

TOPcast Episode #75: Field Report #7: “Fostering Resilience” for the Spring

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. Hello Kelvin.

Kelvin: Hey Tom. I like that podcast.

Tom: It’s a decent podcast.

Kelvin: Yeah. Could be worse.

Tom: Very decent, I must say, to quote the famous Ed Grimley.

Kelvin: Wow, there’s a callback.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. I wonder how many people listening know who Ed Grimley is.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Only people with the silver in their follicles.

Tom: *(laughing)* Maybe. Maybe. The great—The very great Martin Short.

Kelvin: That’s right. Who I heard—did I hear this just recently? I thought... Yeah, okay. Martin Short’s Canadian. I was listening to a Marc Maron podcast and I always, for some reason, have to pause for a second. Dana Carvey and Martin Short I sometimes will confuse. Dana Carvey is from Montana.

Tom: —From California.

Kelvin: I heard Montana is what somebody said.

Tom: Montana? So, I’ve heard him interviewed a number of times. Maybe he’s lived in southern California.

Kelvin: Yeah, could be. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Tom: Actually, Marin County, I thought, because he's talked about doing early stand up when he was very young and knowing Robin Williams when he was working the clubs.

Kelvin: I think I'll have to go back and listen now because it was the J.K. Simmons interview which I enjoyed a lot. You know, turns out he has a music degree, studied conducting, and then like, that role that he got the Oscar for—which I haven't seen—in *Whiplash*, he actually was conducting. He said, "No, I got a degree in that. I wouldn't want to fake it!" The director was like, "Don't worry about it. We'll bring in a body double." "No, I can actually read charts! I can wave my hands to the music! It's fine!" Anyway, Marc Maron. But none of that is what we're here to talk about today, Tom. *(laughing)*

Tom: Yeah. We got off on a very, very odd little cul de sac there. But come with us, dear listener, because we'll bring you back.

Kelvin: Maybe!

Tom: Yeah, but you know what, this is interesting because, you know, we're going to have one of our field reports from the front lines of pandemic instruction, right? But one of the things I was commenting to somebody recently is that because we live our lives on Zoom, or Skype, or Microsoft Teams, which is—I've had all three today.

Kelvin: Speak about whiplash, there's some whiplash right there.

Tom: Yeah, exactly. Literally, I've been in all three today. So, what I've noticed is that the kind of conversation you and I just had—

Kelvin: Mhmmm.

Tom: —I don't have anymore.

Kelvin: Yeah!

Tom: Because they're just agenda-driven, you know, virtual meetings. I don't have the just leaning in the doorway or catching you in the hallway or something. I heard a funny story from a colleague. When we first started coming back to the office—you and I are both sitting in the office right now—and she told me this hilarious story, and then I realized, I haven't heard a funny story from colleague since March. So, you know, sorry listeners, you got to hear me and Kelvin catch up a little because we haven't really been doing it.

Kelvin: That's right. But hey, maybe this is sort of that virtual collegial conversation virtually. You need a little of this, you know, because maybe you're in the same boat we are.

Tom: Yeah. I think that social lubrication, people are kind of missing now. I think there's—and I think for virtual companies or virtual organizations—of which we

haven't been one until March hit—they figured out how to do that. They work it into their life. The way the business, the organization runs, they work in some of that social lubricant, if you will, of having those kinds of conversations and having a couple of minutes or having a happy hour or whatever it is. But those of us that haven't lived in in that way, you know, I've noticed its absence.

Kelvin: I try, Tom—I don't know if you know this—very deliberately try to bring the extraneous into every interaction that I have.

Tom: Yeah, I know that about you.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Just lubricating the social, that's what we're doing.

Tom: Well, speaking of lubricant, I've got a cup of beverage in front of me that you poured for me today.

Kelvin: I did.

Tom: And I'm enjoying it.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think it's a nice cup of coffee. So, you're probably wondering what it is. Well, I'll tell you if you'd like to know. So, today's coffee is a single-origin Honduras from the Santa Barbara region of Honduras—not California—and the Finca Las Brisas farm produced by Dennis Teruel. This coffee was roasted by Victrola Coffee Roasters in Seattle, Washington, and Tom, if you've been paying attention, this description might *sound* familiar to you, but this is your first time tasting the coffee because this coffee made a previous appearance during the early days of our at-home recordings of the podcast during Episode 65: "Field Report #2."

