TOPcast Episode 101: Debating "The Cameras-On vs. Cameras-Off Debate"

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're listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. That's what the TOP stands for: Teaching Online Podcast.

Kelvin: Capital T, capital O, capital P, yes. Hello Tom.

Tom: Yeah, so just in case someone's catching us for the first time and they wonder, "What's this TOP business?" Well, there's a method to our madness. We have a lot of TOPs things in our inventory here at UCF. It's a bit of—

Kelvin: It's a family resemblance.

Tom: We keep going back to the same well. But that's okay. It's okay.

Kelvin: Teaching Online Pedagogical Repository (TOPR), Teaching Online Preparation Toolkit (TOPkit), and the Teaching Online Podcast (TOPcast).

Tom: Yep. We got to come up with some more.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: There's already a Top Hat. That's a commercial vendor.

Kelvin: No relation.

Tom: No relation.

Kelvin: No relation.

Tom: Yeah. So very cool. We've got an interesting topic today Kelvin, but before we get into that, on the Zoom, I see you sipping something that you poured into my cup just moments ago. What's in the thermos?

Kelvin: Well, Tom today's coffee is a single origin Ethiopia Yirgacheffe from Cup to Cup Coffee Roasters in Savannah, Georgia. While we always say that TOPcast is a "collegial conversation about online teaching and learning conducted over a shared cup of coffee," I was struck by the statement the roasters put on this bag of coffee. They said, and I quote, "Coffee is relational. There's something about sitting down and enjoying a good cup of coffee that breaks down barriers and opens the door to friendship." I thought that was a particularly good reminder as we start today's episode.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: So how's the coffee and how's the connection?

Tom: All right. I like the coffee a lot. It's good. I think we've had Yirgacheffe before on the podcast.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: It's a name one does not forget.

Kelvin: No.

Tom: And I think the connection's pretty good. So you said coffee is relational, right?

Kelvin: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom: What'd you say? It breaks down barriers and opens doors?

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Yeah. I think both of those relate to the topic of the day, the topic du jour.

Kelvin: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom: Am I in the ballpark?

Kelvin: Yeah. That's exactly right. And I'll give the inverse of that, too. I think that sometimes contentious topics can lead to fights and battle lines and fractured relationships. So, we don't want none of that.

Tom: No.

Kelvin: None of that. That's right. So yes, today I'll warm us up by saying that during more than one year of emergency ad hoc remote instruction in which there was near ubiquitous use of synchronous online video conferencing platforms—hello, Zoom and others—one issue that surfaced as important and dare I say contested, was the question of whether or not to require students to have their webcams on by default. Since synchronous online elements are likely to remain a part of our higher education experience to some extent or another, even beyond remote

instruction, we thought a deep dive might be an order on the cameras-on versus cameras-off debate. We're going to try to remain civil and courteous while discussing the issues just as we hope all of us do every day.

Tom: Civil and courteous, yes. So, are you ready to rumble? Kelvin and I are going to take opposite sides of this issue, and for the purposes of the discussion I, Tom, will be taking the pro position of cameras shall be on while Kelvin is going to take the con position of, “Cameras? We don't need no stinking cameras.” Cameras will be off. And so while we don't really intend to "debate" the issues formally, we will try to have a robust exchange of ideas in a way that will allow us a fuller airing of the perspectives on both sides, and there are legitimate perspectives on both sides.

Kelvin: Yeah, for sure. And you know, it's probably, before we get into that, Tom, as we were saying, right before we hit record, it's probably good just to kind of lay out a little prefacing, some disclaimering here that, there was synchronous online teaching and learning going on before the COVID-19 pandemic. And I would assume that in those courses and programs that you would follow good practice that you would do for any online course. You communicate expectations well in advance and you do so systematically if it was part of a program. You would lay out program expectations. I don't know, you got to have a webcam and here's what we do with the webcams and all that. But when the pandemic came along, right? Everything's out the window. We're making this stuff up as we go along with remote instruction. So it's not been such an established kind of a practice. So as we are having this conversation, we'd probably, I think we're talking about how do we move forward, not what was all the hubbub for whatever it was. 18 plus months.

Tom: Yeah. And I think that's a valid context to begin with. So maybe as part of my opening statement for the pro position, I'll start there because I totally agree that it's a completely different context during the pandemic. Students were thrust into a fully remote synchronous in most cases environment, where either they didn't have a webcam and you couldn't buy one. You literally couldn't buy one. They didn't exist. So you might not have had access to one, no matter what you did. Even if you were willing to pay for it, you had no access to one. We were providing students with work arounds on how to turn their iPhones and Samsungs and things into webcams for purposes of participating in class, and that's not ideal. But maybe the bigger issue and the one that's maybe more germane to the follow on conversation is also kind of the personal circumstances that students are in many cases.

And particularly for a lot of the students, we serve a lot of Pell eligible students, who don't come from a lot of means. And there may be concerns about exposing the circumstances that they live in, and there might be some embarrassment about [that]. Certainly they don't need to feel that, but I understand why people do, and they don't want to show where they live.

So during the pandemic, people had no control over either one of those things. Either the access to a webcam or the fact that suddenly they're in a remote environment that they didn't choose. And as a result, I think that the rules were, it

went out the window if there were any. And I think there's an awful lot of grace we needed to give to students and understanding. What I'd like to do now though, is sort of flip the page and say, okay we're sort of past those circumstances, at least here in the state of Florida. We're pretty much back to the kind of section schedule by modality that we had pre-pandemic, where if you want to take a face-to-face class, you have that option.

So if you're taking an online class or a remote class—and I do draw a distinction between those two things—then it's your choice. You're making a choice to take a class in that modality. And as a result, I think that you need to conform to the requirements and expectations of the faculty of that class and of the institution. And as somebody who's held an awful lot of meetings lately and done an awful lot of webinars where people do not put their cameras on, it sucks the complete energy out of you to just talk to a bunch of black squares with white names. I've done it, and it's no fun.

And I understand that if somebody is a faculty member, there's a performative aspect to that. And that's part of what they like, and they also want to be able to get something back from the students. Like, is this connecting? Or if it's not connecting, do I need to go into more detail? And you can see that on people's faces and you know that they're at least sort of attending, if you can kind of see their faces and not multitasking or watching TV in the background or playing video games or something.

So I get the argument from faculty that now in a more normal context—I recognize we're not a 100% normal, but in a normal-ish more than we were a year ago context—that cameras on is not an unrealistic expectation and that students should understand the rules and the expectations when they sign up for a class like that. So there's my pro position.

Kelvin: Yeah. Thanks for that. So I guess I'll state as an opening of the con position of cameras should not be on by default as a requirement. I'll say that, I think that often the cameras on requirement perspective tends to hang around the word engagement, right? But is it really engagement? It's really more accountability. It's demonstrating that students are present and listening or at least giving the appearance of doing so. And that's kind of a rather passive conception of engagement. It's like engagement from an instructor perspective rather than engagement from a student perspective. So I'd like to offer instead a centering around a different word. I'd say, let’s center around the word include. Let's include all the students, and if you work from a non-camera on default perspective, that allows everybody to start equitably and inviting either cameras on when it is value add to do so, or even exploring alternative engagement techniques—that is techniques in which students actually engage through contributing rather than just doing the Zoom smile—that could be carried out in a variety of ways. It demonstrates a valuing of all students equitably and it demonstrates a desire to include everyone. It's kind of consistent with our general higher ed emphasis on diversity and equity and inclusivity. And I think the diversity thing, right? We don't always know what's going on with students. There could be any number of circumstances that aren't just about showing privacy concerns or showing one's own household background. There's any

number of things that could be going on, and I think for some faculty who get into the requiring cameras on thing, there might be a certain level of naïveté, not necessarily problematizing or recognizing the variety of situations that students might find themselves in or needs that they have. And I ran across recently a really interesting infographic from Appalachian State University—maybe we'll throw it in the show notes—that just kind of unbundles a lot of the issues and gives a little bit of a decision-making flow chart that, again, enriches the decision-making rather than just sort of saying, "Hey turn your cameras on." What are you trying to do here? And what are your other alternatives?

So I think that kind of inclusivity actually is more likely to lead to real engagement than the “turn your cameras on” engagement argument really is. And then finally, I guess I would say that, where's the data? We talk a lot about, “Turn the cameras on to get engagement.” But I’ve looked, and I can't find any data that actually says that cameras on leads to engagement or learning, but I can find data that speak to the problems of turning a cameras on as a default.

So I ran across this quote recently from our colleague Rachel Stern-Lockerman in a conference presentation that maybe I'll just end with. She said, "Cameras do nothing to engage attention and requiring them can do quite a lot of harm." So that's the end of my con position opening statement and looking forward to a conversation around this topic now.

Tom: Yeah. Well, I will say that the con position is certainly the prevailing one in the Twitter sphere, if you follow along any of this debate. There’s very few that at least are willing to venture out on the Twitter sphere and say, “No, we need to require cameras.” It's mostly from faculty on campus that I hear that.

Kelvin: Yeah, me too.

Tom: So having stated both positions, I think it's fair to say, “It depends,” right?

Kelvin: That's our standard answer to everything on the show.

Tom: It is. But it's so true.

Kelvin: It really is.

Tom: And I actually—although I think it's a little bit of a straw man where you sort of take a side—I think we’re both probably somewhere in the middle, but maybe leaning towards the actual sides that we talked about.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think that's true.

