TOPcast Episode 114:
Making Sense of COVID’s Ongoing Impact on Online Higher Ed

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)

Kelvin Thompson: From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom Cavanagh: And I am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And you are listening to TOPcast, The Teaching Online Podcast.

Tom: You put extra pauses in there. Is that to get people to lean into the microphone, or I'm sorry, to the headphones?

Kelvin: I just thought it was maybe the “Shatner version.”

Tom: Okay, you never know. Yeah, I read, here, we'll go off on one of our crazy tangents. [Laughter] I read an interview one time with, I think it was the editor of Rosemary's Baby, and I think it was Roman Polanski who directed that. It was either the cinematographer or the editor. There's a scene where somebody's on the phone in a bedroom, and the shot is sort of down the hallway into the bedroom, but you can't quite see the person, you can only just see sort of like the edge of their body and their head. The editor was like, "We can't use that shot. It doesn't even show the subject." Polanski insisted, and then he said, when he went to the theater and watched it, everybody was leaning over to try to see into the room.

Kelvin: Oh, that's funny.

Tom: He realized; he knew exactly what he was doing. He was doing it on purpose to try to draw you in, and that's what I think you're doing with your pauses. People are leaning in and trying to say, "What's he going to say next?"

Kelvin: That's right. If only people were that attuned to what gibberish might possibly come out of my mouth.

Tom: And let's be clear, I'm not at all comparing the subject of Rosemary's Baby to the TOPcast. [Laughter]
Kelvin: Thank you. I don't know that I actually saw that movie, but certain things are in the zeitgeist, and it's like, still, you say Rosemary's Baby, and I get creeped out.

Tom: Oh, me, too.

Kelvin: I'm like, "Nope, nope, nope."

Tom: I don't know if I've ever seen that movie either.


Tom: Yeah, I think I've seen that shot just because of that thing I read.

Kelvin: Film school.

Tom: Yeah, film school. My film school was showing. But anyway, that is apropos of nothing. You know what is apropos of something?

Kelvin: What's that?

Tom: Coffee. Coffee goes with everything, including pauses and intros and completely non sequitur stories.

Kelvin: I'm still stuck back on ... wouldn't that be a good name for podcast, "Apropos of Nothing?"

Tom: Non sequitur stories.

Kelvin: But both of which, okay, spinoffs. Listeners, go ahead and write into us and tell us which of these you would like to hear us turn into a complete spinoff podcast.

Tom: Instead of the Teaching Online Podcast, it'll be the… something else.

Kelvin: I guess, sure. You want to know what this coffee is?

Tom: I do.

Kelvin: All right.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: So this, Tom, as I'm drinking out of my SMU mug, is a coffee I picked up in Tejas when I was at the OLC Innovate 2022 conference. It's actually from a Houston roaster called Katz Coffee. And this is, you undoubtedly noticed…

Tom: But you were in Dallas.

Kelvin: I was in Dallas because of my Houston roaster, yes.
Tom: Gotcha.

Kelvin: Sorry. Thank you. But SMU, yes, exactly.

Tom: SMU in Dallas.

Kelvin: Did I tell you Veronica Diaz said to say hello?

Tom: Hi, Veronica.

Kelvin: Right, there you go. Yeah, I keep forgetting to tell you, she's living there, too now, Dallas. All the finest people are.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: But this coffee does not come from Dallas, it comes from Houston, from Katz Coffee, and it's, you might have noticed, a flavored coffee. It's called Texas Chocolate Mudslide.

Tom: Yeah, I did notice flavor. It's good.

Kelvin: Yeah. I'm not a big...

Tom: I know.

Kelvin: ...big flavor person, but it was something nice. Family picked it up while we were there, but it's tasty. I thought that because this Katz Coffee place, they have this slogan, and it says, checking my notes here, “Good coffee is more than just taste. Good coffee is more than just taste.” They go on, on their website, to talk about, of course, all the fair trade, and work with the farmers, and they donate a percentage of every pound of coffee to some charitable foundations that are aligned with their company's mission. Then they go on, and they have this whole thing about their community that they've built within their employees and, ”Make sure you click on every person's picture, so you find out about them.” They have this whole vibe, “Good coffee is more than just taste.” So, I thought there's something there connected to today's episode, I think, but what do you think?

