TOPcast Episode 54: “Keep It Simple Starting” with Design and Teaching

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(upbeat 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 are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hey Tom.

Tom: Hey Kelvin. It’s a fine podcast.

Kelvin: Yeah, it’s—I think I’m subscribed.

Tom: (laughing) Pretty sure I am, too. It’s one of my regular monthly listens.

Kelvin: Yeah. Although I do listen on the non-statistic-fied, non-data-fied link that we have.

Tom: Really? I’m one of the downloads that you track.

Kelvin: Thanks a lot.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: How many times do you listen to it? That’s probably good to know. (laughing)

Tom: Just once.

Kelvin: OK. That’s good. I feel much better about our listenership now. (laughing)

Tom: Yeah, really, yeah. I’m responsible for any increase we may have had. No, I mean I really listen to it just to see how stupid I sound. (laughing) Just to see, “OK, what did we say?” And generally, I’m relieved. Generally.

Kelvin: Generally. Yeah.

Tom: Yeah.
Kelvin: I’ve had that experience, you go, “Oh man. Oh, that wasn’t as bad as I thought it was.”

Tom: Right. “I thought that was terrible.” Of course, we have people screaming into the radio or headphones now like, “Oh, that one was pretty terrible.”

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Maybe.

Tom: Maybe. Alright.

Kelvin: You could write us, dear listener.

Tom: *(laughing)* Let us know what you like and don’t like.

Kelvin: TOPcast@ucf.edu.

Tom: Alright, I heard the dulcet gurgles.

Kelvin: The dulcet gurgles, my favorite band.

Tom: *(laughing)* Dulcet gurgles. Yeah, they’ve got a Christmas album coming out.

Kelvin: *(laughing)*

Tom: Of some brown liquid. Smells quite aromatic.

Kelvin: It’s coffee.

Tom: *(laughing)* It is coffee. I’m being a little euphemistic, but so Kelvin, what do we have in the thermos today?

Kelvin: Well unusually, Tom, while I brewed today’s coffee, I did not choose it.

Tom: What? Who chose it?

Kelvin: You!

Tom: I chose it?

Kelvin: You chose today’s coffee! So, how about you tell us about it and how about you make the coffee connection?

Tom: I will.

Kelvin: And I will judge *you*.

Tom: *(laughing)* Thank you for brewing, because if I had done it it would have been some viscous, you know, sludge that would’ve not tasted good.
Kelvin: I would’ve drank that, probably.

Tom: So, let me take you on a short journey. Out west.

Kelvin: Oh.

Tom: To the great state of Colorado.

Kelvin: Colorado.

Tom: Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to do a keynote talk at the University of Colorado online conference—

Kelvin: Yeah, OK.

Tom: —that they do annually out there. It was a great event. I really enjoyed my day out there. The Denver and Anschutz medical campus community, that got together, and we were talking about online learning. It was our old friend Courtney Borton.

Kelvin: Courtney’s been on TOPcast before.

Tom: Courtney has been on TOPcast and was previously the Director of Marketing for UCF Online, who’s now at the University of Colorado, and she and her colleague Scott Chadwick, who’s Vice Chancellor for Enterprise Development, had invited me to come out there. And they treated me really well. It was a great event, a great discussion, a lot of good questions after my talk, but they were so generous they gave me some coffee as a kind of parting gift. And one of them, I thought, would be appropriate for today’s topic.

Kelvin: Oh, do tell.

Tom: It is Huckleberry Roasters, and on the side of the bag it says: “Huck.” So, I kept thinking of Mark Twain when I looked at it.

Kelvin: Yeah, Huckleberry Finn.

Tom: It’s called Red Eyes Blend and it’s described as balanced and well-rounded. But here’s the part that I thought might be thematically appropriate. In true Thompsonian fashion.

Kelvin: I’m ready now.

Tom: Alright, so this is the description on the side of the bag of coffee.

