

TOPcast Episode 22: Better Together: Diversity in Online Education

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- From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I am Kelvin Thompson.
- TOM And I am Tom Cavanagh.
- KELVIN And you—yes you—are listening to TOPcast: The Teaching Online Podcast. Hi, Tom!
- TOM Hi, Kelvin!
- KELVIN How's it going today?
- TOM It is going well. We are once again recording in the morning.
- KELVIN I know, so weird!
- TOM It is. It is beverage appropriate for us.
- KELVIN What do you mean by that?
- TOM I mean that usually you're bringing a thermos of hot joe for us to share.
- KELVIN In the afternoon or evening. What's wrong with that?
- TOM Well for some of us, our heads buzz on the drive home.
- KELVIN And what's wrong with that? (*Laughter*) See, welcome to my world! Coffee's an anytime beverage. Well, for regular TOPcast listeners—and we hope that there are some—
- TOM My mom!
- KELVIN Hi, Tom's mom! You may know that Tom says that I bring in a thematically selected coffee around which to have a conversation related to online education professionals, but in a tremendous reversal, in this episode, we're finally there, Tom's in charge of the coffee.
- TOM Yes!
- KELVIN So, Tom, I can't wait to hear what you've brought in for us and why.
- TOM Yes! In a very special TOPcast, Tom is responsible for the coffee. So, as I often do, when I'm responsible for something, I have delegated.
- KELVIN Yeah, I've experienced this, many, many times.

TOM I know! But I've delegated for a reason. Not just because I didn't want to do it. I have asked, you and me, and two very special guests—

KELVIN Oh, there they are!

TOM —who we will meet in just a moment, to bring their own coffee, and our own coffee.

KELVIN That's smart! I should do that!

TOM So, we've each brought our own coffee because today's episode is all about diversity. We are going to talk about diversity, the value of diversity, the challenges associated with diversity, and nothing epitomizes diversity more than four different cups of coffee.

KELVIN Or something! I'm curious.

TOM Yeah, that's right! It's doesn't necessarily have to be coffee.

KELVIN So, you want to introduce our guests and then we'll find out what everybody is drinking?

TOM Yeah, let's do that. Actually, let's have when they introduce themselves tell us what they are drinking. So, let's start with Ke'Anna Skipwith. Ke'Anna is Director of Online Experiential Learning Programs at Northeastern University in Boston. So, Ke'Anna, can you just sort of introduce yourself, tell us a little bit about your role, and what you're drinking?

KE'ANNA Hello, everyone! It's so good to be on the show today. However, I am not a coffee person. I am a huge fan of herbal tea so my beverage of choice today is an Armenian mint tea. And mint is supposed to be good for the digestive and immune system. And right now, it's doing a pretty good job of keeping me warm in Boston. *(Laughter)* So currently in my role as a director, I work with departments to formulate processes and evaluate practices that are vital to the successful creation, migration, and implementation of online courses. I do research and make recommendations to implement innovative concepts for online learning practices. I work very closely in faculty development as well as working with their departments to create systems that monitor student learning, engagement, and academic success. And prior to that, I was an instructional designer at Northeastern University in which I was responsible for the design and development of graduate online courses.

TOM Awesome! Thank you. Our other special guest is Lamont Eddins, who is an instructional designer for the Larry L. Luig School of Business at Berkeley College in New Jersey. And it's in Paramus, which is not far from where I spent half my childhood.

KELVIN Wow! There we go.

TOM So, welcome Lamont. What are you drinking?

LAMONT Yes, I'm not a coffee drinker. To be honest with you, I've never drank coffee in my life so I couldn't tell you what it tastes like. But I am a juice guy so I have some orange juice and I try to drink as much water as possible. So, I have my water bottle next to me drinking water.

KELVIN That is awesome! But we need to remedy that coffee thing. We're going to hook up somewhere and fix this coffee thing.

TOM Yeah! If you've never tried it. I didn't start drinking coffee until I became a parent and needed to stay awake. That's a true story.

