

TOPcast Episode 38: Storytelling and Empathy in Online Education

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- (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 are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Here we are again, Kelvin.
- KELVIN Here we are again, Tom.
- TOM One of my favorite podcasting places.
- KELVIN *(chuckle)* The closet?
- TOM The closet. Yes. We've done it in some strange places.
- KELVIN The strangest place was—
- TOM New Orleans?
- KELVIN — the French Quarter. There were people coming up and staring in our face while we're trying to talk. *(laughter)*
- TOM Yeah, and the ironic thing is that we didn't even get to use it because of my inability to work my iPhone.
- KELVIN It's alright. Registered TOPcast insiders got the actual raw recording of—
- TOM The Kelvin half of the conversation?
- KELVIN Yeah, something like that. It was, you know. It's like that.
- TOM Cool. Well. With no further ado, I say we jump right into the Thermos.
- KELVIN *(laughter)* That's going to be a tight fit, Tom.
- TOM *(laughter)*
- KELVIN That's going to be a tight fit if we both try to climb in there. Well, I should let you know, Tom, that today's episode of TOPcast is groundbreaking.
- TOM Well, do tell.

KELVIN Yes, because we have not one—as normal, regular listeners will know—not one coffee but two featured coffees in this episode.

TOM ¿Dos cafés?

KELVIN ¡Dos cafés! (*laughter*)

TOM Wow.

KELVIN I know you're concerned about your caffeine saturation dose, but I'm only giving you like a half a cup or a quarter cup of each one.

TOM Alright, thank you. I was wondering why there are two mugs situated in front of me. Now I know!

KELVIN That's right. So, these two coffees are connected by a story, Tom.

TOM Okay.

KELVIN The first coffee comes to us from the lobby of the Johnny Cash Museum in Nashville, Tennessee. (*Johnny Cash voice*) Hello, I'm Johnny Cash! So, during the 2018 OLC Innovate conference, I had an occasion to pop into the museum and found in the museum café—you won't believe this—an extremely tasty cup of coffee roasted specially for the café by a local Nashville coffee roaster called Bongo Coffee Roasters, and they call this specialty blend—get this. You ready?

TOM Ready.

KELVIN Hold on. “A Brew Named Sue.”

TOM Of course they did.

KELVIN (*laughter*) So, if you don't know, that's an homage to a famous Johnny Cash song, which I can testify pairs just fine with the coffee. I have sipped the coffee and played the song.

TOM At the same time?

KELVIN At the same time.

TOM Alright!

KELVIN I liked the coffee so much that I bought some to bring home and share with you.

TOM Well, thank you!

KELVIN Yes. *(Elvis voice)* Thank you, thank you very much. That's a whole different guy.

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN Once I got back home, I discovered that our UCF colleague Dr. Beth Nettles had picked up some coffee for us from directly across the street from the Johnny Cash Museum at the Goo Goo Cluster Shop and Café.

TOM Okay.

KELVIN They call this one "Goo Goo Brew."

TOM "A Brew Named Sue" and "Goo Goo Brew."

KELVIN That's right. I can't confirm much about the provenance of the "Goo Goo Brew" other than to say that on the Goo Goo Cluster Shop website, we're told that this was a Kona blend "specially blended to pair with Goo Goo Clusters." I don't know how they did that, but it's a good story, and I have tested it. I ate a Goo Goo Cluster with the coffee.

TOM And listened to some Johnny Cash?

KELVIN Yeah, exactly, and it all tasted fine to me. What's not going to taste good with a Goo Goo Cluster? *(laughter)*

TOM I was just about to say that.

KELVIN In fact, I brought a Goo Goo Cluster if you want to nibble on that while we're doing this.

TOM *(laughter)* You know how I feel about chewing into a microphone.

KELVIN I know, you don't like it. Well, you can have some afterwards. So, given that today's episode is going to feature two—count 'em—two guests and we're going to be talking about storytelling, I thought bringing both of these two coffees in connected by a story made sense.

TOM Awesome! Alright, well, let me take a sip of the first one.

KELVIN So, that one is—

TOM "A Brew Named Sue?"

KELVIN I think that one is this one, so that's "Goo Goo Brew," and the one on the other side is "A Brew Named Sue."

