TOPcast Episode 53: A “Sobering” Conversation About Diversity Among Leaders of Online Learning

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(upbeat music)

Kelvin Thompson: In front of a live audience at OLC’s IELOL Immersion Experience, I’m Kelvin Thompson.

Tom Cavanagh: And I’m Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And you’re listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast.

Audience: (Applause)

Kelvin: It’s amazing what you can do with special effects. That almost sounded real, didn’t it?

Audience: (laughter)

Tom: Yeah, Tim pressed that applause button just at the right moment.

Kelvin: (laughter) Boy, that’s good budget spending there. That’s awesome. IELOL, Tom.

Tom: Yes.

Kelvin: How do you spell that?

Tom: (laughter) Institute for Emerging Leaders in Online Learning. It’s a long-standing professional development program run by the Online Learning Consortium, previously the Sloan Consortium. For many years, [it] was the child of our good friend Larry Reagan at Penn State.

Kelvin: I know Larry.

Tom: And is now kind of roaming about the country. Last year it was with Dave Cillay in Washington State, and this year and next year, it’s here in lovely, balmy Orlando.

Kelvin: It is balmy. Is it balmy here? It’s balmy. Yeah, nobody’s thrilled about the balmy. (laughter)
Tom: Yeah, yeah. No, it’s funny. Weather is a big theme that we talk about often.

Kelvin: It is.

Tom: And I was saying to somebody on the phone today that August is our “penance” for February, because February is pretty awesome. Yeah, it’s not now.

Kelvin: Very briefly. It’s not now.

Tom: It’s not awesome now.

Kelvin: But air-conditioning, as we talked about in a previous episode, I’ve been telling everybody your story about how—

Tom: Dr. Gorrie.

Kelvin: Dr. Gorrie is featured in Washington, DC. The dude who invented air-conditioning.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: I like him. He’s my friend. He’s my buddy.

Tom: There’s actually a statue in Washington, DC, for him.

Kelvin: That’s awesome.

Tom: Cool! Alright, so, Kelvin you have pre-poured.

Kelvin: I have pre-poured some coffee into your mug and my mug, but we have a guest we’ll introduce momentarily.

Tom: Yes.

Kelvin: She’s sans-coffee, Tom.

Tom: I know. That’s alright.

Kelvin: It’s alright.

Tom: We’ve had guests who didn’t drink coffee at all.

Kelvin: We try to be inclusive. We welcome people regardless of their coffee “aficionado-ness.” Affinity.

Tom: *(laughter)* Aficionado-ness?

Kelvin: I don’t know. I make up stuff.
Tom: Okay.

Kelvin: Yeah, something like that. You want to know what you’re drinking?

Tom: Sure. Lay it on me.

Kelvin: Uh, try not to spill it on you. So, today’s coffee was a gift to me—so, regifted to you and to our listening audience out here—from Massachusetts Colleges Online, and it comes to us specifically from Shelburne Falls Coffee Roasters in the village of Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts. And I love this. The tag line of the roastery is: “Roasted and blended by hand.”

Tom: As opposed to by foot.

Audience: (laughter)

Kelvin: Well, I don’t know. Wine’s probably blended by foot.

Tom: By foot, yeah.

Kelvin: I saw that Lucy episode. I Love Lucy. You know—

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: She was stomping the grapes, right? Something.

Tom: Elbow, yes.

Kelvin: Something.

Tom: Okay. Well, that’s cool!

Kelvin: Yup!

Tom: It’s artisanal!

Kelvin: Yeah! It is artisanal. It sounds like— You know, I was reading the whole thing on their website. They start out, this couple, they started off going from like festival to festival carrying their hand-roasted coffee and then carrying along their little kid with them, and now she’s the general manager (laughter) of the place.

Tom: Aw! That’s cool.

Kelvin: And they’ve got an expanded, you know, they’ve got cafes and all that. At any rate, you know that I love a great single-origin coffee.