Kelvin: And a two from the German Judge.
Tom: \( \text{(laughing)} \) “Life can be tricky. On those days, coffee shouldn’t add complexity; it should make the day easier. Red Eye is our blend for when your coffee needs to be simple, no-fuss and delicious.”

Kelvin: That’s what I shoot for. I shoot for being simple, no fuss, and delicious every day.

Tom: That’s right. “Each week, our hand roaster selects a variety of coffees from around the world and blends them into a tastes great straight up or with milk.”

Kelvin: Which makes you happy.

Tom: It does, because I’ve already got mine, with my milk powder in it. So, how’s the coffee?

Kelvin: Yep, yep. I think if I poured that in my eyes, they’d be red.

Tom: \( \text{(laughing)} \)

Kelvin: But it tastes just fine. Tastes just fine. I think it’s very nice.

Tom: Yeah. Yet another blend making its appearance on TOPcast.

Kelvin: That’s true. How is it with the froof?

Tom: Yes, so it is great with milk. \( \text{(laughing)} \)

Kelvin: Yeah? There you go.

Tom: And I assume great without.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: So, do you get the connection to today’s episode?

Kelvin: I do get the connection. I have to give you more than a two from the German judge.

Tom: \( \text{(laughing)} \)

Kelvin: Yeah. That’s at least a fair-to-middling coffee connection. Nah, it’s better than that.

Tom: I’m entirely adequate.

Kelvin: \( \text{(laughing)} \) That’s what I shoot for every day. Because you said that coffee shouldn’t add complexity, it should make the day easier and that does seem roughly in alignment to our theme today of… We have this mantra around here at UCF in our online and blended-related digital course design work we say: “Keep
it simple, starting”—and you’ve said before—“at complexity as expertise builds.” So, you start simple and then you ramp it up from there. So, yeah, why add undue complexity? Yeah that makes sense. I’d give you, let’s see, on a scale of one to ten, I’d give you a solid 7.5 on that. Maybe even 8.

Tom: I’ll take the B.

Kelvin: *(laughing)*

Tom: I’ll take the 80% B. That’s good, yeah. So, yeah, we’re going to talk about the importance of starting simply when you’re doing something new in online and technology-based learning. So, if you take this quote from the bag of coffee, and we replace “coffee needs” with “online learning needs,” it’s our blend for when your online leaning needs need to be simple, no fuss, and delicious.

Kelvin: Oh, “and delicious.” I like that. Yeah.

Tom: *(laughing)* So, you’ve been here longer than I have, and so this KISS acronym predates my tenure at UCF, and I’ve been here for almost 11 years.

Kelvin: Yeah. It started with now retired professor Steve Lytle, who was a frequent guest. We refer to him as a “web veteran” faculty member who would come into our faculty preparation program here at UCF and he would share his wisdom. And again and again and again, he had boiled down this little principle. He said, “my advice to all of you as you start out is keep it simple starting.” And, you know, that really kind of resonated with the faculty colleagues in the room, and it kind of just took root in our lore and in our general practice as instructional designers or working with faculty and as they come through our pipeline of faculty preparation. So, it is something to which we aspire in our work and you suggested, “Hey, maybe that’s a good topic. We should expound upon what keep it simple starting looks like.”

Tom: Yeah, and you know if you think about online learning, especially in those early days of online learning, it probably can seem, to the uninitiated, kind of overwhelming. And it’s like, “I don’t even know where to begin. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to start.” And by saying, “Well, don’t worry about all of that. Let’s just worry about this piece. We’re going to do this module or we’re going to do this assignment or we’re going to just kind of, you know, do an outline of your course.” Whatever, you know, way you need in. But not to overcomplicate it and, kind of, as they say, “bite the apple,” or “eat the apple one bite at a time.”

Kelvin: Yeah. And I would say that today’s episode on this topic is probably particularly relevant to the everyday design needs of instructors and instructional designers. Sometimes we try to be real strategic and we talk about kind of leaderly, you know, kind of things and that’s good for all of us from time to time, but I think there’s a lot of practical, everyday advice to be found in this episode. And I would say this “keep it simple starting” is relevant today, just as relevant as it was in the old days. Maybe just relevant in different ways, perhaps.
Tom: Yeah, yeah. So, I know you’ve kind of jotted down a few kind of practical tips. You wanna maybe talk about a couple of those?

Kelvin: Yeah, I’ll give it a shot. I thought maybe the first…You can debate whether these top two bullets should be one and two or two and one, but I thought maybe the first thing I would say is, “Don’t try to employ all at once, every possible so-called ‘best practice’ or every possible online tool for every idea your colleague suggests.” “Well, you know what I do is—” And you’re writing down the list. Don’t try to, you know, drop the whole quart of firewood on the fire all at the same time.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah. It’s like, “Oh, man I saw this cool widget. I wanna put Twitter in and I want Piazza and I want…” You know, put all these YouTube videos in there. So, it’s like woah, let’s just kind of take them one at a time, see what you really need and then…You know, I’ve described the same situation with adaptive learning.

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: Not to sort of jump ahead, but I know that was one of the things we had talked about.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And in adaptive learning, it’s very similar to kind of, I think, the early days of online—or what we call traditional online learning now. Isn’t that ironic? It’s a paradigm shift for faculty and you’ve got to think of your course in an entirely different way and we’re actually counseling faculty to just start with one module.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And don’t overthink what you’re trying to do. Kind of get the main points into the course in an effective way. And then, I’ve described it as a coral reef. So, over time, more interesting things can grow on that coral reef and make it more colorful and bring a broader, you know, variety of colorful fish to come live in your coral reef. But you need that substrate, that foundation to begin with that’s solid before you can start adding all of the color and variety and, you know, enhancements.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think that’s good, and I think that does sort of tease out a difference between the early days of online, traditional online, and the modern days. We have a lot more to choose from now in online tools. Like you said, Twitter and Piazza and whatever. The early days of traditional online are like the today of adaptive learning, and you’re just trying to get your head around what this is.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: There’s definitional kind of things. So, there are different kinds of complexities that you are at risk of, unfortunately, employing.
Tom: Yeah. So, your second one is sort of, I think, maybe a corollary to what I just said.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Maybe a better way of saying it. It’s just, “Focus on the essentials of good course design.” It’s that foundation that you need in order to build kind of the creative, you know, flair that you want to add to the course to just make it more visually interesting or engaging.

Kelvin: Yeah and like I said, you could kind of debate whether which of those should be higher priority, right? You know, do you just focus in on good course design or do you just slow your roll first and go, “Wait a second, I’m not going to be overwhelmed. I’ve just going to pick something.”

Tom: Right. But I would also say you probably don’t want to do something just trivial and say, “OK, I’m keeping it simple.” You know? It’s like alright, I put one video in my…It’s like OK, but I don’t think that’s going to move the needle and really make a difference. So, you kind of have to find that sweet spot.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, that’s true. And we have a little time at the end, we’ll talk about what “keep it simple starting” doesn’t mean.

Tom: *(laughing)*

Kelvin: There’s probably abuses. You could go to the dark side with that.

Tom: Yeah. So maybe that’s an example of that.

Kelvin: Like, “I’m going to do as little as possible.” *(laughing)*

Tom: *(laughing)*

Kelvin: That’s not the kind of simple we’re talking about.

Tom: Yeah, yeah.

Kelvin: I’m pretty sure. But I like the next one as well, which is simple in a different kind of way. Not simplistic, but simplifying in an elegant sort of way and that is “ensure clarity in expectations logistical instructions,” right? I sometimes advise folks in our field, faculty and instructional designers, be clear about the what not necessarily about the how, because some folks worry that you’re dumbing things down if you try to be explicit with students. Well, be clear about the what: what you’re expecting. The how, that’s…There’s appropriate problematizing, I’m not going to answer it all for you. You figure out the how. You know? You do the hard work. But you shouldn’t be guessing where you have to find your assignments, nor should you have to be guessing like, “I don’t even know that this assignment is.” *(laughing)*
Tom: Yeah, yeah. I always kind of describe it as: Where do you want your student—your students—to be spending their intellectual energy?

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: And if it’s figuring out how to access the first module—

Kelvin: That’s a problem.

Tom: —that’s a problem! It should be on, you know, actually engaging with the material, not trying to navigate your course.

Kelvin: Mhmm. I agree. A little academic confusion over wrestling with ideas and application, that’s a good part of the learning process.

Tom: Sure.

Kelvin: Confusion over… (laughing) I don’t even know.

Tom: “What do I click?” Yeah, that’s probably not a good one.

Kelvin: That’s not good.

Tom: The next one you have I actually like, and I use a lot, which is the “distant student litmus test.” You know, would a student on the other side of the world understand/be able to complete what I’ve designed?

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And that’s also come up with me when I talk to faculty about like even lecture capture, because it’s really east to privilege the students that are right in front of you in the room, and you always have to remind them, “Look, there are students out there in the world watching you. So, you have to remember to engage with them as well.”

Kelvin: Yeah. I just got kind of a flashback to 50’s television and like, you know, “eat all your food, because I’m going to ship it into a plate to somebody around the world.” But that’s a whole different kind of around the world story.

Tom: Yeah. So, really, you know, design for the, I’m not going to say least common denominator because that sounds almost pejorative, but so that everyone can get started and understand.

Kelvin: Yeah, and I think online-ness, right? And it’s challenging, I think, too, Tom, because many of our institutions—not all I’m sure but many—we do have some students who are taking fully online courses who do live nearby in the geographic area.

Tom: Yeah. That is true. We know that for a fact.
Kelvin: We do! That’s certainly the case here at UCF. The great majority, in fact, live within driving distance. Now, they might be taking fully online courses because they’re time-shifting. They’ve got life obligations that make kind of the traditional hours of the university time-prohibitive for them. So, I had a conversation with a faculty member just this week where I think it behooves us to consider that students are choosing to take fully online courses for reasons.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: And they’re legitimate reasons to them, and we have to respect that. You can’t get in the way of those reasons.

Tom: Yeah, OK. Alright. You want to talk about the next one?

Kelvin: Sure. I think this was your suggestion. “Adopt a universal design for learning kind of orientation.” UDL principles. That is, will all students, regardless of their ability or disability, be able to access and complete all the materials?

Tom: Yeah, and you might ask yourself, “Well how does that…What does that have to do with keeping it simple?” The way I kind of come at that is that it’s a lot easier to design accessible materials from the beginning as opposed to trying to retrofit them later, which can be really complicated and expensive. So, you know, if you’re going to be adding—I don’t know. Here’s a real simple example—if you’re going to be adding a picture to your course—a graphic of some sort—adding the alt-text at the time you do it for accessibility purposes, it takes you an extra five seconds, right?

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: But if you had to go back and find all your graphics and go into HTML tags or even find the text field after the fact, it would be this huge pain to do it through your whole course, to find all those things. So, you know, keeping it simple not only makes it easier for you to do it at that time when you’re creating it, but makes it easier for the students to consume it. Especially those that might need an accommodation.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that’s good and including things like media—video and audio—that need transcription.

Tom: Yep.

Kelvin: You know, to actually work from a script up-front if it’s something you’re producing originally, that simplifies everything. Right?

Tom: Yeah. The next one is—Oh, I’m sorry, go ahead.

Kelvin: I was going to say, or our colleague Eric Mane at our UCF Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning, you know, offers this sage advice, “I try to just choose stuff that’s already captioned.” (laughing)
Tom: *(laughing)* If you can, yeah. That doesn’t always work.

Kelvin: No.

Tom: So, I was going to say that the next one, I think, is very similar—

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree.

Tom: —to the UDL idea, which is to “pursue a mobile-first approach.” So, if you’re going to design your course—if you’re going to write content in your course—try to do it in a way that allows students to consume it in multiple platforms.

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: An example… I remember listening to Ryan Seilhamer, who runs mobile strategy for us here, was talking to our faculty about is don’t make a reference in your text—and I used to do this all the time, I’m as guilty as anybody—don’t make a reference in the text to, you know, click on the “submit” button on the left or click on the “assignments” button on the left.

Kelvin: And I’ve done that a lot, too.

Tom: Me too.

Kelvin: Because you think you’re being helpful.

Tom: Right! But now we know that students are consuming course materials in a mobile environment where this stuff is not on the left anymore.

Kelvin: No.

Tom: It’s maybe in a hamburger menu or it’s down at the bottom of the page or something. So, that just adds confusion. So, if you kind of have that awareness as you’re designing it in the beginning, you’re keeping it simple in both the design side and in the consumption side.

Kelvin: Yeah, and just to emphasize that, because I think that’s such an important point: I and probably you made those kinds of written instructions because we’re trying to be helpful and clear for students, but in this new mobile device world, all we did is just inject confusion.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Now, I will say that, you know, I don’t teach as often as I used to, but when I did, *(old man voice)* it was back in the days before we had a lot of online learnin’ back in those days.

Kelvin: *(laughing)*

Tom: You know, so we didn’t really have mobile. We didn’t have a lot of mobile consumption.
Kelvin: *(Old man voice)* “When I did mobile learn’ I always just had a long extension cord on my computer.”

Tom: *(laughing)* That’s right. *(Old man voice)* “I was walking around the house with my desktop on my back. That was mobile learnin’.” *(both laughing)*

Tom: *(Old man voice)* “Had to walk uphill both ways, in the snow!”

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Oh my gosh.

Tom: Yeah. So, to be fair to us, I guess. But you can’t do that anymore.

Kelvin: No.

Tom: Because we actually know that is, in many ways, the preferred way to consume content.

Kelvin: Yeah, right, and yeah, for sure. You had said, when we were talking about this ahead of time—and you’ve touched on adaptive—that hey this “keep it simple starting” thing is broadly applicable, you know, as much as we talk about, you know, fully online courses. There are other implementations that it’s relevant for as well. You mentioned adaptive already.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: But blended might be another, right? Like I…When I’m doing consulting on blended learning, I often quip that the integration between the face-to-face and the online components of blended course is, arguably, the single biggest design challenge. So, knowing what your strategy is, you know, how are you going to… What is it you’re going to do face-to-face? What is it you’re going to do online? It is sensible? Is it predictable on the part of your students? Have you made that evident? Does the schedule reflect what’s what? Does your syllabus actually call this out as a blended course and explain why? You know, all that plays into it. How do you talk about it to students? That’s one very straightforward, simple example of that “keep it simple starting” principle in blended, I would say.

Tom: Yeah, and a lot of this is about expectations management with students, right? I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been asked—you probably more than me—“So, do I do my discussions in the face-to-face environment or do I do them online?”

Kelvin: Right.

Tom: And my answer’s like: it’s up to you.

Kelvin: Yeah, right.
Tom: You know, what are you trying to accomplish? What’s your personal style? What are your objectives? Do you want to have broad participation by everyone in the class or do you kind of want to just have a free-flowing discussion where maybe a couple of students might dominate, but that’s OK? You know, I don’t know. What are you trying to accomplish? So, there’s no right or wrong answer except you need to make it explicit to the students what the expectations for the course are and their expectations. Because if you start mixing it up, that’s the biggest way to sow confusion and add complexity.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that’s right. I thought, too, the… We’ve been talking about broad, arguably, broad course modalities. Online, blended, adaptive. Adaptive may not be a full-blown modality, but it has big implications for course design. But even littler implementations, right? Just specific things, like, we’ve talked before on TOPcast about the idea of what’s called in some circles “inclusive access” or “first-day access.” We get that discounted, published provided e-text kind of access. Just even starting something like that, you can take it on as a huge, complex thing or you can just kind of keep it a bit simpler. So, knowing what the essentials or non-negotiables are and what the “nice-to-have-for-a-later-day” kind of thing are. Being able to classify when you approach an implementation in that way, I think is probably helpful.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Don’t want to overwhelm. Like, you know, as we kind of started this, the whole idea of “let’s not boil the ocean.” Let’s just take it one step at a time and, you know, we’ll eventually get there.

