

TOPcast Episode 37: 6 Deadly Sins of Online Teaching

KELVIN This episode of TOPcast is brought to you by UCF Online. 20+ years of award-winning online excellence. 75+ online programs. One of the largest and most innovative universities in the U.S. ucf.edu/online

(musical transition)

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're listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Back at it again, Kelvin.

KELVIN Back at it again. It's true.

TOM Here in our studio: our palatial recording studio.

KELVIN With the retractable roof and the piped-in sunlight.

TOM Yes. That's right.

KELVIN It's nice.

TOM It is. It's wonderful.

KELVIN *(snickering)*

TOM We've got an aquarium full of live sharks below us.

KELVIN *(laughter)* Wouldn't that be something?

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN Okay! If you don't do a good episode, in you go! *(laughter)*

TOM *(laughter)* There are places in Orlando where we actually could do that.

KELVIN Oh, I thought there were other higher ed. institutions where that was the thing.

TOM Maybe. There's a theme park or two that have giant aquaria.

KELVIN That's true. Aquaria? I guess that's a thing. Sure.

TOM I guess.

KELVIN I guess it's plural.

TOM I'm saying it is.

KELVIN It's Latin.

TOM Aquariums. Aquaria.

KELVIN That's like the snobby people who talk about discussion forums.

TOM And fora?

KELVIN Yes!

TOM Yes, I've heard those discussions.

KELVIN I've been that person.

TOM Yeah. I am a data/datum guy.

KELVIN Yeah, sure.

TOM I try to use data correctly as a plural.

KELVIN That's right!

TOM So, while I'm blathering on about fish, I'm hearing the gentle gurgles of a Thermos.

KELVIN Gentle gurgles? That's just my stomach. *(laughter)*

TOM *(laughter)* That might be the shark down there.

KELVIN Could be. That's right. Yes, sir.

TOM So, what is being poured into my mug here?

KELVIN Well, Tom, we're setting the stage with this first episode of our fourth season, thank you very much.

TOM Yay!

KELVIN That's right.

TOM Fourth season.

KELVIN That's right. Happy anniversary.

TOM Happy anniversary.

KELVIN We're setting the stage for this first episode of our fourth season for adventure.

TOM Adventure?

KELVIN Daring!

TOM Okay.

KELVIN Mayhem! Zest! (*whispering*) And danger!

TOM Wow.

KELVIN You know what you're drinking?

TOM No, but now I'm a little bit scared.

KELVIN You're scared? (*laughter*)

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN Take a sip and see what you think. I hope I did a good job brewing it.

TOM Okay. Yeah.

KELVIN That's Death Wish Coffee.

TOM Death Wish Coffee?!

KELVIN That's Death Wish Coffee.

TOM Wow. Like, Charles Bronson.

KELVIN Exactly! Which am I wrong? I think now there's a remake.

TOM There is. I think it's Bruce Willis.

KELVIN I'm like, I don't know how to feel about that.

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN That's kind of weird.

TOM Death Wish Coffee.

KELVIN Death Wish Coffee.

 TOM So we're drinking vigilante coffee.

KELVIN I know! Don't you feel like (*growl*)? It's good stuff here.

 TOM Nothing says tough vigilante like Tom and Kelvin.

KELVIN (*laughter*) That's so true.

 TOM Alright, so I think I kind of get the connection.

KELVIN Yeah, so, why don't you take us on? It wasn't just setting the stage for the next season, although it maybe does that. It actually has relevance to today's topic.

 TOM Maybe. Really, if it doesn't, does it matter anyway?

KELVIN Oh, it does, Tom. It always matters.

 TOM It always matters. Okay. So, I would say that if you are a vigilante, you are a wrathful person.

KELVIN Okay.

 TOM You want vengeance.

KELVIN Uh huh.

 TOM And those are attributes that are not considered the most wholesome.

KELVIN Okay.

 TOM And that you would be suffering may I even say from sinful behavior?

KELVIN (*gasp*)

 TOM You would be wrathful.

KELVIN I feel like I need a shower now.

 TOM (*laughter*) That would be one of the seven deadly or capital sins.

KELVIN Ah. Seven deadly sins. Yes, that's right. Yeah, that's kind of where I was going. We're going to talk today about what we might call the six deadly sins of online teaching.

Getting back to our online teaching roots in this first episode of our new season. So, six deadly sins.

TOM Okay!

KELVIN Death Wish, deadly sins.

TOM Deadly sins of online teaching.

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM Wow. Abandon all hope, ye who enter the TOPcast podcast.

KELVIN You know why these are the deadly sins of online teaching?

TOM Why?

KELVIN They'll kill your courses if you do 'em.

TOM Ooh! That's good!

KELVIN That's it.

TOM Let's hope that we can save some people—

KELVIN —from that?

TOM Yeah. The sixth level of Dante's Hell.

KELVIN *(laughter)* That's right. Whatever. Yeah, sure, and I don't know. These are just six. These are some that we've talked about, and you know, you guys might have other ones and if you do, let us know. It's all good. So, how do you want to proceed? Do you want me to tell you the first one?

TOM Well, maybe before we jump in, I think it's important to know that—at least in Christian thought, and I imagine it's the same elsewhere—the seven deadly sins are kind of not in isolation.

KELVIN Well, that's true.

TOM There's a countervailing virtue that is something that you can aspire towards to overcome that particular deadly sin.

KELVIN Well, that sounds a whole lot better than this other stuff. Maybe I should have gotten like Angel Coffee and we could have drank that instead of the Death Wish Coffee.

TOM Death Wish Coffee. No.

KELVIN But I feel a lot tougher now.

TOM You know, if it bleeds it leads, right? So, let's go with Death Wish Coffee.

KELVIN *(laughter)* Okay.

TOM But I think that keeping in mind the ameliorating virtue as we go through the six deadly sins of online teaching will be helpful because this is a hopeful podcast.

KELVIN And helpful! But a little bit dangerous.

TOM Helpful and hopeful.

KELVIN Tell your friends. This is a dangerous podcast.

TOM That's right.

KELVIN They might not be able to handle it. Tell them that.

TOM I'll tell them! I will!

KELVIN *(laughter)*

TOM Just wait 'til you see my Tweets. Alright, so, you want to start?

KELVIN Sure.

TOM Okay.

KELVIN So, I think this arguably is the foundational deadly sin of online teaching. You ready?

TOM Bum bum bum!

KELVIN Being absent.

TOM Being absent. Oh my gosh, that is the number one complaint that we hear from students.

KELVIN Being absent, and to your point, the countervailing virtue to that vice is what one might call instructor presence, right? So absence versus presence. We've heard all of these terms. Phoning it in, you know. Robo-course, right? That's a thing. So, what are some tactic ways that come to your mind that students can feel the absence of an instructor?

TOM Feel the absence? It's a risk in some self-paced courses. Different kinds of self-paced tutorials, some competency-based or mastery-based.

KELVIN It's a risk.

TOM Yeah. Elements of adaptive if you're not careful with how you deploy it. I think for all of those, you need to just keep this in mind.

KELVIN At the same time, though, even in—dare I say—traditional online courses at this point, if one is not sensitive to how one develops content materials and how one posts and interacts with students, you can do that in a way that really feels detached, right? So, the presence. Our colleague—now retired—Dr. Bill Phillips talked about instructor persona and interjecting that into the materials and into your discussion postings and announcements and individual student messages and so forth. Doing that on a regular basis. That's a thing. That's a positive cultivation thing.

TOM Okay. So, that's deadly sin number one.

KELVIN Deadly sin number one.

TOM And the virtue associated with it.

KELVIN Absence versus presence, right?

TOM So, number two!

KELVIN Number two—

TOM Dun dun dun.

KELVIN Dun dun dun—I think follows rather well from the first one so it's just a degree removed: aloofness. So, there's absence, but then there's aloofness. Aloofness versus engagement, we might say.

TOM Okay, I can see that as being qualitatively different from presence and absence.

KELVIN That's right, because it's not just that you're not there, but there's a tone. I'm told sometimes I have tone. *(laughter)*

TOM *(laughter)* Okay.

KELVIN Like, don't have tone.

TOM Nonverbal communication cues.

