

What's Exciting Dr. Norm Vaughan About Blended Learning?

Kelvin Thompson: Hi, Norm. It's so great to have you back on TOPcast. Now, last time, we had a chance to talk about blended learning and the interconnections—these human interconnections—at this macro level and this intersection at the community of inquiry model guiding, what happens in individual course context partnerships on campus and off campus, all of that kind of stuff, but we ran out of time in our last conversation for me to ask a question that Tom, actually, originally asked me to ask you, which is, what's exciting you? I know it's hard to get you excited about things, but what's exciting you about blended learning and its future?

Norm Vaughan: Well, what's exciting for me, Kelvin, and I'm going to go back to work that you've done here, especially with your research into teaching effectiveness, your RITE group with Patsy and Chuck. They were saying, basically, it's pretty difficult these days to find anything that is not blended, and what I mean by that [is] digital technologies that are connecting students in classes and out of classes, but what really excites me, Kelvin, is the students. Why that excites me? I'll be honest, when we started blended learning, we started—and I'm going to be careful because I don't know your context perfectly—but we were you on a smaller scale. We had explosive growth on campus in the late '90s and in the early 2000's. We didn't have space for all our students, so I'll be honest, one of the drivers for blended learning ... We always hoped that it was going to increase the quality of the learning experience for both the students and the faculty, but I'll be honest, the big driver was we were out of space.

So for better or worse, that was one of our key drivers, and I'm not criticizing administration, but we had to control cost. So it was the idea that you needed to reduce class time by a minimum of 30%, so, unfortunately, our initial definition had nothing to do with pedagogy or pure learning. It was about class time. So, again, a course that used to meet three times a week—an hour on Monday, an hour on Wednesday, an hour on Friday—we could now run three sections because one section would be in the room on Monday, another section Wednesday, and a Friday.

The problem with that, Kelvin, is at that time, the late '90s/2000's, [for] students? This was new to them. Even online learning was new, and for them, they equated less class time with less work. I'll be honest, we had a lot of challenges with blended learning in the early days because the students weren't really clear around the expectations, what their roles and responsibilities were and, I'll be honest, the faculty really weren't clear, like I'm still getting my head around about the integration between face-to-face and online. So I think there was just a lot of unhappiness and a lot of friction. My gosh, where has time gone? That's like 10, 15, 16 years ago.

What's exciting for me now is in a lot of our high schools, students are taking more and more courses in a blended and an online format and what that means is not only are they familiar with that modality, they've started to develop the habits, the skills, the knowledge to take responsibility for learning. Because, Kelvin, when we started blended learning, it wasn't the technology glitches, it

was the student support, students having issues around time management, study skills and especially, reading.

So what is exciting for me now and, again, I'm generalizing here, but the student population is ready for this and they're ready for this in ways that are really exciting, and I think it's about taking ownership of their learning. We can call it personalized learning, whatever, but it's exciting. Again, we borrowed this from you, Kelvin, but students are creating their own pathways, so rather than creating all these gateways and you have to do it this way, it's exciting to see students using blended and online learning to create their own pathways—their own unique pathways—for degrees. I know this happens at UCF, the majority of your online students are physically here on campus, and I think that's exciting because you're making intentional, informed decisions. This is a course—we don't call it traditional anymore, we call it enriched—where you're going to need a lot of physical class time just because maybe it's an area that you don't have as much confidence, [and] you want to have more human, face-to-face interaction.

So it's exciting for me because I really think that's the future of blended learning, and I think very soon, it won't be blended learning. I don't know if it will be personalized learning. I think it's going to go back just to learning. But I think, again, just having two kids in university, that's what university is all about for me: growing up and learning how to be an active and engaged citizen, contributing. We talk about workplace skills, but I think again, when we look at John Dewey—I'm going to drift for a minute because what is old is new—that John did a lot of his writing during the first world war, democracy and education, how people think during the depression, and he always said the strength of a democracy is its public education system. Again, I'm just going to give a little shout out because here we are, November 10th, two days after an election. I hope everybody remembers it. Let's create a system that empowers everybody. I mean, we want to have that sense of engagement, but just the more I'm involved in this, when students are excited and they see that they're starting to take control of their lives but also contributing and helping others, we just win-win.

That's what's exciting me about blended learning, Kelvin. I think we've overcome the humps over there, the waves reach the shore, and what's exciting, and I'm seeing it with faculty. Faculty are excited. I mean, you see that at UCF. That's going to become a major part of your teaching load at a lot of universities: blended or online. It's not just one of these esoteric courses or just innovated course sections over here. It's become mainstream, and I think it's really going to be exciting for everybody. We need to keep that idea that we're learning partners.

