TOPcast Episode 50: Conveying Quality: One Way to Better Inform Stakeholders

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(upbeat music)

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

Kelvin Thompson: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you, my friends, are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. They are friends.

Kelvin: I was just thinking that. Yeah! I would hope so!

Tom: I would hope so. I would think.

Kelvin: Friendly. You know, I have yet, Tom, to see, “Listened to your podcast. You guys suck.” Nobody ever says that.

Tom: Yeah, that’s true. I imagine if they think that they stop listening pretty fast and so far, nobody’s been quite so rude as to come up me and say, “Hey! Just listened to your podcast! It was terrible!”

Kelvin: Although—I was going to tell you this, but I’ll do it on mic because why not? Transparency—we did recently our first one-star rating on Apple Podcasts.

Tom: (gasp) Really?

Kelvin: Yeah. So, somebody did. Either that, or maybe they thought one star was the best.

Tom: I guess. They didn’t leave a comment, did they?

Kelvin: No.

Tom: Like a textual review?

Kelvin: “You guys are horrible.” No, I mean generally they’re good. Honestly, mostly five stars, I think a couple of four stars, and then that one one-star.
Tom: One star. Wow. It’s like, you know, when you teach a class, and everybody rates you high and you get that one student that just didn’t like you and that’s the one you totally focus on.

Kelvin: Yeah. That’s right.

Tom: Obsess over.

Kelvin: But it’d make us feel better, dear listener, friends of ours, if you offset that one, if you like what you’re hearing or what you heard at some point. You know, if you just want to be kind, you could go to Apple Podcasts and make a five-star rating.

Tom: That’s right! It actually does help—not that we make any money on it or anything—but it helps the algorithm.

Kelvin: Yeah!

Tom: It helps people find the podcast for people who are looking for this kind of podcast based upon the number and types of reviews that they receive.

Kelvin: That’s right.

Tom: Okay. Wow. I hear you slurping.

Kelvin: Yup. Sorry about that.

Tom: So that’s probably a good cue that we’ve had enough banter.

Kelvin: (laughter) I was just sampling the coffee because I thought boy it’d be bad if it wasn’t good. (laughter)

Tom: (laughter) Alright. Well, um, I do have a cup of steamin’ joe in front of me here, and the aroma is intriguing.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: So, tell me what’s in the thermos, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Today’s coffee, Tom, is a single-origin coffee from Thailand. This is only the second Thai coffee that we’ve had on the show. You might remember our very first coffee back in episode #1 was a Thai coffee. I don’t have a whole lot of Thai coffee. It’s only the second one.

Tom: I do remember having it. I didn’t remember when.

Kelvin: Yeah, way back. This coffee was hand-delivered to us by UCF instructional designer Dr. Anchalee Ngampornchai from a recent trip back to her home country of Thailand.
Tom: Thank you, Anchalee.

Kelvin: Yeah. This coffee is from the northern region of Thailand on the border of Myanmar, and Anchalee shared some photos which we’ll include on the show notes page and it is—I gotta tell you—it's beautiful, this small mountain village up there with its own coffee-roasting cafe. It's kind of a destination spot. I found some other folks online Facebooking and Instagramming about it. It's kind of cool. So, we refer to the village and the coffee as Pha Hee. And Anchalee has been coaching me in my Thai pronunciation.

Tom: “Pha Hee.”

Kelvin: Pha Hee.

Tom: Okay.

Kelvin: So, to Anchalee we’ll say thank you, or I think it is “Cop Coon Crop.”

Tom: Wow, okay. Well, I'll take your word for because I was going to go for gracias.

Kelvin: (laughter)

Tom: Which is probably not the way it's pronounced in Thai.

Kelvin: Amazingly.

Tom: Yeah. Well, thank you, Anchalee. That was very thoughtful of you, and I look forward to seeing those pictures.

Kelvin: Yeah, they're beautiful. I can't. It's just lovely. We’ve spoken before about how coffee is a bit like wine, you'll remember.

Tom: Mhmm.