Tom: Numero dos.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Who would've thought we'd be doing this many of them? This is Field Report #7. It was in my cup at that time, but it was not in yours because hey, we were totally separate at home. But now we're both drinking it. So, I'll ask you how the coffee is again. You said it was good, but I'll put you on the spot, and how's the connection?

Tom: Oh, yeah. No, I do. I like it. And the connection is...

Kelvin: *(laughing)* The connection. The connection!

Tom: Yeah, I'm not sure I'm getting the connection other than it's linked to the early days of our COVID transition.

Kelvin: Yeah. So, the theme of today's episode it seems like is callbacks, right? So, this is a coffee from our "Post-COVID" episode, and dare I say that five months ago, maybe we thought we'd have been out the back end of this thing by now and have ended the field reports and beyond the talk and really, truly post-COVID,

but here we are still during COVID. So, we can share this coffee now. But we're still not back to normal, exactly. You know—

Tom: We're not in the same room.

Kelvin: No. Even though we can share the cup of coffee, so that's progress, but we're not in the same room. So, it's not real normal, five months after the previous episode was recorded. And we're all trying to figure out, "Well, what are the next steps?" What's, you know—Gosh, we're getting so tired of the "new normal" or whatever but [we're] finding our way. You know, finding some kind of equilibrium. So, this was coffee that was obtained during the cancellation of the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative Conference in Seattle back in February 2020. It was brought home by instructional designer Charlotte Jones-Roberts. And so, instead of waiting to break it open until we're back together, we're going to break it out now, draw a line in the sand, and [talk about] what's the next step forward? So that's my connection. That's my help. That's my primer for today's episode. So, what do you got?

Tom: Yeah, I guess I was on the right track by the callback to the previous episode in the connection to the COVID, but we are going to talk about what's next. We're going to talk about Spring planning and how we're all starting to prepare for another semester where we may be dealing with a pandemic. I want to just take a moment to thank Charlotte for flying all the way to Seattle to buy us a bag of coffee, then turning around and coming right home. *(laughing)*

Kelvin: Thanks Charlotte!

Tom: We even talked about her, I think, in that episode and that trip. Unfortunately, she was the first or at least her trip was the first casualty of all of our travel bans and everything that we're all under right now. So maybe Charlotte, you should have stayed a little bit longer in Seattle while you had the chance because we're all locked down now.

Kelvin: Yeah. That's right. 'Least she got there. I think we had other people that didn't quite make it. They turned around in route, en route. Yeah, that's right. So as a reminder, for as long as this current reality of remote teaching lasts, we are continuing a monthly miniseries of field reports in our first Monday episodes of TOPcast in which we focus upon some aspect of this unique circumstance. Meanwhile, on the third Monday episodes, we will continue on with our guest interviews because life goes on. And I guess we'll have to talk about at some point, Tom, how long we, you know, consider remote teaching like a temporary thing and how long we keep on going to the field reports. I think we'll do a few more maybe. We'll see from there.

Tom: Yeah, kind of before we pressed record today, we were just talking about that. Like, we thought this field report thing would be just a little temporary miniseries within the world of TOPcast, but it looks like there's no light at the end of the tunnel right now, at least as far as how we're teaching. I guess as long as we have something to say about it, we'll keep doing it. But at a certain point, it may be

that we start transitioning to maybe some more of our standard conversations and bring in COVID-ish elements.

Kelvin: Yeah, we're going to be in double digits in our field reports here pretty soon. But back in our—speaking of a callback—in Episode 65, which was “Field Report #2: Preparing for the Post-COVID Future,” we said that: one, our general approach has been to rely more on actual online courses than remote instruction in each semester and better prepare non-online faculty for remote instruction each semester; and secondly, we're already hearing voices in our field—back then, five months ago—speaking about the longer term AKA years' impact of COVID-19 and remote instruction. So, this is where we pick up today's episode. As we record this episode, we are well into the Fall 2020 term, and like our listeners, we continue to think about what's next. What does the next term hold? How do we prepare for what's to come? So, we thought we'd have a conversation about that.

