TOPcast Episode 49: “You’re Making Me Crazy!” How to Improve Online Education

Narrator: What is big? At UCF, being big provides options, big creates opportunity, and big offers more than 80 accredited online programs and certificates that fit your life no matter where you live. Ranked as one of the nation’s Top 15 Online Programs by US News and World Report, UCF Online is more than just convenient, it’s life-changing. To apply or search for degrees, visit ucf.edu/online.

(upbeat music)

Tom Cavanagh: From the University of Central Florida’s Center for Distributed Learning, I am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin Thompson: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. We are back again, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: Back in the bunker again.

Kelvin: Is there a hurricane outside again, Tom?

Tom: No hurricane! The weather is—oh my gosh—it’s beautiful here in Central Florida.

Kelvin: It is nice.

Tom: We talk about weather a lot to start the show.

Kelvin: We should change the name of the podcast.

Tom: I know.

Kelvin: (laughter) Weather you wish to listen or not.

Tom: (laughter) Something like that.

Kelvin: Something like that.

Tom: Some awful, awful pun.

Kelvin: Pun. (laughter) It’s the only kind I know how to make, Tom.

Tom: Yeah, well it is mid-April here in Central Florida.
Kelvin: Mhmm. Allergy season.

Tom: Allergy season, definitely. You may hear it in my voice, but it is not quite oppressively, horridly hot and humid out yet.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: It’s pretty darn nice out there.

Kelvin: Those few months we have out of the twelve that aren’t that way.

Tom: Yeah, we get just a couple, but we’re on the cusp of no longer enjoying our weather but man, it’s great.

Kelvin: Let me pause for a second and just say thank you to all that is good in the universe for air conditioning.

Tom: *(laughter)* Yeah, absolutely.

Kelvin: I’m in favor. I’m a fan.

Tom: It was Dr. Gorrie. Did you know that?

Kelvin: No.

Tom: I think it’s G-o-r-i-e. If you go to the rotunda in Washington, D.C.—

Kelvin: Okay.

Tom: —every state has a statue of a famous resident.

Kelvin: Okay.

Tom: There’s fifty of them in the rotunda. Florida’s is Dr. Gorrie.

Kelvin: That is absolutely—Washington, D.C. got something right! That’s awesome!

Tom: Yeah. He invented air conditioning.

Kelvin: That’s the right person to celebrate for Florida.

Tom: Absolutely.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* I’m in favor of this. I’m going to look this up now. I did not know that!

Tom: Yeah, I’m a wealth of useless trivia.
Kelvin: Yeah. Weather or not you choose to listen. *(laughter)* We’re changing the name of this thing.

Tom: That’s right.

Kelvin: You know, maybe, as we make our slurpy, slurpy sounds.

Tom: *(laughter)* I did hear the coffee pouring.

Kelvin: Yes, maybe it’s time to reset the coffee bit.

Tom: Yeah, it’s been a while.

Kelvin: Tom, why are we beveraging?

Tom: Well, I mean one of the original conceits of this podcast is that it’s just a couple of dudes sitting around having a cup of coffee, talking about interesting online learning things.

Kelvin: Or weather.

Tom: Or weather, yeah. Weather seems to be making a lot of appearances.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* That’s right.

Tom: So, pull up a chair, put on your headphones, pour yourself a cup, and join us to have a robust discussion.

Kelvin: “Robust.”

Tom: Yes.

Kelvin: That’s right. That’s exactly right.

Tom: But it’s turned into a thing.

Kelvin: It is a thing.

Tom: And it’s drawn out of your particular expertise and interest in all things java.


Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: It is true.

Tom: Well, you know what a clover is and what a pour-over is.
Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Which puts you at two things ahead of me.

Kelvin: (laughter) Okay, sure. Yeah, well, I bring the coffee. I bring the coffee to us and we talk, and I should tell you about today’s coffee. Today’s coffee comes to us from our friend, Dr. Eric Fredericksen.

