

TOPcast Episode 30: Learning Mobile

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

TOM And I'm Tom Cavanagh.

KELVIN And you're listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hi Tom!

TOM Hi Kelvin! How's it going today?

KELVIN Well, you really want to know?

TOM Yeah! *(laughter)*

KELVIN *(laughter)*

TOM So, for the listening audience, we are recording in the bunker again as a weather event is unfolding around us.

KELVIN Yeah. Hurricane Irma. It's a thing.

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN It's exciting.

TOM Yeah. So, this is pre-Hurricane Irma. We're hoping Hurricane Irma does not actually strike Florida, but as we are recording this, they're forecasting it to come kind of straight up the east coast of Florida, and we hope that doesn't happen.

KELVIN That's right, but the university is preparing to close down for a few days. We have a saying here in Florida: "Everybody's hunkered down."

TOM Yeah, so classes are cancelled tomorrow, and then the university is closed on Friday and Monday. We'll see what happens after that.

KELVIN I hope Orlando survives.

TOM We've been through this before.

KELVIN That's right. We have. We've survived.

TOM We have.

KELVIN But fisticuffs are breaking out. There's lines for gas. People are a little panic-stricken more than normal, I think. Probably the Houston aftermath has got people on edge a little bit.

TOM Yeah. Let's hope it's nothing like that.

KELVIN Hopefully not.

TOM But an interesting online learning connection.

KELVIN Yes?

TOM I've been having the conversations around campus and with various officials about, "Well, what does this mean for our online students—"

KELVIN What does it mean?

TOM "—and online faculty?" We've got some that are not even here in state. Our policy—I guess policies will vary according to each institutional context, but here, if the university is closed, then the online courses are closed, as well.

KELVIN That's been our practice. Some people ask, "Well, do you really have to? Couldn't you just keep going?"

TOM You could! And in some cases, students and faculty do when they're able to, but look, faculty and students are people too, right?

KELVIN *(gasp)* Really?!

TOM Yeah! A lot of them have to go home and put boards on their windows and buy water and everything else that they have to do. So, it's as much about safety preparedness for our staff and students as it is the technical ability to keep going. Look, our LMS is cloud-hosted. It's nowhere near Florida. That sucker is going to keep running, but it's the human resources that we need to worry about.

KELVIN That's right. As well we should care about the humans. So, speaking of coffee.

TOM Yeah! *(laughter)* Of course!

KELVIN *(laughter)* And I always am speaking of coffee. This is a good coffee for today's episode, Tom. This is what we might call Plan B coffee.

TOM *(laughter)*

KELVIN Because maybe for our regular TOPcast listeners, it's worth saying that we are recording this episode concurrently in front of an eLearning Academy audience for the faculties of Spokane Community College and Spokane Falls Community College.

TOM Nowhere near Orlando!

KELVIN Nowhere near Orlando. They're wondering, "Hurricane? What is that? Hurricane?" So, we were supposed to be doing this completely live, and we are actually pre-recording it.

So, our friend Ben Whitmore from up in Spokane actually sent us some lovingly craft-roasted coffee from Vessel Coffee Roasters. I've tasted it. It's a nice Guatemala San Isidro, and that's not what we're drinking.

TOM *(laughter)*

KELVIN Because we're always about the integrity of the coffee here at TOPcast, and this is whatever we had in the drawer for the office Keurig.

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN It isn't the Vessel coffee.

TOM Yeah, we could pretend it's the Vessel coffee but we are transparent and, as you said, we have integrity here. So, I'm drinking a scrounged up Green Mountain Coffee Keurig that I was able to get into my cup here. My Florida Distance Learning Consortium mug.

KELVIN I got my "I flew the Stearman" cup here. That was nice. That's more interesting than the coffee. I have no idea what this is. It was just in the drawer and that's kind of how it is. So, we will feature Ben's coffee in another episode, probably, because I have to share it with you.

TOM Well, let me try to make a thematic connection!

KELVIN Please do!

TOM Because we were on the go today in an unexpected "We better record this" kind of mode before the university is shut down—

KELVIN That's good, Tom. Keep going.

TOM We had to be highly mobile—

KELVIN Yes.

TOM —and find resources in the environment. So, we found coffee to match that.

KELVIN I think I see where you're going with this.

TOM It's a stretch, but it's there.

KELVIN I gotcha. So, you're making a connection to the topic of today's episode, which is mobile learning.

TOM Yes.

KELVIN Got it.

TOM And you were coming from another location.

KELVIN I was.

TOM And you were mobile.

KELVIN I'm still sweating.

