

TOPcast Episode 23: What is Your Elevator Pitch? Talking to the Public About Online Education

- TOM This episode of *TOPcast* is brought to you by UCF Online. Twenty plus years of award-winning online excellence. Over 75 online programs. One of the largest and most innovative universities in the U.S. ucf.edu/online.
- From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I am Tom Cavanagh.
- KELVIN And I'm Kelvin Thompson.
- TOM And you are listening to *TOPcast: The Teaching Online Podcast*. Hi, Kelvin!
- KELVIN What's up, Tom?
- TOM Not much. I am ready to do some podcasting.
- KELVIN Woo! Let's do it. I just came for the coffee.
- TOM *(Laughter)* Well, you're ruining the surprise for any new listeners that we have.
- KELVIN Oh, you think people will be surprised that we have coffee?
- TOM Yeah. None of our regular listeners. Both of them. *(Laughter)*
- KELVIN Yeah, you know we talk about it sometimes, right? I mean, I think at this point some people are like, "Stop! Don't fast forward." Because some people think, you know, what somebody, said "Well, yeah, you guys were in this tangent about coffee," and somebody else said, "Oh yeah, I skip past the coffee 'til I realized it actually had something to do with the show."
- TOM I've heard both, anecdotally. So, for those who hate the banter, sorry, I'm going to banter for just a bit. But some people like the coffee bit, and we don't do it too long.
- KELVIN I hope not.
- TOM We're being a little meta here. And some people hate the coffee bit and just want us to get to talking about online learning. I don't know. We are complex. So, as a way to try and thread the needle, we will talk about coffee, but not for very long.
- KELVIN Yeah.
- TOM Or banter for not very long.
- KELVIN I hope so.
- TOM Maybe we'll just do one banter episode and make it, you know, a very special *TOPcast* for those—
- KELVIN They are all very special *TOPcasts*. *(Laughter)*

TOM —who don't care about online learning but maybe want a like Kelvin's, you know, coffee tour or something.

KELVIN Yeah, okay. Maybe! There's that one episode about the free and open online resources and you about went off the rails because I think we were at six minutes before we really got into the topic.

TOM Yeah, I remember. I was tiring of the banter at that point.

KELVIN *(Laughter)* I have a high tolerance.

TOM Yeah, well, we are at a 1:48 into it now.

KELVIN See! You have a low tolerance. *(Laughter)*

TOM I think anybody can sit through a 1:48.

KELVIN Yeah, okay. Alright, so, you want to do this show or what?

TOM Let's go!

KELVIN Okay! Let's do it! What are we talking about again?

TOM We are talking about...So, the theme for today is to talk about how to address online learning to people who don't necessarily live like us in the world of online learning.

KELVIN Well, that is true and, you know, after all that talk about talking about coffee, we never did actually talk about the coffee so...

TOM I was setting you up with that theme.

KELVIN Thank you! Well, that's good because I've got something. So, here's what you're drinking, Tom. It almost doesn't matter, but it does. It's a Rwanda Hingakawa coffee from Starbucks Reserve. So, they're small batch roasted stuff, and they do a little bit...But here's why I brought this coffee. So, recently, a few weeks ago, I was sitting in my local Starbucks which has the high-end coffees—which, you know, I've spent a lot of money on—and the manager walks over. I was doing some work in the afternoon. She comes by and she drops in front of me, two unopened bags of whole bean coffee and I'm like, "What?" and I look at her like, "What?"

TOM "Thank you for putting my kid through college."

KELVIN And it was kind of like that! No joke! I looked at her questioningly and she said, "Here, I just thought you'd like this, and you know you're in here all the time." And I was like,

“Yeah, my Porsche outside appreciates the bag.” And so, it made me smile. I really appreciated it and so, since it made me smile—this coffee—I thought it was appropriate for today.

TOM Oh, I get it now! Alright, so, do you want me to set it up or do you want to set it up?

KELVIN Yeah! Go for it!

TOM So, in December of 2016, I had the opportunity to appear on the Tavis Smiley show on PBS on television and talk about online learning. So, I get the “smile” that was brought to your face.

