TOPcast Episode #68: “Getting Everything Current:” A Holistic Approach to Accessibility

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 am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin Thompson: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you’re listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hello, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Hello, Tom. I see that you have redecorated in your upper room at your house.

Tom: I have. I have come into the office, collected all of my belongings, including all of my office furniture and paintings and posters on the wall that I have in my office, brought them all back to my house, and installed them so that I have an exact replica of my office at home for purposes of this Zoom podcast.

Kelvin: That’s good. If it makes you feel more productive, hey, I’m for it. Sure.

Tom: Yes, either that or I’m a dirty, dirty liar.

Kelvin: (chuckles)

Tom: I am actually sitting in the office. So, I am back. I am back! UCF has asked senior administrators to start coming back. So here I am.

Kelvin: I came in yesterday.

Tom: You did. I saw you.

Kelvin: (laughter) I saw you at the very beginning of the day walking in, and I saw you at the end of the day walking out.

Tom: (chuckles)

Kelvin: And I had some video conferences with you.

Tom: That is funny. We had a couple of meetings. Yeah, on Zoom with each other just literally across the office suite from each other.
Kelvin: Is this the new normal, Tom? Is this it?
Tom: For a while, I’m afraid so.
Kelvin: Okay. Ooh, I see you in Zoom there, sipping something.
Tom: Yes, I am sipping something.
Kelvin: What is it?
Tom: So, maybe a quick reminder to our listeners, maybe some who may be new, that we are—
Kelvin: We hope so.
Tom: —a collegial conversation carried on over a cup of coffee, and coffee is a bit of a theme for us. So, we always have some—in normal times—thematically selected coffee, and mine is not thematically selected. So again, we are recording in the afternoon. Not that anybody really should care. You can listen to it in the dead of night if you like or first thing in the morning, whatever makes sense. But we are recording in the afternoon, and for my afternoon cup, I try to stick with decaf.
Kelvin: Oh, I got you.
Tom: So, this is yet another cup of my decaf mainstay, the San Francisco Bay French Roast.
Kelvin: I got you. Yeah, I got you. You know, I splurge when we record in the afternoon. I make a, you know, legit with-the-caffeine-added coffee and have a second excellent cup of coffee for the day. So, my coffee, Tom, is a single-origin Colombia roasted nearby at Foxtail Coffee Company in lovely Winter Park, Florida, but actually from the state—or in Colombia, it is called a “department.” I learned that—department of Tolima. Specifically, my coffee is from a town in Tolima called Planadas. So, the municipal—municipal—municipality?
Tom: The municipality. (chuckles)
Kelvin: (laughing) What is that? They have a really tough governor—I mean a mayor or something. Municipality. The municipality of Planadas is only about 50 years old, but it was apparently founded by folks from other coffee growing areas in Colombia. Some people might recognize Huila, which is an adjacent department in Colombia. So, coffee became a thing. And while our single-origin coffees are usually known by country name, there are often other names associated as well, like Colombia this, Colombia that, Rwanda this, Rwanda that. And those other names are usually specific farms or towns or washing stations where the coffee is processed, or regions—such as states or departments—so, there is always a context with the coffee origins. So, the coffee’s pretty good.
Tom: I like Foxtail.
Kelvin: Yeah? How is the connection?
Tom: We have them on campus.
Kelvin: That is true. We do.
Tom: Well, I was trying to follow along. I did get a bit sidebarred with municipality and you lost me there.
Kelvin: (laughing) That would do it. That was prestidigitation.
Tom: (chuckles) Supercalifragilistic.
Kelvin: Expialidocious.
Tom: Yeah. I am afraid I may be coming up empty on this one.
Kelvin: I am going to give you a little bit more, right? So, like on Miller’s Analogies Test—which is an alternative to the SAT for some places—it’s all analogies. Department is to town as system is to institution.
Tom: Okay.
Kelvin: And we are going to have in this episode an interview that focuses on a system-wide effort carried out as an institutional strategy with implications at the faculty and instructional designer level.
Tom: Okay.
Kelvin: So, I don’t know if you can follow some logic in there or not.
Tom: I can in there now. Feels like I am back in high school taking the SAT with those analogies.
Kelvin: Municipality. (laughter)
Tom: I was told there would be no test to this podcast. So, thank you for the bait and switch, but I think I get it. So yeah, we are going to be talking about this system-wide effort with someone who has been very involved with it, and what they are working on which is kind of cool. Maybe you can fill in some of the some of the details for us.
Kelvin: Sure. So, we have, from time-to-time, on TOPcast talked about the importance of online course accessibility. We even did a bit of a deep dive into our practices at UCF for ensuring that online materials are accessible by all learners back in Episode 21, which was, believe it or not, Tom, season two.
Tom: Oh, we were just small toddler podcasters.
Kelvin: Baby podcasters, right? (laughter) Toddler podcasters. Yeah, we call that accessibility. It’s a journey, not a destination.

Tom: I remember that quote.

Kelvin: But today, we are going to hear about a system-level initiative for accessibility of information technology—not just online courses—and how that broader effort affects the on-the-ground accessibility work at one institution in that system. Now, I would say this is particularly important currently as our COVID-19 response continues lest you think, dear listener, that we recorded this episode, months and months ago. No, no, we’re current. Just this morning—we are recording this at the very beginning of June—just this morning, I saw a piece on Inside Higher Ed regarding legal issues potentially faced by higher ed institutions this fall 2020 as a result of our COVID-19 response, and hello, online course accessibility was one of the issues. So, very, very relevant, I think.

Tom: Yeah, it’s a big deal. And we certainly heard all sorts of things that came up as we moved to 100% remote and had folks trying to help those students in a lot of different ways. So, about that system-wide effort, Kelvin, you interviewed Dr. Sherri Braxton during the 2019 OLC Accelerate conference.

Kelvin: I sure did.

Tom: So, at the time we are recording this, the most recent one that occurred the prior fall. And Sherri is Senior Director of Instructional Technology at University of Maryland, Baltimore County, where we know several other folks. I have several good friends there. She is her institution’s Quality Matters coordinator. She has worked in the field of instructional technology for nearly twenty years and is active in our professional associations, such as EDUCAUSE, the Online Learning Consortium, and the IMS Global Learning Consortium. Sherri has also served as faculty co-director for EDUCAUSE’s Learning Technology Leadership Institute Program, where you had a little something to do with that as well.

Kelvin: Yeah, I’ve been on the faculty there before and I can attest to Sherri’s good co-directing.

Tom: Yeah, and general all-around awesomeness.

Kelvin: Yeah, I would say that too.

Tom: Any comments you would like to make about your conversation with Dr. Sherri Braxton before we cut to the interview?

Kelvin: Sure. Sherri is—what did you say? All-around awesome.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah, that’s true. I would say she is a true leader. She is top-notch. She thinks deeply and acts purposefully. I will mention real quickly, just because we get into
jargon a little bit in the interview, there are some acronyms. Quality Matters (QM) most people will know. VPAT: Voluntary Product Accessibility Template. I kind of mangled that in the interview a little bit. WCAG some people say, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. W3C: the World Wide Web Consortium, which is now like the most dated acronym ever, right? We actually say “World Wide Web” right out there. But that’s it. I think we let the interview speak for itself.

Tom: Okay, awesome. So now through the magic of podcast time travel, here is your interview with Dr. Sherri Braxton.

(musical transition)

Kelvin: Thanks for joining us, Sherri. So great to have you on TÖPcast today.

Sherri Braxton: My pleasure.

Kelvin: So, we were talking before we hit record about some of the work that is happening at your institution and system around accessibility and how that relates to kind of our broader community of online education folks. And so, I thought we might talk a little bit about your context, and then what kind of principles might be good takeaways for our audience of instructional designers, online faculty, and online administrators. How does that sound?

Sherri: That sounds great.

Kelvin: So, tell us a little bit about your context.

Sherri: Sure, so back in 2014-2015, the System of Maryland assembled an accessible technology and information working group to really look at what needs to be addressed on the different campuses with regard to access. Accessing content, whether it is on the public websites or within courses, all contexts. So that group created a set of guidelines, and those guidelines were passed down to the different institutions, and they were charged to develop a working group with some diverse stakeholders around campus to start addressing these issues. We’d already been doing some of this stuff on our campus, but in May of 2019, we actually formalized the process and set up a working group to look at IT accessibility.

Kelvin: Okay.

Sherri: So, the guidelines had five strategic areas to look at. The first being procurement of accessible technology, library resources, captioning—which we will talk about in the context of classes—and then online course content. So, that could be for your traditionally offered courses or fully online courses. And then, of course, the global website for each campus, both the intranet and the front-facing website. So those are the five strategic areas.

Kelvin: That’s a lot.
Sherri: It’s a lot. And so when we looked at the guidelines back when they were delivered in 2015, we created a compliance checklist based on those guidelines, so that we could just go through and track to see where we were and what we needed to address at UMBC. And at the time, it was the Director of Student Disability Services, our AV services—which is our classroom technology person within our Division of Information Technology—and myself. And we went through and we did kind of a cursory look, and we found that, you know, we were doing okay, but it hadn’t been formalized on our campuses at this point. So, the working group we assembled in the spring had a much broader group of people to cover those strategic areas of procurement. The library. Of course I had course content since I’m Director of Instructional Technology.

Kelvin: Yeah, right.

Sherri: And then the website, we had an institutional advancement. Our webmaster as part of the group, and then we also cover captioning within my organization on campus. So, that working group spent the summer looking at that compliance checklist and going out to their areas and seeing where the gaps were, and brought those back, and we drafted this three-year strategic plan, a roadmap to try to get all of those guidelines addressed.

Kelvin: Wow.

Sherri: Yeah. So, within that, obviously, for our instructional designers, you know, there are two key areas. Two strategic areas: the online course content and the captioning of video.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Sherri: Yeah, so we’ve been providing captioning for screencasts and lecture captures for the last two years. We’ve had process in place. And faculty have adapted to using it pretty well, and we put it as part of our ticketing system. So, we just help faculty create your screencast, put in a ticket, tell us where your video is, we’ll send it off to our vendor.

Kelvin: Okay.

Sherri: And we will upload it for you. And you will have it. Yeah, so it’s cut out a lot of the work for them. And they’ve really grown into it. And we have this past year adopted a new screen capturing platform, which has also helped simplify that process.

Kelvin: Are there any gaps then with captioning in online courses?

Sherri: The only gap is making sure faculty are actually submitting the tickets, and so part of that policy development that we will have to do is to, you know, talk about that accountability and what their role and responsibilities are and accountability for making sure they do it, right? You know, it’s hard to wrangle all faculty in who are doing things.
Kelvin: Is that right?

Sherri: *(laughing)* As you know, but educating them and informing them why it’s important, not just for students with differing abilities, but just universal design of some people really need to have the visual. They need to have the transcripts. They need to be able to access the information in the way that is most comfortable for them.

Kelvin: So, you frame that as—I think I heard you say. I don’t think you used these words—but the concept was like instructor-created video content.

Sherri: That’s correct. Primarily, that’s what we are supporting. Now we know that faculty go out and find videos. And so, that’s part of the reason we have got the librarians involved in this process also, to be making sure they are vetting the sources, that it’s not copyrighted, that they can use the material freely in their courses.

Kelvin: So, does that mean that if faculty member chose to, hypothetically speaking—

Sherri: Like you’ve never experienced it? *(laughing)*

Kelvin: I could imagine a world in which, you know, a faculty member might go to a video sharing site and go, “Huh, that’s a great little video that’s very useful in my course. I’m just going to embed it right here in my course and bypass the librarian-vetted materials and all that.” Does that mean swim at your own risk, no lifeguard on duty, or how would that work?

Sherri: So, you know, it’s hard for us to wrangle and capture all of those. But we have adopted Ally. We are Blackboard school. We adopted Ally. So, one of the things that Ally does is also help us find content that’s not accessible. So, maybe we could find that that exists through the reporting that you can get from the tool? But really, we can put out the education and tell people how to do it and use the best practices but, in the end, you know, there’s going to be some that—

Kelvin: It’s up to the individual to make good choices and engage with what you’re offering institutionally.

Sherri: That’s right.

Kelvin: That’s reasonable.

Sherri: Yeah, it’s tough.

Kelvin: Yeah, I hear you.

Sherri: You know, when you’re adopting all new tools and you have the best practices laid out, it’s really hard to ensure that everyone follows them.

Kelvin: And that’s very much in the weeds, the captioning thing.
Sherri: Yeah.

Kelvin: That’s a big commitment.

Sherri: Yeah.

Kelvin: What about the others? Like, online course content?

Sherri: So, the other online course content—like PowerPoints and PDFs and all those things—again, we provide support for faculty learning how to do that. We do workshops. Student Disability Services will help if a faculty comes and they have someone who needs accommodations. They know the tools, they help them, and then they will refer them to us if they need additional assistance. And again, when using Ally, Ally will also help find that content that is not accessible and can do some remediation on the spot. It’s a pretty powerful tool, and we’ve just adopted it in the past year. So, a lot of what we’re going to have to do around all of this accessibility is education and helping people understand the benefits of doing it.

Kelvin: Got you. And does that show up in your three-year plan for both the captioning and the online course content?

Sherri: They are, in fact, in the three-year plan and the policy development around responsibility and accountability. So, each of those strategic areas, we’re going to have to have a subcommittee that’s going to work specifically on those policies and get them through shared governance.

Kelvin: Got you. So, have you gotten really into the weeds these last months? And this year? Are you more encouraged than when you started out? Or are you more like “Wow, this is daunting?”

Sherri: Since I was the chair of the working group and will be, I’m sure, involved with a lot of these subcommittees, I’m encouraged because the individuals who served on our working group really understand the importance of making sure accessibility is present for all of our IT infrastructure, whether it’s the website or for course content. As we’re procuring things, I think if we really change the policies of procuring technology and have the WCAG standards and other things like that looked at just in addition to the VPATs—I’m using acronyms. I’ll spell them out. So, the Volunteer Accessibility…VPAT.

Kelvin: Procurement Accessibility Templates.

Sherri: Right. As you know, those are really not thorough, and vendors can just say, “We have VPAT.” But having them actually look at something that is a little more robust like the W3C standards for accessibility and making sure those are built into the procurement process. Our procurement people are open to it, but we just need to help them. They’re not experts in accessibility, right? So, VPAT? Great, that was good enough for them. But we know that that’s really not good enough to ensure that what we’re bringing on campus is going to be accessible by our students. So, I am encouraged. I am encouraged, but it is going to be a lot of
work, and three years may be an accelerated timeline, but I think we could do it. I think if we have the right people on the committees, we can get it done.

Kelvin: Let me zoom out and ask you this for a second. So, in your work in the online course world, if you had to imagine—kind of compare and contrast—if you were to do this accessibility work for online, separate from this broader context, the institutional system, and IT five strategy areas, all that. If you’re just doing only the online, would that be easier and better? Or not?

Sherri: Kelvin, it’s almost as if I fed you that question to ask me.

Kelvin: (laughing) Oh, really? Good!

Sherri: Because we do have a process that’s separate and distinct from this for online course development. We call it our Alternate Delivery Program. The faculty who want to change a traditional course to either a hybrid or fully online go through. It follows the Quality Matters rubric, which has a very key piece about accessibility now. So those faculty have to meet a certain level of standard for their courses to be QM compliant. The accessibility pieces are required standards. So, by that context and through that context, our recently developed online courses don’t have an accessibility problem.

Kelvin: Okay.

Sherri: You noticed I said our recently developed—

Kelvin: I did notice that.

Sherri: Because there are people who have been developing courses—I’ve been at UMBC for five, five and a half years now—there are people online before that, doing their own thing, you know, so getting those people to go through a process to look at their courses and address those areas. Just good course design for some. Others, including accessibility. That’s again, something else that as part of the policy development, we would have to enforce or—enforce is such a hard word to use—encourage best practices for those online courses.

Kelvin: So, the broader context: this system, institutional, accessible IT is really getting everything current.

Sherri: That’s right. That’s exactly right. Getting everything current.

Kelvin: So, in that sense, there’s a real benefit broadly, but also specifically in the online course area.

Sherri: Exactly, and as I mentioned, since my group—my shop—focuses on that, that will be our strategic area that we’re in charge of: captioning of the videos and the online course content accessibility.
Kelvin: I would guess, but I am curious if you would agree with this, I would guess that there was something also sort of—how would I put this—the whole is greater than sum of the parts? Holistically encouraging by framing all your accessibility work more broadly, rather than just being zoomed in.

Sherri: I think that’s exactly right. I think there has been a lot of litigation around schools not having the basic things accessible. You know, you go to a website as a new student who wants to go to an institution and they’ve got a nice tour online, right? A video tour, but it’s not captioned. There’s no transcription of what’s provided. They’ve got nice images and PDF files that aren’t screen readable. So yeah, the broader context is really access equity for student success, whatever that may be, in whatever context that may be, right? And then we drill down to all those areas where that’s important to look at accessibility. Where do students navigate that they need to make sure they have access to anything that’s digitally stored?

Kelvin: So, it sounds like at the end of the day, this is really an exercise in transforming culture.

Sherri: In some cases, it will be, yes, because it’s no longer just the responsibility of Student Disability Services and classroom tech and physical plans for accessibility to buildings. We’re talking about thinking universally, IT accessible content throughout the institution.

Kelvin: That’s a great example. I think we should probably follow up with you in a couple of years and see how all of this is playing out.

Sherri: See how that roadmap is playing out? Yeah.

Kelvin: That’s right, and hopefully well, right? Sometimes we think we bite off more than we can chew in the short term, but, you know, we forget that if we stick at it for a while, we can really accomplish some things.

Sherri: And we can really chomp these specific goals that need to be fulfilled over time, right? I mean, there are some short-term things you know. We have some tools we can already take care of and remediate lots of content. If we educate faculty that those tools are there, they can do a lot of that on their own. But then there’s this larger scheme of getting an enterprise tool for the website, right? All of those individual college and departmental websites to go through accessibility checks and that’s clearly going to be a more long-term project. So yeah.

Kelvin: Well, thanks for sharing with us today a little bit of your context on accessibility, and we ought to follow back up and see what’s emerged later.

Sherri: I’m hoping we will be able to report good things and success.

Kelvin: Thanks.

Sherri: Thanks, Kelvin.
Tom: So, Kelvin, that was your interview with Sherri Braxton.

Kelvin: It was. Isn’t she great?

Tom: She is great. You know, one of the things that struck me as I listened to that was just how comprehensive their approach was. I know you and I sort of chatted about this in preparation for this discussion. That it was more than just online learning. It was sort of, you know, IT related, but that is part of what made it so comprehensive. And you even made a comment to the effect of just that’s really big. It’s got a broad scope. And, you know, I kind of commend them for their ambition in taking all that on.

Kelvin: And not just at one institution, right?

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: That University of Maryland system is…There are a lot of institutions in that thing.

Tom: There are, yeah.

Kelvin: They have to coordinate all that? Deep and wide, for sure. Yeah, I think a couple things stood out for me. Sherri spoke to the procurement process, which is really I think more on what we would call the information technology side. Although I suppose that there are—especially during our COVID-19 response—we’ve been procuring new online services, right? And accessibility in that context is all the more important. And so, that is hard to bring people along who don’t live this every single day, like in purchasing offices. So that’s a challenge.

Tom: Right. Yeah, and just sort of the kind of thoughtfulness with how she’s approaching it. Particularly her piece of it, which is kind of the world we live in—instructional design and course development, things like that. I just really appreciated, you know, that level of care and the attention that they’ve placed on accessibility, because it really is important, especially now. I mean, obviously, we had no idea when you recorded this that we would be in the midst of a global pandemic. But thank goodness people like her are thinking about this because then it puts you in a much better position to deal with a situation like this, where suddenly everybody is online, and students who need accommodations still need to continue their education, as well. So how can we make sure that we serve everybody?

Kelvin: Yeah. Yeah. You know, one of the things I was struck with, though, is despite all of that, right? She talked about policy, which we’ve talked about institutional versus state or federal or you know, policy or regulation and laws, all those kind of things before. But the system or institution level policy—but even with policy and presumably resources, and good practices which she talked about, there’s still…It’s so important for the individual faculty member to be involved in the
process. You really can only go so far with online course accessibility without that faculty member being engaged and cooperative in the process.

Tom: Yeah. And we talked about that I think in the episode that we did where, you know, I’ve described accessibility and open education as sort of taking every hill individually with every faculty member. Accessibility less so than, say, open educational resources, because you don’t have as much choice to not comply. But what you want to do is just make that part of the air that everybody breathes. That accessibility is everybody’s job, and it becomes part of the process. And, you know, it’s a culture shift, and Sherri alluded to that in her comments. And I think we can all relate because we’ve all had those conversations, you know. We talked about those situations where a faculty member said, “Well, if I am going to have to caption this, then I’m just going to take it out.” Like, well, no, that’s not the answer. Let’s figure out a plan to caption it, you know? Let’s just work on it. It can be done. It can be done.

Kelvin: Right, and to that point, right? Instructional designers working hand in glove, shoulder to shoulder, elbow to elbow, Zoom to Zoom, Teams to Teams, whatever, with client faculty are so important to that, you know, that…What would we say that is? That adoption or that persuasion process?

Tom: Yep. All right. So maybe I should try to kind of wrap all this up in a nice little summary.

Kelvin: Tidy Amazon box.

Tom: (chuckles) Amazon box. So, I think it’s probably fair to say that accessibility’s never easy, right? Both institutional strategy and the tactical work of faculty and instructional designers are necessary to ensure that all learners have access to their online learning content. Amen, brother.

Kelvin: Yeah. Yeah, I agree with that. That’s right. I agree, totally. We have time for a plug before we sign off?

Tom: Let us plug.

Kelvin: All right. We haven’t mentioned this in a while. But we do, believe it or not, dear listener, send out regular email newsletters with a direct link to the current episode—twice a month, currently—and all the show notes right in your inbox. The first Monday version even includes—a link to exclusive bonus content, and possibly a decoder ring. No, there is no decoder ring, but there is exclusive bonus content. To become a TOPcast Insider—we call them—and get these email goodies for free, please visit the signup sheet online at bit.ly/topcastinsider and sign up today so that you can get your email next time the episode drops.

Tom: Yeah! And the bonus content. We sometimes do put some secret bonus content in there. Cool. All right. Well, thank you to Dr. Sherri Braxton for the conversation. Thank you Kelvin for the interview. Until next time for TOPcast, I’m Tom.
Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya!