

## TOPcast Episode 24: Multilingual Musings: International Connections in Online Education

- KELVIN From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I'm Kelvin Thompson.
- TOM And I am Tom Cavanagh.
- KELVIN And you are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. What's up, Tom?
- TOM Not much. I'm thirsty.
- KELVIN That's great, Tom. You know why?
- TOM No.
- KELVIN I've brought a Thermos full of coffee—
- TOM What a shocker!
- KELVIN —to share with you.
- TOM Great!
- KELVIN That's good. So, here's the deal. You want to know what this is? I like this. It actually has like a nice taste to it. You taste it yet?
- TOM I did. ¡Que beuno!
- KELVIN Mhm! Well, it's interesting you say that. This actually comes from Colombia. A region called—I mean I hope I don't butcher this—I guess it would be... It's H-U-I-L-A. Would that be Huila?
- TOM Huila!
- KELVIN Huila, Colombia, and they call this a Claudia Samboni because Claudia Samboni actually has a little collective there and grows this coffee. So, Novel Coffee Roasting in Texas works with Claudia and her colleagues—her farm colleagues there—and brings this in, and I think it's a very nice cup of coffee.
- TOM Yeah, I like it. ¡Me gusta!
- KELVIN Well, see, that's very impressive! There is a reason that we're drinking Colombian coffee, and you're going into speaking in tongues over there, Tom, and why is that?
- TOM ¿Porque? Well, I've had the opportunity a couple of times to participate in conferences—international conferences—overseas. I've done a couple in China, I did one in Brazil, and there was simultaneous translation and you got to interact with people from various cultures who spoke different languages. I found the whole thing fascinating and enriching. Many of the leading conferences in online education happen to be hosted in

the US, and while we often see scholars and practitioners from other countries at these US-based conferences, it's easy for those of us here in the US to develop something of a provincial view of online education. In fact, you know, as we know online education truly is a global phenomenon. I get asked all the time, "Well, what if we brought in students from this country? Or could they take it from that country?" And so, we need to give attention to how the world and online education intersect. And also, we look at this sort of changing demographics of the United States and thought who could we talk to about all of these issues?

KELVIN If only we know somebody.

TOM If only we did, and thankfully, we happen to know someone who is uniquely positioned to help us.

KELVIN Well, that's true. So, you, Tom, interviewed our friend and colleague of many years Alexandra or Alex Pickett during the 2016 Online Learning Consortium Accelerate Conference.

TOM I did.

KELVIN Alex leads the Center for Online Teaching Excellence or COTE. They're really big into acronyms. I'm an acronym lover and even I find they have a lot of acronyms. The Center for Online Teaching Excellence within Open SUNY—SUNY being the State Universities system of New York. And so, Alex is a Fellow of the Online Learning Consortium. And I mean really if you're listening to this you probably know Alex. Alex has been recognized formally and informally as a leader in our field for many years. But you know, I don't know if everybody knows this. Alex—or we might say aka Alejandra—is actually Colombian American and cares quite a bit, is very passionate about kind of this whole internationalization, global context, Spanish-speaking world relevance—all that kind of stuff—so hence the interview.

TOM So, why don't we just take a listen to it now, and then we'll pick it back up when it's over.

KELVIN Sounds like a good idea.

*(musical transition)*

TOM So, we are here with Alexandra Pickett, a good friend of ours for many years, working primarily with the Online Learning Consortium and prior to that the Sloan Consortium. So, Alex, welcome to TOPcast.

ALEX Thanks, Tom.

TOM And I wonder if you could, just for the home listening audience, introduce yourself and

your title.

ALEX Sure! My name is Alexandra Pickett and I'm the Director of the Open SUNY Center for Online Teaching Excellence. SUNY is the State University of New York, the largest state university system in the galaxy. *(laughter)* So, we're 64 institutions. We have, you know, 400,000 students, 40,000 faculty and staff. It's a large university system with everything from community colleges to doctoral institutions, and I lead the Center for Online Teaching Excellence, and I have been in charge of online faculty development and online instructional design for over 20 years.

TOM Wow! Well, we're out of time. *(laughter)* No. The largest in the galaxy! I didn't realize that IPEDS data extended all the way to Jupiter.

ALEX *(laughter)* No. It's probably just the Western Hemisphere, because probably in Europe, their Open University system is probably larger but, yeah, certainly in this hemisphere.

TOM Yeah, well we're big fans of SUNY and the work that you've been doing. We've following along.

ALEX Awesome! Mutual fan society here today. I'm so happy to be here with you guys.