KELVIN Yeah, so I think we really see this as interactions with the whole class and with individual students whether that's synchronous communication or asynchronous communication. Discussion boards or voice thread, individual messages or what have you, podcasts, whatever your shtick is, you can cultivate a positive tone or more of an aloof, detached tone. Can I tell you this story? This is horrible. I'd get fired for this today probably, I think, but back in the day when we were using stone knives and bear skins to teach online, you know, I was working here but I was in grad school also here and I accidentally logged in with the full god's eye instructor view.

TOM Yeah. Still happens to people today. They report them to me. *(laughter)*

KELVIN That's right. I would have owned it if there was anybody to tell or if there was a protocol for doing it. I felt really bad, because here's what I saw. I logged in—and we were using an older learning management system at the time—and I went into the discussion board, and I suddenly realized that I wasn't logged in as me because I saw the million unread discussion postings from the instructor's view, and I suddenly had a whole different perspective of that instructor, and I was like, "Oh, I don't want to know this! I don't want to know that you haven't read a single that anybody's written all semester!" So, that's horrible.

TOM Yeah, well, judge not.

KELVIN I know!

TOM Lest ye be judged, because there are different ways of managing a course, and sometimes the discussion boards are set up to just be a discussion between students, not to be a mediated thing by faculty. But I get your point.

KELVIN Yes, that's right, and that is a good point, right? That we should be aware of our unintentional aloofness and try to cultivate a perception that you never perfectly control how you're perceived by somebody else, but there are strategies for cultivating student engagement by faculty. Shout out here to the Teaching Online Pedagogical Repository (topr.online.ucf.edu). You could find all kinds of stuff there. If you're afraid of aloofness, you can pursue the virtue of engagement.

TOM Pursue the virtue. Alright! That's two down.

KELVIN Mhmm. Here's the halfway point.

TOM Halfway point. Deadly sin number three.

KELVIN This one might be controversial.

TOM Dun dun dun. Yeah, I can see that.

KELVIN Being teaching-focused.

TOM As opposed to?

KELVIN Being learning-focused.

TOM Learning-focused. That's right.

KELVIN It's not really about you. It's not really about me.

TOM There are some faculty that might take exception to the way we've characterized them

KELVIN (*whispering*) I think that's right.

TOM But I take your point. I don't disagree. I think that... I was teaching at a community college a number of years ago and their big thing was being a learning-focused institution, and there was all this training and I went through classes on flipping the script a little bit from being a teaching-focused institution to being a learning-focused institution. It was all about the students learning, and I think if you come at it that way, it makes you a better teacher.

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM It's two sides of a coin.

KELVIN Yeah, I think that's right, but conversely, you can make a fetish out of focusing on teaching and it doesn't necessarily get you to the learning.

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN You hope it does.

TOM Yeah. Sage on a stage or whatever kind of tropes we can trot out.

KELVIN That's right. All the lecture stuff. Barr and Tagg's seminal 1995 article that kind of does this nice dichotomy between... I forget how they frame it. It's either sage on the stage or lecturer/non-lecturer, or it might be teaching and learning. I don't know, but it's a good read if you haven't read it in a while.

TOM Mhmm.

KELVIN Number four?

TOM Number four! Dun dun dun.

KELVIN And these get a little bit more nuanced as we go down or up or whichever way we're going. Rote learning centered. That's R-O-T-E. Rote learning oriented.

TOM That's the sin.

KELVIN Yup. Versus meaningful learning oriented.

TOM Okay.

KELVIN Right? We talked before about lower-ordered thinking skills and higher-ordered thinking skills so maybe another alternative title is HOTS versus NOTS.

TOM It's a good thing I was drinking during that.

KELVIN (*laughter*) I was waiting for a spit take.

TOM Yeah. (*laughter*) HOTS versus NOTS. Higher-ordered thinking skills.

KELVIN It's an egregious pun. Yeah, but recall kind of stuff, that lower level of Bloom's Taxonomy, and I don't think anybody sets out for that, but we sometimes stumble into it. We don't think about it, right? And I think a lot of it is just if we just sort of accept the functionality of the learning management system without really critically thinking about how to design for higher-ordered thinking and so forth, we can stumble into a bunch of multiple choice tests that are just recall-oriented, for instance.

TOM Yeah, I think that's true, and as you know, you can write a multiple choice test that gets to synthesis.

KELVIN Of course! It's just hard!

TOM It is hard! It takes a lot of work, but it can be done. And this also puts me in mind of an initiative that our Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning was working on. I want to say it was sometime last year. This notion of transparent teaching, about being really honest with students about why they're learning the thing that they're learning and how it's applicable in different contexts whether it's a professional environment or work or job or whatever, but "here's why I'm teaching you this thing," so that they don't just think it's some pointless make work that the teacher's putting me through this gauntlet of nonsense.

KELVIN I think that's an excellent point because otherwise you're in this box-checking thing. The faculty are box-checking and the students are box-checking. You know, it is kind of mindless. Box-checking.

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN Number five?

TOM Number five!

KELVIN Another controversial one, maybe, and you know, I don't know.

TOM Dun dun dun.

KELVIN Just being a grader versus maybe what we might call adopting kind of a reviewer mindset. Speaking of box-checking, you're just kind of going through and going B, C, A, F, 0. You know? As opposed to, "I see what you were going for there but you didn't quite land."

TOM I wonder if maybe even another term besides reviewer—and I know this term is used elsewhere so it's probably not the right term because it has different context but almost like a coach.

KELVIN Yeah! I like that! I see what you're doing there.

TOM Yeah, because I'm thinking I've been guilty of this. So, I teach writing, and when I'm teaching online, I use Track Changes a lot, and it's easy for me to go into a student's paper and make the change with Track Changes, and the intention I have is to say, "Look what I've done so that you can learn and understand what I'm looking for or what I think the professional workplace is looking for so that you can do it differently next time." But I worry it's maybe not as big a concern here because I've taught grad courses at UCF pretty exclusively and they kind of get it, but even so, I worry that they just go, "Okay" and just don't really critically think about that comment, and if maybe I would put in a little more effort, it would be, "This area is not quite working. Why do you think that?" Like, force them to work a little harder at it so that they come up with the answer as opposed to me just saying, "Change this to this."

KELVIN Yeah! I like how you're framing that, right? And I do think it has a lot to do with the nature of the feedback.

TOM Mhmm.

KELVIN Like, I do think in terms of robust and appropriate, but I like where you're going. It's the raising the issue not solving the problem, necessarily.

TOM Yes, and in fact our writing center, if you go in and want help with your English Composition paper, they're not going to edit it for you. They're not going to write on it. What they're going to do is point out themes and give you tips and send you back to do your own work on it.

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM And I think that's the right approach. It's harder, and it takes more work on the faculty member or the writing tutor's part, but I think it has much greater long-term benefits for the students.

KELVIN And it's not just writing as a subject area, but this dynamic honestly probably could be somewhat influenced by subject area.

TOM Sure.

KELVIN In some subject areas it may manifest in certain ways, but I like to think there's a broadly applicable principle here that if you're coming from a place of "What's wrong with this?" or "Fix this" versus "Hey Tom. How could this be better?"

TOM Yeah. Well maybe in like a quantitative context, if you think about math, it's why the faculty and teachers in the K-12 environment want you to show your work.

KELVIN Yes!

TOM So, they can find out where you messed up and point you back there, and maybe the analog—I don't teach math—but the analog would be instead of changing the numbers on step three, you'd be like, "Ok. You got it wrong right here in step three. What do you think you did wrong?"

KELVIN Yeah. That's good. But like so many things with teaching and learning, scale can be an issue with this kind of thing that we're talking about.

TOM Yeah, because it's work.

KELVIN It's a lot more efficient just to A, 0, 1, 2, 3.

TOM Let the LMS grade it automatically.

KELVIN Something. That's right.

TOM Alright, so, we've come to our very last deadly sin.

KELVIN There's probably more. (*laughter*)

TOM (*laughter*) Just between you and me, there's probably another couple volumes.

KELVIN I could tell you lots of stuff I've done wrong that have made horrible experiences for students.

TOM Maybe we'll do a part two with even more sins.

KELVIN Even more sins!

TOM It'll be Tom and Kelvin's confessional.

KELVIN *(laughter)* Well, it is a little sweatbox-y in here. Is it just me or is it hot in here? Yeah, I don't know exactly what to call this one, but I am thinking of it as individualist or isolationist versus interventionist. I know it sounds kind of foreign policy-related, but individualist versus interventionist, and I think really we could frame this as being related to student success at the course level. Do individual students sink or swim on their own or is it the role of the instructor to throw the student a life preserver, to step in and offer help?

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN And I think it varies. I would assert that you're not helping your students—and maybe you are killing your course—if you were just adopting, “Hey! You're on your own in here! I'm not helping you! You haven't logged in in three weeks, but I'm not going to say anything to you.”

TOM I think that maybe this one is also somewhat related to number three, which is learning-focused versus teaching-focused.

KELVIN Yeah, that's probably true.

TOM Because it's about the ultimate success of the student and what can you do to be an agent for that?

KELVIN And this, too, I imagine is controversial. I have plenty of folks I know—just like I'm sure you do, too—faculty, colleagues who I can imagine taking issue with this framing because they want to enact a level of rigor and a level of students stepping up and not being like helicopter faculty or bailing students out and so forth, but there is a balance there in my mind.

TOM Yeah, I agree.

KELVIN And scale is an issue, like so many things.

TOM You could probably say that about every single one of these.

KELVIN Yeah, scale's always an issue. But those are the six.

TOM Six deadly sins!

KELVIN They'll kill your courses.

TOM So, what about you, dear listener? One, what are you guilty of?

KELVIN Oh!

TOM But two, maybe you've got some others to suggest, and we've got a really cool TOPcast community that you can share them with and maybe even more so share your strategies for counterbalancing them. To counteracting them.

KELVIN How could they do that?

TOM They would go to our website at topcast.ucf— No, I always get it wrong!
topcast.online.ucf.edu

KELVIN topcast.online.ucf.edu

TOM Oh my gosh.

KELVIN That is correct.

TOM And you will know that these are unedited episodes because of my fumbling.

KELVIN *(laughter)* It's all good.

TOM What you hear is what you get, folks.

KELVIN That's it.

TOM Yeah, so go to the community and share your ideas about what would be a sin and what would not be a sin and who knows? Maybe we'll structure this into some sort of a conference proposal.

KELVIN That'd be kind of crowd-sourced. That'd be kind of cool! A panel.

TOM It would be cool.

KELVIN Hey! If you want to participate, you just go right in there and drop a comment. Or if you want to be real creative, you can voice record a comment about this and email it to us at topcast@ucf.edu.

TOM We'd love that! And we take coffee donations which guarantees a shout out.

KELVIN *(laughter)* That's so true!

TOM So, in addition to going to the community, you can always just reach out to us through our email at topcast@ucf.edu, and just a reminder, this is the beginning of season four of TOPcast, so invite a friend to listen.

KELVIN It's dangerous!

TOM It's dangerous! (*laughter*)

KELVIN (*laughter*) They might not be able to handle it.

TOM That's right, but you know, maybe you can hold their hand through the first episode.

KELVIN Yeah, we've got some plans for season four. We've got some stuff we've talked about. Some are kind of dangerous, sharp edges, but if you've got thoughts that you'd love to hear us talk about, then shoot us a note. Let us know.

TOM To make an Orlando-based reference, where we are, keep your hands and feet inside TOPcast at all times because the ride's about to get bumpy!

KELVIN (*laughter*)

TOM Fasten your seatbelts!

KELVIN Buckle up!

TOM Alright, I think we've stretched that one out as far as it's going to go. So maybe you want me to take a shot at the bottom line here?

KELVIN Sure!

TOM So, online courses—as we know—can be wonderfully engaging and very human learning experiences, but they can also be mind-numbingly dead environments, where faculty and students are just kind of going through the motions. Like our Death Wish Coffee. Almost like the undead zombies wandering the landscape. So, the faculty member that's teaching the course is probably the key differentiator between these two possible outcomes. Will they choose virtue or will they choose vice?

KELVIN Yeah, I think that's probably true, and I'm always stunned still by the folks who—when we talk about online teaching—really worry about the role of the faculty member, but you know, it's job security. I do think it does come all the way back to the instructor of the course. They can make or break an online course, so that's job security, Tom.

TOM Absolutely. So, maybe that's a good place to wrap it up for TOPcast. I'm Tom.

KELVIN I'm Kelvin.

TOM See ya!