TOPcast Episode #83: Re-thinking Synchronous for the Post-COVID Era

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 am Kelvin Thompson.

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

Kelvin: Hey, Tom. Good to see you.

Tom: Good to see you, too. Here we are, once again, socially distanced in the same office.

Kelvin: Mhmm. Last episode, we were home. I guess we never really commented on why. It was because there’s internet work being done in the office.

Tom: That’s right.

Kelvin: It wasn’t like there was plague or you know, anything like that. It was—

Tom: No, we weren’t sure we could guarantee a good, solid internet connection at the place where you’re supposed to be able to guarantee a good, solid internet connection.

Kelvin: I do appreciate, more than ever, a good, solid internet connection as you know.

Tom: I do. Yeah. Like a fine wine.

Kelvin: Hoping to have one. (chuckles) That’s right. Yes.

Tom: Yeah. All right. So, I just saw you take a sip.

Kelvin: Yeah, I was going to say.

Tom: And I have in front of me what you poured from across the room.
Kelvin: I have amazing dexterity that I can pour across the room. That’s true. I was just going to say, good and solid. I think that’s how I’ll tip my hand. I think that’s how I would qualify this is coffee. So, for those who are newer to the podcast, we’ll say we do frame TOPcast as a “collegial conversation about online teaching and learning conducted over a shared cup of coffee.” So, we talk about coffee a little bit at the beginning of each episode. So, this coffee, Tom, that I have poured for you—and you’ve probably enhanced with your trademark “proof.”

Tom: Yes. Just a tad.

Kelvin: Just a tad of “proof.” It comes to us from Bones Coffee Company in Cape Coral, Florida. You might recall we had coffee from Bones Coffee not too long ago, a while back. And so, this—

Tom: That’s the southwest coast of Florida, right?

Kelvin: Yes, that’s right. Cape Coral down south of Naples, I want to say.

Tom: Oh, is it south of Naples?

Kelvin: Or maybe it’s north of Naples. Anyways, it’s around down there. It’s down that way. It’s down that way.

Tom: Someone will correct us. Somebody in Florida Gulf Coast will correct us.

Kelvin: I’m sure that’s true. It’s down there. I don’t get down that way too often, but like the previous one, this also is a flavored coffee. They have other things, but I guess they seem to really do a lot of flavored coffees. And you know, I’m—I think you know this—I’m not generally a fan of flavored coffees, but so far, Bones seems to do flavored coffees very well.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: So, this flavor, you might have noticed, is a bit of a callback flavor. It’s called “Egg Nog.”

Tom: Is that what it is?

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: I did detect the flavor and an aroma. I like it. It’s like a nice treat here in the afternoon, but I wasn’t sure what it was. So, it’s eggnog.

Kelvin: Eggnog, which is, you know, we might say a bit of an anachronistic flavor at this point in the calendar.

Tom: Yeah.
Kelvin: Egg nog’s one of those foods that kind of finds one little niche in the calendar and hangs out here.

Tom: If you’re still drinking your eggnog in February, it’s probably time to wrap it up.

Kelvin: That’s a problem. But eggnog flavored coffee? That’s okay. That’s alright. So—

Tom: I did hear somebody—I don’t know who it was, some comedian or somebody that—like, his big hot take was “Eggnog all year long!” You know, why should we relegate eggnog to just the month and a half that it’s available?

Kelvin: That is a good question. I guess you could make your own, I suppose, but I don’t think most people make homemade eggnog. We at least start—even if it’s doctored—we at least start with the store-bought stuff, I think, for the most part.

Tom: Probably. Maybe some of our friends in the upper Midwest. That just seems like they would do something like that.

Kelvin: That’s possible. That’s possible.

Tom: *(in a midwestern accent)* They’ll bring a hotdish and some homemade eggnog, don’t ya know?

Kelvin: *(laughing)* A hotdish, yes. So, I’ll ask what you think of the coffee overall and can you—I’m going to just go ahead and tell you. This is not like the best connection I’ve ever made, right?

Tom: Really?

Kelvin: It’s not. But you find a connection to today’s coffee?

Tom: Yes! I can which means it’s a good one for me. Yeah, you know how I like it to be completely obvious, you know, like if we’re interviewing somebody, that coffee happens to have the same name as that person. “Oh, I get it!” Yeah, because Tom’s so dense, he can’t see the symbolism here. But no, I get it. I like the coffee. It is a bit of a dessert for me right now maybe because some of my “froof” I put in there, but yeah, it’s a little bit of a treat. I don’t know if I could drink a lot of it. It’s kind of rich actually. But the connection, I’m going to presume, is the callback, right?

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: Because we are revisiting a topic from the somewhat recent to mid-past.

Kelvin: Yes, that’s—yes! That is great!

Tom: Ding, ding, ding!

Kelvin: Ding, ding, ding!

That’s right, you win the rest of this episode (laughs).

“A new car!” Yeah. Okay, cool.

Nope, the rest of this episode. We, you know, we’ve—I think we’ve talked about things, we’ve kind of spiral curriculum-ed our way through topics before, but this one is a little bit of an unusual episode because we’re going to actually truly revisit a prior episode and see how well that episode has aged now in the COVID era and discuss how we agree or differ today with the perspective in the original episode. You want to tell us about the earlier episode?

Yeah, so we’re going to go back to the distant past of in the before times of 2018. So, that was Episode #42 and—I don’t know, should we—yeah, I guess we should say what the title was and everything. It was “Designing for Synchronous Online Learning.”

Can you imagine? Can you imagine that it’s been like—

A year?

—almost a year?

Yeah. It’s crazy. Yeah, it doesn’t feel like it, but it sure has. In other ways, it feels like it’s been ten. You know, catch me on the right day.

I’m with you on that.

So, if you haven’t listened to Episode #42, or have it memorized, like what’s wrong with you? But maybe this would be a good time to maybe just press pause on this one and go back and listen to that one. Although you don’t have to, we’ll try and catch you up. But it might be worthwhile as sort of a way to kind of compare and contrast how things maybe have changed for you in your own context at your institution, because they have changed here. That’s for sure. And so, we’re going to revisit the whole concept of synchronous learning.

In light of our COVID experience.

Exactly, and how it’s changed in the past year. And then maybe a little bit of how we see it changing going forward after this year, in the after times.
Kelvin: *(laughing)* I feel like I should title case every time all of these things. “The Before Times.” “The After Times.”

Tom: Yeah, it’s like a Mad Max movie or something. *(in an elder accent)* Everything ‘membered, everything marked in the After Times from the Before Times. Yeah, okay.

Kelvin: That’s exactly it. So, you should find—for our listeners here—you should find that link to Episode #42 within the metadata for this episode recording or directly on the TOPcast website, which is [topcast.online.ucf.edu](http://topcast.online.ucf.edu). So, we’re going to wait for you to pause, to listen, and to return.

Tom: Seriously, we’re going to wait.

Kelvin: And we’re back. We’re done waiting. *(laughing)* That’s how I feel about COVID.

Tom: No, we’re done. We’re done waiting. Yes.

Kelvin: Fast forward. We’re done.

Tom: Yeah. All right. So, Kelvin, you and I have listened to it.

Kelvin: Yes!

Tom: And have had a chance to kind of reflect on, oh, how naive we were a year and a half ago. Or more than that? Two and a half, right?

Kelvin: Yeah. As this as this episode releases, yeah.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Just about, pretty close.

Tom: So, do you have some initial reflections?

Kelvin: Well, maybe I’ll ask you first. Big picture, how well did that episode back then age to your today-ears, in light of COVID-19 and our experience with synchronous remote instruction? I mean, we’ll get into some specifics, but generally speaking, did you feel like, “Oh my gosh, that is such a Before Time’s thing,” or was it like, “Well, no, I can—there’s still some relevance.”

Tom: No, I actually thought it was still relevant because we kind of—our conversation meandered a bit as it tends to do. Long-time listeners will know.

Kelvin: Yes, it does.
Tom: We talked a bit about blended learning and some, like, point-to-point synchronous, like, not-using-Zoom kind of technologies, more like Mediasite kinds of things. But we did talk about HyFlex, and you—

Kelvin: Weirdly enough, right?

Tom: Yeah, you went into quite an explanation of HyFlex, that seems a little bit pressured.

Kelvin: Yeah, I’m sorry. Quite an explanation *(laughs).*

Tom: *(chuckles)* And which we ended up talking about again later, post-COVID, after it had started. And the principles I think that we talked about remained the same. So, we did talk about intentionality, about the need for good design. Even in a synchronous course, it’s not just “show up and do what you have always done.” It does take some thought and some instructional design and some pedagogy. And I think all of that is true now. And I think maybe one other reflection is that despite the ubiquity of synchronous remote instruction that we are all doing, that maybe we hadn’t really been doing before, I think the preference is still the well-designed asynchronous online experience.

Kelvin: Tell us why, Tom.

Tom: Because it’s intentional, and it’s designed, and it’s set up to take full advantage of the modality in the medium. So, for example, you know, you could link out to web research, and to online games, and to articles, and to videos, and other kinds of things that’s very difficult to do in real time. Really, the format of synchronous instruction, particularly—and we’ll talk about this a little bit—through this particular platform of a meeting platform. It’s optimized to be a meeting platform, not an instructional platform. It forces you into certain kinds of instructional strategies. It sort of forces you into a lecture-first strategy, and that’s just what it’s designed to do. It’s designed to have people talk at other people or with other people, and that doesn’t always make for the most interactive, engaging [experience] if it’s not well-designed and intentional.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Soapbox. I’ll get off my soapbox now.

Kelvin: No, I think all that’s right. I think one thing that was true of us when this episode released in 2018 that is different of us today—and I suspect that the comparison will hold with a number of our listeners from their institutional context, but not all—is back then, we really only had informal—I think we used the metaphor “island in the ocean”—informal synchronous prior to the pandemic.

Tom: Right, it was supplemental.

Kelvin: Yes, that’s right. We gave several examples, but now we have many. *All* faculty and students who have experienced whole synchronous courses for multiple semesters. Now, I’m not going to go so far as to say that all of them have had
experience with “when well-designed” to pull up phrase out of our colleague, Shannon Riggs’ great book *Thrive Online*, which if you haven’t read, you should read. That’s her phrase that she uses a lot, like, “when designed well, you know, online is just as good or better than face-to-face or anything else.” So, “when designed well” really should be emblazoned upon us for all of our teaching and learning. It’s not always, but we certainly have a lot more people.

Tom: And it’s true regardless of modality. Face-to-face classes can suck too, right?

Kelvin: That’s right.

Tom: You know, if they’re designed well, then they don’t. And it’s the same in online. It’s the same with synchronous online, you know, across the board.

Kelvin: That is right. And like you said, we did, as you say, meander, and we talked about some derivations and back then, we did have some particular things bubbling up where there were some, like you said, classroom-to-classroom kinds of synchronous video, but I suspect that as we look forward now, into the future, I think that we’re…We’ve said previously that we’re going to have more synchronous going forward than we’ve had in the past—I think that’s true—but the kind of synchronous we’re likely to have more of going forward is more of that, for lack of a better term, multipoint. You know, Zoom from wherever at a certain time. I think that’s the kind of synchronous we’re talking about.

Tom: Yeah, so we’ve mentioned this before, especially during our field reports, but I have—and I think you agree that an opinion that one of the lingering aftereffects of our giant experiment with remote instruction is that we will continue doing synchronous learning online to some degree in the After Times. And how can we do that well? And how can we ensure that we do it at the same quality with the same preparation with the same assessment that we do our asynchronous online instruction? So, maybe that’s a good transition to talk about what we’re doing on that front. So, you know, you and I have talked, and we want to engage our faculty in having that conversation about what does synchronous learning look like at UCF post-COVID-19 pandemic? And how can we take advantage of their perspective to come up with a forward-looking plan?

Kelvin: Yeah, that’s right. So, we have commissioned a faculty group as we are recording this. I don’t yet know who’s going to be in that faculty group. The window has closed, and the selection process has begun, and I’m not privy to it. But we’re going to have a little group of ten faculty with some modest funding, with some facilitation jointly between our Center for Distributed Learning and our Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning to have some folks take a deep dive at the burgeoning literature related to synchronous video, online teaching, reflect on their own personal experiences with that, and really help us make some recommendations that help us going forward very thoughtfully. I’ve asked them for five deliverables, basically, and they’re going to pull those five together in one written document. First, with some benefits now and later, is some sort of an articulation of what we might call good practices for synchronous online teaching. You know, you find that in dribs and drabs, but, you know, to have that group thoughtfully say, “This is good. This is less good.” You know, you want to
do the good, and so that’ll be useful as long as the COVID response lasts and the post-COVID orientation, which is their focus. Secondly—

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Go ahead.

Tom: And beyond. I mean, that’s the key.

Kelvin: And beyond. That’s right. That’s correct. And secondly, and fundamentally, you know, kind of the big question, should our university do something formal with synchronous online teaching in the After Times, you know, post-COVID? And I suspect the answer is going to be “yes.” We have to be open to them saying “no.” I think we’ll want to hear why. But something formal, like standalone, which we didn’t do here at our institution, pre-COVID. So, we want to hear, would you recommend that? And if the answer is “yes,” then there are several other questions that bubble up from there, like, “Okay, how do our existing structures and models need to accommodate that new, formalized synchronous online teaching? Should it be a standalone modality? Should there be several modalities?” Is it really, “No, it shouldn’t be a standalone. It should only be something that exists within an existing modality?” Like, you know, there’s only video courses, but some of them can be synchronous, you know. Is it like that?

Tom: Or a portion of them could be synchronous.

Kelvin: A portion of them, that’s right.

Tom: And if that—regarding that particular deliverable—if that group comes back and says, “No, I don’t think we should have synchronous strategy for the university.” I think we’re going to have to engage deeper on that because—

Kelvin: Absolutely.

Tom: What do I do with a department that shows up to me and says, “We’re doing it, Tom?” Okay. What guardrails of quality do I have to kind of enforce the best practices?

Kelvin: That’s exactly right, and that’s got to be part of the dialogue, right? Is to let this group know that we were anticipating some of that demand. So, what would you suggest? You know, instead of how do you make this work well? Fourthly, I think we’re beginning to see some emerging synchronous online teaching/learning platforms. You said earlier, we’ve kind of co-opted existing video conferencing platforms for this remote instruction period, but we’re beginning to see some built-for-this platforms emerge. And so, we’ve worked out some access so this group will be able to kick the tires, take a look, and see if they would recommend one of these or not. Like, maybe they see, “Oh, yes, the built-for-it really makes a difference. That helps support the ‘when designed well’ kind of thing.” To quote our previous two episodes ago, [it] “helps people do the right thing.” But if it doesn’t, then maybe it’s more about just using one of these blank canvas—no pun intended—video web conferencing platforms like
Teams or Webex or Zoom or whatever. And then finally, there’s got to be some consideration of faculty preparation, like, “Okay, thoughtfully, now having thought about what’s really good synchronous online teaching and how this all plays out, what kind of preparation do our UCF faculty need in order to make that happen?” So, that has implications for faculty development and related that because we coupled together faculty development with longer term impact evaluation. We’ll talk about impact evaluation little bit, too. So, I can’t wait to see what they come up with, except that we can’t wait to see what they come up with. (laughs) So, you want to talk about that?

Tom: Well, I mean, you’ve given them a while. You’ve given them a deadline of the end of the Spring semester to come back with some answers, but you’re right. Some events have overtaken us in the meantime. So, for example, we have some colleges that want to do particular things in the Fall, and we need to have some resolution, at least, on how to label those things in our student information system, if nothing else, at least at a minimum, because registration starts in March. And we have three-semester/three-term registration, so they’re building the next three terms for those students of Summer, Fall and Spring. Sheesh. So, for example, one of the things that they’ve come to us with is that for one of our video modalities, where you can have up to 20% of the instruction face-to-face, it gives them some flexibility to do partial blended. The result of COVID has been that they want to do that. They want to have some face-to-face experience, but they want the online portion of it—which has always been asynchronous—to now be a live synchronous session with Zoom. Like, okay, that’s interesting. And I understand why they want to do that, but we’ve never done that before, so we don’t have a code for it to communicate to students what the expectations are. And then the fact that if they sign up for one of these courses, they’re going to have to be online at a certain time on a certain day, every week—or several days every week—whatever the schedule might be. And I’m really hyper-focused on making sure that students are absolutely aware of what they’re signing up for, because they’ve got work schedules and families and everything else, and I think it’s only fair to them, so we’re having that conversation right now. So, maybe by the time this actually is released, we’ll have some idea of at least what we’re doing for Fall. My hope, though, is what we figure out for Fall will be the answer going forward, because I’d hate to have to do two things, but we’ll do what makes sense.

Kelvin: Yeah, it’s challenging. You know, the way I keep thinking of it is let’s say that we were—let’s hope not—but let’s say for the sake of conversation, that we’re still in some form of remote instruction for the Fall. Heretofore, we at UCF have not charged a distance learning course fee for ad hoc remote instruction courses. We’ve tried to do a little bit better every semester, we’ve tried to do a little bit better preparation, but we’ve not charged that. And I think if we didn’t do anything else, I think what we’d want to do is sort of make what was synchronous remote instruction [into] officially synchronous online teaching, I think, which would be a real modality that actually charges a distance learning course fee, has a bit more guardrails in place for faculty preparation and evaluation and support and so forth, and not so ad hoc. I think at the very least, we’d want to do that. Now, I’m hoping we’re not in as much of a remote instruction situation in the Fall, in which case by default, what was remote instruction would go back to some version of face-to-face.
Tom: Right.

Kelvin: And then it’s a question of do colleges or departments want to continue to offer some kind of online that’s palatable to them, i.e., synchronous online?

Tom: Well, you know, based upon the predicted vaccination schedule—you know, we’ll see what the future holds—but based on that, I think it’s a reasonable assumption that [by] Fall, we’ll be back to some level of more normal. Knock on wood.

Kelvin: Knock on wood.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Let’s hope so. You did make a passing point that I just want to underscore, because I thought it was a good one. Whatever we do, we’ve got to be really clear with students, because to do otherwise sort of de facto bait-and-switches them, right? You don’t want to—if students are thinking, “Oh, I’m going to have an online experience so that I can fit my coursework into my, you know, adult responsibilities,” and then they find out that they’ve got to be, you know, three nights a week or three afternoons a week at a certain time right here, you know, looking into the web camera, that’s different, right? So, we got to be really clear. And it’s not just clear with our students, it’s clear with our college and department contacts as well. Everybody’s super clear. The more complicated this is, in some ways, the harder to communicate about it.

Tom: Yeah. And coming up with making sure that we have very standard processes and procedures around how that gets captured. So, I think we learned a lesson this Summer and Fall from our BlendFlex experience where the only way we coded that a course was BlendFlex, it was actually in the course notes. And despite our attempts to provide standardized language for those course notes, it wasn’t always used. So, to this day—maybe this is us admitting more than we should in a public podcast—but to this day, I’m not sure we know exactly how many courses use BlendFlex. I think we’ve got a pretty good sense, because we’ve come up with all the different possible keywords and searched for them, but that’s no way to, you know, plan for an ongoing sustaining modality. Now BlendFlex was just a stopgap. It’s not something that we plan to do permanently, but I think synchronous instruction, as I’ve said, I think is going to stick around for a while, and so, we need to come up with a sustainable, scalable data solution, like a meta tagging solution for this.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think that’s right. I think that’s probably a good place to leave it too. You want to try to put this plane down on the runway?

Tom: Sure. So, I think you and I will both say it’s safe to say that the global pandemic will leave behind changes in what we do and how we do it, and as we anticipate the After Times of a post-COVID era, as soon as possible, the purpose and practices of synchronous online teaching and learning will likely be renewed and more relevant than ever before.
Kelvin: Yeah, I agree with that. It makes sense. Well, we’ll be feeling our way a little bit, but I think we know kind of generally what to anticipate and, kind of, at least, what questions to ask and what the areas are that we’re going to have to address between here and there.

Tom: Yeah, absolutely.

Kelvin: You know what, maybe we’ll check back in on this topic in the After Times.

Tom: Thank you for the Egg Nog coffee.

Kelvin: Yeah, I kind of like it. You know, it’s a—maybe that is a way of having eggnog that’s not spoiled, even in the summer. I don’t know how often they make it, but—(chuckles).

Tom: Well, at the risk of coming across as somebody with an alcohol problem, like, I’ve said it more than once that sometimes the coffee you give me would be good with the nice splash, and this is one of those, I think. Yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah, for sure. We have time for just a quick plug, you think?

Tom: Let’s do it.

Kelvin: I think we plugged this a while back, we had a a job posting a few months ago that we have now tweaked. We did fail the search, and we have tweaked the requirements of that, and we have now reposted it for a Director of Instructional Design that oversees our twenty-plus faculty instructional designers. It is a great position, and we really want everybody to know about it. So, whether it’s you, dear listener, or whether it’s somebody you know, would you take a look at this? We’ll put it in the show notes, but if you have a pencil here is a bitly link: bit.ly/didposting. That is DID: Director of Instructional Design. bit.ly/didposting. Lower case, no spaces.

Tom: Yeah. So, just maybe I’ll underscore that. One is that I think that maybe we didn’t quite capture the job description exactly as we had intended, and so, that’s sort of on us in the original job posting, but I think we’ve adjusted and corrected that. And the second is that this is a key leadership position for us.

Kelvin: It is.

Tom: This is the person who oversees our entire Instructional Design team. And that is the team at the center of the bullseye for us of the, I think, award-winning, nationally-leading online learning work that we do. I try to stay objective, but it’s hard because I honestly think this is one of the best places in the country to work. If you’re in online learning in higher ed, there aren’t very many places better than UCF to come. And if you think you can be the Director of Instructional Design, we want to hear from you.
Kelvin: Absolutely. Or share it with a colleague. You know, share it widely. We’d love more folks, rather than less folks applying. That’s all I got.

Tom: Yeah, me too, and if you do apply, we look forward to seeing it. Cool. So, that’s probably enough for today, Kelvin. Until next time, for TOPcast. I’m Tom.

Kelvin: I’m Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.

(musical outro)