TOPcast Episode #88: "It Really Always Comes Back to Design"

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. Greetings, Dr. Thompson.

Kelvin: Greetings, Dr. Cavanagh. That seemed like it was like just personalized. *You.*

Tom: *You*.

Kelvin: *You*.

Tom: I'm talking to *you*, dear listener.

Kelvin: Just the one. The one that we're here for.

Tom: That's right.

Kelvin: Just you.

Tom: Just you. Yeah, this sounds like we're getting into some like, deep meditative podcasts like, for, you know, good health and mental wellness.

Kelvin: Who did that on *Saturday Night Live*? It was like "Deep Thoughts with—"

Tom: Jack Handey.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Jack Handey. I always thought that was "Deep Thoughts." Yeah. Hopefully, the thoughts are semi-deep. Maybe not that deep today.

Tom: Yes. Well, shallow to mid-length thoughts today from Kelvin and Tom on TOPcast.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: I don't think we're going anywhere up to the maybe even neck depth. Maybe. We'll keep it chest and below.

Kelvin: Yeah, that sounds good. You can extricate yourself if you want to, dear listener *(laughs)*.

Tom: *(chuckles)* That's right. I'll keep it in depths so that I can wear my floaty.

Kelvin: Sure. Okay. Now my head went to old *Tarzan* movies where inexplicably, there's quicksand every five feet, let alone, you know, just the horrible racial stereotypes and the poor production and everything else. But there's quicksand every five feet.

Tom: I saw some comedian—we're really getting deep into the banter now—but some comedian, I think, talked about this. Like, "When I was growing up, I thought by the time I got to be an adult, quicksand was going to be a major risk for me."

Kelvin: *(breaks into laughter)* That's right.

Tom: It was like, every TV show, every hero is always in [quicksand] and there always was a vine nearby you had to throw in and get—yeah. I actually thought quicksand was a lot more common than it really is.

Kelvin: They memorialized the death of the character because the hat's floating on top of the quicksand.

Tom: Right, right. Yeah.

Kelvin: And then they come up to them from behind like, "What's up?" *(laughs)* "Oh, you're not dead! Darn it."

Tom: Yeah. Have you ever encountered quicksand in real life?

Kelvin: No. Have you?

Tom: Me neither. So, dear listener, if you have actually encountered quicksand, we want to know.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Do you want to know that?

Tom: Please contact us at our TOPcast email address and tell us just a brief story about your quicksand experience.

Kelvin: Or even possibly "slow-sand" or just "medium-speed-sand" as the case may be.

Tom: That's right. We're not going to discriminate against other kinds of sands.

Kelvin: topcast@ucf.edu.

Tom: Well, how do we transition from that, Kelvin?

Kelvin: I'm waiting to see what you do *(laughs)*.

Tom: *(laughs)* Well, what coffee goes with the rescuing of your friend from quicksand? Pull them out and say "Phew, thanks. Hey, I could really go for a cup of Joe."

Kelvin: Yeah. Well, I mean, maybe. Possibly? You tell me. Today's coffee, Tom, comes from Portland, Oregon—at least, that's where it was roasted—specifically from McMenamin's Coffee Roasters. McMenamin's has an array of cafés and other food and beverage and—believe it or not—lodging establishments across the American Pacific Northwest. Their various coffees have very interesting custom artwork, and apparently an emphasis on quirky characters. Artwork's a bit of a trademark across the entire company. You know, I'm kind of down with that. You can kind of tell I'm into the quirky. This specific coffee is a single-origin Kenya—so, there's your connection to your, you know, old, inaccurate *Tarzan* movies that were supposed to be taking place in Africa—Kenya from McMenamin's "Roaster's Reserve." And the artwork—you might like this, Tom—the artwork for the roasters reserve features a cat apparently using the coffee roasting machine, so maybe this was cat roasted? I don't really know.

Tom: Hey, who knows?

Kelvin: Could be, but you like cats.

Tom: I do. I have two.

Kelvin: I do, too. Perhaps today's coffee continues the theme established last episode in which we spoke of a coffee growing region with a reputation as being one of the best in the world because Kenyan coffees are quite notable for their high quality. So, how's the coffee? And could you find, in the jungle that was that little description, a connection to today's topic?

Tom: I do like the coffee. It's good. I'm sipping it as we speak. And I—so, I certainly see a certain connection because we're doing an interview today.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: And I happened, just by coincidence, to have listened to this interview. So, I know who we're talking to.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Amazing! How unlikely.

Tom: Yeah, amazing. Yeah. Little do you know, Kelvin. I listened to it. And, in fact, McMenamin's is mentioned in the interview, so—

Kelvin: Possibly our first dual coffee connection.

Tom: Yes, it's a little meta for us, but yeah. So, the coffee, actually, I presume, I mean, it was referenced by our podcast guests today.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: So, that's one. She also is from Pacific Northwest Oregon in particular.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: And you hit the quality of the Kenyan coffee a little hard.

Kelvin: I did.

Tom: And we are going to talk a little bit about the quality of online courses. So, how am I doing?

Kelvin: You're right there.

Tom: All right.

Kelvin: I'm with you. A+, Tom. Good job.

Tom: Cool. So, maybe I should end the suspense and tell our listeners who you spoke to.

Kelvin: Yeah!

Tom: So, not that long ago, Kelvin, you interviewed our friend Shannon Riggs. This is not one of our old "in the can" interviews. This was fairly recent, during the COVID-19 pandemic. And for those of you who don't know Shannon, you should. But she is the Executive Director of Academic Programs and Learning Innovation for Oregon State University's Ecampus. And very notably, Shannon wrote the 2019 book, *Thrive Online: A New Approach to Building Expertise and Confidence as an Online Educator*, and it's one that you have mentioned more than once before.

Kelvin: I'm a fan. I like it a lot. I've said in some circumstances, some context, that this is the book I really wish that I had written. You know, I feel like it represents a very similar perspective. If I was, you know, more skilled and more able to get things done, I'd like to think I could have written something as good as that. But it lays out a very similar thought process, so I'm real proud to promote it everywhere I go.

Tom: Cool. So, that's actually a really great setup. Anything else you want to add?

Kelvin: Nah. Let's listen to the interview, and we'll talk about it a little bit when we're done.

Tom: Okay. So, through the magic of podcast time travel, here is your interview with Shannon Riggs.

(musical transition)

Kelvin: Hey, Shannon, so good to have you with us on TOPcast today.

Shannon Riggs: Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm a longtime listener, first time caller.

Kelvin: *(chuckles)* That never gets old. I love it. I hear that from folks now and again, and I love that. Well, as you know, I'm a longtime fan of your book *Thrive Online* and of your work at Oregon State. And so, I'm really happy to have you directly on the podcast and get to talk to you a little bit about your book, your work, and how all of that kind of applies toward kind of this tweaked trajectory of the future of online education. Do you mind if I just ask you first? You said—because I don't normally do this with interviews, I'm drinking water. It's the afternoon as we're recording this, but I noticed you were sipping a coffee mug, so I got to do a little bit of a coffee connection with you. So, tell me the story of this mug and the beverage that you're drinking here.

Shannon: Yeah, this is—it's McMenamin's Coffee Roaster's mug and McMenamin's is a Northwest chain. It is pubs and restaurants and hotels that are super fun. They have a really interesting architectural design. They're usually built in old buildings and old structures and kind of remodel. There're several that are in old elementary schools that have been refashioned into these kind of hotels and eateries. Yeah, but I have a McMenamin's passport, and I'm on my way to become a Cosmic Tripster.

Kelvin: A what now? You're going to become a what?

Shannon: A Cosmic Tripster.

Kelvin: A Cosmic Tripster.

Shannon: That means I've taken my passport to all of their locations and gotten the stamps for all the various activities and visiting all the places. And, you know, it's important to have goals in life and that's one of mine.

Kelvin: I want to be a Cosmic Tripster now, too. *(chuckles)* I don't know that it's possible, but I'm going to set myself a new goal. But thanks for sharing that. That's awesome. We'll have to throw—we'll have to look up and throw in the show notes a little bit about that, as well. All right, so back to the regularly scheduled topic. So, as you know, I'm a big fan of your *Thrive Online* book, but—and some of our listeners have probably heard me promote the book over some time—but, you mind if I just ask you what led you to writing this thing?

Shannon: Sure, sure. Yeah. It was mostly that I was finding myself in a conversation that was kind of boring and not helpful, but over and over again. And the conversation was, "Can we really do online teaching well in my class, my

discipline, this subject area?" And I would say, "Yes, you really can." And sometimes they would say, "No, I don't think you can." And sometimes it is, "Well, yeah, but I have this colleague who did." And it was just—those conversations were really repetitive, and not very interesting or helpful. And so, I was looking for a way to shift that. And I think, you know, by shifting that question of "Can I do this well?" to "How do you do this well?" all of a sudden, there's a lot more to talk about, and the conversation becomes more helpful, more creative, and just more interesting and more helpful overall.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, that's awesome. And, again, for those who haven't read the book yet, you should. You should buy it, you should read it, you should discuss it with colleagues. Shannon, you know that, you know, we're doing that at UCF. We're having discussions about your book, and I think it does—it heightens the conversation. It raises the bar a little bit when you use phrases like, "Well, when designed well," or, you know, you're not comparing "when not designed well" of one modality with "when really designed well" with another modality, and then thinking that you're talking about the same thing *(chuckles)*.

Shannon: Right, right.

Kelvin: That kind of intentionality, it raises the conversation a little bit. So, I love it. I love the overall thrust [and] find it really engaging. Can I ask, though? This book has like, if I remember right, a publication date of like, 2019. I think it really hit shelves maybe in 2019, but in certainly early 2020. And then in 2020, we had a global pandemic. Some people listening to this historically might be surprised to hear that we had a global pandemic in the year 2020, and it resulted in a lot of emergency ad hoc remote instruction. So, what do you think about this whole goal of yours about kind of raising the bar on considerations of quality and online teaching and learning alongside this mass exodus to remote and online tools usage because of the pandemic? What do you—how does that affect our world?

Shannon: Yeah. I think it's really important that we not equate the emergency remote teaching that's been happening this year with what I'm now calling "traditional online education," which is really fun to get to use that phrase. But they're really not the same thing, so I think it's important that we not conflate those things and not assess online education overall by remote standards and vice versa. I don't think we should be assessing the amazing work that's being done in these remote courses, with faculty who have, you know, just reinvented the way that they do things, and students reinventing the way that they're learning, and figuring that out in short order during a pandemic when everyone is under so much stress. So, I don't want to disparage the work that's being done in these remote environments because I think it's pretty remarkable what we've been able to do to, you know, keep education going through this year. But they really are different things. I think many of the lessons that we've learned from the traditional online education can certainly inform remote instruction and help faculty just make that a better learning experience overall. So, I think, to me, that's what's really interesting about this pandemic and the impacts on online education. It feels like a real tipping point to me where, you know, everyone's kind of been thrust into online education, like it or not, ready or not, and, you know, it'll be really interesting to see how online education comes out of this,

you know? Will we—will more faculty feel like, "Oh, wow. They've had some good experiences and I really can connect with students and engage with students in this online environment. Maybe this is worth exploring more than I thought of before." But I also think we need to be careful of letting any kind of negative experience that, you know, if for a remote course didn't go well for faculty, that we need to be careful about how we talk about that so that they're not thinking, like, the fault is in the medium itself. Because it really always comes back to design, regardless of how you're teaching or what environment you're teaching in. It's "Are you designed well for that environment?" and, you know, for how you're going to interact with your students.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think that all makes some sense to me. I think the book, as written, seems to my eyes to generally assume, as you said, a traditional or classic asynchronous online design approach. But in reading, and rereading, and having conversations during still our pandemic response era, and thinking about coming out of that pandemic response, it seems to me, as I have conversations with our faculty clients at UCF, that many, if not most, if not all of the lessons in your book are also applicable to things other than traditional, classic asynchronous online design. Like blended course design, which I think you know, there will be a hunger for coming out of the pandemic. And they'll probably have some kind of vestigial, some sort of lingering, synchronous online teaching that I think there's still some applicability to that as well from the lessons learned in your book. Do you agree with that? And then what examples of that come to your mind as you think about your book and you think about those contexts?

Shannon: Yeah. I do agree with that. And I think the book is definitely written with that asynchronous online format in mind, but I think there's even a note in the foreword of the introduction about how there are definitely lessons learned or lessons that can be carried forward into other formats. And I think if we keep coming back to that question of design and those principles, I think that's really [how] it applies in every format. One of the things that I found so interesting—and I've tracked this on Twitter, and just through other conversations through higher ed this year—is this great debate over whether the web camera should be required to be turned on for students, or should students' privacy be taken into consideration or they're not comfortable having the camera on and they can turn it off. And the way I hear it talked about so often is like, whether the camera is on or off is going to determine the engagement, and that's really not a useful way to get to engagement. Like, I always want to interject into those conversations and have in some cases and say, "Well, what are you asking the students to do? How are you engaging them? If they're engaged, they will probably turn their cameras on." But it's ultimately a design question, and I think a lot of this book comes from that perspective. So, I think that if you're taking that perspective, and you're thinking about those interactions between the faculty and the students, the students and each other, the students and the content, and you're thinking about how you want them to be engaged with all of those various components, then if you follow that trail, regardless of which modality—synchronous or asynchronous—you're teaching in, you'll be able to come to a good outcome.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's excellent. I think it's a very good point. Tom and I've talked before about that, you know, and from my K-12 days, you know, one of the

things I learned there is, you know, telling isn't teaching, and listening isn't learning. And in the higher ed context, it's like, walking into the classroom isn't learning either, right? Nor is turning on the webcam. It's not learning, and it's not engagement, and people sometimes talk about the "Zoom smile."

Shannon: Yes. Yep. There definitely is that *(laughs)*.

Kelvin: *(chuckles)* They just sort of sit there, checked out, you know. And you, sitting with your webcam off, might be much more intellectually and emotionally engaged with what's going on just because you have your webcam off. But I love the idea of designing deliberate, intentional interactions and activities. If you had to—if you were, I guess, maybe not "had to," but if you were writing this book now—if you were to like rewind maybe two, three years, you know, in the publication cycle. Like, if you were at this point, and you're, you know, pretty far along, you're writing out the book, you're finishing the manuscript, but it's during this pandemic era and you're thinking about blended, you know, being a thing coming out of the pandemic and you're thinking about synchronous online, what do you think you would have added to the book that isn't just sort of generically applicable? Anything specific about blended or synchronous that you would address? Would you address the webcam thing? Would it be something else? What would you say?

Shannon: I definitely would address the webcam thing. You know, I had an interesting conversation that kind of gets to, I think, the point that you're kind of probing around with a faculty member the other day, and it was someone who—he was new to online teaching through this remote period, and he had read *Thrive Online*, and he was saying that he still feels unprepared. Like, he hasn't done all of the course design and the development, you know, just because he's been so busy just retrofitting his courses to be delivered remotely. And he says, "You know, heading into this Fall term, where I may be still doing some online teaching, or some remote teaching, or even a HyFlex kind of teaching, I don't—I still don't—I feel like I need more time to do all of the design recommendations that you have here." And what I shared with him was that, you know, of course I'm in favor a really rigorous design process and standards, and that's the ideal, but if I were in an emergency kind of situation, I would go for like, a simplified kind of design. Just go with a pretty straightforward and simple design and really focus instead on the engagement piece, and if you're focusing on that learner engagement and interacting with your students and making sure that they are interacting with each other in some way and kind of providing some structure for that and that your students are doing something with your course content other than just watching a video or reading about it, that they're actually getting their hands on and actually doing something with it, that is going to lead to a successful learning outcome. Even though the design may not be 100% where we would like it to be if we had all the time in the world and all the resources, that I think if we prioritize that engagement regardless of how we're teaching, and where or when, that that's really the path forward.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's great. That's great. And then just as we start to wrap up a little bit, you know, I think one of the—you know, I've talked about this a lot as we've interacted—and I think one of the things really compelling about your book is

not just the ideas in it. I really think there's something—this is one of those rare times where the title is particularly evocative. It really does. You shouldn't judge a book by its cover or by its title, but you know, people do. And the *Thrive Online* thing—I feel this way, and I've talked to others who do—it just captures the imagination, right? What led to that, and what was sort of the mental picture in your mind when you think of like, faculty and students and even behind the scenes, the instructional designers and technologists and others, setting up a "thriving online" thing? What's the mental picture that's in your mind? What's that look like to you?

Shannon: Well, for the title, I really have to give credit to the series editor Katie Linder, who has just a remarkable whirlwind of just wisdom and energy, and is just an amazing person to know. But she and I had had some conversations about just the ability to thrive in online teaching, and we both have a very deep passion for faculty development and just collaborations with faculty and partnering with them. And as we were talking about it, you know, we both also have the experience of teaching in a classroom, and we know that there's a lot of joy that happens there for faculty and there's an energy and being there with your students that's really exciting. And when designed well and facilitated well, your online classes can have those same kinds of really energizing, really inspiring, life transforming kinds of interactions with your students, but it really does require a good design and good facilitation and that engagement. And so, we just kind of have this dream of helping more faculty have that joy in their teaching, and, you know—I don't know. It sounds maybe a little silly or a little not so important because, you know, the student learning outcomes and student success is always important, but I really believe that faculty enjoyment and faculty success are also really important because if faculty are energized and inspired and they're really feeling connected with students, and we can help them get to a place with some training on pedagogical approaches or course design or online teaching techniques, that's good for students in the end. If the faculty are engaged, and you know, they have that kind of energy, students are going to pick up on that, and it'll, you know, have that interplay that faculty experience. We know what that looks like and feels like in an on-campus setting, and some of us—and I would say more of us over time—are learning what that feels like in an online setting. So, yeah. I think that's really where this book came from as I really wanted more faculty to have that sense of thriving in their work.

Kelvin: Well, that's excellent. And I'm with you and Katie on that dream, you know, of faculty joy, dare I say flow, dare I say—you know, that whole thing. And I think your book is a wonderful contribution to the likelihood of more faculty and more students having that. So, thanks for sharing a little bit about the book and for being with us today, Shannon.

Shannon: Yeah, my pleasure. My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

(musical transition)

Tom: So, Kelvin, that was your interview with Shannon Riggs.

Kelvin: It was. She's awesome, right?

Tom: She's great. Yeah. I've actually been on several panels with Shannon [and] spoken to her a number of times. Yeah, I'm a big fan as well. You know, she did say a couple of things that really struck me. Part of your conversation with her where you were touching on the comparison of the very best experience of one modality against the maybe not greatest experience of another modality, and it's kind of a disingenuous comparison. And as Shannon was saying, "Well-designed, intentionally designed applies to all modalities. And you should be comparing apples to apples." And I think she's so right. How many times have we heard people say, "Online learning is not as good as this, you know, face-to-face seminar I took with, you know, Professor 'So-and-so,' the Nobel Laureate." and like, "Yeah. Well, what's going to compete with that?"

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Yeah, right? Surprise!

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, I agree with that. And yet, you're absolutely right, Tom. People—whoever they are—people do that all the time, you know? All the time. You know, the bad of one against the good of another, and then use that to kind of reinforce an existing bias one way or the other. Perhaps, if they have—

Tom: Kind of like a straw man.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Yeah, yeah.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: And it comes up in our world all the time.

Kelvin: *All* the time.

Tom: That, I thought, was a really kind of interesting thing to shine a light on in your conversation. I appreciated that.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah. No, I agree, and I think that is a theme. The book's nice, by the way: four parts. I think I commented on it in the interview. We have a book discussion this semester that's wrapping up in another week or two, and Shannon's going to be kind and come kind of back, clean up in a Q&A author discussion with the faculty. But it works really nicely. We just do one part at a time and each part's, you know, several chapters—you know, kind of several lengthier [chapters]. It's not just like, a little chapter, and there's a big theme. It makes for a good dividing lines to be able to have a discussion and not have it, you know, take forever and ever and ever, and I like that. I appreciated her willingness to engage with the thought of "If you're writing this during the pandemic, or, you know, or kind of post-pandemic, what are the applications? You know, do you kind of feel like this thing is now outdated," and you know, the answer, of course, is no. And the reason is design, right? It's the timeless principles.

Tom: Right. Yeah, and that's what we continually preach. Just because something is synchronous, doesn't mean it's easy. It doesn't mean you don't have to prepare. I remember trying to convince faculty—this was years ago, pre-pandemic, when they might have wanted to do something synchronous—that it was analogous to my years working in television. It's like, you can't just show up on set and expect to just talk and have that be at all effective. So, you need to prep, you need to have a script, you need to have a run down, you need to know what your segments are, you need to know how you're going to engage, you know, you need to know what your transitions are, you know, all of that. And that's just sort of the mechanics, let alone accomplishing learning objectives and, you know, engaging students in the process. So, to do it well requires intentional design to make it quality.

Kelvin: Yeah, right. Yeah, I'm with it. Everybody should pause this, go to your favorite online store, look up this book, buy it, and then come back and finish the episode.

Tom: Maybe one last comment to just really compliment something that Shannon said in that interview about what advice would she have particularly for synchronous during the pandemic.

Kelvin: Right.

Tom: And she basically said, "Just keep it super simple, don't overcomplicate it, and just be kind of hyper-focused on engagement—student engagement." It just seems—

Kelvin: It's good advice.

Tom: Yeah—so right to me.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree.

Tom: You know, and from what I hear—looking backwards now at the pandemic and what our faculty have done, I think the ones who are successful are the ones that kind of just intuited that and did it.

Kelvin: Yep. I agree. And to me—I mean, I'll just pull on that thread just for a tiny bit. See, and design includes that, too. It's the intentionality. I think sometimes we think design, we kind of think static, you can diagram it on a page, or it's the content, it's the layout, or, you know, the alignment between objectives to assessment through content, and some kind of formal assignment structure, but it's also like your TV metaphor, right? There's this lived experience thing that you are planning for.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: There's an intentionality.

Tom: Right. Whether or not you're going to have breakout groups is part of your design—it's part of your plan, you know?

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Yeah. So, it was cool. You want to, since it was your interview, try and summarize in some sort of a bottom line for us?

Kelvin: Yes. Although everybody should be worried that, as you know, Tom, I don't do pithy, but I'll give it a shot. I do work at it. You know, intentionality. I'll say emphasizing the importance of intentional design and effective teaching as the basis for quality learning experiences is more important now than ever before in online education, and applying the ideas in Shannon's book is one way to make this happen. How's that?

Tom: That's good. Yeah. Agreed, agreed. So, nice interview. Thank you for the coffee. Thank you, Shannon for being on TOPcast. So, until next time for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.

(musical outro)