TOPcast Episode #74: “Connecting the Dots:” Lessons for Leadership

Narrator: What will your future look like? The job you do today could be different than the jobs of tomorrow. Some see this as a challenge. At UCF, we see opportunity, a chance for you to grow your knowledge, and strengthen your skills from anywhere life might take you. With in-demand degree programs and resources for your success, UCF Online can help you prepare for the future and all the possibilities that come with it.

(musical transition)

Tom Cavanagh: From the University of Central Florida’s Center for Distributed Learning, I’m Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin Thompson: And I’m Kelvin Thompson.

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

Kelvin: Woo!! TOPcast! Love it!

Guest: Woo!

Tom: (laughter) Woo! We got a lot of wooing going on, including one mystery woo that we heard in the background.

Kelvin: That's nice.

Tom: That's a lot of energy there, Dr. Thompson.

Kelvin: Well, you know, we try to add value.

Tom: I may just jump straight to given all that energy. What's in your thermos?

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Vodka. No, that's not true. No, it's coffee. It is unadulterated pure coffee from the wild lands of East Lansing, Michigan. This is a Biggby Best from Biggby—or Big "B"—Coffee based in East Lansing, Michigan. It was suggested to us and actually sent to us by our colleague, Dr. Shubha Kashyap, who has roots, I believe, in East Lansing. So, how is this coffee that you also are drinking because it's in your cup, too? And how's the connection?

Tom: Yeah. Okay, so for those who may be watching on our bonus video, you can see I'm using our branded TOPcast mug.

Kelvin: Lovely. I love it.

Tom: Lovely, yes. Available for purchase [which] we make no proceeds from, by the way. So the coffee is very good. I like it. And the connection is one of your better connections, Kelvin. I have to say. Yeah, you know how I'm like a sort of direct, not subtle—

Kelvin: Straightforward.

Tom: —straightforward—

Kelvin: In the bullseye.

Tom: —very simple, very literal kind of guy. And, um...

Kelvin: You found the connection.

Tom: This one's right in my wheelhouse. Yeah, so this coffee was sent to us by Shubha, and she's sitting here with us right now.

Kelvin: Wow!

Tom: She is today's guest.

Kelvin: It's amazing!

Tom: It's amazing!

Kelvin: What a connection!

Shubha Kashyap: Thank you! Thank you!

Tom: Yeah, she was our mystery woo at the top of the show for those that were wondering.

Kelvin: That can be a whole new segment. Who's the mystery woo? You, dear listener, could be the mystery woo in an upcoming episode of TOPcast. Send us two pounds of coffee addressed to...That's not true. So I guess we should say we are joined live today by special guest Dr. Shubha Kashyap, and if we were living in different times, which we're not, but if we were, we'd be recording this episode live in front of an audience made up of the 2020 cohort of the Online Learning Consortium's Institute for Emerging Leadership in Online Learning or IELOL. However, we are living in COVID times still, so we're preparing this episode for asynchronous access by IELOL participants followed by a live Q&A discussion with the cohort, and if all has gone according to plan, retrospectively, both this episode and a recording of that live Q&A will be released to TOPcast listeners in mid-September 2020. So here's hoping that's what has actually happened. Tom, you want to introduce more formally Shubha?

Tom: I would be very privileged to do so. So Dr. Shubha Kashyap currently serves as the Director of Online Learning Design and Innovation for the College of Engineering at the University of Michigan. Formerly, she held a number of different roles at Penn State University—where IELOL used to be housed—and other institutions related to academic affairs, student affairs, and online instruction. Notably, Dr. Kashyap is also a member of the faculty for the 2020 cohort of IELOL. Welcome Shubha. Thank you so much for being on TOPcast.

Kelvin: Woo Shubha! Yay!

Shubha: Thank you so much, Tom and Kelvin for the opportunity to join you today, and I'm glad to jump in with a mystery woo any time you need one.

Tom: So, what are you drinking? Are you drinking Biggby Coffee as well?

Shubha: I am drinking Biggby Coffee in a Michigan Engineering mug.

Kelvin: I see that. Big Blue!

Shubha: Yes, Big Blue! I'm a Spartan holding a Michigan mug working for the University of Michigan.

Kelvin: I thought it was weird. Those East Lansing roots and yet...

Tom: Ann Arbor, yeah.

Kelvin: I don't know how you do that.

Shubha: It's part of being a leader, I guess.

Kelvin: Oooh!

Tom: Mental compartmentalization.

