TOPcast Episode 110: The LMS: The Institutional “Linchpin”

Narrator: When you know what you want for the future, you need the present to line up with your goals. UCF online offers more than a hundred fully online programs in healthcare, engineering, criminal justice, and more, so you can get to your future and beyond.

(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, the world’s best podcast.

Kelvin: You just slide these new taglines in that—

Tom: I'm going to keep trying them till one of them sticks.

Kelvin: These are not substantiated or validated. We're going to need to employ a fact checker from now on just for the podcast.

Tom: What? Three Pinocchios for my claims about the world's very best podcast? I know. Hey, Sarah Koenig, she's got nothing on us.

Kelvin: Serial. I haven't listened to Serial since season two. It's still going, right?

Tom: Yeah. It comes in and out. It shows up every once in a while, but they're part of the New York Times now, I think, and they produce other things.

Kelvin: The first two seasons were quite good. I enjoyed both of those.

Tom: Me too.

Kelvin: I need to get back to them. It's hard to keep up with all the podcasts, right? People come up with new ones all the time.

Tom: As we are evidence of, everyone's got one.

Kelvin: Let us have a podcast! The bar is low. That's right.

Tom: All right. So, Kelvin, I see you sipping on your mug of joe right there. Oh my gosh. There's a deep cut. The WebCT mug. Wow.

Kelvin: Yes, sir.

Tom: Look at you. You don't even have to go into the thematic coffee connection. With just that mug I think I've got a thematic connection, but I will let you go ahead and explain what we're drinking today. What is in the thermos, Dr. Thompson?

Kelvin: Well, Dr. Cavanagh, today's coffee is a single-origin Costa Rica from Otus Coffee Company in Winter Garden, Florida. Otus Coffee Company apparently likes to give thematic names to their single-origin coffees. They call this one "Wine Club." And I don't really know why they called it "Wine Club." I assume they gave it that name because one of the tasting notes is red wine. There's no actual red wine—don't get excited—in the coffee, but it's a tasting note. But to me, the name "Wine Club" put me in mind of the camaraderie to be found among wine aficionados who pursue excellent wines together. And by the way, while we always put links to the episodes, featured coffee in the show notes, "Wine Club" sold out and is no more so links to different, similar coffees from the same roaster will be in the show notes instead. So, how is this coffee to you? And could you find a connection between the coffee and today's topic?

Tom: As usual, you're an excellent coffee sommelier. I like it. It's good. I'm not picking up wine notes in there. And when you say, "don't get excited," I guess my pension for a snort or two precedes me.

Kelvin: We had that alcohol infused coffee.

Tom: Yeah, I know. And I did get a little excited about that one, but yeah. It's good coffee. Thank you. Connection, I'm not as good with. I have two ideas.

Kelvin: Okay. I can't wait.

Tom: Neither one which you're going to like. One is your mug. So, the mug is the WebCT mug, which is a learning management system that we used to be a client of before our friends at Blackboard bought it and even after. And then the name of this particular coffee is "Wine Club." And if there's something that people like to complain about more [or] to whine about more than the LMS, I don't know what it is.

Kelvin: That's good. I should have came up with that one myself. That was good.

Tom: I don't think that's the connection.

Kelvin: No. I was really thinking more about the camaraderie and the pursuing excellence thing.

Tom: Pursuing excellence. Yes. Yes.

Kelvin: I was going with that. I did try to think for a moment about, do I dare do a hominem and do I dare do something about whining, but I didn't go all the way there like you did, but everything you said is true. There's a lot of whining involved with the LMS. That's for sure.

Tom: Yeah. So do you want to introduce our guest?

Kelvin: Sure thing. Our guest today is our UCF's Center for Distributed Learning—or CDL—colleague, Ms. Kerlene King. Kerlene is a member of CDL's Leadership Team.

Tom: Woo!

Kelvin: That was the non-mystery woo. That was Tom on the woo, ladies and gentlemen. That's right.

Tom: My trademark woo.

Kelvin: Tip your servers. So, Kerlene is a member of CDL's Leadership Team and serves as manager of LMS Services with her portfolio including a team of LMS administrators and a team focused on technical support for digital learning tools. Kerlene also serves as our lead LMS Administrator and co-leads our work with learning analytics. Outside of UCF, Ms. King is co-facilitator of the Canvas Peers Research Universities Group (or Canvas R1 Peers Group for the insiders). And notably, Kerlene is a certified project management professional, and she's a graduate of both the Online Learning Consortium's Institute for Emerging Leadership in Online Learning (IELOL), and EDUCAUSE's Learning Technology Leadership Institute (LTL). Welcome, Kerlene.