Tom: Hello, Eric.

Kelvin: From the University of Rochester. And Eric also, as we might have said in the past, is the current president of the Board of Directors for the Online Learning Consortium. We featured Eric and his research in Episode #36—believe it or not—called Finding Online Learning Leaders. And so, this coffee from Eric is a bit of a departure for us as it’s a flavored coffee.

Tom: Yes.

Kelvin: You know my favorite flavor is coffee.

Tom: (laughter) Yes.

Kelvin: I like my coffee to taste like coffee. This coffee is called—watch this—"Jamaica Me Crazy."

Tom: (Jamaican accent) Yah man.

Kelvin: (laughter) So, the roasters on the label of the bag say this is a “delightful mix of cinnamon, rum, and pecan [pick-AHN]”—or as I learned to say it growing up, pecan [PEE-can]—"our most popular flavor." Now, I was going to ask our colleague, Dr. Rohan Jowallah from here at UCF—

Tom: Who’s from Kingston.

Kelvin: (laughter) That’s right. I was going to ask him, “so, Rohan, does Jamaica smell like cinnamon, rum, and pecan?” Because what makes this Jamaica? I don’t know, but I’m going to go on a limb and guess he’s going to say no, but maybe. I’m going to ask him.

Tom: I bet he might say yes. Who knows?

Kelvin: He might say yes. That’s right.

Tom: He loves his homeland, as he should.

Kelvin: He should. He has a lot to be proud of there.

Tom: (clears throat)
Kelvin: So, how’s the coffee, and how’s the connection to today’s episode, Tom?

Tom: I like the coffee. I especially like the rum.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Artificially flavored, Tom.

Tom: Artificially flavored, yeah.

Kelvin: Artificially flavored.

Tom: This would be a whole lot more interesting broadcast.

Kelvin: That’s a different show.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: And I do get the connection.

Kelvin: Ohh! It’s been a long time coming. *(laughter)*

Tom: It has. It has.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* It’s been a long dry spell. I don’t know if my Kung-fu is back or not, or maybe the coffee helped.

Tom: Or I just need something really obvious because I’m pretty shallow.

Kelvin: Or rum.

Tom: Or rum, yes.

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: The more, the better.

Kelvin: So, help us with the connection, Tom.

Tom: So, we’re going to be talking about things that drive us crazy about teaching online.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: And as I said to you in the hallway on the way down here, that it might more appropriately be called “Things That Drive Kelvin Crazy That Tom Agrees With.”
Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: Because you took the lion’s share of the prep for today’s episode.

Kelvin: That’s fine. A lot of things drive me crazy, Tom. A lot of things.

Tom: Having you do all the prep for the episode is probably around the top of that list.

Kelvin: That’s not true. I’m happy to do this. And yeah, I checked with you, right? And you said, “No, these things drive me crazy too.”

Tom: They do, yes.

Kelvin: So, it’s not just me. In my house, I’m told that I’m full of comments and critical opinions about things. I have lots of comments about lots of things. *(laughter)* But we should note, too, that this is the first episode of Season 5.

Tom: Cinco!

Kelvin: Four years are behind us, Tom.

Tom: Wow.

Kelvin: Four years.

Tom: So, we’re starting Season 5.

Kelvin: Starting Season 5 with this episode.

Tom: We’ve wrapped four whole years. We’ve never missed a month.

Kelvin: Nope! So, in the spirit of Season 4’s kick-off episode—which was number 37—the very popular Six Deadly Sins of Online Teaching, this is kind of another numerically and meta-themed episode.

Tom: Mhmm.

Kelvin: So, I guess these are—how many did we end up with here? Eight things—

Tom: Ocho.

Kelvin: —that makes us crazy about the field.

Tom: We’ll see if we get to them all.

Kelvin: Yeah. *(laughter)* Number one—Okay, I see our time is up.

