

TOPcast Episode 25: But FIRRSST...Lead Innovation!

- TOM This episode of TOPcast is brought to you by UCF Online. 20+ 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're listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hi Kelvin!
- KELVIN Hey Tom!
- TOM So, this is a bit of a strange episode for us. A very special TOPcast.
- KELVIN More special than usual, Tom. It's unique.
- TOM It is unique, because we have had a TOPcast first, ladies and gentlemen.
- KELVIN That's right.
- TOM This is our first re-recording.
- KELVIN Believe it or not. You thought that we had done multiple takes on all those other episodes. *(laughter)*
- TOM Because they're so perfect.
- KELVIN But no. No, we're one-take Tom and Kelvin, usually.
- TOM We have had a couple of episodes that have been very lightly edited. Very lightly, because frankly, we just don't have the time to do much more. *(laughter)*
- KELVIN That's right.
- TOM But yeah, this one was one that we actually recorded—for us, while we're recording this—last week in New Orleans at the Online Learning Consortium Innovate Conference, and like last year, we wanted to try and do something on location.
- KELVIN That's right.
- TOM So, we took our recording devices out into the French Quarter.
- KELVIN We thought it was going to be a lot of local color.
- TOM Yes, and it was perhaps a little too colorful.
- KELVIN *(laughter)*

TOM It happened to be during the opening day of the French Quarter Festival.

KELVIN It was colorful.

TOM It was basically a mini Mardi Gras. It was crazy. *(laughter)* We saw it all.

KELVIN There was this guy that came up right during the recording and was like staring at us like six inches from our faces. It was great.

TOM Yup, and we had all kinds of other people in various states of inebriation wandering by. There was a guy just probably five feet from us who was wearing a suit with quotes written all over it, and he was the Quote Guy. You could go up to him and get your own custom quote.

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM We could hear the music coming. We had found a place that we thought was the quietest we were going to find, and we walked all around Jackson Square.

KELVIN Oh, we did.

TOM And it was actually in an alley on the west side of St. Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square, and it actually wasn't a terrible location.

KELVIN Yeah, it was good.

TOM The terrible part was me and my inability to understand how to record on my iPhone.

KELVIN *(laughter)*

TOM Even though I've done it before, I hadn't used that particular app, and it didn't work.

KELVIN So, we had like half of a— *(laughter)*

TOM Yeah, and as interesting as Kelvin is, hearing just his half of the conversation probably would not a good podcast make.

KELVIN *(laughter)* That's right. Even I would testify to that. Yes.

TOM So, we were drinking coffee. We did go to a local coffee barista.

KELVIN We were.

TOM It was an interesting colorful little place, and it was right there in the French Quarter. Only about a block or so from Jackson Square. You want to tell the listening audience what we were drinking when we actually recorded this?

KELVIN Yeah! So, as I recall, Tom, I was drinking a Rwanda Nyamagabe from Passion House Coffee that we got at this little coffee place. They don't roast their own. They pull in high-end coffee from other places, so this one was Passion House Coffee. You were drinking, I think, a latte.

TOM I did. I had a latte.

KELVIN We obtained both of this from this little boutique coffee location like you mentioned in the Quarter called Spitfire Coffee, and I thought that was an appropriate place for us to obtain our coffee for the episode recording for today's topic because it was during the OLC Innovate conference and we were talking about innovation—and we're going to talk about innovation here in a moment—because Spitfire was the name of an interceptor aircraft that was kind of innovative during World War II and widely credited by the public at the time as a significant factor in English successes during the Battle of Britain. So, I think we have a photo of you in Spitfire. We'll put that on the show notes page.

TOM To prove that we were actually in the French Quarter.

KELVIN That's exactly right. Just some evidence. We want to be evidence-based here on TOPcast, Tom. If you look behind Tom in that photo, you'll actually see this big curtain/drape thing that actually has all these illustrations of the Spitfire aircraft. So, that's kind of cool.

So, that was kind of the reason. That's why we got that coffee, and so, here we are, back in the studio.

TOM Back in the studio, and it is much quieter here.

KELVIN It is. *(laughter)* And less colorful.

