

## TOPcast Episode 26: "Going Straight to the Source:" The Student Voice in Online Education

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From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I'm Kelvin Thompson.

TOM And I'm Tom Cavanagh.

KELVIN And you—yes, you, my friend—are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hey Tom!

TOM Oh, hi Kelvin!

KELVIN *(laughter)* Don't want to take you away from whatever you're doing over there.

TOM It's funny to find you sitting across from me in this podcast recording studio.

KELVIN *(laughter)* I've been here for the last three hours waiting for you to pay attention.

TOM *(laughter)* Yeah. I've joined you now!

KELVIN *(laughter)* I'm glad just for a moment of your attention. I appreciate it.

TOM Well, I'm glad to be here.

KELVIN I'm glad to have you.

TOM Because we're once again recording in the afternoon—

KELVIN Yes.

TOM —I got me a powerful thirst.

KELVIN A powerful thirst?

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN Well, that's good. I got some coffee for you.

TOM Good!

KELVIN Yup. Here it is. I've poured it all for you a moment ago. You got it.

TOM Yes!

KELVIN We don't have the verisimilitude of the pouring right now, but there actually is—I can

verify—coffee in Tom’s cup.

TOM There is aroma that you cannot smell through our podcast technology yet.

KELVIN Well, you want to know what this is, Tom?

TOM Okay.

KELVIN ...Is that a yes?

TOM That’s a yes.

KELVIN Okay. I’m not going to tell you.

TOM You’re not going to tell me?!

KELVIN I’m not going to tell you. Sometimes you just have to go to the source.

JORDAN Hi, this is Jordan. I’m a barista for Axum Coffee at our roastery location, and today we are talking about the Ethiopian Sidamo. It’s going to be about a medium-roasted coffee, and we’re brewing on a French press. You can really expect flavors: some nice stone fruit flavors on the front, a very mild citrus, and a very smooth and clean finish coming from this coffee with a really juicy body. It’s very nice. I hope you enjoy it.

KELVIN Why, thank you, Jordan! Wasn’t that nice?

TOM Wow! We were suddenly transported to a coffee establishment.

KELVIN Wasn’t that great? A roastery location. Axum Coffee Roasting in Winter Garden, Florida. So, we’ll put the location and stuff in the show notes if people are interested. So, as appropriate for today’s interview, Tom, sometimes you’ve just got to cut out the middle man and go straight to the source.

TOM I get it. I get it. Well, that’s cool. Well, thank you, Jordan. Thank you, Kelvin. The coffee’s delicious, and since this is a podcast only marginally about coffee—

KELVIN *(laughter)* Only marginally.

TOM —let’s turn our attention to what we really want to talk about.

KELVIN What’s that again?

TOM Which is online learning!

KELVIN Ah, yes!

TOM We are going to go directly to the source. We have a real live student.

KELVIN Wow! Pickled?

TOM Pickled? No. Pulled from his natural habitat.

KELVIN Ah, yes.

TOM We've brought him in here to do a little ethnographic study, otherwise known as an informal interview over coffee.

KELVIN *(laughter)* That's right.

TOM So, we are joined by one of our awesome student workers, Alex DeCurnou. Hi Alex!

KELVIN Hi Alex!

ALEX Good afternoon to both of you.

TOM Hi! What are you drinking, Alex?

ALEX I'm drinking water.

TOM Yeah, you're making a better healthy choice than either one of us.

KELVIN I call it "coffee clear".

TOM "Coffee clear"? Yeah. Pre-roasted coffee. That's right.

ALEX It's deconstructed coffee.

KELVIN That's right! You could spend twenty bucks for that in a high-end restaurant. That's good.

TOM So, I have had the great privilege of seeing Alex in action. He has been a part of our panels that we do on occasion. When we do faculty training, we try to bring in students and have them share their experiences directly with faculty, and Alex has been a part of that. We have also had visits from various people including a delegation from the Gates Foundation that Alex was a part of, and [we were] just really impressed with how he was able to articulate his experience as a student who's taken kind of a non-traditional path here to UCF. So, Alex, I wonder if maybe you could kind of introduce yourself. Tell us about your major, what year you're in, and then we'll jump into some questions.

ALEX Sure. I'm Alex. I'm a computer science student here at UCF. I'm in my senior year—

whatever that means at this point. I just have a ton of credits.

TOM Yeah, it's just based on credits.

KELVIN You know, I had three senior years.