TOM *(laughter)*

KELVIN That's exactly right. Well, yeah! That's a good thing. So, mobile learning. So, we put a lot of emphasis on mobile in general here at UCF as I'm sure a lot of institutions do. Since I'm the one sweating, I'm going to kind of share the wealth. How would you define mobile learning?

TOM Mobile learning? Well, generally I would define it as involving some sort of a mobile device, whether that's a smart phone or a tablet. Some people have extended that to include a laptop. I personally think that's a bit of a stretch but I've heard that definition before. So, yeah. Something that involves a device, some sort of wireless technology, or kind of broadband something.

KELVIN Yeah, I think that works for me. Now, just to pull on that thread a little bit, so, as you framed it, you could make use of such devices whether you were teaching or learning in an online class, in a blended class, in a face-to-face class, in any of those kind of modalities, right?

TOM Sure. Yeah. I don't think mobile learning is necessarily restricted to any particular modality. It's particularly well-suited for online, but it's not limited to that.

KELVIN Yeah, and I think that's worth calling out, right? Because I think some folks think of mobile learning—some folks still kind of use kind of this label kind of like a modality—“M learning”.

TOM “M learning”. I've heard of that.

KELVIN Right, and so, I tend to agree with you. I don't know that I consider mobile learning a true modality in the same way that we talk about online and face-to-face and blended, but it is a thing to think about and address, though. There are some things that can get in the way of success, there are things that its success enables, and so forth. So, I don't know. What are some of the things that we've done here at UCF, which might be instructive for our listeners to foster, to take obstacles out of the way?

TOM Well, maybe we can frame that answer in two ways.

KELVIN Please.

TOM So, one is looking at some statistics, and then the second would be, “What do we do as a result of those statistics? What are some practices?” So, the first answer would be we do a periodic survey of our students and faculty to determine their mobile usage. What is the penetration? What is the overall ubiquity of these kinds of devices and this type of interaction? Is it a big deal or not? And so, I have conveniently some statistics in front of me.

KELVIN It’s almost like you were prepared!

TOM Almost. That’s why I’m wearing my glasses. So, I’m going to read just a few statistics from this report, which is available on our website and perhaps we can stick it in the Show Notes for folks to look at.

KELVIN Absolutely. It’ll be there.

TOM This is done every so often. So, 99% of our students own a smartphone.

KELVIN 99%?

TOM 99%, according to this survey, at least of our respondents. 63% own a tablet. 35% own an eBook reader. 28% own some sort of wearable technology. So, like a Fitbit or an Apple Watch or something. 3% own multiple smartphones. 7% own multiple tablets. 3% own multiple eBook readers. So, of the wearable ownership, about 12% is a Fitbit, 4% is the Apple Watch, and 7% is other. Those are sort of the largest percentage blocks in there. I think all of that’s interesting and it confirms some stuff that we’ve heard previously, which is that our average student shows up with three devices on campus. So, they have a tablet, a smartphone, and the laptop, or something like that. Then if you add in a Fitbit or an Apple Watch, there’s four devices. When we look at connections to the network, you can see that it’s like a hockey stick slope of mobile usage is starting to become the predominant first choice for accessing information at UCF.

KELVIN That’s a good callout. Just to say before getting into the implications of those statistics—we should all, as online and blended faculty or folks who care about technology-mediated teaching and learning, pay attention to what reality is vis a vis these devices and usage on the part of our students. So, you just mentioned two good things. You can actually survey students, but through things like Google Analytics, other analytics packages, you can actually take a look at real behavior and see how are folks accessing the learning management system, your website, the network as a whole, all of that stuff.

TOM That’s true. There are analyses of accesses to the network, and then internally, we’ve set up a Google Analytics site just to look at the accesses to the learning management

system. I look at that a lot, especially at the start of the semester like we just had. It's amazing to see what kind of diversity of devices people are accessing the network with. Every once and a while you see an xBox, PlayStation, or something on there.

KELVIN *(laughter)* I love that.

TOM It's like, "Who's on the PlayStation in Venezuela?" Okay. You got to be ready, I guess, for any possible contingency.

KELVIN Which is probably a good transition point to the implications for the statistics, right?

TOM Sure! Yeah! So, one of the things that we've tried to do is recognize this growing behavior by students of going to a mobile-first access orientation and ensure that faculty understand what that means when it comes to the design of their courses. So, Ryan Seilhamer, who runs our mobile strategy here—

KELVIN He is like the mobile guru.