TOM Much less colorful. We don't have people in strange costumes staring at us from six inches away.

KELVIN Yup.

TOM But, no place like New Orleans!

KELVIN That is true.

TOM It's got its own vibe, and it was fun. It was a great conference, and we thought that we might base a podcast episode on a session that you and I did while at that conference.

KELVIN Yes.

TOM We were in their Innovation Lab and did a bit of a seminar/workshop that seemed to go over pretty well. It's on the topic of innovation. So, your coffee choice of the Spitfire was well chosen. Maybe we can just sort of jump in.

KELVIN Yeah! So, I guess we were going to kind of hit some highlights, some relative concepts from that session here on this episode, and this is really all about leading innovation in online education. We have some constructs and models to share, right? So, maybe, Tom, can we start with just operationally defining innovation as we're talking about it? I swear some people—They say innovation and they mean a new piece of technology or something, but how are we going to operationally define innovation?

TOM Yeah. Well, we're defining it within our own kind of narrow online learning world, and I should say that we co-authored a chapter that is forthcoming in a book which—hopefully by the time people hear this—

KELVIN Or within the next five years.

TOM —will have been out. Academic publishing is an industry ripe for innovation.

KELVIN *(laughter)*

TOM Let's just say. So, at some point, it will be out. There's a lot more detail than what we will talk about today in that chapter, but one of the things we mentioned is the definition of innovation as implementing new ideas in online education in order to bring about better outcomes.

KELVIN Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

TOM So, it's a means to an end.

KELVIN Yes. Not an end to itself, which some people—I mean, with a conference like Innovate, there was a little bit of that in some cases. Not using a broad brush, but sometimes we talk about innovation so much it seems like it takes on a life of its own. I remember our colleague Alex Pickett was talking about during the conference—we've had her on TOPcast before. Alex's a great person. Open SUNY. Alex was saying, "Well hey! Let's not get ahead of ourselves. There's got to be some kind of a need that you're going to address that that's the reason you're innovating. Not just for the sake of innovating."

TOM Sure. We hear a lot about disruptive innovation and it's become kind of this thing. "Well, we must disrupt!" Well, why?

KELVIN Yeah. That's right.

TOM Maybe? But it needs to be for a reason, and we'll get into some of that in a moment. Maybe we should start with kind of some contextual visioning of innovation.

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM So, you have prepared a quadrant: a four-box quadrant of how to think about visioning, and it kind of breaks down into the "here and now", which would be the bottom left of the—No, I'm sorry. The upper left of the quadrant. The "here and now", which is more like current operations. The day to day work.

KELVIN The quotidian.

TOM Right. Then we have the "there and then" which is the opposite corner, which would be the bottom right, which is sort of this distant vision that doesn't yet exist yet.

KELVIN Right.

TOM "Doesn't yet exist yet." That's nice. And then, in the other boxes we have "here and then", which would be strategic planning. What are we going to do here but at some point at the future that's maybe not distant?

KELVIN Five years. Ten years. Twenty years. Whatever.

TOM And then, of course, we have the "there and now", which is what is happening at another institution right now that we should be aware of? I assume we'll do some sort of a link or something to this because it's easier to see than to hear.

KELVIN Yes. Right. And I think, you know, we found that useful to kind of frame out—Like if you've got a need and you're going to go in search of a solution—you're going to innovate—your vision is a good starting point, right? As you said, there's the "here and now", and we want to—If all we're going to be concerned about is just kind of doing day-in and day-out—What's that old cliché? "If you keep doing what you've always done, you're going to keep getting what you always got."

TOM Right.

KELVIN So, if we're imagining better outcomes, well, you're going to have to look outside of that immediate quadrant. Not to say that you just want to keep up with the next software update and keep on, you know, maintaining a certain level of service, but there is a place for looking at things like the "Horizon Reports" and the "Current Issues in Teaching and Learning" from places like EDUCAUSE.

TOM "7 Things You Should Know".

KELVIN Yeah, and the Online Learning Consortium and WCET. All of these organizations put out trend outlooks of some sort, and that's helpful, but it is, like you said, good to [say], "Well, what's happening at Institution X? They seem to be doing a good job with a similar situation." So, that helps. So, I said to you not long ago that there's this famous art quote that [goes,] "All art is a series of recoveries from the first line that you draw." In some ways, we might look at innovation as a series of recoveries from your first cast of the vision.

