Speaker 1: When you realize what your future can be, you want to do it right. UCF Online offers more than a hundred fully online programs, plus personalized support from success coaches, so you can get to the future that's right for you.

Thomas Cavanagh: From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin Thompson: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Thomas Cavanagh: And you are listening to TOPcast, the world-famous Teaching Online Podcast.

Kelvin Thompson: Keep trying out these new modifiers.

Thomas Cavanagh: If I keep saying it, maybe it'll be true, right? That's cool. Hey, we've got some international listeners.

Kelvin Thompson: That's true.

Thomas Cavanagh: Based on whatever data we can get, which is imperfect, but we do see that on occasion, from all over, from all different continents, except Antarctica. Haven't seen anybody from there yet, but hey.

Kelvin Thompson: I think some countries just have one person on a particular episode or whatnot. But I got to tell you, it's kind of weird. I mean, even at the time we're recording this, there's still the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. And during this, we've actually had Russian downloads and Ukrainian downloads. That makes no sense to me whatsoever, because surely people have better things to do, but-

Thomas Cavanagh: Yeah, you would think, although maybe in the middle of Russia where you're far away from it and not necessarily involved [crosstalk]-

Kelvin Thompson: Ukrainian one got my attention, it was-

Thomas Cavanagh: Yeah. I would think... Yeah. Yeah. Wow. A brief aside, we have a student, a UCF online student who's in Kyiv right now.

Kelvin Thompson: Really?

Thomas Cavanagh: And she's studying. She's an international relations, fully online, student. Yeah. I think she's got two classes that she's in and doing her best to log in and study amidst bombings. It's pretty remarkable. Yeah.

Kelvin Thompson: Wow. That's sobering.

Thomas Cavanagh: It is. Yeah. Yeah. It reminds me a bit of when I taught for a former institution that served a lot of military students, and I had a student one semester that I was teaching who was at the base in Afghanistan, in Kandahar. And she wrote

me and said, "Dr. Cavanagh, I'm going to be late with my assignment this week, because we got attacked." And I'm like, "Okay. Yeah, that's good. Tell me what you need and when you can get it in and we'll work it out. It's fine. Yeah. When you got mortars flying over the wall, you got other things to worry about besides my assignment."

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah. It puts it all in perspective, right?

Thomas Cavanagh: It does, yes, but that's not what we're here to talk about today, Kelvin. I will be the king of awkward transitions.

Kelvin Thompson: Nah, it's all good. But we have coffee in hand. We've got topic at the ready. So would you like to know what you're drinking here?

Thomas Cavanagh: I would love to know what I'm drinking. I've pre-sipped. So tell me.

Kelvin Thompson: Pre-sipped. Well, today's coffee is a dark roast blend called Hidden City from Zoka Coffee in the Seattle area. And I was wondering about the title. People make these titles of blends, Hidden City. And I speculated a little bit about that. I thought maybe it had something to do with the dark roast or whatever, but then I noticed that the roasters included a photo of Seattle all but obscured by very low cloud cover. And I know that you often comment that I brew a strong cup. So what do you think of this French roast coffee?

Thomas Cavanagh: It's good. I like a good French roast. It is a bit strong. I had to add some extra [froof] to whiten it up, to get into the proper beige-ish color that I prefer. So yeah, I did notice that, but it's good. I'm enjoying it.

Kelvin Thompson: Yes. So now, I feel a little bit like, and date myself even further, the normal, like Paul Harvey with kind of a "And now you know the rest of the story."

Thomas Cavanagh: Yeah.

Kelvin Thompson: So below the fold here, I will say what you're drinking, Tom, is decaf, decaf.

Thomas Cavanagh: Yeah?

Kelvin Thompson: Decaf. So strong, bold, flavorful, but decaf. Surprise! Decaf. Yes. So yeah, Hidden City surprise. So you've already commented on the taste of the coffee. So now, I'll ask, can you find a connection in this little coffee to today's topic?

Thomas Cavanagh: Interesting. Interesting. Well, I think I may have commented, especially when we were recording at home, when we were at home, usually my go-to in the afternoon was a decaf French roast, which was a little strong, not quite the strong, but a little strong, from San Francisco Bay. They had the nice compostable cake cups that I like. So I guess I didn't expect it, but I've had it before, something similar. So the connection, let's see, it is coffee, but maybe

it's not quite the coffee that we thought we were going to get. I think there's something in there with the topic du jour here.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's the path I was trying to walk, for sure. I thought kind of the surprise, "Ooh, this is a little different." And maybe even the low-line cloud cover over Seattle with just the space needle and a couple of building tops popping up over, maybe that symbolizes obscured intentions perhaps a little bit as well. So I thought the surprise and the obscuring, I thought maybe that kind of got us in the general vicinity of our topic. You want to tell people what our topic is?

Thomas Cavanagh: Sure. So today, we're going to explore this concept that you've been calling onlineness. So what is it that makes an online course quintessentially online? Sometimes, students sign up for an online course only to sort of find out, surprise, that, oh gosh, I have to show up for an orientation and I got to show up for my exams, but it's not quite so online. I live in New York and your class is in Atlanta or whatever. So it makes it difficult. It's about setting proper expectations.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah. That's exactly right. And before we go any for further, let's perhaps go on record and say online courses, we think, really should be online, that is, they require deliberate design in order to achieve the flexibility that students were pursuing when they sought out and enrolled in said online course. Right? Do you agree with that?

Thomas Cavanagh: Amen. Yeah, yeah. And all right, airing the dirty laundry. Not recently, but years ago, I mean, we had issues where a student would sign up for an online class, and the example from New York is not arbitrary, that they actually flew down for their exams because the exams were in person, in a testing lab. Well, we got to put a stop to that, and we did. And we've got arrangements that can be made if it must be a proctored exam where you can go to a lab or something or some other third party or whatever. But that kind of stuff happened, and it's really a disservice or disservice to the students.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah. Yeah. I agree with that. And yet, I think sometimes, I bump up across this now and again, maybe not in those really egregious ways, but maybe in sort of tangential corollary kind of ways, like just little nuances on, did you think this through, this online thing?

Thomas Cavanagh: Yeah, yeah. I was invited. I think it was yesterday. No, Wednesday. Not that the listening audience cares or knows what day it is, but two days ago, when we were recording this, to a department meeting with faculty, and I was invited to just do some Q&A, if they had questions about online learning, and so I was happy to do it.

And a number of the questions were along the lines of "How much face-to-face stuff can I get away with in my class?" I'm paraphrasing, but that's basically the

theme. And I was like, well, you know what, if you want to do that, we have a modality for that. Let's call it that and not call it the online class. So let's try and set the expectations because... And to further complicate it, within the state of Florida, a lot of this is defined by what's eligible for the distance learning course fee, which is 80% and above. So 20% of your class could be face-to-face and still be considered "online", at least as far as the distance learning fee is concerned. But in practice, we try not to-

Kelvin Thompson: Right. That's exactly right. I was going to say, I know it's maybe not always the most popular thing. We have colleagues who are like, "Well, faculty and departments are within their purview to fit within that 20%." I don't tell anybody about the 20% if I can avoid it.

Thomas Cavanagh: Yeah. Well, I mean, I referred this department, which is in our lovely college of engineering, to the modality that specifically allows for 20%. It's a primarily online class, but with some... And those courses are actually not even visible to our UCF Online students to prevent that problem of the kid from New York having to fly down to take his test.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah. No, exactly, exactly, exactly, exactly. And I don't know, maybe I'll say this as kind of a little bit of a way in. I mean, all of this that we're talking about is a thing, has been a thing, will be a thing to some extent or another on an ongoing basis, and we can unbundle some of these principles more, but maybe the current moment where there's still a bit of, maybe we'll call it modality flux, right?

For instance, the... I don't know what else to call it other than sort of pseudo HyFlex Zooming of in-person classes. With all that stuff, it kind of complicates the onlineness thing, right? Because we start to think, maybe not we, our listeners, maybe we wouldn't do this, but colleagues, people we know might inadvertently become insensitive to the needs of online students, if we begin thinking that onlineness "is just a convenience, not a necessity," right? You just sort of go, "Well, you're choosing to come to the class versus not." No, no, no, no, no. Students with adult life responsibilities sought out a course that they didn't have to come into the classroom for, right? And that's a thing. So I do think that this moment we're in right now makes it a little bit more challenging. Do you find that or no?

Thomas Cavanagh: Oh my gosh, yes. I get myself wrapped around the axle a little bit when we're talking about this idea of flex, however that's defined, but usually, there's a flex in there somewhere, where it's I'm standing in my classroom and I'm teaching, but I'm either and/or broadcasting and recording what I'm doing so that a distance audience can participate or students have the choice to come or not.

So the course was designed to be essentially a face-to-face course that's conducted synchronously in a classroom, presumably where there might be some discussion or something, and over time, that students gradually drift away

and don't attend and suddenly become asynchronous online participants in a course that was not intentionally designed to be online.

And is that an online course? I would argue no, but it's become a de facto one. And so we try to put some guardrails on to prevent that, but honestly, since the pandemic, with the ubiquity of Zoom, all kinds of things can happen out there with creative and motivated faculty and students who prefer convenience over getting up at eight o'clock in the morning.

Kelvin Thompson: But gosh, it's still awfully difficult to communicate clearly with students in those kinds of situations that you describe, right? It's hard for students to know what they're signing up for. And I mean, you make a good point, too, about the rise of online synchronous courses, and I think we're seeing industry-wide more of that than we did pre-pandemic. We've said before on the podcast that we didn't do really much at all of that here at UCF pre-pandemic, and it's a thing. Now, we've got a bonafide modality for it and so forth.

But even there, right, there's less flexibility if you have synchronous scheduled, synchronous online sessions, but even there, you're not expecting students to show up in your building, right, in your classroom. So there's still a certain amount of flexibility. So students knowing what they're signing up for and knowing what they're committing to and being able to plan their lives around it, that's a thing.

And just a quick comment, you mentioned our UCF Online students, which longtime listeners will know is our program for exclusive... It's an exclusively online experience for students who get a reduction in the fees associated with campus-based services, so they don't have to come to campus at all. But we have a number of students, right, in any given semester who are certainly taking fully online courses.

And so for our purposes in this conversation, it is probably helpful, I would say, to consider a student in an online course to be an online student. I've heard a colleague of ours recently say, "Well, if they're not a UCF Online student, I wouldn't consider them really an online learner if they're swirling across modalities." And I disagree. I think anytime you've got a student in an online course, you've got to think of that student as an online learner. And for course design, it's imperative. You got to imagine that everybody's... I tell people, if you're designing this online course, imagine you're designing for everybody being in pick a faraway country.

Thomas Cavanagh: Yeah. I agree. Yes, students will mix and match and take a variety of modalities concurrently, but that online course needs to function for the student in Alaska, and we're in Florida.

Kelvin Thompson: That's right.

Thomas Cavanagh: So, yeah, I totally agree. And if it doesn't, I don't think it's a well-designed online class.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah, yeah, yeah. For sure. Maybe a couple of things. I think something we've talked a lot about around here, requirements are different than options, right? So you can have options, maybe, as long as you're careful with them. It's requirements when you get in trouble, like you're hypothetical, well, non-hypothetical student flying from out of state in order to come to a required in-person experience for an exam or whatnot. See, it's the requirement that gets you in trouble. If it was an option, for which there was an alternative, well, you're in a whole different place.