Kelvin Thompson: That's awesome. Sorry. I'll want to edit that out. My phone suddenly buzzed.

Norm Vaughan: No, no, we got at the end. But that's what's exciting me, Kelvin! I think it's going to be neat. You know, Kelvin, the thing is, for you guys, you've got it, Kelvin. You have the most amazing group of teams here, but it takes money to run these things. You've got to keep an internal revenue stream coming in. And again, quality takes time, but it also takes funding because that upsets me. We often get money from the government or somebody or whatever, to create a new program or whatever, but then there's no money to sustain it. Kelvin, in my perspective, I

have set so many people up for failure because we do a great job at creating the foundation and then once the money is gone, or a money or appoint people to, it's money but you need somebody coordinating all this and you've got yourself, you've got Tom, you've got Joel up there, you've got your president. This does not happen inertially. Everything we've talked about is what needs to happen at an institution: you've got to design, you've got to organize, but you've got to support it. You're a touchstone for so many people around the world, Kelvin.

Kelvin Thompson: That's kind. I'm fascinated, though, by what you said about what's exciting you about potential developments in blended learning. My interpretation of that is because newer, younger students will have this prior experience with blended learning, it allows the different—the technology, the structure—to disappear, to become transparent and you get on with learning—the ownership and all that—and yet I hear you also talking quite a bit about the importance of design and the importance of an institutional structure, so there is a little bit of a countervailing force there, so how do you make sense of that?

Norm Vaughan: Again, the old thing, one size doesn't fit all. But what's exciting for me, again—and I think we have to be careful, we all know this—but back in the day there was a focus on the tools, there was a focus on the technology, and this technology is expensive and it goes out of date very often. So at our institution, I don't want to even guess, but I'm sure it was hundreds of thousands of millions that we were spending on upgrading our computer systems. It's fascinating how we don't have any mandatory laptop program or anything, but how this has just disappeared ... I was over looking at your new library, you have machines there, but on our campus, we don't have computer labs anymore except in specialized areas where we're doing really, really rich simulations or something. But it's fascinating because I think if we're able to still somehow keep that money but put it into learning spaces, because I think space is so important. Again what I'm trying to say is we've got two forces happen here, like you said. [One] is just a societal force because, again, I think what we really need to work on with students, though, is their digital identities. I think that's something we've overlooked.

You folks have done such a great work with digital fluencies, but I think it really is the identity because that's who you're becoming. Your professional identity is a merging of your physical and your identity. I think too many of our young people don't understand the repercussions because once things happen, they're there forever. But even basic communication skills ... I love my two boys dearly. I've never seen them put a phone to their ears, and whenever they want to get me, it's a text message. "Hey dude." Now, for me, that's not too bad, but they're doing that with employers and everything and just, again, that there's a professional way of communicating to the world, face-to-face and digitally. So we've got that happening and I think we really need to be aware. We really need to get a better sense. We need to work with students and really ... That's where I think we should be doing a lot of studies, and I know you are.

Again, it's not just technology. It's the mindset that's developing and what's happening about them and their communication around that, but again, this doesn't happen in a vacuum. I'm going to criticize my institution. I don't think

we've intentionally designed for it. I mean, we're taking advantage of it in terms of it has reduced our IT infrastructure hardware budget, but we haven't figured out how we should be harnessing that in different ways. Again, I think it really comes down to empowering students [and] students' voices. Students love to be part of planning committees, and I think it's great to have that young voice, and I mean that around on IT department meetings here, I just ... It's been so exciting, Kelvin, because I've seen the same thing happen a little bit with us. A lot of the students who were Techrangers here have now become employees at UCF, and that is just so powerful because not only are you getting that youthful energy, they have more first-hand experience on campus from the student perspective than we do.

So again, all those principles that I talked about in terms of for teaching—we can almost call it leadership presence—is that you need to have the leadership, and just like this is the Center for Distributed Learning, this is also UCF is the home of distributed leadership, and I really mean that. I've observed that over the past three days, Kelvin. Leadership happens at every level. It's been so exciting because, obviously, there are people who are in formal leadership positions, but every person that I've observed in that leadership position—and I've worked with thirteen—you can see that it's a shared form of leadership with their teams rather than them sitting there and talking about how great their team or whatever it is. They turned it over immediately to the individual who headed up, or the entire team, and Kelvin, that's exciting because everybody's empowered.

So again, I just think there's so [many] similarities between teaching and learning that there is ... Kelvin, I'm going to really get out of control, are you ready for this?

