

TOPcast Episode 27: Humanizing Online Learning

- TOM From the University of Central Florida’s Center for Distributed Learning, I am Tom Cavanagh.
- KELVIN And I am Kelvin Thompson.
- TOM And you are listening to *TOPcast*: the Teaching Online Podcast.
- KELVIN Why, that’s amazing!
- TOM “Why?” Were you going to say, “Why are you listening to *TOPcast*?” (*laughter*)
- KELVIN (*laughter*) No! I would never question somebody’s wise and kind choice to listen to *TOPcast*, Tom.
- TOM I would never question either.
- KELVIN That’s right.
- TOM I sometimes question why we sit here doing it, but I would never question—
- KELVIN That’s the coffee.
- TOM (*laughter*) The coffee! Speaking of coffee, I sit here with a steaming mug in front of me, which smells aromatic and tastes tasty. Tell me what I’m drinking.
- KELVIN Well, Tom, today’s coffee comes to us from our buddy Jon Pizzo.
- TOM JP!
- KELVIN Uh huh, he’s part of our *TOPcast* team working behind the scenes to make sure that all of the web stuff happens correctly to connect people with the podcast and the show notes. I think we’ve given a shout out to our beloved producer Tim Reid. Wave, Tim.
- TOM Hi Tim!
- KELVIN Aaron Hose.
- TOM Hi Aaron!
- KELVIN And Jon. He’s making all the little web parts and RSS feeds and WordPress plugins and all that stuff happen. Jon, a while back, went over to Tampa and went to Buddy Brew Coffee and picked up this nice Costa Rican Tarbaca Tarrazu.
- TOM Tarbaca Tarrazu.
- KELVIN Indeed.
- TOM That sounds like a *Star Wars* Jedi.

KELVIN That's right.

TOM *(Chewbacca noise)*

KELVIN Was that Chewbacca? I don't know whatever that was. So, I thought the Buddy Brew Coffee and its arrival through our colleague Jon was appropriate for today's topic: human connections in online learning. What do you think?

TOM Cool! I like it! Thank you, Jon, not just for the coffee *(laughter)* but for everything that you do behind the scenes. In fact, many people—If you've gone to our website and looked at the *TOPcast* feed, the posts are all from Jon Pizzo.

KELVIN That's right. He's the guy that makes it happen.

TOM He's the guy that makes it happen, but it's not just him. As you mentioned, Tim and Aaron. There's a whole team that makes us look adequate.

KELVIN That's right.

TOM Could you imagine how we would look if we didn't have these people backing us up?

KELVIN I can imagine.

TOM *(laughter)* So, we're very fortunate to have such talented people propping us up behind the scenes, and one of them is Jon. I guess he's bringing us coffee now, too, so that's awesome.

KELVIN That's right.

TOM I like it! So, since Jon is a human being— *(laughter)*

KELVIN *(laughter)* I was waiting!

TOM The theme for today's episode is humanizing the online learning experience. So, Kelvin, you recently had the chance to interview Dr. Bonni Stachowiak—I think I got that right—Director of Teaching Excellence and Digital Pedagogy and Associate Professor of Business and Management at Vanguard University. During the 2016 Online Learning Consortium Accelerate Conference here in Orlando, she joined us on a panel that we did about podcasting and was featured here on *TOPcast* at that time.

KELVIN Yeah, if you haven't already, you should check out that episode. I think it's "Professional Development Through Podcasting" or something. It's a good episode.

TOM Yeah! It is, and there are a bunch of people—

KELVIN Not just us.

TOM —who do really interesting podcasts.

KELVIN Including Bonni.

TOM One of whom is Bonni. Yeah, and she is the renowned host of the famed podcast *Teaching in Higher Ed*, which we both enjoy.

KELVIN Absolutely.

TOM So, Bonni talked to you about how to humanize online teaching and learning, which is an interesting topic given that some people feel that technology dehumanizes, and you guys kind of touch on that a little bit.