Thomas Cavanagh: Right, right. Yeah. It's the same thing for the orientation, the face-to-face orientation for the online class at the beginning of the semester or the midterm study session or whatever it is, or even office hours, which now or mostly online the last two years, but even prior to that. I mean, so all of those things, as you say, as long as they're optional, it's different. But if there is a requirement, I'm thinking of adding an online synchronous element to an asynchronous online course, typically as best practice, we recommend that faculty do that more than once at different times, days, and record it to try and catch everybody.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. The recording thing at a minimum, right? Because then you've got some flexibility built in there. It's not about the requirement being in that synchronous moment. It's about attending to whatever was shared in that session. And if there was something that students had to submit, can it be submitted asynchronously based on that synchronous session? It's just, that's designed. That's intentionality, right? You got to think those things through and not assume.

Thomas Cavanagh: I just had a meeting right before this with a faculty member, who's in charge of a program, and a dean and a chair, and we were talking about a proposal he has. It's a fully online program, and what he'd like to do... And you probably may knew who I'm talking about. What he'd like to do is add a face-to-face cohort as an expansion of his enrollment and his offerings and the kinds of students that he can attract, especially international students, if he wants to bring them here to the US.

So where he's ended up is that for some of the courses, they're going to stay completely online and the face-to-face cohort and the online cohort will be taking them together. But for other courses, there will be a face-to-face section and an online section that run concurrently where the online discussions and online assessments, the courses are co-listed together, so that both groups do those online components, but the lectures that happen in the class are either consumed to participated in, live in the classroom or online, depending upon which section that you're in. And it could be asynchronous online with recorded.

It is an engineering sort of discipline. So it's probably very quantitative, and they're writing formulas and stuff. So it's not like the students... The discussion

would be happening online as opposed to in the classroom where they're kind of more conveying information. But I couldn't help but think, as we were having this discussion literally an hour ago, about this conversation we were going to have now. And so I don't know, is it online? Is that really face-to-face? I don't know. Is it fish nor fowl?

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah. Modality flux.

Thomas Cavanagh: Yeah. Yeah.

Kelvin Thompson: Modality flux. I mean, we're... And it's why it is good to talk these things through and go, okay, well, if a student was completely remote, not just in a particular planned for circumstance, but an unplanned for circumstance, what would happen? And those are good test cases, I think, sometimes. We box ourselves into corners sometime.

I remember talking to different situation, but the boxing in, I want to say it was maybe an undergraduate course in legal studies. There was a... Many of our online courses, right, they don't... All the coursework doesn't have to be completed sitting in front of a computer monitor, right? You can walk away from the monitor, but there are examples of field work that one can go and do, right? Lots of examples of those things, but this was a legal studies course and fully online course. And the instructor announced, I don't know, somewhere mid-course, mid-semester, that there was going to be a fieldwork experience. Students were going to have to go to, and I think it was phrased as the courthouse, locally, like Orange County or something like that, during the work day and do some sort of an observation and write up notes and so forth.

And there's several problems with that, right? One, if it was framed as the courthouse in the Downtown Orlando, well, no. Just because you brokered access to that, that's not... What if I'm in Saudi Arabia, what am I going to do? Fly in for the occasion? I don't think so. But you could certainly arrange go to your local courthouse. Local protocols might vary, but generally, they're accepting. You want to plan in advance. You want to call them and ask if they could... There might be a checklist of things, but you could say, "Go to your local courthouse and here's what you're going to do."

And then secondly, announcing it mid-semester that there's going to be a nine-to-five kind of an expectation, "Hey, I take online courses because I work nine-to-five and I do this in the evening. So now, I'm an adult life responsibility student, and I got to take time off of work to do this thing that you didn't announce until this week," that's not good either, right? So there's several things wrong with that kind of scenario. So it's not just even the modality purity. It's the ripple effects, right, that you got to think through. You can't just assume that students are within driving distance from the campus. I like to... Antarctica, wherever, but faraway.

Thomas Cavanagh: We'll get one of those students there one of these days in Antarctica.

Kelvin Thompson: I think we had one a long time ago, was working for one of the research agencies or something, was doing some sort of fieldwork in Antarctica. Pretty sure.

Thomas Cavanagh: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I agree. Yeah. You need to take all of that into account in an online class. And one of the advantages of an online class is that the world is sort of your classroom if it's designed well. But I'll sort of bring it back to that question of design that we kind of started with and has bit of a theme for you and I, that we always kind of talk about. Even that example that I just gave, I mean, what I said to the faculty member was that, well, we'll get his instructional designer involved and we'll start talking about how this can be put together so that it's the best quality that it can be, because that's my biggest concern.

We don't want to do a course delivery strategy based on cost avoidance. It needs to be based on the objectives, the needs of the students, ensuring that we're hitting our quality expectations. And that resonated with him, and I'm glad the chair and the Dean were on the call because they agree with that. But it's real easy to look at the program and say, "Well, geez, we got to have X number of students at X amount of tuition." And I mean the whole point of trying this new model is because they kind of are looking to grow headcount. So that's what's driving it, but we can't let that tail wag this dog, so to speak.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah. I mean there's all kinds of contexts, right, at the department program level, institutional level, shout out back to TOPcast Episode 97, finding the right mix of modalities at your institution amidst all the flux, right? We discussed some of the reasons institutions might pursue offering certain modalities and in a certain different mixture because of their context.

But at the end of the day though, I think, like you said, it comes back to design and it comes back to holding the line on an online course as an online course, right? And you don't want to put students at any kind of a disadvantage ever. You have to kind of think that through and make it evident to students what the expectation is. And as you said earlier, and if it's something other than fully online, don't call it an online course, call it something else.

Thomas Cavanagh: Right. That's exactly why we have the modalities we do. We got a flavor for everything. We can help you. We can help you categorize it correctly. Look, I live this as an adult student. I took an online class one time and it turned out that that online class had a requirement that I build something in a simulation lab on campus, that it's not software that I could go buy. Right? It was really a high-end expensive software that they made available to students, but I had to come to campus and book time in this lab to do this thing. And if I were in Alaska, it just wouldn't have happened, right? So it only works for local students who could come in on a Saturday and do it like I did.

Kelvin Thompson: And sadly, I mean, thankfully, this is a rare thing in my experience during my time here at UCF, but I have seen situations analogous to that, where then the instructor of record kind of puts it on the student as it's their problem, in your role there, right? Like, "Hey, I can't." "Okay. Well, I'll be happy to work with you to see how you are going to solve your problem." "No, no, no. It's not my problem, you see."

Thomas Cavanagh: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And in fairness, I mean, this was many, many, many years ago.

Kelvin Thompson: Of course.

Thomas Cavanagh: We've come a long way since then.

Kelvin Thompson: Yes, that's right. That's right. Well, you think it's about time to start wrapping up this topic. Anything else you want to add before we-

Thomas Cavanagh: No. My decaf is running low. Thank you. My head won't buzz on the drive home. I appreciate that. So yeah. Thank you for the Seattle coffee.

Kelvin Thompson: Yeah. You're quite welcome. Hope it's enjoyable. Well, let me try this by way of wrap up. We'll be doing our students a disservice, we might say, if we are careless with how we design or promote or support online courses. Students take online courses for specific reasons, and these courses must be designed to allow for maximum student flexibility, whether that's flexibility of time and space or flexibility of just space, whatever it is, maximum student flexibility, if those courses are to fulfill their purpose. How is that?

Thomas Cavanagh: That's good. That's a good coda, a good summation of what we just talked about. So just a reminder for all of our friends listening that the entire catalog of past TOPcast episodes, plus all of the "Read more about it" links that are associated with each episode and more, photos of our guests and links to coffees, and it's a real treasure trove of information and follow-up, they're all available on our website, which you can find at topcast.online.ucf.edu. Again, topcast.online.ucf.edu. So until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin Thompson: I'm Kelvin.

Thomas Cavanagh: See ya.