Kelvin Thompson: *(laughter)* Sure.

Norm Vaughan: Okay.

Kelvin Thompson: Of course.

Norm Vaughan: Kelvin, this just in my little world, which has been really fun, it's the intersection. Again, my real grounding is in the corporate world and, I'll be honest, I still do a lot of work with our Canadian Pacific or National rail line. I still do a lot of work with our banks because they got tangled up with their little messes, whether you like it or not, that's your home, because that's the one you're familiar with. But then I actually did a little jaunt with the K to 12 world, and it's fascinating with them. Stephen Covey, I think we're all familiar with his *7 Principles of Effective Leadership*. His son, Sean. It's called *The Leader in Me*. It's the *7 Habits of Happy Kids*, and I think again, this starts right from kindergarten all the way, and it's where I hope we're really going to reform our education system, and Canada is internalizing rather than externalizing the process.

Kelvin, you remember when your daughter was young, I remember my two boys were young, they were so excited to go to school, and they were so excited to come home and tell us what they were doing. I didn't have to prompt. There was none of this, "What did you do in school today?" They're excited and that innate

curiosity—sticking dirt in their mouth or whatever ... Kelvin, just my observation with two boys as they went through the system, the joy, unfortunately, was lost because I think they were externally trying to please people, rather than being internally fed and motivated. I think we need to go back to that, helping students discover themselves. I think it's pretty simple to do, but the system's going to take time, but figuring out where am I with my learning, where do I want to go and then working with people to develop the strategies from getting A to B, because I think we're all not too bad about goal setting. Where we really fall down is how do we achieve those goals and the strategy to do it?

Again, I think it's exciting for me because—just my observation of working with young people—they're not quite there with the goal setting, but my observation with this generation—and again, maybe I'm too Pollyanna rose color—this is a generation that really wants to make a difference. If I ask them, there's no hesitation of how we can improve what's going on in this class or whatever, they're there. And my observation even with my two boys, they love to help out. I just think there's an innate sense of us, Kelvin, that we feel good when we've helped another human being. So that's sort of my vision or whatever.

Again, I just think, Kelvin, I'm not sucking up, but it's kind of neat to physically come here because I've come to Orlando a number of times back when it was Sloan-C—it's OLC [now]—but I've never had a chance to physically come here. I've appreciated the workshops, the webinars you guys have done something, but again this is why I like blended learning. Until you're on the ground and you meet people and you feel the energy, it's exciting. I've had just the best three days here because I'm feeding off your people, and I hope it's mutual.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah, absolutely.

Norm Vaughan: I hope I can pass some things on. But just the ideas—

Kelvin Thompson: Your presence is caffeinating. *(laughter)*

Norm Vaughan: Well, so is yours. *(laughter)* Okay, I'm good now.

Kelvin Thompson: Thank you for that. I hear those themes. I think that it's fascinating to me that what's exciting to you about the future of blended learning are really human connections and themes of identity and leadership and connecting, designing for those things to take place, but then really calling out the individual ownership and identity of individual learners. So, it's not about the technology, it's about the human connections. That is exciting.

Norm Vaughan: It is exciting. And again, I don't think we can really do one with the other because technology is playing such a cool road, just the collaborative ... So, our nursing department has a wonderful phrase: the more technology around us, the more the need for the human touch. But it really is not one without the other because—you're going to get me forever—but it's fascinating.

My mother was a nurse. A lot of my best students have gone from education to become nursing or community educators, but they're in an interesting thing.

Obviously, just like teachers, nurses, it's a very human profession. They're there because they like people. But when we're in a digital world, and nurses are at a really interesting place, at least in Canada, I think the States were ahead of us, but moving to digital record-keeping. That's a huge issue, especially for a lot of them who are true nurses, who are used to taking notes by hand, putting things in a folder. They felt that this was initially getting in the way, whereas I think over time and, again, working in partnership with a lot of our technology providers but also with the patients and the patient's family, once things have digital—obviously there's patient confidentiality or whatever—but it becomes more transparent when we're doing diagnosis and everything. Everything is there. It's not hidden on a piece of paper or on notes in doctor's handwriting we can't write.

So I think it's been exciting. I see this in the medical practice for a lot of us whose parents or whatever are getting involved. Obviously we have the expertise of the doctor and the nurses—they're professionals just like the teachers—but we can contribute to that. It's interesting, the access we have, not just to information on the Internet, but to other people. I think that's exciting because, again, just like in education and health care, we're moving to more of a partnership model.

Kelvin Thompson: That's great. Thanks for joining us, Norm.

Norm Vaughan: Okay.