ALEX Ah, so there you go.

KELVIN How many are you going to have?

ALEX Well, this should be the last one, hopefully.

KELVIN The last one. *(laughter)*

TOM Fingers crossed.

ALEX Fingers crossed, certainly. It's my last year. I'm just finishing up a couple classes. I have a couple capstone classes left. I was supposed to graduate in the fall, but that's not going to happen. I'll graduate in the spring. So, yes, this hopefully should be my last senior year.

TOM Well, cool! And, as a computer science student, you're working in the right place, I think.

ALEX Yes.

TOM I now happen to know a little bit about your path to UCF, and I will ask you to reflect on that a little bit, but just for the listeners, you started at a large state university here in Florida.

ALEX Yes.

TOM Things didn't quite work out the way you wanted them to.

ALEX Yes.

TOM You took some time off, did some working, went to our local state college partner—

ALEX Yes.

TOM —and then, through our DirectConnect to UCF program, ended up transferring to UCF.

ALEX Yes.

TOM So, all of that is true.

ALEX Yes.

TOM I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that experience and, as a student who did well in high school, how that journey has kind of impacted you and how you think about higher education.

ALEX So, high school for me was fairly easy. To be blunt, I didn't really try a whole lot. Everything kind of just came naturally. So, college came along and I said, "You know..."

KELVIN "How hard could this be?"

ALEX Yeah! "How hard can it be, really?" Like, honestly, I was like, "I've done all this stuff before! It's just gen eds. I've got this. It'll be fine." Well, you know, college is a little different than high school. There's nobody to tell you to get up in the morning. There's nobody to tell you to go to class. There's nobody to tell you to do your work. This and that. Everything is on you. So, I didn't go to class, stuff like that, and through the combination of some family stuff and just being a bad student, I had to leave.

I'm kind of tying this into how it's affected me, right?

TOM Yeah.

ALEX So, yeah, I actually had to switch out of the major that I was going to do. I was going to do med school. That didn't work out. So, it was always kind of a dream of mine, and I actually did a whole bunch of research and everything involving med school. That didn't work out.

I left the major university [and] worked for quite a bit of time. I was doing medical research, and I went from medical research to working in fast food. Fast food is a totally respectable line of work, but it's quite a big difference coming from the two. So, those years—I guess it was about two years—were quite a humbling experience. Just working with the hungry masses, as I call them, and how they can treat you at some points.

I had a lot of time to think about why I'm going to school, if I'm going back to school, why I'm going to do it, and how I was going to do it. So, I made the decision to move from the city that this major university was in to Orlando and go to the state college that I attended. I worked while I was there—much more humbling, again—and while I was there, I still didn't have my act together as far as school. I was like, "Oh, you know, now this is really easy. These state college classes. I really have this!" But I still wasn't doing the work because I thought it was so easy, right? It got to the point where I was just like, "You know, I really have to get my stuff together." And then, here I am.

TOM Here you are! And well, you're doing great now.

ALEX Yeah! Much better.

TOM Well, I mean part of that is obviously some maturing has happened.

ALEX Yes.

TOM But some of that is maybe finding a subject that was really kind of more aligned with your interests and skills.

ALEX Yeah, so I would say that I've always been good working with computers, in general. I [originally] picked a major because I was like, "Oh, I want to learn something new! I don't have to do something I'm good at, because I like learning." (*laughter*) Well, that didn't really work out. So, I picked something I'm actually good at, and it seems that picking the thing that you're actually good at is probably the best way to go.

KELVIN There's a tip, listeners.

TOM Yeah, pro tip! Well, tell us a little bit about how online learning played into that journey. You, I imagine, had to take some online classes because you were working.

KELVIN Either fully online or blended. Any of that.

TOM Right. Both at the state college and here at UCF.

ALEX Yeah, and actually, at the state university, I took maybe one fully online class. At the state university, there really wasn't an LMS to draw everything together, so it was a lot of outside [software]. You have to pay for a membership in WebAssign or Caduceus, a medical learning type of thing.

KELVIN Interesting.

ALEX So, you have to pay for that, and then the instructor has an account on this external service, and they check your grades through there.

At the state college, I think it was Blackboard, if I'm not mistaken. It's not terrible. (*laughter*) They all have their strengths.

TOM It's mostly how the classes are designed.

ALEX It's mostly how the classes are designed.

TOM That's at least what we contend, right?

KELVIN That's what I always say, Tom!

