TOPcast Episode 60: Growing [As] Leaders in Our Online Learning Field

Narrator: What will your future look like? The job you do today could be different than the jobs of tomorrow. Some see this as a challenge. At UCF, we see opportunity, a chance for you to grow your knowledge, and strengthen your skills from anywhere life might take you. With in-demand degree programs and resources for your success, UCF Online can help you prepare for the future and all the possibilities that come with it.

(musical transition)

Kelvin Thompson: From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom Cavanagh: And I'm Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And you're listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hey, Tom.

Tom: Hey, Kelvin. Think you've got a slight maybe edge of a cold, but it's giving you that good radio voice.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* "This is CNN."

Tom: Yeah!

(both laughing)

Kelvin: And now we're gonna get sued. Somebody—

Tom: Somebody, yeah.

Kelvin: Either Darth Vader or the network—one or the other—suing us. I hope not.

Tom: I have a good friend who's a senior executive at CNN, so hopefully he wouldn't sue us.

Kelvin: Well, he wouldn't sue you.

(both laughing)

Tom: That's right! That Thompson guy! Sue him!

Kelvin: *(laughing)* I don't know anything about it. I showed up, but the guy starts talking. I can neither confirm nor deny anything. That's right.

Tom: Alright, so, while we were introing here, you have done our obligatory coffee pour.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: And thank you for that, because you just poured it for me, and I guess I will do the obligatory "Kelvin, what's in the thermos?"

Kelvin: Well, Tom, today's coffee comes to us from TOPcast listener Jason Johnston, Director of Teaching and Learning in the College of Social Work at the University of Kentucky. Jason shares with us his "favorite local coffee blend" from Drinklings Coffee and Mugs. I love that company name—

Tom: Coffee and Mugs?

Kelvin: Coffee and Mugs. Really, they sell a lot of mugs. You can see on the website. They have so many mugs, they have classifications of mugs—

Tom: Oh my gosh.

Kelvin: —which is kinda cool. And they've got the coolest URL ever. It's drinklings.coffee.

Tom: Hah!

Kelvin: I think I'm gonna get a "dot coffee" domain.

Tom: That's pretty good. Yeah.

Kelvin: I think I'm gonna get…It's pretty awesome. And they're in Wilmore, Kentucky. And we are drinking—from Drinklings Coffee and Mugs—the "Oxford Blend," Jason's favorite. So, you and our listeners might recognize the homage in the name of the roaster and the blend to the famous group of writers, "the Inklings."

Tom: It's the first thing I thought of.

Kelvin: —who met at Oxford in the early 20th century to encourage one another in their writing. And the group included Dorothy Sayers (at least peripherally). They're pretty much a bunch of old white dudes, right? But they had some women in that were in their circle peripherally, at least, and C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien are probably the most famous luminaries among them.

Tom: Yep, yep.

Kelvin: And it's my understanding at the Drinklings café that the espresso machine is named "The Lord Elrond."

Tom: *(laughing)* OK.

Kelvin: In terms of the coffee itself, Randy the Roaster tells us—or at least tells Jason—that the beans are a blend of Columbian and Sumatra, and he says, "the Sumatra is darker and earthier, while the Columbian is roasted to a light profile to give it

some sweetness and floral notes." So, how's the coffee, and do you get the connection to today's episode?

Tom: It is really good. It's a bit strong, although maybe that's the way you brewed it.

Kelvin: Maybe so.

Tom: But it's good. So, the connection.

Kelvin: Mmhmm?

Tom: I…

Kelvin: This is gonna be one you don't like. It's more…It's impressionistic. *(laughing)*

Tom: I'm struggling a bit with the connection, so you may have to take me by the hand and lead me through the path of the connection.

Kelvin: Yeah. I was thinking, like, the Inklings, Oxford, Lewis, Tolkien. I mean, they're known for these memorable characters and these roles and just rich story. All of those writers. And they met together as writers to network, to grow, to get better writers. They have these great names, Tolkien especially. Invents, what, languages and some of these names—

Tom: Oh, yeah. He was a linguist.

Kelvin: Yeah, it's amazing. I've read some of the backside of the *Silmarillion*. There's all…You could go to sleep at night reading in the original Elvish, but a lot of…Tolkien especially has a lot of memorable names like, you know, "Kelvin" sounds like it could be in Tolkien, I've often thought.

Tom: *(laughing)* Well, Tom Bombadil is.

Kelvin: See? There you go! See, we've got reason to like Tolkien here on TOPcast. So, I kind of thought that some of that set the stage for an interview that we've had in the can for a while, and that particular interview talked a lot about roles in online learning leaderships and the importance of networking and sharing information with each other to be kind of better together. So, I kinda thought, "Yeah, maybe the Oxford blend from Drinklings would be good for this episode."

Tom: OK, I think I get it now. It was a long way around—

Kelvin: Impressionistic. *(laughing)*

Tom: —but I'm there. OK, so.

Kelvin: Not on the nose.

Tom: *(laughing)* No, but that's OK. And in fact, this particular episode is maybe, you know, the "alpha case," "example one," of why we are doing two episodes a month now.

Kelvin: Uh-huh.

Tom: Because we had mentioned that we have some interviews that we had recorded a while ago and just hadn't gotten to yet, and there are a couple. This being one of them.

Kelvin: They're the worst of the bunch in terms of how long they've been. *(laughing)*

Tom: Yeah, how long. Moss is growing on them, yeah. And it's no fault of the interviewee.

Kelvin: No, no, not at all.

Tom: It was just us and the way we schedule.

Kelvin: Timing and all that.

Tom: Yeah. So, this is an interview that we did with Dr. Kelvin Bentley. And in it, he talks about roles in the online learning world. He talks a lot about the network—and we'll reflect on this, maybe, after the interview—and how important your personal network is. *(laughing)* And, as you said, memorable names in—

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: —in Tolkien and Lewis' books. Yeah, his name is Kelvin.

Kelvin: That's right. What a wonderful name. I don't see Kelvin too much, except for the meetings of the Kelvin Society—

Tom: *(laughing)*

Kelvin: —when we get together now and again. I think you and Kelvin Bentley have spent more time together than he and I have, but we have more of a social media, email relationship, I think.

Tom: Well, you're both, you know, big *Doctor Who* fans.

Kelvin: That's true. We've compared *Doctor Who* collections before and so forth, but he's done more, I think—looking at pictures that he's shared on Twitter with his kids—more *Doctor Who* events and stuff. I haven't done any of that. But I collect *Doctor Who* stuff. And I watch *Doctor Who* and read *Doctor Who*. That's true. You wanna do a formal—

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: What we call the "introduction" of Dr. Bentley?

Tom: Sure. And we really appreciated him taking the time to talk to us. So, Dr. Kelvin Bentley is Vice President of Learning Strategy at Six Red Marbles. It's an educational content and services provider, sort of consulting. At the time we recorded this interview, he was the AVP of Digital Learning and Innovation at the University of West Florida. There's one brief reference to West Florida in the interview and that may be why. So, that'll tell you how long it's been on the shelf, that he's actually moved positions since we recorded this. *(laughing)*

Kelvin: But much of what you guys talk about is timeless. *(laughing)*

Tom: It is, and we wouldn't be airing it now if it wasn't still relevant, and Kelvin's got a lot of good things to say and I think he's always an interesting person to talk to. So, I did interview him back during the OLC Accelerate 2018 conference.

Kelvin: Was that 2018? Not 1918.

Tom: 2018, yes. We've lapped it. So, yeah. And we speak broadly about the growth of leadership positions in online ed. and that being sort of a predictor of more strategic emphasis within higher education.

Kelvin: Anything else you wanna say about it before we cut to it and listen to it?

Tom: I think he's a pretty good follow on social media. I mentioned his social media presence a little bit in the interview, and I would encourage everybody to follow him because he posts articles that are interesting, he has interesting opinions. I may not agree with everything that he says, but I think he's always thoughtful about it. And then, as we said, he posts a lot of jobs. I think that's a service to the community that he provides, so, you know.

Kelvin: We'll put all of his profiles on the show notes page.

Tom: In the show notes. Yeah. Definitely look him up. So, I guess through the magic of podcast time-travel, here's our interview with Kelvin Bentley.