Kelvin: Yeah, right. That’s good and, you know, a lot of the stuff that we’ve been talking about is probably really frontline, instructor-as-designer facing, but for the instructional designers in our listening audience, this is all relevant there, too.

Tom: Absolutely. Yeah, that’s how you talk to faculty. That’s how you counsel them and kind of bring them along to, you know, I always say to help them realize their vision for the course.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: But perhaps expand what their vision is with your own instructional design expertise so that their course becomes greater than they even imagined it to be. And getting there doesn’t necessarily mean, you know, jumping the whole gorge in one jump, you know.

Kelvin: Right. I don’t know who said this originally, but that whole thing that we tend to overestimate what we can get done in the short term, but underestimate what we can get done in the long term.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: I think that’s relevant as a corollary here.

Tom: Absolutely. Alright, so I see the clock ticking and I’m down to my last sort of grounds in my coffee mug. You had teased earlier about KISS—“Keep It Simple
“Starting”—does not mean. And so, why I used an example of just putting a video in your course and calling it “online.”

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: You have some suggestions, I assume?

Kelvin: Yeah, I mean I’ve got just a couple. I don’t want to make you think it’s going to be earth-shattering, but just a couple things that came to mind. First, “keep it simple starting” does not mean lack of intentional design. Like the example you gave, “here’s this one video” or what we might call “shovelware:” just kind of put the content in there. The online filing cabinet thing. Whatever the easiest thing is.

Tom: “I’ll just put my PowerPoints up and here’s three PDFs” and yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah, that’s not real intentional. That’s not real design-oriented. That’s not what we’re talking about here.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: *(Old man voice)* “They told me on that podcast to keep it simple starting, so I did—” No. And it also doesn’t mean, we said keep it simple starting, not keep it simple forever, right?

Tom: Right. It’s a coral reef!

Kelvin: *(laughing)* That’s right! It grows!

Tom: Takes years and then it grows into this fantastic ecosystem.

Kelvin: So, it doesn’t mean never iterating or never seeking to improve or never seeking to innovate. We want good. Good growth. We should always be trying to improve, you know, as a living—like the coral reef—a living organism. With your online courses.

Tom: *(laughing)* That’s right. Cool, alright. Well, maybe that’s as good a place as any to kind of land our plane.

Kelvin: Land our plane.

Tom: We’ll keep our landing simple.

Kelvin: Just going to jump out the door.

Tom: *(laughing)* Oh yeah, that’s right. “We’re here!”

Kelvin: *(laughing)*
Tom: “See ya, folks!” That’s as simple as it gets, so. Alright, let me see if I can take a shot at our bottom line.

Kelvin: OK.

Tom: So, “Keep It Simple Starting,” what we are calling the more positive KISS principle—

Kelvin: Because you know the other one.

Tom: We all know the other one, yeah. Not that it’s profane. It’s just not positive.

Kelvin: That’s right.

Tom: It is great advice for instructors and instructional designers pursuing digital course design. Starting with the essentials and iterating over time will make for a more successful experience for all concerned. Most of all, our wonderful students.

Kelvin: That’s right. I think that’s right. Seems…that’s been my experience.

Tom: Yeah. Absolutely.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Cool.

Kelvin: Alright. Well, thank you, Tom. Thanks for recommending the coffee and—

Tom: *(laughing)* Thanks for brewing.

Kelvin: Hey, I’m happy to! Yeah.

Tom: Thanks to Courtney Scott and the whole team out there at the University of Colorado for the coffee.

Kelvin: That’s awesome. Well, until next time for TOPcast, I’m Kelvin.

Tom: And I’m Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.