Tom: Yeah, exactly. Quite a bit of banter.
Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: But that’s alright. So, since you sort of took the lead on putting the list together, shall I prompt, and you respond?

Kelvin: Sure thing.

Tom: So, what would you say is the first one on the list that makes you crazy?

Kelvin: *(laughter)* You kind of do that little voice every single time.

Tom: It’s the Morning Zoo with Tom and Kelvin!

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: You called us, and you’re the fifth caller with What Drives You Crazy?

Kelvin: That’s right. We’ll send you some Jamaica Me Crazy coffee. Number one, we have a hard time even knowing how to refer to the field. Like we can call this Things That Makes Us Crazy About the Field of Teaching Online/Online Education/Digital Learning—

Tom: Distance learning, online learning, e-learning—

Kelvin: Distributed learning.

Tom: Distributed learning, yeah.

Kelvin: Whatever it is.

Tom: Yeah, what is this we do? It’s not anthropology, right?

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Why do they get the easy one?

Tom: Yeah, exactly.

Kelvin: Yeah, so we have a hard time even knowing to it. So, we did talk a little bit back in Episode 44 this past season—The Intertwined Futures of Online and Digital Learning—where we kind of talked about that a little bit. And we even waaaaaaay back—you won’t remember this far back, Tom, but in Episode #1—

Tom: We were wee tadpole podcasters.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Right. “What is Online Learning?” was the main title of it. So, we kind of touched on this a little bit before, but even in the last episode—Episode 48 with our guest Dr. Chuck Dziuban—he made reference to Katrina Meyer’s statement about can’t we just talk about learning rather than online?

Tom: I wrote a book chapter that was called basically that.

Tom: Yeah. “Basically That.” No, I forget exactly what I called it, but it was something about how online learning is just becoming learning and if somebody’s interested, I guess we could link to it. It’s open source.

Kelvin: Uh-huh, sure.

Tom: It was the last book Diana Oblinger edited when she was president of EDUCAUSE.

Kelvin: Mhmm. That’s cool. No, I think there’s a really valid point there for sure. But then I think it’s much like these mugs from which we are drinking this tasty Finger Lakes Coffee Roasters’ Jamaican Me Crazy coffee here. I hope I said before where it came from, from Eric. Finger Lakes Coffee.

Tom: Finger Lakes Coffee, because nothing says Jamaica like the middle of New York State.

Kelvin: (laughter) It’s lovely up there though.

Tom: It’s beautiful!

Kelvin: I think it’s probably really nice this time of year.

Tom: I would imagine.

Kelvin: But much like these mugs, they have a handle that we can pick them up.

Tom: (laughter)

Kelvin: And it is useful to have some way to refer to our field, right?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Just learning is pretty broad. What kind of learning? From what part of learning are you? It’s helpful to have something. But it does drive me crazy that you have to spend, in some circles, like ten minutes trying to explain what you are and what you’re not.

Tom: Yep. So, one of the things that you had suggested which I thought was a good idea was a suggestion for something that would ameliorate the craziness that it drives you to.

Kelvin: Yeah, take away some of the crazy.

Tom: Yeah, take an anti-crazy pill—

Kelvin: Mhmm.
Tom: —by perhaps defining the terms a little more consistently across the landscape.

Kelvin: Yeah, sure. Be consistent with those terms. Yeah, I think that would help. That’d help me feel less crazy.

Tom: We actually talked about this—I forget the number of the episode—but it was the one that we recorded at the last OLC.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: Where we talked about digital learning as a term versus online learning.

Kelvin: Yep, episode 44.

Tom: Oh, that was the one you were talking about.

Kelvin: That was it.

Tom: Sorry, I was focused on number one.

Kelvin: That’s it. Both are true.

Tom: Both are true.

Kelvin: I think it’s come up maybe here and there as well, but yeah, it’s a thing.

Tom: Yep. Alright, so that’s one.

Kelvin: Number two?

Tom: Define your terms, have a hard time knowing what we are. What is the second thing that could be potentially driving Kelvin crazy?

Kelvin: My gosh, this does drive me crazy, Tom. I think it drives you less crazy, you have to tell me though.

Tom: Okay.

Kelvin: Online has to freaking justify everything, you know?

Tom: *(laughter)* This is a family podcast, Kelvin.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Where it’s like held to a higher standard, it seems like.

Tom: Yeah. No, it drives me crazy too.

Kelvin: Although you’ve told me, “Get over it.”
Tom: Yeah, as I’ve forced myself to because the more I say that, the more defensive I feel.

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: And the less effective it is in actually changing somebody’s mind.

Kelvin: Yeah, I’ve given that advice in a couple of talks recently trying to channel you there, and I still sputter. But you know Chuck, our friend who was here last episode? Chuck Dziuban has often quipped, “When did face-to-face become the gold standard?” You know he’s got that line.

Tom: Yeah, he’s right. I’ve quoted him on that many times.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: I can think of plenty of crummy face-to-face classes I’ve been in.

Kelvin: Yeah, sure.

Tom: I’ve been in online classes that were way better. The modality does not make quality.

Kelvin: Yeah, and conversely, there have been some really wonderful face-to-face classes and some not-so-hot online courses, right.

Tom: Sure, absolutely.

Kelvin: But I will say this—I’ve said this a lot in different settings—that online does tend to make the invisible visible and implicit explicit.

Tom: Yep. That’s a good way to explain it.

Kelvin: So, it surfaces things, and those things might be good. *(laughter)*

Tom: Yeah. *(laughter)*

Kelvin: But I think things are more likely to be good frankly because you’ve had to make your assumptions more explicit, you had to put it all together, the design is clearer I think because of that.

Tom: Yep. So, a potential fix for that to avoid the crazy?

Kelvin: Eh, just accept it. Take the high road, rise to the higher standard.

Tom: Yeah, meet the challenge head on.

Kelvin: Meet the challenge.
Tom: And you know—

Kelvin: Grumble under your breath.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: As I do often. I go home and kick the dog, and not really, I don’t have a dog.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* And the cat’s tough.

Tom: I have spoken to an associate dean here at UCF in the past, and she does not have terminal degree in her college, but she’s an associate dean and she handles a lot of stuff, and she’s had to deal with some of the bias associated with “oh, you don’t have a terminal degree,” and her advice that she gave herself that she lives by is just kill them with competence.

Kelvin: Mhmm. That’s good.

Tom: And it’s served her well cause she’s awesome.

Kelvin: Yeah, that’s good.

Tom: And I think there’s maybe something to be learned here for that, just say “okay, if these are the rules we got to play by, then we’re going to win the game.”

Kelvin: Yeah. Yep. Number three?

Tom: Number three. You want me to go?

Kelvin: Sure. Go, please.

Tom: Alright, this is one definitely I agree with.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Not those first two but this one.

Tom: No, I told you, I agree with all of them. Online somehow automatically equates to lower quality.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: Just because it’s online means it is not, you know…

Kelvin: What is up with that?

Tom: Yeah, and it is sort of a corollary to the comment about when did face-to-face become a gold standard.
Kelvin: Yeah, I agree.

Tom: I read an article in the paper this week! Might have been even yesterday. One of our influential colonists was writing an article about the K-12 virtual system here.

Kelvin: Yeah, which is nationally known.

Tom: Nationally known, it’s the largest in the country. They do a great job. But his high school daughter was in an online P.E. class.

Kelvin: Oh, boy.

Tom: He was writing about some other things. They’ve had some issues he with their board and other things, but as an aside, said, “Yeah, my daughter was in it.” And basically, he said as a premise that “if it’s online, it’s not good, and she was in an online P.E. class and how would I describe that? What’s the nuanced word I’m looking for? Oh yeah. Stupid.”

Kelvin: (laughter)

Tom: Okay, thanks.

Kelvin: Thanks a lot.

Tom: Yeah, so there’s a prima facie kind of bias that if it is online, therefore it must not be good from people who have not personally experienced really well-designed online courses or programs.

Kelvin: Yes. That’s right. We’ve talked about this. We’ve run into this regularly. Different work groups or decision makers within our state elsewhere, other organizations, and somebody will try out something like that, “Well, you know, there’s widespread belief that online’s poor quality...” Well, is there? I mean, you know...

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: There’s kind of like this, is that right? I mean, you see some surveys of like higher ed. faculty and administrators, and you see proportions and all that, but I don’t know that that’s completely true. There’s definitely a sector. There’s definitely a portion, but really? Everybody?

Tom: Yeah, and I think that the audience that’s potentially listening to this podcast is sort of in our corner on this.

Kelvin: Oh, of course they are.

Tom: It’s to the choir we preach.
Kelvin: That’s right.

Tom: But I think we all sort of get frustrated by this, and everybody who lives in this world of online education has dealt with this question.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Isn’t it a lower quality because it is online? Aren’t they all cheating? And isn’t it easier? Like convenience is somehow equated with ease.

Kelvin: Yeah, that’s right. And we’ve talked a lot on this podcast about Iron Triangle and so forth, and so you balance quality, affordability, and whatever the other one is...

Tom: (laughter) Cost, quality, and access.

Kelvin: Yeah, access. I was going to say scale. Yeah, access, right?

Tom: That was one of the questions that Tavis Smiley asked me when I was on his show.

Kelvin: Yeah, sure.

Tom: And my answer was that it’s not so much the quality of the course, and his question was more about him serving employer perceptions, but it’s about the brand.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: So, if it’s a quality institution that has quality infrastructure and good assessment and faculty development and all of that, then if they’re applying all of that to online as much as they are to face-to-face, and in many cases as we’ve said more to online, why would you think it’d be worse? Why?

Kelvin: Yeah, that’s true. And I think the idea behind kind of adjusting this one, making it better, making me less crazy, is similar to the previous one: provide evidence of online quality. It might gall you, but just kill them with competence, right?

Tom: Yep.

Kelvin: Just keep trotting it out there. Show the data.

Tom: Yep.

Kelvin: For sure. I know we’re going to have to ramp up our frequency, our speed of these things if we’re going to make it to all twenty-seven of them before the…

Tom: We’re halfway there.
Kelvin: (laughter) There’s not twenty-seven.

Tom: (laughter) Twenty-seven.

Kelvin: There’s not twenty-seven.

Tom: Yeah. Alright, so the next one, you want me to do?

Kelvin: Sure.

Tom: Because this one is one that I sort of threw in last minute.

Kelvin: (laughter) No, but it’s—I was going to make a quip, but I’m not going to.

Tom: Okay, maybe discretion being the better part of valor.

Kelvin: Sure.

Tom: So, this is one I see a lot that for-profit and online are somehow equivalent.

Kelvin: Yeah, right?

Tom: They get conflated.

Kelvin: Sure.

Tom: Online is for-profit.

Kelvin: Yeah, and that’s not true.

Tom: It is not true, and I think that it’s sort of insulting both ways.

Kelvin: Absolutely.

Tom: So, it’s insulting to those of us that are not for-profit because we take a lot of pride in our non-profit status, but it also implies that all for-profit is bad.

Kelvin: Which is also not true.

Tom: Which is also not true. We have a lot of friends in the for-profit higher ed. space and they do really excellent work, and unfortunately, I think they have been tainted by a few bad actors in the for-profit space.

Kelvin: That’s right. So, there’s actually like a cloud of other assumptions and beliefs that are kind of behind that kind of conflation you’re talking about. But yeah, that’s not true. Online and for-profit are not the same thing.

Tom: They’re not.
Kelvin: So, how do you fix it?

