TOPcast Episode #70: Student Access to Digital Materials During COVID and Beyond

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. Hey Tom.

Tom: Hey Kelvin. How are you?

Kelvin: Well, I'm dandy. I'm standing here in the new office, and you know, there's worse things. Got a window. Got coffee cups.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. I'm across the suite from you—

Kelvin: I could almost wave at you.

Tom: Safely secured in my office. Yeah, we've got a brand-new office for those who have been keeping track at home, and someday we'll actually have the staff in here with us which will be wonderful.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Yeah. It does seem generally a little hollow and echoey at the moment when you walk around.

Tom: But it has been nice seeing people briefly even masked up and distant as they come in and unpack and it's like, "Hey!" It's like coming back after being away from school for the summer and you see your friends again in the fall. Like, "Ah, how was your summer?" It was a little bit of that.

Kelvin: A little bit.

Tom: So that's been actually very nice.

Kelvin: Yeah, I hate packing. I hate unpacking.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: I just like being.

Tom: *(chuckles)* Existing?

Kelvin: Existing, that's right.

Tom: Yeah. All right.

Kelvin: Yes, sir?

Tom: So, enough chit-chat, Dr. Thompson.

Kelvin: Enough of that.

Tom: Yeah, what is in the thermos? Because we are actually drinking the same coffee today.

Kelvin: We are.

Tom: You wandered over here, masked up, and poured me a cup of sanitized coffee.

Kelvin: *(chuckles)* Sanitized coffee, that's right. "I just added a dash—" No. Just, like, disinfected everything first while we were pouring. Yeah. Well, today's coffee, Tom, comes to us from TOPcast listener Marica Paljakka-Cargo. Marica Paljakka-Cargo, Assistant Professor of Interior Design at St. Louis Community College in Missouri. I'm hoping I said all of that right. I repeated it like I knew what I was saying. I don't really know. Marica is originally from Finland. So, she sent us some coffee from her homeland. And this is—more brutalization of the Finnish language to follow—this is called *Juhla Mokka*, or "celebration mocha" from Paulig Coffee, and my impression is Paulig is one of those big coffee companies that makes a lot of popular and affordable coffee for a lot of people. And Marica also sent us the following note, and this may be the most nostalgic coffee note we've ever gotten. So, I like this. She said, "I recall the smell from the Paulig Coffee factory in Helsinki when walking to school as a kid. Scent of a hometown coffee is like your roots. It's the bond that links you back." And then she adds a note to us and she says, "Wishing you both majestic moments with coffee from the land of thousands of lakes and midnight sun…and a nation that can't get enough of coffee." And then—I didn't know this, maybe you knew this—but Marica also lets us know that Finns drink more coffee per capita than any other nation. And that's—I've looked—consistently that's true, year after year. She says they drink about 2.2 pounds of coffee per person per month.

Tom: It's cold up there.

Kelvin: I guess. And then, Marica also notes, "Naturally, I have to also be a big fan of your TOPcast coffee dialog." Yay! Somebody is. "Although I am a tea drinker, I can appreciate majestic moments with a drink of choice." And I like that: "majestic moments." Isn't that great?

Tom: Yeah. I love that description she provided.

Kelvin: That's great.

Tom: I'm nostalgic for it and I've never been to Finland.

Kelvin: I know! I want to go walking around the streets of Helsinki *(sniffs)* smelling coffee.

Tom: Yeah. It sounds almost like the, you know, the kind of tour that you might get at like Epcot. You know, if they had a Finland at Epcot. They have a Norway and it's similar.

Kelvin: Yeah. That's true, that's true.

Tom: But that's cool.

Kelvin: I appreciate this. How was the coffee? I think it's pretty good, actually.

Tom: It is good, and thank you, Marica. Yeah, it's good, and the description is equally good.

Kelvin: Yeah, maybe better. I don't know. It's very good. Now, here's where the standards are going to have to lower. How was the connection to today's episode, Tom?

Tom: Alright, so I was trying to attend a little better than I have in the last couple to the description, and I'm going to zero in on your "impression" that Paulig is one of those big coffee companies that makes a lot of popular and affordable coffee for a lot of people.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah.