KELVIN Yeah, and you know, she’s such a pro, right? You try to interview her, and she’s interviewing you right back. So, it ends up being a true conversation, I think, which is kind of nice in its own way.

TOM You can tell she hosts a podcast where she interviews people.

KELVIN Yeah, exactly. That’s right. It’s like, “Let me interview Terry Gross. I’ve been interviewed back. What just happened here?” *(laughter)*

TOM Yeah, that’s cool. Let’s take a minute and listen to you and Bonni talking about humanizing online education.

(music transition)

KELVIN Hey Bonni. Thanks for joining us today on *TOPcast*. Great to have you here. I feel like I’m repeating myself from when we had Katie Linder on the show, but big fans of *Teaching in Higher Education* here at *TOPcast*, so it’s a real honor for us to have an educational podcaster of your stature right here with us, so thanks for being here.

BONNI Well, it is great being here, and are you going to say where “here” here is?

KELVIN Uh, no, why don’t you tell us where “here” here here is?

BONNI “Here” here is in the middle of the Dolphin Resort in Orlando, Florida.

KELVIN Because that’s the way we roll.

BONNI Yes.

KELVIN *(laughter)* That's right. So, the OLC Accelerate 2016 Conference at the resort. Not just, "Hey, you want to be on the show? We'll fly you in and put you up in the resort!" because that's how we roll. No, it's not quite like that. So, it's a good venue. Lot of great folks, so this is a great opportunity for us to connect and interview leaders in our field, just like you!

So, we talked a little bit before we hit the record button and have a general direction in our conversation, but I want to frame it with this. Can I do that? So, I've been in this online education world for about eighteen years, and throughout that time, you know, when I'm out and about, it comes up in conversation with whomever. "Well, I work in online education." People look at you a little bit funny. "What is that?" So, eventually I'll say, "Well, have you taken online courses? High school? College? Anything? Trade school? Whatever?" and inevitably somebody—I don't go too long without hearing some version of "No, I've never done that because I don't really want to interact with a computer." It depends on what kind of mood I'm in how I want to respond to that. Sometimes I just shake my head and [say,] "Oh, I understand," and walk away. Sometimes if I'm in a feisty mood, I scratch my head, I look at them, I scrunch up my face and say, "Well, you know, you're not interacting with a computer. You're interacting with other human beings through a computer." You know? Sometimes that gives people pause, and they go, "Huh. I never really thought about it that way before." That sort of thing. So, I said to you before we hit record that maybe it's my own rose-colored glasses, but as I look at your inventory, your library, your catalog of episodes on the *Teaching in Higher Ed* podcast, I feel a theme of the human element. I feel a theme of a validation of human connection. While you're not exclusively about the technology-mediated context—you do all kinds of themes—I think that cuts through, whether they're technology-related teaching and learning things or not. That's a fascinating thing. So, I thought, who better than you to talk about where's the human element? What do we need to do to keep that in the forefront in online education? So, with that, I'm going to shut up. Why don't you just respond to that? What do you think about this whole human connection in our technology-mediated contexts?

BONNI I'm interested in hearing your input on this thought, but I wonder if we might start by saying what is it not?

KELVIN Huh.

BONNI What is it that we find ourselves tempting to do that really depersonalizes online learning? We're here at the conference, and there's been some wonderful ideas, and I'm going to bring some specifics up, and by no means am I meaning to criticize the examples I'm about to bring up, except that any time our strength gets turned up too loud—the volume gets turned up too loud on it—it does become a weakness.

KELVIN Right.

BONNI So, we heard this morning from the Minerva Schools, and I don't remember the gentleman's name—the keynote speaker—but we can probably include that in the show notes. *(laughter)*

KELVIN We will make that happen.

BONNI They have a proprietary system that allows us—[It's] very much like in if everyone's ever used the Zoom platform before. I've heard it described by Doug McKee as *The Brady Bunch* platform.

KELVIN Yeah, right. I got it.

BONNI *(laughter)* I can see who's above me, who's next door to me, so to speak, and there's actually scores, the people's interactions, because one of the things that data shows us is, for example, without anything to negate this, men and women alike will be more likely to call on males in a classroom than females. They have a scoring that'll say, "This person has talked this quantity of time in the class." "This person hasn't talked a lot." "This person's talked too much." While I think that would be a helpful measure as an educator—and I am one who, by the way, uses an attendance app that will randomly call on students so I can prevent myself from doing it—if all we rely on are the data markers in a class—be it on online or be it in person—I think we're missing something. I think relying on templates too much. For your podcast, you probably have a template. You talked about always starting the show the same way. I have the same thing. We have theme music. Some consistency is helpful in learning so you know what to expect, but it's the unexpected that create the greatest memories for us, and so, when I go and work with institutions that are so wrapped up in templates and the PowerPoints got to look like this and this lecture's supposed to be this long or this video vignette or whatever, we're dehumanizing that experience. *(laughter)* Anyways, so I wondered if you have any other things you could think of that we do or we get tempted to do that have good intentions but wind up dehumanizing the experience for our online students.

KELVIN Yeah, I think you make a very good point. Our efforts at efficiency and scale are big categories of things, I think, that probably take us that direction.

BONNI How about the reply to three other people's messages?

KELVIN Sure, right.

BONNI There we go.

KELVIN Anything that's standardized or stock [is] helpful, right? As a seed. Like, I try to frame—When I'm working with faculty—or myself, instructional designers, anybody—any time we talk about stock messages, I try to frame them as customizable messages, starter dough, stock messages. Don't just take this and just use it. You know, I've said before, students can smell a stock message a mile away. Stock posting. Okay. *(clinking noises)*

Cookie cutter. Stamp it out. Because I think, you know, over time, you do develop efficiencies, but you got to keep yourself fresh. That's like the often-ridiculed stereotype of the older professor who walks into the classroom with the yellowed lecture notes that she or he has been using for twenty years. I think those of us in my world—in the technology-mediated stuff—we laugh at that, but it's no different online if you just sort of make a fetish out of efficiency and reuse and so forth, so that we don't have to deal with the individual lives that are interacting with us in online settings. So, yeah, I think it's interesting.

BONNI I love your analogy of starter dough, and just as infrequently as I make sports references is when I make baking references, (*laughter*) but my understanding of the starter dough: I get it from someone else and then I add my own ingredients to it, but what is beautiful when you put this into teaching online is then everybody can have a chance to work with that dough that we're creating together. They can knead it themselves, get their actual experience in it, and then make it to watch it cook up and all enjoy this together, and then actually pass that—because you save some of the dough, right?—pass that on to the next class or the next group people.

KELVIN That's a good example. I use that idiom a lot in that context, and I've almost missed the—I've sort of chewed the taste out of that chewing gum metaphor. I've lost the fact that, yeah, that's the greater context of the story of the starter dough metaphor, so yeah, that's excellent. I think that's good. So, what do you think, Bonni? Whether you're in a real-time, same room kind of teaching and learning context or whether you're in some kind of a technology-mediated context, what do you think that instructors can do to remember that those are a bunch of individual human beings with their own lives and all that? Where's the place of that in the teaching and learning process? How do we remember that and value it?

BONNI One of the things I think is really helpful is thinking about how we go about introducing ourselves in a class, and so often, I see this as something that's pretty generic. "Tell me about yourself. Tell me why you're taking this class," and it can be, for me, such a great way to ignite a spark in whatever the content is that we are learning, and then start to get people accustomed to many to many interactions, and one of the things that is so important and really hard to do is to help people unlearn everything they've been conditioned to experience about classes. What is it like to be in a class? The teacher or professor will be up front, I will be sitting, whatever. One of the guests on my podcast talked about paying civil attention. "I'm just behaving like I'm paying attention but I'm actually not really present for you." And help them bring in a little piece of themselves, and what's great is so many times, whether our learning management systems allow us to do this easily, or even if they don't, just how easy it is to capture video on our smartphones today and upload it to a service like YouTube, and what if we, for introductions, have people use video to do that? That really can help personalize it, and then, just how we respond back and how we can capture these little slices of their lives. Another thing I think really helps, too, is not—Yes, we're going to have these guide posts that are in our course design in the first place thinking about really important, deep

questions that we're going to be exploring, but there's also the willingness to give up some control because stuff happens during our classes. In a class that I taught recently, there was the issue that came up with Wells Fargo, and some of the fraudulent accounts that had been made and the 5,500 employees that had been let go as a result, and that story—We talked about it one day in class, but it kept unraveling, because we talked about, “What is it like for the CEO and how might he have acquired his wealth? What are stock options?” because students wouldn't have necessarily known that, and what was nice is I had a way that we could start sharing the stories and then the students could share back with me, and it's nice, too, when we open the wall of our classroom up and can engage on social media, too, and start to see what other people in other business classes in this particular example are thinking and saying about the topic, as well.

KELVIN

I think those are excellent. In fact, let me just throw another log on the fire. I think one of the things I appreciate about you from afar—we've just recently become acquainted in real time—but from afar, listening through the auditory lens of your podcast, you seem to be somebody who—maybe I'm wrong—recognizes the value of what maybe some of now used as kind of a label of emotional intelligence, emotional life, which I kind of think of this really human part of us. One of your episodes on empathy I really appreciated. Empathy's in the title, but you and your guest talk about love in the context of the interactions that the humans of a class have with each other. Love, right? I don't know many faculty who would go so far as talking about loving their students so freely. What do you think about that? Where is the place of the valuing of emotional life and that inner person, in general, and then how do you think that plays out in—or could it play out in—a technology-mediated context?

BONNI

When I think about how my teaching has changed the most in twelve years, it really does actually come down to love, and that is such a loaded word in every sense of it, (*laughter*) because it doesn't mean not having high expectations. I have very high expectations for my students, and I encourage faculty to do the same. If we don't have high expectations, is that really love? Allowing people to invest all the money that they do in higher ed., all the time to what end? So that you cannot actually have the capabilities you need to pursue your own dreams and have potential? So, I think that if we go a little bit deeper, it's not necessarily a friendly love. (*laughter*) You know what I mean? It's just a love that says, “No, you can do better than that. You have great potential. I expect a lot out of you, and I care about you.” It's that combination of wanting to challenge my students—not ridiculously more than they think they're capable of, but a little bit more than they think they're capable of—at the same time saying, “I'm here to support you. Here are the other institutional resources that are here to support you. In fact, look at these people that are in this class! There are people here who may support you now, but maybe even down the road, be able to support you and just recognize in the value and the network that gets built when you have a real memorable experience in a class.”

The topic of empathy, I think, is definitely what has changed so significantly about my teaching. I used to grumble a lot about students, and I used to be suspicious of their

motives, and it's easy to get caught up in that. In fact, Jesse Stommel, who's been a guest on my podcast, has been quite vocal about publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Ed* profiting off of our venting about students. They have a blog that does a "Dear Students," and I will admit to having—before him challenging my and many of our thinking on that—to reading those and chuckling, and there's entire books that have been written about, "Here are all the ridiculous things my U.S. History students have said about history. Isn't this funny to laugh at our students?" It's easy to get caught up in that, and today, I think, "Oh my goodness." In the last year, I have had—whether they were in my class or they had been through it and were on into other classes—a large quantity of students who have lost a parent during higher ed., during their four years of college. That is something I've never experienced. How could I not—And it doesn't even have to be something so drastic. When I was in college, just things were so different for me. I could go before the semester started—because that's how at least many of us did it back then—you'd go to your college's bookstore, you'd load up all the books—and many times, my mom, who loves, loves, loves books, would be there with her credit card. Cha-ching! Right? *(laughter)* We didn't have to wonder, "Gee, am I going to eat? Or am I going to pay for my textbooks?" What I'm realizing more and more now is you have no idea that person's story, but if you're going to err on one side or the other, err on the side of love. Err on the side of empathy. That you don't know that story, and that when—Just even this semester, I had a student who he in one of the classes was wearing little earbuds and seemed pretty detached. Kind of had the "I'm too cool for school" thing, and if I would have predicted the results on the exam based on his level of my perceived engagement, I thought he probably would have been a C or lower. He ended up getting the highest grade in the class. *(laughter)* You just never know! You never know! And I'm so glad that I didn't decide to harp on him that day, because I have actually seen—as I get to know his name, and I get to know what he's interested in, and I get to know the dynamics of the class. I don't know that terribly much, but I know that he has a lot more potential than I initially would have given him credit for, and why shouldn't I do that to the extent that I'm capable of doing it for every single student that comes through?

KELVIN Yeah. Do you think that's harder or easier to view the uniqueness and individuality of students online rather than face-to-face?

BONNI I think it is harder to do it spontaneously, and it's probably easier to do it when you cultivate more effective ways of doing that through an online environment. I think you have to show more purpose, more intention, more planning to do it well online, but that could just be my own weaknesses. I don't know. What do you think about that?

KELVIN I think that's insightful. Yeah, I mean, to the extent that online education is still, in many regards, asynchronous-driven, while you can plan for a kind of spontaneity, you can plan for flexibility, there's not quite the same in the way that we're both in the same physical space looking at each other at the same time. There's not a "Hey, let's go this direction," or right this moment kind of thing. So, spontaneity happens with a little bit of a—It's like the old Apollo-era outer space communications, you know? Somebody says something and then there's a beep thing, and then there's this delay, and then you get this response.

It's a little bit like that. I think that's insightful. I've always found some degree of comfort in the fact that historically, the older days—it's changing now with the advent of more ready access to video and even synchronous video—I used to take comfort in the fact that online education was not subject to the negative aspects of so many of the visual social cues: the prejudices. That was a great example you just gave of a student, earbuds, "I'm too cool for school" characterization, right? You're reading that student that way, and online I wouldn't necessarily have seen him that way, other than maybe something he had said about himself or how he conveyed himself, but I've still built my own little projections of personas of students not unlike that even in online courses. Based on the little communications that I get from students and what they say in discussion postings or in their work or reflections or whatever, and then I'm sometimes surprised in the same way. I've had that same kind of epiphany, "Aha! Shame on me!" kind of thing online as you've described in a face-to-face setting. So, I think that's a good point.

I'll ask you one last question if I can. I know our time's dwindling. Something I thought a while ago while you were talking is—you were talking about students, and you said, "you," and I was thinking, "you" has a plural sense and a singular sense, right? To what extent do you think that—and we'll say online and blended courses especially—to what extent can we have a focus on the student as "you" in a singular sense as opposed to sort of a general "you" as students. Like, we can care for our students in the ways that you talk about empathetically, but then, where are the limits with that as individuals?

BONNI I would hope that there wouldn't be in the sense of the kind of engagement that we would have in a traditional classroom based [course]. I hope that we aspire to and build plans to have that same kind of—*(laughter)* It's actually interesting. The word personalized learning has created this trigger in me because I've read so many criticisms about what marketers are calling personalized learning that my mind is actually starting to say depersonalized. It's trying to create some algorithm to make you feel like this is personal for you, but actually it's just some cookie cutter algorithm that isn't even really transparent, that you necessarily can't see. Part of that, I think has to be us looking at two "C"s. One is getting our students to be thinking about being curators. Curation is a really big part of Jarche. He's an expert in personal knowledge management, and his way of framing what personal knowledge management—he calls it mastery—is seek, sense, and share. Teaching our students how to go out and find information and find credible information and then curating it, making sense of it in some way, and then sharing it—the value that they bring to whatever it is that they do after taking our class is a big, big value.

