TOPcast Episode 97: Finding the Right Mix of Modalities at Your Institution

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

Tom: And I'm Tom Cavanagh.

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

Tom: Hey Kelvin. How are you this afternoon?

Kelvin: I'm all right. I'm okay. You know, the world's an interesting place, but I'm floating along on the surface of it, as if I don't have a care in the world.

Tom: Hey, you're taking a page out of the Tom Cavanagh playbook right there! I'm the king of compartmentalization, man. That's my tactic strategy.

Kelvin: I see. All right, well, that's good to know. That's right. I got it. All right. Super. I'm already feeling the setup of today's coffee bit. *(laughter)* You see if— I think it's going to flow. It's going to flow very nicely.

Tom: I can hardly wait. *(laughter)* So, you've mentioned the coffee and you did pour this for me just moments ago. I have tasted it. It is interesting. What is in the thermos, Dr. Thompson?

Kelvin: Well, Dr. Cavanagh, buckle up because we're going on a ride with this one. So, just come along with me. Today's coffee is a flavored blend called Shark Bite from Bones Coffee Company in Cape Coral, Florida. And, hey, what can I tell you? There were a couple of sales back-to-back with Bones Coffee.

Tom: I was gonna say, this isn't the first appearance. Just recently.

Kelvin: We've had several Bones Coffees recently, and I just got a good deal. And I like good coffee at a cheap price.

Tom: All right, it's all good.

Kelvin: So, just don't make anything more than... but, the Shark Bite thing. You and our listeners might recognize the name Shark Bite because it's the name of a popular mixed drink. The

end result, as I understand it, is a drink that looks ocean blue with a splash of blood red, hence the name, "Shark Bite." And I was thinking, that's the compartmentalization thing, right? Floating along on the surface. Everything's fine. Well…maybe.

Tom: Maybe. May be a predator right below you or not. Yes.

Kelvin: It's possible. I remember that *Jaws* poster. That swimmer was just thinking it was all fine. Here came Bruce, coming right up to the surface. So, with the alcoholic mixed drink, Shark Bite, typical recipes call for Blue Curacao, red grenadine, and usually one or two kinds of rum. Today's Shark Bite coffee is, as you will see, just brown in color. It doesn't have any blue.

Tom: Mine's more of a beige.

Kelvin: Well, you lightened it a little bit, but there's no blue or red in there that I can find. But it does have, supposedly, a bit of a spiced and buttered rum flavoring, making it somewhat reminiscent of the cocktail of the same name. So, I'll ask you how the coffee is and if you could find some kind of a connection to today's episode topic?

Tom: Yeah, I think so. So, I like the coffee. I am getting that little spice, buttered rum, a little bit, so it's good. I like it. So, the main connection I'm getting is the fact that this is a blend, this coffee. I know you're a single-origin guy, but you will, occasionally, try out the blend for the podcast. And one of our topics that we will be revisiting is blend, blended, blended learning, blended universities…to kind of foreshadow what we're going to be talking about today. The rest of it, I don't know.

Kelvin: Here's where I was going. Yeah, you're with me up until there. And then, here's the next bit. So, we talked a little bit about the recipe for the mixed drink and a recipe for the coffee flavoring. And that makes me think about the institutional recipes for the place of blended learning, online learning, face-to-face, and more. Finding the right mix for all of those things in the institution.

Tom: Okay, I get it now. Yeah, that was a bit of a stretch there. *(laughter)* That's all right. It's all good. I get it now. Cool. Yeah, so I am not particularly familiar with the Shark Bite drink, but sounds good. I may look for that on a menu next time I'm poolside at a tropical bar somewhere.

Kelvin: Found a lot of pictures online. Maybe we'll find one and throw it in the show notes. It's fascinating. It does look a little creepy, frankly. You're like, "Oh my gosh, Bruce got one! That's not good."

Tom: Yeah. It's a little weird with the red in it. Yeah, I guess. Yeah.

Kelvin: I know, it's a little strange.