Kerlene: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Tom: We're very excited to have you on the podcast, Kerlene. In fact, when we first started the podcast and we were talking about guests—and we're talking about years ago—yours was one of the first names that we were talking about. And it's taken us this long to find—

Kelvin: It shows you how efficient we are at guest scheduling.

Tom: Yeah. So, Kelvin, it's been a while since we've devoted an entire episode of TOPcast to LMSs—or learning management systems, if you're not familiar with the acronym LMS. And we do talk about it frequently though, right? Our last episode that was completely devoted to the LMS—if I'm seeing your notes correctly—was episode 12, which is titled "The LMS: Past, Present, and Future." It's a bit of a—

Kelvin: We figured we don't need to talk about it anymore because we covered all of it. The entire space time continuum.

Tom: We covered it all in sort of a Dickensian Christmas story or Christmas Carol kind of a way. "The LMS: Past, Present, and Future." But we are here to talk about all of those things with somebody who's actually an expert in the subject, and that's Kerlene. So where would you like to start Kelvin?

Kelvin: Well, Kerlene, I'm just curious. We gave you something like, “hey, we might talk about this. We might talk about that.” Sos let's start with something that's not on your list. So, what did you think when we said, "Hey, you want to come on a podcast and talk about the LMS?" What'd you think?

Kerlene: I was like, “Okay, I guess that's an interesting topic. Some people they want to know about it.” It's one of those things that when you do it every day, you're like, is it as exciting as people [think]? Would [people] want to hear about it on a podcast? And I'm like, I assume so. You talked about it before, and I thought it was a very intriguing session that you did. So, I thought, okay, yeah. I'm intrigued.

Tom: Well, I think you're unnecessarily humble because, you know this, because the number of institutions that have to us—especially after we adopted Canvas, because we were a very early adopter of Canvas—and leaned on our institutional and your specific expertise in trying to set up their Canvas instances means that they found it pretty interesting. And I don't think you can kind of underestimate how important it is for the delivery of online instruction, and even supplemented face to face instruction now. I mean, as we're kind of coming out of COVID, it's underscored just how important this modality is even to just traditional instruction. So, I'll start with a question. And this is one that I think we've talked about before, and one that seems to come up a lot, which is this idea, like two competing thoughts. One is that the LMS should just sort of be infrastructure. It's plumbing, right? It's like electricity. It should just sort of be there, but it shouldn't get in the way of what I really want to do. And then the other kind of end of that spectrum is, no, it's like a strategic instructional tool that has certain affordances that you just can't get any other way. And you can use it a certain way to teach that in some ways is superior to maybe what you could do face to face. The complaints faculty often have is constraining. It forces you into a certain kind of teaching that constrains, but I'm wondering where, from your perch, where you might fall on that spectrum, and if you have any thoughts on that tension?

Kerlene: I kind of see a little bit of both sides of that. Because on one hand, I feel like if I'm doing my job well, then the LMS is not at the forefront of the conversation. It's not an interrupter. Because at the end of the day, if your goal is to enhance teaching and learning through this platform, then you want the teaching and learning to be the focal point. And so, I don't want the technology to interrupt that. So, on one hand, I understand that. Yeah, I'm okay if it's the plumbing, because I would rather everything else be the present thing. But I would say that in order to get to that point, you have to be mindful about it. It doesn't just happen. We do a lot of training here. We do support. You have to think about, “how can I structure my course in this platform” so that you can get to that point? So, there's a little bit of both. I feel like you do have to pay attention in the beginning. You do have to do some work to get it to a point where it just becomes something in the background that you're not even thinking about.

Tom: I think about it like a referee on a football field or soccer field or something. They're there to enforce the rules, keep the ball in play, make sure everybody's playing fairly, but not to influence the game. To kind of go into the background a little bit.

Kelvin: This feels like a little bit of an artificial question, but I like imagery. I like metaphors. I'm always coming up with…almost can't utter a complete sentence without invoking some illustration or metaphorical or idiom or something. So, I wonder, Kerlene, do you have a preferred metaphor or illustration for the LMS and its place in our institutions?

Kerlene: When I think about that, I'm almost laughing because you're asking the LMS admin. Am I biased? Absolutely. But when I think about it, I feel like it's a linchpin. I feel like it's really important and vital to any institution in at this point. I mean even our institution, when you think about the fact that we don't have enough buildings or you have something like what happened in the past two years where we were able to move online, how valuable having an LMS and, because we have been in this space for a while, how much easier it was for us to transition to that space. I think it's absolutely vital now, and I think it's almost expected. Because we have students now in K-12 who are using LMS platforms, so they're almost accustomed to it now by the time they get to higher ed. So, I feel it's vitally important to any institution. So, I'm almost surprised because I've had conversations with people who are just getting into it, who are just seeing the value of it. But for us, I think, I don't know. I can't see us not having an LMS platform at this institution at all.

