

TOPcast Episode 35: Blending Our Way to “A Whole New Level of Student Success”

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(musical introduction)

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

TOM And I’m Tom Cavanagh.

KELVIN And you are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast.

TOM The Teaching Online Podcast. I’ve heard of that.

KELVIN Yeah, I hope so.

TOM I’m a subscriber.

KELVIN *(laughter)* I am, too. I subscribe, listen, and contribute.

TOM Yeah. *(laughter)* I even click on the Show Notes on occasion.

KELVIN *(laughter)* That’s right! I learn stuff. I learn stuff, but anyway, we digress.

TOM Yeah, well, we encourage all of you listening to—

KELVIN Do all those things as well!

TOM Yeah! I mean, if you do subscribe or you access this through an app, I mean, that’s— Actually, the primary way I access is through Apple. If you’re on a Google phone or whatever, there are tons of resources on the website—

KELVIN There really are.

TOM —that sometimes get missed if you’re only accessing through an app, so every once and a while, head out to the TOPcast website.

KELVIN topcast.online.ucf.edu

TOM Thank you.

KELVIN Or you can just click the little link inside. Here’s a little pro tip: if you’re on the Apple Podcast and you tap the cover art, it’ll display in-line the text, and there’s a link directly through to the browser.

TOM So, there's an easy way to do it. But seriously, there's links to everything from, you know, resources, if we're talking to a guest, an interview, extra things we've referenced, and always information about the coffee of the day.

KELVIN Indeed.

TOM Which I imagine we have some for today.

KELVIN Oh, we do have! I'm drinking it.

TOM Oh! What's this in my hand?

KELVIN *(laughter)* What am I drinking now? How did I get here? What am I doing? Yes, Tom, this is coffee. So, our colleague and enthusiastic TOPcast listener Gus Roque from Florida International University brought us today's Columbian coffee from a small family roastery in the Miami, Florida, area called Macondo Coffee Roasters.

TOM ¡Hola Gus!

KELVIN Man, that Gus. He's a good guy.

TOM Gus is awesome.

KELVIN He is. So, while brewing the coffee this morning, Tom—which is still hot, I think, which is nice—

TOM It is!

KELVIN It's a cold day so I appreciate hot coffee.

TOM It is cold! In Orlando—for those of you listening, forgive me one brief...

KELVIN Yeah, I know! Go off!

TOM So, we live in Florida, right?

KELVIN That's right!

TOM For a *reason*!

KELVIN *(laughter)*

TOM People are going to say, "Oh, don't tell me about how you think something's cold." Look! It was 28 degrees this morning! Straight up!

KELVIN That's right!

TOM With wind chill and everything, it said feels like 20.

KELVIN I want some credit! I came to work anyway. *(laughter)*

TOM *(laughter)* Yeah. So, 20 degrees? That's like for reals cold.

KELVIN I know, right? Although I was on a Twitter chat this morning and, you know, there was a colleague in the Chicago area and he's like, "Wah, wah, wah. It was -4 the other day." *(laughter)*

TOM Yeah, but we live in Florida!

KELVIN I know! Feel bad for us!

TOM It's in the 20s, man. That's alright. By Saturday, it'll be 71.

KELVIN *(laughter)* Thankfully. People get sick.

TOM Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. It's nice and warm.

KELVIN Bet it is! I like it. So, even though I brewed it this morning, while I was brewing it, I was using some recently acquired new brewing equipment. Still kind of working the kinks out of my process. I was reminded that no matter how much you know about what you're doing, it is in the doing—the hands-on process—where you end up with a good cup of coffee or...something else, and I'm really hoping, Tom, that you've got there the former, not the latter. *(laughter)*

TOM *(laughter)*

KELVIN So, active careful engagement is required for a good cup of coffee. So, I thought this was particularly relevant given our topic for today's episode. That make sense?

TOM It does. Active careful engagement, yes. Sounds pedagogical.

