TOPcast Episode 43: “What’s Going On Down There at UCF?” A Case Study in Change Management

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(intro music)

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: And you’re listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hey Tom.

Tom: Hey Kelvin.

Kelvin: What is up?

Tom: Uh…clouds. Sky.

Kelvin: Yeah, but man, the weather is certainly better than it was here in Florida a week or so ago, right?

Tom: I guess. We’re down to 89°, I think.

Kelvin: Ooh! It’s chilly! Break out the jacket!

Tom: It’s chilly. It’s break-out-the-parka weather. I happened to be in South Florida this past weekend. It was balmy, but my wife and I were watching the news and saw that it got down to like below 70° at night here in Orlando.

Kelvin: Might have to turn on the heater.

Tom: We were jealous. The one weekend we go away was the one weekend when you could put on a non-tank top to walk around outside.

Kelvin: That’s true, but hey, at least we don’t have a hurricane.

Tom: That’s true. That’s true. Yeah, and actually, speaking of which, we wanted to say something about the hurricane. You want to—?

Kelvin: Please, go ahead.
Tom: Okay. I will. We know that a lot of our friends here in Florida that we work with a lot through the Florida Virtual Campus and other partnerships were impacted by Hurricane Michael which recently hit the panhandle.

Kelvin: And Georgia.

Tom: And Georgia! That’s true.

Kelvin: Some folks, I still heard, insult was added to injury up through the Carolinas.

Tom: Yeah. So, we know, having been through this ourselves a couple of times, what that can do and how disruptive that can be. I mean, just last year, with Hurricane Irma, we were out of commission for seven business days here on campus at UCF and we didn’t even get it as bad as our friends in the Keys or in Miami got. So, our thoughts are with all of our friends to the north of us, but in a practical sense, we’ve been trying to promote this on social media a little bit and on other channels, but for those of our friends who are on the Canvas LMS, our team here has developed a tool—an integration—called Due Date Changer that came in real handy for us last year post-Irma, and it allows you to basically reset all of the due dates in your course very simply.

Kelvin: Yup.

Tom: We’ve open-sourced it and are offering it to anybody, really, but in particular those people who have been impacted by the storm or other sort of acts of God that they had no control over. If they want to use it, it’s out there on GitHub. We’ve promoted it through the Florida Virtual Campus. Also, Instructure Canvas has been sending it out. We got great support from them, including from their CEO Josh Coates who chimed in and jumped on it when we made the suggestion. So, for more information about that, maybe we’ll put a link in the show notes.

Kelvin: Absolutely.

Tom: Please, feel free to use it. We hope it helps.

Kelvin: You can certainly just Google “UCF Due Date Changer” and it would come up. You can get it really easy, and it is probably the single most popular integration with our faculty ever. It’s right up there with UDOIT, the accessibility checker. A couple of clicks, one page, knock ‘em all out, course by course makes things a lot easier than it would be otherwise.

Tom: Yup.

Kelvin: So, hopefully you guys recover. Okay. So, from hurricanes to coffee, Tom.

Tom: Hurricanes to coffee! I smell the coffee. I see the thermos. I’m sure—and I hear it now—there will be some magical connection between what we are drinking and what we’ll discuss.
Kelvin: Yeah, well, Tom, I feel like I’ve said this a couple times recently, but this is, I think, a first for us. The reason it’s a first is this is a flavored coffee.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: I’m not a big flavored coffee person. I don’t know if you know that. I mean, there’s a couple times I’ll try it.

Tom: You’re a bit of a purist.

Kelvin: I am. I like my coffee to taste like, you know, coffee. *(laughter)* From various places and their subtleties that come from that, I just enjoy that. But, this is an organic spiced vanilla coffee from Latitude 23.5 Coffee and Tea in Sarasota, Florida. This coffee came to us by way of you, Tom.

Tom: Indeed it did.

Kelvin: From a doctoral student who’s also a TOPcast listener. Would you like to give her a plug?

