TOPcast Episode #77: Field Report #8: Strategic Blended Learning in "COVID Times"

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. Greetings, Dr. Thompson.

Kelvin: Greetings, earthling Cavanagh.

Tom: "Take us to your leader. We come in peace." Actually, that's probably the only thing left for 2020 to bestow upon us.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Please don't! You had to be that guy?

Tom: *(laughing)* An alien invasion.

Kelvin: *Fine*. Thanks.

Tom: Right after the murder hornets and the fire tornadoes, we'll have aliens invading.

Kelvin: Oh, okay. I'm blaming you when they show up tonight. That's all I'm saying. Tom had to invoke them.

Tom: I'll take full responsibility for the aliens.

Kelvin: I hope not. Or maybe they're friendly aliens. Maybe they're like *The Last Starfighter* or something.

Tom: Maybe they've got a vaccine for—They solved COVID on their planet, you know, six millennia ago.

Kelvin: Well, that'd be nice.

Tom: Yeah. Who knows? Right? Maybe they'll be friendly. Casper the Friendly.

Kelvin: That could be, like, just a quick turn of events. Wouldn't that be nice?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: "Here's your vaccine! All done."

Tom: That's right. Deux Ex Machina.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: He'll just come out of the sky.

Kelvin: That's true. That's right. It's like, "done."

Tom: Yep. So, Kelvin, I see, on the Zoom screen, you in the office—

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: —like, 12 feet from me, drinking coffee.

Kelvin: As far as you know.

Tom: And I am drinking, I presume, the same coffee.

Kelvin: Yes. I think so.

Tom: What am I drinking? What's in the thermos?

Kelvin: Well, today's coffee, Tom, is a blend—believe it or not. You know I'm kind of a single-origin sort of a dude—but a blend called Oktoberfest. This episode is releasing in November, but we're recording it in October. So yes, it is timely in that sense. Oktoberfest from MadCap Coffee in Grand Rapids, Michigan. You enjoyed the single-origin Ethiopia in the last episode. This blend includes beans from Ethiopia and from Colombia: both two good sources of coffee beans. And this, they say, was designed as a seasonal coffee appropriate for a particular time. I was intrigued by the description that it's "perfect to sip as your morning coffee as the air becomes cooler and the leaves begin turning color." I was like, "We don't get much cooler or color around here in Orlando." *(laughing)*.

Tom: No. We go from 89° to 88° and maybe it doesn't rain. That's about it.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* That's right, but I can dream, Tom! You can dream with the aliens.

Tom: The yellowing of the palm fronds is what we get, but that just means they need nitrogen.

Kelvin: *(still laughing)* I'll sit out on the patio and go, "Ooh, brrr!"

Tom: Yeah *(chuckles)*.

Kelvin: Anyway, how's the coffee, and how's the connection?

Tom: I like the coffee, and I like the connection, Kelvin. I think I get it.

Kelvin: We're all about that. Break it down.

Tom: So, let's see. It's a blend of a coffee.

Kelvin: It is.

Tom: And so, that's a bit on the nose, which is the way—

Kelvin: The way you like it.

Tom: Yep. But it's also, I think you said it was a seasonal coffee appropriate for the time or something like that.

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: And Amen, brother, because that's what we're talking about today. We're talking about the strategic use of blended learning within COVID times.

Kelvin: COVID times. Yeah, that's right.

Tom: So, good job.

Kelvin: Thank you. I'll get a A- or something like that. I'm keeping track of these grades.

Tom: So, today, as I said, we're going to talk about the role of blended learning within the short to mid-term maybe—basically, during the pandemic response—and so, as a reminder, for as long as this current reality of remote teaching lasts for all of us—

Kelvin: May it be short.

Tom: May it be short until the aliens show up. We are continuing our monthly mini-series of what we're calling "Field Reports" in our first Monday episodes, in which we focus on some aspect of this unique circumstance that we find ourselves in. And then on the third Monday episodes, we'll continue on with our guest interviews because life goes on.

Kelvin: It does.

Tom: So, that's our reminder. Thank you for the blend coffee. And yeah, so what do we want to talk about when it comes to blended learning?

Kelvin: Well, just a little framing, right? In our previous Field Report #7 (Episode #75), we said, "It is important to find a healthy, helpful middle ground…. [A] balance between extremes… 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 all the way back in Field Report #2 (Episode #65), we said, "The future is blended. Maybe that's more true now than ever before. We're going to be hungering for some face-to-face as we emerge from the pandemic, and so, finding an equilibrium between the online and face-to-face at the course and institutional level may be more important than ever before." So, we've been talking about this recently, that blended learning might be helpful to us all right now, or as you said, in the near term as we start feeling a pull toward face-to-face back on our campuses. We're all not in exactly the same places, but some institutions are staying completely online or remote. Some are, you know, making a push for face-to-face, but sooner or later, we're all going to feel a need to be doing some face-to-face classes, some sooner rather than later. And so, we've been talking that blended probably has a place to play at that point.

Tom: Yes, we have. And just a reminder: this is not the first time that you and I have talked about blended learning on TOPcast.

Kelvin: Far from it.

Tom: Far from it. It is a subject that we turn to periodically and one that we care deeply about here at UCF. We've been doing it for a long time. We call it something else here, but basically, what most people know it as is blended learning or hybrid learning, and I assume we'll probably put a couple of other episodes in the show notes in case somebody wants to go back and go a little deeper on some of that.

Kelvin: We'll do that.

Tom: Yeah. So, maybe it would make sense to sort of define what we mean by blended learning.

Kelvin: What do we mean by blended learning, Tom?

Tom: Let's see if I can give it a shot without actually reading our modality definition. But for us, it's a reduction of in-class time through the use of distance learning technologies. But it's an intentional design strategy where a portion of the content and class activities and assessments would be done face-to-face, and a portion would be done online. And the overall objectives of the course, expectations for the course, time that a student would spend working on course materials would be equivalent, whether they be face-to-face, fully online, or blended. But in this case, it's what we call "mixed-mode." It's a mixture of the modalities between online and face-to-face. And the online is typically asynchronous, and the face-to-face is typically synchronous. Anything you want to add to that?

Kelvin: Yeah. That was good. I like to just, you know…I have to work hard to be pithy, as you know, and so, when I do, I sometimes say blended is the strategic combination of online and face-to-face. We, as you said, reduce the class meeting times here, and conceptually—we've talked about this before, you and me and in these episodes—but just as a reminder, we would say that conceptually, it's very

helpful to think of blended as face-to-face enhanced online courses, rather than online enhanced face-to-face courses. It just gets you to a better design place.

Tom: Yeah, agreed. And we've talked about that framing, and I like that personally, as well. And I've used that myself, because I think it kind of gets you out of the "Well, I just need to, you know, put my discussions online or something." Well, maybe that's part of it, but that's certainly not all of it. And maybe it's worth drawing a distinction between what we just described and what has been become a fairly common practice during COVID times. So, there's been a lot of terms. We've talked about this thing we call BlendFlex, which is not blended according to our definition. It's got "blend" in it, but actually, our blended definition is something called "mixed-mode." So, not to confuse everybody keeping score at home. BlendFlex is a derivation of, you know, a type of HyFlex. And I would not classify HyFlex as blended according to our definition, because it gives the student the choice. The student could be completely face-to-face or the student could be completely online if they wanted to in a HyFlex modality. So, it's not an intentionally-designed one that takes advantage of the unique affordances of each modality in what I think you've come up with is sort of like a mixed map of, you know, describing how they interact with each other. In a HyFlex, they don't. They run independent of each other.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And then there are several other terms. You want to go through a couple of those?

Kelvin: Yeah, multi-modal seems to be showing up a lot—not to be confused with mixed-mode at UCF. Multi-modal seems to be used in kind of a beyond HyFlex kind of a sense. It seems related to the HyFlex/BlendFlex, but from a kind of more theoretical bend. And then more recently, we've certainly heard about the combination of asynchronous online and synchronous online for "bichronous" or "bichronous." Sounds like—I don't know—a weird planet in a B movie. I don't know.

Tom: I've been saying it's a Transformers villain. Bichronous.

Kelvin: *(in a robotic voice)* "I'll get you, Bichronous." Yeah, exactly.

Tom: But that showed up in a recent EDUCAUSE review article that I think a lot of us, you know, thought was really interesting. So, there's a lot of stuff to describe all the various practices that are going on right now, just to try to create enough support to give faculty and students what they need in a very challenging context.

Kelvin: Yeah, people are reaching for, you know, "Give me some clarity. It's murky here. It's confusing." So, I appreciate all that effort, but I think you're right to highlight the fact that that stuff? Not blended.

Tom: Right, but at a certain point, many of us—and some of us sooner than others—will have certain amount of pressure to start doing more face-to-face to "get back to normal as best we can." And of course, that'll be on a different schedule,

depending upon different schools' contexts and what the infection rate looks like in certain areas and who knows, vaccines or herd immunity or pick your whatever. At some point, we'll be back, but it seems unlikely that it'll be just a magic snap of the fingers and, "Okay, everything's normal again." That there's going to be some transitional period while we get everybody back on campus. Maybe not everybody gets vaccinated right away, but they want to get started. I don't know. We're all speculating, right? Nobody knows anything, but it seems like blended learning, as we define it here mixed-mode, is a strategy to start that transition back to normal. While we are still dealing with the reality of limited physical capacity in rooms—We can't put as many bodies in the rooms as we would like, right away. So, blended learning, you and I—

Kelvin: Actual, intentionally-designed blended learning.

Tom: Yes, sorry. Keep catching me if I'm not explicit.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, no, that's right. I'm just going to keep putting adjectives in there *(laughs)*.

Tom: Yeah, that's a potential strategy for making this transition, for bridging between what we're doing now and kind of what we were doing before. And maybe it's a practice that remains. We've seen—We've talked about this. Our success rates for students in blended courses is higher than it is for any other modality. It has the lowest withdrawal rate. It has the best student evaluations at the end of the course. So, I mean, there are good legitimate reasons to do blended again intentionally, when it's done well, but there's also this other thing. You know, it's funny that George Mehaffy, the former Vice President for Innovation and Academics at AASCU, used to talk about blended learning as kind of a gateway to fully online learning, and I'm thinking that it's maybe a gateway back.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right.

Tom: From fully remote back to something face-to-face, you know, if we can stand it up fast enough.

Kelvin: Right. And that's a—Let's just pause on that for a second. I think that's: one, an important point; two, it reinforces what we said before about face-to-face enhanced online courses; but three, you're right to point out the time, right? Because imagine building a 100% really intentionally-designed online course. And you know, we kind of think blended, "Oh yeah. I'll throw some stuff online." No, here we're talking about really thinking it through, and then being really deliberate about what we do face-to-face. That's what you're talking about. Yeah,

Tom: Yeah. It's no less work building a blended class than it is to build a fully online asynchronous class, because it's a page one redesign. You have to rethink your pedagogy when you're doing that—if you're going to do it right, and not end up with like, what we've talked about where you have a course and a half. You do everything you did face-to-face, and you just add online elements? That's not good. You'll end up with lower results. Or if you just repeat stuff in two

modalities, you know, have them read the textbook and then do a discussion on the textbook online, and then come in class and do a discussion on the textbook. That's probably not a good idea.

Kelvin: Well, let's talk some more about what you just said about that "gateway to face-to-face," normal kind of thing. How does blended help us in that sense?

Tom: Well, so for example, we know we're—So, we'll talk specifically about the COVID context, because that's the gate, that's the bridge that we need, right? So, the biggest limiter that we have right now is the physical capacity of the rooms because we've got six feet between every seat, which means we're only running at about 25% to 30% of room capacity. Yet, we still have 100% of demand. So—

Kelvin: Thankfully.

Tom: Yeah. What might be delivered in a BlendFlex environment, and we've talked about this previously. Just to recap, a class would be assigned a classroom—say it's a class of 100—and in a BlendFlex model, it's divided into thirds, where a third of the class is permitted to come into the physical classroom once per week, and then the other two-thirds of the week, they will participate remotely. Now, that has proven to have some challenges this Fall since we've implemented it. Nothing that we didn't kind of foresee, but it doesn't mean faculty love it.

Kelvin: Turns out students prefer just staying remote. *(chuckles)*

Tom: That's one of them. Yeah, an increasing number of students, when they realize they've got the choice, don't come physically to class. And you know, I get it. It's no fun teaching to two people in a big giant room. It's safer. This campus is very safe.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Which means very empty, I think.

Tom: Well, in some cases, yeah. At least the classrooms, yeah. But it's also, I'm hearing, it's exhausting for faculty to teach to two audiences simultaneously. It takes a lot of energy, physical and mental, and I get it. And so, some of them have said, "Isn't there some other thing we can do?" And one of our suggestions is maybe we do more blended. So, instead of taking that class of 100 and splitting it in thirds, you divide it into three blended sections. So, instead of a faculty member lecturing a Monday lecture, the subsequent Wednesday lecture, and the subsequent Friday lecture, maybe you put your lecture online and have some activities online that's supported asynchronously. But each Monday, Wednesday, Friday meeting is with a different cohort, [and] you do your discussions in the classroom.

Kelvin: Or whatever that's value-add.

Tom: Right, whatever that you think should be done face-to-face. But you design the course in a way that the students come once a week in an intentional way, as opposed to you just lecturing and doing what you're doing and then the students sitting in front of you rotate. It's different. So, and then you could potentially

design each of those blended sections independently, cross list them into a master section, if you will, and kind of teach it all as one big section and grade it all at the same time, things like that. There are management strategies as a faculty member that could make that easier to manage so it doesn't feel like three sections.

Kelvin: Right.

Tom: But then you maintain your capacity, right? Your distance in the classroom.

Kelvin: Yeah, and you also—I mean, as compared to BlendFlex, which I think is a helpful comparison that you made. This actual blended, this kind of COVID-capacity blended that you've described, also serves to reduce the amount of in-classroom presence of both faculty and of students in your scenario, right? In your scenario, students are coming one day a week, but here, the faculty member in that BlendFlex thing, faculty members come in three days a week. Here, everybody's only coming one day a week per class section, I suppose, in that sense.

Tom: Yeah. Although, the faculty member, if it's the same faculty member teaching all three sections, would still be coming. But you could also have three faculty members—three faculty teaching in each of those slots and accomplish the same kind of objective. And maybe the biggest thing is, it would address potentially the two complaints that we just talked about. One is there's no way for students to skip because it's not being broadcast, if you will, or recorded, because it's something that is uniquely face-to-face that you have to accomplish. And then the mental and physical energy associated with teaching two audiences is removed, because you really are just concentrating on the people in the room at that time, and then the online portion is asynchronous.

Kelvin: Yeah, and the online is hopefully, right, well-designed asynchronous. Where everything is add-value, right? And you're not just having to, "Oh, I got to make students come to class!" Well, if you offer something that's actually useful and necessary for learning, then, you know, that's maybe not as much of a thing. It's pull versus push, right?

Tom: Yeah, and it's not foolproof.

Kelvin: No.

Tom: Because we know there's still going to be cases where students or faculty need to isolate or get sick. There are going to have to be accommodations made for that, and nothing's perfect.

Kelvin: Just like there would be in a face-to-face course.

Tom: Exactly. Yeah. And we knew, going into BlendFlex, that it wasn't some panacea of, you know, great solutions that would solve every problem. But what it did was it was the 80% solution that we needed at the time, and it still has its place

going forward. But what we're trying to do is maybe respond to faculty feedback and give them some other options.

Kelvin: Yeah. I like, you know, historically, as you know, we, as many of our listeners know, we've framed—*we* collectively, broadly in our field—have framed blended learning as kind of the best of both worlds: the best of online and the best of face-to-face. And here, it's all the more reason that that bridge, you know, you've talked about, it's a really good in-between step, if done wisely. I keep thinking about our colleague, Chuck Dziuban, who's been on the show before. You know, Chuck has been inclined to say blended learning is not a treatment. It's a boundary object, you know? You know, people kind of hold it up and go, "Oh! Blended learning!" But five people mean five different things by it.

Tom: I can't tell you how many times I've had a conversation with somebody and they're describing flipped.

Kelvin: Exactly.

Tom: And we would not consider flipped—that doesn't reduce any seat time in the classroom—as blended.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: We like flipped, but it's not—according to our definition—blended. But for some people, it is. Yeah, that's the boundary object that Chuck's talking about.

Kelvin: That's right. So just putting a label on it doesn't make anything magical happen, right? You know, well-designed, intentionally-designed? That's going to get you to the desirable outcomes that you've talked about—logistical and learning outcomes.

Tom: So, if we had some listeners that sort of liked this idea and wanted to try and implement it, you know, do you have some advice or principles you think they should try to adhere to?

Kelvin: Yeah, I'll throw a couple things out there. One, I would say, you know, we have codified quite a bit of stuff on the—primarily archived now—Blended Learning Toolkit website, containing the BlendKit course materials. And that's available, still online at blended.online.ucf.edu. And you can find BlendKit course materials, design documents, it'll walk you right through. But here's a few things. It seems like the integration—the meaningful integration between online and face-to-face—is the biggest design challenge for doing this well. So, giving sufficient attention to that is really important. And so, there's design documents on the BlendKit site that would help. Something I think you've said before that I really appreciate is there's no such thing as more than 100%, right? We've talked about the stretchy bag, like, "Okay! We've keep putting this more stuff in the bag, and it keeps stretching!" And there's this tendency you said a while ago, the course and a half phenomenon, right? You've got to hold yourself as you design a blended course—a combination of online and face-to-face. You got to hold yourself to the same amount of stuff, the same amount of learning activities, the

same amount of assessments, the same amount of content, same amount of time. It can't just keep stretching. And that whole thing that we've talked about before, about design an online course and then step back to strategic face-to-face value-add sessions. And it's hard. It's hard to do this well, but it's worth the effort. Now, maybe more than ever.

Tom: Yeah, those are good. Those are good pieces of advice. Totally agree. I don't know. I'm looking at the clock and I'm looking at my cup, which is which is almost empty. You think maybe you want to try and give us a bottom line?

Kelvin: Sure, I'll jump out of the plane and meet you on the way down. *(chuckles)* I'll parachute out.

Tom: Jump out of the plane. *(chuckles)* That's a new metaphor.

Kelvin: I was getting tired of the old stuff *(laughs)*.

Tom: Jump out of the plane with a ribbon on. Yeah *(chuckles)*.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Land on the button at the bottom, go splat! See if the aliens will pick me up on the way down. So, I guess I would say well-designed online courses might be the least disruptable instructional choice during the ongoing pandemic, but sooner or later, some return to face-to-face will occur, and when that happens, well-designed blended courses provide a more resilient option than purely face-to-face with maybe more positive experiences for both students and faculty as a result. Would you agree with that?

Tom: I concur. So, maybe before we sign off, we have time for a plug.

Kelvin: Ooh! Plug us.

Tom: So, I'd like to share one from one of our friends and colleagues here at UCF. TOPcast listener, Dr. Steve Heglund, from our College of Nursing. He posted the following review on Apple Podcasts recently.

Kelvin: Ooh, wonderful.

Tom: He said that TOPcast is a "fantastic blend from a single origin."

Kelvin: Ooh, I see what he did there.

Tom: Very clever, Steve. "What a great source of information and inspiration for those who educate from a distance. Thank you Kelvin and Tom for the witty repartee and relevant information. You are a great origin for a wide range of topics that blend together for a very well spent half hour!" Thank you, Steve.

Kelvin: Wow. That's nice.

Tom: Yeah, that is nice.

Kelvin: "Witty repartee," he says.

Tom: Yeah, and we—I don't know, I didn't solicit that. So, thank you, Steve. And if you, dear listener, are so inclined, we would love it if you would click a star rating or leave behind a one sentence review on Apple Podcasts or whatever your listening platform of choice might be. Those algorithms look at those types of things to help others discover content like this and this show.

Kelvin: Yeah. That's great. We love that.

Tom: Yep. Awesome. Well, thank you, Kelvin. Thank you for the coffee.

Kelvin: You're quite welcome. Thank you for the conversation.

Tom: Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.

(musical outro)