Kelvin: Nicely done. Nicely, nicely, nicely done. Well, maybe that's a good transition. So, Shubha, as we discussed recently, you've had an interesting career journey—as Tom alluded to—with maybe access to education as a bit of a consistent theme. And one point we discussed was that as a leader, you've learned some things about facing new challenges, like working at your archrival as a Spartan, maybe. So, for instance, you're now working within the College of Engineering as an online education professional and, you know, STEM and online education don't always mix smoothly. And so, we thought we might start by asking you to quickly review your career path and some of those leader lessons you've learned along the way about facing new challenges.

Shubha: Sure. Well, thank you so much for the opportunity, and it's a great privilege to represent the University of Michigan but also the IELOL community. This is a great institute and I'm so glad to work with a new set of peers every year that join the IELOL family. So a little bit about myself, as you mentioned through my journey, is I have worked at various institutions. I come from a family who strongly valued education and I think it's because they saw how education changed the trajectory of lives for people in their own lives and in their own families and in their professional careers. And I think at some point, everyone has a moment where they really struggle or they need some support or they need some help, and I faced some of those times myself in my own education journey. And as, you know, folks stepped in to help me and sort of get me on a path towards success, I started asking them, "So what did you major in or what did

you get to— How did you get to where you are?" And several people said, "Oh, I majored in student affairs administration. I majored in higher ed. I am a higher ed professional." And these people kept showing up in my life that I thought, "Wow, I would love to do what you're doing." And so that sort of set me on this path towards higher education. And it's really when I started finding my professional focus. And I said, "Well, I want to be able to do this for other folks as well," and so, I've served in various positions in, as you mentioned, in student affairs and academic affairs. But the key for me was how am I contributing to helping those that otherwise wouldn't have access? What is my contribution in this space? So this has led me down some interesting journeys. I've worked in student athletics where I supported tutoring efforts for a football team—having never been to a football game.

KELVIN: Wow.

Shubha: Interesting, interesting, interesting way to learn about your students and learn about the people you're working with. When I went to Pennsylvania [to] work for Penn State, I actually worked with a program that worked with highly motivated students that didn't have necessarily the same access and privilege that students across the across the county would have had. And so, my role wasn't to just provide them with resources but to better understand their direct needs, and this required me to really embed myself in their role, their challenges, and then not find prescriptive ways to help but actually understand their journey, and then understand how they could best be supported. Nothing is a one size fits all approach. So, when I switch to online education, this was a big shift for me because I was moving from a student support to administrative role, and this was brand new. And I have to say it pulled back the curtain a little bit on how higher ed works. And it almost set me back for a year. I said, "Whoa, what is going on? I thought this was about student access." And what I realized was I had to look at how the university works, and how the administrative functions aligned to best support students. So I embedded myself within the system, began to understand the challenges that adult learners face and distributed students, and how we as administration, staff, and faculty can best support them. So, each time I took a career shift, it was to serve a different audience or to understand their needs and challenges. And I think that what this did for me was it sort of helped me realize that whether I'm a leader in one type of space or another, the key was for me to understand the challenges and their needs, and then to sort of make sure that I was comfortable with the idea that I had to learn a little bit about this group but also leverage the strengths and opportunities of the group that I was working with and understand how best to support them. Shifting to University of Michigan, I'm embedded in a STEM area now, and I'm not one to make generalizations. So, I think this was key for me was, "Help me understand what I need to know to work and be successful and support students and faculty in this space." And it's been a great journey to be at the University of Michigan now for about a year.

Kelvin: Very cool. Very cool.

Tom: Yeah, thank you. Thank you for that career recap, and I think that it would be both inspiring but also potentially familiar to a lot of people who are currently participating in the IELOL program. One of the things that we had discussed a

little bit prior to clicking record was what a leader has to do to come up to speed in areas that they might be responsible for leading that they don't have any experience in, and you sort of alluded a little bit to the football team, but you're not an engineer, right?

Shubha: Mhmm.

Tom: But you are currently supporting a college of engineering and the delivery of that particular content. I wonder if there's any strategies, insights that you might be able to offer to not just the IELOL participants but all of our listeners who might be put into a leadership role where they have jurisdiction/responsibility for things that are not necessarily familiar to them. It's something that I've dealt with several times in my career, and it sounds like it's something that you have as well.

Shubha: So, thank you. That's a very good question. When I think about journeys like this where I'm walking into a new space—whether it's physically a new space or culturally, a new social context—I sometimes think of it as walking into a foreign country. You know, we have new language. We have new customs. We have new attributes to learn. We have a hierarchy that often exists that we may not be aware of, and walking into a country and using your own norms or your own context from where you grow up into a new country doesn't always translate. So, the quickest way to sort of learn and embed yourself in a new community is to learn those norms, to learn the context, learn the language, meet people, develop your network, figure out how to go to the grocery store. I think all of this translates—

Tom: I was going to mention food. Best way to learn a country is eat their food.

Shubha: Where is the good coffee is always a great intro question for folks.

Kelvin: That is a very, very good, important question to ask.

Shubha: It is! And so, this is one of the things that I have done each time I make a shift, even within the same institution. You know, moving from Educational Equity to the World Campus was a cultural shift for me. And so I think that for anyone that is looking to grow in their career or looking to shift in the context of their work, treat it like you're walking into a new country. You're moving to a new place. Be kind, give yourself a little bit of grace, and be open to what you're going to learn, but also don't forget where you've come from. You know, they are all people, as well. There are norms and contexts, and you also have contributions you bring to this community. So, weigh that with what you're learning along the way. I did this. I've done this now a couple of different ways, and the key is I've watched other people do this. That's how I learned it. I myself only watched because I watched new people incorporate themselves and find ways to contribute to an organization when they moved in, and I really enjoyed how they articulated that. They said, "I'm here. I'm here to contribute. What can I do to help you hit the ground running quickly?" And watching other folks do that has helped me sort of understand that that's something that I would like to do when I move to a new group or work with a new community.

Kelvin: That's excellent. Like one of the themes I'm hearing I think within that, right, is that I heard even in your recap is be a learner. Like, you know, have your eyes and ears open. Be a learner. Learn the space and don't make assumptions. Right? And would you agree with those as kind of practical, break it down kind of things?

Shubha: Yeah, I would agree. I think that there are times where I learned from situations about what I would like to do. There are also times I am learning from a situation about what I would do differently, and there's still learning taking place. So, an openness to learning is key. It's also very tiring, I have to say, you know, that openness to learning, and I think that's part of being a leader is managing your energy and making sure you prioritize what's important to you or what's important for your role as you learn.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's excellent. And can I ask you this too? As you were speaking a minute ago, I was reminded of my major qualitative research professor in my doctoral program, and she used to have this mantra that she would always instill, and she said with qualitative research—and I think there's so many areas this applies. It seems like [it with] this one—you want to make the strange familiar and make the familiar strange. And I think that I've always loved that kind of that idiom in it, and as we talk about don't make assumptions and take on a learner and be kind of cross cultural, you know, kind of come in like a different culture, different country. I mean, does that resonate with you?

Shubha: With me or with Tom? *(laughter)*

Kelvin: No, with you.

Tom: He doesn't care what I think, trust me.

Shubha: Okay. *(laughter)*

Kelvin: No, that's not true. I always care about you, Tom.

Shubha: So, I do agree with that. That does resonate with me. One of the more important steps that I took, or it sort of fell in my lap, or it's hard to say sometimes a little bit of both is an opportunity to receive some coaching. Professional coaching. I met with a coach, and this was something that is a career interest of mine. It's something I do as part of my role within and beyond my organization. And that was a very life changing learning opportunity.

Kelvin: The coaching was?

Shubha: Coaching. It was behavior-based coaching. Rubi Ho, if you haven't met him, he really helped me shine a spotlight on myself on some of the behaviors that I felt were contributing to my success and those that were holding me back from success. And that was also a very important learning opportunity. I would recommend that for anyone who...Well, let's not qualify. Anyone. It's a great opportunity.

Tom: You know, it's not quite coaching, but I often hear when people describe their own sort of career journey, the mention of mentoring and the importance of mentoring, and I'll admit I haven't really had the benefit of a formal mentor in my own personal career. There are people that I've observed and admired and tried to emulate. So, maybe they didn't realize they were being a mentor in some ways, but I've never had somebody sort of like formally play that role for me. I've done it for others a couple of times and have found it rewarding from that side of the fence. But I wonder if that's something that you've experienced on either side—either as a mentor or as a mentee—and if you found that valuable along your journey?

Shubha: Yes. I have had several key mentors through my roles and just professionally and personally, and one, just because I know we're talking about online education, Larry Ragan has been a great mentor for me.

Tom: Friend of the show.

Shubha: Friend of the show, yes. And friend of IELOL.

Kelvin: Yeah, very much.

Shubha: What I really gained from that specific mentoring relationship—and many across the board—is there's an element of timeliness that occurs. You may have someone you need to speak with who can provide you with timely support or feedback or guidance. And that is something that...That's gold. Timeliness when it comes to support and feedback. The other piece was accountability. There were times where I needed a mentor to sort of hold me accountable to some of my choices and decisions and say, "Is this really the best thing for you right now? What are you doing for yourself to progress?" or whatever those questions are that you're working on. You know, your mentor knows what—or should know, hopefully, if you have a two-way interaction—is what you are working on for yourself. And they can also be that great person to very gently hold you accountable. And the way they may do that is, "Well, I know I've heard you talk about this in the past. Is this aligned with your goals or your expectations?" That's a very gentle accountability move right there, and as a mentor, you've already accepted that this is someone that you respect and that you are listening to and those mentors are...Again, how you select your mentors, there's no one way and you should never have just one, but the idea is that maintaining some connection to someone who you can chat about larger topics with, confidential topics with, who can offer you a wider perspective beyond what you yourself are seeing—you may have blinders on—and your mentor may be exactly that person you need to open things up a little bit. It's been a really valuable experience for me.

Kelvin: Just a comment on this: that made me think of a resource that maybe we'll put in the show notes. Forgive me, I don't remember what organization it anchored down to. I want to say it was one of the faculty organizations and it's really framed as a faculty tool, but I think by extension, anybody can use it. It's a mentoring map, right? And I think that dimension, that nuance that you mentioned, Shubha, of not just having one mentor or having multiple mentors,

different kinds of dimensions. This map lays out all kinds of different dimensions in professional and personal life. It's almost like a family tree kind of a thing. And then you, as the person who's taking responsibility for themselves, is literally like, "Huh, who do I have in my network who is fulfilling this role?" Again, whether they are knowledgeably, intentionally in that role, they know that formally or not, it's like, "Who do I look to in this area?" And I think, you know, there are passive mentors and active mentors. You've been fortunate to have real active, deliberate mentors. Tom's talked about having—what we might call in the literature—passive mentors who, you know, you get stuff from. You know, you're ringing them out of valuable insights, but we'll put that in the show notes. Does that kind of concept— Is that kind of aligned with what you're saying of like, you don't just have one person that you're emulating. You get different voices in different areas of your professional and personal life. Does that make sense?

Shubha: Yes, that resonates with me. The piece I also like to remind folks is what type of mentor are you going to be? You know, there are going to be times where people are going to come to you just as you've gone to others, and what's your contribution going to be? How are you going to be there to help them through their journey? And, you know, for me, and this will...Maybe it's the first time I've articulated it, but I don't think it would come as a surprise to most is when I'm chatting with folks, I'm trying to help them identify their own strengths and leverage their strengths. Most people are very hard on themselves, right? They know what they're working on. They know what they're not doing well. They know what areas they want to approve, but they're often not really great at leveraging what they're good at. You know, they sort of say, "Oh, I must be good at it so everybody's good at it. It's something that comes naturally to everybody." And I say, "It's easy for you because you're good at it. Never minimize your own strengths. This is a strength that you have. It's not equally distributed. So, make sure you always leverage your strengths." And so, oftentimes that's how I see when I'm looking at someone or chatting with someone, I always like to remind them of, "Yes, you may have things you're working on, but let's leverage the strengths and positive attributes you have, and let's see how this impacts your journey or how you can leverage that for the next stage of your career." And I think that's something that we need more of oftentimes, is for someone to remind us of what we do well.

Tom: Some of what you're describing could fall into this category of advocacy, and that has come up in the IELOL discussions. I know it did last year during the podcast that we did.

Kelvin: With Liz Ciabocchi, season 5. Go look it up.

Tom: Yes, Liz Ciabocchi, another friend of the show. Now you're a friend of the show, Shubha.

Shubha: Thank you!

Kelvin: The mystery woo.

Shubha: Woohoo!

Tom: Yeah. Have you had people advocate for you that you've been the beneficiary of? And how have you helped advocate for others who maybe felt marginalized in any sort of way? We heard this a lot from women last year it seemed like. That they felt that the culture that they were working in didn't encourage them to speak up, and they needed somebody who would actually create the space for them to do that. And some of that's perception, but perception is reality if it's causing you to change your behaviors. And it sounds to me—without knowing a lot more than what you've described about your own career journey—that you've been able to find that path and advocate for yourself, but I'm wondering if you've helped others and others have helped you along the way?