Tom: Sure. So, thank you, to Chiquita Lane, who I had the pleasure of meeting with to discuss her doctoral research and put a question out from her on the WCET listserv to try to explore some additional sources for her lit review and inform her research, which is really interesting stuff. I enjoyed my conservation with Chiquita. She’s a TOPcast listener, and thank you so much for the coffee. It may take us a while to get to it, but here we are drinking it, and I’m enjoying it because I do like a flavored coffee. I have some hazelnut at home that I drink, but I mix it up between the non-flavored and the flavored.

Kelvin: Alright! Sure! Well, I chose this coffee for today’s episode because sometimes, whether you like it or not, sometimes things get a little spicy in our work and that’s going to come up in today’s conversation. So, you like the coffee?

Tom: I do like the coffee.

Kelvin: You get the connection?

Tom: I get the connection. So, what are we talking about?

Kelvin: Well, let’s put it this way. Here’s some more foreshadowing. One of our cohorts—I think it was Patsy Moskal—got a note. I won’t name who it was from, but she said, “I got this email from this colleague that we know and love. ‘What’s happening down there at UCF? *(laughter)* What’s happening down there?’” So, we’ve been in the news. A technology-mediated course implementation within a UCF college has encountered some what we might call student resistance, and this resistance has made its way into various news outlets.
Tom: Indeed it has. Yeah, so those of you who may have been reading Inside Higher Ed the last few weeks probably saw—actually, it wasn’t just the digital learning coverage. The first article was kind of above the fold. (*laughter*)

Kelvin: How about that?

Tom: Front page.

Kelvin: Good times.

Tom: (*laughter*) About our College of Business redesign, and frankly, some of the blowback coming from the students based upon this redesign. We’ve been getting questions. I did a follow-up interview with Mark Lieberman, the reporter from Inside Higher Ed, and I appreciated the opportunity to kind of dig in and address some of the follow-up questions he was getting. I’ve been invited by Inside Higher Ed to write an op. ed. column about this, which I will probably do, so maybe by the time this comes out, it will have been published?

Kelvin: We’ll put it in the show notes whenever it comes out, regardless.

Tom: If you don’t see it, it probably means that Inside Higher Ed said, “Not good enough! Doesn’t meet our standards, Cavanagh.”

Kelvin: I hope not, but we thought we might take a moment in this few minutes with you, dear listener, to pause and reflect on what we’ve learned at UCF through this experience.

Tom: Yeah, and maybe provide a little more context than is possible through Reddit forums and even Inside Higher Ed articles, where I think as fair as Mark Lieberman was—and I’m not faulting him—there’s a lot more to the story and it’s more that I would like to say potentially. I imagine that some of the people who listen to TOPcast probably also read the Inside Digital Learning stuff from Inside Higher Ed.

Kelvin: I would hope so. If not, you should.

Tom: Yeah! I certainly subscribe and appreciate the emphasis that that publication puts on the work that we do.

Kelvin: But along with the context, I think this is a case study. This is a case study. You’ve said this, and I appreciated the thought. This is kind of a change management exercise, and so, getting into the particulars about it, there are some lessons that we’re learning and some lessons that our listeners might take away from our experience.

Tom: So, maybe it would be helpful just to kind of—

Kelvin: Break it down?
Tom: Yeah. So, I guess I will do that.

Kelvin: Yeah, tell us how we got here, Tom!

Tom: Sure, and thank you for talking to Mark Lieberman the first time, because I was in Europe. *laughter* That was fun, reading that article while I was overseas.

Kelvin: How about that?

Tom: So, going back in time a little back.

Kelvin: *(sound effects denoting traveling back in time)*

Tom: In the wayback machine there. The College of Business here at UCF has long used a lecture capture format to teach fairly large sections of their core courses, and it was a model kind of pioneered by a previous dean and inherited by our current dean. To be honest, I mean, they’re the College of Business, right? It’s an efficiency model. These are outliers for how online learning is done at UCF. This is the exception, but there are cases where some of the courses were extremely large. Like, 1500 students large.

Kelvin: That’s large!

Tom: Yeah, and while there was a class meeting time in a lecture hall, the vast majority of students—90%, maybe more—would watch them on demand from home through streaming video, and in many cases—based on our information—would binge them before midterms and finals at a faster speed than regular 1x speed.

Kelvin: Right.

Tom: So, I don’t disagree with our college dean that that’s not really the optimal educational experience that we wanted for our students. So, some of that was the genesis behind talking about what could we do better? What kind of experience does he want for his students in the College of Business here at UCF? He’s really big on having students engage, take ownership of their learning. He’s kind of recast the advising model to be kind of career coaches. He wants it very practical so that they can be effective and employable when they enter the workforce. So, all of that we agreed with. So, we had over a period of time a series of meetings and talked and brainstormed and shared our blended learning data with him. We’ve had a lot of success here at UCF using blended learning. We’ve talked about that in previous episodes. We could also share some of the data again. At the same time, we were also experimenting with adaptive learning and seeing really good results, and there’s a new push here at UCF to emphasize active learning in the classroom. So, between blended, adaptive, and active, those three things—and I think we’ve even talked about that redesign in a previous episode, so I won’t belabor that. It was a research-informed discussion. It wasn’t an arbitrary “let’s just get rid of lecture capture” thing. It’s like, if we’re going to get rid of lecture capture, what can we do better based on the research and our experience? So, we did a pilot with three courses in the College of Business. Two were core courses and one was sort of an elective, a creativity one. They went
fairly well. It was like a 1200-seat section that got turned into a blended format where the students would meet in person five times a semester and do the balance of their work online either through pure adaptive or a sort of quasi-adaptive homework tool and content delivery through the LMS. As I said, the grades were essentially unchanged, so we did no harm by making a change, which frankly we sort of expected a little dip. Anytime you do a big change and you’re not maybe expert at it yet, it’s not an unreasonable expectation. So, having it be essentially equivalent outcomes—at least with grades—we saw as not a bad foundation, and then the survey data was pretty good, too. Most students—over 65%, I want to say—graded it positive or very positive, and then there were some neutrals in there, as well. What was interesting, though, was that there was a very small minority of students who actually attended class every time that commented about that in the surveys, and I don’t think we paid enough attention to that subset of students who basically were a little bothered because they actually came to class. It’s a small number of students—or a small percentage of students, I should say—but a small percentage of students in a 1200-person course becomes an $n$ of increasing number. So, we didn’t, I think, pay enough attention to that little nugget of feedback that was imbedded in the survey results.

Kelvin: Just to drill that in a little bit, so in the former model—the video lecture capture model—where students could come to class or not come to class if they wanted, there were students who were regularly coming to class, and then in this new thing where it was five class meeting times very focused in active learning and so forth, they were coming to class then, too, but for them, it was “Hey! I’m not coming to class as much as I used to.”

Tom: “You’re taking something away from me” was their narrative.

Kelvin: As opposed to all the data would suggest a huge, great majority of the students enrolled in these courses formerly in the lecture capture model weren’t coming to class, and by the way, not watching the videos either.

Tom: Right, and in fact, those who did watch them binged them at double speed, but we also know from analytics that not everybody was watching the videos.

Kelvin: Right.

Tom: So, I don’t know. I’m just making up a number here, but out of a class of say 1000, maybe 50 would show up on the regular, and so that’s a very small percentage.

Kelvin: That’s correct.

Tom: But, you multiply that now when we take this pilot to scale across ten or fourteen courses, that 50 in every one of those courses adds up.

Kelvin: Yup.