KELVIN Excellent point.

BONNI And then the second one is communication. Just that—I mean, real communication—one-on-one communication—and then also giving opportunities for students to communicate with each other. When Gardener was on my show—why am I?

KELVIN Gardener-Campbell.

BONNI Gardener-Campbell. There we go. *(laughter)* When Gardener-Campbell was on my show, he talked so much about just the value of the many to many conversations, and so many times that means helping our students be able to build a network not just with that specific class, but how do they do that within others that are participating in the online programs at our institutions, but then how do we even build even more powerful networks even outside our institutions and just helping them learn how to navigate that type of a communication and the value of a personal learning network?

KELVIN That's great. Hey, thanks for your insights and helping us to keep our attention on humanizing the connections between instructors and learners in our online and blended contexts. It's been a delight to have you here, Bonni.

BONNI Thanks for having me.

(music transition)

TOM So, Kelvin, I thought that was a really interesting conversation that you and Bonni had about humanizing online learning.

KELVIN Yeah, I thought she was really thoughtful and just thinking things through and really pulled me into a really thoughtful space, and yeah, I enjoyed the conversation.

TOM I liked even at the very beginning of the conversation when she turned it back to, "Well, what do we not want to do?"

KELVIN Right.

TOM "What are the practices that we should avoid?" Because sometimes you can define what you want by kind of cutting away all the pieces that you don't want, which I thought was an interesting way to look at it. Not one that I've typically done in the past.

I liked your idea of starter dough.

KELVIN Aw, thank you!

TOM I thought that was good.

KELVIN Yeah, it was great, but then she knew this thing that I don't always think about which is the collaborative nature of starter dough, and I thought that was a great little—I mean, it is what it was. It was a metaphor that she actually contributed to my understanding of it which was a metaphor about contributing to and building upon. It was very meta.

TOM It's like *Inception*.

KELVIN It is!

TOM *(laughter)*

KELVIN I haven't seen that. I've got to see that sometime.

TOM It's a dream within a dream within a dream.

KELVIN Maybe this is here.

TOM Maybe.

KELVIN I would have dreamed for a bigger studio.

TOM *(laughter)* Maybe the last thing I'll comment on was that notion of loving your students, which is not a typical way to think about adult higher education students. Maybe in like an elementary school or something I've heard that kind of phrasing, but I get what she's trying to get at there, and I think it's really noble, and can you do that through online learning? I like the way she framed it by saying it's through setting high expectations and demanding the best of students kind of in their own self-interests. I thought that was really cool.

KELVIN Yeah, absolutely. That was good.

TOM So, cool! Alright, maybe if we had to kind of wrap it up, online teaching and learning isn't going anywhere, right?

KELVIN We surely hope not! *(laughter)*

TOM And it will continue to draw upon newer and newer technologies to better serve our students, but education is and perhaps always should be a very human enterprise. As you said, it's not a person interacting with technology so much as it is a person interacting with another person through technology.

KELVIN Yeah. Right.

TOM So, maybe we should all work on emphasizing the humanity more in connections between students and instructors than the technology.

KELVIN Yeah, that's a good word.

TOM Cool! So, do we want to encourage anybody to go out to iTunes and leave us a review?

KELVIN Yeah! You should do that.

TOM Alright! Hey everybody, why don't you go out to iTunes or your favorite podcast app of choice [and] leave us a review? It's really helpful in the algorithms to help other people find content like this, and we would really appreciate it.

KELVIN Click the star thing while you're there, too.

TOM Yeah, and don't forget that if you are listening to this through some sort of an app that we do have a website, and there are all kinds of resources on the website that might allow you to go deeper into some of these topics and some of the things that are referenced in the discussions, particularly in the conversation you had with Bonni will be available in the show notes.

KELVIN Yeah. Absolutely.

TOM Great! So, until next time, for *TOPcast*, I'm Tom.

KELVIN I'm Kelvin.

TOM See ya!