Tom: Do I ever know that!
Kelvin: Yes. That’s right. Yeah, I’m not sure you knew what single-origin coffee was before we started doing this. But now you wish you— *(laughter)*

Tom: Not sure I know what it is now.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* But today’s coffee is a blend.

Tom: Okay.

Kelvin: You know, which is okay.

Tom: It is fine.

Kelvin: That’s alright. Now this blend specifically is called “Rainbow Roast.”

Tom: Rainbow Roast?

Kelvin: Rainbow Roast. They have all these titles for their blends, and they have stuff that they say about them. So, this Rainbow Roast, we’re told, is “an ambitious—and meticulous—concoction of five different roasts and four varietals from three continents.”

Tom: Oh my!

Kelvin: Yeah, right? It sounds like a lot of stuff, and since these loquacious roasters give a purpose statement for each of their coffees—let me just add this—that this Rainbow Roast “routinely dispels illusions.”

Tom: Wow, that’s an ambitious coffee.

Kelvin: Isn’t it, though?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Alright. So, how’s the coffee? And I don’t know if you notice, but there might even possibly be some connection today’s episode and the topic in said description of the coffee.

Tom: So, the coffee is good. I like it. It is a bit strong which for me, you know, but I like it.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And the connection is good, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Ahhh!

Tom: Congratulations!
Kelvin: It’s been a long time coming. That’s effusive. I like it.

Tom: Yeah. Kelvin—I’ll turn to the audience—his connections are sometimes better than others.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: But today I think I get it!

Kelvin: Well, that’s good.

Tom: So maybe that’s a great segue to introduce our guest—

Kelvin: I think so.

Tom: Who is sitting so politely here enduring this banter.

Kelvin: Sans-coffee.

Tom: So, we are joined today by our friend and colleague, Dr. Liz Ciabocchi.

Kelvin: Woo Liz!

Tom: Who serves as Vice Provost for Digital Learning at St. John’s University in Queens, New York, and who is also a faculty member here for OLC’s IELOL program. So, this is Liz’s second appearance here on TOPcast. She was our very first TOPcast guest way back when we were baby podcasters in episode number nine.


Tom: Single digits. Which was called: “Telling Disruptive Stories: Women as Leaders in Online Education.” So, you, Kelvin, interviewed Liz back then.

Kelvin: I did.

Tom: About some of the work she was doing with research into an advocacy for women as leaders. Today, we’re hoping to extend the trajectory of that topic into a broader conversation on the importance of diversity alongside related concepts such as inclusivity, equity, advocacy in online and digital learning leadership.

Kelvin: We’re going to do all that inside of thirty minutes?

Tom: Yes.

Kelvin: That’s amazing.

Tom: So, welcome, Liz. Welcome back, I should say.
Liz Ciabocchi: Thanks so much, Tom and Kelvin. It is lovely to be back here today with you.

Kelvin: Well, you’ve got other people to look at, so the lovely part is really on them.

Tom & Liz: (laughter)

Kelvin: But, you know, at least, we offered you coffee. You didn’t drink it, but you know.

Liz: Yeah, I’m about as caffeinated as I need to be right now.

Kelvin: That’s what Tom says, but I give him some anyway. (laughter)

Tom: Yeah, I drink it for the integrity of the show. And, oh my gosh, sometimes if we record two in a row, I drive home from work with my head buzzing.

Liz: Yeah, I can imagine.

Kelvin: It’s good to have you back, though.

Tom: Yeah.

Liz: Thank you so much.

Kelvin: We didn’t know what we were doing with the interview stuff, so our producer Tim loaded us up with gear and we went into your conference hotel room and kind of balanced on the edge of a desk. (laughter) And this is better than that, right?

Liz: This is great! I mean, you know, there was some advantage I think to having that privacy for the first interview, it was a little less daunting. Now I’m in front of a live audience here, and it’s exciting.

Tom: Yeah, no pressure.

Kelvin: 2000 people sitting here in front of you. I mean that’s awesome!

Liz: No pressure!

Tom: Yeah, thousands, thousands.