Tom: And I'm going to say that's the connection.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's the big part of it. And then there was a little bit of that story that Marica sent us. That, you know, that has lingered in her memory. It's made a lasting impact, a lasting impression on her. And so, slide that one in there too. Slide that one in there too.

Tom: Okay, cool.

Kelvin: What's that got to do with today's episode?

Tom: We are talking about accessibility and affordability and the future as informed, I guess, maybe a little bit by the past, at least the recent past. So that'll tie into her nostalgia. We're all nostalgic for pre-COVID days, I think.

Kelvin: That's true, that's true. A day doesn't go by when somebody doesn't say something like that.

Tom: Yeah, yeah.

Kelvin: "Remember when we could do this?"

Tom: Yeah. So, I think I think it's close and the coffee is good. And so, the connection's okay, Kelvin.

Kelvin: D+?

Tom: At least. Maybe a little higher.

Kelvin: Oh nice! Okay, I pass this class. Well, quite often, we speak about our audience of TOPcast listeners and the larger community of which we are a part as online education professionals or sometimes digital learning professionals. And we also call out our various facets of this community: you know, the online and blended faculty, instructional designers, online learning leaders. But I have to say, upon reflection, we seldom mention another part of our larger community. There are many corporate partners who supply technologies and learning resources as their contribution to our collective online education work of helping all students learn and obtain a high-quality education affordably and efficiently. And today, we're going to hear from a guest who is part of this corporate part of the family. So, Tom, you interviewed Cheryl Costantini recently since we've been working teaching and learning remotely. And you want to tell us a little bit about Cheryl in the interview?

Tom: Yeah, happy to. I enjoyed the conversation. Cheryl Constantini is Vice President at Cengage where she has worked for over 20 years. She currently leads product initiatives for Cengage Unlimited, and her particular focus is removing the barriers to educational access and supporting learner success.

Kelvin: Any comments you'd make before we cut to the interview?

Tom: We have kind of a wide-ranging discussion. We covered a lot of different topics but she's very knowledgeable and she has an interesting perspective given the fact that she kind of has a national view working with so many different institutions on a kind of national level. And I think that informs her perspective. And it's definitely worthwhile. So maybe we'll just sort of comment and reflect on it after the interview.

Kelvin: All right. Well, great. Well, here is your interview, Tom, with Cheryl Constantini.

(musical transition)

Tom: Cheryl, thank you very much for being on TOPcast.

Cheryl Constantini: Thank you. I'm thrilled to be here today.

Tom: Well, I know that, you know, Cengage has been involved with, you know, not just the distribution of materials or textbooks or even digital materials, but has been, you know, trying to work with partner institutions throughout this entire switch to remote learning. I know we've worked with various different publisher partners that we have—including Cengage—and one of the things that's come up is affordability. And this was something that really kind of struck home close for us when we started getting requests from students to access digital materials. And for us, we had a very practical reason in many cases, because when we switched to remote learning this past spring, it was on spring break, and students actually left their materials—whether it was a physical textbook or a laptop or a tablet or something that had access to the digital materials—in their dorm rooms. So, they were sort of stuck. And so, the publishers did a great job working with us, as did you know, companies like VitalSource through VitalSource Helps. So, I imagine in the conversation that you're having with your partners across the country that this is a theme that's showing up. Would that be correct?

Cheryl: Absolutely. I mean, many students were in that situation where they had left their books on campus. And when I talked with administrators and faculty, one of the things they were very grateful of was, you know, that we had opened up access to all of our course materials for free for students. So, you know, access for us was the first thing we wanted to help students and our partner institutions with. You know, they can't do anything without access to the learning and to the materials. So, we did that. But in addition to that, we also learned that institutions that had already had programs whereby—either institution-wide or for particular aspects of their academic programs—if they already had programs where students had unfettered access to course materials, they actually fared better because they already had that in place. So, it was a really interesting conclusion that I think some administrators reach is that, "Oh, you know, my institution already had programs in place where students had instant access." It just was something that they fell right into. They already had it. [We] didn't have to give them something new. So, it was, you know…Our key motivation was just to provide access to as many students as possible, and we had thousands of new courses created for students.

Tom: Well, you know, it's interesting. I was looking at—sort of in preparation for this conversation—the survey that Cengage underwrote from Babson and from OLC, and when you look at the question about what assistance would be most helpful for online instruction, I mean, the number one answer was—for both faculty and institutions—was information on how best to support remote students. So, I mean, that's not surprising. That's a very general sort of answer. But the second one, the second most largest response was greater access to online digital materials, which is sort of what you're alluding to. And I know for us, what we call first day access, what a lot of schools call inclusive access, has spiked for the summer semester, where it's something that—I know other schools are sort of ahead of us in this space, but for us, it's something that we've been rolling out and has been getting increasing attraction, and then this seems to have spiked it. And I don't know if you're seeing that elsewhere across the country when it comes to inclusive or first day access.

Cheryl: Yeah, we definitely are. And we have two programs that are like that. So, we have inclusive access, which most publishers—including ourselves—offer, but we also have something different which is Cengage Unlimited, which is all access, meaning students have access to any materials in our course catalog regardless of what courses they are enrolled in. So inclusive access is more of a course-by-course access. And the reason why sort of open access to our entire library was really effective is that the institution didn't have to worry about which courses the student was enrolled in and do they have access to the materials for that course. If they had "a subscription to Cengage Unlimited," they had access to anything they needed. And the thing that faculty really like is it gave them flexibility as they were trying to adjust to a remote learning setting and teaching setting. [It] gave them access to maybe assign different materials, right? Because anything in our library was available to any of their students.

Tom: You know, it's interesting if this spike is indicative of a future trend. Like, I don't think that the…What I've been describing as, you know, we're hitting sort of a high watermark with online learning as a result of COVID. We can't go any higher. Everything is online, right? But at some point, the water is going to come back down as people come back on campus, and perhaps there's a vaccine and people feel safer to do things the way they used to do it, but I don't think the water's ever settling back to where it was before. And I think it's the same thing with access to digital materials. And I wonder, you know, based on kind of your view of the national landscape, given your position, what you think maybe some of the longer lasting impacts of this grand national experiment will be?

Cheryl: Yeah, so always looking for silver linings, right? And I think there are many. I think there are many for institutions, there are many for faculty, and ultimately, there are many for the students that we serve. One is on the institutional level. I heard a lot of leaders say that they were very interested in talking to leaders at other institutions, that they really wanted to explore their network and understand what was working for some other institutions that they might want to adopt some of those best practices. And so, I think that that is a benefit to everyone, right? That we are sharing the best ideas, that we are figuring out what's working, and we're all sort of in this together. So, I think that's one thing that is going to be lasting. You know, even before COVID, we would often bring institutional leaders together, you know, annually or semiannually for some type of leadership forum, and people really enjoy meeting other college presidents or other provosts and talking about some issues that they are all grappling with. I think that that will continue and that that is even amplified. That need is greater today and will be going forward as institutions are faced with a host of challenges, right?

Tom: Yeah. And not to interrupt you, but it's interesting that, you know, what you're saying is reflected in that survey, that same survey I referenced before. The number one thing was information on how best to support remote students. I think the number four was a webinar for students on how to succeed in online courses. And number five was an online resource hub, with links to information about how to quickly transition to online learning.

Cheryl: That's right. That's right.

Tom: Yeah.

Cheryl: So, there are lots of implications there for both faculty and students too, right? So, with faculty, you know, I think we've always understood—and faculty would admit this—that they have a really deep understanding of their discipline, but perhaps as not much knowledge in the discipline of teaching and learning, right? And that has definitely increased over time. But with this really radical shift to remote work, no one was given the option, right? Like everyone had to get online. There is now—I hear this all the time from faculty—there is such a curiosity around how to do things better, around how to learn more about learning, and how to become a better teacher. And so, that is one of the silver linings for me, is that everyone is taking this really seriously. And it's not just a COVID issue, right? Like, this is going to persist. And then that knowledge that faculty are gaining today stays with them, right? On the other side of that, I think students also have a responsibility on this. Like, you know, whether it's our survey or any of the other interviews we've done with students, students jump to the conclusion really quickly that remote learning isn't for them for various reasons. And it's a bit of a generalization, but you hear it a lot in the media, how students [say,] "if the fall is going to be remote, I'm not interested." And I think that we need to figure out a way to empower students to also understand the positive side of learning online, right? Because there are some positives. So, they take ownership of that learning, too. Because if they're going to go into the fall with a little bit of a, "It's not going to work for me," it's going to be very difficult for faculty if they are in some type of blended environment to really accomplish what they seek to accomplish, which is students' learning.

Tom: Yeah. Now, there are a couple dimensions in that, I would think. So, obviously, there's the whole difference between, you know, well-designed, online instruction and remote learning—and I appreciate you using the term remote learning. [That's] something Kelvin and I have talked a lot about. And so, remote learning might just be intrinsically inferior to online just because it hasn't had the benefit of, you know, structured design and the time to build it that something that is designed natively for an online environment, you know, might be. So, that's part of it. And I don't blame students maybe for not being thrilled with that experience. But on the other side, these students who are experiencing remote learning…are not the primary online learner. You know, that might be a nontraditional adult learner who has a family or is picking online learning, because they want online learning. These are students who came for the campus experience, and now they're being told you can't have it. So, you know, there's all…I think there's a couple of different, you know, layers to this that are impacting that perception of it. Some of it justified and some of it is just a mismatch of the audience to the product. And I wonder if, you know, when you talked about, you know, faculty perception—even student perception—you didn't mention administration, and I wonder if there's a disconnect there. Do you think administration is on board? A lot of the push to reopen has been from sort of an administrative perspective, with some concerns from both students and faculty. Although I would think that—I do think that the freshmen—incoming freshmen—kind of want to be on campus. Others maybe have a little more concern. So, do you think that the administration is reflecting some of those same interests, needs, and desires?

Cheryl: Yeah, I think the administrators are in a very difficult position.

Tom: Thank you. *(chuckles)*

Cheryl: They're in a very difficult position because as much as they want things to go back to "normal," we really don't know what the fall is going to present ourselves with, and so, the best thing to do—and this is what most institutions are doing—is preparing for various scenarios. I will say, though, that it is difficult for faculty when administrators and college presidents are putting messages out there to their incoming students or their returning students, "We're going to be back face to face." And if that isn't the case, right? Because there's usually a caveat in that message that's somewhat subtle and that not everyone will pick up on, then that will really be a challenge for students to sort of adjust to. And who's going to have to deal with that challenge? The faculty, right?

Tom: Yeah.

Cheryl: Now, I will say, though, that just as faculty are really getting more comfortable and better understanding the merits of both a remote teaching environment and a face to face and starting to figure out, "How do I take the best of both of these"—right?—"so that I have a truly blended experience that maximizes the learning and the outcomes for my class?" I also think administrators are starting to think about the same thing. So, whereas they understand a core part of the student experience is on ground whether it is the athletics, whether it is any of the extracurriculars, or just the social aspect. You know, I've talked to many administrators who are figuring out, "How do I maintain sort of the core, the essence of that experience for students where they can have some of that, but maybe not all of it?" And what parts of that experience are most important to that, right? The football games, maybe. May be difficult to do. They can't do the football games. Maybe they can do more smaller group social activities, right? So, I think just like the faculty are thinking about how to set up their classrooms to take advantage of both mediums, administrators are also thinking about, "How do I maximize the use of my campus and that social interaction that students crave, while also balancing the need to be socially distanced to maybe have some of the classes online, maybe not resume all of the activities?"

Tom: Well, you know, maybe that's—this will probably a leading question, so forgive me—but maybe, as sort of a wrap up question, you're sort of alluding to the fact that—and I think this is sort of something I've been espousing—that one of the lasting impacts of this whole experience is that we will value more the things that must be in-person. And we will probably have more things online, but then that will make the things that remain in-person that much more valuable. And so, you touched on some of the kind of student life things, you know, but I wonder if you could make a comment on the instructional side of that?