Tom: Yeah, I've actually, within the past week or two, started getting questions and started having meetings about Spring. And so, we're recording this in the middle of September. It's not too soon to start planning for Spring, because students will be—

Kelvin: You and I have been talking about Spring for a long time. It's been my observation [that] people—I'd say to people, “You know, it seems like everybody was so focused on Fall.” You know, we were talking about Fall, because you had the Summer, right? And a lot of institutions aren't doing stuff. But we knew a lot more about the Fall earlier than we do about the Spring, I think, generally speaking in our field.

Tom: Yeah, well, it kind of reminds me a little of like, when I was underage, and you keep thinking, “When I turn 21, things will be better. I'll be able to go to a bar and hang out my friends. I'll have a drink,” and so 21 becomes this thing in your head, this milestone. So, then you turn 21, and then nobody tells you, “You keep going.” Right?

Kelvin: *(laughing)*

Tom: “What do you mean, I get older?” Right? And so, you keep getting older. I kind of felt like Fall was kind of our 21 in some ways. Like, “We just got to get set up for Fall. We're teaching this BlendFlex thing. We got to get all the equipment installed. We've got to train all our faculty.” Like, “Whew! We did it. Fall! ...What?”

Kelvin: Keep on going *(laughing)*.

Tom: Keep on going. Yeah. So, we're looking at Spring right now, and right now, our assumption, I think, is that Spring is going to present us with the same context as Fall has presented us, and we're going to probably end up doing basically the same kind of thing that we did for Fall, for Spring. I saw a news headline just yesterday that some CEO from, I think, the world's largest manufacturer of

vaccines—it was an Indian company—said it won't be until 2024 that everybody in the world can get a vaccine or whatever it is.

Kelvin: That's attention-grabbing, isn't it?

Tom: It is! Right. Now, there are privileges, right? To being in a wealthy western country where we would probably end up getting them first or something. But still, it's a sobering headline that I saw. And I'm thinking, "Wow, we better start really normalizing mask wearing if we haven't already." I mean, it pretty much is. I don't go anywhere, and I don't see—I mean, everybody wears masks every time I'm going out.

Kelvin: Yeah. Thank you. Thank you, mask wearers. We all appreciate it. Keep doing that. Keep doing that. Yeah, you know, before we hit record, I know I said that I had run across—speaking of news items—I had run across this quote from Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top infectious disease expert in the US, which maybe a lot of folks around the world are aware of, as well. He was quoted in a news article saying, "I don't know what's going to happen, and I'm not predicting." And I thought, "Well, dang, if that guy doesn't know what to anticipate, what are we going to talk about on this episode?" But I think we can talk about some principles that we believe are wise, right? About what seems to be the smart course of action that we can weave into our work to help our institutions be successful, right?

Tom: Yeah, and there [already] have been some announcements like this, just like for Fall. The Cal State System has already announced what they're doing for Spring, and it's basically going to be what they did for Fall, which is almost entirely online, except for some few exceptions. The ones I'm curious about are the schools that pivoted. Like the UNC's or the Michigan States that started face-to-face and tried to do everything they could and had plans and then abandoned them when circumstances changed. What are they going to do for Spring? I wonder.

Kelvin: Right. Yeah. I think that's interesting. And, you know, it seems like they get some criticism, right? There's a little bit of like, "Oh, can make up your mind?" Or whatever. And I think that is a tough one, right? Because—I think we've talked about this before—we need to be open minded, right? And open to change and flexible and nimble and all, but then there's a balance between that and staying the course, making a good decision, and sticking with it to some extent. But I tend to agree with you. I think that generally, most of our institutions are going to be doing some version—in the Spring—of what we did in the Fall. Maybe with some tweaks, right? Like lessons learned, I hope. You know, adjust things a little bit. Some proportions may be [adjusted,] but I suspect that's what we'll do at UCF. I expect most institutions to do that, but I think one of the things that we need to all say to each other is we should avoid expecting a quick snap back to the old normal. Like, I might have told you this. A couple of us were having a conversation about some procedural operational stuff, maybe a month ago, and one of our dear colleagues said, "You know, okay. Well, that thing that you said? That's only for Fall," and a couple of us looked at each other and looked at her and said, "Well, only for the Fall? Yeah, I think I would just

assume that we're going to stay on this path that we're on until you hear differently. Don't expect that our exigent circumstances of Fall 2020 just—poof!—are going to go away, right?" It's a "don't expect a quick snap back." You know, it's going to be a while before we emerge, and then, you know, focus on these broader principles.