TOM Right.

KELVIN It kind of takes you a certain direction. But, apart from that, where do you go in search of your vision, and what are you going to try to solve? We've come up with this little heuristic, as you said, that was in this article that we're writing—well, that we've written and is going to see the light of day at some point—and that we focused on in the Innovation Lab session. So, you want to maybe just kind of summarize the little heuristic and then we'll take it apart [and] elaborate on it?

TOM Sure. So, it's an acronym, naturally, called FIRRST. F-I-R-R-S-T.

KELVIN Maybe it's "fierst".

TOM Yes. Roll the "r" whether you're Scottish or Latin or something, but there's an extra "r" in the FIRRST. So, the acronym stands for:
Follow the energy
Invent the future
Research and make a decision
Recognize resource limitations
Solve the big problems
Take action

And so, maybe we should just quickly run through a bunch of those.

KELVIN Yeah! Do that.

TOM So, the first one—the "F" of FIRRST—is "Follow the energy," and it's really important, I think, for leaders and aspiring leaders—particularly in online education—to recognize when there's already something cool and interesting happening. If there's some sort of critical mass coalescing around some particular kind of initiative—particularly if that even tangentially sort of aligns with something that you're trying to accomplish. How can you nurture, fertilize, water that so we can grow and help you kind of accomplish what you want to accomplish or can shape that to kind of feed another agenda? It sounds almost exploitative the way I'm describing it, but I don't mean it that way. I mean it's sort of taking advantage of good work that's already happening and not squashing it just to fit some preset agenda, but kind of recognizing when something organic is happening and doing what you can to nurture that.

KELVIN Well, it's like the antithesis of the Sisyphean journey, right? I mean, we've all encountered this experience of it feels like you're pushing this ginormous boulder up a hill and it's going to roll over you and flatten you at times. It's the opposite of that.

TOM Yeah, and so, maybe an example that—We'll draw a few examples from personal experience here, but one is our adaptive learning initiative. We've been working on an adaptive learning pilot for the last several years, and it's expanding and having some success, but we've mostly been working at it at kind of an enterprise-level with one particular platform that's been successful for us. But we've also discovered that within one particular college that a publisher platform is reaching a certain level of adoption that we have to take notice of.

KELVIN Right.

TOM And rather than try and force the faculty in that college to adopt this enterprise platform that we've been using, maybe a better solution is to encourage them to keep using the thing that they've been using that has similar outcomes—maybe it's not exactly the same—but rather than try and get them to culturally adopt something completely different, to just leverage what they're already doing and recognize that there is already this critical mass that can serve our larger adaptive learning goals.

KELVIN Yeah. That's good.

TOM Alright, so the next one: “Invent the future.” So, that one is in many ways kind of the opposite from “Follow the energy” where you want to take advantage of something that's already happening. “Invent the future” is where you declare a desired state and do what you can to create that, and that can be a lot of work. *(laughter)*

KELVIN Maybe it is Sisyphean, right? I mean, not everything can be that way, but if you are dedicated to it, right? “I believe in this desirable end state. I'm willing to work for it.” Pick the hill that you're willing to die. You're all going to die on this thing.

TOM *(laughter)*

KELVIN They can't all be that, but maybe it is worth it.

TOM Yeah! Maybe! And so, the example we've selected *(laughter)* is badges.

KELVIN *(laughter)* It feels a lot like a Sisyphean journey.

TOM It does. We've talked about this on this podcast before where I just feel like I keep pushing this badging agenda that we just haven't been able to get a whole lot of traction on, but we haven't given up on it. I think micro-credentials, achievements, stackable

credentials—Call them what you want. I think that there's a place for them in our higher education ecosystem, and we've just kind of got to figure out the code on it. *(laughter)*

KELVIN Yeah. Right.