ALEX They're a lot more discussion-based as far as online learning at that state college, which I

think is actually really good, you know, because you're really trying to sculpt a better student when you're at a state college, and then, when you're here at UCF, I've taken a couple of fully online classes, and I really enjoy how everything is actually blended together with all your grades and your calendar, assignments, and everything else. You don't have to go [to another website], you certainly don't have to pay to take your classes, and everything is actually brought together. You can contact somebody in the same tool that you're actually doing your assignments in, and it just makes it really easy to actually go back and forth between the functionality.

KELVIN I'm going to call that well-designed, Tom. Well, do you mind if I ask, Alex? So, you talked about one online course back at your original university.

ALEX Sure.

KELVIN At least one at state college, and then at least one here at UCF. Were your motivations to take online courses the same at each of those three places or, in some cases, was it because you had to? Was there no other option? What was your decision-making process at each of those three institutions?

ALEX So, I'd say that my motivations between the three reflects my maturity at those points.

KELVIN Okay! Tell us.

ALEX So, at the first state university, I took an online class. I think it was a medical terminology class, and I heard it was the easiest class on campus, and I said, "That's certainly what I want." So, that's what I took.

KELVIN Sign me up!

ALEX That's exactly what I did. I said, "Okay! So, it's the easiest class on campus. I'll take that." I got an A in it, so that's why I was taking online classes then.

KELVIN Because it was only offered online?

ALEX It was only offered online, right. Now, there's that old idea that online classes are always the easiest, so I was like, "Oh, you know, I've taken this online class and I was fine. I'll take another."

TOM Convenience equals easier, right?

ALEX Right. Which it did not. So, that plays into the whole trend of not doing well and then having to leave. When I was at the state college, I took an online class because I was working so much. It got to the point where I think I took mostly online classes for my time in the state college just because I had to work to live. I had to work to pay my rent, to buy food and everything, and I was driving so far to work anyways that that's the only

thing that really worked for me. It was either that or take classes at 8:00 at night and go back to work after that.

Now that I'm here at UCF, I think it just really works with the—Well one, I think the classes here at UCF are more interesting, you know? They select the online offerings compared to the state college where I was before. So, that works a lot better for me because now I'm actually saying, "Oh, let me pick something that I'd like to learn."

TOM These are classes in your major now?

ALEX No, actually. Not all of them.

TOM Really?

ALEX So, I actually had a technical writing course. That one's in the major. But I had a political and economy class, and I said, "That would be interesting to take. I haven't taken a class that I haven't had to take for a long time just for fun." So, that's what I did. I thought it was really interesting. But, yeah, now I guess I'm just looking for things that work within my schedule. I don't have to really work to live anymore and I'm not working all the time, but it does fit my lifestyle.

TOM Sure, well, and you work for us, at least part-time.

ALEX I work for you guys!

TOM Well, I wonder if you can kind of share, based on your experience, what you think a good online course is versus a bad online course. That can be particular characteristics, and maybe think about it through the lens of what do students expect in an online class and what should they expect? Because sometimes there's a disconnect between what students expect and what faculty expect.

ALEX So, as far as students expect...I'm an older student, so at this point, I kind of know how the game goes.

KELVIN Alex doesn't sound it, but he's actually 84 years old.

ALEX Right! Right. At least on the inside.

TOM He's an old soul.

ALEX Yes, very old, I've been told. So many times.

Some students expect that it's going to be easy or the time is going to be less. Like, "I don't have to be in class all the time. I don't have to go to class. I should just be able to do all my work and be done." What they should expect is that, you know, it could



actually could take a lot longer of a time since you're not actually in front of a class. There's a lot more information that you have to take in on your own now, and really, depending on how that instructor tests you on that material, you know, you can really not take a whole lot of time, or you can be like that political economy class that I took, and the professor will test you on every single piece of text that you read, and I learned that really quick. *(laughter)*

And, I'm sorry, did you say what faculty should expect?

TOM Yeah, well, answer it however you want. What makes a good course? Like, what would be advice for a faculty member?

ALEX I think what makes a good course is that really, for me, communication is key. Really, whatever software you're using, stuff like that, it's not going to help you all that much unless you as a faculty member, you as an instructor are really communicating to your students. You don't have to talk to them all the time because honestly, if I were an instructor, I wouldn't want to. *(laughter)* I know how us students can be sometimes.

TOM *(laughter)* I wouldn't want to talk to me!

ALEX Right. I know how students can be sometimes, but just being clear with communication and stuff like that. Sometimes the software makes it easier for that.

KELVIN Now, when you say communication, communication about what?

ALEX Communication of deadlines, of expectations, of my responsibilities as a student, because if I know what the instructor's expecting of me upfront at the beginning of the course, then maybe [during] add/drop week I can say, "Well, maybe that's expecting a little bit too much of me." And I'll drop the class before I'm in the class.

KELVIN Even that expectation you talked about a while ago of maybe at first you expect that it'll be less work and it's actually more work. Communicating that upfront would be helpful.

ALEX Right. Exactly. For that technical writing class I took, I originally registered for a certain section, and I saw that they wanted Facebook and this and that. They wanted us to do a lot of our stuff through social media, and at this point, I don't have social media. I've kind of taken myself out of that equation, but the fact that they communicated that upfront instead of saying halfway through the semester, "Get on your social media accounts! We're going to submit our assignments through there now!" I was glad that she was very upfront, and said, "Hey, this is how you're going to do it." And I said, "Okay, I'm not taking this class."

KELVIN "I'm out!"

ALEX Yeah, and I really respected that.

KELVIN Clarity. That's good.

TOM Yeah. Cool! You know, we hear a lot—and you've kind of alluded to this—that “Gee, is online learning as good as face-to-face learning?” In your experience as a student, do you have those conversations with your classmates? Do you compare notes? Or does it not even come up?

ALEX As far as online versus face-to-face?

TOM Yeah.

ALEX At this point, I don't have a lot of online classes left. They don't offer any of my major classes online, but I will say that—Sorry, you said online versus face-to-face, right?

TOM Yeah. Yeah, is it as good as face-to-face?

ALEX Personally, I think it's as good as face-to-face, but it's also a lot of with the instructor being clear and upfront. It's an effort type of thing. If I see somebody putting in the effort that I'm being expected to put into this course, then I'm much more willing to put forth that effort. So, if that instructor is saying, “Here's what I'm doing. Here's what you're doing,” it's going to be great, and that's when I think it's going to be as good as face-to-face. If they're using online as a tool to kind of cast off the students and only deal with them when they have to, then that's when it's not as good. I can tell when that's happening, and if I can tell when that's happening, I'm sure other students can, too.

TOM Yeah, sure. Well, we often say that faculty who are good teachers are good teachers regardless of modality.

ALEX Right. Regardless of medium.

TOM The same ones that are good in the classroom are probably good online, because some of those behaviors transcend modality.

ALEX It does.

KELVIN Alex, you mind if I follow-up from that a little bit?

ALEX Sure.

KELVIN Tom and I have talked about this. Recently, there's certainly a related school of thought which is... Well, like, you described your state college experience. Working students, non-traditional [students, students with] life issues, okay, I can see the online program thing, but, you know, [for] university, high level, high achieving, high expectation students, they shouldn't really be relying on online courses. I thought I heard you

expressing a different perspective that you might still elect to take online courses even though you're very engaged on campus and in your coursework and so forth. You want to comment on that? Is there a real place for online learning for everybody?

ALEX I think so. Honestly, I think that most students, if not all of them, should take at least one online course.

KELVIN Why?

ALEX I really think that people should diversify the way that they learn, the way that they encounter information, the way that they encounter people in the world, and that's just me, in general. That's something that I try to do throughout my life, but I think it does have a place. Honestly, if they offered more of my classes online, I'd totally take them because I think a lot of these classes would benefit from the rewind and playback of being online. You can look at things and say, "Oh, I still have classes that I can go back now and look at the material from last year," and it certainly prepares me for any, like, coding interviews or internships that I'm looking for now. Now, if this was just a face-to-face thing, I would not have that opportunity. I'd have to go look at my notes, and to tell you the truth, I don't take great notes. *(laughter)*

TOM *(laughter)*

KELVIN *(laughter)*

ALEX The fact that I can go online and go, "Oh! Wow! This is great!" These really good instructors have really good notes that I can go back and look at.

KELVIN Good.

TOM Well, as I'm sort of looking at the clock, I wonder if you could comment on... Now, it's hard to kind of look in the rearview mirror and know for certain, but if online learning hadn't existed for you in your path that you took—particularly as you described your experience [of] working while you were at the state college—do you think you'd be here now or would you still be at the state college or would you just not have been able—

KELVIN Or that fast food place?