KELVIN I believe it. That'll do it to you. That or whiskey. One or the other.

TOM Both! Sometimes at the same time. *(Laughter)* So awesome. Thank you both for being with us today. We are going to talk a little bit about diversity and just a little bit of background about how we made this connection. Last year, at the EDUCAUSE Annual Meeting, I went to a round table discussion on the topic of diversity that Lamont happened to be facilitating. I thought it was a fascinating discussion and thought it was a topic that was worth discussing. It was something that you and I have been talking about for a long time.

KELVIN Yep!

TOM Knowing the background of Lamont and his collaborators—one of whom is Ke'Anna—fits right in our world of online learning. I thought it made sense to invite them on the show.

KELVIN That's awesome! And we have. We've been talking about this topic for a long time, so I'm glad we are finally having this episode. So, welcome, Ke'Anna and Lamont. Can we just start with this, as a way in? Tom, you and I have been talking about diversity for a while but here's a broad question for everybody. Why should we even be talking about diversity among online education professionals?

KE'ANNA Sure! I think diversity, especially in this time, this climate, it's just really important. I can speak from the professional development side in my role where as a woman of color, it's good to have either a sponsor or mentor but most importantly how diversity really speaks to the culture of online education. And with that, I'm thinking, with the diverse population of our students, more working professionals, we have to really cater their needs, their wants, and their desires they want to accomplish in their educational endeavors. So, we just have to be cognizant of what's going on. So, I think it's a great topic to really dive into. We are all different, we learn in different ways, so why not come together and really make a difference and impact on how we want to learn? What do you guys think?

TOM Lamont, you want to add anything to that?

LAMONT Sure, I second the notion of Ke'Anna's statement. As a man of color, I think it's important to look at and see what's happening in our institutions. If you look at our faculty base and you look at the learner's population, it's a very diverse population. So, how do we ensure that we are meeting that diversity in terms of ensuring that we are create high quality courses that fit the needs of not just the learners but the faculty members as well? So, again, this is a very crucial topic because, again, people are trying to further their education to better their lives and what way to do that is through higher education. It's a critical topic because you are always going to have diversity in higher education.

KE'ANNA And I also think too, that we want to be more inclusive now. We want to look at the different stakeholders, the faculty, the student, and actually what is the institution doing to build up diversity issues?

TOM The issue of inclusion is interesting. Kelvin and I have been talking about this. Our president here at the University of Central Florida, he's made one of our goals of the university during his entire presidency which is—

KELVIN 20 plus years—

TOM 25 years. Yeah! One of them is to be more diverse and inclusive.

KELVIN Inclusive. Right.

TOM Too much coffee this morning.

KELVIN Well, there it is.

TOM The way he's described it is you can be diverse and everybody still not get along.

KE'ANNA Mhm.

LAMONT That's true.

TOM That's why diverse and inclusive go hand in hand. And there is a lot of literature—and I believe Kelvin that you are probably going to put some of these in the show notes—

KELVIN Yeah, absolutely.

TOM —that state, empirically, that the more diverse your teams are, the more productive they are. The better your outcomes. The more creative you are.

KE'ANNA Absolutely!

