TOPcast Episode #85: Blended Is the Future. (And It's Not Just Courses)

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)

Kelvin Thompson: From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom Cavanagh: And I'm Tom Cavanagh.

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

Tom: Hey Kelvin. I was pausing there for a second to see if we were interrupted by any sort of "mystery woo," and thankfully, I hear none.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Thankfully.

Tom: Not that I don't appreciate the people that we've spoken to. They're wonderful people and I've enjoyed having them on the show.

Kelvin: You're just glad that it's over *(laughs).*

Tom: *(laughs)* It does sort of take me out of my rhythm a bit.

Kelvin: You know, my Shangri-La is one day, I'm going to get a spit take out of you yet. It's come close a couple times, but I think I almost did one a while ago where we were talking before we hit record *(chuckles)*.

Tom: Well, I see you drinking and speaking of spit takes…

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: You know, in our immortal TOPcast words, what's in the thermos, Kelvin?

Kelvin: Well, said thermos contained—until I poured it out for you and for me—a particular shared coffee, and let me tell you a story, Tom. Today's coffee has been a while and coming. It comes to us a while back from our colleague and TOPcast listener, Cindy Lohan. Currently from Western Governors University, Cindy, for our listeners, has held a number of roles in online education over many years in virtual K-12, higher ed, and in the vendor community. And specifically, this coffee is back to our TOPcast preferred practice of single origin

coffees. It is a Guatemala from Stuart Coffee Company in Stuart, Florida, where Cindy has continued to maintain her home base while working remotely with a variety of employers. As with others that I've known who work remotely, I assume she balances virtual connections with periodic on-site presence. I assume so. I don't know. At least that's—I assume—what the case is when there's not a global pandemic going on. So, how's the coffee? And could you find a connection to today's topic?

Tom: I like the coffee very much. I think I see the connection.

Kelvin: Ooh, *(laughing)* yes, yes, yes.

Tom: Yeah. I do.

Kelvin: We're just going to go with whatever it is you say it is.

Tom: *(chuckles)* And, I mean, I have to say, actually, Cindy's an old, old friend of mine. We went to high school together down in South Florida. And I knew—

Kelvin: I noticed the "old, old" *(laughs)*.

Tom: Yes. Although I look a lot older than she does. Yeah. Before she was Cindy Lohan. And she does have a, you know, really distinguished career in education. She was one of the first teachers at Marjory Stoneman Douglas in K-12 down in South Florida. So, thank you, Cindy, for the coffee. It is very much appreciated. And—

Kelvin: Mm-hmm.

Tom: Yes. So, what's the connection?

Kelvin: What's the connection?

Tom: Besides the fact that I've known her since high school? The remote workforce aspect of it, I'm going to guess, given the nature of her roles. I know she's worked for a publisher and a vendor and now for Western Governors. So, yes, and those have all been remote. Yeah. That's the main one that I'm digging on.

Kelvin: Yeah, let's go with that. No, I think that's right. That's what I was thinking. And the only other thing there is—it's more subtle—but then we've been doing blends a lot lately for some reason or another, and I was just glad to be back to a single origin coffee which is ironic, right? Because the word "blended" is about to come up a lot this episode *(laughing)*.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: So, we have spoken a lot on TOPcast about the potential of blended learning, especially as we plan to emerge from COVID-19. But when we've talked about blended learning, typically we've meant blended course design previously when

we've discussed it on TOPcast. But today, we want to give some thought to a bit more broad context for blended learning in higher ed. We want to give some consideration to blended campus experiences for students post-pandemic, and to get there, we want to take a bit of a side trip to touch on the likelihood of blended or hybrid workplaces in the post-COVID world. How's that for a setup?

Tom: Yeah, something we've been talking about a lot lately here internally, and it's been consuming a lot of cycles both here at UCF [and] I imagine that at other institutions, but also kind of national organizations. I know you're involved with the Online Learning Consortium's blended learning reimagining and that conversation sort of happening at a more macro level as well.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, I mean, you know, I don't know how—we were talking about this recently—I don't know how many times—and it's not just me saying it, right? I don't know how many times I've heard people say some version of, "Boy, blended. Blended is the future." Now more than ever.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Well, before we hit record, I was mentioning that I had recently done sort of, one of those little self-paced online courses that was kind of reflecting on the remote work experience, and one of the things that they said in this course was that most people preferred a hybrid work environment as opposed to 100% remote or 100% in the office, when you asked employees. So, you know—

Kelvin: I think that's interesting.

Tom: People are kind of voting with their feet. Well, *(chuckles)* when we're done with the pandemic, I imagine that they will vote with their feet based upon that kind of polling data.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. I do think it is important to note, you know, kind of the continued pandemic response versus the eventual post-pandemic thing.

Tom: Yeah, it's hard. I find myself falling into that trap sometimes too, where I have to kind of caveat, "All right, this is about when they have a choice versus now, where we kind of don't have a choice."

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah. I have been saving a lot of this, too. You and I have talked a lot about this. And as you said, you've been fostering a lot of discussion with a little taskforce here at UCF within our Division of Digital Learning, but I think in general, synthesizing the stuff that I'm reading and listening to and talking to colleagues, I do think that it is difficult to imagine—I'll put it real broadly—it's difficult to imagine that 100% of employees will return to their campus workplaces 100% of the time post-pandemic. It's hard to imagine that having stretched the possibilities of what can be done virtually, and then looking for what value in-person/face-to-face can offer. So, I think some degree of flexibility and hybridization is definitely on the horizon.

Tom: I would agree. Now, obviously, the disclaimer there is that [depends] upon the job. So, you know, if you're in a student-facing role on campus, if you're a groundskeeper or something, you know, then maybe you can't necessarily do

your job remotely, but it's been interesting to see how many jobs really can be done remotely. So, things that you might think of student-facing, like advisors or something, I mean, that's all happening virtually through, you know, Zoom and Teams and other meeting technologies. So, it's stretched our imagination—this pandemic—to think about a world where you have access to these tools, and you aren't necessarily bound to the campus environment in a way that previously we thought was the only way to do things.

Kelvin: Mm-hmm. Well, do you want to talk a little bit about what's kind of bubbling up with our own Division of Digital Learning taskforce here? Some concrete things that you and they have been talking about? Does that help us?

Tom: Yeah, maybe it's one way to kind of get into this conversation. Who knows, by the time somebody is listening to this, it's in the future, and all of this was like, "Wow, they really got that wrong."

Kelvin: *(laughing)*

Tom: But for now, it is something that we are kind of grappling with, and it's "What does this this future state post-pandemic look like for our work environment?" And we've got a building full of knowledge workers here, and 95% of them are 100% remote. There's a small handful of people that kind of have to be on campus, and then others of us who choose to be here on some basis, and otherwise, everybody's remote. And it's worked okay. So, I've asked a group of staff members from across the division representing different kinds of teams and different kinds of employees from full-time to part-time. We've got full-time faculty classified staff to professional staff to others across the range to spend the Spring semester looking at the future of remote work within the division. Obviously, assuming that nothing would end up conflicting with HR or other kinds of policies that might come out in the future from the university, but in the absence of that, what does our policy look like? And I've given them two pages of questions to think about as part of their charge. But a lot of it, for me, comes down to culture. That needs to be our North Star. For me, it's innovation over productivity. You might be surprised to hear me say that. I don't care as much about productivity as I do about innovation because I think that's our bread and butter. And I got asked a really good question by somebody from our HR department, which is "What have we learned about blended learning that could be applied to blended work?" And I thought that was an interesting way of framing it. And I think—I don't remember if we talked about this—

Kelvin: Remarkable, insightful question.

Tom: It was! Yeah, and I know you and I've talked about this so many times. I don't remember if we've talked about it on the podcast, so I don't want to bore our listeners by going into it too much. But it very much—high level—it is privilege the things that are face-to-face, and do those really well, take advantage of those opportunities, and don't squander them with things that could be done remotely.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And that is the core of what the team is looking at right now.

Kelvin: I think that's excellent. And yes, I think that is a very key piece of advice for doing blended course design. I think we have talked about that a little bit in the past here on the podcast. And I think that's really wise, as we think about some kind of a blended or hybrid approach in the workplace going forward. Like, well, I guess one real concrete example that I wonder about is—I said this in a talk recently. I was doing it in a virtual talk. I was doing it at another institution. I kind of made this point that I think this is kind of the future. But imagine conference rooms where there are some folks who are physically present, you know, in your workplace, and others are on screen via a collaboration platform like Zoom or Teams or WebEx or something. And maybe the default expectation is that, you know, you don't make a big deal out of like, "Oh, who's going to be able to be—?" You just kind of set up the collaboration tool appointment and link, and put it in the appointment regardless, right?

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: And then it works. It's kind of almost like a universal design for learning approach, you know? You kind of plan the broadest access, and then in practice, it's like, "Okay, you're going to be here, and you're going to be here for a particular reason, and then the rest of us can be connected." And that might be a thing. I don't know, but it might be.

Tom: No, I agree. I think that's coming. I think that's a given—what you just described: to try and make this as seamless as possible and have it "just work." I think it's going to have to be like that. But there are other kind of, more minutiae kinds of questions that I'm also asking people to talk about that are kind of policy related. Things like, alright, so, if you're one of these remote people in one of these meetings and the rest of the team is in the room, or if you're one of three or four remote people and it's a big team meeting or something, should there be an expectation to have your camera on so that you are equally present to that group as they are to each other and to you? Or you would be, as if you were in the room. And maybe that's not quite so optional as it is now. So, I'm drawing a distinction between now which is people are remote, not by choice. So, they may not have a configured right workspace or they've got their kids home and their spouse home. It's not designed as a voluntary thing right now. But as we joke in the after times, when you do have a choice, and you have some agency and whether or not you are remote, well, I think the expectations change under those circumstances, and I think that your colleagues expectations of you potentially change. So that's one example.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: One I heard in this little self-paced course, too, was, yeah, you may be just as productive on any given day of the week remotely. But if you are working remotely Monday and Friday—or Monday or Friday—there is a perception that you're just angling for a long weekend. And even if that's not true, maybe it's better just to have a policy not to have remote days on Monday/Friday just to

avoid that perception of people. I thought, "That's interesting. I hadn't even thought of that."

Kelvin: Yeah. Right. And again, in the after times, not right now.

Tom: Exactly.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think those are interesting ideas, to be sure. I think a relevant note here—we can stick in the show notes—you know, EDUCAUSE has been doing these quick polls in recent months, and it's kind of gauging from the community things that will help guide us as we emerge from the pandemic, and there was one related to remote work, specifically related to institutional data security and personal privacy issues. Those were kind of not exactly counterbalanced, but somewhat counterbalanced in the poll. And they had some interesting thoughts about that [and] just practices. You know, engaging to what extent the respondents were employing those practices. Very interesting. So, I think that has some implications for how you do that.

Tom: I think we have a lot we can learn from organizations like EDUCAUSE, which is a fully remote organization. I know they have offices in Colorado and DC, but by and large, the organization's remote. John O'Brien lives in Seattle, right? So, he's not even in the offices. So, what can we learn from organizations like that, from the Online Learning Consortium that are 100% remote that can help us? Like, for example, I'm thinking that part of the reason we were so successful—and I may have said this before—is that we had established relationships forged face-to-face that just carried over into the remote environment, and that worked really well, but it's been a year we've been doing this now, and we've hired people, and there are people that we've hired that have like, never set foot in our building, and that I haven't met face-to-face.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And how do we bring them into our culture, make them part of the team, have them influence what we're doing when it's just on Zoom? It's hard. And if we were going to have a more remote workforce, what do those organizations do—like EDUCAUSE and OLC—to onboard people and make them understand the culture, and how they can be contributors, and all of that? It's all new territory for us in the in the academy.

Kelvin: Yeah, it's funny. You know, that made me think of you and I were both on a conference call, as we're recording this, earlier today that involves some of the provost from around our state system, and they were doing some thinking about the post-COVID times and getting different perspectives. And one of the faculty members who's on our Board of Governors was making some suggestions, and one of the provosts' riffed on that suggestion to comment about the nature. What is it to be a university and what is it to be a faculty and anchoring down to the geographic presence, you know, and the relationships that are there? And this provost was commenting, like, "I don't know what that would be like to have faculty that you hire and that are somewhere else. And there's no like,

collegiality," he was saying, "and there's no presence, you know, anchoring to this institution."

Tom: He was getting at the concept of community.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: And that when you join a university, you join a community of faculty and students, and I take his point.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah.

Tom: But I mean, before UCF, more than 12 years ago now, I worked at a university that was distributed across the globe with campuses everywhere, and they did something like every other year, I think. We would have a conference where they invested and paid the money and brought everybody together.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And we would have an event, and it was great. It was professional development, but it was also about team building, and it was about getting to know your colleagues that might work on the other side of the planet. It was great, and I think you probably need to do that periodically.

Kelvin: Yeah. Well, I said we would lily pad jump over to this other topic. I think that topic of post-pandemic workplace is relevant for our listeners, you know, regardless of their role, but maybe more core to the target of our topics on the podcast is this assertion I will make. See what you think. It's also difficult to imagine that 100% of students will return to their campuses 100% of the time post-pandemic regardless of what the institutional context was pre-pandemic, right? We've seen some of that dynamic here at UCF for many years, but I think there's implications of that. If that's true, there's implications for kind of a lot of things that we've already touched on a little bit: student services, student life and all of that. But would you agree that that's more likely to be the case post-pandemic now?

Tom: Yeah, totally. And I even see that in my own family. So, my son's a college junior, and I was talking to him the other night. He's going to move off campus next year and be in an apartment. And I was like, well, you know—he's in a fraternity house right now—"it's been nice having you on campus," because even though all his classes are online, in theory, he'd be more likely to be on time for class if you can just skateboard over there as opposed to get in the car and drive and find a parking spot and everything. And I was like, "You know, I don't want any incentives for you to kind of say, 'Oh, I don't have to go to class.' He's like, 'Dad, probably my classes are going to be online anyway.'" And that's probably not something he would have said.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And I imagine there are a lot of other students that are saying, "Well, you know, I have a lot more flexibility because there are more choices for me now." You and I know because we've been having a conversation about modalities with students and faculty. When we most recently talked to students, they told us even though they have to—like, for a synchronous class, if the faculty member records it, they quickly realize that and say, "Okay, I don't have to get up at eight o'clock. I'll watch that later."

Kelvin: 3 a.m.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah! One of them said that. Yeah. So, I think the future is, I mean, it is blended, to quote you. It is definitely going in that direction.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think about things like student services. You touched on this a little while ago when we were talking about the workplace. What services for students will only be offered face-to-face? You know, in terms of privileging, you know, kind of things that can only be conducted in person. But what services will be provided online or face-to-face as kind of an option, or *only* online? I wonder about that. You know, our student services colleagues, some years back, I remember sitting in an office in our Millican Hall, our administrative building, where we were asked to consult on "Well, how do you make these things more virtual? How do you use Skype?" *(laughs)* I remembered this conversation very clearly.

Tom: Yeah. Well, yeah, that's where it started, and it took a while to bring them along. They're all along now.

Kelvin: Yeah. *(still laughing)* That's right.

Tom: But, you know, one of the areas that never left campus and hasn't left for the last year is health services and counseling.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: They're there. Now, they're doing a lot remotely to support students who aren't on campus, but they're also seeing students in person. And it's hard. There's only so much telehealth is going to get you, right? At some point, you need to come in and say, "This is where it hurts," or "This looks funny," you know, whatever. So, I think some of those will probably always have a face-to-face component. But I've been amazed at what even that group has been able to do remotely.

Kelvin: Yeah, I'm also, you know, in terms of what we call, like, "campus life," that student experience with the institution and beyond just courses, I'm really curious about how much that will revert back to 100% face-to-face, or whether those will stretch to do more virtual offerings. You know, right? With, say, our UCF Online students who don't have a presence on the physical campus, that's sometimes a little bit of a challenge for them because not all student organizations offer those virtual options and so forth. Like, an example of an institution where this has done well—I think because it keeps coming up as an example through the years—is Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA).

It has a long-standing virtual student union that has lots of activities. We'll put a link in the show notes. I remember seeing a session from them years ago. I think that's a great exemplar, but to what extent will our institutions offer options or be solely virtual? I'm really curious to see how that pans out.

Tom: Yeah, I mean, I have a theory that just like, meetings here going forward will always include the link to the Zoom or Teams or whatever it is, I think that, like, clubs will probably have that, too. And that will make it much more accessible for the fully online students who want to participate in those clubs, where in the past, it's been really hard. In fact, one of our colleagues here was working on an app to try to make those things available to fully online students who weren't able to access them. So, I think that will just become part of it, and that'll be used by clubs or affinity groups, and I know that groups have started meeting now. They're continuing the work that they do. I'm thinking of our, like, Caribbean Students Association, and they meet on Zoom. And that will probably continue, I would imagine, or at least have a Zoom option. But like, during orientation week, or not even orientation week, but like the first week of the term in the Fall, they have all this week of welcome kind of stuff. There's like a movie out on the lawn in the Mall. And, you know, this year—last two years—it's been just virtual. You can log in and watch the movie with all your friends, and that's just not the same as getting on a blanket and having a sandwich and laying back and watching it, and the weather here is fantastic in the evening. I think that's what students are going to want to come back for.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. And then you quoted me, I'll quote you. I do think another element to this, you know, that's a little bit closer to courses is I suspect that post-pandemic, part of that blended student experience will involve a post-modality swirl of course-taking behaviors. You wrote a piece a number of years ago coining the term that we're in a post-modality era, and that was back circa 2008-2009, something like that, and that's been our experience here at UCF. I think that's going to be the case at more institutions, where students kind of bounce between fully online courses, explicitly blended courses, fully face-to-face courses, and that will be a kind of a blend of their experience with the institution as well. Would you agree?

Tom: Well, I think in many ways, UCF was a bit of, I don't know, a groundbreaker in that because, I mean, The Chronicle did an article about us many years ago, calling us "The University of Tomorrow" or something because of that phenomenon of students swirling between location and modality. It's like, "I'm not an online student. I'm just a student and I take online courses, I take blended courses, I take it from this campus, I take it from that campus—whatever I have to do, I'm going to do it." And we try to facilitate that to the best of our ability. And yeah, that's sort of the idea of post-modality, and I think more schools are experiencing that now and will. This came up on this call that we had across the state today, where faculty, like, could they decide halfway through the term "Okay, next two weeks, we're going to be online," and then come back and say, "Okay, and the rest of the term are going to be face-to-face." Like, well, do they have the authority to do that, or is that a university decision? How you teach? What classroom [are] you assigned? It's a really good question, and, you know,

the gentleman who was bringing it up is a faculty member. And, you know, he's bringing it up from that perspective.

Kelvin: Yeah. So, blended, broader, big picture. You know, I don't think we have time to talk about this here, too, but maybe just to plant a flag for a future conversation that we've hinted at before: I do think part of blended to be in the future is, I think, we have to allow ourselves some openness to further mutations of blended course design, post-pandemic. We've already seen some of that call here at our institution, been planning for it and so forth, but we'll unpack that, maybe in a future conversation.

Tom: Yeah. And I would caution anybody listening to this who thinks, "Wow, you know, we got all this green field we can run because of all of this technology. We've got everybody kind of on board now, and it's been…The ground has been laid." I'll mix all kinds of motive quotes. But I caution you, the same thing applies that applied with asynchronous online learning, that I used to say—I still say—that it's too easy to outrun the quality supply lines. You can just open—

Kelvin: Say that again, for Mike.

Tom: *(laughs)* Yeah, really. You can just create a new online course shell in whatever your LMS of choice is *(snaps)* like that and assign a faculty member, or hire an adjunct, or whatever it is. Go teach! Well, that doesn't mean it's going to be good. And it's the same thing with synchronous, it's like, "Okay. Hey, I know how to use Zoom. I can just teach like I do. That must be good." No, it needs—You need to have it be sustainably high quality. Everybody's willing to forgive a little rough edges because of the pandemic, but going forward, they will not, nor will we, should we, as an institution accept anything less than the best we could possibly offer. And I think we're approaching that pretty soon.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: People's expectations are going to go up, and it's like, just because you're on Zoom is not enough.

Kelvin: No, that's right. And I can't help myself, so I'll make two real quick blended course design plugs, and then we can unpack this another day. But one: no matter what else blended might be in terms of mutations, I think blended has to be the strategic combination of online and face-to-face. Strategic. There's an intentional design, not just a combination of circumstances, and I've been thinking about this a lot lately, Tom: with blended design, there is a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. It's not just, "Let me connect these two things." Like you said, the "Oh, I've got a Zoom account, now I add it to—" No, there's a whole, and that takes intentionality and a thoughtful integration. We'll talk more about that another day, but if you're tempted, don't be! Say no! Just embrace quality.

Tom: If it feels super easy, then question it, right?

Kelvin: That's right. That's right.

Tom: It shouldn't be super easy. It's just not. Not if you're doing it well.

Kelvin: Yeah. Well said. Well, you want to try to land this plane for us?

Tom: Let me. Alright, so, to paraphrase Dr. Kelvin Thompson that "blended is the future," and especially now more than ever, but this isn't just limited to blended course design. The student campus experiences and the campus workplaces are more likely to be blended as we emerge from COVID-19 and move forward into the after times.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. I think that's right. We'll see if we're right, but I think that's right.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah. And if not, we'll just delete this one from the feed. Nobody will ever know we were wrong *(chuckles)*.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* There's a record.

Tom: That's right. Well, thanks for the coffee, Kelvin.

Kelvin: You're welcome.

Tom: Thank you, Cindy, for the coffee.

Kelvin: Yes, thank you.

Tom: Talk to you soon.

Kelvin: Yes, and I guess that's a good place to leave it, so until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.

(musical outro)