Tom: I was recently in the ocean on my brother-in-law's boat, swimming with my son and with him. We were jumping off the boat into the water, and I don't know, we were in 14, 15 feet of water, several hundred yards off the beach, and my son cut his leg on the ladder getting back up into the boat and it was bleeding pretty good. And we were like, you're done. *(laughter)* You're not getting back in that water.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Dinner time!

Tom: Yeah. Yeah.

Kelvin: Welcome to Florida.

Tom: That's right. Welcome to Florida. All right. Well, cool. So, we are going to talk about blended learning and the right mix of online and blended and face-to-face and [let's] caveat this episode with saying, we're going to, maybe, be a little presumptuous with our expertise but, hey, it's our podcast, so. We're going to share what we think and you are certainly welcome to disagree.

Kelvin: In fact, we'd love to hear from you.

Tom: Yeah, please do.

Kelvin: So, we have spoken of blended learning many times in podcasts past and especially since the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. And, in particular, for instance, we've noted that blended is the future. And we've also spoken about the modified expectations of digital learning after more than a year of nearly ubiquitous emergency ad hoc remote instruction. And if that's all new to you, then scroll back through the past year's releases to find episodes on any of those topics, but you might particularly want to check out episode 83, "Rethinking Synchronous for the Post-COVID Era;" episode 85, "Blended is the Future (And It's Not Just Courses);" and episode 91, "Intermodal Learning." Those would be particularly relevant, I think. And Tom, you said we might frame up this conversation with online, blended, hybrid, and in-person. What's the right mix? That was a prompt that you, sort of— It was at least derived from a prompt that you had recently shared from something that you were involved with.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. It was a panel event. Actually, my first time on an airplane since February of 2020. And, maybe, we'll talk about this in a future podcast, but I had the opportunity to participate in this collaborative with some colleagues, and that was one of the prompts that they had given us to stimulate some of the discussions, start thinking, and I thought it was an interesting one for us to maybe talk about here. So, online, blended, hybrid, and in-person. What's the right mix? And the question itself implies that there is a right mix for everybody. And, of course, the answer is, "it depends," right? And it might not be the right mix at a single institution from semester to semester, depending upon what's going on. And certainly, last year, that mix was a lot different than it was the year before. And if you're listening to this at some point in the 31st century, we're talking about the COVID pandemic here. So, we were 100 percent online and that was the mix that we needed. That was the right mix. But absent any sort of worldwide health crisis, what's the right mix for your institution? And it completely depends on what kind of institution you are and what your goals are, you know?

Kelvin: Yeah. Context is everything, right? Institutionally public versus private. Are you a large, are you medium, are you small? Are you one of those dwindling, traditional, residential experience, 18- to 24-year-old places or—like so many of us—are your students really made up of folks who have adult life responsibilities? I was thinking about it. Here's a term I haven't used in a while. I put it down in our little prep sheet. Remember when we used to talk about commuter schools? Nobody uses that language anymore, really.

Tom: No, no. Yeah. That does seem like an antiquated term, a little bit.

Kelvin: It really does.

Tom: In years past, like when I was in high school a million years ago, UCF was considered a commuter school, but we're not anymore. But we are a large transfer-receiving institution.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: And that does impact what we feel our mix should be. How do you serve these students, many non-traditional, or even traditional age with non-traditional needs? If they have work or family or other kinds of things—even if they are 20 years old—how do you serve up a mix that allows them to accomplish their academic goals?

Kelvin: Yeah. And, like you said, you mentioned institutional goals and there are like, what's the mission of the institution, what are the big goals of the institution? But then there's what would be the goals that you would be pursuing in this, supposed, right mix of modalities? What are you trying to accomplish, right? For instance, are you trying to promote better student learning or to better serve existing students through increased access? Or are you trying to recruit new students? And I guess you could call either of those last two things sustained enrollment. I like to talk a lot about enrollment these days. Or are you trying to drive innovation? Or any number of other things could be goals that you're pursuing in that modality mix, I think.

Tom: Yeah. And then I think you can layer goals on top of goals. So, if you want to increase access, online learning—but also blended learning—would allow you to significantly increase the number of students you serve with the same physical plant, because you're splitting sessions that are on campus with online meeting times. So, it can be about utilization and efficiency of campus-based infrastructure resources, for example. There's any number of reasons that can be targeted for your mix, whatever it might be. And you're right. A community college mix that doesn't have residential students, that serves maybe a primarily non-traditional population, it's going to be very different from a four-year liberal arts college in the middle of the country somewhere that's not urban. They both have very different missions and very different student populations. And it means that their mixture should probably be different, but that probably does mean that there is some optimal mix for what your goals are, and it's worth being strategic and intentional about thinking through those goals and how can you align your strategies and tactics to best serve them?

Kelvin: Yeah. Right. And I was thinking about this recently. I think maybe you and I have talked about this, maybe on mic, maybe not, but a concept that was around here at UCF 25 years ago, 23 years ago when I got here, was this combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches, right? You can approach any of this work that we were just talking about in a top-down manner. A mandate from on high: "Here's what we're going to do." You could approach it, as many do, many institutions, especially blended learning. I've lost count of the number of institutions where it's completely a grassroots activity. Just the interest of the faculty and it just bubbles up in whatever. But one of the things I really loved about our founders of the enterprise here is they leveraged the synergies inherent in doing both top-down and bottom-up. And that's really creative, I think. I've been revisiting that. I

got a session coming up at a conference in a couple months and trying to unpack that a little bit. But I think we could talk about that, right? I mean, there's things that you can do institutionally, but then there's some ways that you can harness the energy of faculty and students even engaging, right? We've even recently been doing—I think we've talked about it on the podcast before—this digital learning course redesign initiative, right? Speaking of Shark Bite, you dangle out some incentive funds and you put some parameters around it, and then you just find interested faculty who want to do interesting things in course design.

Tom: It's pedagogical chum. That's what you're describing.

Kelvin: Well, there's the title of this episode. *(laughter)*

Tom: *(laughter)* "Pedagogical Chum." There you go, I like it. That's a hashtag we should get trending. But yeah, you're right. And I've written about this in the past and talked about it quite a bit where if you can align institutional, big, macro goals with grassroots student and faculty goals, and if you drew a Venn diagram, that part where they overlap becomes really powerful because you get everybody aligned towards the same objectives and you don't have to convince people. You don't have to fight. You don't have to push really hard because there will be a lot of momentum behind it, and what you need to do is feed that and put in the right infrastructure, the right resources, the right personnel to realize that. So, if it's, for example, a large, I don't know, maybe a program. Maybe a program that the community needs because of some workforce need. So, that's an institutional goal they might push down. "We need a program in X. We need more nurses" or something like that. Well, the students might want that kind of a program. Yes. Maybe, it's even online. Yes. I need that because I want to be a nurse, but I'm busy and I can't come to campus, so I need an online nursing program. The institution wants to create that because there's a market opportunity that could expand access and generate revenue. And then you can get some faculty involved on how to build that in a way that they're onboard with and excited about. It could become really exciting. It's when you don't have those things in alignment, where you're pushing something from the top-down and there's no interest from the bottom-up, where you run into resistance and you're constantly having friction. That makes it hard. I think your point's well taken. The mixture should reflect these various constituencies and their goals if you can, at all, align them.

Kelvin: I think a couple of things that live at the intersection of that top-down and bottom-up—that they might feel a little bit more institutional than grassroots, but I think they live at the intersection—are clarity and consensus around modalities. Like, what are they? Do you have a name for it? Even broadly, do we have some agreement on what do we mean by blended or what do we mean by online or whatever? And then, faculty preparation. The idea of having it and the idea of what the nature of that preparation would be, right? That lives at the intersection, I think, of two things. Blended, in particular, we talked about a few moments ago and I wanted to harken back. I happened to run across this recently. Back in episode three, Tom, of TOPcast. It was our first episode on blended learning. And you said something I've been quoting for a few years now, that blended learning, arguably, sits at the sweet-spot intersection of faculty preferences and institutional goals. It's the same kind of a concept here, but blended typifies that opportunity that exists, I think.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. I agree, still, with that. And I think I cribbed a lot of that concept from Joel Hartman, who used to talk about that a lot. And I think there's a natural extension of that concept. If an institution is going to have some intentionality behind what their mix is, and that extends beyond the classroom. So, how do you serve students in a mixed way? Including the services and counseling and making sure you can pay your bills online and all the other things that students need to do digitally, need to be a part of this. Access library materials, whatever it is. The whole institution needs to start thinking as part of a digital transformation, as opposed to just, "Oh, that's just what happens in the classroom." It is a bit of a paradigm shift and it can be a little overwhelming, but, I bet most institutions have more of this in place than they think. They just aren't contextualizing it in this way.

Kelvin: Yeah, two quick plugs on that. One, again, episode 85, "Blended is the Future. (And It's Not Just Courses)." And the other is there's been this whole series over the last year or so of EDUCAUSE QuickPolls. And I saw a summary of a recent EDUCAUSE QuickPoll on digital transformation, since you just brought that up, and it was really interesting. The whole idea of bringing digital affordances to any number of business processes, I guess, is as good a definition of digital transformation as any, and the takeaway I got from the little summary is, yeah, there's a whole lot more of that going on in higher ed now than there was a year and a half ago.

Tom: Yeah, absolutely. Maybe one other plug is a couple of books series coming out of the Online Learning Consortium and Every Learner Everywhere, coauthored by our friend and colleague, Tanya Joosten, about blended learning. But also, at least at the time we recorded this forthcoming, that extends it beyond just the classroom as well, to start thinking about the blended institution and the criticality of that, especially as we come out of the pandemic where we've talked, I've talked, about the water line being 100 percent during the pandemic, but it's not going to settle back to where it was pre-pandemic. We're going to have some additional amount of online and blended learning that will extend to other parts of the university. I'm thinking, even here, we're doing virtual counseling now and health appointments and other kinds of things that, frankly, we weren't doing before the pandemic, that we probably will continue to do. The topic of office hours during faculty classes, I actually think we will probably see more virtual office hours going forward, even when things are "back to normal." That's not going to stop. So, that extends to all corners of the university and I think the work that Tanya and her collaborators are doing is pretty interesting.

Kelvin: Yeah. I mean, to me, yeah, I agree with that. I've seen the one playbook that they've released and I hear that there's a second, broader, more programmatic one that's coming. And I think that's all part of this general, renewed emphasis on blended learning that we're seeing percolating through our field. I know, for instance, the Online Learning Consortium Board of Directors commissioned a blended taskforce, just to look at what should that association be doing to grow blended learning more than just letting it be a wildflower, you know? Cultivate it more. And I think we'll see more of that in our conferences and work with professional associations. But I'm reminded of, I guess, something of a truism. I think we've trotted this out a few times in these podcasts, but I'll trot it out here because I think it's relevant. Not every course should be online, but nearly every course could benefit from being blended. I think that's a real relevant point here. That continues to be true in my estimation. That's one of the reasons that I think blended has so much traction right now.

Tom: Yeah, I agree. I also think it's a safe landing pad back for a lot of faculty who were face-to-face faculty, who were forced into emergency remote instruction, that are now working their way back to the classroom, but don't necessarily want to give up some of the practices and things that they did during the pandemic. And so, blended seems to be this middle ground where they can have the advantages of both. And we're seeing it in our numbers, right? So at UCF and, I don't know, we're probably not typical, but prior to the pandemic, as measured by student credit hours, we were 49.4 percent online and blended. And we were at about 37 and change percent fully online. So, the balance was blended. And this fall, right now, we're at 54 and change percent, at least as the numbers are right now. The fall numbers aren't final. So, if anybody cares, we can give an update later. But we're like 54 and a half percent online or blended. And that blended number, our mixed mode modality, is up now over 13 percent. And we've got another modality that's kind of a blended-ish modality, and that's way up, as well. So, between the two of them, it's approaching 20 percent. That's a lot. And I think it's a combination of two things for us. The one is the pandemic. It's a consequence of what faculty have done. As they come back, they want to maintain some of those practices. But the other is the course redesign project that you mentioned. There was a big emphasis on blended in that project. And that happened to be what we were working on when the pandemic hit. So, I think a lot of faculty have continued that work. So, between those two things, it's become a bit of a force multiplier for us in blended. And I think that's a good thing. So, we'll continue to encourage it and promote it.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's good. After 25 years, we get to, at least in terms of a semester's credit hours, we get slightly more than 50 percent. I think you make an interesting point. Blended really could become the dominant modality here or at many of our institutions for the reasons you talked about, but blended is really hard to do well, right? There's just so many variables. So, compared to purely face-to-face or purely online, blended's more challenging to implement. There's more variables at play. I think that's been, by my estimation, that's one of the reasons that blended has not grown, previously, larger at UCF. I suspect that's true at other institutions, as well.

Tom: Yeah, well, there are design challenges. Because, as you say, it requires a lot more design thought to do a well-designed blended course. The results can be much better than any other modality, but it doesn't happen by accident. It requires work. But there's also logistical challenges, because blended courses still require a classroom on campus, and that has to be coordinated and synchronized and all the other things that registrars do that that makes it more complicated to scale. But just to, and I know we've talked about this in the past, but the definition of a blended university isn't just blended courses. It's a mixture of online and face-to-face. And I think if you look at it in that holistic, broad sense, you can maybe expand the definition of blended, at least at the institutional level, to something a little bigger than just a single course that meets partially face-to-face and partially online.

Kelvin: Yeah. Agreed. I don't want to open up a can of worms here, but we did mention hybrid before. I think, for a long time, for most of us, hybrid and blended were interchangeable. They were synonyms, just depended on your preference. It was rare to find a place where the two terms were used together but in distinct ways. I'm beginning to see a little bit of a shift in that. I don't know if you're noticing this, but hybrid seems, increasingly, to be used to mean some kind of version of HyFlex, where there's a dual online and in-person experience offered simultaneously, rather than being a synonym for blended. I think

that's worth paying attention to as we go. Are you seeing that, as well? Or am I just imagining things?

Tom: No, a little bit, yeah. Especially since the pandemic, when HyFlex suddenly became everybody's interest. And take the other half of that portmanteau flex, we ought to do a podcast just on the term 'flex' and how it has confused people here on campus and within the state, as all the twelve state universities here are using the word flex slightly differently. And the Board of Governors has its own definition that we have to report on. That might be a fun conversation. Maybe I'll have a spirit-infused coffee on that day. Or, maybe, I'll actually have a Shark Bite. We can talk about that, but Kelvin, I do see that the coffee is running down.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: And, perhaps, I should try to land a plane here.

Kelvin: Yes. Do that. Land it, Tom!

Tom: So I think, as we've said throughout this, it seems likely that most higher education institutions will continue to offer a variety of digital course modalities, and I think that's only going to expand. And getting that mix right at your particular institution and in your context is a challenge, but it will require involvement from every stakeholder if it's going to have any lasting value for you and your students and your faculty and your community and your administration.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think that's right. You think we can slide in a plug before we get out of here?

Tom: Yes. The jet way has not quite shut the door yet.

Kelvin: Yeah. I feel like I'm Jason Bourne now, jumping across the jet way. So, it's been a little while since we've solicited input from our current listeners and, look, we know podcasting's a passive medium. We trust that you're out there and listening. The data tells us that you are, and we're generally okay with that. But, we'd like to know a little bit more about who you are, what you like about the podcast and, frankly, how we can better provide episodes that are worth your while. So, here's something worth your while. Would you please take a moment to complete the TOPcast Listener survey at bit.ly, that's B-I-T dot L-Y slash TOPcast survey 2-0-2-1. That's http://bit.ly/topcastsurvey2021. We'll leave this open for a little while because, hey, you might be getting this a little bit later on down the road. So whenever you hear this, please take a moment to respond. That's http://bit.ly/topcastsurvey2021. That being said...

Tom: We'll put that link in the show notes.

Kelvin: We will. We'll put that in the show notes. We'll put a bunch of stuff in the show notes. We'll find a picture of the Shark Bite drink. We'll put all kinds of stuff in there. So, unless there's anything else that you want to throw in the show notes, until next time for TOPcast. I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.