Kelvin: So, Tom, you want to kick us off here?

Tom: Kick us off? Sure. Okay, so Liz we can sorta just jump right in.

Liz: Sure.

Tom: So, from your vantage point, why do you think it’s important in our community to have an ongoing conversation about diversity? And I know when we were
talking about this recording prior to you coming to Orlando, you mentioned inclusivity, equity, and advocacy. So why is that important to online learning leadership?

Liz:  
Well, look around the room. Okay, look at the group. We’re a diverse group of people and we represent a thin slice, I would say, of the larger higher education landscape. The short answer to your question, Tom, I believe is we have a legal, moral, and ethical responsibility to do this. There’s tons of legislation that I won’t go into around these issues in higher education, but at the end of the day, for me, it’s very personal, and I suspect for lots of folks in our audience this is a very personal topic. It’s not always an easy topic. It can be a very controversial topic. Sensitive. But at the same time, we have to push through all that because we’re still grappling with the fact that we have problems with representation of women and people of color in particular in the field of higher education generally. I don’t have hard statistics on...those statistics for online learning specifically, but as part of a larger landscape, I think we have an obligation to examine these issues and to really take part in the conversation, the larger conversation with our colleagues outside of online learning as well. So, I’d like to, you know, have the opportunity to talk about things that have changed since the last time we spoke and some things that fortunately or unfortunately have sort of remained the same.

Kelvin:  
Well, you want to do that?

Liz:  
Sure!

Kelvin:  
What do you think has changed and what do you think has not changed?

Liz:  
Well, Okay great. So, you know, thinking about when we aired the first interview, which was January 4th of 2016.

Kelvin:  
Oooh, you knew that?

Liz:  
I have it right here.

Kelvin:  
Tattooed on the back of your arm.

Tom:  
She’s got it tattooed. That’s funny, I got every episode tattooed on my arm.

Kelvin:  
(laughter)

Liz:  
What has changed? I’m going to stick with my noted here because I really do want to hit some of these very important points. So, since that time, I think what we’ve witness in our country and the world, in fact, has been a wave of activism. A wave of activism particularly among women and particularly among people of color. We have witness Women’s March on Washington [and] women’s marches all over the world. We also witness the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. We have seen a surge of activism around issues of sexual violence and harassment, which was actually started by women of color and facilitated by...
a major social media campaign back in 2017, which, of course, I’m referring to the #MeToo movement.

Kelvin: Right.

Liz: So, a record number of women were elected to the US Congress in 2018 midterm elections, right? Including higher numbers of women of color than we’ve ever seen before. Issues of diversity, inclusion, equity, and advocacy have taken on a much greater significance in our current political climate, I believe, and they’re very much at the forefront of higher education as well. So, I hope that kind of brings us to where we have been and what’s changed.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Liz: What hasn’t changed, unfortunately, is some of the statistics around representation in higher education. So, want me to launch into that?

Kelvin: Please!

Tom: Sure.

Liz: Want me to talk about that?

Tom: You’re talking about probably the broader—

Liz: I am.

Tom: Because you had said that, you know, we probably don’t know the specifics, necessarily, within online learning, which sounds like a great research area.

Kelvin: If Eric Fredericksen needed something else to do.

Tom: (laughter) Yeah, we’ll put him on that.

Kelvin: Since he’s got that list of online learning leaders, as we’ve talked about in another TOPcast episode. We could actually survey everybody, maybe, and get into something. But we don’t have that, right?

Liz: Well, I’m glad you mentioned that, because I’m going to talk about that just a little bit. Just a little bit.

Kelvin: Oooh, that’s nice.

Liz: But let’s go through just a few salient points here about representation of women and people of color in leadership in higher education. So, going to refer to the American College Presidents study that was done in 2016 and give you some information from that study. Just 25% of college presidents are white women. 25% white women. Only 5.1% are women of color. Those percentages may be a little bit higher now because this was 2016, but I think we’re still in a place
where less than a third of all college presidents are women. 58.1% of college presidents are white men. Only 11.8% are men of color. So, while we focused on women’s leadership in our last episode, I want to continue in that vein, but I also want to talk a little bit more broadly about these issues. So, that’s at the highest level of leadership in higher education. Let me just add this, and this really took me back a little bit, and this comes from a report called: “Administrators in Higher Education,” which was done in 2017. So, just two years ago. In every category of administration in higher education, whether you’re talking about athletic directors, facilities directors, student life administrators, enrollment managers, academic administration, you name it. Whatever category. There isn’t a single category in higher education administration, in which white men and women are less than 75% of the work force.

Kelvin: Wow.

Liz: That’s pretty sobering, to me.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Liz: And I was a little bit surprised by that. In the categories of staff, administrator, faculty, other professionals in high education administration, for every dollar earned by a white man, okay? Every dollar earned by a white man, women of color earned about 85-89 cents, white women earn about 82-93.5 cents, and men of color earn—they do a little better, by the way—earn about 88-98 cents. So, we’re looking at issues of representation, we’re looking at issues of compensation, and we’re still not where we should be.

Kelvin: Right.

Liz: And we can break this down and slice and dice it any which way you like, but that’s the cold, hard truth.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Liz: Yeah, so when you talked about Eric Fredericksen’s study—

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Liz: Let me come back to that for a second. So, Eric Fredericksen—our good colleague and the president of the OLC Board currently—did a national study of online learning leaders in US higher education also back in 2017, and when he undertook that study, the sample that he identified was a sample of 820 online learning leaders, okay? 820. About 255 of them actually responded. But of those 820 online learning leaders, the only real demographic information that I could glean that would be relevant for today is that they were about 50% male and 50% female. So, I thought, “Well, that’s good news.”

Kelvin: Yeah.
Liz: You know, at least we’ve got, you know, some gender balance in that pool.

Kelvin: Better than 70-30.

Liz: Yeah. Better than 70-30. But this, again, is, you know, a small sample. So.

Tom: That’s interesting, you know, every so often here at UCF within the Center for Distributed Learning, we will look at our male-to-female ratio. We’ll look at, you know, what kind of representation we have, and the last time we did this, I think we were exactly 50-50 male-female. Which was interesting. It’s hard to hit that exactly. Like, we couldn’t have done that if we tried, and, you know, I wonder if that’s an indication of a trend that potentially is emerging? I mean, are we seeing…Can you infer anything from the data that you got from looking at Eric’s demographics? Even though, there might be some selection bias in that because not everybody responded to that.

Liz: Correct.

Tom: But do you think it’s indicative of maybe a larger trend of maybe seeing more women, you know, rising to levels of leadership within online learning?

Liz: Well, we know that women’s participation is at a higher level than males as students in higher education, as employees in higher education. We already know that there are lots of women in the pipeline, right? Lots of women in the pipeline. The question, the critical question that you’re asking is are they rising in the ranks? And we haven’t seen enough movement of women into these senior leadership positions or any positional leadership position at rates that impress me at all. We’re still pretty much in the same place we have been, you know, over the last three years since we did our first podcast. So, I’m encouraged by the fact that there are so many women in the pipeline. We have more work to do to prepare those women, support those women, and get them into these leadership roles. Because we also know from the research that organizations that are led by women are productive organizations. They have been shown to be high performers, and so I think that there’s a real rationale from a financial standpoint as well as from all these other standpoints that we’re talking about today to make sure that women are positioned as senior leaders.

Kelvin: Good.

Tom: I was just going to say, you know, just an observation about myself that sometimes I tend to think of this very much from a rational standpoint of…You mentioned the word productivity, and we’ve done diversity podcasts before. Episodes before. And we’ve talked about some of the studies that have been done that have shown that diverse teams out-perform teams that are not diverse.

Kelvin: Yup.

Tom: And even if you took away sort of the moral or ethical or representative arguments in favor of diversity and equity, if you just said, “You’re going to be
more productive. You’re going to have better outcomes.” I mean, that in and of itself, I think, is an argument for it.


Kelvin: Yeah. On a lot of different dimensions, right? I mean race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identification, religious or non-religious background, cultural background, modes of thinking. You can just kind of go down the whole rabbit trail, right? As opposed to, “I want people to be just like me, and we’ll all be happy together.” You know? We’re better together in our diversity, right? [It’s] the thing. But I wanted to ask, Liz, from your vantage point, from your observations— You think a lot about this stuff. We’ve been talking a little bit about the numbers and how we’re doing and that was, I believe the word “sobering” is what you were, and now makes me think we should be drinking something else.

Liz: A little stronger?

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: A little stronger than the coffee.

Liz: Something a little stronger.

Kelvin: Maybe. But I heard a speaker a few weeks ago who is a researcher broadly in this area, Dr. Jo Ann Canales from Texas A&M Corpus Christi, say—I hadn’t heard this idiom before—she said: “Well, diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusivity is being asked to dance,” and I liked that.

Liz: I like that quote, too. I came across that. I thought about throwing that in here somewhere. You beat me to the punch.

Kelvin: Yeah, there it is. Well, I wanted to know, like, from where you sit, within our broader online education community, from what you’ve observed, how inclusive are we when it comes to our senior leaders? You’ve talked about some of the numbers on kind of where we land, but how, as a community, how inclusive are we? And I guess that’s within our institutions and kind of in our broad cross-section community of online education.

Liz: I’m trying to unpack your question a little bit here.

Kelvin: Yeah, sorry.

Liz: Can you help me?

Kelvin: Sure. So, we have how we’re doing, like this percentage of women, this percentage of men or persons of color or not.

Liz: Right.
Kelvin: But how inclusive are we? How welcoming are we, either within the institutions, or in our kind of like, say we have a thing here sponsored by the Online Learning Consortium, our broad online education community. How inclusive are we?

Liz: I think that’s… It’s a tough question to answer on one hand because I think that campus climate studies and things of that sort can answer some of these questions. I don’t have them top of mind right now and I don’t have the stats to throw out, but I think that the fact is we are trying desperately to assess those exact kinds of questions. How inclusive, how welcoming, how accepting. It’s hard for me to say, but I do know that there’s not a higher education institution that I can think of that doesn’t have some kind of initiative in place, an office in place, a committee in place to deal with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. I can speak from my own experience at my institution, where there was an incident that prompted some very significant and quick action, and it had to do with issues of diversity and inclusion. It was a student-related incident, but it had such an impact. Students were so passionate about it and so upset by it that it really prompted the leadership to take action that it probably should have taken previously, but you know, it just took something like this to happen. And it’s unfortunate that it had to come out that way, but at the end of the day, what we ended up with was the allocation of resources to creating a new diversity and equity and inclusion center—[including] a student center and a faculty center on our campus—a new position within our institution of a chief diversity officer. I would bet that lots of you come from institutions that already have that, but we didn’t, and we’re a Catholic and Vincentian institution, so you know, diversity is not the easiest thing for us to tackle, quite frankly. But I think that we are working very hard to come to terms with shared language and definitions around what we mean by “inclusivity,” what we mean by “diversity,” what we mean by those terms, and that’s a first step. We’re also working very hard on multiple fronts. So, we’re working through our faculty center and our student centers. We’re working through our HR department, you know, on faculty hiring practices, on curricular initiatives, all the way around. It’s a big, big undertaking. I’m optimistic about where we’re going, even though I don’t have, you know, a perfect response to the question. I think that we’re heading in the right direction.

Kelvin: Thanks for that.

Tom: We had a former president, John Hitt, who used to say that, “You can be diverse. Everybody hate each other.”

Kelvin: (laughter) Let’s not!

Tom: The key, the goal, is to try to be inclusive. So, you know, it’s just another way of saying that quote that you just shared.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: You know, it’s being able to bring your authentic self to work and, you know, have your talents put to their best use in the service of a shared mission.
Liz: Yeah. I think I would be remiss if I didn’t mention, you know, the broader context here. You know, we work in online higher education, we work in the higher education landscape, but what’s going on right now, politically, socially, it has an effect on all of us, you know, across the field, and I think that we have to acknowledge that. We’re living through, in my view, a really tough time right now. It’s just difficult, it’s upsetting, and we can’t remove ourselves from that context. You know, we live within that context as well. So, I think that taking up... So, having the opportunity to do this today, at this time in our lives I think is a great opportunity, and I’m grateful that we are able to take it on.

Tom: So, do you have any advice for our listeners and the folks in the room? That if they want to be more diverse, inclusive, to, you know, promote advocacy within their own individual contexts as leaders emerging in online learning, is there some nice, Tweetable piece of advice that you could offer?

Kelvin: (laughter)

Liz: Well, Tom, this comes in the session I’m doing tomorrow.

Tom: Okay!

Kelvin: Oooh, nice plug.

Liz: So, I don’t, you know.

Tom: Sorry for everybody who’s listening. (laughter)

Liz: I don’t want to give away all the good nuggets here today.

Tom: Gotcha. Maybe a little teaser.

Liz: But really, yeah. I mean, there are certainly personal, sort of individual strategies that we can all pursue to learn more about these issues ourselves and there are resources that I will mention tomorrow in the session. Certainly, as an agent within the institution, there are definitely ways to get more involved and become more of a champion, I would say, for these issues at the institutional level. But, you know, finding your seat at the table around topics like this can be challenging. So, yeah, we’ll talk about some of those strategies in the session tomorrow.

Kelvin: Do you mind if I ask you? I mean, it’s great for the folks who are in the room, but for the folks who aren’t who are listening, are some of those resources linkable? Could we put those in the show notes for this episode? That might be a good—

Liz: Yeah, I have a few things up my sleeve for you.

Kelvin: Alright. That’s good. Alright.
Tom: \textit{(laughter)}

Kelvin: So, if you haven’t been going to the show notes, dear listener, you can go there and find carefully curated stuff just for you from Dr. Liz Ciabocchi.

Tom: Yeah, a few bonus party favors. Surprises.

Kelvin: That’s right.

Tom: Alright.

Kelvin: Make life better.

Tom: Awesome! So, Kelvin, any parting thoughts?

Kelvin: I have no parting thoughts, Tom.

Tom: Okay. Well, thank you for the coffee. My cup is empty.

Kelvin: Okay. I can pour you some more.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: You want some more?

Tom: I’m okay. I’m good. \textit{(laughter)}

Tom: So, maybe I can kind of wrap it up for us.

Kelvin: Wrap it up. Land the plane. Something.

Tom: Put a bow on it.

Kelvin: Put a bow on the plane?

Tom: All of our various metaphors that we use.

Kelvin: All that stuff. That’s true.

Tom: So, inclusivity, diversity, equity, and advocacy are among our—sorry—among our senior community leaders are important goals for online education, and I think Liz has definitely reinforced that.

Kelvin: Yup.

Tom: These are also important concepts for all leaders to embrace and promote, so that our institutions are stronger, better places to work. More productive. So, Liz, thank you so much for taking time out to be on TOPcast yet again.
Liz: Thank you so much, Tom.
Tom: Sure.
Kelvin: Love to have you back.
Liz: Thanks, Kelvin.
Kelvin: When you can drink coffee.
Liz: I’ll try to keep that in mind for the next time.
Kelvin: (laughter) But you know what, we’d welcome you even if you didn’t drink coffee.
Tom: That’s right, yeah.
Kelvin: Even if you were a lowly tea drinker.
Audience: (laughter)
Kelvin: See, that’s what not to do.
Liz: Thanks.
Kelvin: I guess we’ll say maybe we’ll sign off and say until next time for TOPcast, I’m Kelvin.
Tom: And I’m Tom.
Kelvin: See ya!
Audience: (Applause)