

TOPcast Episode 29: Designing Better Blended Learning

- TOM From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I'm Tom Cavanagh.
- KELVIN And I'm Kelvin Thompson.
- TOM And you are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Howdy Kelvin!
- KELVIN Sup there, Tom?
- TOM *(laughter)* You were magically transported there to the Old West. Didn't realize that was going to happen.
- KELVIN Well, pilgrim...yeah, I don't know. I've got nothing.
- TOM Yeah, we'll save the John Wayne impressions for a very special TOPcast.
- KELVIN I wanted to say thank you for actually validating that I might possibly in some universe have been John Wayne. Thank you for that.
- TOM It was the "pilgrim" thing.
- KELVIN Oh yeah, there was that.
- TOM So, how are you doing today?
- KELVIN You know, I've got a cup of coffee in front of me, and it's not bad. So there you go.
- TOM So do I! So, why don't you go ahead and tell me what I'm drinking.
- KELVIN Okie dokie. Well, once you get past the creamer that you put in it, our coffee today comes to us from our colleague Aaron from Open SUNY's Center for Online Teaching Excellence or Open SUNY COTE.
- TOM Thank you, Aaron.
- KELVIN Aaron's worked closely with us, as you know, in connecting UCF's famed BlendKit professional development course on blended learning with faculty and instructional designers throughout the SUNY system. So, Aaron sent us a lovely—I think—Guatemala Antigua from Keuka Lake Coffee Roasters in the Finger Lakes region of New York. So, I thought it was very appropriate for today's episode, since we're going to delve back into the specialized topic of blended learning. How's the coffee?
- TOM It's good. I like it. Is that how it's pronounced? Keuka?
- KELVIN Yeah, I had to ask, because I thought it might be Koo-ka. That's how I would have pronounced it.
- TOM There's a college—Keuka College—as well.

KELVIN I think it's all that Keuka area. I asked around when I was up there a few months ago, and they said, "No, no. Keuka!"

TOM Well, thank you, Aaron. It's very good! We appreciate it. We are imbibing of your generosity right now.

KELVIN Indeed. It's tasty, too.

TOM It is! So, as you mentioned, we're going to be talking about blended learning today, and we have a very special guest. So, you interviewed—several months ago, at the point we're recording this—Dr. Norm Vaughan.

KELVIN What a great guy!

TOM Our good friend. I guess you and I are probably charter members of the Norm Vaughan fan club.

KELVIN That's true.

TOM Norm's great. If you don't know Norm and his work, he's a professor of education at Mount Royal University in Calgary, and he came and visited us here at UCF around the time of last year's 2016 Online Learning Consortium Accelerate Conference, which traditionally happens here in Orlando. Norm is an internationally known speaker on blended learning, and every time I talk to him, I learn something about blended learning.

KELVIN So true.

TOM He draws on his experience as a researcher, an instructor, and a consultant as he helps advance what we know about the topic of blended and hybrid learning. If you don't know Norm, you're in for a treat.

KELVIN Oh yeah!

TOM Norm is something of a force of nature.

KELVIN It's true.

TOM In a good way. In his enthusiasm and his passion for what he talks about. So, you got the chance to talk to him about blended learning. Anything you want to say about that before we cut?

KELVIN Buckle up! Buckle. Up. I think I make some comments at the beginning of this interview, and I would listen to those if I were you.

TOM Alright! So, through the magic of podcast editing, let's go ahead and listen to your interview with Norm.

(musical transition)

KELVIN Welcome, Norm. So good to have you with us on TOPcast. Glad to be meeting with you. I know our paths have crossed several times. I've been in rooms where you were a force. You're everywhere! I've benefitted from learning from you and hearing from you, and as we've had time interpersonally, you're a force. So, for our TOPcast listeners, if you have the variable speed option on your player, you might just want to put that down at half speed so you can process what's coming at you. I tease, but it's great to have you on our show, Norm. Thanks for being here.

NORM And Kelvin, I'm just going to throw it back at you. Thank you so much for allowing me to be here, because I'm just going to talk a lot about it, and the big thing I'm going to talk a lot about with blended learning is this idea of partner relationships. That it is. It's relationship, relationships, relationships, and I think what's exciting for me—especially being at the University of Central Florida—that's one of your mandates. That your institution is partnerships, and I really think that's going to be what makes the difference in higher education. It's when we create those internal and external partnerships. So, I will, like you say, try to slow it down a little bit. But I know one of the things that you were interested in—and I'm interested in as well—is why are we still using that term “blended learning”? You mentioned, you know, it's been twenty years. We've had eLearning, mLearning, blended learning. So, again, this is just my perspective based on n of 1, but based on observations and conversations and also based on my personal experience. That's what I'm going to start with. Right from my personal experience. Who I am.