TOM So, we're trying to invent that in many ways here at UCF. Now, I know other schools are saying, "Well, we're doing it!" Well...we're not. *(laughter)*

KELVIN We're working on it. That's right. It's maybe worth saying that in our little heuristic, right, FIRRSST, that these are not necessarily sequential steps all the way through. Like, you just gave the examples of the first two "Follow the energy" and "Invent the future". Those are maybe even either/or or maybe they work synergistically somehow.

TOM Yeah, this isn't a cookbook. It's not a sequential ordered steps that you need to follow. These are just different aspects of how to think about innovation, and it could be that any particular initiative touches multiple of these.

KELVIN That's right. So, we offered them in the spirit of "Huh, well, I hadn't really thought about that: this one piece of heuristic I've now found value in. I wouldn't have thought about it unless you brought it up." So, that's why we're offering it. We're onto the first "r", Tom. What is that?

TOM "R": "Research and make a decision."

KELVIN Oooh, those are good.

TOM So, you have to be able to do your homework and base any decision you make on the research that you do, and it's really as much about understanding why you want to do something as it is kind of understanding that you have to do something. *(laughter)* Let me see if I can make that more obscure.

KELVIN *(laughter)*

TOM Maybe with an example. So, MOOCs.

KELVIN Uh huh. Heard of those.

TOM Yeah, I think most people listening to this have heard of MOOCs: massive open online courses. They were all the rage not that long ago, and it was a bit of *Keeping Up with the Joneses*. A lot of institutions—

KELVIN "Following the energy." *(laughter)*

TOM *(laughter)* “Institution X is doing a MOOC. Oh my gosh. We better do some MOOCs, too!” And there was a bit of a land rush into the MOOC world, and I’m not sure every school was completely sure why they were doing it.

KELVIN Right.

TOM They hadn’t really done the research to make a decision about getting into the MOOC business. Now, that’s not to paint a broad brush. Some schools did have a good idea. “We want to do this for outreach purposes” or “We want to do this for marketing or for university brand exposure” or whatever it is, but if you were just doing it because you perceived some competitor was doing it first and you thought, “Well, I better, too!” That’s probably not the best reason to get into an innovation.

KELVIN Right.

TOM It’s going to just cost you money. *(laughter)*

KELVIN Sure.

TOM And if you don’t know what your goals are, you can’t research, really, if you’re going to be able to accomplish those goals.

KELVIN And, I guess, too, though, part of that research is staying attuned to general trends in innovations, and, you know, we probably all are like Siri. We’re all listening all the time. We’re all watching all the time, and when you see something that looks like it has potential, then you dig in. You learn a little bit more about it, right? Research can then bifurcate. It can be go and look at what other people are doing, what other people are publishing, but then, at some point, it might involve piloting something, trying it out, collecting data. So, that research can be both the more passive variety of reading, consuming, but it can also be some doing before you make a committal decision at more of an enterprise level.

TOM Yes!

KELVIN Would you agree with that?

TOM I would, and I think it also implies that you should be as data-informed in your decision-making as you possibly can.

KELVIN Yes. Absolutely.

TOM It’s about mitigating risk.

KELVIN Absolutely!

TOM You want to try to have as much information, as much data as you can so that your decisions are based on something other than just a hunch, which can be bad. *(laughter)*

KELVIN Right. Yeah. Absolutely.

TOM Alright, so the second “R”: “Recognize resource limitations”.

KELVIN *(laughter)* We all recognize the resource limitations.

TOM Yeah, and I’m going to make a fairly controversial statement here, although I didn’t make it up. In some ways, resource limitations can be a good thing. “What, Tom?”

KELVIN What, Tom?!

TOM “How dare you say that!”

KELVIN That’s right. We never have enough money.

TOM You know, there’s a definition of creativity that if you had all the resources in the world, if you had unlimited resources, there would be no need for people to be creative.

KELVIN Sure.

TOM Because you can only be creative within boundaries, within limits, and if there were no resources limitations then the solutions we would come up with would probably be wildly inefficient and probably not the best solutions. So, in some ways, resource limitations kind of force us to optimize things and come up with creative innovative ways to accomplish things. In our chapter, we quote Arthur Kirk, the former president of St. Leo University, who said something along the lines of, “It’s not about the resources you have but how resourceful you are.”

KELVIN Right.

