TOPcast Episode 99: The Importance of "Faculty Voice and Faculty Valuing" in Online Education

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 am Tom Cavanagh.

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

Tom: Hey, Kevin. How are you this fine afternoon?

Kelvin: I am fine.

Tom: I wonder sometimes when we say that, "How are you this afternoon," or whatever, what time of the day people are listening? Because I have a doctor, who, I call their office, and when I want to try and get in touch with the nurse or my general practitioner, her voicemail says, "Good morning."

Tom: I'm calling at 4:00 in the afternoon, and it seems odd to me that that's now forever recorded as a good morning. It just takes me out of the call for a brief moment, before I have to leave my message for whatever refill or appointment I need.

Kelvin: Yes. Anachronisms.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Anachronistic existential podcast meanderings and musings.

Tom: Yeah. So, is this on your morning commute, into your day job? Or is this on a long run at lunch? Or maybe in the evening, while you're walking the dog?

Tom: Who knows? Who knows what you're doing, and when you're doing it?

Kelvin: Drifting off to sleep. People use this podcast when they have a hard time sleeping.

Tom: It's a cure for insomnia.

Kelvin: There's a podcast like that.

Kelvin: There's a guy who just reads stuff, and I'm like, "Okay, that might be handy. That's a little better source."

Tom: My son listened to one he told me about. I think there was one that was just Morgan Freeman's voice reading stuff. He said that one was pretty bad.

Kelvin: Oh, well, I'd fall asleep to that. I'm going to find that interesting.

Tom: Well, it probably, but who knows what he's reading, but it's.

Kelvin: It could be the phone book. I'm going to probably listen to Morgan Freeman.

Tom: Probably. He's just got such an awesome soothing voice, right?

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: But we don't, maybe you more than me. I hear myself, and I hear this nasally whine, and I just, "Oh my gosh, is that what I sound like?"

Kelvin: We don't. I think we should just give our listeners permission to mentally edit the time references at any point that they want to.

Tom: That's right, that's right.

Kelvin: Every time we say, "Good afternoon," they should hear "Good," whatever.

Tom: Fill in the blank.

Kelvin: Fill in the blank. That's right.

Tom: Yes, and we're talking about the time we're recording. We recognize that there are different times to be listening.

Tom: A podcast I listen to, sometimes, in the intro has, "This recording has been ripped from space and time for your convenience."

Kelvin: I like it, I like it.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah, I do, too.

Kelvin: Yeah. That's good. You asked, "What's in the thermos?"

Tom: You can read my mind. Yes, I have been sipping here as we prepare, and I do want to know, what's in the thermos, Kelvin?

Kelvin: Yes. That's called an abrupt transition, Tom. That's what's in the thermos.

Tom: And there's one where there is actually a thermos, because I saw it.

Kelvin: There is a thermos for those video viewers. It just made a cameo appearance now, for you auditorily minded folks there. Just trust us.

Kelvin: Well, I'll say first, this coffee connection is briefly interrupted for breaking news to make a final plug for our single question TOPcast listener survey, right up here at the top of the episode, rather than at the end. That URL to the survey again is bit.ly/topcastsurvey2021, bit.ly/topcastsurvey2021.

Kelvin: Whether you've just started listening to the podcast, or whether you've been with us for years, would you please take just a moment to answer one question, one question? That's it, just one.

Kelvin: That URL again is bit.ly/topcastsurvey2021. We'll leave the survey open for a while, so even if we don't plug it anymore, and even if you're listening to this episode, well after its initial release, please go ahead and respond. This is for you also, bit.ly/topcastsurvey2021. We now return you to your regularly scheduled coffee connection.

Tom: Well done.

Kelvin: So, today's coffee, Tom ...

Tom: Yes?

Kelvin: Is a single origin Ethiopia.

Tom: Okay.

Kelvin: I picked this up locally in Winter Park, Florida, from KOS Coffee & Bodega. It's a diminutive form of a Norwegian word, KOSELIG.