TOM He is. He's great. He created the Canvas Mobile Users group and has chaired that for a while. If you want to know anything about mobile, talk to Ryan. But, in any case, one of the things that he tries to do through our faculty development program is share with faculty best practices. So, for example, if you put this type of a table in your LMS page, it looks great on the desktop or on the monitor, but when that gets reformatted into a mobile view, that table's going to break and everything is going to wrap weird and you probably shouldn't do it that way. You should do something that is more responsive-friendly. He gives a bunch of examples that are eye-opening when you don't think about it.

KELVIN Right. Yeah, I think that's excellent. So, I guess, to unpack that a little bit, though, that doesn't mean necessarily try to design everything to be perfect for the guy on the xBox in Venezuela.

TOM Yeah. That person is a couple of standard deviations off the mean.

KELVIN That's right.

TOM But, somebody on an iPhone is not.

KELVIN That's right. So, the greatest good for the greatest number. Try to be mindful in general. Hopefully, if there are standards as those develop and we implement them—things like responsive design—if there are best practices and standards, as those are implemented, it should be good for everybody. The edge case of the xBox? *(laughter)*

TOM I mean, that's fun to talk about, but that's not the tail wagging the dog. Well, I have some other stats that I think kind of speak to that, and I think it's interesting when you look at student use of mobile apps, where do they spend their time? 77% is on music, 76% is

social networking, and 69% is social media. I'm not exactly sure of the distinction between those. I'd have to ask Ryan. 67% is entertainment, 57% is navigation—I assume like maps and things—but next is UCF Apps, which is 54% of students. That's something like 1-2-3-4-5, number 6 on this long list of UCF Apps, which includes our LMS, our UCF App in general. It includes some navigation, athletics, our portal. All of that stuff is part of it. Clearly, students are accessing that information on mobile devices. If we don't recognize that and design for that presentation, we're kind of disenfranchising a really large number of students.

KELVIN Yes.

TOM I've also heard—I wish I had the statistics for this. It's probably out there somewhere—that mobile devices are a way to potentially bridge the digital divide, because you don't necessarily need Fiber wired to every house in a rural district or in an inner city where those problems tend to occur, but it's a cell tower and a student with a device that they may already have. Can you leverage that to deliver education and make it more accessible for people who have a harder time to reach it?

KELVIN That's exactly right. So, that has all kinds of implications for course design, for media design, message design, and learning activities. I think that there is a little bit of push and pull on that ladder—not to go down too much of a rabbit trail, Tom—but the idea that while we want to be sensitive to this big install base and not disenfranchise anyone, I do think that we do hear from students sometimes that the implications—the mobile thing—is, “Well, I can be anywhere at any time accessing my online course.” The reality is that a lot of students are like, “Yeah, I'm going to wait until I have this particular time and place. I'm going to log into the learning management system, and I'm going to do my stuff there all in one sitting and I'm going to walk away again.” Whether that's on a desktop or on a laptop computer, whether that's on a mobile device. So, the access via this device is one thing, but the any-time, any-where, all-the-time, on-the-go, checking things constantly? That might not be reality.

TOM And I think it's idiosyncratic. It depends on the students. Some students want that and some don't. Just like some students say, “Yes, I want my assignments pushed into my Facebook feed,” and others are like, “No! That's my personal thing! I'll go in the LMS when I want my assignments told to me.” So, everybody's got a different perspective, which is why it's nice to give them some control over that. So, within the LMS, they can choose notification preferences, and certain things can be pushed into certain channels and not into others.

KELVIN That's good. Got more stats there?

TOM Yeah! So, for example, 35% of students indicated that they would like instructors to use mobile apps or devices in coursework. So, I think that opens up an interesting opportunity. So, these things are so easy to use, right? They're loaded with apps that integrate cameras and the ability to record sound and all kinds of stuff that you could

easily send somebody out into the field, if you will, to take a picture of something and post it in a discussion post forum or whatever it is. Some ethnographic study, you know. The opportunities are almost limitless to bring the outside world into the online environment through this device, where in the past, you might have to go check out a video camera, might need to know how to do video editing, and all kinds of other things. Now? It's just point-and-click with iMovie or something.

KELVIN Which is a very interesting a good distinction to make. That's not about "accessing" your online course. That's about using a tool regardless of course modality.

TOM Right. It could be any modality.

KELVIN That's right. A shout out here to our colleague, our friend, Professor Rick Brunson here at UCF. He teaches journalism, and Rick has shared numerous times in our faculty development program his personal modeling of using the mobile device in—

TOM He teaches digital journalism.

KELVIN He shows up in a newsroom in one of the organizations here in Orlando, and he's doing the little video camera thing. "Here I am! You can see local TV anchor Tom Cavanagh behind me and we're getting ready to talk about—" and he's modeling it before he asks students to do it.

