TOPcast Episode #81: Technology Adoption as Enabling the "Right Thing"

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

(musical transition)

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

Kelvin Thompson: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

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

Kelvin: Woo!

Tom: Hello, Kelvin. Yeah, woo!

Kelvin: That's a non-mystery "woo."

Tom: You're the mystery "woo" today.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* That's not a mystery. Well, it's a mystery that I'm, you know, still here. And might I say again, this year, Tom, Happy New Year!

Tom: Happy New Year, Dr. Thompson! We are turning the page into 2021 which I think—it's probably a bit of a cliche at this point—but we're all hoping it's better than 2020.

Kelvin: Aren't we though? Aren't we though? I'm still haunted from that TOPcast and Friends Holiday Special. The retrospective of like, "We were so happy at the beginning of 2020!" *(laughing)* What do we know?

Tom: *(laughing)* Look at these poor, naïve rubes just strolling gleefully right towards the edge of the cliff that everybody else can see.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Yeah, that's right. So, you know, I'm jaded this new year. Like, I'm cautiously like, "Oh, yeah. We'll see." *(laughing)* But yes, hopefully better.

Tom: Yeah. I mean, I said stuff like—I remember saying at one point that—and I think we were still talking about it being in Wuhan.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: And, you know, I think it was our, you know, our colleague, Baiyun's family.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: And I was asking her about how it was going for them and they were all locked up and in quarantine, and we were all in shock about that. And it's like, "Wow. Well, this probably—"

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Yeah, little do you know.

Tom: Well, this probably won't be resolved by the time this airs, right? In a couple of weeks. Can you imagine? It's going to go on for another two weeks?

Kelvin: *(still laughing)* Aah!

Tom: Lo and behold, here we are: January 2021.

Kelvin: Yeah, what does that make it? Probably like, 40-something weeks? *(laughing)* If you're going to count in weeks. I stopped counting in weeks a long time ago.

Tom: Yeah. It's like a baby. How many weeks old is our lockdown?

Kelvin: Yeah. Too many.

Tom: Definitely a terrible toddler of sorts at this point.

Kelvin: Oi, yikes. Yes, that's right. But a good year.

Tom: All right. I heard you slurping. I heard a little slurp, a dulcet gurgle of sorts.

Kelvin: Ooh, a dulcet gurgle of sorts. Yes, indeed. Hope you all, you know, bought your holiday album from back in the TOPcast and Friends Holiday Special.

Tom: Yeah, I hope everybody enjoyed that. That was a bit of a departure for us.

Kelvin: That's right. They do call it "holiday special." *(laughing)*

Tom: *(chuckling)* Yeah, yeah.

Kelvin: It's a "special," not an "everyday."

Tom: We did have a little palate cleanser with our interview with Luke in between that and this.

Kelvin: That's true. That's right. Yeah. So, you're wondering what it is you're drinking?

Tom: I am wondering what it is I am drinking. Yes.

Kelvin: Well, this, Tom, is a blend called "Foundation" from ReAnimator Coffee Roasters in Philadelphia, PA. The roasters say that they've carefully constructed this blend to be a good everyday coffee. It was the first blend that the roasters made, so that was their foundation, hence the name. It's kind of interesting as a blend, because—I'm intrigued by this—it's somewhat seasonal. While about 60% of the coffee is always sourced from Brazil—and they say they always add a bit of Ethiopia in there—the remainder is made up of different coffees at different times of the year. So, I thought this would be a good choice for today's episode because we're dealing with some fundamental or foundational principles that can guide us in our ever-changing times. So, how's the coffee? And how's the connection to today's episode?

Tom: Coffee's good. I like it. You do make a strong cup of coffee, Kelvin Thompson, but that's okay. I like it. It'll perk me up for the rest of the afternoon. I'll get all my emails done extra fast. No, it's good. I like it. You know, it's funny for somebody who claims to not be a coffee blend fan, you've been bringing quite a few lately to TOPcast, sommelier.

Kelvin: Yeah. I haven't counted. More than I used to. I think that we—I hope—still predominate with single origins, but yes, a few high-quality blends have crossed my path during the last year. And so, I've brought them in, you know, as an opportunity for connection and so forth. And some of them are pretty good.

Tom: Well, this one's pretty high quality. I like it, and as far as the connection goes, you sort of laid it out for me there, so I don't really have to guess. And I think it's fine. It's a fine connection.

Kelvin: It's fine. It's alright. It's alright. No other comment. We'll just—as we get into the episode, people'll figure it out for themselves. It'll be alright.

Tom: Yeah, I think it's good. Yeah. Because, as you said, we're going to be talking about kind of foundational principles and how that should guide some of the work that we do and the decisions that we make. And that's how you describe the coffee: foundational.

Kelvin: Yep. "Foundation Blend." So, not bad, huh?

Tom: Not bad at all. So, we are in a new year, right?

Kelvin: Happy New Year.

Tom: And it's probably worth noting that—as of at least this recording—the COVID-19 global pandemic is still underway. So, we are recording this, in full disclosure, prior to January 1st.

Kelvin: *(gasps)*

Tom: Not that much prior. So, I think that we can safely predict that by the time you are listening to this, not much has changed. So, although the COVID pandemic, we're still dealing with it on a daily basis as institutions, we've decided not to

label these necessarily as “Field Reports” anymore. We’re kind of stepping away from that “Field Report” label. Even though I think, you know, we both anticipate continuing to address, you know, different aspects of remote teaching or other COVID responses related to digital teaching and learning during these first of the month episodes. And we’ll continue with our practice of having guest interviews on our third Monday episodes. And I guess, to state the obvious, right? One positive holdover from 2020—

Kelvin: Oh, I want to hear a positive thing about 2020, Tom. Give it to us.

Tom: Yeah. *(chuckles)* —is we’ve decided to continue with our twice monthly scheduled release. That was an experiment. And at least for now, it’s an experiment no more. It’s become sort of instantiated as part of TOPcast present practice, I should say.

Kelvin: Yeah, no, that’s good. Yeah. Yeah. So noted. So noted. So specifically, as you said, “foundational principles.” In this episode, we’re going to give some thoughtful consideration to how specific technologies can help or hinder various aspects of the teaching and learning process. This is particularly important in times of change when new technology platforms spring up quickly. And I’m going to just offer up one of my Kelvin-isms, right? One of Kelvin’s general principles, and you can pick it apart or debate it, whatever, but then the episode’s going to go a whole different direction if you do too much of that. But that principle that I’ve found to be useful is this: we should make it easy to do the right thing. We should make it easy for faculty, for students, for whomever. We should make it easy for them to do the right thing. So, in this case, make it easy for faculty to do the right thing through our technology adoption, make it easy for students to do the right thing. So, one way of examining critically the tools available to us as online learning leaders is to consider what right thing those tools enable or prevent. So, part of our job is to identify and promote right things from both, I would say, a strategic and a moral perspective. One, I’m curious what you think about that principle. And two, maybe we could talk about some use cases?

Tom: Yeah, I think it’s good. And I’ve never articulated it like that before, but I certainly agree with it and have tried to live it. And I think it’s both the tool selection and the process around the use of that tool.

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: You know, you don’t want to set barriers to doing the right thing inadvertently, but you also…you don’t want to make things so loose that it becomes kind of a wild west where you don’t have controls to encourage the right thing to be done. We’re talking kind of abstractly about it, which maybe makes it a little harder to conceptualize what we’re talking about. Maybe we should zero-in on a couple of examples that might concretize this concept of yours.

Kelvin: Well, one that kind of—what put us on this path for this episode was you had brought up kind of a revisiting of online proctoring, given its prevalence during the COVID response era. So, how does online proctoring play into this?