TOM I really like that, because I think there’s some wisdom in it, especially when you think about a school like St. Leo that innovated its way to success and completely changed their model. Southern New Hampshire is another example like that.

KELVIN Yeah, sure.

TOM You want to talk a little bit about what we do here? Maybe with Hack Day?

KELVIN Sure! I mean, I guess, to transition into that, [with] resources, I think we often think in terms of money and equipment and so forth and personnel (if we have enough people) but at some point, it’s digging deeper into those personnel resources, right? So, we’ve talked a little bit before in a past TOPcast episode about Hack Day or—what’s Google

call it? 20% time? Something like that. So, these kind of stimulating and, in a sense, “following the energy”—to kind of mix up our heuristic a little bit—of the passions of our individual personnel. So, as you may remember, we give a whole day once a semester where, “Hey! You can work on anything you want to work on!” It’d be great if it was kind of related to your job, but it doesn’t have to be, and so, we’ve had student projects gen up all kinds of interesting things. Sometimes they parallel where the industry’s going. Sometimes they’re totally out there somewhere. I remember there was one a while back—I forget what it was actually called but I think of it as a real-time engagement tracker. You’re sitting in class as a student—

TOM I remember that one.

KELVIN Moment by moment, you can [think], “Okay, losing interest” and *click, click, click*. “Losing interest!” *Click, click, click*. Versus, “Oh! That’s interesting!” *Click, click, click*. And so, the instructor, in real time, could see an aggregate dashboard of “I’m losing ‘em! I’m losing ‘em!” (*laughter*) It was kind of interesting, right? So, we’ve seen sometimes those little snippet projects actually turn into something.

TOM Yeah, in fact, every time we do a Hack Day—and we do it three times a year, and it’s one day per semester—the staff can work on whatever they want. Almost always there’s a significant percentage of them that we just implement.

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM It’s awesome. When we did it very early on, I remember the team mobilized our website in 24 hours.

KELVIN They made it mobile-friendly.

TOM Yeah. They made it mobile-friendly. I mean, we’ve since redesigned it and added some kind of responsive design, but that was really cool. It’s not always programming-related.

KELVIN Right!

TOM One time, the admin team completely organized the supply closet.

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM And we vote on these things, and the winner gets a prize and glory.

KELVIN We had a cross-team group that did a style guide for our content.

TOM That’s right! Another—Well, the reorganized supply closet came in second!

KELVIN Yeah! (*laughter*) It’s a worthy venture!

TOM It was! Somebody else cleaned and fixed up our golf cart.

KELVIN That's right, and it needed it.

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN So, all of those—I guess, in a weird sort of a way—are examples of being resourceful with our personnel resources, and our passion.

TOM That's right. So, Hack Day is a way for us to have a very efficient (*laughter*) way to innovate stuff in 24 hours. It's pretty amazing.

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM Alright, so "S" of FIRRST.

KELVIN F-I-R-R-S!

TOM "Solve the big problems." We have long since moved past the day when we measure ourselves by our own metrics.

KELVIN What do you mean by that?

TOM We must be evaluating ourselves based upon big metrics like what is your president measured on? What is your board measured on? What is your provost measured on? Those are the kinds of metrics that we need to be directly supporting. So, we can't just count, "Gee, how many online sections did we create last year?" and call that a victory. It's in the service of something, whether it's access or an institutional mission or a revenue generation or whatever it is, it needs to be something that is big and tied to an institutional mission.

KELVIN Yeah. Absolutely. So, one of the things that we're really big into around here—maybe wherever you are, it's big there, too—is decreasing time to graduation, increasing our graduation rate, increasing retention, and so forth. So, we have all kinds of metrics across the entire institution that are being drawn into tight alignment, and so, one of the things that we're talking about right now is how we can use some of the institutional data that we have that is identifying pivotal courses that may negatively or positively affect a student's likelihood of graduation in the major, looking at those and saying, "Hmm, what can we do to make them more successful?" For instance—just as a for instance—we know that historically our blended courses outperform face-to-face and online and everything else, so, one simple question to ask we've been talking about is, "Well, are there blended sections of those courses?" If not, maybe it would be strategic to look at some of those and select them and "blendize" them and recognize some benefits. That would be low-hanging fruit, or if there are already blended sections, what might we do to

underscore and add emphasis to that? We've had similar conversations about applying adaptive components and such courses and so forth, but that kind of alignment with those institutional goals is a whole different deal than just saying, "Okay, well, what faculty are coming and wanting to make blended courses?"