Tom: What do I think?

Kelvin: Think you should go back to Texas there, buddy.

Tom: So, as I usually say, well, I know what I'm drinking now, and I know what the subject is that we're talking about today. So, good coffee is more than just taste. I don't know.

Kelvin: That's all right. That's okay.

Tom: I like that expression.
Kelvin: Yeah, it's nice, right? Yeah, it's good. So, it's kind of broad. I just thought that it kind of cues up and connects into aspirational values and societal impact, kind of brings that up, even though we're talking about something as mundane as coffee, good coffee is more than just taste, and yet you can still have societal impact. I thought there's some vibe there, I think, with today's interview that we're going to feature.

Tom: Okay, yeah. I can see that, yeah.

Kelvin: So tell us, what are we going to happen today there, Tom?

Tom: Well, we have an interview, and it's one that I conducted a couple of weeks ago. Would you like me to introduce our guest, or would you like to introduce our guest?

Kelvin: I'll do that part. I guess that was like, "Hey, Kelvin, do your job." So, you did interview Anya Kamanetz, and no doubt, I am certain that many of our listeners would be familiar with Anya Kamanetz. She's currently an award-winning education correspondent at NPR, and she was previously a staff writer at Fast Company Magazines, contributed pieces to many other prestigious publications. Anya is the author of several books, notably and discussed briefly in your conversation, DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education. Her most recent book as we record this, is The Stolen Year: How COVID Changed Children's Lives and Where We Go Now, and it's currently available for pre-order. Is there anything you want to say about the interview and kind of the connection between the coffee bit and the interview, now that you've heard aspirational values and societal impact?

Tom: Yeah, definitely, certainly societal impact. That's kind of where we start the interview, with kind of a reflection on COVID and what COVID has sort of wrought through the education system. We tend to be very much focused on higher education, but I mean, Anya's reporting has covered also the K12 space, very heavily, and we sort of start there, but we don't stay there. We talk about a couple of other things. I've been acquainted with her for a while and have had the opportunity to interact with her a few times, and I just find her really thoughtful, and her reporting seems to really understand the education space, and so, I appreciated her perspective.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah. I agree with you, whenever I've heard her before, I'm like, "Okay, you're somebody who kind of gets it, gets us. That's good." Well, through the technological marvel that is modern podcast time travel, here is your interview with Anya Kamanetz.

(Musical transition)

Tom: So Anya, thank you so much for being on TOPcast.

Anya Kamanetz: Oh, thanks for having me.
Tom: So, a lot of areas we could go and talk about, specifically around your reporting work in education, but I thought I might start with the topic du jour, which is COVID and the impact of the pandemic on education. We've seen impact here at the university on students. There's a lot of mental health challenges, there's been a lot of growth in online learning, and students who have been exposed to digital tools, faculty who have been exposed to digital tools. There are a lot of multi-variable impacts that have been on students over the past two years. I wonder if you could just maybe comment on what you've seen in your reporting, what you've observed in talking to students and to parents.

Anya: Absolutely. Obviously, we've all been immersed in this for the last couple of years. I think from the higher education perspective, it might be interesting to think about this in terms of what a university education provides, which are things like a sense of meaning and purpose, discovery, and a sense of community. These are all the basic needs that were so disrupted by the pandemic. We lost that sense of certainty and control over our lives and our futures. We lost the sense of community that campuses provide, that families try to provide. So, I mean, the reason I think it's useful to think about it that way is to say, first of all, we've never been in a better position to understand how mental health is not an individual stigma, but in fact, it's a public health issue that's affected by things in the environment. And that is a good thing in terms of how we talk about mental health, and how we address it. I also think it's useful to frame it this way in terms of a loss of meaning, purpose, identity, planning, community, because those are the things that we're in a position, that university educators are in a position, to supply and replenish as we move forward.

Tom: Yeah, thank you. Specifically around the focus of our podcast, which is digital learning, how do you think student expectations have changed around online and digital learning? Let me give you at least my own personal bias here to frame the question, that I've been kind of railing against what I've called the great conflation of emergency remote instruction and intentionally designed high quality online, mostly asynchronous learning. There have been a lot of people who have conflated those two things. I think that that's still maybe out there, but you can't control other people's perceptions. So I wonder, given your vantage, what have you seen, what have you heard from students when it comes to their perceptions, opinions of online learning, given the fact that maybe the first time they've ever even taken an online class was during this emergency remote instruction period?

Anya: Sure. So, obviously we share this bias and this interest, as somebody who's been looking at the evolution of online learning and sort of predicting a huge transition for more than a decade, it's kind of a moment where you say, "Well, I didn't want it to happen this way."

Tom: Right, right.

Anya: The fact is that when you talk to parents… Sorry, the fact is that when you talk to students about their experiences with remote learning during the pandemic, you're going to hear a lot of negatives. That is because it was an emergency
situation, and these courses were not thoughtfully designed to be online, for the most part, and students weren't prepared to be online students.

Tom: Nor did they choose to be. They chose face to face, and they got forced into online.

Anya: They chose face to face, and they got forced into online learning – that's exactly right. So, we heard a lot about disengagement, we heard a lot about, "I just can't do remote. I'm not the type of person who can do remote." People kind of personalized it, catastrophized it. You did see those bright spots. I recall kind of talking to, so there were some, I don't know if you remember this, but there were some lawsuits early on where people were saying, "My tuition's not worth what it was, and I don't want to pay this." I talked to a law school professor at a pretty elite school, and she was like, "I don't think these lawsuits are going to go anywhere because I hold my seminars online, and they're fine." So, there's certainly a level of, and this is part of the polarization of higher education, where the perception's not always immediate for people, especially at, I mean, not to stereotype elite institutions. But if you have folks who are used to kind of either lecturing or holding a small discussion section, and they just transfer that into the online space, and they have very motivated students with a lot of support at home, who are very adept, they may not perceive much loss in the transition to online. Where students that really need innovative teaching in order to succeed didn't always get that.

Tom: Yeah, that's interesting. I wonder if you've observed or heard, or maybe it's even still kind of early, from students who are making that transition from high school to college, and what their expectations for remote or online learning are. If all you know about online learning is your junior and senior year of high school, being on Zoom, and then you come into a university, and you're offered an online option, you might say, "No way," but that may not be at all what is being offered. So, do students have expectations that are informed by the pandemic, as they're coming into a post-secondary context?

Anya: Oh, I think they definitely will, and it's going to vary a lot by the student. There definitely are students who are thinking differently about the type of institution they want to apply to. Some are saying, I mean, we've seen the polarization again, obviously there's a drop off in overall applications, and then there's some institutions that are being sort of winner take all, they're getting more applications, even though other institutions are dropping. So, part of that might be, "Well, I can go anywhere, geography is not as much of an issue because I can always go remote, or I can live at home." So, the expectation that remote will be there, and that the barriers, or time and space, are going to be lowered for me, is one set of expectations. Then you have almost the reverse set of expectations, which is students that missed out on two years of milestones and experiences, may want that enhanced learning. We have seen recently my colleague at NPR, Elissa Nadworny, has reported that there's an uptick in trade school applications, where people are really seeking that hands on learning, which is sort of precisely what you can't get online.
Tom: Yeah, that's interesting. You mentioned students who have those supports at home, and one of the things that sort of came into high relief during the pandemic is the digital divide. It seemed to be more exacerbated in the K12 space than in the higher ed space, but certainly it was evident here in the higher ed space. I wonder if we will see improvements because of the light that's been shown on the digital divide through the COVID experience, and if there are maybe net benefits to come out of this, such as a democratization of learning that becomes more accessible to students, provided that they've got the bandwidth and maybe the supports at home. But I mean, that's a big topic we could probably spend a lot of time talking about, but I wonder if you could just touch on that digital divide question.