Tom: Yeah, that's—I mean, that's one that I've been spending probably more time than I would have like dealing with. Both licensing, negotiating with vendors, and going through the purchasing and legal process, as well as getting faculty trained, and dealing with student complaints, and all of the other things around online proctoring, right? And obviously, it's not me personally always doing all those things, but a lot of times, it comes through me that I have to be traffic-copped to dole out to the right people to respond to. So, it's one I've been giving a lot of thought to lately. And I think all of us recognize the role that online proctoring plays—the important role it can play—but I think all of us, in a utopian vision of the world, would like to see a world where we didn't need it, right? Where we didn't have it at all. So, how can we have this tool, but encourage its responsible use? Not…Like, for example, not have it serve in place of more authentic kinds of assessments. You still want to have the authentic kinds of assessments, and in some cases, you would prefer that, right? Instead of having proctoring. But proctoring is a means to an end, I think, to get us towards those kinds of assessments when the time comes. There are ways to set up the proctoring systems so that they can be configured—like how you set the dials and switches in the settings—to enable or not enable certain kinds of behaviors, whether that's using AI or live proctoring versus not live proctoring, IP address checking, other kinds of things that you can set up or not set up, depending upon how it's used.

Kelvin: Mhmm. So, from the standpoint of this principle, what right thing does online proctoring enable, or what right thing does online proctoring prevent? Like, I think one right thing is, it seems like the…There are—at least during the pandemic response—there are faculty and disciplines who previously resisted online teaching because of their more traditional assessments and their concerns over, say, academic misconduct and kind of high stakes testing. Online proctoring is something that makes it a little bit more…[it] greases the skids. It makes a little bit more palatable for them to engage in whether we call it remote or online. So, in that sense, online proctoring enables the right thing of actually engaging in online teaching and learning, which I think we would agree is the right thing, I hope. Would you agree with that?

Tom: Yeah, I think that that's been an interesting kind of silver lining to this whole remote teaching cloud that we've all had to sort of face. That there have been positives that have come out, one being that departments/disciplines that we haven't traditionally engaged with, because they've been primarily face-to-face or resistant to online learning, have been forced to confront that. And one of the big objections that they've had has been the ability to ensure academic integrity and the kinds of tests that they give. And I think they've seen now, through the use of these technological platforms, that they can assess how they want. Now, you and I might argue that there might be better ways of assessing, but at least right now, how they want to assess—which is closed book exam as if they were in a classroom somewhere—they can do it. And I would say, from a macro perspective, do the right thing from a student's point of view is to, you know, ensure that academic integrity is being encouraged and rewarding the honest students by making sure that the dishonest students are not able to kind of get away with cheating. It values the degree a lot more, if we can guarantee as much as we are able to, the integrity of the assessment, the exam, and the ultimate final grade.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree with you, though. I think you said something along these lines at the beginning—we were sort of talking about this—that online proctoring itself doesn't necessarily go far enough to help faculty transition to deeper or, we might say, more authentic forms of learning assessment. And I think maybe before, we've talked about more—if there is such a thing—more cheat-proof assessments. Like, the more authentic and deeper you are, the less prone to kind of replicative cheating there is, right? I thought I might plug a couple things. We did talk about academic integrity online some time ago, back in Episode #33. Can you remember that far back? "Academic Integrity Online: Addressing Criticisms." And we talked a good bit about assessment types, the role of proctoring academic integrity, and so forth. And there's some other good podcast episodes of—we'll put in the show notes—one is a recent one from our colleague Bonni Stachowiak over at Teaching in Higher Ed. She interviewed Deandra Little in an episode called "Authentic Assignments." And our colleagues from SUNY Oswego on the "Tea for Teaching" podcast a couple of years ago now had an episode titled "Assessment" where they interviewed David Eubanks, who I think is still at Wake Forest. And those are some good backgrounder substantive ideas on assessment. They do go a little bit deeper than is enabled by online proctoring.

Tom: I might say, also from a—and maybe not necessarily about assessment—but just, you know, platforms and decisions that encourage doing the right thing, the use of a single standard learning management system is probably one of those again, at a macro level. I'm not sure how many schools there are out there anymore that just have a free for all, every college can have their own LMS within a university. That's—I think that's becoming more and more rare. There's still—

Kelvin: Well, you still run across them sometimes though, right?

Tom: You do. You do. It's true. I hear about it every once in a while, and I also hear about different schools within maybe a system like a university system or college system using different tools. But for the most part, having a single LMS encourages a certain level of consistency that allows you to support the faculty better, support the students better so that they don't have to relearn how to use the platform every time they log into a new class. Talk about cognitive load. You want them learning the content, right? Not how to navigate every class that they're in.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's exactly right. So, I guess driving this particular use case home on online proctoring, it's…We kind of have an "it depends," conclusion, right? Neither rejecting online proctoring, nor naively thinking that online proctoring is enough [or] is a viable option for online higher education. It's more of an "it depends," right?

Tom: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, obviously, it's nuanced. It really—yeah. It's so context-specific that there's no "one size fits all," which is how some people like to frame proctoring.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: But if you're going to use it to your principle, use it responsibly to encourage the right kinds of things that you want, the right values that you want for your institution.

Kelvin: We have a couple of other use cases in our notes here. Why don't you pick—we probably have time for one. Why don't you pick? Take us down a rabbit trail.

Tom: All right. Let's—I don't know, how about a COVID-related one? Video. Synchronous video. So, you and I are recording this on Zoom right now, and a lot of people have been teaching via Zoom and other tools like it, who had never done it before. And how can we use these kinds of synchronous video platforms that have been thrust into the core critical path of all of our institutions in a way that encourages faculty and students to do the right thing? To engage, as opposed to lecture, like, through the use of the tools inherited, whether it's a whiteboard or polling or other kinds of tools that you can bring in or embed within an LMS or something like that. You know, how can you have them do the right thing? And I think you had jotted some notes on that as well.

Kelvin: Yeah. I mean, to me, I think, two right things come to mind pretty quickly. One, echo is our last use case, right? Synchronous video platforms arguably facilitate entrée into "online" for faculty and disciplines historically resistant to asynchronous approaches. You know, "I can't really do this in an asynchronous way." "Okay. So here you go." And then related to that is, I think, you know, there's a provision of immediacy—some real-time or near real-time communication—and you already hinted at this: we do sometimes equate that or at least some people equate that with "engagement." We could debate whether that's enough, but there has been a…That represents something. That real-time thing is kind of a right thing that we're enabling, and it allows some people to participate who wouldn't have, otherwise: disciplines, faculty, and therefore their students. It's been so important in this remote-instruction era.

Tom: Yeah, and even remote meeting, right?

Kelvin: Yeah, right.

Tom: Good grief, if we didn't have tools like this, how would we—

Kelvin: *(laughing)* We wouldn't be doing much.

Tom: No, we wouldn't've been able to have carried out the businesses at the university, let alone teach classes—

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: —which is, you know, the core business at the university, but just all the ancillary stuff to support that. I mean, all day long we're meeting, whether it's on Zoom or Teams or Skype or one of the million tools we have. It's just necessary, right? So, how can we encourage people to do the right thing? And so, for me, the ability to see my colleagues—some of whom I haven't physically put eyes on since March—

Kelvin: Yeah, right.

Tom: —you know, of 2020. That's a long time to work with people and never see them. It's weird. So, video has helped, although there are some colleagues that have not even turned the video on in all that time. Well, I see you now and you come in the office sometimes. So, I'm not putting you into that category.

Kelvin: I'm bandwidth poor on a lot of days. *(chuckles)*

Tom: Yeah. But I mean, they have their reasons, and I'm not criticizing that, it's just…I do think that there's something about the…there's some…there's a right thing about being able to look at your colleagues while you're having a conversation with them about it. There's a human element of it that video at least allows you to approximate.

Kelvin: Yeah. Although, in a teaching/learning context, I mean—I guess this sort of parallels our online proctoring analysis a little bit from the standpoint of this right thing. In a teaching/learning context, just connecting technologically in real time isn't enough. It doesn't go far enough, right? You're tired of hearing me say this from my K-12 days: "telling isn't teaching and listening isn't learning." You know, okay, fine. How many times are we going to hear faculty complain about students not turning on their webcams, or students, you know, feeling put upon, and, you know, there's arguments to be made on both sides. And if you just wait for the technology to do its thing—I mean, back to your earlier comment, when we started this episode, it's not just about the technology, it's also about processes, right? And practices, and that idea, I think, of espouse—I don't know who it sources back to first—but that idea of inviting, faculty inviting students in. You know, not requiring, but inviting. And even saying, "It means so much to me when I can see you, and I don't want to invade your privacy or whatever, but, you know, be appropriate." You know, and I mean, you hear faculty talking about "students in bed!" And you know, "Put some clothes on, would ya?" And you know, all kinds of things. But, you know, just humanizing that. You need those kind of processes and parameters to make it more engaging, not just video being on.

Tom: Yeah, and I think that—I think it's interdependent too, because as I think you and I have talked about—I don't remember if we talked about it on the podcast or not—but synchronous—

Kelvin: We should hit record more often. *(laughing)*

Tom: Yeah, we should just record our lives because it's so vastly interesting, right? Synchronous video isn't going anywhere. When this thing's all over, I think that's one of the remaining echoes of the pandemic: that synchronous video will be more ubiquitous than it was before. And so, we better figure out how to use it well. Right now, as much as I like Zoom—and I kind of like it. It just works most of the time, and it's very good at what it does—it's a meeting platform. It's not a teaching platform.

Kelvin: Right, right.

Tom: And we've been using this sort of square peg in a round hole since March, and we've just been making it work by pushing real hard to get it in.

Kelvin: Right.

Tom: And that's okay for a while, but there are—and this is probably a future episode, as things get a little more mature—but there are new products coming out that are optimized for the synchronous instructional space, and that'll be interesting because that will further encourage faculty and students to "do the right thing." How to create engagement, how to do different kinds of lessons, how to get people in groups working together, how do you assess, and like, one of them I saw allows the student to turn on the video just for the faculty member and not for the rest of the class. The faculty member can at least check in and make sure that you're paying attention or whatever, but if the student has issues or is embarrassed about, you know, their circumstances, or whatever the reason is that they have their video off, it doesn't have to be exposed to the rest of the class. And I thought, "That's an interesting idea."

Kelvin: I'm right there with you. I think both of those things are important, right? One, the emergence and codification of what we might call "good practices" in synchronous online teaching and learning. And then to what extent can emerging platforms make it easier to do those right things? I think both of those things are very, very important.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Well, the coffee is dwindling. The hourglass is almost empty. Shall I take a stab at kind of landing the plane?

Tom: Please do. You have the con, Dr. Thompson.

Kelvin: Well, I would say with new technology platforms emerging regularly—and especially in times of change, like those we're still living through. We're getting, you know, new technologies popping up all the time—it's important that principles guide our adoption decisions. Not just circumstance, but principles that are more timeless. And these principles, I would say, must center on how students and faculty are affected. There might be institutional or policy considerations as well, but they must center on how students and faculty are affected. Would you agree with that?

Tom: I would agree with that. Yeah, absolutely. So, let's all try to do a little bit better every day and encourage our, you know—I'll paraphrase you, something you say all the time—and then we'll encourage all of our colleagues to do the same. So, maybe you would indulge me in a little post-holiday plug?

Kelvin: Plug away.

Tom: So, dear listener, would you please consider potentially sharing TOPcast with your colleagues? You could maybe email them, or text them a link, maybe buy some time on a sky-writing plane over the beach or the lake, and you could share

an episode that you think they might value. Or you could even invite colleagues to listen to an episode and then discuss it together like a mini version of a book discussion group. We have heard of people using TOPcast in professional development groups, like a weekly or monthly kind of discussion group amongst colleagues, and I'm thrilled when I hear that kind of stuff.

Kelvin: For sure.

Tom: So, yeah. If you like this and you think that others might like it, then please do share.

Kelvin: The more the merrier.

Tom: All right. So, thank you for the coffee, Kelvin. It was delicious and foundational. And good conversation, as always. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.

(musical outro)