TOM Yeah! Would you still be there because you just couldn't carve time during normal hours to go to class?

ALEX I don't know if I'd actually be in school. So, the answer to would I be in school? Probably not, because honestly, at that point in my life I was working so much that it was a real requirement for me. It was either work or be homeless. Work or starve? So, when you're doing that, you're like, "Well, I don't want to keep working this job, so I have to figure out something that works." Now if they didn't have online classes to help me do

that, then I'd probably still be where I was save for some magical cash infusion where I wouldn't have to work, but barring that—because that's never happened to me—  
(*laughter*)

TOM We're all waiting for that! (*laughter*)

ALEX Right. Exactly. You know, I really think that if those online opportunities were not there, then I would still probably be where I was originally: at the state college or trying to get into the state college or at least lengthening the amount of time that I spent there.

TOM Well, I don't know but, speaking for myself, I think it's a real testament to your grit, to your perseverance that you've been able to navigate all of that with collections of credits from a couple of different institutions and to not give up. The finish line is in sight, and as much as we want to wish you success, (*laughter*) we want you to keep working here, too.

ALEX Well, I like it here!

TOM Kelvin, any final comments that you want to make?

KELVIN I guess maybe—and this may be too abstract of a question—but you know, we talked about student perspectives and faculty perspectives and all, but you know, there's people like Tom and I—administrators, instructional designers, those kind of folks—who help shape what online education looks like at other institutions. Any words of wisdom? Like, that high level “less Facebook, more...” I don't know! It could be anything you want to say. I say that just because you said, “Facebook? I'm out.” But whatever.

ALEX I think going forward, like Tom said, people who are already great teachers and great educators are going to be great whatever the modality. I would just say, “Keep up what you're doing.” We all recognize it. I mean, there are some students who really don't care, but there's a great majority of us who can tell who are the really great educators and teachers, and we really respect you guys for that. Keep putting in the effort that we already see you putting into face-to-face, because if we see that you're doing it in whatever modality you're doing it in, we respect that and we respond so much more strongly or properly, so to speak. Because we respect that, and we want to put in the same amount of effort that we see the teacher putting into it.

KELVIN That's good.

TOM That's a really good point.

KELVIN Thank you for that.

TOM I've actually heard that before. If the teacher phones it in, why shouldn't the student?

KELVIN Yeah! That's rough, though, right? Well, so—here I'll put this out there, Tom and Alex—

maybe I'll summarize it this way. For people like us, Alex—Tom and I and our listeners—as online education professionals, we've developed expertise from scholarship and from our professional experiences that guide our work, but for successful online education initiatives with continued relevance to students, it's incumbent upon us to regularly hear from students like you about your experiences just to keep us well-grounded. We feel good about that?

TOM Yeah, absolutely, and in fact, as you guys know, we hold an all-hands meeting with our staff once a semester, and we almost always try to bring in somebody to represent the student voice whether it's a panel of students who have disabilities or who need accommodation, military students, student athletes, transfer students, whatever it is, we really do think it's important that we continually listen to the voice of the students, even for those staff that don't regularly interact with students, which is why this conversation has been really interesting, and we have probably a whole page worth of questions that we didn't get it.

KELVIN Oh yeah. Easily. And, not to say that we've got this all figured out. Tom, you and I have talked about it even recently. [We're] continuing to look for new ways to hear that student voice, so I think that's something we would encourage all of our colleagues around the world to do. More connections with students is the way to go. Stay relevant. Well, before we wrap up, if you haven't visited the TOPcast website, please do so. There's all kinds of show note information. We'll probably have a photo of Alex there on the show notes to see his "coffee clear". I don't know. We always have stuff for every episode that's relevant and fun. [topcast.online.ucf.edu](http://topcast.online.ucf.edu)

TOM Thank you.

KELVIN Yes, and hey! If you've been listening to TOPcast for a while or if this is your first time, it really does make a difference if you go to iTunes and leave a star rating behind or even a one sentence review. That helps the algorithms gen up to people like you to TOPcast. It connects people. You know, we've been plugging this for a little bit: be a registered listener! We'd like to know who you are. We're going to give you some free additional content and whatnot, so go to [bit.ly/topcastclub](http://bit.ly/topcastclub). We'll send you a little newsletter, we'll give you some freebie stuff, and you'll be glad that you did. That being said, until next time for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

TOM And I'm Tom!

KELVIN See ya!