- TOM And that actually, Lamont, that was a topic that was explored in that round table that you facilitated.
- LAMONT Yeah, I agree to that. Just speaking on my experience, I know with my team is a very diverse team in terms of background, in terms of where you come from, your education. So, I think it really helps out a lot. Because what it does is open your mind to different things and different perspectives as to what's happening, particularly in online learning. You try not to be close-minded, but when you have a diverse group of people, it forces you to think outside the box and be creative to ensure you are meeting the needs and even the wants—like Ke'Anna mentioned—for the stakeholders, whether it's the learners, whether it's the faculty members, the deans, and so forth. The more diversity you have, the [larger] variety you are going to have in terms of critical thinking and creativity.
- TOM You know, it's interesting. There's a productivity/quality argument to make in favor of having diverse teams. Particularly, we are talking specifically about online education but it gets broader than that. And this is also broader, there's also an aspirational aspect to it. After I went to that session last year at EDUCASE, I was talking to a colleague and we were sort of comparing notes on different sessions we went to and what we liked. I mentioned the diversity session. She happens to be an African-American woman in a leadership position kind of similar to ours. And she said she has very few people that she can look at as examples like her. And it struck me that we should be setting an example that there are opportunities in this space for everybody. And it extends down to students, too. I'll give one quick anecdote—and I think this is relevant to what you said Ke'Anna about the kinds of courses we are building for our students. I was talking a math faculty here who built into our adaptive platform in one of her courses, kind of a random name generator in the word problems. And she used names that were not necessarily just like Tom, like mine. But she had sort of East Asian and Indian sort of names and all kinds of different names and students were just stunned that they saw names that looked like their family names when they went through the problems. They were able to relate to it more. Sort of anecdotal feedback and I thought that was terrific.
- KE'ANNA Yeah, I think that's great because I feel like the students can really identify themselves with actually the scenario or learning the content or materials that are being presented. It puts that culture in there that the faculty cares about the experience I'm having, the school cares about the experience I may be having. So, make it more realistic. These are people I can identify with and I think it kind of helps the learning experience as well.
- LAMONT And if I can belly of that as well too. I think it also provides to learning with confidence. They are able to see somebody that is similar in terms of ethnicity or race or so forth so if they see that person in a certain role, it gives them a sense of confidence, saying, "You know what, if they can do it, I can do it because they come as a similar background as I do." I think that it helps the institution out in terms of knowing that if you are certain type of person, —hether you come from a certain culture, a certain religion, a certain

country—that you will be comfortable and get the same opportunity as the next student or next learner to succeed and do what it is that you want do after college.

TOM And I imagine—I mean I don't have evidence, but it just seems surface valid to me that outcomes are impacted by that.

KELVIN You would think.

TOM If you can relate to the questions more, you're going to attend to it more, engage with it more, and maybe do better on it.

LAMONT You're completely right.

KELVIN This all makes sense to me. We've got these value claims, this empirical evidence, that diversity teams are smarter, they are better problem solvers. We've got this kind of assertion that having a match between the faculty and the instructional designers of especially online courses, having the demographics of those folks matching more of the profile of the student body, there's probably better cultural value assumptions that are built in. All that makes sense. How do we know how we are doing right now in online education? I can look around our instructional design team and I can think, "Okay, what's the racial, ethnic, country of origin, religion, sexual orientation if I know it." I can kind of go through those things and then say, "Well what do I know about my institution?" Am I way off? But what do we know data-wise in general in our online education field?

TOM And I should say just as you guys think about the answer to that question that you both have been involved with the diversity constituent group within EDUCAUSE which was why you were involved with that session. So, you have a little bit of experience, you are sort of experts in this, certainly more so than we are. So, what do you think?

LAMONT In terms of evidence, there's a couple of things that I look at. As an instructional designer, you do work with faculty and you do have an opportunity to see the class list and the different names. And the diversity that I see in the different names indicates to me that okay, we do see a wide range of students of different backgrounds coming to institutions such as Northeastern or University of Central Florida or Berkeley College that are looking to further educate themselves. We need to ensure that we do create a diverse learning environment because when you are in an online learning environment, you don't necessarily have the same opportunities to quote-unquote wing it, as if you were in an onsite classroom. Because in an onsite class, you come to class, you get to physically see your student body and you see who is in the class so you might be able to make adjustments based on what you see. But in an online learning environment, you are assuming a person is from somewhere so you have to assume that you are going to have a diverse population. So, when you are creating a course, you want to take that into consideration. You are kind of assuming that you are going to have a diverse population so what are you going to do to ensure that the course is properly created so that you are prepared for that class to come in?

TOM That's an interesting comment. Maybe I can just kind of pull on that thread a little bit. I guess what you are saying is online students tend to skew to be a more diverse population because of the reasons why they need to take online classes. Maybe a more non-traditional population, more first generation. That's an interesting comment that I hadn't really thought about before, and I think that also means that there is a greater responsibility on online learning professionals like us to be aware of that.

