TOPcast Episode 61: Beyond the Coronavirus: Continuity of Operations and Online Education

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)
Tom Cavanagh:	From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I'm Tom Cavanagh.
Kelvin Thompson:	And I'm Kelvin Thompson.
Tom:	And you are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast.
Kelvin:	I've heard of that.
Tom:	I've heard of that, too. As I've said before, it's one of my top 10 favorite podcasts.
Kelvin:	*(laughing)*
Tom:	I don't know exactly where it ranks in that order, but—
Kelvin:	It's in there somewhere.
Tom:	It's in there somewhere and I do listen semi-regularly.
Kelvin:	That's right. Yeah, me too. You gotta listen to it to write the show notes.
	(Both laughing)
Tom:	That's right, and as I've said, I will listen to it just to see what stupid thing have I said?
Kelvin:	You know, I'm amazed that it doesn't sound worse.
	(Both laughing)
Kelvin:	I've had that thought.
Tom:	That's true.

Kelvin:	Like, "Oh, this one's gonna be bor—Oh, that's not as bad as I remembered it being!"
Tom:	I know. I think we are pretty harsh critics of ourselves when we record them.
Kelvin:	Yes.
Tom:	And then when I listen to them, I think maybe I'm way too forgiving of myself. *(laughing)*
Kelvin:	Maybe that's it too, you know? Uh yeah. But, hey, I only listen to most podcast episodes once, and if you're doing something else like walking the dog or mowing the grass or driving the car, maybe those little moments are just kind of smoothed over.
Tom:	That's right. Well, if there's one thing I do know about podcasting—
Kelvin:	What is that?
Tom:	—it's a thirsty business, Kelvin.
Kelvin:	*(laughing)* It is a thirsty business. That's true.
Tom:	And from what I hear, there's probably some beverage to help me with that thirsty business.
Kelvin:	Yes, yes there is. Our colleague, by the way—I meant to tell you this—our colleague here in the state of Florida, the executive director of Florida Virtual Campus Distance Learning Student Services area, John Opper, said recently that he thought we ought to have an album where we had different thematic song selections related to digital learning and the LMS. I said, well, we've talked about the "Dulcet Gurgles" Christmas album. It didn't quite make it in 2019, but maybe 2020. *(laughing)*
Tom:	So, our own album. Like, he's talking about our selections or that we would perform?
Kelvin:	Well, I don't know, but he came up with—
Tom:	Heaven help our audience.
Kelvin:	—he came up with a couple of titles which I can't rightly remember right now that were mashups of famous things and LMSes and various digital learning things. So, there may be something to this in the TOPcast store. At least some album art, we ought to come up with at some point.
Tom:	We will see, and thanks, John, for the suggestions.

Kelvin:	*(laughing)* I was like, "Oh, that makes me think he might listen from time to time." That's at least maybe four or five people, maybe.
Tom:	Yeah, I think he does. He's mentioned it to me before.
Kelvin:	That's good. *(pause for sip of coffee)* The pause that refreshes.
Tom:	So, what's in the thermos, Kelvin? What am I drinking?
Kelvin:	Well, this, Tom, is the "House Blend" from Atomic Coffee Roasters in the Boston, Massachusetts area. Atomic Coffee started in 1996, and they like to remind us that "atomic" refers to "a source of vast potential energy with the power to start a chain-reaction," and they pride themselves on being "a catalyst, a spark that attracts and connects people." So, this "House Blend" is a blend of coffees from Nicaragua and Honduras, and the roasters say it is "balanced, milk chocolate, nutty notes with a dry finish. "
Tom:	I get all of that, actually.
Kelvin:	Do you? That's good.
Tom:	Well, I've also got hazelnut creamer in it.
Kelvin:	*(laughing)* Just add flavor and you, too, can get the notes.
Tom:	That's right. I'm getting milk chocolate and nutty notes, and it is balanced. It's good. I like it. It's atomically good.
Kelvin:	Atomically good. I like the name of the roaster and I don't know what that makes them. There's a whole thing: there's first wave, second wave, third wave, coffee roasters. That might make them second wave, then. '96 is a long time. So, you like the coffee?
Tom:	Mm-hmm.
Kelvin:	I'm gripping the table for the, "How do you like the connection?"
Tom:	*(laughing)* Well, I'm not exactly sure I get the connection, so I'm gonna go with the "vast potential energy with the power to start a chain-reaction," so…Maybe? Something like that?
Kelvin:	Sure, yeah. That's good. I was kind of thinking along those lines as well. I mean, "since 1996." That kind of resonated with me because that's kind of our operations here at UCF: started in '96. Then, the catalytic power of putting stuff online, you know. I think there's something there. It affects the way we think about teaching and learning. So, I thought, "Well, that's maybe a barely tenuous connection that would lead us into today's topic!" *(laughing)*
Tom:	We don't need much. *(laughing)*

Kelvin:	I'm looking for something here, because we said that we were gonna be discussing the continuity of operations planning and the role that online education can play. So, I thought, "Well, there's some catalytic power in there somewhere."
Tom:	Yeah, and, you know, at the time we're recording this, the world is dealing with the outbreak of the Wuhan coronavirus and—
Kelvin:	Scary stuff.
Tom:	—by the time this is first released, that will not have been resolved. And it's not the first time we've had some sort of a pandemic that has—
Kelvin:	Was it the H1-V…What was that a few years back?
Tom:	Yeah, there was the bird flu. There was SARS.
Kelvin:	Yes. So, we've seen these kind of health things come up, for sure.
Tom:	Yeah, we have. I have a note here. The University of Hong Kong, in 2003, had shifted to distance learning solutions to keep the university community active due to SARS, which was affecting them at the time.
Kelvin:	Wow. SARS was that far back? Wow.
Tom:	Yeah.
Kelvin:	Goodness gracious, I'm old. And that's early. That was pretty neat that they…2003.
Tom:	Yeah, it was. Definitely. They did what they had to do. I don't know a lot about that other than that reference. So, it's that current event that has been the catalyst for us to kind of have this conversation.
Kelvin:	Again, with the catalyst.
Tom:	*(laughing)* That's right. But it could be precipitated by any number of things, and here in the state of Florida, annually we deal with hurricanes.
Kelvin:	Yep, boy do we.
Tom:	And inevitably, every year we lose multiple days, and usually we fare better than our friends on the coasts whenever a hurricane is striking. So, hurricanes, other weather events, and how can online learning be used to mitigate any sort of down time that might be associated with that? I remember when I was at another university, on Christmas Day, there was a tornado—
Kelvin:	Oh my gosh.

Tom:	—that went right down the center of campus and destroyed our administration building. It was uninhabitable after that. It eventually had to get raised and rebuilt. There was a whole brand new, beautiful one there.
Kelvin:	Was that like '97, '98? Something like that. Or was that afterwards?
Tom:	It was after that, yeah.
Kelvin:	I remember a late-year, early-year—
Tom:	It was early 2000's, but fortunately it was on Christmas Day. There was nobody on campus. So, it was just physical damage. People weren't damaged.
Kelvin:	Wow.
Tom:	And then occasionally, here, I have discovered that our department is on other department's continuity of operations plans.
Kelvin:	It's good to be thought of.
Tom:	Yeah, so, you know. If the health and—
Kelvin:	It's like being written into a grant. *(laughing)*
Tom:	That's right, like, "Hey, surprise! Here's what you're gonna do." An example being something like if, "Hey, the Health and Public Affairs building, should that burn down?" Which almost happened one time when there was a candle lit in an office.
Kelvin:	True story. Can't make this stuff up.
Tom:	So, should that happen, "Well, we'll just go online! We'll just put everything online that was taught there." It's like, well, it would be good if we knew about that so we could be a part of your plan. So, online learning has long been a solution, a mitigation strategy. Whether it's some sort of pandemic threat or it's a natural disaster. It's much better to be proactive and plan for it than to kind of scramble and react to it after the fact. And that's kind of what we wanted to talk about.
Kelvin:	Yeah, that's right. So, I think we're gonna be in search of some generalizable principles that have some more timeless application, but even though we're dealing with one of these health things right now, and we could be talking about if the institution shuts down. We've given that example. Or, in the case of the health thing, sometimes it's more of everybody's spooked. I remember that was the deal with the bird flu. It's like, you might have faculty or students out of commission. What can you do to keep people engaged without them interacting with each other and breathing the air?

Tom:	Yeah, which is actually the case in Wuhan, China, right now. We have a colleague here who's from Wuhan and she told me that her relatives—she's got cousins and folks who are still living there—they're all quarantined. They can't leave their home.
Kelvin:	Oh wow.
Tom:	So, they can't go to school. So, how would you continue and not lose the semester or whatever if you're in that situation? Now, obviously that's a very extreme situation, but there are people in the world right now dealing with that.
Kelvin:	Yeah. So, generalizable principles, not just one-off but concretely grounded. We'll try to talk through some of those things. You kind of laid one out there already, I think, which is do or have it done to you. You're advocating for taking some initiative, do some thinking, do some communicating with others, especially if you find out that you're on their plans. *(laughing)*
Tom:	Yeah, absolutely. But also think about the institution. Honestly, there are few places in the country that don't have something, right? So, North Dakota may not get hurricanes, but you sure do get blizzards. Right? You could be snowed in for a couple weeks, even, depending upon some crazy event that might happen. So, any number of things could come up and you might ask yourself, "is this a plan that will get us through the last month of the semester?" Or, "is this a plan that will sustain us for some interim period until we can get back on our feet?" I think both have their place. Some of it might involve an inventory of what you currently have access to. Like, do you have a lecture capture system? Do you have some sort of collaboration system, whether it's like Zoom or Adobe Connect or whatever it might be? You know, Blackboard Collaborate, something that could quickly be used to deploy at scale and have faculty even just lecture online if you had to do that quickly. And if that was going to be one of your solutions, you ought to plan for that now and have some training in the can and some stuff that you could press a button and launch on a website or something.
Kelvin:	Because otherwise you're talking about going from a cold start, right?
Tom:	Exactly, and at that point you might not have access to resources, right? Because you might not be allowed on campus or you can't get to campus for whatever the case might be.
Kelvin:	Right, like I can think, in our case and I know this is the case for a number of institutions, but not all, we happen to have LMS accounts set up for all course sections every term. It's helpful in terms of our Title IV financial aid funding confirmation of academic engagement, but we have those. Of course not everybody uses them substantively, but they exist, which is a whole lot easier to use as the basis for something else more ongoing than if you had to say, "alright, well we only had 100 sections with LMS access. Now we need to double that or triple that or quadruple that. How do we do that? How do we inform the faculty? How do we inform the students?" Even though you're gonna try to keep it afloat, it takes you weeks just to…You don't want that. That's not helpful.

Tom:	Yeah. And maybe this would be a good spot to talk about a couple of best practices. So, the Sloan Consortium has published a special report—or published it several years ago—about something they call "The Sloan Semester." Now, I'll talk about what that is in a moment, but as sort of a post-script to that special report, they do offer some advice, which, I think, is consistent with what you and I were just talking about. So, the first is develop an academic emergency plan as you develop your facility plan. So, what is your academic resiliency plan? This is something that the state of Florida is dealing with. I participated in a summit this year that the State University System convened at the University of Florida to talk about this across the system. They brought in someone who was a faculty member at the University of North Carolina Wilmington who had dealt with hurricanes and had done some amazing simulations and planning associated with future hurricanes that might strike their campus. So, have a plan. It's not just about, "what do you do with the students?" Like if it's a natural disaster or something. It's also about how do you teach them? What do you do with the faculty? Establish and have ready online repositories of courses, or—and I might add to that—other institutional instructional assets like a lecture capture system or some sort of a quick way to do lectures online. Number three: develop a plan for reestablishing institutional websites fast.
Kelvin:	Right.
Tom:	So, how do you get the word out? How do you facilitate communications? How do you let people know what the plan is if they've not been part of planning?
Kelvin:	Like a real simple concrete example of that we've had in place here for years is there is a virtual switch that if an emergency comes up, an alternate version of the university website's homepage goes up with real prominent emergency messaging, and that's all very tightly coordinated among a number of offices, including us with the LMS. We kind of reiterate—
Tom:	And I would say make sure it's mobilized—
Kelvin:	Right.
Tom:	—because that's where most people are going to be in a natural disaster. On some sort of mobile device.
Kelvin:	That's right.
Tom:	Number four: develop a set of guiding policies and obtain policy commitments. You may need to change policies.
Kelvin:	That's true.
Tom:	There was a time when I would get the question, "Well, when the university shuts down because of a hurricane, do we stop our online courses? Because they can keep running, and we've got students who aren't in Orlando." We actually had to have a discussion about that. Now, obviously it was a while ago. We've had good policy in practice for a while. But the answer here is, yes, the university

	is shut down. And that includes our online students. So, if you're in Alaska, you get a break because your faculty are home boarding up their houses. It's about life and safety first, right?
Kelvin:	But that doesn't mean that you shut off access.
Tom:	No, because our LMS is hosted in the cloud in another state, right? So, the courses are, presumably, are gonna keep running and be available, but we need to make sure that it's communicated to the academic community—the students and faculty—that the university's closed.
Kelvin:	Because there are some maybe counterintuitive aspects of that. "Well, does it really matter?" We've got to think it through, be deliberate, be clear up-front.
Tom:	Right. And every course is designed in a different way and some are gonna have adaptive release where it's gonna be on a weekly basis and some you can just run. You have to manage policy in the aggregate, not in the specific.
Kelvin:	That's right.
Tom:	Number five: design an academic buddy system in which your institution can partner with another institution and formulate some sort of a plan that if our university goes down, we're gonna come to you for HR support or for IT support or maybe you can help us with your instance of your LMS or something.
Kelvin:	We've seen versions of that with the New Orleans area, with Puerto Rico, with several cases I can think of.
Tom:	And then their last one is don't hide it.
	(Both laughing)
Tom:	Once an institution has developed a disaster recovery business continuity plan, you need to make it known, right?
Kelvin:	*(whispering)* Shh! Don't tell anybody!
Tom:	Make sure people know about it.
Kelvin:	That's funny.
Tom:	Even though these were written several years ago, I think they still hold up. I think its really good advice.
Kelvin:	So, we'll put a link to that report if we can in the show notes. At least those recommendations. That'll be a good source.
Tom:	So, should I say a word or two about "The Sloan Semester?"

Kelvin:	Yeah! Why don't you?
Tom:	So, the Sloan Consortium—maybe I'll start there—is the predecessor organization of the Online Learning Consortium. It was started with some grant money from the Sloan Foundation, and the Sloan Consortium, at the time of Hurricane Katrina, stepped in with some grant funding and created this thing called "The Sloan Semester" for institutions that were impacted by Hurricane Katrina. Mostly in southeastern Louisiana. Schools like Tulane and Xavier and Loyola, but more than just them. Everybody in that area. Their students scattered, right? Because New Orleans was flooded and so they had to go to other places and the semester had just started. If I remember, that was like in September, maybe August. It was early in the semester when Katrina hit, and their classes had begun, and they had paid and everything. So, people had to get out. So, what the Sloan Consortium did is they set up a policy and an infrastructure so that the students could complete the courses they had already paid for at the institutions where they were registered and do it online through partner schools. The idea would be at no tuition cost to them. It was covered by grant funding, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation subsidized the costs. They provided grants in the form of $2500 for 11 or more enrolled students per section. $1500 for 6-10, $1000 for 3-5, and $500 for 1 or 2 enrollments per section. And the Sloan Consortium managed that process. So, it ran from October 10th, 2005, and it ended January 6th, 2006. At the end of it, Sloan Semester offered 1,345 no-cost, fully online, accredited, accelerated courses from 153 different Sloan-C institutions.
Kelvin:	It's noble work.
Tom:	It really is. It enrolled more than 1,700 hurricane-affected students and filled more than 3,000 seats in both undergrad and grad level courses. And it's an example where online learning kind of came to the rescue, real early. Now, it did involve some grant funding and an organization that was willing to stand it up, and this little special report that they put together—I encourage you to read it, because it's really fascinating. It goes into a lot of the details and the challenges and how they overcame some of those challenges and lessons learned.
Kelvin:	Again, we'll put that in the show notes.
Tom:	But, I think as an example of how online learning can be deployed to, "Here's how we're gonna finish the semester," and leverage the power of the network. I think it's a terrific example.
Kelvin:	That's right. And then the "buddy system" would be kind of a way to proactively build on that within an institution's own sphere of influence.
Tom:	Right. And if you're part of a system, which most schools are. Maybe if you're some sort of a private independent, it's tougher, but you could be part of some other larger organization.
Kelvin:	Consortium or something.

Tom:	Yeah, exactly or some independent college organization or something. There is a network of sorts that you ought to have a conversation about to kind of build in this kind of resiliency.
Kelvin:	I think that's a really good thing, especially if you're really badly affected. Your institution is shut down or out of business for a bit. There are, of course, other things. Like you've said, like using your video lecture-capture platform or the LMS or something that is less drastic.
Tom:	Right, yeah. You had another example that you wanted to talk about, too, right?
Kelvin:	Well, what I really wanted to say, within the context of rapidly putting stuff online, which totally makes sense to me. Like you said a couple times: lecture. How can we quickly deploy lecture online?
Tom:	And, again, that's in the context of how do we finish the semester?
Kelvin:	Of course, that's right. Which I think is a great thing, right? You want to think, "How can I be as non-disruptive, assure continuity as rapidly and smoothly as possible?" And it's an opportunity—back to that catalyzing effect that we talked about—because maybe that would bring into the fore some of the first thinking that some departments or colleges or faculty even do with online, right? The folks who are already doing it, they can do it, right? It's the folks who haven't done it.
Tom:	Right. They're probably beyond that level of practice, too.
Kelvin:	That's right, yeah. But I worry a little bit—this is just the dark underside, here—I worry just a little tiny bit. There's like an upside and downside. The upside is, "Yay! We can help people and maybe they'll be more inclined to do some online stuff." The downside is, if it's just sort of this replicating the face-to-face, no interaction, sage-on-the-stage kind of thing, that worries me a little bit, right? We underscore non-intentional design. Again, we've said this before, not that you can't do an intentionally well-designed lecture, but sometimes—
Tom:	But not in an emergency.
Kelvin:	That's right. That's right.
Tom:	Yeah. So, I think you're right. That's a good point, and this is really kind of "any port in a storm." Let's deal with an emergency situation, triage it. This is not about what's the optimal design that we would prefer?
Kelvin:	That's right. And if we can—we had this conversation recently, I think—even what platform do you use or what toolset do you use? Because we were talking about a video lecture capture platform readily deployed versus a web conferencing tool built into our LMS that has, natively, a bit more interaction functionality. So, the very fact that the tools are there to foster interaction might lead to a more interactive experience than just one-way broadcast, let's say. Just to think. To underscore that, Tanya Joosten and her colleague Rachel Cusatis—I

think is how you say her name—had this great little study connecting quality efforts and student success. It's in the Online Learning Journal. I'll give you a quick URL to it. We'll stick it in the show notes. They have this quote here that I love. It says "a strong effort should be made to design online courses rather than move face-to-face materials of a course into the online environment. Design is the most influential measure of instructional characteristics that potentially increases student outcomes." I mean, our listeners will probably say, well duh.

Tom: Duh. Yeah. *(laughing)*

Kelvin: But that is a conclusion toward the end of their research report that I just found is so helpful to say. So, check out the show notes for a link to that study. To me, it just underscores this. "Any port in a storm," but if we can do a little better?

Tom: Which is why you should have some intentional preplanning, right?

Kelvin: Yes. That's correct.

Tom: Have some training. Maybe have some faculty champions that can kind of say, "Look, if we're gonna do this, let's do it as well as we possibly can, given the circumstances."

Kelvin: Absolutely. That is correct.

Tom: Cool. Alright. Anything else we want to say about this topic? I'm sure there's a lot that could be said.

Kelvin: I mean, I guess maybe just to be explicit about something that you said earlier, which is some "surprises" are predictable.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: If you live in Tornado Alley or a hurricane zone or whether you have snow days, this is coming.

Tom: Right, at some point something's gonna happen.

Kelvin: That's right. Then there are other things that are maybe more unfortunate, and so you can plan for those, too. Planning for it upfront is a lot less…It's like when I give myself "plenty of drive-time" to get anywhere in town. I'm a lot less stressed than the people who are doing crazy stuff around me in traffic.

Tom: Don't submit your online assignment at 11:59 on Sunday night.

Kelvin: And then complain about the fact that—

Tom: The internet went out.

Kelvin: That's right.

(Both laughing)

Kelvin: If you plan ahead, you're a lot calmer.

Tom: That's right. Yeah.

Kelvin: A word to the wise.

Tom: Alright. So, maybe I can kind of see if I can put a bow on it here?

Kelvin: Sure.

Tom: Online education professionals like us can play a role in helping our institutions maintain or resume operations when we are faced with various crises. Along the way, there might even be some spinoff benefit to our online initiatives. We can learn a thing or two along the way.

Kelvin: Yeah. Maybe folks will go "that online stuff wasn't as bad as I thought it was gonna be."

Tom: Right, or like it's forcing us to think about good, prepackaged training, so that we could deploy something quickly. That training could be used, potentially, in other stuff.

Kelvin: Right. That's good. Well said.

Tom: Cool. Alright. If you have ideas or have had experience in this area of academic resiliency, in having online courses help to mitigate problems, drop us a line.

Kelvin: TOPcast@ucf.edu or check out the show notes where we have the resiliency project from the State University System of Florida and the "Sloan Semester Report" that Tom talked about at topcast.online.ucf.edu.

Tom: Cool. So, thank you for the coffee.

Kelvin: Mm-hmm.

Tom: Thank you, Atomic Coffee Roasters. *(laughing)* Was trying to get that right.

Kelvin: I hope you don't glow in the dark from now on, Tom.

Tom: No, it was good. I've just finished it. So, from our—until next time— *(laughing)*—What's our line? Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.