TOM Well, he talks about this one anecdote—I probably won't get it exactly right, so Rick, I'm sorry—where he was at the beach one day, and he happened to have his smartphone with him, and he looked over and Dwight Howard, the basketball player who was playing for the Magic at the time, happened to be standing in the surf with some people getting baptized. So, he recorded it on his cellphone, took a few pictures, and literally had it on the Orlando Sentinel in the matter of a few minutes, and it got shared worldwide on ESPN and all these other places. He suddenly had this lightbulb that said, "Okay, this is the future of journalism because everybody's a reporter now." So, how can we teach our students to leverage this tool to become the journalists of the future?

KELVIN I just love that. Right? I love that story. I've heard him share that, as well, but that idea that you're framing here of this smartphone device is not— Earlier we were talking about access to technology-mediated learning environments. What we're talking about now is the smartphone as a tool, as an inquiry tool, as a knowledge creation and curation tool, field research, and journalism, which is data collection. Just fascinating.

TOM Yeah. I think that there are a lot of possibilities. So, not just for consuming—like checking your assignments or downloading something—but also producing content and making that part of your educational experience by what you develop and learn and share.

KELVIN So, just to comment on this, the learning management system we use here at UCF is Canvas. You've mentioned the Canvas Community. It's pretty mobile-friendly natively. I know, because I've spent sometimes... Just before an assignment is released, I'm like, "Oh my gosh! I've got to fix it now!" It's sometimes a little unfriendly to spread and zoom in, and "Okay! I'll keep tapping! I've got to get that button!"

TOM There are new apps now.

KELVIN That's right. There are! But I'm just saying: you can make it work within the mobile browser, which is great, but yes, there are also apps which even open up additional kinds of functionality.

TOM That's a whole separate philosophical conversation about, "Should something be in an app? Should it be responsive web design?" I'm not expert enough to have an opinion, but I think that there are relative advantages and disadvantages to each approach.

KELVIN I think that's probably true. Then, if I can put you on the spot for a second—because we've had this conversation a number of times—you mentioned the UCF app and apps. You have been rather supportive of Ryan, in particular, and his leadership in mobile broadly at UCF because, I believe—I won't put words in your mouth—you've told me that because you see the potential for mobile in effective teaching and learning, so you're willing to take on mobile for the entire institution, to an extent, in order to get to that bullseye of the teaching and learning mobile.

TOM Yeah, and I think that's true. We certainly don't do it in a vacuum. We partner with UCF IT and others, but yeah, I do think that we are a teaching and learning and research university, and we should leverage all the tools at our disposal, and this is one of them. If we can drive that and it benefits other areas of the university—like athletics and health services and the pharmacy and the Student Union and everybody else who wants to have pieces of the app—great! But I think the primary thing is still the teaching, learning, and research mission of the university.

KELVIN That's good. Well...

TOM Man, we could talk about this... There's so much more about mobile learning. Maybe we'll have to do another one.

KELVIN We might, and besides, this merely adequate coffee is dwindling in my cup here, so maybe we need to wrap this up. Can I take a stab at wrapping this up? Feel free to disagree, Tom.

TOM *(laughter)* Okay.

KELVIN It wouldn't be the first time. So, at the risk of being quippy—I'm occasionally quippy—mobile learning in some ways really is not a thing. There's just learning and mobile is just a reality. There's ubiquity. It's just our current reality.

TOM One more flower in the garden.

KELVIN One more flower in the garden! But in another sense, mobile learning is a thing because we have to pay attention to it, we have to plan for it, we have to design for it. Whether you've got the iPhone emulator up on your phone and you say, "Well, how will this work on an iPhone?" So, those two things are a bit intentional. We have to be thinking of mobile in online teaching and learning and maybe even face-to-face. We just have to be thinking of it if we're going to be staying relevant to today's students. Would you agree with that?

TOM I would agree with that. Ignoring it is ignoring the preferences of your students, as evidenced by their actual behavior.

KELVIN *(laughter)* That's right.

TOM Don't believe what they say. Believe what they do, right?

KELVIN Yes. That's a lot of wisdom. We could spend an entire episode just on that topic. Student behavior.

TOM Alright! So, are we ready to go hunker down as Irma approaches?

KELVIN Yeah, I guess so. I guess we don't have any choice. So, as always, check out our Show Notes. We'll try to load them up with a lot of mobile-friendly goodness. You can find those are topcast.online.ucf.edu. So, until next time, I'm Kelvin.

TOM And I'm Tom.

KELVIN See ya!