TOM That's a good example. So, let's turn to the final letter in our FIRRST.

KELVIN A very important one.

TOM And that's "Take action."

KELVIN *(laughter)* Yeah, how about that?

TOM In some ways, this is a little distinct from "Research and make a decision" because "Take action" implies that you're never going to have all the data you need.

KELVIN That's right.

TOM You have to get yourself real comfortable with the notion of risk. Being a leader—particularly in something like online learning, that is continually evolving—involves inherent risk, and if you're not comfortable with that, then you're not going to have fun in this job. *(laughter)*

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM But, if you've done your homework, if you've mitigated that risk as best you can with data, if you recognize you will never have all the answers, then don't get caught in the analysis paralysis, and remember: not doing something is a decision. I heard someone say one time that, "Decisions are what leaders make when the data don't present themselves." Because if all the information was there, you wouldn't need a leader to tell you what to do. It would be evident. Everybody would know. But we don't live in that kind of a world, and we don't work in that kind of an industry. So, without any sort of clear direction, sometimes you kind of have to *(laughter)* put on the goggles and jump in the pool and assume you're going to be able to swim.

KELVIN So, I would say, Tom—would you agree?—that all these—"Follow the energy," "Invent the future," "Research and make a decision," "Recognize resource limitations," "Solve the big problems," "Take action"—all those individual pieces live in a relationship with each other, right? They're not necessarily sequential steps, but there is yin and yang balance with all of those, and we're advancing that any innovation in our online education space could benefit from just kind of a run-through [of] that list and think about, "Well, is this relevant? Is that relevant? How am I doing this? How am I not doing that? Ooh, I hadn't really considered that!" So, it all touches innovation somehow or other.

TOM Yeah! I think these things are all related somehow—some more maybe more directly than others—but it’s a nice way to kind of take a step back and look at the projects/innovations that you are directly involved in, and kind of understand how they fit into this ecosystem. Why are you doing it? How can you help yourself do it a little bit better?

KELVIN Yup.

TOM So, maybe that’s a good place to kind of wrap it up.

KELVIN Yup! Sounds good to me.

TOM So, it’s the leader’s job to recognize opportunities, marshal resources, know when to act, and how to accept risk. This can be difficult in highly complex, often political environments—kind of like the ones we work in.

KELVIN *(laughter)*

TOM This context includes both short- and long-range considerations, keeping up with rapidly emerging trends, while simultaneously attending to the responsibilities of the daily operations—what I call occasionally popping your head up to look at the horizon—

KELVIN *(laughter)*

TOM —requires a particular set of leadership skills.

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM The concepts in the FIRrst heuristic that we’ve just gone over are intended to serve as a potential structure for online learning leaders as they navigate the steps of what we have called in the past the delicate dance of strategic decision-making.

KELVIN Yeah, shout out here to an earlier episode. We did this live TOPcast episode at an OLC conference in front of a live audience, and that’s where this whole FIRrst framework was really born, right? Coming out of some of those ideas in that episode. So, we’ll post a link to that previous episode in the show notes, as well.

TOM So, if you haven’t had a chance, give us a review on iTunes, check out our show notes, and feel free to sign up as a registered listener.

KELVIN In fact, we might slip this in, so do it now. We might just have in there some of this bonus content, you know? Like, we might have had a recorder running with a primitive audio feed from our Innovation Lab session. You might get to hear that if you are a registered listener. There’s other little behind the scenes opportunities to connect with

Tom or me. We're going to throw some things in there periodically, so, it would help us to know who's listening. It'll help you to get access to some of this other content.

TOM Yup. Bonus, special, exclusive content.

KELVIN So, I should give the URL, though. That's bit.ly/topcastclub to be a registered listener.

TOM Awesome. So, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

KELVIN I'm Kelvin!

TOM See ya!