Kelvin: Well, there's some ways in which it's not like wine.

Tom: (laughter)

Kelvin: But there's some ways in which it is like wine, in that there are delicious single-origin coffees from coffee-growing regions around the world, influenced by their own unique environmental factors.

Tom: Mhmm.

Kelvin: So, I thought that this tasty single-origin Thai Pha Hee coffee, hand-delivered direct from where it was grown and roasted, would be a great fit for today’s episode. So, how's the coffee and how's the connection?

Tom: I like the coffee very much, actually. It's very good.
Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: The connection, I don't know, Kelvin. Again, I know what we're talking about today, so I get it.

Kelvin: Well, that helps. It always helps. *(laughter)* It always helps.

Tom: You're good about not putting it right on the nose in making it too easy.

Kelvin: That's right. We're subtle.

Tom: *(laughter)* That's right.

Kelvin: Or higher-order critical thinking skills.

Tom: Yeah, so I would say that the way that you've described the single-origin nature of the coffee, the kind of care that it was picked and roasted, and all of the effort that went into it, would be consistent with something that would be of high quality.

Kelvin: One would hope.

Tom: One would hope. And what a coincidence that today, we are going to talk about that very subject.

Kelvin: Coffee?

Tom: High quality.

Kelvin: Oh, high quality. *(laughter)*

Tom: We always talk about coffee.

Kelvin: Oh, that's true.

Tom: That's a given.

Kelvin: It's why I show up.

Tom: *(laughter)* So, our dear listeners, our friends, may remember that we occasionally frame our discussions around the Iron Triangle of Quality, Cost, and Access.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: Today, we are revisiting that triangle to talk once again a little bit about quality.

Kelvin: Mhmm.
Tom: And to do that, we have a special guest.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: A few months ago, Kelvin, you interviewed Dr. Deb Miller, Assistant Vice President for Digital Learning and Innovation at the University of North Florida.

Kelvin: I did.

Tom: Deb and you co-chair the statewide “Quality” workgroup for the State University System of Florida’s Online Education Strategic Plan under the authority of our State University System Board of Governors.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: And you two spoke about the statewide online course design Quality initiative Florida is implementing for the State University System.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: You did that at the OLC Accelerate Conference in 2018.

Kelvin: Mhmm. Yep.

Tom: We should probably note also that while we have touched on this issue of quality many times, we do have two past episodes that were specifically dedicated to the topic of quality: episodes #14 and #16.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: And as always, you can find them and all of their other sibling episodes on the TOPcast website at http://topcast.online.ucf.edu.

Kelvin: Nice plug, Tom.

Tom: Thank you. So, anything you want to add about your interview with Deb?

Kelvin: Yeah, I'll just give a shout out to Deb. I'll say, I enjoy working alongside Dr. Deb Miller on our Quality Workgroup in the state of Florida. Deb is one of those all too rare individuals who combines a big picture grasp of strategy with a political savvy and a boots-on-the-ground pragmatism.

Tom: She's just also plain nice.

Kelvin: Yeah, I like her.

Tom: (laughter)

Kelvin: I'm pro-Deb.
Tom: Pro-Deb. Alright, so through the magic of podcast time travel, here's your interview.

(transitional music)

Kelvin: Well, Deb, thanks for joining us on TOPcast. Good to have you here.

Deb Miller: Thank you, Kelvin. Excited to be here.

Kelvin: We've been working together for a while on this statewide Quality initiative in Florida. So, pretend I don't know anything here. I'm going to ask you some questions about this because this is kind of a little bit unique that we have a Quality initiative playing out across the entire state and really across two systems. We have a State University System and we have a Florida College System, and we're trying to coordinate that across everybody. Maybe let's start at the beginning, like why do we have a Quality initiative?