TOM Alright. The "Goo Goo Brew" will do.

KELVIN The “Goo Goo Brew” will do.

TOM And “A Brew Named Sue” will, too.

KELVIN Oh, that’s good! I got my Dr. Seuss mug I’m drinking out of today. You see that?

TOM Could you would you in a podcast booth?

KELVIN “Today you are You, that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is Youer than You.” Thank you, Dr. Seuss.

TOM He’s full of wisdom.

KELVIN That’s something. Full of coffee.

TOM They’re excellent. Thank you, and thank you Dr. Beth Nettles.

KELVIN Yes indeed.

TOM I get it. So, we’ve got two coffees, and we actually have two guests on the show today.

KELVIN That’s exactly right.

TOM So, back during the OLC Accelerate ’17 conference where you and Beth picked up these coffees, you interviewed Angela Gunder and Jessica Knott on the broad topic of storytelling. Angela is Director of Instructional Design & Curriculum Development for the Office of Digital Learning at the University of Arizona, and Jessica is Learning Design Manager and Applied Researcher for Michigan State Univerisity’s IT Teaching and Learning Technology. Both Jessica and Angela are impressive professionals.

KELVIN I can testify thusly.

TOM And they have amazing energy. You should definitely read their bios in the Show Notes. Angela and Jessica are also passionate about storytelling.

KELVIN They’re passionate about many things, but yes, storytelling is one of them.

TOM And awesome volunteers for the Online Learning Consortium. They’ve studied storytelling, and they have been engaged with innovating conference planning to incorporate storytelling efforts.

KELVIN Yup.

TOM We'll put some links to some of that in the Show Notes. They are also frequent collaborators and have teamed up on many projects including co-chairing the OLC Innovate 2018 Conference.

KELVIN Yes, they did the 2018 Innovate Conference, but we actually recorded this back during the 2017 Accelerate Conference.

TOM Yes. Just shows you how involved they are.

KELVIN They are! That's exactly right.

TOM That's cool. Well, you had a great discussion with them about storytelling. We're going to go ahead and cut to that now, and when we come back, maybe make a few comments.

(musical transition)

KELVIN So, we were talking about before we hit record that storytelling is a thing. Storytelling's not a new thing.

ANGELA Not a new thing.

KELVIN Ironically, you know, as we segue, but there's a lot that we can do with storytelling. Can I just ask maybe broadly to get everybody on the same page why storytelling is a good thing, and then maybe we can talk about maybe new forms of storytelling and how that plays out in our field a little bit?

ANGELA So, I love the—and I used this quote earlier. We're actually at OLC Accelerate right now. I used this quote earlier at our Women's Leadership luncheon, but Ira Glass said that storytelling is the machine—and I really like that—the engine of empathy. When you take the idea of narrative and you think that it's beyond just the way that we get people to come to consensus, to launch onto new journeys of novel ideas, it's actually how we're wired, that we're driven by stories and that it's in our DNA. So, if we think about how we can use storytelling in all of our work, wouldn't we want to use the tools that are actually linked to how we're wired as human beings?

JESSICA Absolutely. It also provides a really important safe space for dissensus, as well. It's easier to disagree with someone in a story than it is to disagree with them in a typical conversation. "Well, that's your story. How does mine compare?"

KELVIN Yeah, and I'm going to date myself horribly—although I will say that as I make this reference that I watched it in reruns, not in real-time—but historically, being a big geek, *Star Trek: The Original Series* I think of very much that way, right? Gene Roddenberry, no matter what, love him or hate him or whatever, a lot of hot topic sensitive political issues played out on stage in *Star Trek* disguised as science fiction.

ANGELA Yup. Absolutely. There is a great author Christopher Vogler, who in the 90s took the idea of the monomyth which was created by mythologist Joseph Campbell back in the 40s and said all of our most compelling stories that we tell and that we're drawn to are all based on this hero's journey. So, when you look back at *Star Trek* episodes—and actually *Star Wars* specifically was one of the major works that Christopher Vogler referenced—he says we're all heroes in the waiting, we're here in the ordinary world, and some sort of call to action—some sort of cataclysmic event—compels us to leave, to go about and do something that will hopefully bring some good back to the ordinary world from where we came.

KELVIN And that is probably the most famous thing—that hero's journey thing—but I've read somewhere a quote from John Lasseter of Pixar Disney fame who had sort of an alternative monomyth kind of a thing, too, that he found useful, and it's a stranger came to town and everything changed.

JESSICA Yup! That's a good big one, and think about that in the context of education.

ANGELA What does that mean when somebody comes in and everything is disrupted? That's a neutral statement. That's not a positive or a negative.

KELVIN That's right.

ANGELA I think that that's one of the things that we're called to do as educators: to take all of these things as neutral elements and hopefully, if it looks pretty challenging that we're reimagining it as an opportunity, because we need to be modeling that experience for our students. They're going to go out in this world where there's all sorts of ambiguity and they're going to have to make sense of it and then hopefully be propelled into action.

KELVIN So, let's talk about that a little bit. So, how does that play out specifically in our educational settings? Maybe even at the individual course level? How does storytelling play out at all but also maybe storytelling with new forms as media, as well?

JESSICA Why don't you start with the bud and then I'll talk about the development framework?

ANGELA So, when you think about our traditional role in the classroom as educators, we want to make these compelling arguments for students, and we can lead with data or we can contextualize things that will connect them to the real world. It's not an "or." It's actually an "and." So, one of the ways that storytelling can be the most powerful tool in our arsenal is that we can look at the data, but actually connect it to things that will compel students to actions so that they're consumers of those stories that will lead them to where we want them to go with our learning outcomes that we've designated. So, certainly reframing a lot of the ways that we deliver a didactic in a classroom, how can we make it compelling? How can we move students to consider new ideas, new structures, new methods that they have not maybe envisioned before? Narrative can be that way for you to do that.

JESSICA And it can also help them find their way.

ANGELA For sure.

JESSICA Everyone experiences... If I put five people out of the hallway into the same online course or conference presentation, they would experience it differently, and through that narrative, we can help students follow a pathway that both works for them and is what we've designed for them to experience.

ANGELA So, I think that that piece is key that you're talking about. One, there's this misconception that maybe we're all sort of close to being in the same boat. We don't necessarily think that there could be people sitting next to us that have different ideas, and then beyond that, too, we could also feel like we're on the other side of it, that we're the outlier, that everybody else feels one way and we don't. We maybe self-select out from speaking about our individual stories. So, one of the most compelling things that we can do is to set students up to be the creators of stories as opposed to just the consumers of stories because there's a lot of transformative action that can occur when you give people the mic, the spotlight, even folks like Jess and I who you will probably laugh when I say that we're introverted.

KELVIN You're wallflowers.

JESSICA You're making fun of us a little bit but we are! So, we are the people who are like, "Hey! We're going to do this thing!" and then everybody gets excited and we're like, "Now we're going to go hide in that corner." (*laughter*)

KELVIN (*laughter*)

ANGELA (*laughter*) And see how it unfolds.

JESSICA And see how it goes because to find those stories and elevate them is really the power behind them.

ANGELA So, nuts and bolts of all of this, I think that there are a lot of great like low-tech, no-tech tools and frameworks that you can use, but one that's kind of a blend of both for me has been Adobe Spark. Lately that's been just melting my butter (*laughter*) in terms of—

KELVIN Is that good or bad?

ANGELA Good!

KELVIN Okay, well, that's good.

ANGELA Just imagine a fluffy stack of pancakes, maple syrup, a little pat of butter on there just melting into goodness.

JESSICA That actually made my mouth water. Talk about narrative. Way to storytell that!

KELVIN Ooh, there you go!

JESSICA Wonderful!

ANGELA I owe you guys pancakes at some point now.

JESSICA Yes, you do.

KELVIN I'll take that.

ANGELA Yeah, but having a tool that not only allows people to create presentational content—so you can have single scrolling parallax pages, you can have individual images, just think of creating a quick meme that could tell a story with just an image and a couple of words, or having an explainer video. It allows you to do all of that, and that's fantastic. It's free and you can do it on any device, but what I love about it—and I'm not getting paid by Adobe for saying all of this—they actually took the hero's journey and broke it up into the acts, and for people that are entering into Adobe Spark and don't really know what story they're going to tell...

KELVIN It scaffolds?

ANGELA It scaffolds, and it asks them questions like, "Who's the hero in this? What was the lesson learned?" They have a couple of different ways that they break that down, and some of the work that Jess and I did related to service and service learning, we actually use a lot of those structures. We used Marshall Gantz's the story of—I'm going to mess this up—me, us... Well, we're going to correct that in post. Just make me sound brilliant.
(laughter)

KELVIN We don't know where the edit button is, so we'll just roll with that, but we'll find it and we'll stick it in the Show Notes.

JESSICA You can't see but I'm sitting here being completely unhelpful in every way. *(laughter)*

ANGELA *(laughter)*

KELVIN *(laughter)*

ANGELA But using famous narrative frameworks to get people to start to unpack what they want to tell and not say, "Oh my gosh, there's all of these great storytellers out there and I'm not one of them," because I've certainly felt that way, and I think I still do quite often.

JESSICA I do, too. My solution is Google Slides. It's techy but if you can create a Google Slide with those frameworks in place, it can walk anyone through that, and most people I've found know how to use Google Slides or can do so with very little prompting, and if you've done it in an iterative way, eventually you're building your own choose your own adventure. You're building it either collaboratively or individually. You can branch off and do different things. I will look at Adobe Spark. I have not experienced that yet.

ANGELA Yeah. Twine is another good one, and we have some buddies John Stewart and Keegan Long-Wheeler who a lot with branch scenarios within Twine, and now you can create these really lightweight games, because when you said choose your own adventure, you just think about all of the experiences that you have. *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* is sort of a choose your own adventure of sorts.

JESSICA The *Oregon Trail*.

ANGELA *Oregon Trail* is another. I mean, these things that we look back at with such love and atavistic longing for? They can be woven into any of our learning experiences that we're trying to create and again better yet put into the hands of students so they can build those things, and Twine is software that lets you do that.

JESSICA Into the hands of students, into the hands of faculty, into the hands of members of your community—whatever that community is—as a way to catalyze change and forward movement.

ANGELA Yup.

KELVIN Yeah, so we're talking a little bit about the intersection of story and story elements, especially choice and branching pathways in story. The intersection of that and technologies. If you had to choose one or the other—and you don't—but if you had to choose story elements or technology. If somebody was just starting out thinking, "Well, there's something here I want to play with this a little bit in my teaching or in my design work." Would you say, "Hey! Start with the technology and then figure out the story," or would you say, "Start with the story and then figure out the technology?"

JESSICA Start with the journey.

KELVIN There you go.

JESSICA Then find the story. So, most of what I do when I'm starting out is journey mapping and I do that with markers and string and post-it notes.

KELVIN So, talk about that a little bit.

JESSICA Find the audience. Find members of the audience. Ask them how they experience the—whatever it is—element or experience you’re about to design. Talk to them. How would you do this? So, if you’re thinking of it in the context of an online course, you’re never going to get the kind of feedback for how people experience that as you will watching them and asking them questions, and as you watch, map or sketch or take notes on exactly what they do. So, when students come into your course, do you expect them to click on the content tab? If you do, have a few students go in and watch them do it. Do they click on the content tab? How many different experiences do they have? So, how can you make the experience common and useable for everyone while also kind of leaving them the space to make it their own? So, you can call it journey mapping or experience mapping, but that map can drive the story or the narrative or even, you know, if you want to boil it down just to the design, you can drive all of those.

KELVIN Now I know before we hit record that we were talking. I mean, there’s course-level stuff, but you guys have been engaged with trying to do some of this work even in the professional development context, as well. Do you want to maybe kind of zoom out and tell us about that a little bit?

ANGELA Yeah. I think that the one thing that we’re really, really focused on right now is the idea that we’re called within our field and our discipline to make data-driven decisions, and that can sound complex and daunting for many folks, but a lot of that boils down to talking honestly and frankly and being transparent about the ways that you’ve had to fail forward. So, when you have a particular instance where you’re working and it just didn’t work out as you anticipated, telling that story around what happened and how you might have been able to convert a challenge into an opportunity or how you’ve had to iterate, how you might have had to open up your network and collaborate with new folks that might have pieces that would help to fix whatever started and didn’t go as planned.

JESSICA I am not the most adept at being vulnerable. How can you own and feel that vulnerability and feel comfortable asking someone for help?

ANGELA Yeah.

JESSICA Help me find this. This is how I failed. It’s “easy” to say go to your network, but how do you find that network?

ANGELA Yeah. One of the strongest things that we can do—and this is a lesson from my mom. She’s an accomplished educator in her own right. She said, “Angela, people want authenticity. Just be real and they’ll respond.” How are we most real other than getting on a mic, telling our story for a little bit, and sharing what’s working and what’s not? We have to break out of this idea that we’re within our institutions and we’re siloed and we’re going to have to figure things out ourselves. I mean, some of the best things that I’ve ever done in my entire career, I was working with people all over the country, everybody participating, everything’s been open and shared and I would argue that it’s a big reason why we’re here right now talking to you because that’s the same mentality that

you're pushing and trying to get out there. How can we explain where we're at and where we want to go?

KELVIN Yeah, I totally agree with that. In fact, I was co-facilitating a professional development thing during the last year—it's like a leadership thing—and what became a big theme was people telling their stories and bringing their whole self to work and sharing their vulnerabilities and sharing their failures and successes. Despite what other curriculum and activities, that became the thing that we came back to again and again and again and again, and as I've run into people months later, that's what they remember. Not surprisingly, right? We remember those evocative stories and that human connection. So, I have to say I really appreciate you unbundling some of this stuff because for me—and I'm curious if you agree with this—one of the reasons I think the whole story/storytelling/digital storytelling/whatever words we want to use are so important in our technology-mediated teaching and learning area is they have a humanizing element, and as we do more and more technology adoption and there's efficiencies and all that, we need more humanizing elements. This is humanizing. Would you agree?

JESSICA I agree. In Michelle Pacansky-Brock's "Humanizing Education," she isn't always going on and saying, "We are storytelling!" but she is using all of these pieces to bring that to the environment. She's a person I look to frequently. I think you're right. It's so easy to be... I was a first generation college student. I didn't know I was a first generation college student.

KELVIN Me either! Me too and me either!

JESSICA The struggles and the "you should know better" and all of this that just made me feel so small and so like, "Where am I going to go? Ha! I'm getting a PhD. What is this all about?" The humanizing elements when I encountered them are what gave me the confidence and the ability and the strength to continue, if that makes sense. So, I think I segued a little bit, but whether or not we call it storytelling, I think it's really important what Angela has been bringing up is that sharing of the story. Who is looking at you right now thinking, "That person is cool," or "That person is smart." What would they do? How would it impact them if you said, "Dude, I had a 2.2 when I graduated." You know? Here's where I am now and here's how I got there, and it wasn't easy but let me help you.

ANGELA Or my advisor failed me and that's why I'm in this field now.

KELVIN Wow.

ANGELA It was the greatest gift that a human being has ever given me in my life.

JESSICA I had an academic advisor tell me, "Don't bother to apply for grad school. You're probably not going to amount to much there anyway, so, you can just look for something

else to do.” If you know Angela or I, you know that the first response was, “Nope! Watch me get this Master’s.”

ANGELA What’s the expression? Hold my beer?

JESSICA Hold my beer!

KELVIN Well, you’ve inspired me with what I’ll maybe wrap up this conversation with, which is we’ve been talking toward the end of the conversation here about ourselves and professionals and adults—whatever those are—in our field, but wouldn’t it be a wonderful gift if students in the courses that we teach and design could have that same experience, right? That human connection. “It’s okay. You’re welcome here. Hey, I don’t have this all together either, and you do belong, and there is potentially a journey. You are on a journey and you are the hero of that story. I can’t wait to see what’s going to happen.”

JESSICA Never let anyone tell you, “You should know better, students.” Never. Create the experiences for your students that are the opposite of what made you feel yucky when you were in college.

ANGELA Hear, hear!

KELVIN Thanks for joining us today, guys. Can’t wait to connect with you again and see how the next parts of journeys that you’re the heroes of, and maybe one day I’ll be able to come up to you without getting you behind a mic and feel worthy to be in your presence.

JESSICA Oh my gosh, Kelvin.

ANGELA *(laughter)*

JESSICA Have you been listening?

KELVIN That’s right. I’m remedial most days. Thanks for joining us, and we’ll look forward to connecting at another conference soon.

JESSICA Thank you.

ANGELA Thank you.

(musical transition)

TOM So, Kelvin, that was your interview with Jessica Knott and Angela Gunder. Interestingly, Jessica and Angela were the—as we said—conference co-chairs of the OLC 2018 Accelerate Conference, and campfire stories—I am told—was a conference theme.

KELVIN It was pretty cool! I mean, the campfire stories, and they had these rangers that were kind of like these guides that would help enhance your experience. There were all these storytelling elements and I think—I don't know for sure—a lot of that, but not all of it, was due to their influence, which is kind of cool, right? Everybody's always talking about innovating professional conferences and they're actually out there doing it.

TOM Yeah! I'm a big fan of narrative.

KELVIN I imagine. *(laughter)*

TOM Some people may know I've dabbled in fiction writing. I've written a few novels and used to write for children's television, but I like to invoke narrative when I do presentations and things, especially as—and I didn't make this up—a way to introduce a topic and to kind of humanize and personalize whatever you're talking about. Statistics are interesting I guess depending on what you're talking about but telling one individual's story who is a part of those statistics can be very powerful.

KELVIN I agree.

TOM We try to do that here as well, and I got that from what they were talking about. How important it is to humanize the educational experience, especially online.

KELVIN I keep picturing, even listening back to that again... you know, I think you know this. I see the world in concentric circles it seems like, but it does feel like this concentric circle kind of arranged whether you're talking about it at an individual course level or whether you think about a person's professional path or their own journey, personal development thing, or even like a big professional development conference thing, storytelling can play a role in all of that, which is kind of cool.

TOM Yeah. Absolutely, and it wasn't just—we were talking about this earlier—storytelling in the context of a single assignment, but in a much broader sort of construct of an entire course being a journey and a story. That's an interesting way of looking at your course. That it's a story that we're all characters in.

KELVIN Yeah, it's kind of cool. Jessica and Angela are both—as they mentioned in the interview—deep into monomyth stuff, and I've interacted with Angela outside the interview before about this. It's interesting to think about what role you play as an instructor. Are you going to pitch yourself as the hero of the story? Well, that would be an interesting choice, but you hopefully want the student to be the hero of the story. So, what's your role? Are you the wise elder?

TOM *(laughter)*

KELVIN Are you the trickster? *(laughter)*

TOM That's an interesting question. I taught a class one time—

KELVIN And you were the trickster?

TOM No. It was called Digital Storytelling, and it was one of my favorite classes I've ever taught. It was in the Digital Media program at another institution, and it talked about narratives where the reader/audience can affect the outcome. Kind of like a choose your own adventure.

KELVIN Sure. I gotcha.

TOM It talked about video games and other kinds of interactive stuff, and I just loved it. If you stretch that analogy to a classroom where the students are the audience, they can change the outcome of the course in many ways, and I just love that kind of stuff.

KELVIN Yeah. A lot of agency.

TOM Alright. So, maybe I can take a shot at the bottom line here?

KELVIN Sure! Bottom line it for us.

TOM So, the more that we engage with technology-mediated learning and teaching, the more we need to cultivate humanizing elements in our courses and initiatives. Storytelling is one way—if not arguably the best way—to humanize education.

KELVIN I love that. That's great.

TOM Cool!

KELVIN Yeah, that's awesome.

TOM Alright! So, do you want to—

KELVIN Can I make one plug before we wrap it up here?

TOM Yeah!

KELVIN So, if you're listening in real time, like when we just released this, we're just getting started—believe it or not—with season four of TOPcast, and we'd love your input on what we should emphasize this season. We've got a sense of what we're going to do, but would you please consider completing a maximum two-minute poll? The URL is <http://bit.ly/topcast04>. It would be very helpful to us if you would do that! Give us a sense of what's important to you.

TOM Thank you in advance.

KELVIN Thank you in advance.

TOM So, for TOPcast, until next time, I'm Tom.

KELVIN I'm Kelvin.

TOM See ya.