KE'ANNA And also, I wanted to include mentioning within the online population they are starting to be non-traditional as we just mentioned. And with that, we also have to think about, here at Northeastern, we have a heavy population of international students so, we have to stay abreast of faculty and staff development about diversity inclusion. In my role, I also work with training programs of the institution of how can we get these faculty, staff, and even managers and leadership together and understand how important diversity is at the school. We do this mostly through events, interacting with students, getting more involved in online webinars so we can see what the students want. But also, be able to train our faculty and staff to be more collaborative so that we can increase the recruitment and retention efforts of our students because it's not just a conversation with HR, it's also what are you doing in your department? How can we give that to the institution so that we can bring these students in and still have a great learning experience? If that makes any sense.

TOM Yeah! We've talked a lot about students, but I wonder if we can talk a little bit about the staff, the online learning professionals. You know, as Kelvin mentioned, we do periodically look at our staff and just kind of check. It's not like we have any particular percentage goals but if you're not aware, you're not aware, right? So, we do look at that periodically and just say what is the constituency of our staff? And I have heard people who do kind of bemoan the state of diversity talk—and I'm not just talking about online learning although I think that it's true for online learning but in higher education in general. If you look at the faculty ranks, the faculty don't represent the same kind of ratios as the student population. And you've both already eluded to that. But some of the reason for that, that I've heard from deans and others is that there is a pipeline issue. The pool of qualified or even interested population who kind of fit a diverse profile is small and there's more competition to hire those kinds of people. I guess my question is, is that true? Do you think that's true? And if so, what can be done to help encourage more people to join us in this wonderful world of online learning?

LAMONT I can speak on that. Working with the business faculty members here at Berkeley College, I will say that we do have a somewhat diverse population in terms of faculty members who come from different walks of life, in terms of their educational background, of their upbringing, where they come from. So, I know our school, as a whole, tries to look at ways of—for lack of better words—is to further populate faculty members— even staff—with a diverse or a well-rounded background so they can relate to the learners because again, the faculty-student relationship is always going to be the foundation of any institution. I think all of you can agree to that. So, if you go out and

promote the idea of giving back to the people who want to be where you are, that can help with trying to bring in people who willing and able to provide the learners with high-quality education.

- KE'ANNA And I also think that most faculty and staff are looking for institutions or organizations where they can actually build their professional networks. So maybe it can be as simple as starting a conversation or community of practice of what other people are doing at their institutions. What worked, what didn't work, and how we can improve that. But I think it definitely starts with a conversation and how we can move from there and getting people who are actually interested in the idea to really speak out.
- KELVIN So, we've got to be ever mindful, ever watchful, kind of check ourselves out constantly.
- TOM Well, that's kind of how we ended up connecting with both of you is through a conversation that happened at that conference, and it was a really interesting conversation.
- KELVIN Sounds like it.
- KE'ANNA And with EDUCAUSE, what's great about it, they allow that to happen. They have so many professional development opportunities. This particular Diversity in IT group was started almost five years ago because they didn't have any diversity initiative. They didn't have a platform to talk about diversity issues within EDUCAUSE. So, starting this group has been really helpful within the organization, meeting you guys. And also, I wanted to point out with the professional development piece of it. Within EDUCAUSE, they have so many opportunities where you can just be a volunteer on the program committee. So, you can actually build up these leadership or developmental skills that you may have or be interested in. It's really kind of connecting with an organization that really stands within those values so that they can build in and implement those things that possibly impact on diversity issues, changes, or even promote them such as events like this where we can talk about it, share ideas, and get it out into the world.
- TOM Yeah, I'll give a shot out for EDUCAUSE. I do think that they take this seriously. We've both been really involved with them. There was one time where I served on the program planning committee, and I believe they even did Ally training before the conference started for anyone who wanted to be a part of that.
- KELVIN Which is awesome.
- KE'ANNA Absolutely.
- LAMONT And to belly off of that as well, too. I know in our conversation at EDUCAUSE, one of the things that was a challenge for people was location. And I guess considering where the three of us, all of us are—being Boston, Orlando, and Paramus, the great New York area—diversity is not necessarily an issue in terms of people finding people. Where in

