

TOPcast Episode 39: Introducing the Teaching Online Preparation Toolkit

- Tom Cavanagh: This episode of TOPcast is brought to you by UCF online. Twenty-plus years of award-winning excellence, over 75 online programs, one of the largest and most innovative universities in the U.S. ucf.edu/online.
- Kelvin Thompson: From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I'm Kelvin Thompson.
- Tom Cavanagh: And I'm Tom Cavanagh.
- Kelvin Thompson: And you are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Hi Tom.
- Tom Cavanagh: Hello Kelvin.
- Kelvin Thompson: Fancy meeting you here.
- Tom Cavanagh: Yeah. Just happened to be wandering by with these headphones on. Thought I would sit down and talk into this here microphone.
- Kelvin Thompson: Have a cup of coffee?
- Tom Cavanagh: Have a cup of coffee.
- Kelvin Thompson: We haven't done this in a while, but I guess we should say, you gotta listen to some of our episodes. It's like I get ... You know, if you were new, or like, what's the deal with the coffee?
- Tom Cavanagh: You know, you're right. We used to reset that every so often.
- Kelvin Thompson: Now and again.
- Tom Cavanagh: Yeah. And we haven't in a very long time. Just assuming that we've got such a vast legion of listeners from the very beginning.
- Kelvin Thompson: A legion of three.
- Tom Cavanagh: Yeah. So, I don't know, maybe it is worth saying a word or two that, you know, what's with the coffee?
- Kelvin Thompson: What's with the coffee?
- Tom Cavanagh: Yeah. So, that's become part of our little routine here. We sit, have a cup of coffee, and talk online learning, and the idea is that we are just a couple of dudes sitting around over coffee, talking about interesting things in online learning, and the coffee, just by coincidence, is always thematically selected to the topic of the day.

Kelvin Thompson: You try to make a connection, right?

Tom Cavanagh: That's right.

Kelvin Thompson: Sometimes you find it a little dubious, I think, but you know, hey.

Tom Cavanagh: Some are a little stretchy.

Kelvin Thompson: Some are stretchier than others.

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah. That's okay.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah. That's all right.

Tom Cavanagh: So, for those that don't know, Kelvin is something of a coffee expert. I call him like a coffee sommelier. He can pair your coffee with whatever your meal of choice is, and he has a refined coffee pallet. I would not use the word "snob."

Kelvin Thompson: I would.

Tom Cavanagh: I wouldn't use such a term.

Kelvin Thompson: Oh, that's very kind of you. That's very kind of you.

Tom Cavanagh: But yeah, I've learned a lot about coffee in the ... What is it? We're on our fourth year now.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah. Right.

Tom Cavanagh: That we've been doing this.

Kelvin Thompson: That's right. It's a lot of coffee under the tongue. I don't know where ... down the hatch? Something.

Tom Cavanagh: Some place.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah. That's right. Well, I guess we should jump into talking about the coffee. I kinda like this. This has a nice taste. I like this a lot.

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah. So, we started our coffee just as we were clicking record.

Kelvin Thompson: Exactly. Poured it down in the cup. So, today's coffee is a—I would agree with this—a tasty Guatemala from a farm whose name I will probably butcher, Miralvalle in Guatemala. It comes to us from a brand-new coffee roaster in San Antonio, Texas, called Shady Cliff Coffee Company. And given that we're going to be talking in this episode about a new start-up project, it seemed timely to drink and feature this coffee. So, we should note that this coffee was sent in to us by Shady Cliff Coffee co-founder and TOPcast listener Kenneth Rogers from the Alamo College District. Thanks very much, Kenneth.

Tom Cavanagh: Thank you, Kenneth. Much, much appreciated.

Kelvin Thompson: That's awesome.

Tom Cavanagh: Much, much appreciated.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah, so what do you think of the coffee?

Tom Cavanagh: It's good. Yeah. Again, thanks, Kenneth.