Tom: Koselig.

Kelvin: KOS is that, and so, it means coziness. I stumbled across this business several months ago, right after it opened. And I was impressed by the focus of the small business. It's a little tiny shop, right across from Rollins College.

Kelvin: I was thinking, "Oh, I need to get some new beans. I'm going to go to that place." So, I recently went there, and they take their coffee seriously, whether you're getting a handcrafted cup on the spot, or buying whole beans like I did, for brewing at home.

Kelvin: They also sell a number of other small indulgence products, things like apple butter, and luxury soaps, and wine and candles. But when you look beneath the surface, the customer experience with their products is just part of the story.

Kelvin: Because the family that owns KOS wants to do good strategically, so they partner with high quality product suppliers and nonprofit organizations, so that they can donate a percentage of each purchase to benefit worthwhile causes locally and internationally. That combination of, I don't know, we might say, personal touch excellence, along with

strategic business savvy at KOS Coffee, seemed to me to recommend today's coffee for today's episode topic. How's the Coffee? How's the Connection?

Tom: Okay. I like the coffee. I think I may have been in there before, last time I was in Park Avenue and Winter Park, yeah.

Kelvin: Could be.

Tom: So yeah, thank you. I probably should have thought to pick up some coffee for the podcast, but I didn't.

Kelvin: It's all right.

Tom: So, I enjoy the coffee. Thank you very much. The connection? Working on that. I know what we're talking about and I now know what I'm drinking.

Tom: Maybe a personal touch, something in there. You kind of hit that a little, with a little emphasis.

Tom: I think you said excellence. Maybe there's a thread in there to pull on, that will lead me, eventually, to our topic.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah. I think so, kind of business strategy, operational excellence, personal experience with quality, I guess, we could say, products?

Tom: Right. Yup.

Kelvin: All that seemed to connect to me to today's topic. So, you're going to tell people what we're talking about, and they can judge for themselves, whether there was some kind of a connection.

Tom: Yeah. So, we want to actually spend a little bit of time really underscoring the importance of faculty in online and blended learning, as opposed to sort of the infrastructure and bureaucracy and administration that we often talk about, that are associated with developing online learning.

Tom: All of that's important, but really the center of the bullseye are the faculty who are responsible for ultimately building, delivering, and then instructing students through online mechanisms. If I can bring you back in time, just to just a little bit, back in Episode 37 of this TOPcast podcast series?

Kelvin: Doesn't that seem like a long time ago now?

Tom: It does. What are we now, at 100?

Kelvin: 99? Next episode's 100, we should.

Tom: Next episode's 100, so wow.

Kelvin: I should bring a cane, you should bring some false teeth. We should bring hats.

Tom: That's right. Yeah. That's amazing. So, Episode 99. Go back to 37. That was our Six Deadly Sins of Online Teaching, and is actually, you tell me, one of our more popular episodes.

Tom: We noted in that episode that "online faculty are at the heart of successful and unsuccessful online courses." What about the role of faculty in the whole online initiative, at the institutional level and beyond?

Tom: In this episode, we wanted to spend that time thinking through the relationship between and among the various strands of our TOPcast audience, the online and blended faculty that we know who listen, instructional designers and related roles, we know who listen, and administrative leaders, who we know listen. That is, to what extent is online teaching and learning a faculty driven activity? And to what extent is it administratively driven?

Tom: One turn of phrase I like to use is faculty-centric. Spoiler alert, the answer to that question is, it depends, right?

Kelvin: It always does, it always depends.

Tom: It is in so many things, right? Yeah, it depends. And it's not a binary. Obviously, those two things are complementary to each other, the administrative side, the system side, and the faculty side, the personal side.

Tom: But I don't know. I think maybe faculty-centric, as opposed to faculty driven, might be a better way of thinking about it, because we can align our administrative systems to support faculty. Maybe, at the end of the day, someone should say, "Shouldn't it be student-centric?" Well, of course, I mean, that's why we're all here.