our conversation at EDUCAUSE in October, there were people who were not concerned but they were just voicing their opinions about the location of where they are in terms of how do you get people of different backgrounds, different ethnicities, and different colors to come to certain locations? I know that that was a major challenge. I know there was people who lived in areas that weren't necessary overly-populated, so how do you get people of different backgrounds to come move to those areas of the country so that they can further implement their initiative of greater diversity within their institution? So, I know that was a challenge for a lot people at our session in October.

KELVIN That's a good point.

TOM That is. That's not something you typically think about. And there's so much we could talk about with this topic and maybe we need to revisit it at some point.

KELVIN Yeah, that's right. It is a good point. We've laid a bit of a foundation today, raising the issues. We so appreciate, Ke'Anna and Lamont, you being here, joining us, sharing your expertise and a little bit of your personal experience as well. I guess we'll press pause on this topic for the moment but hopefully not pressing pause on our awareness and our mindfulness in terms of our practice. So, Tom, let me just ask you this—

TOM Wait, before you do it, neither you nor I shared our coffee diverse choices.

KELVIN What? I'm drinking orange juice, buddy.

TOM I feel shamed a little bit because you both had such healthy choices.

KELVIN What are you drinking, Tom?

TOM I am drinking a ginormous cup of Wawa coffee.

KELVIN And when he says drinking, he means that there is an IV in his arm. *(laughter)*

TOM Yeah, I poured it straight into my bloodstream.

KELVIN I've never seen a cup that big before, Tom.

TOM It's pretty big, yeah. And you, I recognize that cup.

KELVIN Yeah, it's the same cup of coffee I always drink. This is a Starbucks Reserve specialty coffee. Cost me \$49.95 this morning on the way in.

TOM A second mortgage.

KELVIN From the clover, at one of these select Starbucks locations. It's an Ethiopian coffee of some variety that I think was shitake or something, maybe that's a mushroom. I don't

know. But it's good. It's a good coffee anyways. As we wrap up here, maybe this is what we are saying, so you guys see if this rings true for at least this point in the conversation. The field of online education is maybe not as diverse in its makeup as maybe some other parts of higher education, the student body, maybe even the faculty.

TOM Certainly not as much as K-12.

KELVIN Certainly not as much as K-12. I would agree with that. However, the evidence seems to be clear that if we are going to continue to innovate and by golly, we've talked about in other episodes that we have to innovate, innovate or perish. If we're going to continue to innovate, if we are going to continue to work smarter, to perform well, then diversity in our teams and in our leadership is imperative. Would we agree with that?

LAMONT Yeah, most definitely.

KE'ANNA Absolutely.

TOM Yes.

KELVIN Alright, well there you go. We'll leave it right there for right now. And again, thank you Lamont and Ke'Anna, for joining us. For more on today's topic, and there is a lot there, please remember to check out our show notes. You'll find links to all sorts of supporting resources. You'll find those at topcast.online.ucf.edu, and we don't say this enough but we'd love to hear what you think about the ideas that we discussed today. Maybe you agree, maybe there's a nuance that you want to take issue with. Many communication venues are available on the TOPcast website or let's be edgy with the technology. We'd love to have you use your smartphone to record a brief voice memo and email it to us at TOPcast@ucf.edu. We'd love to hear from you and continue the conversation between episodes and maybe we'll have Lamont and/or Ke'Anna back another time to continue on.

TOM Absolutely. And if you like this content then maybe search us out and give us a review on your podcast finder of choice, iTunes or whatever. It definitely helps other people find this kind of content.

KELVIN That's exactly right. So, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

TOM And I'm Tom.

KELVIN See ya!

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