KELVIN Yes, it certainly could be. Should be. I hope you enjoy the coffee, too.

TOM I do, and I thank Gus for it. Gus has been a great big supporter of TOPcast, and we're fans of his.

KELVIN Absolutely.

TOM So, yeah, I get it, because we're going to be talking today about some aspects of online learning that bleed into the classroom environment, especially related to active learning,

and we thought it might be interesting to talk a little bit about a project we are literally about to kick off. We're nothing if not transparent here at TOPcast.

KELVIN *(laughter)* That's right.

TOM So, it's very exciting for us, and it's definitely a cake that hasn't baked yet. I would say we've got a bowl, and we're throwing ingredients in right now for this larger project. We've got ingredients that we know are awesome—

KELVIN Not rutabagas.

TOM —not rutabagas—but how they all mix together and cook up at the end of this project, we shall see. So, maybe it would be worthwhile to talk a little bit about that.

KELVIN Yeah, maybe talk about the ingredients, talk about how they all come together, or you can talk about the eventual vision of the cake.

TOM Yeah, I guess maybe I'll start with the cake, because I always like to eat dessert first.

KELVIN Me, too! Life's short, man.

TOM Life is short. So, recently, last fall, our Board of Trustees identified online and adaptive learning as a key area of strategic emphasis and had it as a subject for a Board summit/retreat that they had. At the end of the day—

KELVIN Which is no small thing.

TOM Which is no small thing! Yeah, actually, you're right! Let me take a moment to recognize our Board of Trustees, which are really amazing in the fact that they are as knowledgeable and engaged and supportive of the work that we do as they are. I know that's not the case at every institution. So, yeah, kudos to the UCF Board, and under the leadership of the Board chair who's really great. So, what they did was at the end of this kind of summit/retreat, it was authorized a significant number or a significant dollar amount of university reserves to be dedicated towards a strategic project to try to scale some of this stuff, and specifically for online, blended, adaptive, and active learning. So, those four elements. Now, a course doesn't necessarily have to have all four, but it should be in this ballpark, and we have made some commitments based on the dollar figures that they have authorized around the number of courses, and it's a significant number of courses—like 100 courses in different categories. 120 different faculty we're going to train. We want to impact 50,000 students. We want to build out 8 active learning classrooms. There's a whole bunch of different things, and we're in the process now—you and I and one of our colleagues, Wendy Howard—of kind of building out the plan for this. It's a three-year project, and I have to provide periodic updates to the Board about our progress against that.

KELVIN I know you're excited about that part. *(laughter)*

TOM That's right. I have great faith in our team, and I think we're going to be hopefully moving the needle. Some of the courses we're targeting for this redesign/redevelopment effort are areas that we haven't often engaged with.

KELVIN Right.

TOM Some of the STEM disciplines, some of the hard sciences—or natural sciences as they prefer, I guess—but with an emphasis on courses that have a history of not being successful with high DFW rates or that are high-impact courses depending on—there's different labels for them—success markers, foundation courses, gateway courses.

KELVIN There's more pejorative labels that sometimes people use, as well.

TOM Yeah, I've heard of some of those as well, but we'll stay away from those.

KELVIN We'll stay away from those. I agree. I've been lately just saying challenging courses.

TOM Challenging courses, yeah. But I would say that the departments and the faculty and definitely the administration are coming at it with the attitude of “We want people to be successful in these courses.”

KELVIN Yes!

TOM It's not the old weed-out.

KELVIN Thank you. I so agree with that.

TOM It's not the old “education as a gate” versus “education as a bridge”.

KELVIN I like that.

TOM This is more of a bridge. I didn't make that up. I heard that from someone, but this is more “education as a bridge” metaphor as opposed to “You've got to pass through this gate.” So, what we're trying to do is put together a plan. We've analyzed institutional data. We've identified a target list of courses that we think are the best opportunities to kind of have that kind of an impact, and then we've also aligned this effort with a larger general education program redesign that is going on concurrently, and the timing is just perfect to kind of layer these two things on top of each other and maybe get more bang for our buck. So, that's the vision. That's the goal behind it. There's obviously more details to that, but that's the big picture.

KELVIN I think it's very exciting. I love the idea of really— I mean, you hope to make a difference every day, you know, for students and stuff. What do I say, Tom? Just trying to make online and blended learning even better a little bit every day.

TOM A little bit every day.

KELVIN A little bit every day. So, you hope for that, but looking where a little positive change could potentially reap exponential benefits, that's exciting, and for all the way up at the Board of Trustees to recognize the potential of that and support it? I think that's awesome.

TOM Yeah, it really is, and we definitely have the support of our president and provost, as well. But the deans have also been terrific, and so, I'm really enthused about it. I haven't seen any big resistance. (*laughter*) Yet. But we haven't kicked off all our meetings yet so I think there'll be things to come up that we just have to work out the kinks, but so far, I've been really pleased with everyone's enthusiasm and support. So, maybe it would be worthwhile to take a moment to talk about why online, blended, adaptive, and active are the ingredients that we're talking about.

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM So, we know from not only national data but I would say even more specifically institutional data that blended learning has outperformed all of our other modalities and that online and face-to-face have essentially been equivalent.

KELVIN Right.

TOM There is no statistical difference between online and face-to-face. As it pertains to student success, measured by grades, blended has outperformed always for twenty years the other two. I think we've mentioned this previously.

KELVIN Withdrawal rates, faculty satisfaction, student satisfaction, all of that stuff.

TOM Yup. All of those things. Blended is the winner, if you will.

KELVIN And if you haven't listened to some past TOPcast episodes on blended, we have several, and we'll put those in the Show Notes, as well. You know, there's innovation needed. We've had Norm Vaughan on before talking about innovations in blended. We've had Charles Graham when he was talking about research agendas and blended.

TOM Questions of consequence.

KELVIN That's right. You love that title.

TOM I do.

KELVIN I know. Yeah, so we'll link to all that as well.

TOM Yeah, and we have some reasons why we think blended learning has been successful here, and a lot of those are touched on in those episodes you talked about, but it's also been the experience nationally in what kind of few studies. There have been kind of meta studies. The one that the Department of Education did through SRI.

KELVIN Yeah, Barbara Means.

TOM Yeah, Barbara Means' work. So, we know that blended outperforms all those others. We know from our own research here that adaptive learning has been very successful, at least in the pilots that we've conducted. Chuck Dziuban and Patsy Moskal have done, I think, some excellent work evaluating that objectively, and we've seen—in several different platforms—success that exceeds what the results would have been had you not used that intervention. So, we know adaptive learning has been working, and I think we're not even really great at that yet, because it's new.

KELVIN It is new.

TOM We're still working on it. And then, active learning, which is something that some schools have already been doing I think with great success that are ahead of us, but we are committed to it. We're in the process of building out this sandbox classroom that will be kind of an experimental place/learning space where we can do different kinds of technology and configurations of classroom setup and different kinds of teaching practices, and we know that we want to build out more of those spaces on campus, and we plan to use this funding to help us do that, specifically related to blended. So, if we combine three things that we know through data, through research, are better than face-to-face—at least the results have been better than face-to-face when implemented well—which would be blended, adaptive, and active, and if we can kind of combine those three things together into one kind of intervention, the theory is that we will have an impact greater than any one of the parts.

KELVIN Right.

TOM That's the hope. The fear that I have is that we take these three awesome ingredients—ice cream is awesome, spaghetti is awesome, and you know, peanut butter pretzel chips are awesome—and you combine them.

KELVIN I don't think I want to do that.

TOM Yeah. That's what we don't want, right?

KELVIN Nope.

TOM We want to make sure that it's a cake that tastes good when it's all done.

KELVIN The ice cream and the peanut butter pretzel chips? I'm down with that.