TOM Well, there's a lot of things that we could talk about, and in brainstorming, "If we have Alex on the show, you know, what are the... What should we talk about?" But we're going to throw a bit of a curve at you. Something that struck me from last year's Online Learning Consortium Accelerate Conference was the Spanish language track that was kind of exclusively for Spanish speakers, and I hadn't see that at a conference before. I know that you were a bit of a driver behind that, and I was wondering if maybe you could talk a little bit about why you thought that was worthwhile, some of the planning that went into it, maybe talk a little bit about some of the sessions that were that were a part of that, and then maybe we can lead into some broader topics about serving that audience through online learning.

ALEX So, yeah, cool. You know, it's interesting when you have an idea then people will put you in charge of it.

TOM Be careful having ideas.

ALEX That's right. So, I am a first generation Colombian American. My mom was Colombian, and I happened to have been born in Mexico because my dad's an anthropologist and was doing his graduate work there. So, I have a long history of and roots in South America and Latin America. I speak Spanish fluently. I was raised bilingually, and so I have an affinity for really trying to, you know, use the privilege that I have of working for this largest state university system in the galaxy to share what I know with my friends, family, and colleagues in Spanish-speaking countries. And so, at every opportunity that I have that I can find, I try to look for those opportunities where we can have some kind of

exchange, and speaking the language helps a lot. So, I have put myself into positions where I, you know, was raised bilingually but conversationally I never went to school to learn Spanish, and so I learned to speak Spanish with my mom and my grandmother. And so, you know speaking professionally and academically is like another thing, right? I learned how to make the bed and wash dishes and stuff like that but never to speak about online teaching and learning or, you know, anything professional. But I have put myself in the position of making myself do that to practice and to be able to share what I know and to learn what is going on in Spanish-speaking countries about what they're doing in online teaching and learning because I think it's so important. So, when it came to Sloan—which is my home and my family—or OLC. As an original Sloan Grantee and as someone—a woman, a woman with Latin American roots, a woman who works in technology and in online teaching and learning—I feel it a strong obligation to share and to communicate. So, I brought it to OLC as an idea. I'd been talking about it actually for a couple of years and then last year—or the year before I guess—I made the suggestion and they put me in charge of the track. So, last year that we had a, you know, full-on Spanish language track. There were proposals that were proposed in Spanish by, you know, native speakers of Spanish, and we had 15 proposals that were accepted and delivered last year in that track.

TOM How did you do the reviews? Did you have to recruit Spanish speakers?

ALEX I did. So, you know, I network a lot, and I use social media a lot. I have also had the opportunity to travel to Spanish-speaking countries and develop a network of people who speak Spanish. It's like an interest of mine, as I described. So, I just called on all of them and sent them personal communications and said, "I need you, number one, to propose something and, number two, to help me to review proposals." And so, we did it. We put together a group of people and, you know, we got quite a few proposals, and 15 of them ended up being presented last year in that Spanish language track. They were presented in Spanish by native Spanish speakers. So, I thought it was fabulous. I think it's really important as an international conference. As an association that is an international online teaching and learning association, it's so important for us to reach out beyond our English-speaking colleagues to understand what's going on in the world in online teaching and learning. We are not the only ones doing stuff. They are doing amazing things in in other countries. I mean, my affinity is with the Spanish speakers but I know that in Europe, if you go to the Eden conference, they're doing amazing things in other countries, and when there's a barrier of a language, we sometimes don't or we aren't able to understand or get to be able to see or experience some of the things that are going on in the world. As a larger world community of people who share an interest in online teaching and learning, we have to be able to figure out how we can bring it all together so that we can all learn with each other and share with each other what's going on. The language, you know, can be a barrier. But, you know, with a track like this or by encouraging folks, you know, from other countries from outside of the United States to participate in this international association, I think we provide a venue and a forum for that kind of intercultural and, you know, experiential kind of exchange.

TOM So, I've personally presented at conferences in the Far East and in South America and there's usually been some kind of like headset and simultaneous translation going on. And you didn't have that at the OLC conference last year.

ALEX Well, I recommended it.

TOM Well, I know it can be costly, as well.

ALEX And it was the first year we were doing it. So, you know, we were trying to get it off the ground and figure out what do we need to do? What do we need? I mean signage was another issue. Simultaneous translation.

TOM I was going to ask about sort of like the plenaries and the keynotes and things like that.

ALEX What we identified were a list of things that we knew—if we were going to do this right—we would need to address, and one would have been simultaneous translation of the plenaries and keynotes. Also, it would have been great to have some ability to allow the people who really didn't speak English to be able to engage or have a buddy or somebody who could go with them to, perhaps, also do some simultaneous translation. We needed to work on some signage, you know.

TOM Well, that's an art, too: simultaneous translation. Just because you can speak two languages doesn't mean you can be, you know, an effective simultaneous translator.

ALEX Here in Florida, though, they have lots and lots of services and lots of people who provide those services. So, I think it's possible. So, yeah, I mean, you know, trying something new always presents all sorts of lessons learned, as well as things that we would want to do in the future: needs, you know, things that worked and things that need to be improved. So, I'm hoping that we're able to bring that Spanish language track back and that we can continue to improve it.

TOM So, when I saw that last year it kind of sparked some thinking in my mind, and I can't find any evidence of it now. But I could swear I have seen advertisements for Spanish or online degrees delivered in Spanish by American institutions. And I—somebody can contact us and tell me if I'm wrong—but I swear I saw it on the DeVry University website. I can't find evidence of it now but my searching skills online may have atrophied. But I thought that was fascinating, and I could see having just gone through our reaffirmation from our regional accreditor and all the things that they look at—the ancillary services of advising, and library, and all the other kind of student support services. It's not just, “Could you put [blank]?” Because you could easily put a course online in another language. We could put our courses in Spanish online, but it's all the wraparound institutional support that we just don't have that kind of redundant multilingual kind of support for. I don't know if you have any thoughts on that, but I think that the first school that can figure this out, there's a giant market waiting for them.

ALEX So, right, you know, I think that we have seen that the demographics of this country have definitely—in at least in the Spanish-speaking demographic—that has been increasing every year. And so, you know, being able to provide educational options and opportunities for people in the Spanish language, I think would be a fabulous, interesting idea. And you're right. The devil is in the details, right? Like how are you going to—and especially if you were to do it online, right, and if they never come to your campus—how are you going to provide all the supports and services and all of the things that are necessary? It's similar to the Spanish language track and microcosm, right? So, you need to think about signage—even if it's virtual signage—and you need to think about advising and you need to think about, you know, books. How are they going to get the student support services that are necessary if their only language is Spanish? And so, you know, thinking that through is going to take some thought.

TOM Yeah, for us, we've built our online program on top of the existing university infrastructure. So, we've been able to leverage everything that is already there. Whether it's the library or counseling or whatever it might be, we don't have to create it. But if you were going to offer that to another language, then you would have to. Or you'd have to hire people who could handle it.

ALEX There'd need to be resources and infrastructure in place in order to support that particular, you know, subgroup of students, right? And have staff in place and have resources in place and have information in place on how to navigate the system, you know, in a different language.

TOM I have heard of schools—this isn't necessarily for online learning—but I'm thinking of one particular school here in Florida. I don't think they still do this, but I imagine they do. They're a Catholic school in Florida. They kind of know who their audience is, and they have offered Spanish language support services to the families of students who are coming to campus. So, providing updates in Spanish and other kinds of information. I don't know all the details but I thought that was interesting. It's a way to kind of bring the whole family into the whole college-going experience and speaking to them in the language that they know and it may be it's a good marketing tool, too, because you're making it that much more accessible. Now the students may speak English and get their instruction in English but some of the outreach to the family is in Spanish.

ALEX Yeah, I wonder if K-12 has any lessons learned for us.

TOM Yeah, I bet they do.

ALEX I bet they do, because I bet they have to engage the parents, and I bet they have mechanisms, processes, supports, and the obviously lessons learned in how they are approaching that demographic. Right? It'd be interesting to see in states that have large Spanish-speaking populations and large school systems just what their supports and services and systems would be to see how that might translate, you know, either to the community college level or beyond.

TOM When I think even about the international work that we do—and there are other schools that do a lot more than we do—but so, we've got a program in South America in partnership with an institution down there, and we deliver the program in English, you know. So, even our professors are speaking English to the students there, and it's kind of a prerequisite for enrollment for the students is they have to speak English.

ALEX What's the country?

TOM Peru!

ALEX Oh, awesome! That sounds cool.

TOM I'm waiting for my invitation. *(laughter)*

ALEX I'm waiting to go with you in your baggage. *(laughter)* I haven't been to Peru. That'd be awesome.

TOM Well, it's an interesting topic, and I think your point about K-12 is really well taken, because I went to the University of Miami and I know that Miami-Dade County deals with this in a big way. And not just Spanish! With Creole and all kinds of, you know, dialects and issues.

ALEX I bet Texas and Arizona and California, probably, might have some, you know, school districts or information at, you know, at the state education level or even at the district level. Right?

TOM Yeah, so there probably are a lot of lessons that we can learn from K-12 and not just in this area. Probably in a lot of ways. They are doing some interesting things in blended learning.

ALEX Yeah.

TOM Well, I think this is a really interesting topic and it's probably, you know, one that we could spend a lot of time, I think, over the next few years digging into. I hope that the... I'll say, foreign language track—probably Spanish—

ALEX Or the international track, or whatever it ends up being.

TOM I hope it comes back strong because I agree. As an international conference, I think that we could attract an even more diverse international attendance by offering that kind of a service.

ALEX Yeah, I think that it would be super cool, too. And I'll volunteer! *(laughter)*

TOM       Awesome! See, be careful! Don't have an idea or you'll be put in charge!

ALEX       I'm always willing to volunteer.

TOM       Great! Alex, on behalf of Kelvin and myself, thank you so much for being on the TOPcast today.

ALEX       Thank you so much! Good to see you guys!

*(musical transition)*

KELVIN     So good to hear Alex on the show, Tom!

TOM       Yeah, she's great, and she's been on our list of interviewees for a long time.

KELVIN     We've mentioned her name in numerous episodes. Just a curry favor.

TOM       We have. She's maybe, kind of like, the silent cohost as she gets mentioned so often. We're fans of her work.

KELVIN     We are very much fans of her work. I was just thinking some people wish that the hosts were silent.

TOM       *(laughter)* "Why don't you guys drink more coffee and have Alex talk more?"

KELVIN     That's right. *(laughter)* Good advice!

TOM       Well, I thought the conversation was interesting. It kind of went in some, kind of, different directions, but the idea of recognizing this changing demographic, the number of Spanish speakers—whether native or second tongue—is a reality, you know, that higher education needs to face. And how do we do that? You know? So, we kind of discussed to two ways. One is through professional associations and conferences and the other is, you know, is there a way that we could provide instruction more directly? I think it's just a matter of time before this happens. We did touch base on the struggles with that being all of the support infrastructure. I think it's a simpler enough thing to build online courses in another language. I used to do that when I was in corporate training, and we would have multinational companies that we were supporting. We would build computer-based training, and it was easy enough to localize into different languages. But, you know, having the library holdings, the advisors, the tutoring, the writing center and all of that, you're talking about a big deal and that's much harder to do.

KELVIN     Yeah, I think that's right, and that's the kind of the zoomed in language-based stuff. And then, I think the broader conceptualization of... I like what you said at the beginning. We all too often—I know I'm guilty of this. I won't speak for everybody, but it's easy to develop kind of a provincial view of online education even though it has truly, truly, a



global reach. It's certainly easy to kind of, you know, just see things from your own unique vantage point. And you know, reaching out, having international conferences that are truly international, having to stretch yourself. I love what you described about being in these other venues and you got like the—whatever the phrase is—you know, listening to the live translations.

TOM The simultaneous translation.

KELVIN Yeah! Yeah, that's cool!

TOM Yeah, it is cool, and I haven't had a lot of opportunity to do that, but the few times that I have, you're sort of struck that, you know what? Online learning doesn't just happen in the US.

KELVIN Yes!

TOM And, you go to these other countries and you're like, "What? You're using Blackboard? Really? And, you're teaching students who aren't in the classroom?" Of course they are. They've got real interesting practices that they're experimenting with, and we ought to have a little more cross-pollination of what's happening. So, it's not just, here's what happens. It's bad enough in the US where the Florida people barely talk to the Florida people. (*laughter*) And then we get to these conferences and it's nice to find out what folks on the other side of the country are doing.

KELVIN Yes.

TOM And so, we should extend that across the oceans.

KELVIN No, that's exactly right. So, maybe this is a bottom line for us today. So, online education is not just the province of one country. Diverse, international perspectives enrich our community and advance our collective knowledge. How's that sound?

TOM Yeah, isn't that what higher education is all about?

KELVIN Well, one would hope.

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN That's right. So, I guess maybe before we go, some shameless self-promotion plugs. We've been softly advancing this idea for a little while now of registered listeners. The idea of, you know, if we know who you are, we give you more stuff. It's like a tradeoff. You know, you tell us who you are and we'll set you up. We'll give you that little value add newsletter that has better packaged Show Notes and resources. And, you know, we'll even do the occasional little meetup. We'll give access to episodes a little sooner or anything else we can think up.

TOM Yeah, and it's as much about creating a community for online learning professionals as anything else, if we don't know who you are, it's hard to create the community.

KELVIN That being said, there are a lot of connection opportunities at the TOPcast website: [topcast.online.ucf.edu](http://topcast.online.ucf.edu). But you know what? We'd love you to be a registered listener and you could do that by just going to [bit.ly](http://bit.ly)—the shortening service—[bit.ly/topcastclub](http://bit.ly/topcastclub). All lowercases. No spaces. TOPcast club. So, I guess until next time, I'm Kelvin.

TOM And I'm Tom!

KELVIN See ya!