TOPcast Episode 65: Field Report #2: Preparing for the Post-COVID Future

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 am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And you are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hey Tom.

Tom: Hi Kelvin! The way you said that made it sound like we have other teaching podcasts. This one happens to be the Teaching Online Podcast.

Kelvin: It’s room for expansion, Tom.

Tom: (laughing) Sure, we can start franchising. Yeah. I like it.

Kelvin: (laughing)

Tom: How are you?

Kelvin: I'm well! Thanks. You know as well as can be expected in, you know, the circumstances but, you know, it is worth a mention here right at the top of this episode, Tom: happy anniversary.

Tom: Thank you! And I didn't get you anything.

Kelvin: (laughing) Just you being here is present enough, Tom.

Tom: (laughing) Okay.

Kelvin: This is officially our first episode of season six, which means that we have—can you believe this—a complete five whole years behind us.

Tom: Wow. Five years. So, what's the five-year anniversary gift? Is it like wood or something like that? Probably should look that up.

Kelvin: I'm pretty sure it's platinum.
Tom: Platinum? *(laughing)* Okay. Then for all you podcast listeners that want to get us something. Yeah, actually I think it's coffee. The five year gift.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* It could be coffee. If I was quicker on the uptake, it would have been coffee.

Tom: *(laughing)* Well, speaking of coffee, because we are recording this virtually through our friends at Zoom, I see you drinking out of your green mug. Kelvin, what's in your thermos?

Kelvin: Well, Tom, you know as you say, we are continuing to bring our own coffee, but I hope you don't mind but I went ahead and for my coffee I did get a little bit thematic today, but I didn't work out a good way to share the thematic coffee with you in advance. So, my coffee today, Tom, is a single-origin Honduras from the Santa Barbara region of Honduras and from the Finca Las Brisas Farm produced by Denis Teruel. This coffee was roasted by Victrola Coffee Roasters in Seattle, Washington, and there's a story behind this coffee which I'll share in a moment.

Tom: Okay.

Kelvin: What are you drinking, Tom?

Tom: Wow. I cannot compete with that. I have no story. I am drinking Fog Chaser from San Francisco Bay Company. It's a nice coffee that we enjoy, and so that's my afternoon choice, but I have no story other than it was convenient and downstairs.

Kelvin: I like the name though. Fog Chaser.

Tom: Yeah! Fog Chaser, and it's in those biodegradable pods that I've talked about. So yeah, we like it.

Kelvin: Wow. Seems like that works on two levels, right? Because it makes you think of, you know, London or San Francisco or something, but then it kind of chases the fog away from your brain.

Tom: *(laughing)* Something like that. Yes. And it's certainly not a foggy day here. We do talk about the weather a lot, but it's a fantastic Florida spring day right now.

Kelvin: Yeah, well, the story behind the coffee in my cup is I chose it because it came to me—technically to us—but to me from our UCF instructional designer colleague, Charlotte Jones-Roberts, who flew into Seattle for the 2020 EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative conference only to find upon her arrival that the conference had been canceled due to concerns over the COVID-19 coronavirus. I think she had something like twelve hours before turning around and getting back on a plane and flying back to Orlando. And in that time—in that limited time—darn if she didn't go and pick us up some coffee that she found at this very nice roastery cafe. And I have set some aside for sharing with you, Tom, when we're back in the same physical space again, so I've saved some for
you. So, in a call back to the old normal coffee connection from our regular studio episode recordings, I'll ask whether you can find a link between this thematically selected coffee and today's topic.

Tom: Um…well, maybe. Yeah. Alright, so we’re going to talk about the future, right? But it's a bit of *Back to the Future*. Like, when we get back to normal, what's it going to be like? How normal is it going to be? So, sharing that with me when we're back is something along those lines. I will have an opportunity to say hi to Charlotte, *(laughing)* which I've only done virtually for many weeks now. So, I don't know. Am I hot or cold?

Kelvin: Yeah! Yeah, yeah yeah, and then I mean, not to be dystopian about it, but then one wonders what professional conferences will look like in the future, you know? How long is it going to take before we go back to an “old normal” of flying into a place and all of that, but I predict a lot of virtual conferences in our future. But yeah! That's exactly the lines that I was on.

Tom: And that conference—that ELI conference—that was the first one where I think we all sort of realized this is different, because we had several other colleagues that were on their way to Seattle. Chuck Dziuban made it to Minneapolis and was able to turn around and come home. Patsy Moskal made it to St. Louis. Charlotte made it all the way to Seattle before she got the word that it wasn't going to happen. So that one was the first of all of them that I think kind of told us that this was for real. You are gesturing at your coffee mug. What does that mean?

Kelvin: Because Charlotte at least got coffee out of the deal.

Tom: Oh, I see. *(laughing)* Thank you, Charlotte for thinking of us. Us poor, you know, thirsty podcasters here back in Orlando. So, we're going to talk about how things are going to change going forward, but just as a reminder, I think, for everybody that this is the second of our ongoing mini-series in field reports from the world of remote teaching and learning. So, kind of at the end of the last episode that we talked about this—although I think we'll probably touch on it even in our interview episodes in the middle of the month—but the main ones at the top of the month, the last one at the beginning of April of 2020, we had kind of said that, you know, we're in the middle of this widespread emergency remote teaching using online tools and techniques and the impact of this—what everybody's calling unprecedented shared experience—will likely be felt for years. So, continuing to share successes and failures will help us all to carry on productively, right?

Kelvin: Yep, and so that's where we pick up this second field report. And if I might, I'll say as we record this episode today, we are slightly more than one month into remote instruction—maybe about four and a half calendar weeks at this point—and for several weeks at our institution, we've been well into planning for summer term 2020, while also doing contingency planning for the fall term. At this point, though, we are already hearing voices in our field speaking about the longer term, you know, like years’ impact of COVID-19 and remote instruction, so we thought we might talk through some of the most likely scenarios in that longer term future, but what do we know?
Tom: Yeah, I mean, we don't know anything. And certainly, here at the end of April of 2020, we don't know anything about fall yet. Different schools are making different decisions based on, I guess, different data sets, particularly, you know. It might be regional, too. I keep hearing a lot of talk about that some parts of the country might be more affected than others, or maybe there could be staged returns to normalcy. So, we're trying to hedge our bets like everybody else and prepare for various scenarios. But one thing that's clear, at least for fall at UCF, even if we're back to “normal,” like having face-to-face classes again, the demand for online instruction has suddenly boomed, and we run a faculty development program three times a year. It's our flagship program. We have a lot of programs. We've talked about that on previous episodes, but the flagship program, it's like a ten-week course. And we have seats for about forty, three times a year, and that's determined primarily by the number of instructional designers we have to support it. We have more than double the requests for the number of seats that we have right now, and that's not even looking at any sort of change in what we might do in the fall. That's just assuming normal in the fall. So, you know, we are changing the way we potentially support faculty and prepare them to teach online on the fly because we have such demand that we've never seen before.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, all that's right. And it might be worth you know—even though we're on our way to longer term, as you've mentioned, fall 2020—it's worth a shout out to our colleagues, Phil Hill and Bryan Alexander, both of whom have written as we're recording this, very recent blog posts looking at and analyzing the potential to fall 2020 and beyond, and we'll post in the show notes links to those blog pieces. Here's my take away. You know, it's hard to know exactly what will happen, but we do need to be prepared, but I feel pretty confident—and this may not sound great—but I feel pretty confident. Seems pretty unlikely that fall 2020 will look exactly like fall 2019.

Tom: Yeah, I think that's probably the safer bet. That it's not going to be exactly the same. Even if we're back, we're back in some other altered way. Like whether it's hybrid courses or you come back for labs on campus and instruction online, or you don't necessarily fill a lecture hall, like you might you have to have space between students who might be sitting in that lecture hall. There's all kinds of different speculations that I've heard and honestly, we don't really know yet.

Kelvin: Yeah. And you've mentioned that we've already seen an organic, increased demand for developing actual new online courses, and so that might be worth a mention. Our general approach in our planning for summer and fall thus far is what I keep saying is a little bit better prepared every semester, right? And a little bit more leaning on actual designed online courses rather than remote instruction, aka online delivery of face-to-face courses. So, it's also probably worth a comment, like you've used this phrase: our existing robust online infrastructure was really a key strategic investment, I guess we might say, in our ability to quickly lean into remote instruction in the spring term 2020, and we've been trying to build on that foundation with a little bit better preparation and a little bit more intentional, new online course development each successive semester that we're planning for.
Tom: Yeah, and I've quoted you by saying every time we are going to do this, we want to do it a little bit better and get closer and closer to the standard that we are used to. So, for example, this spring, it was all hands on deck, everybody in the lifeboat, let's do this as quickly as we can and give our students the best possible experience under very trying circumstances. For summer, we have put faculty into a modified version of our program that prepares faculty to teach in lecture capture, so that they could teach using synchronous tools or record through synchronous tools and have some synchronous/asynchronous experience, but mostly synchronous. But give them some preparation. So, it's not just here's Zoom, go teach. But here's the LMS. Here's some basic pedagogy. Here's how you create groups. Here's how you use the whiteboard. Just be a little more intentional and get faculty to the point where they can make better use of all of the tools that are available to them. And that's for summer. And we've done that. We put 300 people last week through that program. And we have demand for more so we're going to run another cohort, but then for fall, we're working on something else that will take it up a little level higher, not quite to our flagship program standard, but as close as we can get in the time that we have. So, you know, I think your philosophy of step by step, you know, up the stairs until we get to the top is the right one. And I will echo what you said about the work by Phil Hill and Bryan Alexander. I've been, you know, really engaged with what they've been writing. I think that they've got their finger on the pulse of like, "here's what could happen." Not that either one of them are predicting, but they're saying, “here are the various scenarios and what that might mean.” So…

Kelvin: And I guess just to the flip side of that is I was looking… I guess it was just today I was reading this survey of faculty experiences organized by Inside Higher Ed. Researcher Jeff Seaman—he of Babson fame—said of the survey responses, “it's pervasive the sense of ‘I don’t know what I’m doing’ or ‘I don't know if my students are succeeding online.’” As he looks across higher education for the spring term 2020 sudden, remote instruction thing and I'd say that that was much less our experience at UCF spring 2020 thanks to an existing, as you say, robust online infrastructure, and we just want to build on that.

Tom: Yeah, and we were fortunate that we've been doing online learning for a long time. So, we have a large staff, and I think we have a lot of expertise that we were able to point at this problem when it came up. Not everybody was in that position. So, that was helpful. We'd also been, I think, half-lucky/half-smart in the past where like, for example, we have built our own proprietary, remote proctoring system, and when the time came for putting everybody into remote instruction, we did license some proctoring solution, and we have others on campus for particular options for faculty, but they all didn't need to use it because we already had this thing that we built that doesn't cost students anything. So, we were able to save probably, you know, thousands of dollars that we would have had to pay a commercial vendor to come in last minute, and they've been good partners. We've gotten good deals and I'm not, you know, throwing any aspersions at the vendor community. In fact, my experiences with all of them have been really positive throughout this. They seem to really want to help, but it still costs money. And us having the foresight to build our own proctoring tool has saved us a bunch of money right now when we need it for other things.
Kelvin: And I mean bringing that up—just to say this, right—is not just us, yay, pat ourselves on the back! Yay us. It's really, to my way of thinking, underscoring that all of this activity—be it temporary emergency remote instruction or preparing for the longer term of more robustly, intentionally designed and supported online and blended learning—it underscores it takes investment of time and personnel and frankly, dollars.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah, agreed. I mean, in the past, I think I've said this many times, so forgive me for repeating it, but I think one of the greatest risks to online learning is the fact that you can so easily outrun your quality supply lines. It's so easy to just open up a new LMS shell and assign a faculty member in it. I mean, that's easy, but that doesn't mean that course is going to be any good, and the goodness of it is an investment upfront in faculty development and resources and support for that faculty and those students, and having media production and instructional design and everything else that you might need. An assessment. That's the hard part, and that takes time and investment. So, I think there's a little bit of that risk in the situation that we're in now because we're just opening up online courses all of a sudden that where some faculty have not been through that kind of process and aren't used to accessing those resources on campus, or perhaps they don't even exist on some campuses because of resource limitations, or they just hadn't been that invested in online learning previously.

Kelvin: Yeah, and we might, you know, talk in a future episode a little bit more about that quality assurance set of strategies as we go forward, through COVID-19 and beyond, but shall we turn our attention to those longer term effects that would be beyond fall 2020, perhaps measured in years? Pull out the crystal ball and kind of do our best prognostication?

Tom: Yeah, sure. So, I have a few thoughts. I know you do as well. So, the first one for me is that perhaps the most felt echo of this when it's kind of all over I think might be the use of digital tools—educational technology tools—in face-to-face classes. We see this all the time. So, we put faculty through our online faculty development course. It fundamentally changes the way they teach face to face. They don't go back and have, “Okay, here's my face-to-face class, and that's walled off. And here's my online class.” Those digital tools, the use of the LMS, these different resources or games or discussions or assessment strategies or whatever they use in the online course, they find their way into the face-to-face environment, whether it's homework or some supplement or some in-class activity or whatever it is. And I could see that really happening because there's some faculty that are not going to stay teaching online at the end of this. I do not expect that, but it might be hard for them to like not use the LMS going forward in some form or fashion, or not use Zoom to, you know, have a student who might be sick at home and you want to have office hours with them or something. I could definitely see these tools kind of filtering their way into the just regular quotidian, daily activities of faculty on campus. I don't know if you agree or disagree.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. Of course, then, if it was just the use of tools, there'll be some subset of those new to online tools, new to digital tools faculty who feel their way toward effective practices of them and in some way that we might refer
to as good digital or good online or good blended pedagogy. But the tools unto themselves won't do that, right? Just the use of tools—good use/bad use—could possibly be not a great thing in all circumstances, right? “Oh, here's a wrench. It works great for driving in this nail, you know?” (laughing) No, it doesn't. It doesn't.

Tom: Yeah. Well, that's, that's part of our job, right? It's incumbent on us to help them understand the best way to use these tools, and we're certainly trying to do that now at a level, you know, of scale and speed that we probably are not entirely comfortable with. But we're doing it now. So, I agree. I don't disagree at all. Yeah, I think it's gonna be hard for some faculty to go back after having used some of these things.

Kelvin: What I would say is I would kind of pivot from that point about the tools toward maybe saying that I think—I said this today in a talk I was doing—I think maybe I've said for years, the future is blended. I think maybe that's more true now than ever before. You know, we're pushing the envelope, you know, widespread at scale of using online tools for about everything. And then I think on the one hand, that's gonna be good. We stretch our perceptions of what's possible and what's feasible, but then we're also going to find, “well, when do we really feel like we need or want face-to-face experiences?” And I think to some extent, we're going to be hungering for some face-to-face, and so, finding an equilibrium between the online and the face-to-face, which we might broadly refer to as blended, I think that's going to be more the deal at the individual course level, and maybe even an institutional level than ever before.

Tom: Yeah, I would agree with that, too. I think people are realizing that there are some things they can do online that they didn't think they could do online, and so that that probably will expand adoption of blended learning strategies, maybe even flipped strategies, which, you know, we don't necessarily call blended because it doesn't reduce the seat time. But those are, you know, technological pedagogical strategies. I'll throw every -ogical I can think of in there. So whether it's flipped or it's blended, I do think that you're right. We will see an expansion of that, where people start to say, “Okay, let's really value the things that we can do face-to-face that we can't do any other way, and make sure we privilege those. And we're not just lecturing, necessarily, at students face-to-face, because we don't necessarily need to do that face-to-face. There are other things that we should spend our time together doing, whether that's labs or group work or whatever the case might be.”

Kelvin: I do think, sort of outside of the explicitly online and blended world, I think that I'll hazard this one. I think that it's unlikely that the classic high enrollment, large lecture hall class will persist in its previous form. I think it's unlikely that that will continue. I think maybe things like enrollment caps to allow a smaller number of students in the same space, you know, in order to let them spread out for social distancing, or maybe that's paired up with some kind of blended strategy, where, you know, it was 100 students, and now it's going to be a third of that at a time. You know, 33 students on Monday, and 33 students on Wednesday, and 33 students on Friday and you know, you do that in a blended kind of fashion. I think we're going to see interesting creative approaches like
that, and that drives it home for some people. You know, the classic lecture hall thing isn't going to be the same anymore. I think that's entirely possible.

Tom: Yeah, I agree with your scenario of the kind of the Monday, Wednesday, Friday, take the large class, split it up so that we can have students not be quite as close together. Although I don't know. I may differ with you a little bit in that I think what you're describing is probably a short to mid-term kind of phenomenon and if the virus, we get a vaccine or an effective treatment, I think the economy, the economics, I should say, of higher education finances might drive those, you know, those large lecture halls back into practice. If there's no risk, you know, for health and safety, I could definitely see the rubber band snapping back in that situation.

Kelvin: Yeah. Point taken, and I guess just as a call out to some of the broader pieces of writing, as people speculate about the long-term future of just like daily life and stuff, I guess, which we'll throw some of that in the show notes too. I've got my favorites; you've probably got your favorites. In a call out to that, maybe in your scenario, we're assuming there are drug therapies and good screening and all that we might see right outside the lecture hall or right outside the classroom building or right outside the edge of campus, you know, temperature check stations or some kind of screening and some kind of protocol for masks or here's the “sick” section. I don't know what that looks like exactly, but we may see these overlay kind of protocols that would enable the snapback that you're talking about.

Tom: Yeah, I agree. In fact, I think probably in the short term, we will see that, especially if they want to try and do events like sporting events and, you know, imagine football games. Fall is going to be really, really interesting as we go forward. Alright, so sort of looking at the clock. I have one other thought I think this is something that you had mentioned and kind of put in your notes that I agree with—and we've already touched on it—which is the increase in the number and demand for online learning in general has already gone up for like genuine, well designed, let's train our faculty and put more courses into asynchronous constructivist sort of online learning, and that that has already happened. And once that happens and faculty start teaching that way, I don't see them going back necessarily, either. That's never been our experience here.

Kelvin: Yeah. Now just to be dystopian, because I like my coffee dark and bitter. Going to the dark side for a moment, there is the possibility that our online courses and programs standards will actually be watered down, at least across higher education broadly as widespread experience with so-called remote instruction diminishes expectations of online teaching and learning, I'd say quickly. I'd say let's hope not. We need to maintain our quality standards, but that is possible.

Tom: Agreed, and we have to be sort of the vanguards of quality and ensure that it's, you know, the North Star that guides us through these choppy seas. I'll use a bunch of metaphors. But we also have to recognize the reality of the situation we're in, the urgency and the scale. So, none of us would have picked to go online the way we did this spring. But we had to. So, I think everybody would agree it doesn't necessarily represent the highest quality. We talked about that kind of in our previous podcast field report. But your point's taken. I think that
we have to maintain that quality standard even in the midst of all of this. We can't just stand up in the LMS shell and say, “go teach.”

Kelvin: Which again, just to be a broken record, right? That partly means continuing not to call the temporary thing online teaching and learning right? Partly it's to keep that separate. That's up to us. That's up to people in our field to make that distinction for the uninitiated.

Tom: Right. Agreed. So, maybe we should wrap up with this. You had a couple of questions. We don't have answers for these questions, but you want to kind of quickly run through them and maybe we can revisit them at some point?

Kelvin: Yeah! Sure! I was going to skip past them, but since you opened that door, here are some unanswered questions. *(announcer voice)* Will we see a lasting increase in the number of virtual professional conferences? Will we get more comfortable with our institutions, faculty, and staff working remotely? Will more of our student services occur via web conferencing and/or face-to-face only by appointment as a special circumstance? Tune in tomorrow to find out. Same Bat-time, same Bat-channel! Yeah, I mean, I don't know. I don't know what the answer to any of those things are, but they're legitimate questions.

Tom: Holy remote teaching Batman!

Kelvin: *(laughing)*

Tom: Yeah, I think those are really good questions. And certainly, we don't know the answer. We've had a lot of internal speculation about the things like remote working and what does that mean? It's probably a bigger question for corporate industry than it is for higher ed, but it's a real question. Okay, so we don't really know what the long-term future of higher education will look like, especially, you know, who knows what kind of other pandemic or, you know, crisis might appear? But two things, I think, are fairly safe to predict. First, that things will be different than they were before COVID-19. And second, that it will most likely include a more prominent role for the work of online education professionals. I've certainly been invited to a lot more senior leadership meetings than I used to be in, like dean's council meetings, and I'm not a dean. So, I get to go to a lot of those and have conversations. I think that the future will be interesting. So, may you live in interesting times. Is that the famous Chinese curse?

Kelvin: Yeah, no, that's great. I totally agree with that. Well said, and as our clock runs out and our coffee runs out, I guess I'll just send our famous sign off. Until next time for T0Pcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.