Tom: So, I think you make fair points that if you have to mandate engagement by requiring a camera on that forces a student to stare at you but be bored silly while doing it, and it's an hour and a half online lecture that you have to sit through, or I've seen others, not here so much here at UCF, but at other schools like hours. Literally hours like three hours where you’ve just got to sit there and listen. Then I get it. That's not really engagement. Design your course so that students want to

participate. So, I get that, but by the same token, you've done it where you've talked to a Zoom room full of just nothing and it's exhausting and it's not fun and it's sort of depressing. And I think that for faculty to do their best work, we have to find something in the middle here where we're fair and equitable to students, but also recognize that if the students were in class, you'd be seeing their faces. And this is sort of an analog of that. So, how do we thread that needle is the hard part, I guess.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think those are all good points that I agree with. It depends I think you're right. I think we're probably, personally both closer toward the middle and maybe tilting one direction or the other. And yes, I have personally had the experience that you've described and I do resonate with it.

Hey, I spend a lot of my time podcasting like you do, so I know what it is to speak into the void, to the listener that you can't see. So I am practiced at that, but there is something about looking at the screen and there's just a whole lot of nothing. But I do wonder if some of that middle ground that you talk—kind of not an extreme view—but how do you move forward productively? I think it is invitational. I think you and I have talked about this offline before even just stating a rationale. Why would you want cameras to be on right now? Or adopting conventions, I think we've both seen some. Maybe our listeners have, too. I've noticed a lot of communities where either purposefully or circumstantially, conventions have emerged, where if listening, cameras are off and when speaking ,cameras are on. And, you know, that's something, but it doesn't completely address what you were concerned about, right? About you're speaking to the void, as you say—

Tom: Yeah, and maybe the answer is in design, right?

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: So that is a design. It's sort of a blunt instrument design. You can keep them off while you're listening, but turn them on while you're talking. But if you move from a passive lecture-oriented sort of instructional design to something more active where you're going into breakouts or something like that, you could come up with a convention where, alright, if you're in the big room and maybe it's even a large class, there's not a lot of value add to having the camera on if you're just one in a sea of little boxes. But when you go into the breakout room and there's like five of your classmates and you're working on a project together, I actually think it's rude to keep the camera off in that circumstance, unless there's a really compelling reason to have it off.

But if there's not, if it's a preference, then I think turn it on when you're in a small group setting, because I think it makes a difference where you can see your colleague’s face if you're collaborating on some active learning project, and then when you come back to the big room, maybe it's more of a webinar format where you can turn the cameras off. Maybe that's a way to thread the needle a little bit.

Kelvin: Yeah. Personally, I just want to pick up on that word that you said. I think it's an important word. “Design,” right? Intentionality, having some kind of a rationale

that undergirds what you're trying to do. That leads you to actually plan for things to happen in a certain way. And whether that's making use of the webcams all the time or some of the time, or even with no expectation of the webcams, the idea of engaging with students and actually hearing from—like you said with the breakouts—having students contribute in some way, that's powerful. I was reminded as thinking about this conversation, I was reminded about some work that I consulted a million years ago when I was doing my doctoral studies. It's like a 1990 book called *The Spectrum of Teaching Styles*, and there's very descriptive kind of formulations of particular approaches to teaching and different kinds of settings. I want to say they were a couple of physical education teachers, actually, I think. So, highly interactive, as I recall. But the underlying framework was a continuum of complete teacher decision-making versus the other end of complete student decision-making. And I've often found that a helpful reference point, that what you want is your students involved and engaged. Sometimes when I'm working with faculty and instructional designers, I've kind of borrowed that continuum, and I've said that engagement kind of exists on a continuum. There's attention, which is the lowest level of engagement, and it's like you said, your listening is passive versus all the way at the other end is more what we call, in the trade, active learning where students are really doing stuff, and along the way, there are gradations and to really meaningfully involve students means they have some kind of stake. You're respectfully inviting them to share some of themselves and their ideas. And I think that the details can work out. If students are sharing something, whether that's in text, in a chat, or via video or via pre recordings or whatever, then engagement is really going to result. Something that's meaningful is going to result.

Tom: Yeah. You mentioned the chat. That's been an interesting phenomenon where you see that—I actually have not taught at a synchronous course. I've only taught online asynchronously and I've taught face-to-face, but I have not taught a synchronous live course on video—but I've done enough meetings and webinars and presentations and stuff that I think I can have an analog. So you can have a chat going that is hyper engaged.