Kelvin Thompson: Even with all the stuff you put in there.

Tom Cavanagh: I always put stuff in my coffee.

Kelvin Thompson: I know.

Tom Cavanagh: I actually didn't put that much in this one.

Kelvin Thompson: No. That's good. Yeah. I just put the coffee in the coffee. This is very nice. Very tasty. I like it very much.

Kelvin Thompson: So, you got the coffee. You get the connection?

Tom Cavanagh: I do. It's StartUp-ish.

Kelvin Thompson: StartUp-ish.

Tom Cavanagh: Which is one of my favorite podcasts within Gimlet Media.

Kelvin Thompson: That's true. Yeah.

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah. We're gonna talk about a project that has just concluded its first year, so it is something of a start-up for us, and maybe others in the online learning community will find it of value.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah. Yeah, I agree with that. So, what is it?

Tom Cavanagh: Well, it's called TOPkit.

Kelvin Thompson: Who names these things?

Tom Cavanagh: I know. We've got all these "TOP" things. Between TOPcast and TOPR and ...

Kelvin Thompson: TOPkit.

Tom Cavanagh: TOPkit. So, TOPkit is the Teaching Online Preparation Toolkit.

Kelvin Thompson: Yep.

Tom Cavanagh: It is a ... kind of an abbreviation of that long mouthful.

Kelvin Thompson: A portamento.

Tom Cavanagh: A portamento, thank you. So, the idea of that is it's a website and online community—and at least here in the state of Florida—an annual gathering for those of us who train faculty to teach online, and it's replete with resources and examples and questions and answers and discussions and kind of ... It's definitely a community, not just a repository of information.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah. Like you said, February 2018 saw its one-year anniversary, so we're just a couple months past that. So, yeah. We're just getting going really, in some respects, but we've heard a lot of good feedback.

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah, and the idea was sort of built on our experience. We've got more than 20 years of doing faculty development, and we've come up with a few things that we think work. We also have observed from others, things that we think work for them because what we do doesn't work in every context, for every school and there's a lot of way to come at that goal.

Kelvin Thompson: So, why make this thing?

Tom Cavanagh: It actually began longer ago than a year ago. When the state had issued an RFI, I think, or it was an RFP, for ...

Kelvin Thompson: ITN? PDQ?

Tom Cavanagh: ITN? Something.

Kelvin Thompson: XYZ?

Tom Cavanagh: They were asking for ideas on how we could prepare a web resource and kind of annual gathering and just a collection of resources for those of us in the online learning world, across the state of Florida, who are training faculty to teach online. It was an initiative to improve faculty development, and by getting at it, by going through the folks who actually conduct that faculty development.

Kelvin Thompson: I'm trying to, I guess, is this right? Kind of avoid duplication, as well, so you don't all have to do it all over again if somebody could be ...

Tom Cavanagh: Yes.

Kelvin Thompson: You know, hey, here it is.

Tom Cavanagh: To not have good ideas sort of locked up at an institution, but to share them across not just the state university system, but also the state college system. Kind of where our community and state colleges are. So, we proposed. You helped in the preparation of that proposal.

Kelvin Thompson: I came up with the dumb name. That's what I did. I'm not that original.

Tom Cavanagh: It was a little more than that. And then, some of us got in the car and drove up to Tallahassee and presented, and it got reviewed, and we won.

Kelvin Thompson: Yay!

Tom Cavanagh: That was awesome. And then, the legislature proceeded not to fund it.

Kelvin Thompson: Awww...

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah. So, good news, bad news. So, it sat on the shelf for about a year or so, and then God bless the Florida Virtual Campus who stepped in and said, "You know what? We'll fund the first year," because it was a five-year proposal, and the bulk of the funding was required for the first year, where you would actually build this web resource, and then, the subsequent years were kind of to maintain it and then put on this annual conference/workshop, and then the Council of Academic Vice Presidents of the State University System, agreed to fund the subsequent four years.

Kelvin Thompson: God bless 'em. Isn't that great?

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah. It is. So, each institution in Florida—at least each state university in Florida—has agreed to kind of prorate their commitment to kind of keep it going based on FTE at school. So, UCF is paying into that, but only at a portion. I mean, it's not a lot of money when you divide it up. It was ... I don't know. I think it was like an annual \$50 or \$60,000 a year to keep it going, so you divide that across the 12 schools. So, that was sort of how it started. We did throughout ... What was it? 2016? Kind of like the summer/fall, build the website, and stand it up. It was a many-hands-on deck effort.

Kelvin Thompson: It really was. There's actually a page on the ... We should mention this, TOPkit.org. Anybody can get there. Everything's public and it's all Creative Commons licensed. It's great, but there is a page on there that kind of lists... It's kinda like the credits roll at the end of the movie, and you go, "Dang, it takes a lot of people to make a movie." It takes a lot of people to make a TOPkit, as it turns out.

Tom Cavanagh: That's right. You name it from pretty much the whole instructional design team to our Techrangers and all the people who helped program it, and our event planning team, they did an awesome job, so it was definitely a family affair here at UCF.

Kelvin Thompson: There's an advisory board across the state of Florida.

Tom Cavanagh: Yes. I didn't even mention that.

Kelvin Thompson: And we had a ... We did usability testing. We went around to a couple different institutions and had folks test out stuff, and yeah. It takes a village.

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah. In fact, the advisory board is both the university and college representatives. There's even some faculty voice on there. And so, that was ... Yeah, I think it was a well-put-together, well-executed plan by the team.

Tom Cavanagh: And we conducted our first annual workshop last spring.

Kelvin Thompson: 2017.

Tom Cavanagh: 2017, yeah. Depending when you're listening to this.

Kelvin Thompson: That's right.

Tom Cavanagh: And that went well. It was very much geared around helping the people from around the state understand how to make use of this resource and to engage in the community. And then, we just did our second one in 2018, and it was, I think, a really interesting evolution, because it wasn't so much about, "Here's how you use the resources and engage," but it was much more of a conference format where people were sharing. "Here's what works at my school. Here's what we've been doing. Here's what we've learned," and I think people were able to contribute and share information in a really productive way.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah, I agree with that. It's kinda like—as you retell the origin story—it's kinda like the thought is, hey, put all this knowledge together and put it on a website, and that's helpful. But it's only so helpful, because you've got to bring it to life. And so, the online community of practice helps with that. But the workshop is intended to help with that, and that's just kind of grown and people are talking about how they're making use of the ideas on the website, but it's gone beyond that to actually, as you say, to share other ideas. It's taken on more of a life of its own. It's really neat to see that kind of evolution take place.

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah, and so I've mentioned Florida and state-wide a few times, but I think it's important to just clarify that the website, as you said, is open to all. We've got international visitors, but the workshop is sort of restricted to Florida institutions.

Kelvin Thompson: I like to say, Tom, that it's Florida-funded, Florida-focused, but open to the world.

Tom Cavanagh: There you go.

Kelvin Thompson: The site, anyway.

Tom Cavanagh: That's right. In fact, the only things you're gonna see in there that sort of is Florida-specific is the logo.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah, that's right.

Tom Cavanagh: Everything else is completely applicable to any online context, but we were real sensitive. For example, one of the things we included in there, are ... Actually, it's two things. Two different versions of a prototype faculty development course.

We've got the full version and then a light version of it, and there's all kinds of interesting meta-comments in there like, "You're gonna want to change this part for your institution." It's a really easy way to implement an online course. You could just adopt it.

Kelvin Thompson: I get a lot of jaw-drops when I share that with people. Like, what?

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah. And it's based on what we've been doing here for so long and have actually won awards for. Again, Creative Commons, so it's open for everybody, but we were real cognizant of the fact that ... So, we're at a large research university. We've got a large team. There are people in the state, particularly at the college level, that don't necessarily have our staff or resources. So, they couldn't implement training for online learning the same way that we can, but this resource needs to be able to serve them as much. And so, we tried to make sure that we covered the spectrum of the kinds of institutions, and that you could take these resources, and apply them in context specific ways that would be of use to you.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah, I think the sample course is really a draw, and like you said, Creative Commons licensed. You can just right now ... We'll have all these specific links in the Show Notes. You should go there and take a look. Or, you can just go to again, TOPkit.org, browse around, but you'll find the sample courses. You can click right in to a publicly accessible version of the sample courses through our learning management system, and you can just kind of click around, but then, it's all IMS Common Cartridge download, as well. So, you can upload into whatever your LMS is, and like you said, make edits as you wish. They're all highlighted and commented, and you should change this and you should change that. But I think a part that goes hand in glove with that, is something that I really like a lot, which is the Faculty Development Decision Guide.

Tom Cavanagh: Yup.

Kelvin Thompson: So, the idea is, you could take—we could use ability testing on this—20 minutes or less, answer some questions, and it spits out recommendations about what you might do in your context to enhance your existing practice, or if you're starting from scratch, what you can do to get started and then, how the TOPkit resources can serve a role in helping you, which I think, is tremendous. It's based on a model that some of our instructional designers here at UCF put together, the Quality Transformation Model for faculty development, Rohan Jowallah, Linda Futch, Tommi Barrett-Greenly, formerly at UCF.

Tom Cavanagh: And others.

Kelvin Thompson: And others. I hate to start listing names ...

Tom Cavanagh: Because you'll always forget somebody who contributed, but I think it's a great piece of work, and in fact, wasn't it the number one tweeted thing from the last OLC Innovate Conference?

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah, OLC Innovate ... Yeah, that's right. The person who had the highest number of Tweets was tweeting about this resource. You see the image of the model in the tweet.

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah, that's great.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah, it was really cool.

Tom Cavanagh: So, that's a really useful tool that will get to that context question. So, what would work in my context? And that might be even the best place to kind of start when you get in there.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah, I mean, not to go much too much into the weeds, but like for instance, we have the luxury here at UCF of having full-time instructional designers who can actually meet with faculty and consult, and so forth. That's not everybody's deal, as you eluded, so there are some scenarios where you might use existing teaching faculty as peer mentors. And so, that's just one tiny sliver in that model that might take you down a different path.

Tom Cavanagh: Do you want to say a word or two about the Community of Practice?

Kelvin Thompson: Sure. So, we try to ... The idea was to bring to life the website, because you make a website, you launch it, great. And we should say the first year and a couple months, we've had nearly 60,000 page views. Nearly 50,000 of those are unique page views.

Tom Cavanagh: From all over the world.

Kelvin Thompson: From all over the world. Right. And so, I mean, it's getting viewed, but we were very sensitive to, yeah, you just put stuff on a website. Even if you go visit it, that doesn't necessarily get the ideas into practice. And so, the idea of fostering a Community of Practice through some kind of interaction venue, was really important to use, so there are these kind of forum settings on the site, but then they're all cross-linked between the content pages, which is kind of cool. So, you're looking at a content page, and we've worked it out where you can see individual discussion threads or forum threads at the bottom of that page that might be based on tags. It might be related to what you're looking at, and then you can go right into that and see what members of the community are saying. And then, we periodically curate/comb through the Community of Practice and ask for permission to post formally into the site, additional ideas. So, we're seeing lots of interaction around idea-sharing and ... "Well, how do you handle that? Where here's what I do. Here's a Word.doc version of it," and that kind of stuff, which is really kinda cool.

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah, and that was ... That's one of the ... If it had two lungs to breathe with, one is the content and then the other is the community. And as you said, so far, so good. We've already gotten over 250 registered contributors. Anybody can go in and look at the forum, but if you want to contribute, you just have to register, which is free. You just kind of have to put your name in it.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah. You know how that is, right? You're trying to avoid forum spam, and all that, which ... You know, it happens, and we squish it.