Anya: So, on a baseline, there was a huge growth in families with kids in school, getting laptops, getting connectivity, and the school seeing itself as the conduit to supply them. So, as the American Rescue Plan funds continued to flow, they're reporting that there's significant money continuing to be spent on laptops and connectivity. So, schools don't just see this as a one-time necessity to provide, but they're saying, "Oh, this is now part of our duty to provide, and it's part of the basic learning tools." Coming along with that is an uptick in the use of online learning, software-based learning practice, and those types of things. So, I think just as a default, yes, we've accelerated the transition to having technology supplemented K12. Whether or not that ends up being that benefit for learning, you and I both know, I know it's not a done deal. It's going to depend on how these things are applied. I think that there's kind of controversial things in the works, such as in order to remediate the learning that was missed, one of the recommended actions is to have supplemental tutoring, but there's a huge crunch in personnel in schools. So, some schools are spending that money for AI-based tutoring programs, and those vary in quality, and they vary in application. There are some families who are like, "Are you kidding me? My kid didn't learn to read in online kindergarten, and now you're giving them online first grade to try to learn?" So again, I think the gap that we're seeing is in not just innovation, but actually quality control, and actually evaluating outcomes, and seeing what really does work, and understanding, of course, it's not a one size fits all.

Tom: Yeah, and I mean, if anything we've learned over the past 25 years of ed tech or maybe longer, it's that just throwing technology at something doesn't solve a problem. There's process, and it's interesting. You're talking about pedagogy in the context of digital divide because it just sort of reinforces that truth that we've all learned.

Anya: Let me say it a little louder for the people in the back, because we seem to not remember it.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. So, you did also talk about how some students may not be applying right now because they've got these other options. They can do some things online, or they can kind of create their own education, in many ways, which hearkens back to one of your early books, the DIY U. I've been fascinated by that concept since I've heard that concept, and since I read that book when it first came out. I wonder, if that continues, do you think that this idea of, and maybe I should define it for the listeners, DIY U is... Tell me if I get this wrong, Anya,
it's the idea that students can kind of self-construct their own education through a variety of open and other tools, such as Khan Academies and YouTube and MOOCs and other kinds of things, and you can put together the education you want without going through any sort of formal institution. Is that close?

Anya:
Absolutely, yeah, thank you. I feel like this DIY U concept has almost become a victim of its own success, because it has really percolated into the mainstream in a way, where people just kind of assume that they're going to be able to teach themselves things. But the key part about democratization of education is that yes, you have people learning Greek philosophy, but you also have an awful lot of people who want to know how to unclog a drain, or deliver a baby, or grow mushrooms, or whatever it is that they're just interested in. So, I want to share a finding from CommonSense Media, which is always good at portraying the full range of young people's media use. They found in a survey of 12- to 17-year-olds, during the pandemic, 78% said they used media to learn about a personal interest, and 53% said they pursued a creative interest online. That would include things like shooting and editing a video. My daughter got into animation, writing fan fiction, composing music. So, these are the kinds of learning uses of the machine, and the connectivity that really are all around us, and they manifest in so many different ways that I think are worth lifting up and celebrating, even if they don't always approach this idea of you're going to have an iPod playlist that will turn into a bachelor's degree, which was kind of our early concept.

Tom:
Right, yeah. Well, hey, I mean, that really resonates with me. I can't tell you the number of times that I needed to fix something like, I don't know, my pool cleaner, or like you said, kind of unclog a drain, or change a car filter, or something. The first place I go is YouTube, and I always find the answer there. It always teaches me how to do it. It's amazing!

Anya:
People talk about misinformation and disinformation, but YouTube is the biggest open learning platform on the planet, and "How to" is the biggest search on YouTube. It's one of the biggest searches on Google. The fascinating thing about it is that, I mean, some of those channels are monetized, people are making money by giving information online, but there's just an awful lot of people who are like, "I want to share what I learned, and I want you to know about it."

Tom:
Yeah, it's great. Thank goodness for YouTube. So, maybe as a last question, and to conclude, if you have any advice for our listening audience, who are mostly online learning professionals, a lot of instructional designers, online learning administrators, some faculty, based on your conversations with students and parents and others, especially in a post-secondary higher ed context, what would you say that they should know?

Anya:
Everybody's been through one of the most challenging parts of their lives. The lucky thing about being an educator is that you are a meaning maker, and you are tasked with helping other people, especially young people, decide what their future's going to be. We are at a uniquely challenging moment in history, and I think as instructional designers, you have this skill to take ideas and information and turn them into knowledge. I just want to say that it's a really great time to be
doing that. I hope that everybody who's listening, gets the rest that they need to recharge and reframe this work because it's really, really important.

Tom: Yeah, thank you. We've heard that loud and clear from our own team here, as well as from others across the country. So, that's great advice. So, Anya, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us on TOPcast.

Anya: Thanks for reaching out. It was fun!

(Musical transition)

Kelvin: Well, Tom, that was your interview with Anya Kamanetz.

Tom: It was, yeah. I really appreciated her taking the time to talk to us and kind of share that perspective on COVID, on YouTube, on DIY U, all kinds of stuff.

Kelvin: No, it's good stuff. I've listened to it a couple times, and I listened to it again today, before we zoomed in here, and I was kind of loading up everything, what I'm going to listen for. I was struck with the book-ended, big picture kind of stuff. When you started the conversation, she started with big ideas, and when you said, "Hey, any advice?" And it was again, big ideas. I really appreciate somebody who can hold onto some big ideas and make them real.

Tom: Yeah. Well, when you're a national education reporter, I think you kind of have to look at the bigger picture sometimes, which she does, but she's also not afraid to lean into individual stories too, which she also does. But just to kind of state the obvious, COVID had impact, and in many ways, is still impacting. In some places it's not over, and everybody is sort of dealing with it in different ways. It's been tough on the educational system as a whole, from K through 20, whatever.

Kelvin: Yeah, no, that's true. I was thinking in listening to it, that it made me think of a couple of touch points with earlier TOPcast episodes, like our Episode #98, which was, "I Don't Ever Want to Do [Online] Again," our interview with Ryan Rogers, high school guidance counselor, who kind of talked about, as Anya does, what happens if this has been your experience, and then you come into college. I think you set up that scenario, and that's a good kind of delving into there. Then way back in Field Report #2, TOPcast Episode #65, do you remember we did this, “Preparing for the Post-COVID Future.” We were so naive.

Tom: Wow, yeah. Wow.

Kelvin: Field Report #2. Well, let's go ahead and think about how the future's going to play out.

Tom: Yeah, I guess we're still figuring that out. I remember doing an interview with Beth McMurtrie, from the Chronicle of Higher Ed, just as we were going remote, and saying, "Well, the board of governors says just two weeks. So yeah, it's a pain, but we'll be able to just absorb this for two weeks."
Kelvin: Sure.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Well, I think to your point, and we touched on this back in that Episode 65, as I skimmed through the transcript earlier today, we touched on it, that there's, as you just alluded to, there's potential long-term ripple effects. I mean, even beyond the immediate, whenever, COVID clears out of your particular area, or where it's very low transmissibility, or whatever, just the human experience, and we talked about this many times before of like, you don't know what the lasting impact is really going to be long term. But I think it's probably good to check in periodically and go, "Okay, how are we making sense of all of this?"

Tom: Yeah, Anya and I touched on that a little bit, when we talked about kind of the spike in mental health services that have been required by students across the spectrum.

Kelvin: I thought that was good.

Tom: That's been a growing need anyway, that was only, I think, accelerated and exacerbated by COVID, between anxiety about your health, to isolation, all of the things that got wrapped up into the COVID gumbo, for lack of a better metaphor.

Kelvin: Man, that's visual.

Tom: Yeah, that just really impacted a lot of people. I think that we would be remiss not to recognize that and try to put the proper services in place to address it.

Kelvin: Well, I mean, I really appreciated her framing as mental health, as public health, as she said, and that then that's exacerbated by things in the environment, which also makes me think of, there's this Tea for Teaching podcast episode, I tell everybody about. I think the title is “Workplace Burnout.” They bring in one of their deans, who's a psychologist, who summarizes the workplace burnout literature, spearheaded by a researcher named Maslach, who's now retired. Just fascinating because it's framed as a workplace phenomenon. It's not just like, your problem, or your problem – it's all of our problem. So, similar kind of a concept.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, another area we touched on was digital divide, which I think was greater in the K12 space than higher ed, but still present. Then I want to make sure we touch on this, it gets a little away from COVID, but this idea of DIY U, that was when I first was introduced to her work.

Kelvin: I remember when the book came out.

Tom: Yeah, and I really thought she was onto something, still am, because you can see that happening, where especially with the rise of MOOCs, and certificates, and companies saying that they no longer necessarily even require a bachelor's
degree. I think Google has said that now. That you can compile your own education, you just may not have it regionally accredited, but you may have all the knowledge that you need, and that's fascinating.

Kelvin: Yeah, I mean, you tie that together with phrases that are wafted about a lot lately, like “skills gap” and “micro credential” or “micro learning,” and it's potentially a thing. But I was struck by you two both spoke about the YouTube video to know where to turn the screw, and what to connect, or whatever. As you and I were talking right before hitting record, our now retired former CIO here at UCF, Joel Hartman, many a meeting I've heard him talk about, "Well, good training helps you deal with surprises." But the difference between training and education is, with education, try not to be surprised.


Kelvin: Bigger thing than a YouTube video, but still a thing with...

Tom: Still a thing, but also with free MOOCs, you can get into some of that. It's not just, how do I change my air filter in my car, which is how I mostly use YouTube.

Kelvin: Yes, right.

Tom: But for like really deeper subjects that require more of that kind of analysis and higher up on Bloom's taxonomy. Yeah, I think it's a thing. I was at the IPSEA conference recently, and there was talk, a lot of talk, about the 60-year curriculum. It's not four years, get a bachelor's degree and you're done. It's like a continuous, lifelong learning, where you go in and out of education, different kinds, formal and informal, to keep yourself relevant, to change careers, to advance. Whatever it is, it's a real thing.

Kelvin: No, that's good. I really liked, Anya sort of started here and ended here, you asked her about advice, and she said, because I like this quote so much, I'm just going to throw it in. She said, "You are a meaning maker." Speaking to members of our audience, you, dear listener, are a meaning maker, and you are tasked with helping other people decide what their future is going to be. I love that.

Tom: Yeah, I do too, and I think she's absolutely right. I've heard other people say that where education, or I should say information, information is available, the sum total of human knowledge is in my phone right now. That's pretty remarkable. So, if that's available, if information is available to everybody, what value does faculty, does a faculty member bring? Well, they bring a curation and a meaning making to the information that's available. What's important, why is it important, what's connected to what? It's that expertise, and that's, I think, what Anya's getting at in being a meaning maker.

Kelvin: Yeah, I love it. Well, you want to try to wrap this puppy up?
Tom: Sure. So, I think we would all agree that the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 disruption to higher ed, are definitely still being assessed. Continuing to check in from a high-level perspective is important to make sense of what has occurred and to ensure that we are moving toward our intended future. What do we want the future to be? So, can I squeeze in a plug?

Kelvin: Sure, squeeze away.

Tom: So folks, listening audience, if you like TOPcast, tell a colleague and invite them to watch or listen, because you can watch or listen, and subscribe. Smash that like button! Isn't that what they say, “Smash that like button!”

Kelvin: I don't know. Sounds painful.

Tom: Via a podcasting app, we're on all the podcasting apps.

Kelvin: Yeah, pretty much.

Tom: Newsletter, YouTube, or on our website, where you can get all of the awesome show notes and links, and if you want to buy this coffee, and all of that other stuff.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's true.

Tom: It's at topcast.online.ucf.edu.

Kelvin: We don't get any coffee kickbacks or anything.

Tom: No, we don't.

Kelvin: It's just a listener service. And here's a secret thing, we're going to tell everybody now, if you just wait for 10 minutes after it looks like we're done with this recording, we show you how to change the air filter in your car. That's not true at all, but wouldn't that be cool? [Laughter]

Tom: We should link to some YouTube video, yeah.

Kelvin: Well, yes, that's a good plug, and do, please spread the word about TOPcast. We hope it's useful to you. Let us know anything you'd like to see more of or less of. And until next time for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

(Fade in music)

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See you.