Shubha: Yes, I have absolutely had people who helped me along the way, and in some ways, one way that I could look at my career is a series. You know, remember when you're a kid and you did those connect the dots exercises?

Tom: What do you mean as a kid?

Shubha: Okay, well, last week, because we're all in quarantine and looking for fun activities right now. So those connect the dots are sometimes how I kind of look back at my own career. I met a critical person at a critical time in my life and they opened a door for me, and they said, "You know what? This is a project I'm working on. I'd love to have you join me." And that was very impactful for me. It was something that helped me get to the next level. "Hi, you know what, Shubha, I know you've mentioned an interest in this. Let me introduce you to someone who is working on something or could use a volunteer to help with a project that is on that topic." Those dot to dot connections, or those intros, those are a privilege. Also, I recognize that not all opportunities come like that to everyone. And so, when I see an opportunity for me to do that for someone else, I take it. And people say, "Well, you're just making things more complicated because now you're bringing in... You're just making this harder on yourself because now you're bringing in more people and now you have to carry them through to the next level, and you have to make sure you're accountable for what they contribute as well," and I say, "Everyone's accountable for themselves, but someone else at that critical point in my career helped connect someone for me, and it's my responsibility to do that for someone else, especially for women in the field." There is, um, I mean...There is generally a lack of that. People tap themselves. You know, I know that there's known research that when you fulfill various sort of social categories or political categories or perception categories in the culture stratification, that you are tapped more for opportunities and that can also cause more fatigue. And I think for me, it's less about sort of positioning people and it's more about, "Look, I got tapped for opportunities that helped me move forward. I want to do the same for someone else." That's how we pay it forward. And, you know, I think TOPcast is a great opportunity where you also are sort of helping more people to make sure their message is shared. What a great opportunity. And now, you know, that's how this is all a part. You know, so one of my favorite pieces is I loved my gym in State College. It was a great gym. The working out was fine, you know, whatever. But the key was, there were so many people that I met who helped me build connections with others, and I could help them build

connections. And so for me, that was one of the best parts about going to the gym. So, again, the workout was great, but it was the connections, it was the opportunities, and it was helping other people sort of find their way which helped me get a lot out of those connections as well.

Kelvin: That's awesome.

Tom: That's maybe a really great way to kind of put a button on this conversation. I think that's such great advice. There are several things I'm going to take away from this conversation and apply in my own life.

Kelvin: For sure.

Tom: Especially the one about viewing a new situation as a new country. That's an amazing lens to look at that through and I'm definitely gonna put that in my quiver as an arrow that I'll pull out on occasion.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: So Kelvin, do you want to maybe take a shot at at the bottom line of this episode?

Kelvin: Absolutely. And I'll just comment that Shubha, I think we could talk to you for like another hour, right? And the good news is we do have this question and answer session with IELOL participants coming up that we will record and will be bonus content in the show notes area of the TOPcast website. So, any of our listeners who have found this conversation valuable and instructive, I would encourage you go check out the Q&A with Shubha because I'm planning to ask you some more questions. But yes, I will take a shot at the bottom line. So, see how this resonates with the two of you. So, our journeys—our personal journeys—shape the leaders that we become, and leaders sharing with each other the lessons learned along the way can enrich us all as online learning professionals. Would you agree with that?

Tom: I would, but Shubha can disagree if she wants.

Shubha: I'm with you, Kelvin, on this one.

Kelvin: All right. That's good. It's happened so rarely. I appreciate somebody validating my perspective. Thank you very much.

Tom: Well, Shubha, thank you so much for being on the episode. This has been terrific.

Kelvin: Absolutely.

Tom: Thank you for the Biggby Coffee. I will hold it up for those watching at home, studio audience. We really enjoyed it and it was very generous of you to provide our beverage for today's episode.

Shubha: Thank you.

Kelvin: Very cool. Every guest should bring their own coffee.

Tom: *(laughter)* Yeah, absolutely. So, to be continued in the Q&A for IELOL, but for this episode, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.

(musical transition)

Kelvin: TOPcast Insiders, grab your decoders! Todays' secret message is Denver King Zero New-york (one word) Adams Queen Adams Young Zero George Xray (one word) Adams Peter Union Union. Write down the letters from the spelling alphabet and use your decoder to discover the secret message. Not a TOPcast Insider? Do not despair! You, dear listener, can become a TOPcast Insider by signing up for free at http://bit.ly/topcastinsider. That's bit.ly/topcastinsider. All lower case. No spaces.