Kelvin: Linchpin. I like that.

Kerlene: Linchpin.

Tom: Well, and if we look at the survey data that came out early in the pandemic about tool usage, I mean, a lot of the narrative and the spotlight has been on Zoom—and other tools like Zoom—and rightly so. But if you look at the actual usage, the number one thing that was used by faculty was learning management system. It was like 97% of faculty. And I'm not just talking about UCF. It's like across higher education. So that was, I think an unsung hero of this particular worldwide pandemic response. And had it not been so ubiquitous already—like if this was 15 years ago, 20 years ago, try standing up an LMS in an emergency like that—it would've been really hard. So, I think your point's well taken. Well, I have another question about tensions and spectrums. So, I don't know, maybe I'm living in sort of "this or that" kind of space in my head right now, but the other one is, I remember when we moved away from WebCT to our current LMS and you were a big part of that process, Kerlene. And I remember having these conversations with you and others about, "Okay, this platform, the faculty seem to like it because it gives them an awful lot of flexibility. They can do whatever they want in some ways. This other platform seems to lock it down for faculty and they can't do as much." And then on the administrative side, some of the platforms had way more dials and switches for the administrators to customize and do global or local or departmental or even class-based sort of configurations. And then other platforms didn't have that kind of granular control, but maybe offered other things that were good. And it seemed like there was this tension between control and customizability that I'm not sure we completely navigated. We were at the mercy of sort of what the marketplace had to offer at the time. But I'm wondering if you have a preference, both as an administrator and as

someone in light of your previous comments about kind of the LMS getting out of the way.

Kerlene: Right, and I think as somebody who loves technology and loves tinkering with technology, I love customizability. I love being able to play with all the bells and whistles, but in actuality—and probably some of this is because I remember being a part of that process, and as we were looking at different tools and what…Some of them had allotted bells and whistles and "would that be too confusing for faculty?" and whatnot. But going back to the original point, I go back to what's the purpose of the LMS? And if it's to enhance teaching and learning, then you wonder if some of those bells and whistles will get in the way of that, because then it adds a level of complexity that both students and faculty are going to be impacted by every single time they go into the platform. And so, to reduce that you figure ease of use just makes sense. We can start there. I think it's a good starting point and that could be a good focal point. I know that we love the fact that we can customize it and we have the option to customize it. And I think that helps for the faculty, because it's a niche faculty group really who go after certain tools, but the majority are able to function with what's there once what's there makes sense and does what it needs to do. But I just go back to, what's the purpose? Let's not let the technology get in the way of what they need to do. And so, for that, I would go with ease of use though it's hard because I love technology. So, I love tinkering with new things and seeing all the bells and whistles, and I understand too that you can use some of those things to enhance the teaching and learning, to enhance the content. So, there is value in having some of these, what we call LTIs or add-ons to the platform, but at the core of it, if that works well, I think you'll be okay.

Kelvin: Is that primarily Kerlene from the user experience—the ease of use—or is that also true of kind of popping the hood on the metaphorical car from the behind-the-scenes administrative role? Do you like just kind of plain ease of use from that perspective as well? Or do you like highly customizable features in your administrative tool set?

Kerlene: From the administrative side, I think you want a little more complexity. Because we try to put up barriers in certain places because we don't want people to accidentally cause more damage or more harm to themselves. And so, we go into the system, and we say, "Okay, maybe we should turn off these features, turn on these features. Maybe we should extend admin access to other people but turn off things that may cause some damage." So, from our side—and plus I think we have a little more expertise, a lot of technical expertise. So, I think a little bit of complexity is okay. We can maneuver through that. We can figure that out. But I think from the end user perspective, I hope that ease of use, not having to think about what you have to do every time you have to go into the LMS, but have it be an afterthought. And you go into your course, you go into module, you go through the modules, you just know what to do, and you're not thinking about it. I think that's the end goal. But like I said before, it takes work to get to that end goal. For us to get to that end goal, we had to turn on some bells and whistles in the background so that it looks like this to you.

