TOPcast Episode 63: Field Report #1: Making #RemoteTeaching Happen

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 are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hi Tom.

Tom: Hi Kelvin.

Kelvin: This is weird, right?

Tom: It's a little weird. So, we ought to describe the scene for the listening audience. Usually we're in the "bunker," right?

Kelvin: Mmhmm. So, what's different this time?

Tom: We're not in the bunker.

Kelvin: *(Laughing)* That's true. We're in our own two different remote work—in my case, home—locations.

Tom: Yeah, home for me, too. We have a little "bonus room" over our garage. It's sort of the equivalent of a Florida basement, because if you had a basement in Florida, it would fill up with water.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: So, they're above the garage, and it's a little space I share with the cats.

Kelvin: So, you're basically reporting from the attic?

Tom: Basically, yeah. That's true.

(Both laughing)

Tom: The equivalent of a Florida attic.

Kelvin: And speaking of the Florida-specific architecture, I'm in our "Florida Room," as we say, kind of a bonus room. Enclosed, open, well-lit kind of a room—it makes me happy—it's a happy place; lots of daylight, I like that. So, yes—and we're doing this because we're in this remote-work status because of the ongoing COVID-19 coronavirus here in 2020, if you happen to be time-traveling through podcasting and listening to this at some later date. This is a little time capsule for you.

Tom: Yeah, it's very bizarre. Bizarre times we are living in. One comment about the most recent episode that aired—it was the interview with Tammy Powell—that was recorded before all of this hit, so if you did listen to it and wonder, "Why are they not talking about this?" It's because nobody was talking about this at the time we recorded it. That's how quickly things have moved. It's crazy. So, before we get into all of that, we ought to look in the thermos.

Kelvin: Yeah! Well, so, I did put coffee in the thermos today, but since we're in two different home locations, it is "B.Y.O.C" today, Tom: Bring Your Own Coffee. So, I have coffee in the thermos which I poured for myself in my little mug here, so I'm drinking some leftover Oxford Blend from the roaster with my favorite web address ever: drinklings.coffee. What are you drinking?

Tom: Oh, you would be ashamed of me, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Mmhmm.

Tom: So…Well, I do, typically, every morning—so, this is a little attempt at normalcy in these crazy, non-normal times—I usually have a K-cup—we have a Keurig—and we've got these nice bio-degradable K-cups that we order online, so they're kind of cool. So, I have one that's flavored like sort of a hazelnut that I typically drink, and then I have a decaf and I combined them.

Kelvin: Half-caf.

Tom: So, I made this kind of "mongrel" coffee, and then I put hazelnut creamer in it just to make you extra happy.

Kelvin: *(Laughing)* "Mongrel coffee with hazelnut creamer." Tom in his native habitat.

Tom: Yeah, and I'm enjoying it immensely.

(Both laughing)

Kelvin: OK, sure, alright.

Tom: It's good!

Kelvin: I'm sure it is. Tastes like hazelnut.

Tom: The decaf is to keep me from having heart palpitations if I drink too much coffee.

Kelvin: Yeah, I gotcha.

Tom: It's a decaffeinated French roast. It's quite good. But, also, we're trying to be environmentally conscious, so the bio-degradable K-cups. They have a little screen on them. They're not all plastic.

Kelvin: That's cool. I'll have to look into those. I noted your use of the word "bio-degradable," so people don't beat up on you for the K-cup thing. That's good.

Tom: Yeah, although, I mean I won't say I never do, right? But for these—

Kelvin: Not today.

Tom: —Yeah. We try to be somewhat conscious, I guess.

Kelvin: I gotcha. Well, that's good. Well, if I might, I'll kind of put a button on the coffee connection—that this coffee segment is very appropriate for today's episode because it typifies our current reality and the focus of today's episode. We're carrying on but doing things a bit differently in the face of the COVID-19 coronavirus.

Tom: Yeah. So, I think we are like a lot of schools in that we're remote teaching and we are remote working and our students are remote learning, and oh my gosh, what a disruption. It might be worth a little brief timeline, because the thing that has just struck me about this is just the pace—how quickly things have moved. It was probably not even two weeks ago we started thinking about this. "Maybe something might happen." So, we're recording this on March 20th and, oh my gosh, yeah, it was less than two weeks ago when we said, "You know what? Something might happen. Maybe we ought to build a website for faculty just in case." And then that boulder crested the top of the hill and started picking up speed, because it was shortly thereafter that our Board of Governors made the decision—I guess it was late last Wednesday, the 11th, and today's the 20th—it was late in the afternoon on the 11th when they—

Kelvin: It's been a long month, this week.

Tom: —I know. Every day it's been crazy. I don't even know what day it is, sometimes. They said, "You're going all online. Every university in Florida is going all online," and we happened to be on Spring Break last week, so our faculty weren't even around.

Kelvin: Which I think was a boon for us, right? That Spring Break thing helped us a lot, I think.

Tom: It did, although I'm not sure the faculty would entirely agree, because some of them weren't even here.

Kelvin: That's true.

Tom: So, the direction was—it helped us sort of get up to speed quickly, but there's two sides to the coin—the direction from the state was that we need to go completely online by the 18th. Well, actually, the direction from the state was go online as soon as possible. We, as a university, said the 18th, which was Wednesday. So, basically, we had two days after Spring Break to get everybody up to speed, and we had hundreds and hundreds of sections that were not online that needed to be put online. We had to expand an enterprise video conferencing license that was not at an enterprise level. We had to get everybody organized on how we were going to handle support across the entire division, because not everybody is responsible for support, but they are now. Then, we're literally two days into remote teaching and learning and working, and—knock on wood—so far so good. I've just been totally amazed at how the staff has responded and stepped up. You know, emails flying around at midnight and people in the support thread that we've got in Microsoft Teams, and…I don't know. It's been stressful, crazy, and certainly not anything I would want, but I've also been really gratified at how the team has pulled together. I don't know if you had any impressions on our first couple days of this.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree with that and, again, to be clear, at the time of this recording, we are two days into it. It seems like we've been doing it for about a month or more, but we're two days into it. What we call "Operation Keep Teaching" here at UCF. We found that phrase on Indiana University's website, and like a lot of institutions it looks like, really resonated with us, so "Keep Teaching, Keep Learning, Keep Working." I guess just to comment on this, we spoke about, in episode 61, this idea of teaching operations being disrupted—and that's become a reality, as we've become disrupted by a global health crisis—and our online tools and techniques have been enlisted to ensure instructional continuity. So, just to be clear about this, in this episode and maybe at least once a month in our episodes going forward, in the spirit of commiseration and carrying on, we thought we might share some of our experiences with remote teaching thus far—the good and the bad—and also share some of the experiences of our colleagues with whom we've been interacting, just to help us keep focused on moving forward and staying sane and hopefully improving a little bit. The plan right now is to keep going with our 2020 experiment of two episodes per month, however, for as long as this whole "remote teaching" thing lasts, we'll probably focus in the first episode of the month—that first Monday episode—explicitly on some aspect of this remote reaching thing, and then in the middle of the month—the third Monday episodes—we'll continue to feature our guest interviews. We'll probably comment a little bit in our intro or wrap-up, but we're going to try to have some sort of degree of normalcy in carrying on with the broader topics that are our general focus in this podcast because, you know, life goes on. So, in this first episode in this little "mini-series," we thought we might frame this kind of front lines of remote teaching reflective report around some lessons learned—principles on which we can comment with anecdotes from both our institution and those of others. So, that's all kind of a preamble, if you don't mind.

Tom: Yeah, makes sense. So, where do you want to start?

Kelvin: Well, can I start with—I'll throw it out there. You're probably sick and tired of me saying this, but I just can't say it enough because I don't care if I make people

sick and tired. Here's a principle that I just want to put out squarely: don't confuse short-term, online delivery of face-to-face classes with actual online teaching, and don't let others conflate the two.

Tom: Yeah. Totally agree, and there have been some articles in the press about this, and certainly within our sphere and probably the same sphere of those who listen to this, there's been a lot of Twitter conversation about it. We totally agree that what's happening now in most cases is so—I mean, I described the timeline—in some cases, when faculty came back from Spring Break, they had two days to get, say, four classes up online. Give me a break that you're going to have a super well-thought out, pedagogically rich, interactive online course in two days and do it four times, because that's what your load is that semester. It's just not going to happen. So, we have defaulted to the, "Here's a web conferencing platform. Here's how you use the LMS to do announcements and assignments and create discussions, and just do the best you can. And if you need to just lecture during your normal Tuesday/Thursday 10:00am time slot, do that. Just make sure you record it in case students can't make it for whatever reason." I get it. That's not what we would call the absolute pinnacle of online learning, but it ain't bad, right?

Kelvin: Sure, I agree with that. Like you, I've seen a lot of stuff on Twitter. I think I made a tweet on this "theme" a couple of weeks ago and I think it's like the most-viewed tweet I've ever made, I think—and, you know, a lot of people chime in on that. We have our little bit of snobbery, Tom, now and again. There are some people who are like really into, "Well, we need better terminology," and then some people are like, "Well, our field has well-defined terminology." We've talked before about, "Hey, our field—we have so many different names for things—it isn't that well-defined, but sure." There are journal articles and there are textbooks, but you know what? Just because we have terms neatly defined in our inward-facing, insular journal articles and textbooks, don't expect the public or senior institutional leaders or government officials to get it. As we've talked about in past episodes, here, we have to speak plainly about the differences between robust online teaching and learning and our current "emergency practices." We need language that communicates.

Tom: Well, and you've been really good—you've had much better discipline about this than I have—about referring to what we're doing now as "remote delivery of instruction," which is the official terminology from the state and the university, as opposed to calling it "online learning."

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Some sort of differentiator between the two. And I do get my hackles up a little bit when I see articles that are speculating with, "Well, this'll be a great opportunity now to just see if online learning is any good," and like…no.

Kelvin: "Noooooooo!" *(laughing)*

Tom: No, it's not. That just infuriates me. It's like, no, this is a great experiment and there's probably very rich research opportunities in here—and Patsy Moskal and

I have actually talked about this, and she is working up some stuff right now to see what we can assess and evaluate and learn.

Kelvin: But not efficacy research.

Tom: Not efficacy research, right. No, and I think to imply that this is, "Well, this will definitely tell us one way or the other if this online learning thing is any good" shows such ignorance.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: I think it exposes whoever is saying that as somebody who's really not in this world.

Kelvin: It's the MOOC thing again on steroids.

Tom: Yes, yes. I was thinking about MOOCs, too. Yeah. Thinking that was going to solve everything.

Kelvin: "That's online learning!" Well…it's something. *(laughing)* Can I mention this one egregious example that we got from an anonymous TOPcast listener, because I was just flabbergasted by it? The listener isn't anonymous to us, but just to protect the guilty—name and institution withheld. At this listener's institution, "Distance education personnel are not allowed to communicate directly with faculty for fear that their efforts might actually influence faculty to, maybe later, teach online." As the listener says, "The result is that many faculty are unaware that we are able to get faculty free Pro Zoom accounts, Canvas course shells, online workshops for these tools, etc." That's about the most ludicrous thing I've heard amidst all of this.

Tom: Yeah, you shared that with me when I came in and I was stunned. It seems to be such a small-minded "trees instead of the forest" approach that I've heard of in a long time and I feel for that particular listener. We're with you in spirit and wish there was something we could do. But I do think that's crazy because, I mean, right here, we've got all kinds of policies and processes and procedures, and where it makes sense to stick to them to insure a certain level of quality or rigor or to protect information security or something—because the last thing you need is to just try to be so accommodating that you create a giant hole in your firewall or something—but, wherever we can be flexible, we have been flexible. We have done things at this university at a speed that defies the normal bureaucracy, right? We're a pretty entrepreneurial sort of university, but man, oh man, that is, I think, a particularly egregious example of small-mindedness in the face of what's really important.

Kelvin: So, feel free to forward this podcast episode on to folks at your institution who would benefit from hearing that from somebody else. You want to tackle the next principle? We've kind of stepped into this a little bit, but there's probably more to say about it.

Tom: Yeah. So, the idea is that you want to make sure that you have as smooth a path as possible for faculty to do what's easiest for them in the short term, and I did sort of allude to that by saying we want to get faculty up and productive as quickly as possible so that they don't lose course momentum, their students don't lose momentum as much as can be reasonably done, whether that's putting content into the learning management system—assignments and announcements, discussions, making sure that you've got your grade book set up. Then integrating a web conferencing platform into that so that you can do those live and/or recorded lectures. Basically, give the faculty a set of tools, recognizing that not every faculty is going to need every single tool in the toolbox. It's actually something I think we've struggled with a little bit here. We've tried to find the right balance, but we do have a really fantastic team and a pretty big toolbox for faculty. And for faculty that haven't really used it before, to just put up a website and say, "Here's all the stuff you can do" is a little overwhelming. It's like being handed some professional contractors toolbox when you've never even hammered a nail before. You wouldn't know what to do with—"Oh, what's this thing, this level with the bubble in it?" You wouldn't know what to do with it. So, I do think having all those tools available but giving faculty some guidance—take them by the hand a little bit and maybe ask them a few questions like, "What are you trying to accomplish?" and, "OK, then use this and don't worry about the rest of it right now. Just use this for a week or two and then if you want to start layering in some complexity, we can talk."

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right and thinking about, as much as possible from the target faculty member's non-online past experience perspective, what's the most likely sequence of events, right? That influences the guidance. One of our instructional designers, John Raible, early on said, "Well, seems like faculty have to be able to provide some content, whether that's documents or video recording. They want to be able to give some tests. You want to be able to get some stuff in the grade book. How do we help them be really clear about that?" I think there's some wisdom in that. But, I do think when you mention our real robust toolbox—a shout-out, here, to the institutions with far fewer resources than we or some others have—I have to say, it's been extremely gratifying to me to see a number of efforts to coordinate volunteer connection services between the non-online faculty and the instructional designers and instructional technologists in our field. The one that comes to mind is the so called "Instructional Designer Emergency Response Network" as one of those. We'll link that and maybe some others in the show notes. The connection form is really cool. It's just a little Google form. You can sign up as someone who needs help or who can offer help and there you go. I've seen a number of efforts like that, which are just great.

Tom: Yeah, I agree. OK. Maybe, in the interest of time, we should move on to the next principle. I'll go ahead and mention this one, because I did a little Tweet about it on Wednesday.

Kelvin: I saw that.

Tom: This might be my most engaged tweet I've ever had. I know some people who listen to this have much bigger followings than I do, but for me as of this minute, I have 133 likes. That's a lot for me. I don't know if I've ever had that many and,

you know, 28 or 30 re-tweets and things like that. So, obviously this concept resonated with people and that's you really cannot over-communicate in times of crisis. I've learned this personally because I have a tendency to just put my head down, do the work, and expect everybody else is. I don't particularly need a whole lot of validation. Although I appreciate it, I'm not as extrinsically motivated by that. But what I've found is that some people are and it's really important, especially when people are feeling uneasy—it's weird to be working from home right now, so the staff is completely off balance for students and faculty, also. Adding to that, student anxiety that is about as high as it could be right now. I mean, I've been hearing anecdotes—I think you've seen some of the same ones I have—of students who, because of everybody quarantining or self-isolating, students have lost their jobs. These people who were working in restaurants or movie theaters, and now they don't know how they're going to make rent and now they're being told, "Oh, by the way, you need this webcam or something for your class" and maybe they didn't have it. We have cases of students who've left their books in their dormitory. My son is a sophomore at another state university, and he and his girlfriend drove over to the campus, which is about an hour and a half from where we live right now, because she had left her computer in the dormitory and she had to get it. They're going to be online like we are for the rest of the semester. Actually, into the summer if they take summer classes. So, I mean, it's real. We hear about students who are in other states who left their stuff and have concerns about finances or are they sick or have a family member who's sick. It's tough. So, one way to mitigate that is to just make sure that you over-communicate, you reassure, you keep the lines of communication open.

Kelvin: And that's at multiple levels, right? There's multiple audiences involved, multiple channels that are involved. I know you are constantly—it seems like, to me—on the outside looking in on some conference call with senior university leadership, coordinating from there, and within our division, and within the Center for Distributed Learning, and then with faculty, outward-facing student communications. We have workshops, we have email campaigns, LMS announcements, meetings, video messages, individual personal emails, and phone calls. I mean, all of that stuff is going on and it could be overwhelming, but I think—one of the things I've been paying attention to is the wisdom of "unwavering direction" is how I'm thinking of it balanced with the communication of new and relevant information.

Tom: Yeah, and even from more of a macro-level—like from the university level. So, the university is trying to get some of our message out and, as you know, yesterday morning, I was interviewed by literally every T.V. station and several radio stations in town. I was all over the news last night, and I think it's the university trying to say, "Look, the business of the university continues, but in a different way. We know how to do this. Don't worry." Unfortunately, that story got quickly overshadowed by the fact that UCF announced that we had our first COVID-19 case, a student who's recovering right now. Even so, you've got to kind of keep communicating the good news, where possible, and try to keep encouraging folks.

Kelvin: That's right. And I guess this communication piece, for me, goes right into our last principle for this conversation, which really speaks to the human dynamics involved here, right? Don't allow your task-focus to overshadow the needs and the fears of the people, the humans, involved in this whole process. That's a lesson that I think gets driven home for me, again and again. Yours is the, "you can't overcommunicate. For me it's the, "you can't focus enough on the people" part. We're going to take care of the work, you know? We have great people. The work's going to get done, but you can't underestimate the fears, the needs, the insecurities, the variables. So, there's a lot to say about that and very little time to say it, I guess. But for me, I'll just say that the human emphasis should exist within our internal teams and it should be cultivated in interactions with faculty and students. I think of this as a "grounding our work in empathy," is how I'm thinking of this.

Tom: Yeah, I totally agree. I think back to Michelle Pacansky-Brock's humanize online learning work, and I think this is consistent with her research and what she has been promoting for so long.

Kelvin: Yeah. Maybe we'll link to some tweets that I've been kind of curating on the show notes, here. Like, I love—I don't know if you've seen all of these—the empathy-based principles in the revised syllabi, like, for instance, professor Brandon Bayne from the University of North Carolina has posted something like that he synthesized and put it out there and shared it in a Google doc, and people have been applauding that. It's high-level stuff. "Yeah, we're going to try to do our best with the course, but you know what? We're going to be gracious to each other. We're going to do the best that we can. We're going to pay attention to each other." That's wonderful. Cathy Davidson from Haystack, her comment that, "The life skill of crisis survival is not to be underestimated and maybe that's the biggest remote learning principle there is." Josh Eyler is championing honesty and vulnerability between faculty and students. Those kinds of voices I have just really appreciated amidst all the other messages that are floating around out there.

Tom: Yeah, and I saw—I think you may have seen the same message—from one of our instructional designers forwarded from a faculty member who kind of shared her first experience—I think it was Tuesday night. It was even before we were officially online—she held a class in a video conference format—live, synchronous—and she has over 250 students in that particular class and about 100 showed up. I don't think she did any instruction. It was really just listening to students and their anxiety and what they're dealing with, and she said some were crying and some were worried about how they were going to make their rent. It just really struck home for me that this is bigger than just making sure that you get your paper in and take that test. That's part of it, but maybe it shouldn't be the first part. There's a big petition going on right now, not just at UCF, but at other schools, that it should be pass/fail this semester. I don't know how I feel about that.

Kelvin: Yeah, a lot of voices getting behind that.

Tom: It actually makes little sense to me. I don't know what we'll do if we even respond to that, but I get where it's coming from.

Kelvin: Right. It comes from a good place. Regardless, it underscores the importance of, "Just frickin' be human with each other," you know? Beyond the immediate, though—as we get ready to put the landing gear down—we're going to all need to transition to helping all of our stakeholders at our respective institutions think through the longer-term needs here beyond the first two weeks or the first semester. What happens next semester? What happens beyond next semester? We're going to move and cope one step at a time, but we have to start planning and bringing people along step-by-step as well.

Tom: Yeah. Then, for another day, I think there is a really rich conversation to be had about what this does mean for the future of online learning in higher ed. Not those, "Well, this will tell use once and for all if it's any good." I don't mean like that.

Kelvin: *(Laughing)* Not like that.

Tom: But I do mean will it change its shape and morph into other areas and break down barriers in some places or push boundaries? I don't know. It's very possible because everybody from Ivy Leagues to community college, every level of discipline and faculty, student, is being exposed to it at some level right now. I think it's interesting. The same with the whole concept of remote work. Will it change that?

Kelvin: Right. Yeah, probably like you and our listeners, I've seen several articles that are already predicting about [how] every kind of global crisis leaves behind some kind of residue, some kind of change in the way that we do things. There's been some predictions already and some of that has to do with remoteness of one sort or another: remote work, delivery services, all that, pro and con. It's really interesting. Well, shall I try to—

Tom: Well, maybe—yeah, please. That's what I was going to say.

Kelvin: —Land this thing? Alright, there you go. I will put a button on it this way: we are in the middle of wide-spread emergency remote teaching using online tools and techniques right now. The impact of this unprecedented—are you sick and tired of that word, "unprecedented" yet?

Tom: *(Laughing)* I haven't come up with a better one, yet.

Kelvin: The impact of this unprecedented shared experience will likely be felt for years. Continuing to share successes and failures, though, will help us all to carry on productively. Would you agree?

Tom: I agree. That's the plan.

Kelvin: Alright, well until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I’m Tom.

Kelvin: See ya!