Tom Cavanagh: It did happen a few times here.

Kelvin Thompson: We try to squish that when it happens.

Tom Cavanagh: I think we've fixed that.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah, it's always a challenge, Tom. It's always a challenge.

Tom Cavanagh: One of my favorite things is the Ask ADDIE column, and those of you that are Ann Landers fans, or Dear Abbey, we've got Ask ADDIE. And those of you who are instructional designers, might recognize ADDIE.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah, A-D-D-I-E.

Tom Cavanagh: It's all caps.

Kelvin Thompson: It's all caps, that's right.

Tom Cavanagh: For those that might be not looking at it while you're listening.

Kelvin Thompson: That's right.

Tom Cavanagh: And I'm going to reveal a super secret here. So, you may not know, or maybe do know, that Ann Landers and Dear Abbey, they were like sisters, right?

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah, that's the story ...

Tom Cavanagh: And sometimes those advice columns aren't always written by the person whose face is at the top of the column. Well, ask ADDIE has got a kind of a gravatar/avatar image. And I am sitting across the small table from the original ADDIE.

Kelvin Thompson: That's true. I was the original Ask ADDIE. It's since gotten a lot better.

Tom Cavanagh: We won't reveal who's currently doing it, because we don't want them to be outed in public.

Kelvin Thompson: I guess that's true. But we've got like a ... Those were monthly advice column postings for online faculty development. Just very long-tail and niche and all, but it's really kinda cool, and I enjoyed writing the columns that I did. We solicit ideas from folks, and if we can get it in actual kind of, "Dear ADDIE, I'm really in a dilemma."

Tom Cavanagh: "How do I get faculty to engage with my course?" Whatever.

Kelvin Thompson: That's right. "Serve alcohol." Almost did a spit take yet again.

Tom Cavanagh: I was gonna say pizza.

Kelvin Thompson: Depends on what kind of engagement you want.

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah. But that's great. It's a way for the participants in the community to kind of ask an advice question, even anonymously if they want, and have a thoughtful response.

Kelvin Thompson: And I think that's my favorite part of it, is it has kind of a high view of online learning and of online faculty development, so it's a rather nuanced view. It's not just, "Hey, faculty preparation, here's your training materials on your LMS," right? No, it's far beyond that, and these dilemmas and the responses show you how nuanced things are. But I think they're all helpful. Certainly the ones after I stopped writing the column are very, very helpful.

Tom Cavanagh: They are good now.

Kelvin Thompson: That's right.

Tom Cavanagh: Not that they weren't good before, but since I'm not saying the name of the instruction designer who's currently writing them, they're still excellent.

Kelvin Thompson: Yes.

Tom Cavanagh: All right. Maybe the last item we'll talk about is the world-famous TOPkit Digest.

Kelvin Thompson: Hm. Sounds cool.

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah. So, the TOPkit Digest is a periodic email that is sent out under the TOPkit banner to registered subscribers on information, resources, practices that might be of use to them. And there's usually—I think you came up with this too—this idea of like, one for you and one to share. It's like, here's an idea you can put to use in your own practice, and then, here's an idea that you can share with others. And maybe you want to elaborate on that a little bit.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah. And then, we kind of rebranded it a little bit from the kit and from the community. But yeah, it's very much that idea of like, "Here's something for you as an instructional designer/faculty developer that you would personally find useful." And that is probably the one quandary I think we face a lot of times, is some folks think, "Oh, this is a resource site for my online faculty," and it's really a resource site for online instructional designers/faculty developers. It's very meta in that sense.

Tom Cavanagh: When we went to Tallahassee and pitched it, we put it in terms like "train the trainers," which helped.

Kelvin Thompson: Yes. That kind of a thing. That's right. And so, the idea of the Digest is like, "Here's something you can take as an instructional designer or faculty developer,

and then, here's something you can maybe share.” That's kind of the idea anyway, just little bite-sized nuggets. And then, so there's always a feature from the community, a feature from the site, and it's nice when you can kinda say, "Oh, here's Tom Cavanagh from, you know, Podunk Community College or Podunk University," whatever, and we can feature your face, and all that. But then, here's like a little teaser for the current Ask ADDIE column, as well. So, it's really very digestible, comes in your email monthly. And you know Tom, we've got like over 650 subscribers worldwide to that, that are getting those monthly emails.

Tom Cavanagh: I think that's great, and maybe if everybody's listening would go to TOPkit.org. It's real easy to just register.

Kelvin Thompson: And free.

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah, to subscribe to that Digest.

Kelvin Thompson: And that's probably the easiest thing to get started with, but I would definitely encourage folks to click around the sample course. Easiest thing is just subscribe to the Digest, like you said, because then you can look at it yourself. But the sample course is worth a look and that Faculty Development Decision Guide is worth a look as well.

Tom Cavanagh: Yep. So, you want to take a shot at the bottom line here?

Kelvin Thompson: Sure. I will try to land the plane. So, I think this is fair. So, those of you who are regular listeners to TOPcast are likely responsible in some way for this accessible preparation of online faculty, so if that's your role, it's easy to feel that you're on your own and starting from a blank slate when it comes to preparing well your online faculty. So, the TOPkit resources and Community of Practice let you know that you are not alone and you do not have to start from scratch, which is a nice complement to our TOPcast podcast here, I think. If you like this, you'll like that.

Tom Cavanagh: That's right. In fact, if you go to the Center for Distributed Learning's website, they sit side-by-side in our list of other resources.

Kelvin Thompson: Well, they have TOP right in the name, next to each other.

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah, well and there's TOPcast, TOPkit. There's TOPR, and then, there's the Blended Learning Toolkit.

Kelvin Thompson: Yes. The Teaching Online Repository (TOPR). Blendkit, a curated a set of resources for getting started with blended learning, part of blendedlearningtoolkit.org. Great resource there, so all stuff that through the good graces of Dr. Tom Cavanagh, we're able to give away free to the world.

Tom Cavanagh: Yeah. You're welcome, world.

Kelvin Thompson: So, I know we gotta wrap up here, but I think you were gonna make a little plug to our TOPcast community.

Tom Cavanagh: I was going to make a plug. You did a little one last time, and then, I'm gonna do one this time. So, it's time to feature another one of our Apple podcasts—or what used to be called iTunes—reviews. And this one was posted by our colleague Carolyn Andrews from Brigham Young University.

Kelvin Thompson: I love Carolyn. She's nice.

Tom Cavanagh: She's great. I had a wonderful visit to BYU a couple years ago and got the opportunity to do a little talk and hang out with the team, including Carolyn and Charles Graham and a bunch of other people. So, Carolyn wrote “a quick and fantastic way to stay informed on current issues and trends in online learning. The show notes are a fantastic resource that I refer to for a deeper dive into the subject. Drs Tom Cavanagh, Kelvin Thomson are engaging and knowledgeable. Great investment of time.”

Kelvin Thompson: Nobody's ever said that before about anything I've ever been involved with. A great investment of time.

Tom Cavanagh: Thank you, Carolyn. That is very nice of you.

Kelvin Thompson: It really is.

Tom Cavanagh: So, if you too have nice things to say about TOPcast, do please consider going into your podcast platform of choice and leaving a review, or at least some number of stars rating. It helps others with similar interests to find the show. It helps in their magical algorithm.

Kelvin Thompson: That's right, which is really, really cool. And it seems like we get a majority of folks come through Apple podcasts, but hey, whatever, wherever you're finding your stuff is fine. All right, Tom, well I think our coffee's about empty, so I guess it's time to say good night. So, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom Cavanagh: I'm Tom.

Kelvin Thompson: See ya!