Kelvin: I was just about to say that, actually. I think that's the reason I sometimes tilt towards saying that phrase, that, faculty-centric, in certain contexts. But then I stop myself, because, for that very reason, I think we got to always stay focused on our students.

Kelvin: But I think, certainly, we are oriented toward our faculty, we listen to our faculty, we'll talk about it, right? Oh, I'll put this out there. In my opinion, you can't have a meaningful online or digital teaching and learning initiative, without a faculty being at the heart of it.

Tom: Yeah, I totally agree. Even "master courses" are built by faculty. So somebody owns that course, and used their disciplinary expertise to help construct it. Then others need to adopt it as their own, and facilitate it, and teach it themselves.

Tom: We are not proponents of the robo course, the self-paced learning, necessarily, in and of itself. Now there's a role for some self-paced and competency-based in certain models, which you've got on the edges of innovation, but for the traditional, day to day, quotidian online learning, that's faculty driven enterprise.

Kelvin: Yeah. Well, I like what you said about the focusing on talking about faculty, but thinking a little bit about what the interplay is between what we have previously said are the three

strands of our audience, right? The administrative leaders, the instructional designers, or whatever the appropriate similar title is, and the actual faculty. And I think that's good.

Kelvin: Faculty are clearly right there. I mean, you can't have a successful course without the faculty who are teaching it, whether they designed it or not, following up on your master course, template course, standardized course kind of comment.

Kelvin: But pulling on that thread a little bit, I think one of the reasons we have this sort of this team collaboration thing is, just to zoom out, we've talked about this before, this is no secret, faculty are disciplinary experts, not teaching and learning experts, generally speaking. There are of course, exceptions.

Kelvin: Faculty sometimes can adopt what a colleague of ours sometimes calls a craft mindset in developing a particular skill and specialization, in course design and teaching. But there turns out that there is an entire field, informed by a number of different scholarly domains, educational technology, curriculum and instruction, instructional design, learning science, whole bunch of intersecting fields, that inform evidence-based practice in online teaching and learning initiatives. Right?

Kelvin: So psychology, molecular bio, neuroscience, I don't know, I'm making up fields now, everybody has a specialization. But there is there is a cluster of a field around this area, too, in which people are expert.

Kelvin: I'd say that in most of our institutions, it's folks who have titles, like instructional designers, who are the nexus for all of that, right? They are typically the conduits for synthesizing and sharing effective practices from research and scholarly practice literature and associations, sharing that with online teaching faculty.

Kelvin: I think those are some of the instructional designers and the faculty, and then, administrative leaders have a role to play too. You want to comment on them for a second?

Tom: Yeah, I know them. I am them, right?

Kelvin: I was waiting for that very line to exit your lips.

Tom: Yeah. I'm too predictable. Well, maybe even before we go there, just one quick reflection on what you just said, because I think it's 100% correct.

Tom: What I have often said, at the start of our faculty development programs when I've introduced them, I think you did it today, in fact, for our latest cohort.

Kelvin: I did.

Tom: But in the past, when I've done that, I try to underscore to faculty, "You all are the disciplinary experts. You know your subject. You know biology, or whatever it is that you're teaching. And in many cases, you have many years of teaching experience. You know how to teach, you're good teachers."

Tom: But all of that experience has been situated in a physical classroom. We, and specifically, the instructional designers, spend all day, every day, thinking about online learning. And in some cases, generating new knowledge around online learning, because we've got people doing research and scholarly activities, and publishing in peer review journals, and presenting.

Tom: Allow us to help you to bring your expertise to the fore, through our knowledge of how to best use this medium. At the end of the day, though, it's your course. You are the faculty, you own this course.