Cheryl: Yeah. Yeah, I think I read an article in EdSurge a couple days ago around this particular topic, and the example they use—which I thought was a really good example—was classroom discussion. So, discussion in a face to face classroom and how that is a really important part of learning experience. But there's a constraint on that which is time, meaning not all students in the class get to

participate. And for some students, they may not be comfortable participating in that way. So how can an instructor design her course so that she has—if she's in some type of hybrid model—so that she has a component of that face to face conversation and discussion but also brings that discussion online and increases the participation, gets more students to contribute? Either by recording a video and posting it or just a text discussion, it will increase the overall participation. And I just saw that as a win-win, right? Because I hear faculty see all the time, "I just wish my students would participate more, right? It's always the same people, right?" But if you can think about, "How do I get that going in the whole classroom?" You know, thinking about my classroom holistically, both face to face and online, you will increase the quality of the participation as well as the frequency and the number of participants.

Tom: Well, any other words of wisdom for the TOPcast listening audience as we approach a very uncertain fall?

Cheryl: Yeah. No, I think the key to success is going to be flexibility. I know that's difficult. There's a lot of uncertainty. I think my takeaway, though, is that, you know, not only do institutions and faculty need to approach the fall with this understanding of "I need to be flexible," but I think one lasting impact is that students are going to expect that flexibility post-COVID, right? Because the flexibility gives them some advantages, too.

Tom: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's the only way you can prepare at this point is to prepare to be flexible. So, thank you so much, Cheryl, for being on TOPcast. We really do appreciate it.

Cheryl: Thank you. It was a pleasure.

(musical transition)

Kelvin: Well, Tom, that was your interview with Cheryl Constantini.

Tom: Indeed, it was. Yeah, I enjoyed the conversation. As I said, she's got kind of a really good perch from which to observe what's going on nationally, and I think her perspective is definitely valuable as we think about what's coming next in our collective higher education and particularly digital learning space.

Kelvin: Yeah, I really appreciated the emphasis on access. But—and I agree with you—I think that's maybe an overlooked resource that we have in our corporate partners is, like you said, there is a wide perspective that not all of us have that we can draw upon. I thought the point of flexibility is the key moving forward. I thought that was a very important note.

Tom: Yeah, and it's certainly the word of the day here at UCF as we're planning for the fall, and I know it is elsewhere, and maybe if there was anything to put a yellow highlighter on in her conversation, it was that word "flexibility." As we think forward—and even beyond the fall—I think what this whole experience has underscored for all of us is that the fact that flexibility may just need to be part of what we always plan for, you know. In certain parts of the country, certainly here

where we know every year we're going to get a hurricane and we're going to have to do something, we're kind of already prepared for certain kinds of events, but I think this has just kind of taught all of us something of a lesson that there are other things that might be lurking out there that you can't predict. And you just need to have the infrastructure in place to allow that sort of flexibility.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's why we've…I think most of us have paid attention. HyFlex has kind of made a resurgence. And here at UCF, we're pursuing something that you've coined the term "BlendFlex," and what we're doing here, and maybe we'll talk about that at some point. I think the EDUCAUSE learning initiatives, "7 Things You Should Know About" has done a HyFlex redux that's kind of coming out here pretty soon. Maybe we'll link to that in the show notes as well. Well, you want to try to land this plane?

Tom: Sure. So, as we've discussed, since we've been in this kind of field report/remote learning environment, we're all trying to stay alert to how this global pandemic might change our online education work long term. One thing that is likely not to change however, though, is that many, if not all of our students will need access to affordable digital learning content. That is a constant.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's exactly right. And I guess maybe we'll say, too: hey, if you haven't found our show notes, we have links to all kinds of stuff every single episode. Go to topcast.online.ucf.edu and check out what you've been missing if you haven't already been there. And other than that, Tom, I guess I will just say until next time for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya!