TOPcast Episode 98: “I Don’t Ever Want to Do [Online] Again!”

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 am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin Thompson: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

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

Kelvin: Woohoo! Yay!

Tom: Oh, you're my mystery woo today.

Kelvin: Not such a mystery.

Tom: No. It's been a while since we've had one of those, so I guess somebody had to woo.

Kelvin: Well, yeah. And since you put that invitation out into the universe, it's possible that the mystery woo will come back.

Tom: It's possible. I can hardly wait.

Kelvin: Just saying.

Tom: Yeah. All right. So here we are back at it again, Dr. Thompson.

Kelvin: Mm-hmm.

Tom: What episode number is this? I've even lost count.

Kelvin: 98.

Tom: 98.

Kelvin: Tom, can you believe this? We're within spitting distance—not that I'd want to spit on it—of three-digit episode number.

Tom: Wow. We've done this 98 times. That's not even counting bonus content.

Kelvin: Right. Right. Yes. I know sometimes it's—

Tom: And how many times we've recorded that we didn't use, like that time in New Orleans.

Kelvin: It staggers me. It staggers me. You're like, "Is that right? We've done it this many times. That's a lot of times." Yeah. The unfortunate blooper reel in the French Quarter where that odd fellow just came right up and was in our personal space while were trying to record.

Tom: He stared at us from about six inches away while we were trying to talk.

Kelvin: It's strange.

Tom: Yeah. It's New Orleans, man.

Kelvin: Yes, sir. Up close in person.

Tom: I love the Big Easy. It's all part of the charm.

Kelvin: Yes. Hope they're doing well there after their recent hurricane encounter again.

Tom: Again. Yeah. So, Hurricane Ida has just passed through while we're recording this. So, they've definitely been in our thoughts. We know what that's like and they've been through it a lot lately, including last year. So, God bless them.

Kelvin: Yeah, for sure.

Tom: All right. So, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Mm-hmm.

Tom: You came in my office and paid a visit and you poured me a brown beverage from a thermos. I have no idea what it is.

Kelvin: Well, for those who might not know, we do bill this show as a collegial conversation about online teaching and learning conducted over a shared cup of coffee. So, the odds are pretty good that it's coffee. Hence, it's—

Tom: It’s what it tastes like.

Kelvin: —the coffee connection. Well, that's good.

Tom: For the record.

Kelvin: You’re on the right track there. But if you want a more specific explication of your beverage content, I will say that today's coffee, Tom, comes to us from TOPcast listener and colleague Jared Stein of Instructure. This, in your cup, is a single origin Kenya Peaberry from Caffe Ibis Coffee Roasting Company in

Logan, Utah. I'm trying to say that correctly because it's C-A-F-F-E Ibis Coffee Roasting Company. I don't believe we've really discussed Peaberry coffees before on the episodes, really. The so-called “pea-berry” is just really a natural mutation of the seed inside the coffee cherry. Instead of two seeds, like normal inside that fruit, there's only one. And this mutation results in some different characteristics, especially those that emerge during the coffee roasting process, which can lead to some different results in the final cup. So, those factors and the relative rarity of the single seed, which is estimated at somewhere between 5% and 10% of all harvested coffee cherries, tend to make Peaberry coffees sought after. There's a supply-demand thing. People think it's cool. There's all kind of theories. We'll put some stuff in the show notes if you're interested. Some people think more caffeine. Some people think, "Ooh, it's this kind of a taste." Whatever. I don't know. It's a novelty, but it's a natural mutation, which is kind of cool, but I like it. What do you think of the coffee? And could you find a connection to today's episode?

Tom: I'll start with the coffee. I like coffee very much. So, thank you, Jared. I had the great, good fortune to see Jared not that long ago in person when I was in Utah, and he had very nice things to say about the podcast. So, thank you, Jared. And then the coffee showed up shortly thereafter.

Kelvin: Like magic.

Tom: As is sometimes want to do, so that was very generous of him. So, thank you, Jared. Now, the connection. I know what we're talking about today.

Kelvin: That helps.

Tom: And I know what I'm drinking.

Kelvin: You could reverse engineer a connection.

Tom: And I know what you just said. I'm having a hard time connecting the dots.

Kelvin: Yeah. It might not be. Maybe those dots are too far apart and too faded and it's a dusky day. I don't know. Maybe it's hard to find. So let me try to light up the runway for you a little bit here. I was thinking mutation. There's a natural mutation in the seed of the coffee cherry. And this idea of there being different inputs leading to different outputs, I was thinking have a connection to potentially today's topic.

Tom: Okay.

Kelvin: Different ways of doing things from the past leading to different experiences and different things that we might want to address due to mutations in the environment.

Tom: Okay. All right. I think I got it.

Kelvin: All right. That's good.

Tom: Yeah. So, we are in higher ed. Our inputs, in many cases, are K through 12 students, and we are responsible for outputting them according to various outcomes: graduation, success. And so, we are going to be talking a bit about the K-12 experience today. Am I in the neighborhood here?

Kelvin: Yeah. That's exactly what I was thinking. While we've been talking on this podcast for more than a year now about the impact of emergency ad hoc remote instruction on our higher education work in online teaching and learning, what most of us are very familiar with from the news media is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on K-12 education. Boy, there's been a lot said about that.

Tom: Yeah. And I've talked a lot about that, and I know that the emergency remote experience for the K-12 community hasn't always been fabulous. A lot of the digital divide issues are a lot more pronounced in that community than they are in the higher ed community. Not to say we don't have our issues, but I think it's much more extreme in the K-12 space. So, it's been a rough year and a half, especially for K-12. But as most of us in higher ed emerge from this emergency remote instruction, we are going to have a lot of new first year students whose experiences and expectations of college-level online and blended courses are going to be shaped by what they have been going through for the past year and a half, a lot of them negative with pandemic-influenced remote instruction in their high schools. We have on campus FTICs, first-time-in-college, which is our traditional term for our freshman coming in out of high school, and we are also having FTOCs, first-time-on-campus. Those are the sophomores that have spent the last year as a freshman but never came on campus because of the pandemic. They've been remote. So, we've got these two cohorts of students who are on campus for the first time. Both of whom have been immersed in this emergency remote experience from high school or from their first year of college. So, we thought it might be good to give some attention in this particular episode to how we as online education professionals might help make a smoother transition to successful online learning experiences for these incoming, especially these first-year students, these K-12 students. To that end, Kelvin you recently interviewed Ryan Rogers on this very topic of K-12 remote and online learning experiences. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about Ryan.

Kelvin: Will do, yeah. Ryan Rogers is currently Director of Student Services for Lyman High School within one of our local central Florida school districts, specifically Seminole County Public Schools. And Mr. Rogers has more than 10 years of experience in school counselor roles in Florida and Georgia school districts. And he served for a time as an academic advisor at Valencia College and notably for those of us in online education, Ryan also spent 11 years with Florida Virtual School in a variety of roles but ended this time there as Director of FLVS Global.

Tom: And for those, we've made references to Florida Virtual School over the years in our TOPcast recordings, but if you're not familiar with FLVS, it really is, if not one of the premier online K-12 now—it sort of started as high school—but K-12 virtual programs. It really is the benchmark for a lot of what happens in the K-12 space. So, I think Ryan is uniquely qualified given his background to comment

on this, especially what he's dealing with right now and has for the past year and a half in the high school. And Lyman's a very good high school, and Seminole's a very good district here in Florida. So, before we go through the magic of podcast time travel to your interview with Ryan, is there anything you want to say, kind of set it up, something to listen for?

Kelvin: No. I think it'll stand on its own and we'll take it apart on the back end.

Tom: Sounds good. Here's your interview with Ryan Rogers.

(musical transition)

Kelvin: Welcome, Ryan. So good to have you on TOPcast today.

Ryan Rogers: Thank you for having me.

Kelvin: You're quite welcome. So, jumping right into it a bit, now, you know something of the difference between intentional designed online learning experiences and ad hoc emergency remote instruction. You know the difference between those two things, and you know the difference between K-12 teaching and learning and higher ed teaching and learning. So just cutting to the chase a little bit, I wonder, based on your context and what you've observed over the past year or so, what advice would you have to our or higher ed community as we get a new wave of incoming first-time-in-college students as online education professionals? What do you want to tell us?

Ryan: Well, yeah, I think that my biggest piece of advice is really just having to re-educate students on what a successful online or virtual experience is. As you said, there were so many different modalities, different ways of doing it this past year and frankly, different student experiences that many of them had not experienced really successful online delivery. It was really ad hoc at best. And therefore, they really don't know what a good, solid virtual experience or online experience is. Many of them quite honestly are confusing the terminology with it. When they say online, well, what do you mean online? Did you take a prepared virtual course, or did you do the Connect model that we had, an ad hoc type of thing? So even in my office, since then, I've been clarifying a lot. Like, what do you mean you did it online? What kind of online was it? And I've heard even more and more as we've gotten into this school year from students that say whatever their experience was, if you mention a virtual or online class to do, they say, "I don't want to ever do that again." Yeah. You and I know that being in that industry, that's not that typical experience that we have, but they've just been so varied that it turned a lot of them off. So, getting back to my advice is really that you have to start over again and really educate those students about what it is, how it works, the benefits of it, so that they're just not immediately turned off when they hear online learning experience.

Kelvin: Yeah. That's, I think, really good advice. We've talked before on this podcast about just some general waging a campaign of accuracy and resetting expectations and so forth. And I think at the institutional level, even for our own student body, to reset, make some sense, for sure. I wonder if you might speak a

little bit more about those kind of student reactions that you've observed during the last year plus. You mentioned that some students are just like, “No, thank you” to anything virtual or all online ever again. Could you just talk a little bit more about that? Why do you think that is? Is that binary? Is there a range in there, or is it universal like, “I'm done?”

Ryan: Well, I don't think it's universal. I mean, we've had the flip side of that, which we've had students say, "Hey, this was actually a really good experience for me. And I want to continue doing my classes on virtual school or in an online capacity or even a blended part of that." So, we have had that. And I had personally students that really, they were not a stellar student at our school, but they went online last year and they were more successful. So we certainly had that. I think it's probably been the exception rather than the rule. I've certainly heard more of, "Yeah, I don't want to do that again." In general, kids have been really excited to be back face to face to do that. So, it certainly hasn't been across the board, but it's certainly probably the majority of that. And again, I think a lot of it just comes down to the ad hoc nature of some of it just being put together very quickly. We had teachers that had never even taught virtual before that were thrust into it, even teaching subjects that they'd never taught before. So, I think that was a part of it as well. But it's been interesting. I've had a lot of conversation with students. I think last time you and I spoke, that day I had a conversation with a student that said, "Yeah, I don't ever want to do that again." I think part of that is like, listen, I worked 11 years in the virtual industry at Florida Virtual School. And for the most part, those students elected or chose to take it in this modality. Same at the collegiate level, there are... Kids can choose, “I want to do this in a face to face,” or “I want to do this online.” So, right out of the gate, you're getting kids that are electing to do that, that are probably going to be more understanding of what it is, more open to it, et cetera. And I think the big difference with us was that 99% of the population that did it, didn't choose that. Or I should say they chose it for other motives because of COVID and the fear of COVID justifiably so, rather than, "I want to try an online experience." More than before, we saw students that we sort of sat there and go, "Oh my gosh, this student has no business doing that." They already struggled with face to face and are not up to par whether it's with reading or math or not on grade level. How are they going to do that in that environment? Again, I'm a proponent of online that can help those students, but these aren't the students that were really diligent about their schoolwork anyways. To be able to do that online and be self-motivated, time management, all that. So, I think that's the biggest challenge that I saw was that these were students that unlike our experience in the past, made that choice and elected to do it. A lot of these kids did it for other reasons and therefore, they just weren't bought in 100%.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think that's a very good point that, “I didn't sign up for this.” And so, you're already in the sub-basement in terms of working your way up to even tolerable, I suppose. You start off with a negative reaction, expectation. And then I heard you say that in at least some cases, if not a lot of cases, the teachers weren't prepared to teach in the relevant modalities. They didn't have experience with it or formal preparation, firsthand experience. They're just thrust into it. And even, I think I heard you say maybe not even the subject areas, so those are some real major variables that would impact student experiences as well. And then on top of that, design. Was there intentional design to the course? Or was it, maybe

in some cases you're being handed a course that somebody else designed and it actually is cohesive. That would maybe be a step in the right direction, but I'm guessing in some cases you probably didn't even have that. Is that right?

Ryan: Yeah. Well, I mean, with all the different modalities we had, I mean, just speaking from a virtual course perspective, we have Seminole County Virtual School that is a franchise of Florida Virtual School. So, these teachers were handed quality designed courses by Florida Virtual School. But a lot of our teachers that went to teach virtual, basically were applied for accommodations and therefore they were allowed to do virtual. I mean, I know they took several of our teachers. I had a science teacher teaching a leadership course. We had a robotics teacher teaching a science course. Even though it was already built for them, they were new to the curriculum. But as you and I know, and having worked for Florida Virtual and actually helped train teachers, gosh, we even hired teachers that were seasoned English teachers that felt like a brand new teacher teaching a virtual course. So even just knowing the content, teaching in that environment is just completely different for them. And gosh, we used to do training for days and days and really ease them in. This was a matter of like this, in some cases, even after school started. Not to mention, the synchronous Seminole Connect option, which is teachers were essentially given maybe a week to figure that out. Yeah. Everybody did the best they could, but it certainly wasn't ideal circumstances, that's for sure.

Kelvin: I want to pull on the thread of something you said a few minutes ago. I heard you say synchronous, and I heard you say “connect.” Can you just describe how that worked a little bit?

Ryan: Yeah, absolutely. So that was the real new thing. We've always had Seminole County Virtual with the asynchronous, as you said, deliberately designed courses, obviously this through, like we talked about teachers that haven't done it, et cetera. And growth, oh my gosh. Growth beyond belief. But the part that was new, it was new to me. I've never done it. It was new to our teachers and our district was what we called Seminole Connect. And this was really our synchronous online delivery model. What that really consisted of was at most schools, including at my school, Lyman High School, was teacher teaching a face to face class with students in front of them, and at the same time on camera teaching students that were at home coming in via WebEx. That's what it was. And it was extremely challenging. My wife is also a teacher in Seminole County, so she experienced that firsthand. And as you can imagine, what it's like to try to teach kids that are sitting here face to and give them the attention they need, but then you've got to be looking at your computer and looking at who's at home and trying to make sure they're engaged. All those lesson plans that they've called on for years are out the window, as they have to figure out new and creative ways to make sure those students are engaged and just logistically. I mean, the technology obviously had to be in place if something happened and somebody dropped off. A lot of times they couldn't get right back in, the teacher would have to recognize they were off and let them back in. And there were different things like that. It was a challenge. And teachers had to try to adjust. And let's just be honest, I mean, some teachers did better with it than others. And so, there are certainly questions about how much some of those students got from their

learning from doing that. And let's not even mention the fact that students were allowed to change modalities. If they were face to face, they could go to Connect at any time that they felt uncomfortable. So, we literally had students dropping... So, teachers had kids moving, one day they're in face to face, the next day they show up on their camera on WebEx kind of thing. It was definitely a challenge in a lot of different aspects. If a teacher was absent, the sub didn't know how to get into their WebEx room, so the kids at home had no way of getting an education at that point that day. There were just so many challenges. I think it's one of the reasons why I know Seminole County voted to not pursue that model anymore going forward, at least in Seminole County. I know the teachers that put a huge strain on them to try to do both. Yeah. It was interesting, that's for sure.

Kelvin: Well, as we began to wrap up, I wonder if you might comment a little bit more broadly, Ryan, given your time at... I guess, it sounds a little bit ostentatious, but a legendary virtual school context. You were at Florida Virtual School for more than 10 years. The virtual school K-12 model is a little different than our higher ed online teaching and learning model. And I just wonder from your time there and your own personal experience, is there anything you would say just general advice apart from the COVID reaction and all that? Anything that folks in our higher ed field could be a little bit more mindful of in making the transition smoother to students who've had prior K-12 virtual school experiences?

Ryan: I think my advice is, one of the things that we try to do at Florida Virtual School, and we try to do that here, even at Lyman High School is, kids like consistency. And I think that, whether it be consistency in platforms or consistency in structure of courses, it's nice when they're taking multiple courses to be able to know... We even at one time, I mean, we had different design methodologies at Florida Virtual and realized that to navigate this course was different than navigating this course and so on and so forth. And that sometimes was a barrier for students. So, some kind of consistency I think helps, but I think getting back to this other thing, which is that my fear is in the K-12 space that these students that have been through this experience here, that this is more a teacher driven process might flashback to the Seminole Connects and think that that is the experience that they're going to have. So again, that comes back to that education piece of it, and encouraging students to... We talked about marketing, too. Encouraging students to give it another try. It is different, and showing them how it's different, I think, will be a big thing. Yeah. I mean, in summary, I mean, that's always typically been the difference between K-12 and post-secondary online learning. And there's merit to both models. They work well in both cases. And I think in some ways you have different students as well and their level of engagement.

Kelvin: Well, that's a great place to leave it. I just want to say, thank you again for sharing your on-the-ground perspective and your expertise, Ryan. It's been a pleasure having you on the podcast today.

Ryan: Thank you. I enjoyed it. Thank you for having me.

(musical transition)

Tom: So, Kelvin, that was your interview with Ryan Rogers.

Kelvin: Yeah. That's right. I thought that was interesting. Like you said, unique perspective there, well qualified to render some insightful comments, I thought. I'll say that we often comment that our TOPcast audience has three strands: online and blended faculty, instructional designers, administrative leaders. And I'm of the opinion that the stuff that Ryan said really can be acted upon by any one of those groups [or] all of those groups. So hopefully everybody found something in there.

Tom: I agree. Yeah. He sort of touched on all of those different parts of the elephant. And I think that there's a lot that no matter what your role is, you could take away from listening to that. Is there anything in particular you wanted to maybe reflect on?

Kelvin: Well, I think there's a lot we could say, but maybe we jump right into some concrete applications a bit. I think that we could, at the institutional level—we haven't really done this here yet—but we could consider reviewing and revising existing orientation and/or onboarding training materials for students in light of some of those comments that Ryan made about the recent K-12 experience. It's tough to balance, because you don't want to make sweeping changes that are only going to have a short lifespan, but we could certainly take a good look through the lens of his comments and go, “Well, maybe we should add a little emphasis here.” We have in the past talked about disabusing incoming first year students of prior K-12 virtual school experience. It’s not the same. And then we might consider waging a little mini campaign maybe for these new first year students emphasizing the distinct differences of online and blended in higher ed. We could consider that. There's cost and benefit to think about there, right? But then the course and faculty level, I think there are things that instructional designers and faculty could do. I mean, even just as a line faculty member, just expressing even awareness of that, "Hey, I know many first-year students take this course. If you're coming in directly from high school, you might have had a very different experience than..." I mean, you could just make a comment like that or put some syllabus language in place, making a little delineation between higher ed online and blended differentiating from high school. I mean, those are little things that could make a difference.

Tom: Yeah, I agree. And you're right, because we do have so many students in the state of Florida that have gone through Florida Virtual School or others. The state of Florida has a requirement. If you graduate from a public high school, you have to have taken at least one online class, and many students do more than one. And typically, that's through the Florida Virtual School, although not always.

Kelvin: Or one of the franchisees.

Tom: Right. Yeah. But there are also some other competitors, but they're by far the dominant player in the space. It's an issue that we've long grappled with because the way it's taught, the way online learning is taught in the K-12 space is different than it is here. There are a lot more safety nets. The teacher talks to your parents. They make sure you stay up with your homework. They give you reminders. And

if that's your model, your paradigm for online learning…I always joke, we have a particular political science professor.

Kelvin: I see exactly where you're going.

Tom: Yeah, who teaches American national government and might have, I don't know, 150 to 300 students in that class. You know who I'm talking about.

Kelvin: I do.

Tom: He's not calling you—

Kelvin: No, he's not!

Tom: —to make sure you're doing your homework, nor should he. It's grown-up school now, and the students need to reset their expectations. I think coming out of the pandemic and all the stuff that Ryan talked about has just exacerbated that gap, that delta between what the emergency remote instruction was, and if you show up in an intentionally designed online asynchronous course here, it's a totally different experience. And we need to be able to help students crosswalk from that previous experience to what the new expectation level is coming into a university environment.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think that's well observed. He didn't really comment on this per se, and I like to think this is true, so you keep me honest here, but I think it's fair, generally speaking, to say that the learner experience in most K-12 intentionally designed virtual school courses is more of an individualized experience than the experience of learners in most higher ed online courses. I mean, gosh, especially in the early days, we very explicitly embraced social constructivism and the power of the cohort and the group dynamic and all that. So that's a little different than, "It's just my teacher and me," it sometimes seems in K-12 virtual school.

Tom: Yeah. That's true. That is the experience that at least I witnessed with my own child when he was going through that and from what I've heard. And some of that is a workload management for the teachers, so they can keep up with stuff. And I understand. I'm not criticizing that model, but it's just different.

Kelvin: Yeah. Yeah.

Tom: All right, Kelvin. So, I'm looking at the grounds in my coffee and the clock ticking. I wonder, maybe we should try to land the plane. Any last comments before we go to the bottom line?

Kelvin: I think the only thing I would say before that is while being mindful of the experience of these incoming students is a good thing, that doesn't mean that we overhaul everything and cater to their lowest expectations. I think we continue to hold a higher bar for online course quantity. We can be sensitive without throwing everything out the window.

Tom: A former boss of mine here who you know well used to say that higher ed is in the strange position of being one of the only businesses, if you will—"businesses"—that you can give the paying customer less than what they're paying for and they're happy.

Kelvin: I know.

Tom: Like canceling classes, students are like, "Good!" But you're paying for that. Yeah. No, but, “Good. I don't want as much as I'm paying for. I want less.”

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Yeah. Don't always give the customer what they want, because it's not what they need.

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

Tom: Yeah. All right. So, Kelvin, while there are a lot of similarities between higher ed and K-12, and Ryan touched on some of these, certainly it's been our experience with remote instruction over the past year and a half, the unique experience of K-12 students are still really important for us in online higher ed to stay aware of. Sooner or later, these K-12 students, many of them are going to become college and university students, and we ignore their perspective at our own peril. We need to understand what they've gone through and help them to make that transition into post-secondary education.

Kelvin: Hear, hear. Yeah. I totally agree. You've touched down securely all three points on the runway. I didn't even find myself lurching in seat.

Tom: Please wait until we are at the jetway before you get up, though. Please.

Kelvin: No more Jason Bourne jumping across?

Tom: No.

Kelvin: Okay.

Tom: Your items may have shifted.

Kelvin: Oh, well, that's good to know. We have time for a really quick plug if I keep it real quick. So, this is just a little reminder of the TOPcast Listener Survey. This is primarily a one question survey. Where else are you going to get one question? Although there is an option to share more if you are so inclined. Here is that URL. Again, it is bit.ly/topcastsurvey2021. All lowercase, no spaces. bit.ly/topcastsurvey2021. Given the nature of podcasting, we're going to plug this over several episodes to make sure everyone will stay sufficiently invited. Again, that URL is bit.ly/topcastsurvey2021, and we’ll put a link back in the show notes page as well.

Tom: And we thank you in advance for your input.

Kelvin: It helps us help you, so help us help you.

Tom: Help us help you.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: So, Kelvin. Thank you, Jared, for the coffee. It was delish.

Kelvin: It was.

Tom: Thank you to Ryan for the insights. Until next time for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.