TOM Maybe. Yeah, that could work, but you put that spaghetti and meatballs in there?

KELVIN Yeah, I don't think so. Maybe. Agreed. Like, I do think that—and we don't have this all figured out like you said—I think blended and active in particular course situations from a redesign perspective, I think those could be powerful. Blended and adaptive could be powerful. Maybe adaptive and active—again in sort of a blended context, but maybe not leaning on the blended literature as much—could be really powerful. Can we just talk a second or two about active? I mean, because I don't know if it's just me, but it seems like everything old is new again. I mean, in some ways, active has been around, and then in other ways, it seems like there's been this resurgence lately.

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN Right? So maybe just talk about what active is and why it's so popular now, right?

TOM Yeah, sure, and I won't claim to be a super expert in it. We have people on the team who are, but it's essentially a learning space—a learning environment—where there is not a traditional lecture kind of format. It's not a sit-and-absorb, be-talked-at kind of pedagogical model. You know, the old “sage on the stage”. This is more teams, group work, people working together through applied activities like case studies or things. You may have heard TEAL—technology-enhanced active learning—spaces where you might have, like, monitors on the wall with almost like an Apple TV and you bring your own device and you just connect and you can collaborate with, like, say, four to six people around a table with a monitor at the end of all these tables and you might have a room full of these tables where people are all working together. The faculty member has no podium at the front of the room. They just sort of circulate with maybe a tablet or something and make sure that everybody is kind of on track, answers questions. If you have a teaching assistant or something, they might be doing the same thing if you've got a room big enough to sort of accommodate that. I mean, I assume that's what we're both talking about.

KELVIN Yeah, yeah. I think so. I think, you know, back in my K12 days, there was axiom cliché: telling isn't teaching, and listening isn't learning.

TOM Yeah, yeah.

KELVIN And you know, so, I think a lot of stuff that's just good design and good pedagogy fall under the broad heading of active learning, but I think you're right. This learning spaces movement seems to intersect a lot with active learning in the ways the TEALs that you talked about. Just to comment, though. My little rant of the moment is I think in the early days of online, we were so paranoid about online—and maybe the limitations of the

technology and stuff—I think we embraced things like constructivism or cognitivist approaches that were by nature very engaging because that’s what we had to deal with, right? We had asynchronous text-based discussion boards, and the bandwidth and the media weren’t such that you could just easily replicate the lecture.

TOM Right.

KELVIN You know, so, you kind of sort of stumble into “Here’s lemons! Make lemonade!” It ended up being a very engaging experience, but I do think apart from just these disciplinary things where maybe we haven’t pierced the lecture barrier—and there is a shout out for our colleague Dr. Scott Freeman from University of Washington who did that 2014 seminal meta-analysis of lecture and active learning in the STEM disciplines. Fascinating. 200+ studies they examined and all that. All kinds of gains. If there was any active learning at all, anything beyond just lecture—which I think they operationally defined lecture as uninterrupted expository speaking from the instructor or something like that. There’s an engaging picture. So, if you did anything other than that, then it was like active learning. There were all these gains. Like a half a standard deviation higher in grades and a 10% reduction in failure rates.

TOM Eric Mazur at Harvard has published a lot on this sort of stuff, and he’s actually used lecture halls to do this. I mean, that’s not an ideal learning space for this kind of learning, but he’s been able to make it work just by having people turn around and talk to each other. He’s recorded all kinds of learning gains.

KELVIN So, I find that fascinating, but I think just even in the online space—just to kind of finish up my rant—despite that newer technologies and bandwidth and all that, I think we run the risk of trying to replicate the face-to-face environment online sometimes. You see more video lecture capture, and all video lecture capture’s not bad. There’s a whole lot you can do with video lecture capture platforms that are very engaging, but if you do them mindlessly. If you just kind of shovel, “Well, here’s my lecture”, it’s not any better than sitting in the lecture hall.

TOM Yeah, and I think they both are coming from the same rationale. Even if it’s not explicitly articulated, it’s inefficiency, and you want to maximize kind of the return on your instructional investment, if you will, and that’s the whole point of lecture halls. It’s the whole point of lecture capture when it’s implemented like that, and I think that the students kind of suffer as a result. And that’s what we’re trying to get away from a little bit here. You know, we’re a big school, and we’ve got the same problems that all of the other big schools have with trying to have, you know, class sizes and engaging, but this is a serious effort. The Board of Trustees has put some serious money behind it, and we’re going to do our part to try to make it work.

KELVIN Can I give you this quote? You said that, and it made me think of I happen to have Scott Freeman’s paper here. Towards the end of his paper—I love this—“Given our results, it

is reasonable to raise concerns about the continued use of traditional lecturing as a control in future experiments.”

TOM *(laughter)* Thank you, Scott.

KELVIN *(laughter)* Like, ouch.

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN Wow.

TOM Well, Chuck Dziuban says it’s only since the dawn of online learning that face-to-face learning was the golden standard. It’s like, well, why? You know? Some of it’s great, but if you’re in a 500-seat lecture hall and you’re in the back of the room, *(mutters)* I don’t think that’s such a golden standard, if I can say that out the side of my mouth like this.

KELVIN *(laughter)* That’s right. So, I’m real hopeful. I’m like you. I think get these ingredients right and try it out a little bit. I think things are going to be better for big groups of students in ways that are institutionally noticeable.

TOM Yeah, that’s the plan, and maybe as we go along—this is a three-year project meaning we’ll periodically maybe pop back in and say how we’re doing and, you know, what we’ve learned, what’s worked, what hasn’t worked, and maybe somebody won’t Tweet it at our Board of Trustees if we talk about something that didn’t work.

KELVIN *(laughter)* We’re just being honest here, folks!

TOM I’m just kidding.

KELVIN That’s right. But I think evaluation—you said this, I believe—but evaluation is very important, so we’re going to be watching all of this very carefully because we want to see what really does work and what are the right recipes and so forth. So—we’ve already talked about this a little bit—effects might show up downstream more than you would immediately perceive. It might not be in the here and now. It might be a course or two later. We’ve talked about that with our institutional knowledge management folks. Some interesting evaluation approaches.

TOM Yeah, I think that’s true, and you know, a three-year project? It doesn’t mean we’re going to stop doing this after three years, right?

KELVIN No, that’s right. I would imagine that is true.

TOM Cool!

KELVIN So, maybe I’ll—what’s your phrase? Put a bow on it? Put a button on it?

TOM Yeah! Why don't you land the plane?

KELVIN Yeah, something like that. So, let me take a shot at it, and you see if you disagree. Wouldn't be the first time. So, in our field we know quite a bit about designing and facilitating effective technology-mediated courses. I think that's a fair statement.

TOM Mhmm.

KELVIN Our colleagues in other parts of our institutions have specialized knowledge as well, right? Our Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning. Our Student Success colleagues who have responsibility for like tutoring and advising and co-curricular stuff. When we combine what we know strategically, we can potentially get to a whole new level of student success.

TOM Yeah! I think that's true. You know, maybe one example is so we're helping to invest in these active learning spaces because we want to impact blended learning, but that's not to say those spaces can't be used for pure face-to-face classes.

KELVIN Right. If there is such a thing as a pure face-to-face class, but yeah, agreed. Absolutely.

TOM Cool! Alright, so thank you all for listening, and if you like what you're hearing, this might be a good episode to share with a colleague outside of your immediate circle. Doing so might lead to some productive conversations about how to better partner together to achieve your institutional goals. It is as simple as clicking Share on your podcast app or just emailing a link to <https://topcast.online.ucf.edu> and you know you can always check out all the Show Notes at that URL.

KELVIN Yes. That's awesome, Tom. That's a good plug. Thanks for that. Well, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

TOM And I'm Tom.

KELVIN See ya!