TOPcast Episode 103: Learning from 2021: Our Listeners Speak

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’re listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Hey, Tom.

Kelvin: And recorded live in front of a virtual group of colleagues, you are listening to—or watching—the 2021 year in review episode of TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. I’m going to start doing that with jazz hands. TOPcast! Hey Tom.

Tom: Hey Kelvin. Remember back in the day when you’re a kid and, “This week on a very special Blossom.” This is a very special TOPcast.

Kelvin: They’re all very special, Tom. They’re all very special.

Tom: Every Blossom is very special, I recall. Yeah, but this is a very special TOPcast. We are joined by a bunch of friends and colleagues. So, if you all want to, I don’t know, in great cacophony say hi now you’re welcome to. There’s a lot of waving going on.

Audience: [various cheering]

Tom: That’s awesome.

Kelvin: It’s amazing what you can do with the sound library.

Tom: Yeah. Cast of thousands. Yeah. If you’re not watching this, people are going to think that it’s just Tom and Kelvin sitting in a room by themselves with the—

Kelvin: Producer Tim edited us a million times to get that effect of having friends.

Tom: No, we actually do have friends.

Kelvin: That’s right. Exactly.

Tom: They’re joining us now.
Kelvin: It’s lovely. That’s great.

Tom: So here we are at the end of 2021. And as the year is kind of winding down, this is an opportunity for us to, as a community, step back, reflect on the lessons that we’ve learned from the past year in online education, as we begin to prepare for successful new year 2022. And we’re going to do this through the lens of our 2021 TOPcast episodes. We’re honored to be joined today by several of our prior episode guests from 2021. We have Julie Mendez, we have Patsy Moskal, Shannon Riggs, and Tanya Spillovoy. And special guest from 2020, Dr. Kelvin Bentley is also joining us. We are also joined though by a number of our devoted, we hope, TOPcast listeners. Our friends, TOPcasters, who were available for today’s live recording. And as we proceed, there will be opportunities for everyone to contribute. And we can hear from them and to have the direction of the episode shaped on the fly as we go by our guests and friends.

Kelvin: Yep. All that. Our live guests will serve as sort of real time proxies for our listeners and watchers who are catching the episode later on. These guests will help us look back at the past year, identify themes, maybe, to explore today, add their own comments and help us hopefully prepare for the year ahead. They’ll do all of that with the miraculous wonderful, delightful, behind the scenes help of the famous producer, Tim. Tim Reid, who will queue up onscreen response options for our live participants and who will prompt guests to unmute and speak if they’re able and willing, or Tim may read written chat comments on their behalf, if necessary. While there will be more visual elements than maybe in some of our episodes, we’ll all work to stay mindful of our listeners who are depending upon audio to move this episode along.


Kelvin: That’s right.

Tom: So, whether you’re here with us in real time or listening/watching after the fact sometime in the year 2051, we would like to invite you to think about the following question. So, our participants have been given a link. What is one word or phrase you would use to best characterize the year 2021 as it pertains to our online teaching and learning work? Tim has put onscreen a real time word cloud that will be made up of responses from our guests. We’ll tell you what we are seeing as it develops. So again, what is one word or phrase that you would use to best characterize 2021 when it comes to online teaching and learning?

Kelvin: They’re off and running. Blended showed up real fast, then modalities, and I love watching this. I could just watch this all day. It’s like a lava lamp.

Tom: It’s like you guys are reading my mind. These are the words that were coming occurring to me. So, I see modality, student support, synchronous, blended, evolving, expanding.

Kelvin: Crazy changes may be—
Tom: Crazy change. Yes.
Kelvin: —my favorite phrase so far.
Tom: Yeah. Evolutionary, virtual.
Kelvin: Expanding.
Kelvin: Yeah. It’s cool. Open, I see.
Tom: Open.
Kelvin: Leading. We’ll give it another moment or two, see if anything else happens. Because I think the lava might have ceased its flow.
Tom: While words are popping in, what are you drinking, Kelvin? What’s in the thermos?
Kelvin: I brought deconstructed coffee, AKA H2O.
Tom: I got Dunkin decaf going today.
Kelvin: I didn’t know they made decaf.
Tom: Oh, it’s good. Yeah. If you like decaf. Yeah.
Kelvin: I drink decaf.
Tom: Forward is a new word that has just popped in.
Kelvin: Forward. Yes. And it’s interesting because what you hope for perhaps—just putting my own expectations front and center—what you hope for in a word cloud is to kind of see both the range of responses as well as some dominant trends, like, "Ooh, this has bubbled up to the top." And we’ve got range. We don’t have dominant trend really so much.
Tom: Well, I don’t know. Maybe this is an opportunity to kind of turn to the group and see if... You all were probably being good synonym users or dipping into the thesaurus so you don’t repeat something that you’ve already seen. But are there words or themes or other kinds of trends that you see in here that you think maybe have dominated the zeitgeist of online learning more than others? Patsy’s chiming in: change, evolutionary, evolving, crazy change. Those are all sort of the same thing. I think you’re right.
Kelvin: That’s somebody who has done some analyzing of free responses.
Tom: Yes.
Kelvin: And surveys.

Tom: Your expertise is showing, Patsy.

Patsy Moskal: Guilty as charged. Yes.

Tom: Do you want to make a comment on that Patsy? Anything you want to elaborate on?

Patsy: Yeah. I mean, I think we’re all experiencing… Something’s going on in higher ed. We’re not what we were pre-COVID. We don’t yet know what we’re going to be post-COVID, but we’re starting to come out of it. I’d knock on wood, but my desk isn’t wood. So, I don’t have wood to knock on. But so, I think that’s some of what is in the word cloud there. Even blended, I would say, it’s something between. We’re not face to face the way we were before. So, we’ve got some synchronous going on that we didn’t before. So, I just think that we’re kind of in a state of flux. That’s what I see from that.

Kelvin: Yeah. That’s good.

Tom: Well, innovation. Lisa mentioned innovation. That’s a good one too. Online remote from Amy and Steven. I’ve had the same thought Steven, that it feels like a time machine sort of going back to the early days of online learning with this idea of synchronous. Like how do we reinvent synchronous as something new and we don’t just go back to old, maybe not great practices? Like it does feel like everything old is new again.

Kelvin: Yeah. I’ve said that more than once over the last 18, 19 months or so. So, I guess maybe Tom will say that what we’ve just sort of described and for our watchers they’re seeing on screen is 2021 in a nutshell, according to our live guests. Now let’s turn our attention to recalling for a moment how 2021 has played out through the microphones of TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast.

Tom: So, from January ‘21 through November ‘21, we have released 22 episodes. The first Monday episode each month is generally focused on a topic and is at least somewhat influenced by kind of the current moment, and it’s usually just me and Kelvin. Kelvin and I.

Kelvin: The two of us!

Tom: Kelvin and me. I’m the one with the English degree. Meanwhile, our third Monday episode each month has generally featured a guest interview and it’s centering on topics that are a bit more timeless, a little more evergreen that we try to talk about. So that’s our convention.

Kelvin: Perhaps we could say that our first Monday episodes in 2021 have addressed planning ahead, maybe we would say in waves for emergence from remote instruction, like for instance, at one point planning for fall 2021 was like a big thing. That was a moment. And planning for beyond the pandemic we sometimes talk about. Whenever beyond the pandemic is. Yeah, I hear you. Me too. We’ve
touched on topics like hybrid campuses, the role of synchronous sessions and online learning, remote work, course modality changes, the importance of faculty voices, continuing to pursue a high standard of quality and all kinds of more stuff.

Tom: Yeah. And meanwhile, our third Monday, the interview-based episodes have allowed us to diversify the voices you hear on the podcast. So, it’s not just hearing me and Kelvin all the time. We’ve been able to expand that with topics as varied as the existence of and importance of impact evaluation and research, digital learning adoption among STEM faculty, OER, change management, the role of student evaluations, “Jobs to Be Done,” that Christensen concept, and more.

Kelvin: And we’ll shamelessly plug: if you’ve missed any of those episodes, we would welcome you to check your podcast feed or the TOPcast website to get all caught up. And that website is—if you don’t have it tattooed on your forearm like I do—topcast.online.ucf.edu.

Tom: So, we thought that one useful feature of a year in review episode—

Kelvin: Just one, we limit it to one per episode.

Tom: Kind of our focal point here. And again, more interesting just hearing me and Kelvin blabber on, might be to identify an episode from the past within the last 12 months that’s worth revisiting and discussing with our colleagues here live at the end of 2021.

Kelvin: Yes. And controlling for the length of time, different episodes have been available, the top five most downloaded episodes of 2021 are episode 81, Technology Adoption as Enabling the “Right Thing”; episode 83, Re-thinking Synchronous for the Post-COVID Era; episode 85, Blended Is the Future. (And It’s Not Just Courses); episode 86, When Can We Trust Our Students’ Perceptions of Their Own Learning? and episode 97, Finding the Right Mix of Modalities at Your Institution.

Tom: So, producer Tim is providing our live guests and those watching at home with a poll through which they can choose the episode that they are most interested in revisiting today in our interactive of episode. Perhaps a topic has enduring relevance or perhaps something has changed that requires us to reexamine it. We’ll look forward to hearing from our guests as they prepare to make comments or ask questions about the selected episode. It’s a horse race here.

Kelvin: I like it. I like it.

Tom: I see these numbers changing.

Kelvin: I know, it’s cool. Yeah. Currently it looks like the Blended Is the Future is coming out on top with Finding the Right Mix of Modalities—

Tom: Not by much.
Kelvin: Oh, seems it’s changing up! It’s like bumping around now. Like what’s happening?

Tom: Clearly, blended seems to be the winner though.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. It’s like… People love a winner. They just want to vote for the it’s on top. It’s separating a little bit. Ooh, ooh. Second and third place just switched!


Kelvin: It was. Second was Finding the Right Mix of Modalities at Your Institution, but it just became Re-thinking Synchronous for the Post-COVID Era. Interesting.

Tom: They look statistically tied.

Kelvin: Yeah, they do. They were neck and neck. Yeah.

Tom: All right. So, I think we’ve got our—

Kelvin: Oh yeah. I think we call it. I think so. Yeah. It looks like the polling is all stabilized and finished. And the episode chosen for a revisiting of its themes here at the end of 2021 is indeed Blended Is the Future. (And It’s Not Just Courses). And so, we’re going to ask our live guests to begin formulating their observations, comments, questions, et cetera, related to a revisiting of this Blended Is the Future episode. And so, we’ll ask our live guests to please post your comment in the chat, or just note in the chat that you want to speak. And we’ll go from there.

Tom: Yeah. We’d love to hear you speak. So, Tim will be cuing up each audience member who has posted something in the chat once it’s cued if you’re able to unmute and make the comment yourself, please do. I think our audience would love to hear from you. If we don’t hear from you quickly, or if you prefer, Tim will read aloud what you’ve posted on your behalf. So out of courtesy to all assembled, please try to focus your remarks a couple sentences, but we definitely want to hear what you have to say. And it’s interesting that it’s the blended one, because that was the very first word that popped in on our word cloud.

Kelvin: It’s true. Good observation. Good connection. It went like boom, blended, and then it sort of settled down. That was interesting. So maybe Tom, while our guests are posting in the chat, perhaps we can set the stage with our initial host reactions briefly to this episode chosen for revisiting. Like for instance, are you surprised? I’ll ask you.

Tom: No, I don’t think so. Given where we are in the pandemic, it’s certainly something that dominates our thinking here and we have a lot of conversations about it. It’s a kind of a phrase that I’ve stolen from you. You’ve been saying a lot that blended is the future. And I do think as we come out of the pandemic from a hundred percent remote, those remote practices, many of them are going to just linger and remain. And how do we put them to the best use within a
broader context of face to face and online so that’s got blended kind of all over it?

Kelvin: Yeah, for sure. And shout out to our colleague, Dr. Tanya Joosten, who we need to have back on the show at some point. She was a guest a number of years ago. Tanya, as it turns out, has been saying that blended is the future maybe longer than anybody. I found it written in a published piece of hers. Like, man, she’d been saying this for a while, so no desire to co-op that. But we have been saying it a lot on the podcast lately as well. And the fact that it’s like you said, Tom, practices, not just courses, but blending of—like student course taking behavior—blending of taking online and face to face and other modality. As well as we’ve talked about in that episode, what we might call blended student services and all that kind of stuff.

Tom: So, speaking of Tanya’s, I saw Dr. Tanya Spillovoy raise her hand. Tanya, did you have a comment that you wanted to make?

Tanya Spillovoy: I think one of the things that we were just discussing about this post-COVID or current COVID environment is that everyone has these different opinions and comfort level with blended in person, online environments. And when we’re talking about this kind of like open leadership or new way of doing things, there’s so many different opinions on people’s comfort levels, what kind of interactions they’re willing to engage in, and I see folks who are still kind of hiding in their houses and haven’t been to a restaurant yet, while others are excited to be in person without masks. And so, it’s an interesting time when we talk about blended and what’s next in higher education, because so many people are at so many different places in their opinions and comfort levels around social interaction. So, I’m really fascinated to see what will happen next and how this group thinks about this episode and what’s coming in the future.

Tom: Great point. So true. Everybody’s at a different place on the spectrum right now. Yeah. Even in this office where we’re sitting, everybody’s in a different place.

Kelvin: Yeah. That’s very true. I did notice we do have some more things posted in the chat and I noticed that that Shannon Riggs has politely raised her Zoom hand as well. So, I don’t want to step on producer Tim’s facilitation toes, but I see that hand. Shannon Riggs, maybe you can go and then perhaps we can plan on queuing off of the folks in the order that they posted their things in the chat. Shannon?

Shannon Riggs: Yeah. I think it’s really interesting that blended is so much the hot topic of conversation right now and what everyone seems to be after. I mean, we know it’s really an effective means of teaching, but what’s interesting to me about it is I think it’s the most challenging design and facilitation wise, because you have to have all the skills that you would need for in person, on campus teaching and be ready for that, and that’s one kind of preparation and kind of energy, but then you also have to be good at the online design and facilitating in that asynchronous format, which is a whole other different set of skills. And then beyond that, you have to weave those together in a meaningful way so that you don’t end up with a course and a half, or just two disjointed portions of your class. So, it’s interesting
that we’re all so interested in blended. We love that flexibility, but I think we’re going to need to pay attention to the level of faculty support that’s going to be needed in order to do that well.

Kelvin: Yeah. Excellent. Excellent points.

Tom: Agreed. Okay.

Producer Tim: Kelvin Bentley was the first in the chat with a comment.

Kelvin: Dr. Bentley.

Kelvin Bentley: Yeah. No, thank you. No, I was just thinking too, you know what we’re going to have to be… Maybe what will happen over time is that we’ll actually be able to maybe define even more clearly what blended is. Because I think blended and even Hyflex, I mean, we’re coming up with like these really big buckets. I think there’s still lots of nuances based on what schools are doing. And of course, within each school or at each school there’s such varieties in terms of what the blend or what the Hyflex actually is. And my hope is that we’ll be able to collect better data to kind of define, again, good practices and be able to share that out more as we move forward. So, just wanted to point that out.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think that’s a good point, Kelvin. Sometimes when I’m working with groups of faculty and instructional designers around blended learning, as I do sometimes, I have sort of this bullseye diagram that I use to say, “What’s blended?” and just try to get people on the common ground. And like the more precise definitions go toward the center and the broader definitions go toward the outside, and then the kind of the more generally accepted definitions somewhere in the middle. And you can get really precise, and you can kind of argue with people over stuff, or you can get like, as you’ve intimated in the chat, you can blend all kind of things, and call it blended learning. But we have to have enough cohesion in our vocabulary and our terminology to advance our field, I think.

Tim: Jason Johnston is next.

Jason Johnston: Yeah. A question. Some of us were talking about this last summer. We were at a DLA (Distance Learning Administration) conference, and we were wondering what you guys thought. When does online education, blended education, hybrid, Hyflex, et cetera, et cetera, just become education again? How far away are we from that?

Tom: Maybe I’ll take a crack at this.

Kelvin: Please do.

Tom: Feels like I’m going to reference myself. So, forgive me. But like in 2012 or something, I wrote a chapter in an EDUCAUSE book called Game Changers, Diana Oblinger edited, called The Postmodality Era. And it’s basically that. I sort of felt like we were on the precipice of moving beyond this definition by modality. Now modality is important, but it shouldn’t make a difference in how
you perceived quality in education. And it’s funny. I think the pandemic, in some ways has set us back where modality has become so front and center, it’s ubiquitous. The medium is the message in some ways here. But I’m still a believer that I think we can get back. The pendulum’s gotta swing back a little bit, I think, in the direction it was going prior to the pandemic, which was a breaking down of these modality barriers. In some regards, I think while it’s one step back because the pandemic has forced modality in front of our vision, but I think in the long run, it’ll help because it has exposed so many more people to learning in new ways and faculty in teaching in new ways that maybe it will foster more long-term broader adoption. We just have to kind of get through these initial sort of growing pains. Anyway, that’s my theory.

Kelvin: I agree with that to a certain point. And I’ve often thought, I mean, I’ve heard that kind of a statement made as Jason did. Like when is it just education? When is it just learning? When is it just teaching? And Tom, I think you make good points. I’ve often directed people to your chapter and think it’s good. The postmodality era, I think, was a good turn of phrase. And yet. Here’s the litmus test for me. When are we ready to disband our offices of online learning, distributed learning, digital learning, and just say, "Well, this is what we do as a college or university now?" And if we’re not really ready to do that or merge it into kind of one just general thing, then I think that tells us something. That in order to do the work, we find some degree of framing important.

Steven Crawford: Yeah. I do want to comment about the modality question. I think for community colleges, this has been a good thing because of the equity problem. We need to talk about modalities more because we’ve been replacing one modality with another. We used to have lots of evening classes for a population of students, and they all went away because they became online courses. We didn’t keep them for that population. We made them move, and I think that’s going to be the challenge with blended learning and all these modality discussions is we need to increase modalities to be more equitable for our students, while at the same time, not churning off modalities because we decided they’re done.

Tom: That’s a great point. We’ve seen a similar phenomenon here in our regional campuses where those students who would attend night class, because they couldn’t drive an hour to campus, are now online. And there are fewer and fewer students in our regional campuses. They become much more like services centers and advising kind of spaces.

Kelvin: There is so much that we could continue to talk about this, but we might have time for maybe one last comment, if we want to end somewhere close to on time today. Tim, where are we in our queue?

Tim: I’m looking through. There was a lot of nice companion discussion happening in the chat. Perhaps, Lisa has her hand up. So, we give her the last word on this.

Kelvin: Awesome.

Lisa Desruisseaux: Oh, the last word. Wow. Well, there’s so much to say about student support and really making sure that we’re considering what the students need. And to go
back Steven, to what you were just saying about, let’s not forget about the tried and true modalities that a lot of our students are already used to, a lot of our faculty are used to, but for me, it’s really about keeping in mind who you’re serving as your students. And again, being strategic, and Tom and Kelvin, you talked about with the mics on/mics off debate that it goes back to that design piece. And really thinking through piece by piece, using whether it’s a synchronous or an asynchronous piece, why this is the best way, the best experience for the students at that time with that content and/or that skill. Some activities are fine for fully asynchronous, but others, you really need to have a conversation. You need to fully engage. You need to interact with you and each other and the content in ways that the asynchronous piece just does not afford.

Tom: Yeah. I think you said in the chat, it goes back to that intentional design and yeah. And Shannon, I think, is reinforcing that in a different way by reminding us that you can’t go wrong when you put students at the center of that initiative.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Cool. All right. So maybe as the clock winds down, that’s a good spot to kind of leave today’s discussion on revisiting episode 85, which is all about blended learning. So, whether you are able to join us today, live or not, we would love to hear other reactions to this discussion that you might have, and you know where to find us, please reach out to us with your thoughts via email at topcast@ucf.edu, or via Twitter @topcastnow, and now a word from our sponsors.

Kelvin: Some holiday seasons feature their very own nostalgic commercials. They come back year after year and settle into our hearts a bit more each time. Whether it’s Santa sledding down a snowbank on a Norelco Shaver or a small child in a chicken—or was it a duck costume—expressing gratitude to the Easter Bunny—"Bawk, bawk!"—or Mr. Owl getting to the center of a Tootsie Pop—okay, that one didn’t have anything to do with the holiday—some commercials are nevertheless beloved.

Tom: So, in this vein, we would like to remind you of the instant classic that we introduced last year: the commercial for the Dulcet Gurgles Holiday Extravaganza album. And as we prepare to wrap up 2021, and this episode, we would like to invite you to revisit the Dulcet Gurgles commercial. Have a little fun with our online education community. If you write at least one verse of teaching and learning-themed lyrics for any of the songs, listed in the Dulcet Gurgles album, you will be entered into the running to receive your very own TOPcast mug. All the details, plus a link to the commercial are at the following URL. It’s bit.ly/dulcetgurgleschallenge. Bit.ly/dulcetgurgleschallenge. The challenge will conclude on December 31st, 2021, and the winner—it is the winter—but the winner will be announced in early January 2022. The URL again is bit.ly/dulcetgurgleschallenge. And good luck! We did actually get some entries last year. It’s kind of what gave us the idea of people who wrote some lyrics for these ridiculous song titles.

Kelvin: Ridiculous?
Tom: Ridiculous, Kelvin.
Kelvin: Jolly old asynchronous?
Tom: Here’s a mug for the commercial.
Kelvin: Woo! That’s right. That’s right. I can’t wait to see what we’re going to get. And it’ll be telling if we get a whole lot of nothing. But I am hopeful that there’s a lot more creativity among our TOPcast listeners and watchers than that. So, as long as we’re being positive, optimistic, and grateful, perhaps that’s a good time for us to say thanks to all of our guests who are able to join us in real time today for this episode recording. But you know what, we’re also thankful to all of our TOPcast listeners and watchers—our friends of TOPcast—for the work you do in our field and for your kind attention to us. Because I mean, hard to believe anybody would. If you’ll indulge just for a moment, this is also a good time for our annual public expression of gratitude to the broader TOPcast team working—I’m sad to say—mostly unsung behind the scenes of each and every episode all year long. And they are audio and video producer, Tim Reed; web strategist, Jon Pizzo; project manager and editor of the TOPcast Insider newsletter, Bren Bedford; Jackie Compton, who oversees the captioning of each episode; Dr. Beth Nettles, here with us today—wave Beth—who composes all the summary content Tweets; and Janette Rivera who creates trackable short links for our show notes and provides more than you care to know, a lot of behind the scenes coordination. Thank you TOPcast team. We couldn’t do this work without you. Polite applause from everybody. Yeah.

Tom: Yay. Yeah. I mean it’s remarkable. The team of people required to prop the two of us up to sound vaguely coherent twice a month. So yeah, thanks to everybody for all your work.
Kelvin: Vague coherence.
Tom: Imagine what we would be without all that help.
Kelvin: It’s true.
Tom: So, thank you to everybody who joined us today on our end of year special. It was so nice to see your faces again, those of you who were guests and those of you who are listeners. We appreciated all your contributions in the discussion. Thanks for picking an episode to revisit. Kelvin, before we land the plane, any final comments from you?
Kelvin: I’m going to be pithy and say, nope.
Tom: All right. So, until next time for TOPcast, I’m Tom.
Kelvin: I’m Kelvin.
Tom: See ya.