Tom: Now I also, kind of tongue in cheeks, often say, "Ignore our advice, at your peril, because we are here to help you, and make you look better. But at the end of the day, it's your course, and it's not our job to impose anything, except top level university standards. Pedagogical standards are really, really up to you, but we can help you get there."

Tom: Having said all that, I think it does dovetail into the administrative side, which is, it's our role as administrators, and as people who administer systems, is to put the chess board out, and make sure that the pieces are there, and everything's resourced, so that faculty are set up for success, so that faculty can have a great experience designing and delivering an online course, which would translate to students having a great experience in taking, and hopefully succeeding, in an online course. Our job is very much the support infrastructure.

Tom: Everything we do is designed to support faculty: training, media asset development, programming, the instructional design team; everything is designed to give faculty options and choices and extra knowledge on a consultative basis, on how to make their courses probably even better than they envisioned. That's our role.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. And I guess the "our" in there, like administrative leaders, I do think probably subdivides as well, right?

Kelvin: Certainly, it's administrative leaders who have expertise in, and oversight responsibility for, online blended digital programs, but also senior institutional leadership and academic unit leaders. There's a collaboration among all those folks.

Kelvin: I'd say, if we were going to summarize any of that, to pick up on your chess board metaphor, it's really, it's a strategic role. How can this effort, technology mediated teaching and learning, how can that be carried out in the most strategic manner that benefits our students, and aligns with our institutional mission? You need somebody to pay attention to that.

Tom: Sure.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Yeah. Well, then, I want to sign the contract for the best possible platforms and tools ...

Kelvin: Sure.

Tom: So that our faculty have the best assets at their disposal, so that they can do their best work, and not worry about all of that junk.

Kelvin: Yeah, for sure. You said "infrastructure" a couple of times, though, and that made me think of something. I think I mentioned this to you recently that some insights that are relevant from a recent dissertation of a TOPcast listener and colleague, Dr. Jason Johnston, from the University of Kentucky.

Kelvin: He uses that phrase, infrastructure, in a beautiful qualitative research case study dissertation. Toward the end of it, he's building this model. He's really talking about online program development.

Kelvin: You should go look it up. We'll put the link in the show notes. But as he's building this model, both coming out of the literature at all, he discovered, from his research interviews, this construct that he referred to as infrastructure, and he doesn't mean wires and pipes and Ethernet cables and hardware.

Kelvin: His use of infrastructure is this ... Now I'm making a swoop with my hand, because that's how it looks on his visual for his model. It's an undergirding.

Kelvin: This infrastructure, he said, it was primarily two things. It is preparing faculty for success in designing and teaching online courses and programs, and providing instructional design support for them.

Kelvin: That that's the fundamental aspect that in interviewing a number of academic program leaders, he uncovered the importance of that. I talked to him recently, and he used another metaphor, which I didn't see in the dissertation, that I loved.

Kelvin: He referred to, Jason did, that culture building work, he referred to that as tending the soil, making the supportive culture that might be invisible, it might be behind the scenes, but it enables excellence in online course design and teaching and program development. And it might be unseen and unappreciated by the uninitiated.

Tom: Yeah. Well, I think that's a great way to frame it. I'm just reflecting back on the past year and a half, when in March of 2020, like so many others, we had to pivot to remote instruction, because of the pandemic.

Tom: One of the things I've said since then is that I think that we were better positioned than a lot of other schools, just because of our history. But I also said we had a robust infrastructure for online learning, and I'm not just talking about the pipes and the wires, and the LMS platform, and things like that.

Tom: I'm talking about the people and the staff and the processes and how we all work together. I think that's all part of it. And it really is designed to support faculty.

Tom: In our organization, there's very few places where we actually directly touch students. One is in our help desk. And we do that a little bit in our Continuing Education Unit for non-credit students, and some others, and our UCF online coaching staff talk directly to students.

Tom: But otherwise, I mean, certainly all the stuff that you are responsible for, is all sort of faculty-centric, with the exception of that help desk. It's a massive enterprise that is designed to enable faculty success.

Kelvin: Yeah, for sure. In fact, maybe there's some value in providing some examples. I mean, not just to toot a UCF horn, but just to make this more concrete, some examples of maybe what we might call faculty voice and faculty valuing in our UCF context.

Kelvin: You know I like to trot this out. The whole thing, 25 years ago, started from one faculty member trying to save his program. He got some grant funding to try out some distance learning technologies. And like a good researcher, he scoured the extant literature of the time, albeit however small it might have been, and exemplars.

Kelvin: And he said, "Well, no, don't like that, that doesn't look good. Ooh, that looks promising," put a model together, hired a student assistant, to help provide support and instructional design. It was so good, that it was replicable. And that's the foundation on which we continue to build today.

Kelvin: I mean, the basics of that? Look, I want to be very clear. I'm not saying we haven't changed the way we do online teaching and learning in 25 years. I'm saying that the foundation was so good, that there were some timeless elements that have, you can find the bones of the building still there.

Tom: Definitely. There's a through line from today, all the way back to when Dr. Sorg did all of that, and here we are. It started with him and Barbara Truman, and 25 years later, we got a whole building, and 180 people.

Kelvin: Yup.

Tom: Right now, as of this minute, in fall of 2021, 55.4% of our credit hours this fall are online or blended.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: At a university of 70,000 students. It's remarkable.

Kelvin: It is.

Tom: It really is based upon that a foundation of quality and faculty-centrism.

Kelvin: For sure. You mentioned that I did the welcome to our flagship faculty preparation program for online blended design and teaching, that we call, sounds like a graduate course number, IDL 6543. There's been almost, we're getting close, 2,000 faculty who've completed that thing over the last 25 years. That's huge.

Tom: It is huge. And many of them describe it as the best professional development program that that they've been through.

Kelvin: Yeah, it's awesome. From the beginning, we've had the voice of the faculty and we've had instructional designers, specialists in teaching and learning, and mediated teaching and learning. But the whole time from the beginning, we've had what Barbara Truman used to call web veteran faculty coming in.

Kelvin: And that principle remains. That flagship program is now co-led by an instructional designer, and a member of an experienced seasoned member of the online teaching faculty, just to keep it grounded in the experience of the faculty. So important.

Tom: Yeah, web vet, they're super popular. Because they come in, and they tell war stories, "This is what worked in my course, and this is what didn't, this is what I changed." People love it, and I don't blame them. It's really, really practical and useful.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And we do some other things. We try to really privilege the voice of the faculty. We have an advisory board, our CDFAB, Course Development Faculty Advisory Board. That was a prior name, I think it's evolved, but I can still call it the CDFAB.

Kelvin: You just like saying it.

Tom: I know, and one of them, Dr. Janowsky, from psychology, she likes being referred to as Fab.

Kelvin: Yes. Who wouldn't?

Tom: Who wouldn't? And she definitely is fabulous.

Tom: That's right. So yeah, we really do try to have faculty as the privileged primary voice. When we chose our learning management system back in 2012, and we made that, first of all, we had different groups of faculty actually using the candidate systems. And it was their voice that told us what system we were going to use.

Tom: The only thing we said is that we would veto whatever choice the faculty made, if it didn't align with information security protocols, or it didn't integrate with our SIS. Otherwise, faculty are picking this thing.

Tom: And when we did our little announcement video, it was the president of the Faculty Senate who made the announcement. We weren't in it at all, you or me or any of our instructional designers. It was all faculty that spoke about the process, and what they liked about it, and the new platform, and the high hopes that they had for going forward.

Tom: So, we really wanted to put them up on the pedestal, because it was their system, their choice. We've done things like Faculty Spotlights.

Tom: I think, in the past, you've called them the vanguard faculty, that we tried to highlight the awesome work that faculty are doing. We do showcases of faculty work. So, I really think that we try to live that philosophy as best as we possibly can.

Kelvin: Yeah. We have a series that has been on hiatus during the remote instruction era, but hopefully, we'll be able to bring back soon, that we call the Faculty Seminars and Online Teaching.

Kelvin: They're kind of a hybrid experience, where folks can be in a room or live online, or we record everything, and put them out publicly for the world. And a partnership, again, between a member, a seasoned member of the teaching faculty and an instructional designer, and brief, 30 minutes, digestible key insights, but with a lot more go deeper, read more about it, resources about some element of online design and teaching that they've particularly mastered. That's so popular, so important, right, all kinds of ways of amplifying the faculty voice, including seed funds for stimulating and implementing faculty ideas, about carrying out better designs and teaching processes that help us get to institutional goals, all that stuff we're just trying to build on, and support the faculty voice.

Tom: Yeah. Maybe if we think about it, we'll put a link to those seminars in the show notes, because they're available. If you want to go watch them, we've got a couple of years' worth out there. They're really, I think, tight and useful and really practical.

Tom: Maybe the last two comments, and then we'll try to put a bow on it here. The fact that the online infrastructure that we have works really closely, side by side, as almost siblings with our Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning. We partner with them all the time. And they represent, in many ways, the voice of the faculty.

Tom: I've used their advisory board, as well, their faculty advisory board, to run ideas past them, and get input on things that we're thinking about. And that's been super useful.

Tom: Then, lastly, it's probably worth noting that our instructional designers, I was going to say staff, but maybe staff's not the right word, because they are technically faculty, they are non-tenure earning, non-instructional, like a librarian, but they are faculty. And they're covered under our collective bargaining agreement, because we have a unionized faculty here in Florida.

Tom: They are every bit as much a faculty member, as instructional faculty, and work side by side as peers, in a consultative way, with the instructional faculty, to help them. And I think that's been really useful in ensuring that the faculty viewpoint remains in the center of the bullseye.

Kelvin: Yeah, well said. Well, you want to try to wrap this up?

Tom: Yeah, let's try. I think it's probably fair to say online courses and programs can be used strategically to fulfill institutional missions in serving students, that students-centrism we talked about, but this work cannot realize its full potential without the voice and wisdom of our teaching faculty.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's exactly right. Well put; very good. I know I did a plug at the beginning. Can I do a little plug at the end too?

Tom: Why not?

Kelvin: It's a different one.

Tom: Oh, yeah. Yeah, that's okay. Yeah.

Kelvin: It's a different plug. So, some of our listeners might remember, all the way back last year, to the 2020 TOPcast and friends Holiday Special. Hey, if you didn't, you can Google it, and you can find it and watch it now.

Kelvin: While we don't plan anything quite that extensive this year, for 2021, we are planning a recorded live listener engagement opportunity during November of 2021, that will become the year in review, little less celebratory, first Monday episode for December 2021. So, we'll record it live in November, it'll air in December.

Kelvin: If you're interested in helping select the date of the recording, and therefore, being able to possibly join us in real time for interactions during the recording, please complete the poll at the following URL. We'll put this in the show notes too; but grab a pen.

Kelvin: That URL is bit.ly/polltopcastlive21. That's bit.ly/polltopcastlive21, all lowercase, no spaces.

Kelvin: This poll will close on October 11th, 2021, but we will announce the date of the recording via our TOPcast Insiders Newsletter, on Twitter, in the next episode ...

Tom: Skywriting.

Kelvin: Skywriting. Wherever.

Tom: Semaphore flags.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right.

Tom: Smoke signals.

Kelvin: That's right. So, we'd love to have you join us. We hope to have a good time, maybe fewer decorations than the TOPcast Holiday Special, but it'll still be festive, I'm sure, somewhat.

Kelvin: Okay. Well, Tom, it's a pleasure, as always. I do have grounds showing at the bottom of my coffee cup. So, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See you.