Tom: And then you get a critical mass of people that are saying, “You took something away from me, and I’m not able to come to class as much now. You changed the
model. Now I have to ‘teach myself’ instead of you lecturing to me and telling me what’s going to be on the test.” It was a paradigm shift, to invoke sort of a cliche, and I think the biggest lesson learned—to kind of circle back to how you contextualize this—is we probably did a poor job of change management. I think if I could go back in time, I would work with the College of Business to better explain to students why we were making the change, why we think this is better based on the research, what we hope to accomplish in it, what is different about the kind of in-class experience they’re going to have—because it’s based on active learning-applied group work. It’s not lecture-based—and how that will help them in the workforce when all is said and done, and I don’t think we did that well enough. Now, I’m not going to say that didn’t happen because I know that the College of Business included some of this in their orientations and they talked to students, but you know—

Kelvin: The dean is a blogger. He’s been blogging about this stuff for a couple of years before it all started.

Tom: He blogs. That’s true. But it seems that maybe it still caught some people by surprise.

Kelvin: Yeah, of course.

Tom: And so, you get some agitated active students. God bless them. They’re gonna student.

Kelvin: Yup.

Tom: Who started a petition to complain and advocate for change, and it seems to be the group of students who were attending every class who kind of initiated this. So, that’s a group of students who are being told, “You can’t come to class every week. You’ll come five times,” and that’s how they’re perceiving it, and then you’ve got a group of students who never came to class, you know. Thousands being told, “You have to come five times now.”

Kelvin: “What?!!”

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: “I was quite happy with things the way they were!”

Tom: And you can’t sit at home and binge right before the midterm anymore, and we’re not lecturing at you. We expect you to come in and have done the pre-work so that you can be effective in your group. Now, they’re probably not thrilled with the change, and we probably didn’t prep them as well as we could have. So, you have these two completely different ends of the spectrum both dissatisfied. So, they’re joining forces to create a petition and kind of accost our president at open forums. (laughter)

Kelvin: And that’s always fun.
Tom: That’s always fun. Yeah. But, he’s been great. He understands why we’re doing it, and he’s been really supportive, going back to his time as provost. Of course, he wants it to work and he wants students happy.

Kelvin: Yeah, sure.

Tom: And we’re working on that, but that’s a little bit of the background, and I think some of that nuance has gotten lost in the Reddit forums and in the story that’s being told. The narrative seems to be “You’ve taken this thing away from me. UCF’s just trying to make money and put as many students as possible in these classes,” and I think a lot of these students who are part of this petition didn’t realize their classes were 1500 students big.

Kelvin: Sure!

Tom: Because they’d show up and there would be 30 other students in the classroom with them.

Kelvin: Right. I think two other little things, just to add on that. One is—and we’ve talked about this in previous episodes when we’ve talked about blended learning, our traditional classic blended model—that here at UCF, it is a reduced seat time model, right? That is generally speaking in our teaching and learning world, our TOPcast listeners will aver, some folks reduce seat time. Some don’t. That seems to be the big dividing line. We have historically reduced seat time, and in fact, before blended or hybrid was a name, we had—we’ve talked about this before—the designation mixed modality and in the explanation in every course schedule sign-up thing, we’ve got, “This is a reduced seat time model.”

Tom: Yeah, and that’s always been viewed as a positive.

Kelvin: That’s right. Yes. Exactly. It’s an online thing. You’ve got the face-to-face [section], but that same terminology was applied here with these business courses that you’re talking about and this new active learning, five-class session thing. So, there’s a reduction in seat time in the blended context from a meet-every-week for sixteen weeks kind of a sense. That didn’t help with the student narrative of reduced seat time. “You reduced my seat time.” Again, ignoring the fact that you didn’t have to come before. Many didn’t come before, and now you’re actually having to come. So, you could say this is a required seat time model.

Tom: Right. Just change the “R.” It’s an interesting case study in branding, as well.

Kelvin: Yes, it is.

Tom: We’ve had that discussion obviously within the College of Business who would be sort of experts in that.

Kelvin: That’s right.
Tom: We’ve talked about it. It’s probably too late to change it now because it’s a thing out there.

Kelvin: That’s right, and it is technically, I would say, a blended kind of a model.

Tom: Oh, it is.