Deb: Such a great question. So, the work on the statewide Quality initiative that involves not only the State University System, but also the Florida College System, really goes back to some work the Board of Governors did that's gone back for a while. I think they were kind of interested in understanding what the impact of online learning could be for Florida, and they commissioned several reports. And then came out in, I think, 2014 or 2015, the 2025 Strategic Plan for Online Education in Florida, all organized around this kind of Iron Triangle of Access, Quality, and Affordability, and for each of those parts of the triangle, goals were written. One of the goals under Quality was having some statewide online course designation that indicated that a course had gone through some quality review process like one of the nationally known ones, like QM or many people used to use the Chico rubric. OLC now is coming out with standards. So, that's where it all started.

Kelvin: SUNY's OSCQR.

Deb: Yeah, SUNY's OSCQR, which is great because it's open source.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Deb: Yeah. So, that's where it all started, and then a lot of workgroups were formed.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Deb: The Quality workgroup, which was initially headed up by Len Roberson, who did great work on that, along with Cindy DeLuca, and you were involved in co-chairing that for a while, and then I got involved with that a year or so ago, although I have been keeping up with it. A lot of people spend a lot of time talking about, “What is quality?” Of course, many of us used QM, so there was a lot of conversation around the designations that we wound up with. The Q and the HQ I think were loosely modeled on the internal and official QM reviews for those familiar with that. But a lot of the really interesting conversation that I think we had was really around understanding how faculty might react to these
kinds of course designations and thinking about how do we recognize quality course design, but also excellence in online instruction, and that's probably more of a topic for another day. But we came back to the idea of thinking about course design and standards and being able to review courses in a way that worked for all of us and affix these designations that will end up in the state's online course catalogue.

Kelvin: I think you hinted at this. There are two different designations. You said Q and HQ.

Deb: Yeah. Yeah, that's been really interesting. So, the Quality designation really is meant to be kind of a basic level of quality design that any online course should have that says that it's met a certain number of standards, some that are analogous to the QM internal review. It has at least two reviewers. Those reviewers have done some training, and that's the Quality designation. The High-Quality designation is modeled a bit more like the official QM review with a greater number of standards that have to be met and a greater number of reviewers. And something that I think that's great about the Florida designations that differs a bit from the QM standards is that it was really important early on that basic accessibility be available in all the course. So, we kind of added that and made that part of it for both quality levels.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's awesome. You've mentioned Quality Matters, although you mentioned these other rubrics as well, so what's the relationship between Quality Matters and this Florida Quality process?

Deb: So, as a colleague of mine likes to say, “We don't do QM, but we use QM.” We use the Quality Matters standards for many of us, and the reason for that is that of course, many institutions, universities, and colleges have already implemented quality standards. The QM standards. They're subscribers, they've built processes on their own campuses, so, it's a natural fit. But, not everybody, right? Many institutions have either taken the QM standards and added onto it on their own or they've developed their own internally through a process. So, we needed to find a way to accommodate those institutions in this larger initiative as well. So, as part of the work of this workgroup, we've developed what's called an equivalency process, by which an institution that uses some other set of standards can provide to a small committee a crosswalk of these are how our standards are roughly equivalent to QM and here are our processes for course reviews and trainings and so on.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Deb: And I'm happy to say we've had the first equivalency package come through and be approved, and that was UCF's. Congratulations!

Kelvin: Woo! Yay us.

Deb: I did not read it myself, but I heard it was a very impressive package.
Kelvin: We have good people working here. They wouldn't hire me today. I've just been here a long time. I'm just glad that to keep showing up. They keep paying me. I like it.

Deb: *(laughter)*

Kelvin: I don't know if this is a fair question to ask you, but what would you say has been some of the most challenging aspects of putting together a statewide initiative on quality?

Deb: Well, I think there's a couple of things that come to mind immediately. One challenging aspect is that you've got this audience looking at the awards. The Board of Governors and other high-level administrators that don't work with us every day and being really purposeful in our communication to make sure that everyone understands that the lack of a designation doesn't imply a lack of quality.

Kelvin: Right.

Deb: Right? We have a lot of quality courses that may or may not be reviewed for a variety of reasons, and reviewing a course is a significant investment of time and resources by any institution, particularly because we want the process, as much as possible, to be faculty-involved and faculty-led, and faculty are very busy people just like us. Helping people to understand that the lack of designation doesn't imply a lack of quality, I think, has been really important in understanding that it's a process. That's one piece of it. And I think the other is understanding and appreciating all the institutional differences that we have and trying to find a process that's flexible enough to accommodate all of those differences so that everyone who wants to can participate.

Kelvin: Yeah. Yeah, I can see that would be challenging. I think this is right. I think this may be worth teasing out. What is the role of the faculty in this process? Is this some state big-shot mandating that all the courses and faculty have to be reviewed? How does that work?

Deb: Yeah, so the reviews are, of course, optional.

Kelvin: Of course, optional. We mustn't forget that. So, in the QM system and in most other systems of review, faculty are a central part of the process, right? Faculty should be involved in the review of one another's courses. That peer review and that collegial conversation and feedback is very, very important. Typically—I know at my institution—our reviews will typically involve the faculty developer probably an ID, maybe another faculty member from another college, maybe a couple of faculty members. It really is dependent upon the availability of reviewers, and it's something, frankly, that we struggle with getting enough faculty interested and trained and involved in the reviews. We're kind of at a good place for the volume of reviews that we have right now, but we're
concerned about how we keep faculty involved as we try to scale that up. So, I think that's something.

Kelvin: So, involved and led, and not mandated.

Deb: Mhmm. Right. I think what we try to do in my unit is to take as much of the busy work, if you will, away from faculty. So, filling out the forms to get the review set up, managing the process, sending the reminder emails. We try to have our staff do as much of that as possible, so the faculty participation can be really focused on that collegial feedback.

Kelvin: That makes total sense. What would you say is a lesson learned that might be useful to our listeners regardless of whether they are implementing a new institutionally-based Quality initiative or something more consortial, like even a statewide system initiative? Like don't do this. Do do this.

Deb: “Do do this.”

Kelvin: When they ask you if you want to co-lead the thing, sit on your hand. Is it like that?

Deb: (laughter) Well, there's a little bit, but a lot of great richness and in collaboration and in understanding of one another's institution have come out of that. But for institutions beginning to implement a Quality initiative, I'll go back to get faculty involved, make sure that before you select—and this is a personal lesson—before you select a tool, talk about it with a lot of people, socialize it. Make sure that as many people as possible feel comfortable with that set of standards.

Kelvin: That's a good point.

Deb: For a system-level initiative, I think it's really important to identify your goals upfront. What do you want at the end of this? Because increasing quality is not really a very useful goal. We all want better quality, but what do we want out of it and what does that mean, and how will you work together—particularly across systems that have different constraints, different resources, different objectives, as the college system and the university system do? What are the basics you all agree on before you get started and start operationalizing it? So, leave that to the end.

Kelvin: You've just caused me to flashback. Not to make light of such a thing, but I got a little bit of PTSD at the moment thinking about the early part of this process because while you’ve talked about Quality Matters a lot, when this thing started, there was a while there where we were at the state generating up our own standards.

Deb: Right! We spent a lot of time—more than a year I think—trying to develop our own standards.

Kelvin: (laughter) That was crazy!
Deb: It was, and people kept saying, “Why are you reinventing the wheel?” Which is where we wound up back where we were.

Kelvin: Sitting here talking about it today though, I wonder, do you think that was time wasted?

Deb: No, I don't think it was time wasted—

Kelvin: Because at times, I thought it was time wasted! (laughter)

Deb: —Because I think that we all got to understand one another. What I wonder sitting here thinking about it, knowing where we are now and having this history of the last few years, I wonder if we had that conversation now, how it would turn out if we were going to come up with our own set of standards because I really wonder if we wouldn't come up with some much shorter, broader list to use.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's true, and I think you're right. You used the word socialize, like socializing standards, socialize lots of aspects of the process, and I think there was a lot of that. When you've got folks who are coming from different institutions, and they're going to try to put this whole thing together that's overarching with gosh, how many institutions that we're talking about?

Deb: 26 colleges, 12 universities.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's like even 38 or something.

Deb: Yeah.

Kelvin: I was a music major, right? Almost couldn't do that math. But that's a lot, so there had to be a lot of dialogue of calibrating expectations.

Deb: Right.

Kelvin: And there was definitely some reinventing the wheel, but we got to a good place. We got on track, right?

Deb: One great thing that came out of that—and I credit Vance Burgess from UWF for this—was this shared agreement on the important of accessibility and building that into our base. So, if nothing else came out of all that time, that was a worthwhile outcome.

Kelvin: Yeah, and I think one, just because of the value of that, but two, it was a crystallizing moment, what you said, using Quality Matters as a default, not doing Quality Matters, because then it became well, this is important to us.

Deb: Right. It's important to Florida.
Kelvin: As a group, as a Florida initiative, and we feel empowered to say it's going to be part of our baseline quality expectation.

Deb: That's right.

Kelvin: *(whispered)* Can we do that? Is that all right?

Deb: *(laughter)*

Kelvin: Yes, we're going do that. And that's very empowering in that crystallizing moment, right?

Deb: Yeah, that's a great observation.

Kelvin: Yeah. You hinted at this, and I'm going to put you on the spot because I don't know how I would answer this question. What does success look like? Like you hinted out it would be important to know where you're going and to have a goal and all that. What does success look like for this Florida Statewide Quality Initiative?

Deb: Well, as you know, Kelvin, there's a very specific target for us, which is that 90% of all courses in the catalogue will have a designation by 2025. I think many of us wonder if that will happen.

Kelvin: 90%.

Deb: Right. But here's what I think success looks like. I think we've seen some of it already. I think we've seen our governing bodies, and some of our leaders that don't work in this arena every day, come to understand what quality online course design means, what it looks like to review it, and that process and the resources. So, I think that's a win. I think that we—as we talk through various things on the workgroup—have come to much better understand and appreciate the different environments we each work in and the different, not only differences in the way we're organized and structured, but levels of control and resources that are available, and we've had a lot of great conversation about building a process that can be flexible and broad enough to include all of those.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Deb: I think we've been fortunate to have such a great group of colleagues to work on this together with and engage in the work, and I think really, at the end of the day, the big win will be for students because, I'll stick with what I said, the lack of a designation doesn't preclude quality, but I think that just as with any kind of course review or course redesign process, making the time and space to engage in that conversation and to look at your course and to think about what you want to achieve and work on that improves overall the quality of instruction. As we like to say, the rising tide lifts off ships.

Kelvin: We do like to say that. That's true.
Deb: We do. I like that. I comfort myself with that. But I truly do think that, that's what success looks like.

Kelvin: That's good. Sounds like in some ways, anyway, more process, continuous improvement…

Deb: Right.

Kelvin: Than just some destination.

Deb: Exactly.

Kelvin: Yeah, that makes sense. Hey, thanks so much for coming and being a part of TOPcast and sharing a little bit about our Florida Statewide Quality Initiative. Maybe we'll have to have you back and see where we are farther on the journey, down the road a little bit.

Deb: Thanks for having me. It's been fun.

(upbeat music)

Tom: So, that was your interview with Deb Miller.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: Our good friend from Jacksonville.

Kelvin: Yeah, she's great.

Tom: Yeah, I found that really interesting. I know a little bit about that initiative, and I still found it very interesting.

Kelvin: I imagine you do. Yeah.

Tom: It should be said though, I guess, that this is still a bit of a work in progress.

Kelvin: Indeed.

Tom: The whole initiative continues to evolve a little bit. So, who knows, by the time you're listening to this, it may have evolved into some other form and format.

Kelvin: (laughter)

Tom: But I think that it's fair to say that the through line, the premise behind it, remains the same.

Kelvin: Yeah.
Tom: It's to ensure and document and communicate the high-quality nature of courses in the state of Florida.

Kelvin: Yeah, and we have a lot of that, right? We have a lot of online courses in Florida. We have two systems, as Deb mentioned. The Florida College System and the State University System, and the immediate past semester that we just completed as we're recording this, there were 22,000 online course sections between those two systems, most of them in the Florida College System but 8,000 of them in the State University System.

Tom: Yeah. Reviewing all of those against the either Quality or High-Quality rubric…

Kelvin: No small undertaking.

Tom: No, it's going to take some time and some effort.

Kelvin: A lot of money.

Tom: (laughter) That too. That's implied. It never even has to be said.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: But a lot of that time and money is in faculty development and preparation for faculty to build these courses of high quality, let alone review and evaluate them.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: So, I don't know. Do you want to make maybe one sort of summative comment on the importance of that investment in faculty?

Kelvin: Yeah, I've been saying this a lot lately because I think a lot about this quality thing, and I think this kind of effort comes down to time and attention. I've sometimes quipped that it's about time, preparing faculty for excellent teaching and high-quality design. It's about time, but it is about time. It's time and effort.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: So, that is more than we do in face-to-face. We don't formally prepare faculty to teach face-to-face in U.S. higher ed., and we don't conduct as a matter of course—no pun intended—regular course design reviews for face-to-face classes, and yet, that's what we do in online. Both of those things.

Tom: Yeah, and I think it's interesting that some of the quality rubrics, whether it's Quality Matters—which I'm a big fan of—or others, they all assess the design more so than the delivery. While a good design can make up in some ways for a kind of lackluster delivery, you need both.

Kelvin: Yeah.
Tom: You need both, but a good delivery is challenged by a poor design.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: It's a yin and yang.

Kelvin: A yin and yang. That is true.

Tom: Alright, so, maybe with my coffee running to the bottom of my cup, I should try to let you, since you interviewed Deb, do the bottom line.

Kelvin: Okay, sure. I'll try to land the plane, bring it in safely. Okay, so I'll say this perhaps: providing evidence of quality assurance effort in online education continues to be an important step in addressing the concerns of those we might call naysayers and novices. However, the costs and complexities of such efforts should not be underestimated. In system-wide initiatives such as Florida's—I don't think we're the only one trying to do things system-wide—but system-wide initiatives such as ours are important examples to monitor and learn from, I think.

Tom: Yeah, and if you're in a state that's doing something like this, to this level and extent, drop us a line.

Kelvin: Yeah, we'd love to hear about it.

Tom: Yeah, we'd like to hear about it, and I'm sure that the folks in the Florida Board of Governors would be interested in seeing it as well.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Alright, so before we wrap up, you think I have time for a quick plug?

Kelvin: Yeah, if you kick it into double speed.

Tom: Let's shameless plug it up here. Did you know, dear listeners, that most of our regular listeners are missing out on exclusive bonus content sent direct to their email inbox each month?!

Kelvin: (gasp) Say it isn't so!

Tom: No, in fact, they may be missing out themselves! Our TOPcast Insiders receive that bonus content plus a personal message from us.

Kelvin: And who wouldn't want that?

Tom: Yeah, and a copy of the current month's show notes and episode recording right in their email each month.

Kelvin: We make it so easy.
Tom: It is push technology. If you’re not getting our monthly email packed with all those super, duper features, write down this web address:

Kelvin: Here it comes!


Kelvin: All lowercase, no spaces.

Tom: All lowercase, yes. Sign up now to stop missing out!

Kelvin: Ooh, avoid FOMO!

Tom: That's right. You're going to have FOMO. That's right.

Kelvin: (laughter)

Tom: If you don't sign up. If you don't know what FOMO is—

Kelvin: Google it.

Tom: Yeah, Google it.

Kelvin: (laughter)

Tom: Alright, so thanks to Anchalee for the coffee.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Thanks to Deb for the wonderful interview, and thanks to both her and you for all the work on this Quality initiative across the state.

Kelvin: “Yin Dee Crop.”

Tom: (laughter) “You're welcome.”

Kelvin: (laughter) That's right.

Tom: Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.