So, I think like a lot of faculty, I came to higher education initially with very little experience—formal experience and background about teaching. A lot of us come here because our disciplinary experience, our graduate experience with our Master's and Doctorate's. With me, it was corporate experience. So, I'd had a job with an oil company—I'll mention who it was, Exxon—and I'd done a fair bit of corporate training with them. As you mentioned, Kelvin, I do like to talk, and that's sort of my passion: telling stories. I wasn't so bad as a corporate trainer, I found. They were short one-day workshops. I could hold people's attention, but it was really frustrating for me when I started in higher education, because the first two classes I could keep the students laughing. There seemed to be a sense of engagement, but I'll be honest, Kelvin. It was pretty discouraging as the semester went on. This was a face-to-face class. I noticed that attendance was going down, people were looking more and more sleepy in my class, and it seemed this idea of me being the one who was doing all the talking just wasn't working. So, I think that really forced me to really reconsider what I was doing with my teaching practice in the classroom, and again, going back to the partners thing, it was wonderful. We had a teaching and learning center on campus, and not only having conversations, having people come in to observe me, my practice, and just mentioning,

“You know, Norm, you may want to create some space for student dialogue. Even simple think-pair-share question and answers.” For me, this really became sort of the catalyst or the driver that I needed to change not only what was going on in the classroom but outside of the classroom. Because when I came into academia in the mid-90s, that’s when these LMSes were taking place. We had WebCT in Canada. I know you used it. Blackboard, Desire2Learn. My problem was I’d almost created a course and a half. So, again, I was doing a lot of talking in the classroom, and basically all I was using the LMS for was a content repository. There was just a lot of content.

So, when I worked with my instructional designer, it really became apparent that all my course was was just information dissemination. I was just pushing a lot of information out with the students, and again, I think this was really important with the ID person that I’d never heard of this idea of design. You know, an intentional design and an organization for the course. So, we really sat down, and again, I think a lot of us, we talk about backwards design is “What do I want the students to take away at the end of the learning experience in terms of the habits of minds, the knowledge skills, things like that. What are the assessment activities that need to take place?” But this is, for me, where the penny really dropped. This idea of blended learning is that I really needed to be intentional about integrating and connecting what students were doing outside and in class, and this really began with what are we going to get them to do before they come to class? Because for my experience, whether we’re online or face-to-face—and this is maybe my personality—but we still like to hear people’s voice. I mean, I think it’s still rich when we can physically get together. I don’t want to get weird on you, but maybe there is. We have some sort of electromagnetic aura or whatever. Who knows. But I find that even when I work with my indigenous students at a distance is voice makes a difference, and we can do this with web conferencing.

So, again, working in partnership with an instructional designer is really figuring out, looking at the activities, breaking them down. What would work best synchronously? What would work best asynchronously? But how do we build those intentional connections? So, before a physical or a synchronous session, how do we really set the hook like fishing? How do we provoke students? So, it could be getting them excited. How do we disrupt their way of thinking? Like, really challenge them so that they’re questioning, their minds are somewhat open, there’s a sense of confusion or whatever, so that we can follow that up in a synchronous session, and what’s been really a challenge for me is learning to teach with my mouth shut. So, again, I’m not saying I become a guide on the side, but this idea of listening to students first—sort of listening to what they’re doing, linking where they are to where the academic concepts are, and then really helping them lead, collaboratively lift me as they go forward.

So, I think, for me—and this is just my perspective—is why blended learning is still around. For some of us, change—just this idea of transforming, from just disseminating information to helping students co-construct their knowledge—is not something that happens overnight, because we’re learning as well. So, my experience is I had to get my head around this experientially. I had to really understand it and live it before I could do

it with students, and I'll be honest. I'm still a recovering lecture-holic. I found there is a time and a place for a lecture, though. You know, when students are wrestling with an issue and we all can see that there's a concept, a bottleneck, a threshold that they're really wrestling with, that's when we're all gung ho. "I need to talk and have a discussion with them!" But the other thing I found and what's been exciting, and I think what nourishes all of us is we're all learning together. So, it really is a learning-centered environment, and I think that's what's kept blended learning going. It's that we continue to learn in partnership with our students.

KELVIN Yeah, I love that. I love your thinking. One of the themes I hear in what you're saying is design. Right? I know that along with—one of your interest areas is blended learning, one of your research and interest areas is the community of inquiry model. I heard you just yesterday share the seven principles that I have never—sorry, I'm embarrassed—I'd never run across you sharing these before. To me, they seem to sit at this intersection, and I wondered if you might unbundle that a little bit, because to me, they seem like design principles for blended learning. Can you kind of share those and kind of talk about why they're blended? Because here's the fact: people are going to hear these and they're going to go, "Why are those blended principles?"

NORM And again, I'll be honest, I think they're maybe principles we can use in any environment, but I think they're particularly useful when we think of an environment where we're combining different spaces of learning. These online spaces with the physical face-to-face or asynchronous and synchronous. So, just back to the community of inquiry framework, because it's been fascinating for me just re-examining that whole framework. I'll be honest. The way I came about the framework is teaching a graduate course. We had a new director of the Teaching and Learning Centre come to the University of Calgary. His name was Randy Garrison. I was teaching a graduate course in instructional design, and you know, honestly, Kelvin, I didn't know that much about the framework so I had him come to the class and try and explain it. I'll be honest: it went right over my head. Randy's a wonderful guy. Background? He's a physicist. He's a master of Venn diagrams, but it was almost too complex for me, and it overwhelmed me. I'll be honest. I'm a simple guy. The old KISS principle. But the one thing that's really resonated with me over time, and it's based on the intersection of my teaching, my research, and my service experience. It's this idea of teaching rather than teacher-presence, and what I mean by that is when we're in an environment that everybody has a role and responsibility, and it's fascinating, Kelvin. When we start to poke into a lot of indigenous cultures, and the one culture I've been fortunate to learn quite a bit about is the Maori culture in New Zealand.

So, in New Zealand, in the Maori culture, they do not have a word for "learn". They do not have a word "to teach". They have one word: "ako". "I teach to learn. I learn through teaching." And I think it was a French philosopher a long time ago: "To teach is to learn twice." So, I'll get to those principles in a minute, but I think, for me—it's taken time—but this idea of teaching presence. So, again, I'm the captain of the ship. I have to come in with a plan. So, initially, I'm the designer, but what I'm learning, Kelvin, is that when

I design a course, I can't design it in isolation. Not only do I have to design it with the ID. I know you've got Techrangers here. We stole your idea. Or we borrowed it. We built on it.

KELVIN *(laughter)*

NORM We call it Student Technicians and Resource Tutors. Our START program. And those folks, besides providing digital technology support and expertise, they also support a lot of our course redesign. So, a lot of our focus in redesigning courses is probably in the first and second year. So, when we're redesigning them, we try to get third and fourth-year students that have taken these courses fairly recently to be part of the design team, and I think that's really powerful, Kelvin, because again, our perspective about what takes place in a course is very different from a student perspective. I like to think I'm 19, and I like to think I'm a student—

KELVIN You still look it.

NORM Thank you! Thank you. And I try to model that energy. But this idea of teaching presence, I think, is really powerful. That we can look at each other as learning partners. Again, obviously there's going to be some hierarchy here in terms of knowledge, in terms of life experience and things like that, but I think when we open up ourselves to partnership—just not with our students but to the Registrar, the ID—it really changes things. There isn't that hierarchy. That's the sense of distributed leadership. You know, they say the strength of an ecosystem is its diversity, and I think that's what makes it exciting when you're redesigning a course or a program. It's to understand those different perspectives.

So, let's get to those seven principles. And I'll be honest: it was a little discouraging for me that it came up with seven, because I think a lot of us who've been in higher ed. are familiar with Art Chickering and Zelda Gamson's Seven Principles of Undergraduate Education. I've got a good friend David Nicol in Scotland. He's got his seven principles assessment, and there's a guy a long time ago—John Dewey, you know, famous American educational philosopher—and he said, "You know, this isn't about tips and tricks. This isn't about recipes." So, I think we need to think about these as frameworks. We have these seven principles, and the first two really, Kelvin, are around design. From my experience, we're designing for a couple key things here. One, we're obviously designing with the academic concepts in mind, because these are academic spaces. These are learning spaces. They're not merely social spaces, and it's wonderful that we use social media, but we have to remember that social media was designed for social aspects, and we have to be aware of those affordances and how we can shape them so that they're focused on academics. So, deep learning vs superficial. Again, Twitter can be a very powerful tool, or it can be a very superficial tool. So, the first two principles are around design. Again, designing for critical discourse for the academic. But, if that's going to happen, Kelvin, it needs to happen in a safe space. It needs to happen in a space where we trust each other, and trust doesn't come over night. So, we're not just designing for

the first class with icebreakers. We're designing about how we're going to create a safe community where people agree to disagree, where we overcome what we say in Canada, pathological politeness. This is particularly true in the online environment where we can't see people. So, again, we learn to disagree about ideas. Not taking on peoples' personalities, whatever, but learning that.

So, those are the first two principles: designing for a rich academic space but also one that's safe. My experience, Kelvin, is, again, students—whether it's face-to-face, online, whatever—they make some pretty quick judgements about whether they're in or out on our courses, and it's not just our personalities. It's the way we set the tone. So, it's so critical that we get the design, we get the organization going. Where things start to go off the rail, though, is when we start to bring in a collaborative learning environment where students haven't had a lot of experience, and this is something we're working on really, really specifically in our first year, because as we've had discussions, unfortunately, the system I've come from—our state of Alberta—we're conditioning young people to be very individualistic and to be very external with their learning. What I mean by that is doing well on standardized tests. So, it's almost external knowledge focused on that, and again, it's an individual process. These are not group tests. So, the problem with our students when they come into universities is two key things. One is that they haven't learned how to work collaboratively, and this is something that doesn't happen overnight.

So, the next two principles is this idea about sustaining a purposeful community. So, building in the assignments—low-stakes—but how to effectively work as a group. So, again, first two is around design. The second two is around facilitation. So, that's where we need to model. We need to model for students what it means to be an effective learner in the course in terms of an effective learner, in terms of a group situation, contributing in face-to-face and online, and communication is key for kids these days.

So, that's the third and fourth principle. Fifth and sixth is something we have to remember. Students are expecting content expertise from us. They want us to be the knowledge experts, so what we need to do is this isn't about being just a guide on the side or a sage on the stage. It's about situated teaching, and there's times where you're going to need to take the rudder of the ship and you'll need to bring everybody back in focus, because again, especially with undergraduate education, they're having their mindsets—that have been set for eighteen years—challenged.

So we've got the first two principles around design and organization, three and four around facilitation—just modeling the type of learning—five and six is more what I'd like to say is the leadership, but it is this idea of direct instruction—we're direct there—and the seventh one we threw in—and I wish it wasn't there but it's important—is the alignment between what we want students to take away and the assessments and the activities we're designing. So, in the world of research, we talk about triangulation, and I think that's really important. When we work with assessment in our courses, it's like the corporate world. 360 degrees of feedback. Students learning to give themselves feedback, learning to give peers feedback, learning to get feedback from not only teachers but

experts in the field. So, those are our seven principles of teaching presence that are grounded in this idea of the community of inquiry framework. Again, we specifically looked at it from a blended framework because how important it is to blend those environments so that students are really learning those lifelong learning habits, that learning just doesn't take place in a classroom or it doesn't just take place in a webinar. We're developing those habits in mind so you're learning anywhere, anytime, and all throughout your entire life.

KELVIN That is awesome. Thanks for that. We'll put information on those seven design principles in our Show Notes as well as a few links to the lit. review, the community of inquiry model, and other related Norm Vaughan links as well.

NORM Can I just interrupt about that because again, with that—and I'll make sure you get the link—is when we created that book, we made sure it was open access, so you still have to pay a nominal fee for the paperback, but I'll send it to you, Kelvin. The nice thing is that all the chapters are PDFed because a lot of people on campuses are using chapters to stimulate reading activity, so I'll send you that so you can follow the principles.

KELVIN That's such an important thing to do to make knowledge available.

NORM Well, it is. I think it's not only to make knowledge available but to have people challenge the knowledge and build upon it. Again, Kelvin—we'll get back to this interview—that's what you folks have done so well here. You've been so wonderful at sharing everything, and again, I am just going to give a plug. We borrowed your ideas for the faculty development course. The idea that it can't happen just in one workshop, that it needs to happen over time and it needs to happen in a community and it needs to bring faculty together from different areas because again, there's more commonalities than differences.

KELVIN That's awesome. Thanks for joining us, Norm.

(musical transition)

TOM So, that was Norm Vaughan and Kelvin Thompson talking about blended learning, or mostly Norm Vaughan talking about blended learning.

KELVIN That's so true! I told you! Norm is a force of nature! So, what'd you think of the interview, Tom?

TOM It was great. I wish I could have been there when you were talking to him, because, as I said, every time I talk to Norm, I learn something about blended learning. His enthusiasm is contagious, and I always find myself inspired listening to him.

KELVIN Yeah, I agree. I mean, he really believes passionately about the human connections, blended learning, research. You just want to be a student in his class, right? That's all exciting all the time. He spoke to some of our staff and some of our part-time students. I

think they were inspired. You know? It was really cool. I liked what he calls his seven principles for blended learning. I thought that was good stuff. Like you said, maybe not completely blended exclusive but really lend themselves to blended in particular. I thought that was good. That free book—the chapters—that’s a really pretty cool intersection of blended and the community of inquiry model—or as Canadians like to say, the community of in-*quiry* model.

TOM It’s the process.

KELVIN Yes, the process.

TOM Yeah, well, I mean, I guess that sort of just validates stuff that we’ve talked about before which is that good teaching is good teaching regardless of modality. Some of these practices—or principles as he says—they apply to blended learning, certainly, but I don’t think it’s exclusive to blended learning.

KELVIN No, and I love that little tidbit he threw in there. The Maori thing. What was it? Aka? Ako? You know what, I’ll have to go back and rewind and listen to that again. That “to teach and to learn” kind of simultaneously. I think there’s so much truth in that.

TOM Yeah, and for somebody who’s such an expert in it—I’m on the border of being sycophantic now so, sorry, Norm...

KELVIN (*laughter*) Isn’t that great?

TOM Yeah. (*laughter*) But for somebody who’s really such an expert, he is so open to learning and to receiving input, and even as he described his own experience when he got into higher ed. from corporate training, he would seek out people to observe his classroom practices and give him feedback on how to improve. That is just, I think, such a great example for all faculty.

KELVIN Oh yeah! Every one of us. I find that inspiring. It’s heartening. Makes me want to, you know, be more human and open and vulnerable and all that stuff.

TOM Yeah! So, cool! With that said, maybe we should sort of land the plane here.

KELVIN Yes, sir.

TOM That blended learning or whatever it might be called in the future—

KELVIN Yeah, who knows?

TOM It’s not going away, and if anything, I think it’s expanding. A lot of people have claimed that blended learning is a growing trend that people will do more of, and so we all still

have so much to learn about designing and teaching in blended courses in the most efficient and effective way possible for our students.

KELVIN Yeah, and absolutely, Norm is a role model in that. The design and in the teaching, hand in glove. I want to learn right there along with him.

TOM Yeah, and so, there will be a lot of resources in the Show Notes related to some of the things you guys talked about.

KELVIN Absolutely. So, if you're listening on your podcast app, you might be able to just tap right there on your cover art and see all those links, or you can certainly go to topcast.online.ucf.edu. Hey Tom! Maybe it's time to make a plug!

TOM Plug away!

KELVIN So, seriously—no, no, seriously—if you were to go to iTunes and leave a review, we'd love it. It would be great. It would help other people find and love TOPcast as much as you do, and to sort of maybe encourage this behavior that we'd like to see, we thought we might from time to time read an excerpt from the iTunes comment reviews. So, for instance, our colleague Dr. Jessica Levine notes that “the topics of TOPcast are relevant and the resources are invaluable. The organization—particularly the notes—make this easy to follow along with and share with colleagues.” Thanks, Jessica!

TOM Yeah! Thanks, Jessica! That's really nice of her to say.

KELVIN Yes, absolutely.

TOM I hope others get some value out of this, and it's not entirely self-serving to kind of promote the reviews. It does impact the algorithm that iTunes uses to escalate content for people who are looking for this sort of stuff. So, it's as much about trying to foster the community and help people who are looking for this find it.

KELVIN Yes, absolutely.

TOM Cool! So, with that, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

KELVIN I'm Kelvin.

TOM See ya!