KELVIN Tavis Smiley. Yes.

TOM The interview that I did with Tavis Smiley was part of a wider series that he did over the past season, a periodic series—it wasn't every episode—about education and educational innovation and things that are making a difference in education. Other people that he had interviewed were the chancellor from the City Colleges of Chicago, Cheryl Hyman, and Janet Napolitano from California, and me. That's good company to be in.

KELVIN That's good, Tom!

TOM The episode that I was on that aired—he usually interviews two guests unless it's sort of an extended one where he'll do one through two segments—but for me it was two segments on the same show, and the one that followed me was Simone Biles, the gymnast.

KELVIN Well, there you go!

TOM Yeah, me and Simone.

KELVIN That's good. I think, you know, [something] I've seen that's interesting: they've packaged up this content differently. So, one of the podcasts they had there, it was a different order. So, it was you and then it was the actress Thandie Newton.

TOM Oh! Yeah, I didn't see that.

KELVIN In the podcast feed, not too far off from you, was Dick Van Dyke.

TOM Wow!

KELVIN So yeah, you're in good company, Tom.

TOM Yeah, well—just as a quick cul-de-sac here—I was told who else Smiley was interviewing that day, because I used to work in the television industry and we used to

record multiple episodes in a day. So, he did six interviews, I think, that day, and among the people he interviewed—I was the first one on the schedule—were Simone Biles, Robert Wagner, Conan O'Brien, Warren Beatty, and Joe Buck. So, that was pretty cool.

KELVIN Yeah! And Tom Cavanagh!

TOM And Tom Cavanagh! That's right.

KELVIN So, you started to say this, but how did this come about? I mean, how did he connect with you? Do know you?

TOM Yeah, as I understand, it, you know, we've done some work with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. They kind of know a little bit about us through some work that we've done through the Next Generation Learning Challenges, and the University of Central Florida is part of the University Innovation Alliance, which has a relationship with the Gates Foundation. As I understand it, the Gates Foundation has something of a partnership with the Tavis Smiley group to talk about education issues, and I believe I was referred to them through that channel.

KELVIN Still a cool connection, however it came about.

TOM Yeah!

KELVIN Pretty neat. And as you said toward the top of the show—and I think this is true—we all have to deal with answering questions about online education. I personally think that your interview here is a good example of responding to questions and assumptions about online education broadly. So, I mean, here's a guy who's clearly smart, informed, connected, and he had, I mean, I think some really good questions but some fundamental questions. And sometimes that flummoxes me. Not always. I can be geared up, right? But you handled them, I thought, really, really well. And I think that's illustrative. So, maybe we'll cut to the interview and we'll come back and we'll kind of unbundle it a little bit and see if we can find some principles that the rest of us cannot apply. How's that sound?

TOM Sounds good! Let's take a listen.

[Interview begins, transcription pulled from PBS:
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/tavissmiley/interviews/thomas-cavanagh/>]

TAVIS Pleased to welcome Thomas Cavanagh to this program. He is the Associate Vice President of Distributed Learning at the University of Central Florida. He joins us tonight to talk about the success of the university's blended learning programs and the societal influence that technology is having on education and training. Tune in tonight because this, they say, is the wave of the future for how students will be taught in this country. Tom Cavanagh, good to have you on this program.

- TOM Thank you for having me.
- TAVIS Let me jump right in. Tell me what you all are doing that everybody's paying attention to now because you're doing this so successfully with regard to blending these online and classroom programs.
- TOM Sure. At the University of Central Florida, we're a large school. We have 64,000 students and access is really important to us. We really, frankly, wouldn't be that large if it wasn't for online learning because we simply don't have the physical infrastructure to support that many students. So, what we offer students is a variety of modalities that they can choose from to fit their lifestyle, fit their work, their family commitments. And what we find is that close to almost 80% of our students take one or more online or blended courses throughout an academic year.
- TAVIS Tell me how a blended program works. How does one choose or how do you know what's online, what's classroom, how do you balance the hours? I mean, how does the blended part actually work?
- TOM Sure. Well, there's different levels. So, at the course level, you can blend a course where you have part of the course online, part of the course face to face. You kind of have the best of both worlds, the convenience of online learning and some of the social interaction piece of the face to face classroom. When you look at a program level, you can mix and blend a program so that you have online courses, face to face courses, and even blended courses. And offering a variety of options to students gives them some agency so that they can choose their own path, fit their own circumstances, whatever they might be.
- TAVIS I would assume then a couple of things. You tell me if I'm right or wrong. I would assume that you probably have a greater diversity of students because of these options, and I would assume that the online courses are probably a little bit less expensive than what colleges charge to sit in the classroom. Am I right or wrong about either or both of those?
- TOM I think, in general and online learning, your first statement is correct. But at UCF, what we find is that the diversity of the student profile is about the same because online learning is so integrated into everything that we do. At our school, what we do is that the tuition is exactly the same. However, for certain programs, for students who are 100% online who will never be coming to campus, we are able to reduce their out of pocket costs by eliminating fees that are associated with campus services that they won't be using. So, it can be a significant, maybe a 20% discount for them.
- TAVIS So, I'm curious as to how the success of this program is being met inside the academic community. I happen to know that can be a very political community, the academic community. How is it being received? How is it being pushed back against? How is it being talked about? I want to come in a moment to how employers are taking this. Because I remember some years ago when this online learning thing became a really

big deal, there were some people sort of—how can I put this nicely—poo-pooing online education, that you don't get the same kind of instruction, you don't get the same kind of learning, that the online classes are not nearly as regarded as in-classroom learning. So, just give me some sense, first of all, of how this program is being received inside of the academic community beyond the campus of UCF.

TOM Well, you know, the big elephant in the room is quality, right?

TAVIS Yeah, yeah.

TOM Everybody sort of brings that up. And I think maybe early days that was a legitimate concern, but there's been a body of research over the past 20 years that shows no significant difference between work that's done online or at least outcomes from online and outcomes from face to face. I have a colleague at UCF who likes to say, "It was only since the dawn of online learning that face to face instruction became the gold standard of quality education." And I think that there is still that element out there of people who question the validity of online learning. However, it's changing and I think it's changing mostly from faculty who are teaching online and they realize that they can do things online that conceivably they can't even do face to face and expand the world for their students in ways that the internet provides for them.

TAVIS How does the university decide then what are the criteria for whether a course can be taught online versus in the classroom?

TOM It's a dialog with the faculty member and with the department. And, ultimately, it's the academic community's decision whether or not to put something online. And what I do and my department does is work with faculty to see what we can do to bring all of the resources to bear of media, of the internet, to make that a quality course. Ultimately, though, it's their decision.

TAVIS How does the university go about dealing with authenticity? I mean, that's always the question with online anything. Is what I'm getting real? Is this really the student? Is this really the student's work that the student has turned in? How do you deal with that?

TOM Yeah, it's a great question. It's probably the number one question that I get. There are a variety of tools and strategies that you can do, that you can employ, to ensure the authenticity of a student's identity. So, there's video, there is all kinds of biometrics, there are all kinds of tools that you can put in place and we use a number of them at our school, and we're not unique. A number of schools do this. So, I think you can get to a point where you have some validity that this is the student that you think it is. I would question maybe even a large lecture hall where you have a couple hundred students, unless you're checking IDs at the door, you might have a similar problem. Another question has to do with are they cheating online? And we work really hard with our faculty to design tests that are kind of cheat-proof for online, so you're not just testing cognitive recall.

TAVIS Is there such a thing [laugh]?

TOM Well, no, actually.

TAVIS Not when I was in school. I mean, I'm not speaking for myself. Just my friends [laugh].

TOM I have a friend, yeah.

TAVIS Yeah, I have a friend, yeah, yeah.

TOM No, there's no cheat-proof anything, face to face or online. However, I think there are some tools in the online world that aren't available in the face to face world. You can randomize questions, you can time exams, you can use pools of questions, you can check IP addresses to make sure students aren't colluding together. There's all kinds of tools that you can use that I think help to mitigate that issue.

TAVIS It seems to me, though, that while you can do that, that puts an additional burden on the faculty member to have to go through all those checks and balances, so to speak, and how do they respond to being asked to do that additional legwork?