Kelvin: But it’s not our mainstream blended model at UCF.

Tom: No, and it’s not the kind of Carol Twigg NCAT blended model, but it’s a model of reality, I would say.

Kelvin: Yes. Practical.

Tom: I don’t know if we talked about this. I know we talked about it in a previous podcast when we discussed this, but you take a 1200-seat section and you want everybody to meet in person the maximum number of times you can, you look at just the number of class meetings you have and faculty that you have to teach it and you divide that up, that’s five times a semester times 200 people, which is about the max we can fit in a room and still have active learning. It was sort of practical.

Kelvin: Yup.

Tom: So, that’s how we’ve kind of backed into that. 200 people times five times a semester, to be frank.

Kelvin: Yeah, absolutely. But it is interesting. I don’t think I told you this. I don’t know if you’ve seen this for yourself. If you were to do a web search right now for “blended” and “UCF,” you get a lot of things, right? You get the Blended Learning Toolkit we’ve talked about before, the BlendKit course materials, some research, some various things, but recently, on the first page of the Google search, news articles about this surface. So, for some folks, like our colleagues, you’ve got “What in the world’s going on down there with blended learning? Did you guys go off the rails? What’s happening?” Well, it’s a different kind of blended learning, in a sense. It’s a different model.

Tom: It is, and to be clear, I still believe in it.

Kelvin: Yes!

Tom: The dean and I are… I think we’re of a single mind here that we’re going to stay the course. We’re going to fix some of the things that we can fix. Obviously we’re always interested in student feedback and when students aren’t happy, we take that seriously and we listen to them, but we believe that this pedagogical model, once it’s implemented the way we kind of all want it to be implemented—and I think we’re on the way—is going to be far superior to watching 75 minute lectures one after another in a binge session at double speed just being lectured at.
Kelvin: Yeah. Let me just put a fine point on it, right? Our listeners understand this. Bloom’s Taxonomy, right? What we’re talking about is moving up the triangle. We’re talking about application at the very minimum and evaluation and synthesis, those kinds of things happening in these class meetings and you know what? Sometimes students don’t like it when you ask them to do more of that, but you know what? There’s plenty of literature that suggests that’s what employers want: students who can do those things, who can apply and synthesize and evaluate.

Tom: And we know active learning is superior.

Kelvin: That’s right.

Tom: We brought in speakers as we were planning some of this in collaboration or at least partnered with our Faculty Center, and we’ve spoken with people like Scott Freeman in Washington who are the people for this.

Kelvin: The active learning people.

Tom: Yeah, so, again, this was not arbitrary. This is not financially-driven. This, in fact, is costing more than lecture capture to do this right because of the increased number of teaching assistants that we’re putting in the classroom to work with all of these groups, because it’s a lot easier to have a single faculty member stand in front of the room and lecture, and that’s cheap, but that’s not what this is about. It pains me to think that some students and parents think that’s what this is about.

Kelvin: Sure. Well, as we’re drawing a little bit closer to our end time, might we—for the benefit of our TOPcast listening audience—see if we can synthesize ourselves a little bit some of the lessons learned from this case study in change management. What are we walking away with and what would we share with our colleagues listening through the headphones?

Tom: Yeah, there’s a couple of observations that I think you and I have talked about, and you so generously have jotted down here in our preparation notes. You want to take them in turns?

Kelvin: Sure.

Tom: So, maybe I’ll do the first one.

Kelvin: Sure.

Tom: Which is that intentional and beforehand proactive is almost always better than ad hoc and after the fact.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: I might even take the “almost” out of there.
Kelvin: We like to be understated around here.

Tom: It is always better. So, if I could, I would’ve paid more attention to the comments about not being able to come to class every time. Even though it was just a small number in our pilot—

Kelvin: Foreshadowing was there. *(laughter)*

Tom: Yeah! And you know, it’s funny, too. The person who helped us with some of that data collection was Dr. Patsy Moskal, who’s kind of leading some of our analytics and evaluation efforts here. She brought it up to me, and she said, “Well, this is an interesting thing. Look at this.” And I was like, “Yeah, that’s interesting, but it’s only a few students.” I should have listened to Patsy more, which is probably general life advice.