Tom: Well, I think we have to educate policymakers because that’s where I tend to see it a lot. That and faculty.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: Faculty, we don’t want to be University of—

Kelvin: X.

Tom: Fill in the blank.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: We’re probably all thinking the same one, and I hear it all the time. So, my answer is always okay, so if that’s not who you want to be, don’t be that.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Be who you want to be.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: It’s in your control as the faculty, and we are here to help you. So, yeah. And I think also, as online learning becomes more ubiquitous and gets adopted by these bigger brands—like I sort of mentioned, like on that Smiley show—it’s the reputation of the school doing it that I think will drive the quality of discussion as time goes on more so than the modality.

Kelvin: Yeah, right. Your favorite institution here online.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: You get familiar with it, and yeah.

Tom: Yeah, University of Pennsylvania is now offering an online undergraduate program. I have a feeling it’s probably pretty good.

Kelvin: (laughter)

Tom: People are not going to say, “Well gee, you know, Penn, Ivy League School, that must be bad cause it’s online.”

Kelvin: Yeah, right. That’s true. So, number five.

Tom: Number five. So, Kelvin, what drives you crazy?
Kelvin: This is not as eloquent, but online—and really maybe even blended—means puts some content online, like a filing cabinet, like a file sharing space.

Tom: Yeah, here’s my list of PowerPoints and PDFs.

Kelvin: Like, uh, no.

Tom: *(laughter)*

Kelvin: No. And maybe wrapped up with that is, for our blended friends—those who tune in because we do talk about blended into the broad heading of online—nothing against flipped, but the equating of flipped and blended, right?

Tom: Yes.

Kelvin: The idea that well, if you’re doing blended, that must be some kind of online content presentation, and then you’re going to come do the real stuff face-to-face, whatever, and that’s not the case either.

Tom: Yeah. Well, like what our College of Business dean has said in the past, and I think we’ve talked about it, is “I want to put the low value stuff online.”

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Thanks.

Tom: Yeah, okay.

Kelvin: Yeah, I guess it’s an approach, right?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: I do like our colleague Dr. Beth Young here at UCF. Years ago, said to me that she’d been teaching online then she started teaching blended courses, and I think I’ve mentioned this before, she talked about a revelation she had. She said, “at first, I approached it as teaching with an online filing cabinet—face-to-face with an online filing cabinet—to shifting to an online course with strategic face-to-face workshops.”

Tom: Totally changes your lens.

Kelvin: Absolutely.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: I’m like *(choir singing)*.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah, it’s really nice.
Tom: Yeah, she gets it.

Kelvin: Yeah, and I can see now there’s like some MOOC-ishness in here too. There could be some really good MOOCs, but a lot of that’s like content presentation, kind of like this conflation with for-profits. I think it’s just a bunch of content and there’s no real human thing. There’s no real interaction.

Tom: Yeah, and actually maybe that’s a corollary to both of these: the conflation of online and MOOC.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: Because a few years ago was the year of the MOOC, and a lot of people’s only exposure to or understanding of online learning is this hundred thousand seat computer science course and they think, “oh, that must be what online learning is,” and it certainly is not.

Kelvin: Not so much. So, I think to whatever extent we’re able to showcase the best of online or blended, including those human interactions, I think that helps us.

Tom: Yep.

Kelvin: Makes me less crazy the more I see the good stuff.

Tom: (laughter) Yes.

Kelvin: You know?

Tom: Yeah, that’s right. Alright, number six.

Kelvin: Mhmm. You going to do this one?

Tom: Sure. You know what drives me crazy, Kelvin?

Kelvin: Tell me what drives you crazy about this field, Tom.

Tom: When people perceive or even institutions actually take this as a strategy—because it’s happened—that online learning is solely an enrollment growth/revenue play.

Kelvin: Uh-huh.

Tom: And they think it’s just a cash cow that they can use to grow enrollment and make money, and I think that that’s a recipe for trouble. It drives me crazy.

