TOPcast Episode #87: Repairing Our Reputation Post-COVID

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're listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hey, Tom.

Tom: Hey, Kelvin. Sounds like you've got your "professional radio guy" voice going today.

Kelvin: Yeah—

Tom: *(imitating Kelvin's voice)* You're listening to TOPcast. Coming at you live, I'm spinning the hits here at seven forty-five. We got traffic on the nines. *(back in his regular voice)* You and I, we could be the morning zoo of online learning.

Kelvin: Or the afternoon zoo? I don't know. It's after lunch time.

Tom: *(laughing)* Just a general, unkempt—

Kelvin: Zoo!

Tom: Zoo. Yeah, that's probably the theme here.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* There's a callback I haven't thought of it a long time. You might remember this too. On PBS, of course, there's *Sesame Street*, there's *Mr. Rogers*, Villa Alegre, but there was also the *New Zoo Revue*. *(singing the New Zoo Revue theme song)* "It's the New Zoo Revue, coming right at you."

Tom: Oh, yeah. I remember the *New Zoo Revue*. I loved it. The hippo? Henrietta Hippo was in the *New Zoo Revue*.

Kelvin: Henrietta Hippo! Yes! I liked that. Yeah, it was all good. It was good stuff. That's what I think of. So, if I can be that kind of online learning zoo, I'm okay. That's a good zoo to be in.

Tom: I'll take that kind of a zoo.

Kelvin: That's a good zoo. Yeah, you know we—

Tom: Alright—

Kelvin: Go ahead.

Tom: I was just going to say, you know what they do in zoos? *(pause)* They drink coffee.

Kelvin: Well, *(breaks into laughter)* I was wondering how you were going to get there, but I didn't see it. I still don't because I don't know that that's true.

Tom: I probably should have let you talk *(chuckles)*.

Kelvin: That's all right. Do they? Do they? Do they drink?

Tom: Yeah. Well, at this zoo, we do.

Kelvin: Oh, okay, that's good. Well, I was just going to say we haven't said this in a while, but we do describe this show as a collegial conversation about online teaching and learning conducted over a shared cup of coffee which is why we do kind of bring in the coffee a little bit now and again. So, it's all good. So yes, in this zoo, we drink coffee.

Tom: And I'm drinking something that you have poured for me just momentarily ago—a moment ago? Something like that. And I'm sipping it and enjoying it.

Kelvin: Well, that's good. You're probably wondering what it is.

Tom: I am wondering what it is.

Kelvin: Well, today's coffee, Tom, comes to us from TOPcast listener, former guest, and OLC colleague, Dr. Jessica Knott. Jess had a hometown roaster, Strange Matter Coffee in Lansing, Michigan, ship us this light roasted single-origin natural processed Ethiopia from the Sidamo region. We've had a variety of Ethiopian coffees over the years on the show, and we've discussed previously that with a few distinct growing regions and unique flavor profiles, Ethiopian coffees have a well-deserved reputation for being among the best in the world. So, how's the coffee, and could you find the connection to today's topic in there somewhere?

Tom: I liked the coffee. Thank you, Jessica Knott. The connection…I was listening hard because sometimes you embed your connections deep.

Kelvin: *(laughs)* Obfuscate.

Tom: You got to go deep. Yeah. And the only thing that's sort of popping out at me was your last sentence, I think. What did you say? A well-deserved reputation?

Kelvin: Yes, for being among the best in the world.

Tom: For being among the best in the world. And today, we're going to be talking about reputations. Maybe that's the connection.

Kelvin: Yes. That's all I had, Tom. That's all I had.

Tom: All right!

Kelvin: Reputation and shooting for being best in the world. *(laughs)* That's all I had.

Tom: I'll take that, too. Yeah.

Kelvin: That's right. So, maybe we'll say, as a little bit of a preamble, as this episode releases top of April 2021, a full year of ad hoc emergency remote instruction is behind all of us in higher education and K-12 education. Can you believe it?

Tom: No. A whole year. It's been more than a year now.

Kelvin: More than. Throughout the past year, we've addressed many current and anticipated impact of this activity in the field of online education. But one thread we'd like to pull—we'd like to examine a bit more closely—is what we think of as the need for reputation repair in our field, following a year of widespread adoption of ad hoc practices and emergency online tool use. And I think we've been pretty clear. We've certainly tried to be throughout the past year of TOPcast episodes that our position is that actual well designed and supported online education is quite different from ad hoc emergency pandemic response of remote instruction. But we've said before that this distinction is kind of lost on many stakeholders. For instance, some of our students, some of our parents, lawmakers, the public. So that's why our focus today is on post-pandemic reputation of online education. How's that?

Tom: Yeah. Yeah, perfect. And as you know, because I've talked about it, it's something I've been thinking about a lot lately. I've been using whatever platform I have in meetings and conferences and things to kind of bring it up because I worry. You know, we have so many people, as you said, who have experienced Zoom University, or Zoom High School or Elementary School for the past year. I mean, there's even jokes—you can buy a "Zoom University" shirt now. There are class-action lawsuits all across the country about people who have sort of not [been] happy with the experience that they've had, and this may be their only exposure that they've ever had to online learning.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And that's a shame. When this is all sort of over and we get back, I hope, to some level of intentionality and design in all of our offerings—I mean, we haven't stopped doing that, but we've added in some of this more emergency instruction stuff. And I'm speaking sort of collectively as a community now, not just at UCF where that's certainly been true, too. I worry that these people will have preconceived notions of what online learning is based on this less-than-optimal experience that they may have had, especially in the K-12 space, where it's just been really hard for so many across the country.

Kelvin: I agree with that.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: For sure. I mean, I know we've talked a lot about this on microphone and off microphone, and, you know, I think we don't do this enough, honestly, in our field is look—I mean, apart from the pandemic—looking at what's going on currently in K-12 in anticipation for what's going to come, you know, say, five years down the path [or] you know, three to five years down the path because we're fortunate, you know. In our state, we've got one of the most long-standing—we've talked about this before—one of the most long-standing K-12 virtual schools in the US: Florida Virtual School.

Tom: It's the largest, I think, in the world or something.

Kelvin: It is quite good. You know, they do a lot right or, you know, mostly right. Whatever, they're good at it. So, it's good to see what that—but that's not what everybody experiences in K-12.

Tom: But even with that, as good as the Florida Virtual School is, and I think they are—

Kelvin: It's not what we do. It's not what we do.

Tom: It's different than what we do. Yeah. Their model is very different. There's a teacher that is kind of hyper-engaged with his or her students to the point where they call the parents, right? To make sure that the student is staying up with the work and to inform the parents. And, you know, the joke I always make is that our American government faculty member—and you know who I'm talking about—he's not going to call you to see why you didn't turn in your assignment.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* No.

Tom: I mean, you're 18 years old or older, you're an adult now, and it's your job to turn in the assignment on time. It's a different model. The safety nets aren't quite there that they might be even under ideal circumstances for a K-12 online experience.

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

Tom: So, that combined with the virtual instruction that everybody's had—we've talked about this early in the pandemic when some of the some of the surveys came out, but I'll sort of just recap briefly here. I think about a third of the students who were surveyed—and it's kind of been our experience here as well—kind of don't like it.

Kelvin: Right.

Tom: And I think I understand. I think it's a combination of factors. The first is, these are students who chose face-to-face courses. They wanted to be face-to-face.

Kelvin: For a reason!

Tom: Right. And then they were forced to be in a remote instruction environment, kind of against their will. Now, it was against everybody's will. It was a worldwide pandemic. What are you going to do? So, you know, it is what it is, but it doesn't mean they liked it because they didn't—if they wanted to be online, they would have been online prior to the pandemic. That combined with the fact that we had faculty that were equally thrust into this entirely new pedagogical environment and may or may not have gotten adequate training—at a minimum, they got technical training, let alone maybe not pedagogical training.

Kelvin: Right.

Tom: So, they're probably, through no fault of their own, not awesome at it yet. So, you got a bunch of students who didn't want to be there in the first place, and faculty who are still figuring it out. It's probably not a recipe for the best possible educational experience, and I understand some of the dissatisfaction. And honestly, I think that we've done as well as we have as a community. I think UCF, in particular, we've done very well, if I could brag a little on our university. But in general, across the country, the fact that we've done as well as we have is a testament to creativity of faculty and the support of online learning units and others. But that doesn't mean everybody liked it, right?

Kelvin: No.

Tom: And so, that third of people—especially high school students—are showing up in our doors this Summer and Fall with, kind of, their arms crossed and their face frowny, and saying, "You know, online learning sucks. I don't want that." And we're going to have to somehow reset those expectations to say, "Yeah, maybe what you experienced wasn't optimal and you didn't like it, but that's not what we do here. And if you're going to be online, it affords an awful lot of advantages and convenience and even academic success to you. And it's not what you're expecting."

Kelvin: Yeah. You know, gosh, that takes my head so many different ways—too many different places, Tom. I mean, there's certainly, like, for folks like us, many of our institutions, we offer resources to help onboard students into like, online courses. We do that here. We have something. Our mascot, the "Knights," is kind of the metaphor. And so, we have "Knights Online," and we've talked recently about kind of tweaking that, you know, with a—give it a little bit of a refresher, a fresh coat of paint with an eye toward, you know, this immediate experience of incoming former K-12 students. But it's even beyond that, right? Like, you really want people who were like, doing orientation or advising, you really want…I remember years and years ago—not even sure how far—early 2000s, at least, where we sort of—there was—we reached ubiquity with basic web technologies. We were like, one of the Yahoo Most Wired campuses and all that kind of stuff, and we actually started putting in the course catalog statements along the lines of,

"Welcome to UCF. During your tenure here, you can expect to encounter web-based technologies, regardless of the course that you're in." We're going to kind of expect that, and that was sort of this disclaimer; it was sort of a level setting. And it's almost like a version of that that's needed now that sort of, you know, takes a fresh look atm "Welcome to UCF. We do digital learning really well here."

Tom: Right. Right.

Kelvin: *(chuckling)* "We're going to expect you to engage. There's a lot of offerings here. It's not what you had back in K-12 or wherever, right?" And that's tough to try to get everybody on that song sheet.

Tom: It is. And, as you know—because it's your team that's working on it—we are updating our Knights Online, kind of, orientation videos to include some of that expectation setting. And we've had that in the past, but it was much more oblique, and it wasn't as explicit. It was sort of like, "Hey, you may have experienced something different in the Florida Virtual School, but—"

Kelvin: *(laughing)* We've definitely experienced something different now.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah, so it's time to put a spotlight on that and just make sure it's really, you know, front and center for students as they come in, that this is a little different. We've also talked in the past about some of the work that our marketing department did to stand up our own kind of digital learning information page as part of the core ".edu" site for us. Not our UCF Online site or the digital learning site or the CDL site that we manage, but something that's front facing, and actually, there's a part of the viewbook now about how—the digital online viewbook—about how well we do online learning: our history, our experience, this is our 25th year doing it—to sort of lean into that expertise during the time when everybody was anxious about having to take everything online. And that's helped, I think, because it's helped to put the broader power of the university communications machine behind that message, but I'm not sure it's getting to everybody.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree with that. I do, and that's what worries me a little bit, is we've already put in some effort on this and it's sort of still an issue and it's not going to just go away. And that's even just in our own institutional context, just like the institutional context of our listeners. But then there's sort of our broader kind of higher ed. context and kind of the reputation of online and digital learning broadly across the US, across the world. You know, I—we've talked about this. You've sort of put out there that, you know, we really need kind of a bigger push, you know, across the industry. Maybe an opportunity for a lot of folks to collaborate—maybe a number of professional associations somehow—to do a version of what you just described at our institution. You know, how do you take that big message way out there? "We know something about online education! We do it well! Here's what the data say."

Tom: Yeah. Yeah, agreed. And, you know, I've sort of described this as being sort of a national PR campaign that can maybe do some of this lifting with the media, and

policymakers, and parents. I mean, it's across the board of people who I think have a certain set of expectations based upon the experience of the past year that it would be good to reset. It reminds me a little bit, many years ago, I was asked by Diana Oblinger when she was president of EDUCAUSE to join a group that was writing kind of a policy white paper across a bunch of different higher ed. organizations like OLC, and UPCEA, and WCET. There's a whole bunch of them, and I think Jared Cummings and I were the EDUCAUSE people. And it was to accomplish something like that, about sort of the value proposition of online learning that could be shared with policymakers. We all met at the UPCEA office—no, we met at Cooley's offices in DC, I think, when they existed, I guess, as a law firm. And it was really targeted at sort of that Washington corridor of policymakers. And I wonder if we shouldn't do something again like that and get all of those professional organizations together to put out a statement, or do some press releases, or put some tracks into some conferences, or, I don't know, push them into other conferences like NCUBA or other kinds of, you know, non-online conferences.

Kelvin: I think that's an excellent idea. I really do. I mean, I joked about it before we started this recording, like, you know, like it or hate it, you know, Garrison Keillor has made fun of like, the "National Ketchup Council" or whatever on *Prairie Home Companion*. But you know, I mean, there was a time when you, you know, milk: it does a body good, and you got celebrities and, you know, and they got a little milk mustache. And, you know, whether you're lactose intolerant or not, I mean, most of us remember of a certain age that campaign came out, and whether you make fun of or not, it's like, "Boy, there was there was a message that you remember that the milk council put together." We need the "National Milk Council" for online education.

Tom: Well, maybe it's worthwhile to think about maybe not just complaining that, "You don't understand what it really is," but, you know, some principles that we can kind of hang our hat on that could potentially be part of that kind of a message. So, I mean, one of them is that we've—as I said—we've been doing this for 25 years now, and there are other schools like us. And even if it's not been quite that long, it's been a long time. We've got a corpus of research and efficacy data that show that we know what we're doing when this is done right. You know, how do we share that?

Kelvin: Yeah. I mean, Oregon State curates that efficacy database from a disciplinary standpoint, which is great. We've got a long-standing longitudinal impact evaluation work here, thanks to Drs. Chuck Dziuban and Patsy Moskal. Shout out to our colleagues over at SUNY Oswego's "Tea for Teaching" Podcast. They did a recent episode: "It's Been a Year," which I love. It's a great title. It's been a year and—

Tom: It's been a year.

Kelvin: It's been a year. *(laughs)* And you know, and they make a good strong defense of kind of real online education as differentiated from, you know, this more recent stuff. I think that's all good. You know, we've got our own Teaching Online Pedagogical Repository where we anchor down to professional practice and

research literature. There's lots of stuff. Tanya Joosten's data work, you know? That National Center out of University of Wisconsin Milwaukee that she runs. We have lots of stuff that we can offer up.

Tom: Shout out to our own Teaching Online Pedagogical Repository.

Kelvin: Yes. topr.online.ucf.edu. That's right.

Tom: Yep. And you know, another aspect of this—and you sort of alluded to it a little bit as you were talking about sort of the lack of understanding of what we really do, and it's something I've dealt with a lot because I've had to write letters to parents or respond to messages from parents. And there has been a theme that when students who maybe haven't experienced online learning before have been placed into our—what we would call—high quality online asynchronous courses, that they're "having to teach themselves."

Kelvin: I hate that.

Tom: Yeah, and that they're not getting their money's worth, the faculty have abdicated their responsibility, and they're not doing anything, and they've abandoned the course, so to speak. It's just, you know, "Here's a bunch of materials, go teach yourself." Like, "Here's a book, go teach yourself." And of course, we know that's not the case, but it's based on a mental model of—I think you said this: "telling isn't teaching and listening isn't learning," right?

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And that's what goes through my mind when I think about these situations because they've got this mental model of a lecture hall, say, and a faculty member in the front—"sage on the stage"—just talking at you, filling up the receptacles of knowledge while they all sit there dutifull-ibly—dutiful—dutifully—say that 10 times—absorbing the wisdom from the front of the room, and that equals learning. And so of course, the analog online for that is, "Okay, you're on Zoom. You talk at me. I listen. It's just like the classroom." Well, maybe. Maybe it's better in an asynchronous course that's been well intentionally-designed that has engaging media and pedagogy and discussions and other kinds of things. And how do we reset the expectations around the co-construction of learning—around constructivist pedagogy—without sounding defensive? It's something that I've tried to walk a line on. It's hard.

Kelvin: Yeah, it is hard. I get that. And you and I were talking a little while ago, before we hit record, that I just left a session earlier today that Tanya Joosten was doing within the Blended Learning Summit at the OLC Innovate 2021 conference, and she shared a construct which I liked a lot. I can't remember if I've seen it before, or not, but she described it as like, four dialectics, right? Four continua, right? Four domains: technology, time, space, and pedagogy. And she was talking about blended learning, but, you know, there's a range in each of those. And she said, you know, the first three: you know, technology, you're kind of at the midpoint. It's a blend: time and space. There's a midpoint because it's a blend. But pedagogy, it kind of ranges from, like, passive to active. You want active,

(laughs) and I think that's true of all of our modalities, whether it's fully online, gosh, even fully face-to-face, you know, but we don't act that way. You know, in face-to-face, we talk about active learning like it's an unusual thing. Online, I think we've lost this—I think we've lost ground on this over the last couple of decades—but, you know, when we started out the assumption was, like you said: co-construction of knowledge, constructivist. The expectation by default is you're more active than you would have been in a traditional face-to-face course.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: So, that's different. That's not "fill their heads with knowledge."

Tom: Right. Yeah. And then, you know, there are advantages to asynchronous flexibility that work for the nontraditional learner or even for traditional learners with nontraditional demands on their lives whether it's work or, you know, even—I don't know, you're an intercollegiate athlete, or you're in student government, or fraternity life, or something, sorority life, whatever, you know, that puts demands on your time and it gives you some flexibility if you have an asynchronous class. If you don't have an asynchronous online class—if it is just "log in to Zoom at 10 o'clock on Thursday and get lectured," you eliminate half of that flexibility.

Kelvin: You know, you're singing my song. I mean, I've been, as you know, bemoaning this for a while. I think we have to be open-minded post-pandemic about seeing things new and being open to the role of synchronous online teaching and learning, and how our experience with synchronous have done well can mutate some of our existing digital learning modalities, but we must not do that in a way that disadvantages, you know, students who have benefited from two and a half decades of doing it well the asynchronous way.

Tom: Yeah, agreed. So, I don't know if we want to belabor it any more than we already have.

Kelvin: Yes, yes I do! Let's beat that drum some more!

Tom: *(chuckles)* Yeah. But, I don't know, here's an official—for those who are listening who might be in positions of authority at our various professional organizations: if you all want to meet in Orlando, we'll host you in our building—

Kelvin: *(laughing)* That's right. We will.

Tom: —to write up something, you know? I guess—

Kelvin: I'll make some coffee.

Tom: Yeah, we'll bring coffee when, I guess, you know, everybody's ready to travel again. But if not, we'll host the Zoom meeting—

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

Tom: —if you want to facilitate that kind of a discussion, I really do think it's worthwhile.

Kelvin: I agree with that. It's important to get that message out, and it's not defensive. It's about looking out for students. It's about advancing the value of meaningful learning, you know? It's all about that.

Tom: Well, it's also just telling the truth in many ways about what we actually do, as opposed to what you think we do.

Kelvin: Yeah. That is true. I don't know. I think we're coming down to the finish line, Tom.

Tom: Shall I try to land the bow?

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Yes, land the bow.

Tom: So, you know, post-pandemic, when this is all over, and I sort of feel like there's light at the end of the tunnel—I've had my first shot as we're recording this—

Kelvin: Woo-hoo! Me too.

Tom: There will be a far larger group of people who have firsthand experience with or even indirect knowledge of what they consider online education as a result of what we would call remote instruction, and as online education professionals, we need to start working now on rebuilding the high-quality reputation of our traditional "real online courses."

Kelvin: Yeah. Yeah, I'm with you. Absolutely. I think that's exactly right. So, let's do that.

Tom: Yes. Okay. You said it. We'll do it.

Kelvin: Well, that's a good place to leave it. So, hey, we'd love to hear from you, dear listeners. If you want to engage with us about brainstorming even how to do that at your own institutions, I'll put us out there. I'll say, "Hey, we'd be happy to talk to you." Reach out to us. topcast@ucf.edu. Somebody will get back to you. It might even be one of us. *(laughs)* But we'd love to engage about how to move this forward. Well, Tom, I guess it's about time to pull the ripcord on this shoot. So, until next time for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.

(musical outro)