Tom: I think what we'll probably end up doing here—maybe a lot of other schools will do the same—is more evolutionary from Fall to Spring than the kind of revolutionary that we implemented for the Fall. I could see us tweaking some things, some training, some practice. In fact, we've already tweaked our training. We've made a number of little adjustments to it, but the fundamental core of it has remained the same from what we did this Summer. We've just changed some of the some of the details. So, I don't know if we're going to expect any sort of major, you know, giant changes for the Spring compared to what we did for Fall. I would expect similar sorts of ratios of what's online to what's not, the credit hours, the kinds of modalities that we're delivering in. I expect a lot of that to be the same. You know, I say that now having just started these conversations, but that's my sense.

Kelvin: I mean, absent anything coming out of left field, right?

Tom: Exactly. Right. It's easy to say in the middle of September, right? That without knowing, right? So, who knows what could happen between now and the end of the calendar year? But, you know, if everything stays the course, then yeah.

Kelvin: So, I think, you know, my thinking, anyway—I jotted some notes down—as you know was what are the principles that will get us through, even if something comes out of left field? So, I threw a couple of these down, and I'll mention a couple and see what you think, and if you want to add anything to them. I think some of these are just summarizing maybe some of the themes that have emerged in our previous field reports, but, you know, one is the importance of fostering resilience in our practice, right? Because if you're resilient, then your approach is less prone to disruption, that thing [that] comes out of left field. I said recently, Tom, I was covering for you in a BlendFlex presentation. I said, "It's like a Florida palm tree, you know? That can sway in the hurricane force winds. You need some flexibility. You need some resilience."

Tom: Bend, don't break.

Kelvin: Bend, don't break. You know, your approach has to be resilient. Would you agree with that?

Tom: I would totally agree with that. Yeah, yeah. We had a tropical depression blow through the state over the weekend, and I happened to be in South Florida where it was going through. And I had that exact observation as I sat and watched the palm trees get blown, you know, halfway over, but bounce back up.

Kelvin: Yeah, the reason they adapted that way, right? It works. It works for them. So, you know, I guess, what are things that help us foster resilience? One of the

things I thought of was avoiding extremes and rigidity in our thinking and in our processes.

Tom: Yeah. Well, also, kind of what we've tried to do in some of the training is minimize the "thou shalts," the absolutely non-negotiables, and instead sort of provide kind of guardrails, you know. I think about it when I took my son when he was little bowling, and they put up the guardrails so that you can't get a gutter ball. But that ball can roll all over the place inside that lane as much as it wants, as fast or as slow as it wants. And I think about that. So, we just need to set up the guardrails for faculty and for our administrative systems so that everything else can kind of be up to those who have agency and expertise to run it how they see fit. We just need to make sure that we keep them out of trouble or difficulty.

Kelvin: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Any other ways that you can think of that are just good pieces of advice for fostering resilience?

Tom: Certainly the training, right? Providing training for faculty so that they're enabled and empowered to solve their own problems in many ways. That's been helpful, but also the wraparound support services, if you can provide it so that when somebody gets in trouble, you can immediately kind of, you know, parachute in and help. Those are two ideas.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that those are really good. They're part of our practice every day, but I think, you know, that's a very good reminder. That that's one of the reasons I think we fared pretty well here at UCF in the initial March 2020 pivot, because we had some of that built into our processes already. Not everybody does. And then another one, I guess, that comes to my mind that—I know we keep echoing on every single one of these episodes, it seems like—relying more and more on actual online design. That seems to me to be the least-susceptible-to-disruption kind of approach. Again and again, the ones that are actually real online courses, folks were like, "Yeah, it's fine. You know, it's working. We weathered the storm."

Tom: Right, right. Yeah. And we have a lot of those. So—and we have a lot of faculty trained to prepare and deliver those. So that's helped, and I think we'll probably see more, because we're going to be training a whole bunch more faculty this Fall, so that we may see more of these courses in the Spring. And in comparison to what has to be face-to-face, I think we will continue that practice of looking at what has to be a face-to-face experience, whether it's a performance course or some laboratory or something, as well as some of those courses that are correlated with first time in college student retention. You know, the kind of freshman experience that it's important to have the student engage. We do have some of that in the mixture. That's not as big a driver as the pedagogical rationale for why something should be face-to-face, but it is part of the calculus because frankly, we've gotten a lot of pressure from students to be back face-to-face. Which is ironic, because you keep hearing about, you know, these die-ins at institutions where students will lay down and say, "You're putting us at risk." And we know the faculty have had some objections all over the country about coming back, but here, it's been really interesting. Like, even the survey that students did themselves, it was very binary. It was like, half had concerns about

coming back, but half were like, “We want to come back.” So, it was mostly the freshmen that wanted to be here.

Kelvin: And again, that’s a little bit of that finding a healthy, helpful middle ground, right? Balance between extremes. I think that has been good here at our institution. Not only online, but making good strategic use of online. Not only face-to-face, [but] prioritizing online [and] think what has to be face-to-face. And I think we’ll do more of that probably in the Spring. I know we need to probably get heading toward the runway here to land this plane. Anything else that you would think that we need to say as folks are beginning to think about Spring 2021?

Tom: The only thing I might say is that, you know, have your plan. But you know, who was it? Was it MacArthur or General Bradley or somebody? Some famous general said that, you know, “Plans are worthless, but planning is everything,” right? I’m botching the quote but the sentiment is, I think, true, even here. So have your plan [and] the planning exercise, but also know what your contingencies are, because we all want to be data informed. And as you said, if something happens, say there’s a giant outbreak and it’s just not safe, well, you need to be prepared at whatever point to pivot to something else, whether that’s delivering courses online or quarantining a whole sorority house, which is going on at UCF right now, you know. All of that, you know. Have your contingency plans, as well.

Kelvin: You know, I might just make a quick plug—you and I were talking about it beforehand. If you haven’t found the EdSurge on Air podcast and the miniseries that Jeff Young has been doing on—I think he calls it the “Pandemic Campus Diaries.” I find them just so captivating and visceral. Faculty and student voices from around the US in real time, practically, talking about their experience with all this, and it just is really grounding. We think we know kind of the right track, but you when you hear a student mulling over their thought process, it really crystallizes.

Tom: Friend of the show?

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah.

Tom: Jeff Young?

Kelvin: Good guy.

Tom: Yep.

Kelvin: You want to land this plane?

Tom: Sure! So, the way ahead: as long as the COVID-19 crisis remains, we’ll involve more and more focusing on resilience and relying on actual online courses—well-designed, intentionally designed, primarily asynchronous online courses—as well as flexibility in our thinking, I think, will continue to be critical going forward.

Kelvin: Yeah. I would agree with that. Well said. I'll make one shameless plug if I can before we sign off, if you don't mind.

Tom: Plug away.

Kelvin: We are pleased to announce, dear listeners, that we have a special event coming up for our TOPcast listeners this November 2020. We haven't done a special event in a while, and certainly nothing like this! We're billing it as the "TOPcast and Friends Holidays Special." There'll be a bit of whimsy, some special guests, and opportunities for all of us to dialogue about our year-end reflections and our hopes for the New Year in our field. If you want to be in the room where it happens, you need to register for free now using the following web form link, which also includes more info, including the actual date. Notice I'm cagily not saying. So, that link is bit.ly/topcastholiday. Lowercase, no spaces. Go check it out. Reserve your space. It's free. We'll promote it widely beyond, but if you want to be in there and we can actually have a conversation with you, be in the room, then you need to sign up.

Tom: Yeah, join us! This will be a first. It'll be a holiday extravaganza here at TOPcast. It'll be cool.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think so.

Tom: Alright, so maybe that's a good place to wrap it up. So, until next time, for TOPcast. I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.

(musical outro)