Kelvin: That’s true. That’s true. Here’s another one: communicating with students the nature of their course modality and their expected role or roles within that modality is essential. That’s communication from the institution and from individual instructors. We’ve talked about that kind of idea before, right, because we’re all about good design here on TOPcast, but in this kind of a change management sense as well, whether you’re rolling out a classic blended model or an online model or anything else, that’s still true.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: That’s still true. You can’t overcommunicate. When you think that you’ve communicated everything thoroughly, do it a bit more.

Tom: Yeah. You’re just getting started. Okay. Number three: an inconsistent message like what our value proposition is allows the message to be coopted and mutated by others, kind of what you were talking about. The reduced seat time becomes “You’ve taken something away from me.”

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And we’ve talked about this with the College of Business leadership. We kind of feel like we’ve lost control of the narrative a little bit, and I don’t mean that in a PR spin way, but there are some genuine reasons that we did this that we think are beneficial that we probably could have been way better at controlling that message to students than just kind of putting it out there and making some assumptions and then not anticipating the variety of reactions that might come from that.

Kelvin: Yes, and related to that, I would say, if you are unclear about what you are doing and why you are doing it, it’s likely that messaging to students will be unclear as well. So, if you’re not clear, how are you going to make your message really clear for your students? I think that despite the buildup to this and all, we still moved at a rather rapid pace given the numbers involved, and when that’s the case, you and I both know this. Okay, here’s the general direction, but not
everybody around the table is singing the same tune, right? Not everybody is saying, “Oh, is this a blended course? Oh, is this an online course? What is this?”

Tom: “Is this adaptive?”

Kelvin: “Is it just a new wave of video lecture capture?” There’s a variety of folks and perspectives, as many as there were around the table, and if you don’t have that unified, it doesn’t matter how many videos you make or how many blog postings you have or whatever, right? The message is not going to be unified and students aren’t going to get it either.

Tom: Yeah, true. Yeah, so, you know, maybe the last thing I’ll say before we kind of wrap it up is that we debated whether or not we should talk about this on TOPcast or should we just let it fade because as you said it’s spicy and there is a certain amount of anxiety and controversy about it. I get asked about it. I was presenting at a conference last week, and I was in the middle of my presentation and mid-sentence, somebody’s hand went up and was like, “Well, what’s going on with your blended? Aren’t you having some problems?” and I’m like “Okay. Alright. Let’s talk about it.”

Kelvin: (laughter) Good for you!

Tom: “We’ll pause everything I was saying and we’ll talk about that.” So, we did, and you know what? It’s probably always better to be transparent if there’s something that others could benefit from this experience. So, yeah, let’s put it out there. We’re not hiding anything. We have sincere, I think, good intentions behind this, and at the end of the day, I still believe this will be really good for our students.

Kelvin: That’s great. Well, why don’t I take a stab at wrapping this up for us, if that’s alright? You see if you agree with it or not. So, we talked about change management. Well, you know what? Change management is hard, and to riff on a now maybe old management book, “No mouse wants their cheese moved.”

Tom: Nope.

Kelvin: “Who moved my cheese?” It’s part of the business of online education and digital learning professionals, though, to move cheese. If we’re going to innovate, we have to help foster change well, and sometimes there are missteps, but hopefully we learn from those missteps so we can do better next time.

Tom: Yeah, the business of digital learning innovation isn’t just about digital learning innovation.

Kelvin: That’s right.

Tom: It’s as much about communicating that change as anything else, and that may be the biggest bottom line from this whole experience that we’re in the midst of right now.
Kelvin: Mhmm.
Tom: Well, cool.
Kelvin: Well, until next time, for TOPcast, I’m Kelvin.
Tom: And I’m Tom.
Kelvin: See ya.