TOM Some of it, I would say, falls on folks like myself, the more technical solutions. But in the course and assessment design, I think that if a faculty member builds that in up front, it's not really a whole lot more work if they've got resources like ours to help them.

TAVIS So, the other question I want to get to here is beyond how it's received in the academic community or not received by some institutions. How is it being regarded in the world of employment? So, when one gets these degrees, what do you know? Is it too soon to tell—you tell me—about whether or not these online degrees lead to jobs?

TOM I think it depends on the credibility of the institution. So, if you have a degree from a respected, accredited institution, regardless of the modality that it's delivered in, then I think it's the reputation of that institution that speaks to how valid that degree is. If it's some sort of an institution that's not accredited or it's had problems with some scandals or something like that, then, yeah, I would question that. I would question that whether it's face to face or online. In some cases, many of those kinds of schools happen to offer a large number of online programs and I think, in some cases, online learning has been painted with a broad brush, driven by some of the bad actors in the space. But by and large, most public institutions like mine and a lot of private institutions offer online learning and I would put the quality of it up there with anything face to face.

TAVIS And I would assume then that there's no difference in the degree. There's nothing on the degree that says that this student received this degree for taking—you know, there's no...

- TOM No, there's not. It's the same faculty, it's the same curriculum, same outcome, same requirements. And, in some cases, like I said, 80% of our students will take a mixture of modalities. They might take most face to face and a few online or most online and some face to face or all online. It's really kind of up to the student.
- TAVIS So, tell me what you think the future holds. Because I can see this working a couple of different ways. I can make the argument that it's a good thing and it's a bad thing. From the standpoint of the institution, as long as you got enough people signing up for this and there's money being made—not that I want to reduce education to money, but institutions have to survive. If you're giving discounts to these online students, that's less money ultimately coming into the institution if over the long run you see more kids signing up for online courses than for classroom courses, that could be a challenge for the institution. On the other hand, there are these questions that, of course, remain about—you've addressed some of them now—about the validity of this online learning. So, I'm just trying to get a sense of where you think the future is going to take us with regard to how we do these blended courses.
- TOM I think, by and large, we're turning the corner on those questions of is this quality. I think we've got enough literature, enough research, enough just anecdotal evidence of people we know who've gone through programs like this to say that, okay, this can be a quality experience. You know, to your first point about the finances, we like to think that making money is sort of the worst reason to get into this. It should be for other reasons, to support institutional mission, access, you know, success, helping students to make their way through a degree program. And then if you do all those things right, the money sort of takes care of itself. And in our case, the discount that we've applied to our fully online programs is only in fees. So, it's for services the students aren't accessing anyway, so the tuition revenue, if you will, remains the same.
- TAVIS Remains the same.
- TOM Remains the same, yeah.
- TAVIS You think, by and large, this is a good turn for academia in America?
- TOM I think it is in the sense that there are some students, there's a whole population of students, particularly under-served students, under-represented students, who must work, who have family commitments, and want to get an education, and they can't quit their job and go Monday, Wednesday, Friday at 10:00 in the morning to a class. Online learning offers them a path that wasn't there before. And I think that we can make that available to students to help them improve their situations, to get the education that they want. I also think that there are technologies that are being experimented in through online learning like adaptive learning and personalized learning that potentially could have an impact in the future if they prove to be successful.

TAVIS As I mentioned at the top of this conversation, this is the last in our series for this year about the future of education in this country. If you've missed any of these conversations, go to our website at [tavissmiley](http://tavissmiley.com)—go to pbs/—it's not my website [laugh]. Go to pbs/tavissmiley. You can download and look at any of the conversations we've had, all of them this year, about the future of education in America. Tom Cavanagh from UCF, thank you, sir.

TOM Thank you.

TAVIS Good to have you on. Thank you for your insights.

[Interview Ends]

KELVIN That was so cool, Tom! You're famous!

TOM Yeah, super famous. At least on Facebook when I told everybody and shared the link with my mom.

KELVIN She's like, "Cool!" But seriously, in all honesty, I really do think that was a good example for us to give it a listen to and think about some principles that we can kind of deconstruct from there that we can all apply, right? As I said, sometimes I do a good job when folks ask these basic questions, but sometimes when it hits me out of left field, I'm just like, seriously?

TOM Yeah, sometimes, it's easier for me and I feel more comfortable to answer questions about, you know, what assignments should be online versus face-to-face in a blended class as opposed to, you know, is online as good as face-to-face?

KELVIN Right. Right. And sometimes I got really pulled into the weeds or sometimes I'm just shocked because it's kind of like so, do we really think that gravity works?

TOM Yeah. Yeah, well, I mean, that's the question of the bubble. You know, we live in this bubble and we talk to each other and we all kind of understand the same frame of reference. And doing something like this, where you talk to somebody who's a very informed professional journalist but does not live in the world of online learning and you're in a very public kind of forum to do it, you want to make sure that you respond appropriately to these kinds of questions and not get defensive about them. You know, questions about cheating or about rigor or about is it as good as and all of that. It's a natural question, and sometimes you forget that those questions are out there when you live in this world every day. You don't ask yourselves those questions quite as frequently as somebody who maybe doesn't live in online learning would ask.

KELVIN Yeah, I think that's true. So, you mind if I just run down my little list of... This isn't like super elegant or anything. These are some things that suggested themselves to me when I was giving a listen and just maybe see if you react to, see if you agree with, and simply see if we can get some consensus on these, alright? No particular order. Know the facts.

TOM Yeah, don't lie. Or don't make it up.

KELVIN Yeah, I mean you knew stuff. I mean, there were actual, "Oh, you know, nearly eighty percent of you know..." So, you've got a thing. And yet, at the same time avoid getting pulled into the weeds and maybe not pulled in, avoid going into the weeds. Like, we know our stuff so well and we're in love with it and all. Little illustrative examples, fine. But you can go so zoomed in that you lose people.

TOM Yeah, and that's hard to do sometimes because when you do know the facts like, you know, those of us who spend our careers working in this space know it's hard to skim the surface of that at an executive summary level. I was in a meeting yesterday and the president of our university happened to be in the meeting, and somebody described something that was really good—really eloquent—and President Hitt said—I may not get the quote exactly right—but he said, "That's awesome. I loved everything you said but if that's your elevator pitch, you're going to need a taller building."

KELVIN *(Laughter)*

TOM I thought that was great.

KELVIN Yeah, and that's a good little lesson here as well is kind of practice the elevator pitch version. And, you know, my hashtag irony statement that I say often, right, is I don't do pithy. Hashtag irony. But I think too—we talked about this when you got back flying out to California to do the show—but you have to anticipate. You have to put yourself in the hypothetical shoes of the person who's talking to you. Anticipate the questions or assumptions, maybe even misperceptions. Not that I thought that Mr. Smiley was uninformed necessarily or anything but you have to anticipate that. Would you agree?

TOM Yeah, you have to. I did not know what the questions were going to be. In fact, I had asked for them ahead of time. Some of our news and information people had asked for them ahead of time. And the producer was pretty clear. He was like, "Well, first of all, don't worry but second of all, it's really just a conversation between you and Tavis, and you know, he will have some questions that he's interested in but it's going to be sort of where does the conversation go?" So, I couldn't really anticipate what he was going to ask me so I did, in my head, think through what would be some common questions and how would I potentially answer some of those.

KELVIN Yeah, I think it was good. And with that though, I guess, there's some stay on point, stay on message—not horribly so, mind you—but kind of have a message. Just kind of know the facts but have a message and be willing to get that across somehow.

TOM And I'm not very good at the politician thing of no matter what you're asked...

KELVIN *(Laughter)* Answer whatever you want.

TOM Answer whatever you want. Yeah, I tend to try to actually answer the question that's been asked of me which has sometimes has gotten me in trouble but I think it was okay in this case.

KELVIN Yeah, I think so too. And my problem, I find—I don't know if others can relate to this—is sometimes from a point of personal transparency and authenticity, I will to the *n*th degree say, “Yeah, you're right. We don't do a real good job of that compared to where we might want to be.” And that can take you down a rabbit hole, right? As opposed to, well, say, “Compared to at a high level, yes, we do a great job.” You know, just framing things is appropriate.

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN Then, I don't know if you resonate with this but I thought, you know—kind of in the *Whose Line is it Anyway* kind of, the theatre sports stuff—there's kind of a “Yes and...” kind of go with. Follow the energy. You know, Tavis Smiley goes a direction, you follow him. Now, you still have some points and you're going to address those points but you're willing to go with him.

TOM Sure. Yeah, I mean it's a question of acknowledging the concern, right? It's a legitimate concern, you know, “Hey, online, it seems like they would cheat more.” It's not the first time I've heard that question so acknowledge that and then try to give a response to it. And there was a lot more I could have said about that.

KELVIN Of course.

TOM If I had more time, I could have gone into a lot more detail and I think made an even better case. But, you can't just be defensive and say, “You know, I reject that question. How many times do I have to answer that question?” That's not a good way to respond.

KELVIN Yeah, right. Or “Well, goodness! They cheat face-to-face, too!”

TOM Right. That sounds equally defensive. Yeah.

KELVIN So, you got to find that right thing here. And then finally, while neither you nor Tavis Smiley said the words “Iron Triangle”—which we've talked about in previous episodes of *TOPcast*—the construct, the ideas were there, and I wondered if that construct informed your message points and your responses. I mean, are you thinking Iron Triangle-y?

TOM Yeah, but, you know what, I was speaking a lot from my own personal experience here at UCF, and we think that way here. Either directly or indirectly, I think that that definitely informs all of my responses even outside of that forum.

KELVIN Yeah. I think that makes sense. So, to me that just underscores maybe it's a message point thing but it's what is the big picture, what are the constructs that you can kind of hang your hat on and anchor back to and see how you're doing and so forth. So, I don't know. I thought good interview, good principles. Maybe we can all take those and try to apply them when we're outside of our bubble.

TOM Yeah, and if I could just take one moment to thank the entire Tavis Smiley production team. One, they gave us permission to use that recording.

KELVIN Which is awesome.

TOM Which is really nice and I really appreciate that. And then everybody on the staff and Mr. Smiley himself for having me. They were really great about prepping and setting it up and just sort of giving us a forum to talk about something that we care a lot about.

KELVIN So, bottom line it for us and take us home, Tom.

TOM So, for us working in online education, sooner or later, someone outside of our immediate context is going to ask, you know, honest, challenging questions about the value of online education. So, it behooves all of us if we're able to do a good job in responding to those questions. Think about it. Anticipate it. And you know, just be polite. I had a friend on Facebook after I kind of posted the link as I'm prone to do, who said, "Gee! You took a boring subject and made it interesting!"

KELVIN "What boring subject? I was talking about what I do every day."

TOM Thanks. It's only my career that you were talking about. And this is a guy who sells lockers for a living.

KELVIN Just saying. *(Laughter)*

TOM Just saying. I love him, if he's listening. I'm sure he's not. Great guy. *(Laughter)*

KELVIN It's all relative. *(Laughter)*

TOM It is. So, if you haven't visited the *TOPcast* website, please do. We have lots of good stuff out there. We have ways to interact, send emails, look at show notes—not just for this show but for every show—and we'll have a link to the actual interview if you wanted to watch that.

KELVIN Maybe we'll put the interviews to those other two in his series as well: Cheryl Hyman and Janet Napolitano.

TOM Yeah! That's a good idea.

KELVIN Website is at topcast.online.ucf.edu.

TOM And iTunes! If you like this podcast—

KELVIN And we hope you do.

TOM We hope you do. And you think others might appreciate it as well a great way to help them find it is to give us a review on iTunes. It affects the algorithm that helps in search results and all that.

KELVIN Goodness. We'd love that. But if you can only just manage to click a star, that would be fine too. We'd take that star rating.

TOM *(Laughter)* There you go.

KELVIN That'd be okay.

TOM Alright, I think for another *TOPcast*, I'm Tom.

KELVIN I'm still Kelvin.

TOM *(Laughter)* See ya!