Kelvin: No, that’s right. And I wrote down in my notes, kind of parenthetically, “sleazy.”

Tom: (laughter)
Kelvin: A sleazy enrollment growth strategy.

Tom: Yeah, and that sort of plays into the bad actors in that for-profit space who’ve done similar things.

Kelvin: Yeah, that’s right. Yeah, you get tainted. Tainted and painted, right? So, how do you offset that?

Tom: Yeah, I think number one is to make sure that you’re actually aligning your online strategy to your institutional objectives.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: As you’ve described it, what’s your value proposition here?

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: And revenue can be a piece of it.

Kelvin: Sure.

Tom: Obviously, you can’t lose money on it or else why do it, but it should be doing something else in addition. If you look at the Iron Triangle, you should be trying to improve student outcomes, you should be trying to meet a community need by providing access to programs that maybe students can’t access, and if you can reduce cost or generate revenue for the university that they can do other beneficial things with it, you should look at in a much broader holistic context.

Kelvin: Yeah, I remember our now retired UCF colleague Dr. Steve Sorg taught the first online courses at UCF, founding director of the Center for Distributed Learning. Always used to kind of say back in the day, “Well, you can be trying to reach new students, or you can be trying to better serve your existing students.”

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: And honestly, a lot of everything that you might do kind of flows from those two major approaches. A lot of folks say, “I’m going to go find me some new students.”

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: (laughter) Okay, good luck.

Tom: I often quote, as we often do in this podcast, Dr. Joel Hartman, who says that if you’re doing online learning only to make money, it’s a recipe for trouble.

Kelvin: Yeah.
Tom: Because if you’re doing it for the right reasons and you do it in the right way, the money will follow.

Kelvin: Yeah, and I think we’ve seen that borne out here.

Tom: There are lots of examples where institutions and administration have done something to try to make money through online learning and have not brought the faculty along with them, have not brought the community and infrastructure along with them, and they have imploded.

Kelvin: Yeah, so have a value proposition align with your institution’s objectives.

Tom: Yep.

Kelvin: Two left.

Tom: Two left. So, Kelvin, number seven. What drives you crazy?

Kelvin: (sigh) This is maybe more broad brush-stroked, but the belief that “technology” in and of itself will solve anything.

Tom: Mhmm.

Kelvin: You know, oh, let’s just add technology to it!

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: The technology… I suppose it’s true that technology is an amplifier, for better or for worse.

Tom: Mhmm.

Kelvin: It’ll make some things better. It’ll make some things faster or louder or more of or complicate things. Everything comes at a price. But technology is not the same as intentionality or design. You need that.

Tom: And again, to quote Joel, just adding technology without changing the fundamental processes around that technology just adds expense and frustration.

Kelvin: Yes, don’t try to teach a pig to sing. It’s painful on the ears and it frustrates the pig.

Tom: (laughter) Okay.

Kelvin: Something like that.

Tom: Something like that. Yeah, okay. So, how would you ameliorate that?
Kelvin: Well, I think—pulling on the thread from your quote from Joel Hartman there—I think differentiate between technology and what we might call implementation or design. You know, the processed stuff.

Tom: Mhmm.

Kelvin: Technology. So, part of a solution, not the solution.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: For sure.

Tom: Technological determinism does not fit in higher ed. online learning.

Kelvin: Yes, that’s true, although you’ve kind of claimed the technological determinist label on this podcast.

Tom: Sometimes, yes. But I’m as critical and skeptical as the next.

Kelvin: What is that? What’s the contrast? Social determinism or something, is that what it is?

Tom: Something.

Kelvin: Something like that.

Tom: Alright! And the very last thing that drives Kelvin crazy that Tom agrees with.

Kelvin: The role of the instructional designer is almost always misunderstood. I have heard people shout out every exclamation that they could from afar as they heard that. Yeah, I think we all get frustrated by that, right?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: And part of that is the confusion of the terms, I was talking with our Instructional Design team this past week a little bit about that: instructional designer, instructional technologist, learning engineer, whatever.

Tom: And at different institutions, what they do is different.

Kelvin: Yes!

Tom: That doesn’t help. (laughter)

Kelvin: That’s right. That’s exactly right. And related to that, the number of hats these people “wear” at each institution is different.

Tom: Yep.
Kelvin: You wear ten hats, you wear one hat, whatever. That complicates things. And then, as I was saying to our instructional designers this past week, I believe metaphors are destiny. So, the metaphor you use for what this role is I think is important.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: I’ve got my favorite ones and others do as well. But I do think, just to say something I think our audience primarily will agree with, instructional designers are really crucial to this field.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: I really do believe that.

Tom: Yep, absolutely. Alright, so that’s probably the advice to mitigate this particular craziness.

Kelvin: Make that criticality evident.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: This is all anchored down to the linchpin instructional designers. That’s right.

Tom: Well, we’ve reached the end of our eight list. Eight item list.

Kelvin: And I see we’re only two hours into the podcast.

Tom: (laughter) Not too bad.

Kelvin: (laughter)

Tom: My coffee has run low.

Kelvin: Okay.

Tom: So, lot of them is the Spiderman mug that you have generously provided to me.

Kelvin: How was that? You feel like it would (web shooting sound effects)?

Tom: Yes, thank you for spitting into the microphone.


Tom: So, now we have to pay Marvel royalty.

Kelvin: (laughter) Finished the song. I didn’t know that they own it. Sony.
Tom: *(laughter)* Alright. So, Kelvin, you want to do the bottom line for us, wrap it up?

Kelvin: Let the web-slinger land on his three-point roof landing there.

Tom: Yes.

Kelvin: Okay, sure. Don’t get us wrong, we love this field.

Tom: We do.

Kelvin: Whatever it’s called. But there are some things that make us crazy about it. Unfortunately, almost all of these things are misperceptions of those outside the field. But fortunately, it is within our control to reclaim the narrative and alter these misperceptions by our actions.

Tom: If only they would understand us.

Kelvin: If only they would understand us. Seek first to understand rather than to be understood.

Tom: There you go. Alright. Well, that’s cool. So, maybe I’ll do one little plug.

Kelvin: Sure, plug us.

Tom: Before we pull the plug.

Kelvin: Uh-huh, ooh.

Tom: So, as you may be aware, the full catalog of TOPcast’s past 49 episodes—

Kelvin: Forty-nine!

Tom: —are available on our website at topcast.online.ucf.edu. topcast.online.ucf.edu. Have that tattooed on your forearm so you can always refer to it.

Kelvin: Mhmm, I do.

Tom: Like I do.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: Most of the episodes are evergreen and still have value, and we actually get notes all the time from people who are kind of finding us and back listening to our backlog.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: However, Apple Podcasts and other platforms are currently missing the first two seasons.
Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: Note: add that to your tattoo.

Kelvin: (laughter) Asterisk.

Tom: So, we’re going to look into that and see if there’s anything we can do about it. But at the moment, as you’re listening to this, the first two seasons are not available in those apps, so you’ll have to go to the website to hear those first two seasons.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: So, come celebrate Season 5—Episode 1 here of Season 5—by listening to or sharing with a colleague some of the episodes from past seasons gone by.

Kelvin: Oh, what a lovely sentiment.

Tom: Isn’t it?

Kelvin: Maybe I’ll do that, maybe I’ll email ten thousand of my closest friends with spam—I mean an invitation to listen. (laughter)

Tom: (laughter) And if you have sent us coffee, thank you. We are working our way through our coffee backlog as well.

Kelvin: We are, indeed.

Tom: So, until next time for TOPcast, I’m Tom.

Kelvin: I’m Kelvin.

Tom: See ya!