(musical transition)

Tom: Well, Kelvin, thank you for being on TOPcast.

Kelvin Bentley: Thank you.

Tom: Alright, so there's a lot of things that we could talk about.

(both laughing)

Kelvin B: Yes.

Tom: But what I thought we could talk about is my stalking you on social media. *(laughing)* And one of the things that I've really appreciated about you—you're very active on social media—is kind of a service you provide to the community. You seem to have your finger on the pulse of a lot of activity when it comes to various opportunities across the sector at universities, at colleges, at community colleges. Sometimes even in the corporate vendor space! And you share those. You say, "Hey, look! Great opportunity for somebody." I was just sort of curious if you've noticed any trends? Any sort of new kinds of roles or positions just based on your kind of scan of the environment?

Kelvin B: Yes. It's been interesting. I mean, I think instructional designers continue to, you know, that position continues to be something that I think many schools are posting for now more than ever.

Tom: Based on our challenges in hiring instructional designers, there's a lot of competition.

Kelvin B: Yeah. There's just lots of positions, and I would say that there's definitely more director level positions, too, for distance or online learning initiatives. I'm also seeing that there's some schools that are elevating that director's role, right? So, you're seeing like assistant VPs, Vice Presidents, Vice Provosts—online learning, digital learning—and yeah, it's interesting. Sometimes, one of the things that I like to do—and I'm not, you know, actively looking for a new position or anything—but one of the things I've done over the years is just I'll go to HigherEdJobs.com or Edsearch.com, these sites, and it's a great way to kind of, again, just see, "Yeah, what is out there?" And then not just looking at the titles, but then actually looking at the job descriptions and getting a sense of how schools are strategically planning to either enter the space of online learning or maybe it's a re-org of how they've been doing it all along. And so that gives me a better sense, to some extent, of the ecosystem. You know, what schools are doubling down on online? Maybe there are some schools that are actually getting in the game for the first time because they're like, "Oh, we have to catch up because we've never been in the game, so now we have to jump in." So, yeah, it's been interesting to track that.

Tom: Yeah, and it seems like in some ways it's a bit of a bellwether/weathervane of what's happening in the broader higher education space. As we see more online and digital learning kinds of positions being posted and the variety of these kinds of positions, would you agree that you think there's more strategic emphasis being placed on the kind of work that we do by institutions and senior leadership?

Kelvin B: Yeah, I think so. Unfortunately, I think there's still a gap within higher ed. in terms of really fully understanding what it takes to fully support an online learning initiative. So, I think some people simply think, "Well, we're just gonna put some courses up. We'll have a nice, lean, flat organization. We'll have some instructional designers, a multimedia person. We have the learning management system. We'll just get some faculty together and throw some courses." So, I think the plan may not be strategic enough. I think a lot of times we don't have the wrap-around services we need to support the students. So, it'll be interesting just

to see, you know, will there be more even like success coach positions, right? I mean I think we're seeing it in pockets within those institutions that are doing some cool things, like around competency-based education and maybe adopting approaches to helping students in those programs. But my hope is that schools will really take the time to actually think about the entirety of, you know…thinking about the student and thinking about, "OK, we need courses, programs, certificates, but we also need wrap-around services: tutoring, proctoring, accessibility services, and making sure that all of that is in place." I think the big challenge for us, as we know, is that online learning continues to be a bolt-on versus ingredients added in. And it'll be interesting just to see how schools over time figure out how can it be less of a bolt-on and how can we maybe reimagine online learning for the next 5 or 10 years? Not just in terms of the people, but then the data that we collect so you actually make the best programs we can for our students.

Tom: That's interesting, that observation about it being a bolt-on because in some cases, I think that's true. But in other places it's maybe not, where it's maybe more integrated into the kind of core operations of the university. I wonder if there's a divide between those schools that are working with an OPM partner versus those that have built all that capacity internally. And, is the skillset different—I mean, I'm probably asking you to speculate a little bit—but is the skillset different for somebody who might be managing an operation that is mostly outsourced through an OPM versus somebody who is managing an operation that they've built all that capacity internally?

Kelvin B: Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, I guess it depends on, again, what heavy lifting is the OPM actually assisting with, right? So, if it's marketing, you know, things that maybe someone who normally would not, you know, someone who's overseeing an online learning initiative. Like, you know, for me, I don't have deep experience in terms of marketing and kind of doing that part of it. For me it's been much more operational in terms of working with faculty, instructional design support, finding services for students like tutoring and proctoring. I've piloted those and ramped up those types of services. So, yeah, I think now because the OPM market is, you know, now you can get certain things unbundled. So now, maybe you don't need everything that an OPM provides. Maybe you just need the marketing piece because now you have the internal capacity to do the instructional design pieces. So, I think it does depend, in terms of the services you're working with.

Tom: Yeah. I know, just speaking personally, I've learned a lot about marketing.

(both laughing)

Kelvin B: Yeah.

Tom: That I didn't know previously. So, I wonder, as you look toward the future of the space and the kinds of trends that we're observing, do you think that there are particular kinds of skills that, if somebody is aspiring to one of these positions, that they might want to work on to develop and to go get professional training or talk to mentors about or something?

Kelvin B: Yeah. I mean, I think one of the foundational skills continues to be—I mean, I had an opportunity to be a program coordinator of a fully online degree program in psychology, which is my discipline back in 2000/2001. So, in that experience I learned that really one of the key things you have to do is that you have to be very open to collaborating with people across the university. So, you have to have very strong communication skills, very strong skills around project management, being able to follow-up with folks, especially with those who don't report to you because online learning is big and bulky at times and so you have to do your best to kind of manage different facets of it that don't necessarily report to you but are important to the ongoing success of online learning. I would say another thing is just finding out what is out there and doing the research, right? So, talking to colleagues about good practices, getting a better sense of lessons learned. One thing that I still think would help our field is if we could have more transparency about how our online learning operations are actually set up and what we're learning over time, and that information is not very easy to get access to. Like, I could talk with you or Kelvin Thompson or other folks here in the state about what you're up to, but wouldn't it be great to actually have more direct access to certain bits of information, such that you can then more readily use that in your role locally to make changes and to grow out your program or do some things differently? But I think in terms of other skills, I think part of it is just being perhaps more knowledgeable about data. For me, graduate school was the early to late 90s, and so even kind of understanding how you could use data to make better statistical…you know, using statistics to make decisions that have an impact on your programs. So, I think that type of professional development is very helpful. So, those are some things that I think about as you evolve. But I think also it's just being—what does being a leader mean, right? So, being sensitive to the fact that you are trying to grow your program, but then also trying to manage your team. So, I think a good director or someone in a leadership role has to balance being a manager versus also being out front to make things happen and trying to understand that balance. And part of that is just, again, like you said, having a good mentor, but then also collaborating with folks, meeting people at conferences and kind of finding out how they do it. But you have to, I would say, if you're really aspiring to be a leader in this space, you have to beat the bushes a bit. So, if you're a little bit more introverted, for example, just finding ways to make that connection. Even if it's a simple email or a short phone call, but doing that more often every year to kind of connect and grow out your network of folks who do similar work to you.

Tom: You made a couple of really interesting points there. One was that the kind of level or types of leadership skills. I didn't hear you once say, "You need to understand how to create a discussion board in the LMS." If you look at some of the research that's come out of places like EDUCAUSE where they talk about CIO leadership skills, not once does it say how to configure a data network, you know? It's all about relationship building, your communication, all those kinds of soft-skills, leadership skills, because the technical stuff seems like it's something that you can learn and/or hire really good experts to support you if you're in a leadership position. And I find that the further I go in my career, the less competent I get in the LMS.

(both laughing)

Tom: Which is not great to admit publicly, but that is one reason why I try to occasionally teach, because it forces me to at least know, "OK, this update changed this button in the LMS." And so, I can at least have some credibility with the faculty I talk to. Another point you made that I thought was really interesting is this kind of opaqueness, this lack of transparency in how online and other kind of digital learning organizations are structured. I think that's a really good point, and you're not alone in making it. If you look at some of the research that—like Eric Frederickson has done—he had a hard enough time just figuring out who was in charge because there's no uniformity in title, and if there's no uniformity in title, you know there's no uniformity in structure. And I wonder if we're approaching a time where maybe there will be some more consistency. So, if you looked at any, say university, and you looked at their academic affairs department, they would all kind of look the same at least as far as the kinds of positions and jurisdictions that each of those people in authority might have, whether it's…You've got a provost, and under the provost you've got maybe like a graduate dean, an undergraduate dean, and you've got college deans and maybe a vice provost of something or other, and you kind of go, "OK, these all look the same." And if you share that outside your institution, everybody kind of knows what you're talking about. I don't know if we're there yet in online learning. Do you think we're coming to a point where there will be more consistency, or is that diversity good?

Kelvin B: Yeah, I mean I…All of the above. I think the diversity makes sense, because we all understand that our institutions are different, our missions, our history is slightly different, especially the history in terms of how online learning has evolved at our institutions. But I do think that there is an opportunity. You know, I was in a previous meeting a couple of days ago where we were talking about could we actually develop a profile that schools could actually, you know, online indicate, "Hey, I'm from the University of West Florida. I help to oversee online learning. Here are some key things you should know about how we're structured." Right? "That online learning is decentralized across all of our colleges and I work with deans to do such and such." Even having that bit of information, perhaps within certain member organizations like OLC or WCET or EDUCAUSE where we already have a groundswell of schools that are very interested in sharing ideas, and so why couldn't we create that profile opportunity, right? Where we could easily search for schools like us and really kind of understand how online learning is supported organizationally and the types of tools we're using, the types of projects we're piloting. Why couldn't we do that? Again, it's 2018, and so I mean, we find out a lot about ourselves. As you mentioned, I follow you, I follow many other people to find out about different opportunities or grants and things like that. So, there is kind of this transparency from time to time through microblogging, but I think we need something a little bit more structured and—

Tom: It's more personal networks.

Kelvin B: Yeah, yeah. More personal networks, but if we could find a way where we can…I don't even want to call it benchmarking, because that seems almost like kind of too rigid or too official, but wouldn't it be great just to learn where our field is going and to better understand the ecosystem? You don't have to share

necessarily everything about what you're doing. Maybe there's some things you're gonna keep very close to your vest, but if we could find an opportunity to kind of track where is competency-based education right now? Who are the people who are piloting it or scaling it? Who are the people doing adaptive learning, right? We hear about your institution a lot, we hear about a couple others, but what about more of those schools in the middle that may be already piloting, and we could learn a lot of cool things from them as well. So, that's where I hope we can go. Maybe we can find a venture capitalist to help us fund some of that, or maybe some of the member organizations could do that. Maybe WCET, any other groups that are doing the Digital Learning Network, Every Learner Everywhere. Hopefully that will come out of some of their work as well.

Tom: Yeah. Well, that's a utopian vision. And with that, that's not a bad place to stop. So, on behalf of Kelvin and myself, thank you, Kelvin, for being on TOPcast.

Kelvin B: Thank you. Appreciate it.

(musical transition)

Kelvin: Well, that was your interview, Tom, with Dr. Kelvin Bentley.

Tom: It was. *(laughing)*

Kelvin: And we appreciate Kelvin's patience and—

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: —waiting this long for it to air.

Tom: He was probably wondering if we lost the file. *(laughing)*

Kelvin: "Hello? What happened?"

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah. But I thought, really, somewhat timeless content. Really good general observations and advice, and I mean, maybe it would be less so if we were like 10 years out from it or something, but I think we're in the same general era now.

Tom: Well, one interesting thing that struck me listening to that again is the part about the online program management companies—the OPMs—and Kelvin's observation and I think it's true, that OPMs are evolving and they're starting to unbundle their services.

Kelvin: I thought that was good.

Tom: So, instead of having everything included in a fee for service or—I'm sorry—in a rev share, they're now moving to a kind of fee for service—

Kelvin: What do you need?

Tom: Exactly, and you can kind of disaggregate the services a little bit, and that might require a different kind of skillset for the inside leader.

Kelvin: Right.

Tom: You know? You may not need to know everything about marketing, but maybe you do, depending upon what you're buying and what you're building. I thought that was an interesting observation. It might change the leadership profiles, depending upon the context that you're in.

Kelvin: I agree with that. And I thought the general observation that the two of you made about the "weathervane" of growth in positions and diversity of positions, saying something about the "where higher ed. broadly is" in the strategic viewing of online and digital learning or not, depending.

Tom: Yeah, and you can kind of see that at different schools. And I think schools that have online or digital learning leaders moving up in the title hierarchy seem to be making a statement that this is important to us strategically. Just like schools that have the CIO as a vice president or on the cabinet or something, as opposed to a director or an AVP or something that reports three levels down, is making a statement about what IT means to the organization.

Kelvin: I did think Kelvin's several sort of layered comments about the power of networking and sharing, very personally, very broadly, what you refer to as his more "utopian vision" of a more formalized—at scale, en masse—kind of a thing, might be a tall order. But just the power of us connecting to each other and being sort of better together I thought was a wise observation.

Tom: Yeah, and I think it's a great idea. I've actually heard Kelvin talk about that before—more within the state context, when he was in the state university system trying to do something across the state so we could all understand what each other is doing, and if I have a question about X, I can call you and talk about it. I think it's a noble goal. It may be realized through membership organizations, whether that's within a state system or through like an OLC or WCET or something like that.

Kelvin: You've participated—for a while, right? In something that somewhat approximates this kind of a semi-structured informality, the loop-in, the Loop Network or whatever?

Tom: Yeah, the Loop Network. Yeah, I have done that. I've been somewhat remiss of late, but I did participate in a lot of those and I try to when I have time. It's something that EdSurge has done, and it connects leaders to just talk to people that they don't know and expand your network. You know, you always feel weird. It's a 30-minute video blind date, and I've always thought, "Oh, gosh. What am I gonna talk about for 30 minutes?" I imagine other people feel the same way. "I don't know this person." And I've always found the time just flies by and you have a fascinating conversation. I've had it—

Kelvin: Find it valuable.

Tom: I definitely find it valuable. I've learned something. I hope they've learned something. And I've talked to people all over the world. Somebody in England one time I spoke to.

Kelvin: That's cool.

Tom: Yeah, those are great, and if you're not a part of that, I would encourage you to seek it out.

Kelvin: You know, we'll look for web presence, stick it in the show notes as well, and I was inspired by that. I don't know why I haven't participated, but I have a hard enough time just keeping up with people that I know already. So, I started a few months ago—I'm just barely getting started now—keeping some spreadsheets internal to the institution and external of people that I don't want to let it be two, three, four years before I talk to them substantively and try to at least be intentional about reaching out and connecting on some sort of a more frequent basis. Even if it was 30 minutes. Those are applications, you know. You should go and do that, dear listener. Listen to Uncle Kelvin Bentley and take his parental advice there.

Tom: Well, I see the coffee's running low and I'd really like to thank Kelvin for doing the interview and for his patience while it took us this long to actually get it into an episode, but I think it was worth the wait.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree.

Tom: So, maybe I should try and put a bow on it, as we say.

Kelvin: Please do.

Tom: So, if the number and types of new positions in online learning mean anything, this space—digital learning space—is going strong and becoming more strategic as well as potentially growing. However, it's important that we strengthen our personal and professional relationships with colleagues because, as always, we are better and wiser together.

Kelvin: Mmhmm.

Tom: As we've said, if you want to go fast, go alone, and if you want to go far, go together. Thank you, African proverb.

Kelvin: Well, said. That's right. On the wall of the Gates Foundation.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: Can I do one little shameless plug before we sign off?

Tom: Please.

Kelvin: So, here's just a reminder—we don't hit this too often for some reason—just a reminder that for each episode of TOPcast, there is a webpage containing what we might call "read more about it" weblinks related to the content of the episode, and a written transcript of the episode, and a Twitter summary of the salient points of the episode. We might think of that like CliffsNotes from the old days, right? So, if you've been like audio only kind of listeners up until now, check out the content on the website at topcast.online.ucf.edu. and, hey, follow us on Twitter @TOPcastnow. @TOPcastnow.

Tom: I do. I follow it.

Kelvin: Yeah, me too. You know, sometimes you get surprised. "Woah, look at that!"

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: It's exciting. Well, I guess we will sign off and I'll say, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.