that question. When they're thinking about balancing, they may not be able to share responsibility of their research with other people or their teaching with other people, although in some cases they certainly could. I think that co-authorship and co-teaching can definitely be possibilities for that in certain disciplines, but I think when it comes to

instructional designers, in particular, and researchers and faculty, taking a team approach is something that can be really effective [by] really harnessing and using the skills that each person is bringing to the table. For example, we were doing and we continue to do a research project here about closed captioning, and I can't do it without our instructional designers. I need them to help me to do some things on the backend to setup in my learning management system randomized groups of students that are receiving certain kinds of treatments, and they're directly involved in helping me to test the fidelity of the implementation. They have to help me with that. It's not something that I have access to, and they get written into our IRBs for that. So, that's a team approach that is going to make the research better in the long run because they're bringing their expertise of what is kind of the capacity of our learning management system to do some of this randomized testing when it's really not built for that, so I have to really rely on their expertise, but then, they may not necessarily be able to put together that research design without me, and similarly we couldn't conduct the research without the participation of the faculty member whose course is being used for the testing. So, that approach, I think, is something that folks should consider and think about. It's really not a situation where you can have one person who's doing the research by themselves. That team approach is going to make it quite a bit more effective.

KELVIN   That's great.

TOM   Can I go back to something you said earlier which was about your role working with faculty and, you know, it kind of puts me in mind of how our team here works with faculty to try to promote a research agenda, to understand how technology-based learning is being implemented across campus, and what we find is certain disciplines value that kind of research a lot more than other disciplines who might only be interested in what NIH grant did you get. They're not so interested in the kind of research which this would probably be characterized as, and as you kind of work across campus, how much of recruiting do you do? How many people come to you? How do you kind of set the agenda for where you will spend your most scarce resource—which I assume is your time if it's anything like mine—and try to maybe expand the research portfolio into areas that might be new while still serving people who might be coming to you? There's probably eight questions in there I just asked you.

KATIE   Yeah. *(laughter)* No, it's a great set of questions. I mean, I would say the first thing to know is I'm a one-person shop, so I'm the only researcher right now in the research unit although I have a couple of part-time graduate students and a part-time admin who's supporting me, and I could not do the work without them. So, there is a limit of just that resource, that I'm just one person, and so I can't be in all places. We do have to prioritize certain areas, so I would say my main strategy has really been—at first—to try to get a lay of the land, to see who's doing what, and we have been offering some research support and funding in the past. So, that was something I could kind of start with to see who was engaging in that and what were some of the disciplines that were interested, but then also we kind of repackage that funding opportunity as a fellows program, and we launched that in the fall of 2015. That's been also a really interesting opportunity to see

kind of what could come out of the woodwork. Who were the people who were kind of interested in doing this and if they had a little bit of financial support, were willing to kind of take the steps to look a little deeper in what was going on in their classes and in their disciplines? We had a wide range of responses. We have projects that are quantitative, we have projects that are more qualitative, and some that are mixed. We have them coming from a range of disciplines. Some of them are team-based. Some of them are individual. That was really exciting to see who was interested, and then also we run a program here every spring called Faculty Forum where we have about 200-250 faculty who have taught at Ecampus or who are just interested in learning about what we're doing online come to those programs, and at the last one I ran a three-hour workshop on designing basically a scholarship of teaching and learning project that integrated technology and what that would look like. We had a good response to that. I think part of it is just people don't quite know how to approach it and they're not sure if they've never done it before. [They're not sure] what to do, and so even just having a person on campus where we can say, "If you have those questions, Katie can consult with you, and she can kind of work with you on developing that project" is just I think a really important start and just a foundation to give to people that there is a person who can talk with you and who can offer guidance. And even with IRB, we have some people who have just never gone through IRB and they don't know how to do that. So, it's something else that we can kind of provide some information on, but I mean I think that part of it is just trying to let people know [about us]. In some ways, it's really trying to advertise the fact that the research unit exists now—now that we're been here almost a year—that people are starting to come and realize that they can work with us, and we work with a little over 600 faculty for Ecampus so there are quite a few who have just reached out and said, "I've been thinking about this for some time and want to pursue it." It's growing. It's exciting. I think it's one of those areas that we're going to see just different kinds of techniques and strategies used over time, especially as the research unit grows in terms of staffing.

KELVIN   That's great. You know, you've been a wonderful addition to TOPcast. People are loving that they're not just hearing Tom and I.

TOM   *(laughing)* That's for sure.

KELVIN   Plus, you had good stuff to say.

TOM   Yeah, thank you so much Katie. That was really fascinating. We really appreciating you taking the time to talk to us. We're talking from one end to the country to the other.

KELVIN   How about that? We're covering the globe.

KATIE   Yeah, thanks to you guys, too. It's always so fun to chat with you, and I love hearing from you every month with your new TOPcast episodes.

KELVIN   Thanks very much. Thanks for joining us, and everybody, you should always reach out

and listen to Katie Lender on [the] Research in Action podcast.

(music transition)

KELVIN   So that was the amazing—and I suspect non-sleeping, right?—Katie Linder. She might be more productive as an individual than both of us combined.

TOM   Yeah, I respect the efficiency *(laughter)* and the productivity that Katie's able to manage. So, we should note that we actually had two conversations with Katie. While you just heard one here on TOPcast, the other is available on Katie's Research in Action podcast, where she kind of made us squirm a little while we had to talk about what we keep current with reading research literature and other kinds of keeping up with the latest developments in space.

KELVIN   Or try to. Or don't.

TOM   Yeah, it's sort of like that episode of *Different Strokes* where—

KELVIN   Must have been a very special *Different Strokes*!

TOM   It's where *Different Strokes* and *The Facts of Life* crossed over.

KELVIN   Oh no!

TOM   So, she's either *The Facts of Life* or *Different Strokes*. Maybe she's *The Facts of Life* and we're *Different Strokes* and so the episodes cross over. It makes each one better.

KELVIN   Uh huh.

TOM   I hope. She made our podcast better.

KELVIN   See, now I'm stuck on which one are we? Are we *Different Strokes* or are we *The Facts of Life*?

TOM   Whatcha talking about, Kelvin?

KELVIN   *(laughter)* So you can be Gary Coleman!

TOM   That's right. That's fine. So, you don't want to miss that. Go check out Katie's podcast if you want to start with our episode because you're such giant fans of TOPcast. Don't finish with ours, though, because she's got all kinds of great people she talks to on a regular basis including some of our colleagues here at UCF.

KELVIN   Yeah, absolutely.

TOM   She recently interviewed Patsy Moskal. That's a great one. So, yeah, go check out Research in Action. It'll be in our show notes.

KELVIN   It's really good. She comes up with a new episode *(laughter)* every week. Every week.

TOM   Again, not sleeping.

KELVIN   Well, so to finish off this episode TOPcast, though, how might we summarize our conversation with Katie about instructional designers?

TOM   Well, I think it's interesting that there are so many different models, you know? There are different ways of approaching this, and there's not one right way of doing this. There are right ways for your context, and I think that came out in that conversation.

KELVIN   Yeah, I think that's right.

TOM   Alright, so whether they're classified as faculty or staff, instructional designers, or those with similar-related titles—I've seen instructional developers, instructional technologists, and other kinds of titles—we all have a lot of hats to wear and play in ensuring that the design and development of high quality online courses is part of everything that we do. Some of these roles can come into conflict, and balance must be sought by individual instructional designers. As with so many things, though, when dealing with communication and collaboration, teamwork might bring more success than individual instructional designers going it alone. How true.

KELVIN   How true. That's profound.

TOM   *(laughter)*

KELVIN   Must be the decaf.

TOM   Must be the decaf or that you had something to do with the show notes.

KELVIN   One or the other.

TOM   Yeah. Well, thank you for the decaf. I am…you know, quintessentially non-stressed at the moment.

KELVIN   So glad you're not tense, Tom.

TOM   I am not tense. Thank you, Marcus Welby.

KELVIN   That's right. We're going to put stuff about that in the show notes, too.

TOM   Yeah, we just alienated our entire audience. No idea who he is.

KELVIN   Some of you are going to have this pop culture reference now. You'll be able to find out who Robert Young is and Sanka and all that stuff.

TOM   I barely remember, so, yeah.

KELVIN   That's right.

TOM   Go look it up. There's this thing called Wikipedia.

KELVIN   I've heard of that.

TOM   So, thank you guys for joining us today. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

KELVIN   And I'm Kelvin.

TOM   See ya!