Kelvin: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom: And to the point where you almost can't keep up with it. That can be a really effective strategy, as well as a substitute potentially for just visual engagement. And if that's happening, I don't have a problem with that. It's consistent with what I've always said about an asynchronous online course where like I've seen some super interactive, effective asynchronous online courses that don't have a lick of media in it. There's no video and stuff in it, but they're just designed in such a way where people are just interacting, and maybe they're working on asynchronous threaded discussions and they've got projects and there's a lot of sidebar conversations going on, and it's really involved, but there's no video or media. I think it's the same thing. If you have a really effective chat or if you have a good use of polls or you set up some whiteboards or whatever it is, use the tools that are at your disposal, that you can compensate for just the blunt instrument video, “I want to see your eyeballs.” But I'll be the first to admit that I've been in plenty of meetings—usually I'm not like a critical participant—where the camera's off and I got two screens and I got email on one and I got the

webinar on the other, and students are doing the same thing, but when my camera's on, it forces me to not do that. Back to your word, it's an accountability sort of measure.

Kelvin: Yeah. Although, there is the Zoom smile phenomenon. I've watched. I know I've watched some colleagues—probably not here at UCF, probably other places—

Tom: Oh never at UCF.

Kelvin: —Never at UCF—who have perfected the Zoom smile.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: They're doing all kinds of things over here, out of the field of view. Fascinating. I wanted to pick up one thing that you talked about of. You said, it can be, for instance, using the idea of the chat in the webinar or synchronous teaching formats, the text chat thing. It can be hard to keep up with and that's another design opportunity. It doesn't take a lot. It just takes a little bit of upfront decision making to say, "Hey, I know my limitations. I'm going to have a designated person who is going to read through," and at particular moments every few minutes or so, I can't keep up with it, but I can say, "Tom, anything that we should comment on?" "Why yes, Kelvin. We have a comment from Sally Sue and Jamal, and perhaps they would like to unmic or unmute and make those comments." That's a way of planning ahead that doesn't require you to do every single thing yourself.

Tom: Yeah, absolutely. Like you said, it goes back to design.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Just like everything else. It does.

Kelvin: Everything goes back to design.

Tom: It does and that's the essence of quality, at least for instruction. It's designed. You can't just wing it. And there was a concept that we studied in my doctorate program called remediation from a professor at Georgia Tech. And I probably have talked about this on the podcast before, but just to quickly recap, the idea is that anytime you introduce some sort of new media, it remediates the old media. So, when television was first introduced, all it was radio with cameras, and that wasn't the best format for that. And it took a while for television to figure out what it was and become actually a unique medium unto itself. And Zoom—at least during the pandemic and maybe kind of lingering on—was remediating bad lecture-based instruction. And that's not what we want. What we want to do is design it for the medium. And I don't know, maybe this is an opportunity for us to kind of state our final cases. So, I'll state mine as a follow on to that thought, that there probably are times when it makes sense for the camera to be on, depending upon the design of the course. But I will concede to you Dr. Thompson, that there are compelling reasons why that's maybe not always a good idea nor should it just be the default. It needs to be intentional. You need to have

a reason for having the cameras on, and it needs to be a value add for the instruction to accomplish the objectives.

Kelvin: Yeah. I appreciate your reminder that we need to put a button on these positions, cause I was ready to land the plane. Wrapping up the con position I'll say again, design and inclusivity are the keywords, and I will concede to you Dr. Cavanagh, that there are certainly value add times that it would be beneficial for cameras to be on. I just think that we're probably wiser not to—I'll use your phrase—blunt instrument require as a default for them to be on, but to invite and have value add opportunities where students can contribute meaningfully to their learning communities. If we're focusing on those things, then good things are probably going to happen, like learning maybe.

Tom: Kelvin, if we do a Venn diagram of our debate, I think you and I would be the overlap right now.

Kelvin: Oh, that's good.

Tom: Two different spots, but we'd be in the overlap. So I think this was a very productive debate.

Kelvin: That's good.

Tom: I think a lot of our politicians could learn a lot from TOPcast.

Kelvin: That's right. We could make some money as consultants.

Tom: That's right.

Kelvin: I don't want to work in that field though. I got to tell you.

Tom: No me either. All right, so I'm going to try and wrap it up here—

Kelvin: Please do.

Tom: —with the bottom line. So, I think we can say synchronous online activities are likely to remain a part of our digital teaching and learning ecosystem going forward. As with other design and teaching considerations, it is important to have an intentional rationale undergirding the use of webcams in these synchronous sessions. No matter which side of the cameras-on versus cameras-off debate you find yourself on personally, addressing all of the concerns of faculty and students is an important part of our work, and we must do so respectfully and collegiately.

Kelvin: Hear, hear. Hear, hear. Hear, hear. Harrumph harrumph!

Tom: I concede two minutes to my colleague from across the hall here.

Kelvin: That's right. That's awesome. Well said. That's good. And speaking of conceding time, I think I'll concede the plug that maybe I would have made for the next

episode. We'll do that, and we'll come in a very pleasant time for this episode, probably.

Tom: All right. Well until next time for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.