Tom: Well, I was going to go back, but it's another question that we've talked about a lot. You mentioned LTI which is Learning Tools Interoperability. For those that are not familiar with that, it's a standard compatibility, interoperability standard that comes from IMS, which is now called 1EdTech. And one of the things we talked about back in that episode 12 of TOPcast was this idea of sort of the Potato Head analogy/metaphor of, all right, so maybe the LMS will evolve to a point where it's just a grade book, it's just a roster. And then through standards-based integrations, you plug in different tools from various providers to assemble the LMS that you like the best. So, maybe you pull in a discussion board from one LMS and, I don't know, a quiz tool from another. And they all kind of get plugged together in a way through these open standards so that it really does become LEGO-ized in a way. We haven't quite reached there. And I wonder if, one, if you think we will and if you think that's a good idea. Because now you suddenly have to be expert, not just in one system, but in multiple systems from an administrative point of view.

Kerlene: I think, and we've had some of these conversations before especially with the vendor where there is what should be part of the core LMS and then what are things that should be add-ons? And I think the general consensus and agreement was that the basic functionality should be, like you said, the grade book, assignments, assessments, discussion, communication. Make those things work really well because those are the core features of any LMS. And then it's okay to have add-ons, but I agree with you, they're not consistent. So, everything you have to…It's a different way of learning it. It's a different way of maneuvering through it. It's a different way of supporting it. So, every add-on that you add has a level of complexity to it. And so, it may end up taking away from what you really are trying to accomplish. So, I think that's been a topic because when you talk about things like maybe I want to say Canvas. We're with the Canvas platform right now, and they talked about making the quizzing engine an LTI, and that became a big conversation, because now I think people are kind of walking that back. Maybe that should be a part of the core product. And I think they have even said that as well, because it makes it harder to integrate other tools within another LTI. So, it ends up becoming a bigger issue than I think people initially realized, but people are accepting of things like analytics. That can be an add-on. Other tools like Zoom and other tools that we use to help support the LMS, those things are okay being an add-on. But the core features, I think the general consensus is let that be built into the LMS. Let that work seamlessly and let that be your focus.

Kelvin: Extending that a little bit. And maybe as we begin to at least see the runway on the horizon and begin thinking about wrapping up—big picture—if you had like magical superpowers or something and could improve anything about the state of today's learning management system without naming names. I mean, we're not going to call out any one particular product, but just looking at learning management systems broadly, if you could improve any one thing about them in the current state, what would it be and why?

Kerlene: I think the biggest thing would be better insight into how it's being used. I was even thinking about like a futuristic thing, like using AI to tell a faculty member, "Hey, you know that last quiz that you did? Question three, 73% of your students

got that wrong. Maybe that's a question that you may need to look at." Just something, like a little prompt here and there, because you have the information, you have the data. You're collecting tons of data, but we just don't get that level of insight to be able to do something actionable with it. And I think a lot of schools are trying. So are we, but we haven't gotten to that point yet where we're able to make those kinds of decisions and show a faculty member how students are maneuvering through your class. So that if you're asking yourself, should I use the same structure next semester? But you realize students are just jumping from an item that says, you have an upcoming quiz, and they just jump to that versus going through your modules and going through all the articles and videos that you've put into the course so that they can better understand the topic. You realize they're jumping around and not doing those things, then that might be good to know as you're building out your courses and stuff like that. So, that's what I think about. I think that would be certainly helpful. And of course, we look at it from the student perspective as well. How can we use that information to help them be better, and maybe turn in their assignments on time? At one point Canvas had a tool that we were part of the pilot where they would nudge students. And they talked about how much that benefited a lot of students and the impact it had. Just a simple nudge to say, "Hey, you have an assignment coming up." And that was based on data that they collected over time. So, I would love to see more of that in the future.

Tom: Amen. I couldn't agree more. The insights and the proactive use of data within these systems, we have not completely leveraged to the benefit of faculty and students, totally agree. So, Kelvin, I'm looking at my cup and my timer and I'm thinking this might be a good place to sort of wrap things up.

Kelvin: Yeah, that sounds good. Shall I try to put a button on the bow on the runway?

Tom: Yeah, whatever.

Kelvin: Just throw them all in there. All the metaphors. That's right. Well, perhaps we might say that the learning management system is still—red alert!—is still core to the work of online education. To make use of this platform as a strategic institutional tool, we need to cultivate a vision for strategic use and to invest in appropriate staffing and support to carry out that vision. How's that?

Tom: Yeah, definitely. And when it comes to appropriate staffing, you couldn't ask for better than Kerlene King. Thank you, Kerlene, for being on the podcast. It was really a pleasure to have you here to talk about the LMS.

Kelvin: Absolutely.

Kerlene: Thank you for having me.

Tom: Sure. So, I guess that'll do it. Thank you for the coffee, Kelvin. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya!