TOPcast Episode #115: “Blendedness:” Deliberate Design with Student Benefit

Narrator:	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.
	(*Musical transition*)
Tom Cavanagh:	From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I'm Tom Cavanagh.
Kelvin Thompson:	And I am Kelvin Thompson.
Tom:	And you are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Hi, Kelvin.
Kelvin:	Sup, Tom.
Tom:	Sup? Sup? I haven't heard “sup” in a while. “Whassup?!” Yeah.
Kelvin:	Oh my gosh. It's going to be very... It's a very retro episode of TOPcast.
Tom:	Yeah, yeah. What else? “Where's the beef?”
Kelvin:	That lady was 300 years old doing that Wendy's commercial.
Tom:	“I can't believe I ate the whole thing.” Yeah. How far back can we go?
Kelvin:	“I gotta make the donuts.”
Tom:	Donuts.
Kelvin:	That's an older one.
Tom:	Yeah, the donuts. Yeah.
Kelvin:	“Plop, plop, fizz, fizz. Oh, what a relief it is!”
Tom:	Yeah. That's I can't believe that I ate the whole thing. You know what goes really well with donuts?
Kelvin:	Tell me.

Tom: As long as we're talking about donuts.

Kelvin: Tell me.

Tom: Is coffee.

Kelvin: Is that right?

Tom: Coffee goes well with donuts. So, I'm told, yeah.

Kelvin: I was thinking it was maybe going to be antacids, but... [Laughter]

Tom: Both perhaps. Yeah, but we may not have any crullers, and… glazed in front of us here, but we do have coffee.

Kelvin: We do have coffee. We should say for those who have just joined us recently, we do build this show as a collegial conversation, over a shared cup of coffee, about digital teaching and learning, online teaching and learning, blended teaching and learning. That's why we talk about coffee. Not antacids.

Tom: No, yeah. Coffee's sort of our shtick.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: It's more your shtick than mine. I drink it. I'm the beneficiary of your shtick.

Kelvin: Shared shtick.

Tom: Yeah, so Kelvin, what is in the thermos today?

Kelvin: Today's coffee, Tom, is a single origin Kenya. From a processing facility, which they call a factory, which is interesting cause it sounds bad. But it's a facility. There's outside areas and nice... Known as Karimikui, I think is how you say it, in the foothills of Mount Kenya. So, this coffee comes to us from Cat & Cloud Coffee in Santa Cruz, California, and of tangential interest, I'll note that two of Cat & Cloud's founders have a weekly podcast that started a couple of months after TOPcast, back in 2015. I haven't listened to it yet, but I put it on my subscription thing to see what it was like. So, I liked the brief mission statement of Cat & Cloud Coffee. They say that their mission is to “Inspire connection by creating memorable experiences.”

Tom: Inspire connection by creating memorable experiences. Okay.

Kelvin: That's right. So, what do you think of the coffee and what do you think of possibly, maybe, a connection to today's episode?

Tom: Okay. Well, as usual, you brew a good cup of coffee. I'm enjoying this.

Kelvin: Thank you.

Tom: Then as far as the connection... So, I'm thinking it has to do with the word connection and creating memorable experiences, the motto from the Cat & Cloud Coffee Company.

Kelvin: Yes, that's right.

Tom: So, we are talking about trying to create intentional, memorable, educational experiences today. So, I don't know, maybe that's where there's a connection.

Kelvin: Absolutely. That's exactly what I was thinking of. Particularly, as it relates to the in-person encounters within an otherwise blended learning experience. Because extending recent discussions about "onlineness" back in Episode 111, and impact on students back in Episode 113, we're going to extend that to a similar consideration about blended learning. This is, as we've noted before, this is especially important, amidst current modality flux. See Episode 97.

Tom: But so, Episode 97 is about modality flux, but it's also, this isn't the first time we've talked about blended learning on this podcast. We've done it a bunch.

Kelvin: A bunch. We could go... It might not be bad to call back some of these things because we might touch on some elements, but each of those past episodes was a treatment unto itself of particular angles. So, maybe we'll name a few more recent to least recent. Back in Episode 91, we talked about "Intermodal Learning," how do you move from one modality to another. Episode 85, "Blended Is the Future. (And It's Not Just Courses)," Episode 77, which was back during our field report era, was the last of the field reports, "Field Report #8: Strategic Blended Learning in 'COVID Times.'" Way back even, I'll skip all the way back, we had Norm Vaughan on an episode back in 29, talking about designing better blended learning. But even the two that started it all, the back-to-back episodes, Episode 3 and 4 were kind of foundational, finding the sweet spot between faculty preferences, and institutional goals, and blended learning, and the homage to Hot Shots, "Blended Learning Part Deux: Designing the Optimal Blend."

Tom: Yeah, I'm wondering too, I'm thinking back to the interview we did with Charles Graham. I know we talked about research and questions of consequence, but you…

Kelvin: Touched on…

Tom: Charles is really…

Kelvin: He's a world class researcher.

Tom: A blended learning expert, yeah.

Kelvin: That's true.

Tom: He knows what he's doing.

Kelvin: I literally connected somebody to Charles this week. I kid you not. I said, "This is Dr. Charles Graham. He's one of the foremost experts in blended learning research in the world. You guys have a nice conversation."

Tom: Take it from here.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right.

Tom: So, cool. What we're thinking about in today's episode is how, in this moment, kind of coming out of the pandemic, how do we focus on these essential characteristics of "blendedness"? Like we talked about "onlineness" in a previous episode, that can best benefit students, best ensure that all our faculty on the same page when they're designing courses. They're having conversations that we're not talking about different things. Maybe I can share an anecdote. It seems like this happens all the time. Not quite so much here anymore, but it has resuscitated kind of post-pandemic a little bit. It had gone away for a while. But this idea of, "What is a blended course?" There's a lot of questions about flipped versus blended, and some people may define a flipped course as a blended course. We don't here. It's a regular face to face course using a flipped model of instruction because it doesn't reduce any of the seat time and replace it with online elements. So, for us, that's the definition of blended. But that whole question of flipped versus blended is still out there, and maybe there's a legitimate difference of opinion on whether or not that should be called a blended course.

Kelvin: Yeah, we could follow that little trail for a while because I think it sort of depends on your framing. Because you're framing, just to use this example, you said, because there's no reduction in seat time, it's not

blended. If you employed a flipped strategy in an otherwise reduced seat time course, it could be a special case of blended. Depends.

Tom: Yeah. So, maybe flipped is like adaptive learning. It's a treatment that can be applied towards multiple modalities.

Kelvin: Yes. No, that's exactly right. That’s exactly right.

Tom: So, how would you define blended, if that's sort of where I was going?

Kelvin: I have to work at pithy. I don't really do it all that well, but I do occasionally trot out a definition. So, I've been saying for a while now that blended learning is the strategic combination of in person and online in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. That's what I've been saying, and I'll say this about that. You go, "Well, that's not all that precise." I've been saying this lately, too. Here's what I'll say about modality definitions. Definitions should be broad enough to allow for variation, and dare I say, innovation, while specific enough to guide practice.

Tom: Yeah, let's put that on the wall. I think that's true. That's the sweet spot of a modality definition or almost any definition.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: We've struggled with this because we had to rethink our modality definitions coming out of the pandemic with the explosion of synchronous instruction. How do you capture that succinctly, but comprehensively enough, so that it addresses both ends of the spectrum that you're talking about? Specific enough to define what it is, but broad enough so that you don't box it in.

Kelvin: I think your example of the flipped thing fits right in there. It's sort of, "Okay, well, does it meet the other criteria?" If somebody wanted to employ flipped in a blended framework, they certainly could. I was listening to a podcast just last night that happened… it wasn’t because I was trying to do the homework for today’s episode or anything, but it happened to touch on blended or, they referred to hybrid courses, and in the midst of their discussion, the flipped thing came up. They gave the example of this kind of rudimentary, you watch the content videos online, and then you come into the class, and you do these active learning things. One of the other speakers said, "Yeah, fine, but we can do better than that."

Kelvin: So, then she made an argument for, how can we bring about active learning throughout the course, and how can we integrate the two

component sub modalities? She had very good things to say about that. But I thought that was a very good… she saw kind of a continuum. A less sophisticated to more sophisticated rudimentary. You got the parts there. Respect to the sum of the parts versus, "Ooh, now you're doing something new."

Tom: You know, I think all of this is touching on what's been a theme for us lately. The last several episodes, which is this concept of intentionality and design. So, I think the "blendedness" of a blended course is that some of it is online and some of it is face to face. Everything around that is details, execution, and how those two modalities interact with each other is where the magic happens. That's the intentionality of the design. It's what makes it a quality… We've talked about this in some of these previous episodes. So, just to briefly recap, we've had a lot of success here with blended courses. They're arguably our most successful modality with the highest student outcomes, the lowest withdrawal rates, the highest end of course evaluations, all of it. Blended does better. But I think it's because we invest in intentional quality design and work with our faculty. Because without that, blended courses have the potential to be the absolute worst. The two big examples are, one is that you just end up covering the same material in two modalities. So, do your online discussions, and then come into the classroom, and do your classroom discussions, or watch the lectures online, and come on and you're going to get... It's terrible if you're doing just that. The other is, a faculty member that's used to teaching a face to face course and doesn't want to take anything out of the face to face component, and then just adds online elements, and you end up with a course and a half worth of material, and that's equally bad, too. So, it's intentionality that leads to the quality, and how those two modalities work together in its essential blendedness.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. Not unlike our "onlineness" episode, as you mentioned before, Episode 111, the reason that "blendedness" in this topic today is so important, is considering it, and thinking about the design, and the teaching process has direct impact on our students, those decisions that we make. So, if "blendedness" becomes kind of our North Star, then that should lead to good outcomes. If we misstep, then we have reason to think that that's going to be less good. So, I jotted down a couple of things that I think are related to the student thing. Arguably, online courses provide the most flexibility for students. Time and space, or if it's a synchronous online, then at least space. Blended certainly affords more flexibility than a 100% in person class, if we're talking about a reduction in class meeting times. Then there's some related points even pre-pandemic, there was a lot of student interest in blended. Our colleague, Dr. Patsy Moskal, had shared last year with me, this 2019 ECAR study. In this study of undergraduates, 56% of undergraduates preferred blended. That is some kind of a blend, again, there's a range, but not purely in person. Not purely

online. Fifty-six percent, that's not nothing. I'm of the opinion that that's even higher now coming out of the pandemic.

Tom: I agree, yeah. If you even look at the meta-study that was done by Barbara Means with SRI, back in the day…

Kelvin: Back in the day.

Tom: They found something similar where the outcomes were higher in blended courses than in online or face to face. We've certainly seen that preference from students. If we can speculate, it kind of offers you a lot of the conveniences of online, but also all of the kind of social interaction of face to face. You get a little bit of both, and that seems to be attractive to students.

Kelvin: Now, I'm of the opinion, I think that folks like us, you and me, our listeners, I think we probably care about all those affordances, maybe more than students themselves do. I suspect that most students are probably just looking at the scheduling aspect. That, "Oh, this one meets less in the classroom than that one does, so I can..." I think we talked about one of these in our scenario, back in our Season Eight kickoff episode, “The Three Students You Might Meet in Your Online Class.” This one student in that profile generally didn't like to take fully online courses. So, you could go, "Well, I don't want to do fully online, but I like, I like having some, some reduction in my seat time." That's probably what a lot of students are motivated by, I think. But we all care about the fact that if you do it right, we're going to do so much better by the students who are in the class.

Tom: Right. Well, and what we found through our Digital Learning Course Redesign Project, was that the majority of what we were working on, and albeit it was with departments and colleges that we hadn't engaged with as deeply as some others, mostly in the STEM fields, who weren't quite ready to go a hundred percent online, or maybe pedagogically couldn't because of what they were teaching. We had a huge interest in blended learning through that project.

Kelvin: Yeah, no doubt. Now, I do think from a student perspective, I think what's useful for us to acknowledge, is students might not care about all the nuance or even all of the outcomes. "Oh, did you know? You're likely to succeed at a better rate." That's going to be lost on them, but the clarification of expectations, the whys, are really important. You can see this in some of the blended learning professional practice literature as well. The articulation in the syllabus, course materials, especially if you don't do a lot of blended at your institution. Why is this course split? Why are we doing this, meeting less, and doing stuff on online? Even this is a

blended course, front and center, and the technologies that you're planning to use. Why are you using those? The methods, the relationship between what you're going to be doing in person versus what you're doing, getting all that up front and clear that will lead to success.

Tom: Yeah, and it's funny too, because I don't think there's any one answer to that. There are institutional reasons why you would want blended, maximizing classrooms space, and your schedule efficiency, and utilization, and all that. Those are real answers from an administrative standpoint. But from a pedagogical standpoint, I've been asked, "What part of my course should go online, and what part should go face? Should I do my discussions online, so the quiet people actually have an opportunity to contribute?" And the answer is, "It depends." What are your objectives? What's your own personal instructional style? As long as you're intentional about it, you can make almost anything work. You just have to make sure that they're complimentary. Thinking back to some of the work you did on our blended learning toolkit, the idea of this mix map, where you map out ahead of time, what content is taught online, what content is face to face, and how they mix together in a cohesive, intentional way.

Kelvin: No, that's exactly right. That's all exactly right, and, you alluded to this, this isn't new. Just like online learning, there is a body of literature surrounding blended learning. So, it's not just a COVID 19 era thing. But, we've been talking a lot about this here, we do need continued scholarship on this subject in order to foster the benefits of innovation. But we'd be remiss if we didn't make a shout out to folks like you already mentioned, Dr. Charles Graham from Brigham Young, Dr. Tanya Joosten. Tanya is at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Our own UCF's Dr. Patsy Dziuban. Patsy Dziuban, good lord. Our own Dr. Patsy Moskal and Dr. Chuck Dziuban. "Chuck Moskal," "Patsy Dziuban." [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, sometimes they look so much alike. I can see why you make that confusion.

Kelvin: Well, no...

Tom: I kid. Those who know Chuck and Patsy know that's not true.

Kelvin: Yeah, not at all.

Tom: But they're long-time collaborators.

Kelvin: Yes, and see, and even their names get blended.

Tom: There's a mixed map right there. [Laughter]

Kelvin: We talked about the modality flux thing. I'll throw this out there again. I do think that the ongoing, what I refer to lately as the "dual mode simulcasting of in person classes via a Zoom channel," that some people want to erroneously label HyFlex, I think that has confused the blended and hybrid and all that thing, too.

Tom: Yeah, that's another one that I've gotten asked about, this idea of the HyFlex or, we actually spent a lot of time during the pandemic. We did a whole episode on talking about our Blend Flex model, which was our own kind of, modified HyFlex that we did during the pandemic. By a pure definitional basis, yeah, it's kind of a blended course, but it doesn't really fit our intentional design, high quality kind of ethos that we try to put forward when we are doing what we call mixed-mode instruction, but others call hybrid, others call blended.

Kelvin: Right, certainly blended would be the generic term. I think the only thing I would say about that is – I think we talked about this a little bit before we hit record – Most of our modalities, as you said, they are intentionally designed cohort experiences. Those various iterations of what some people are calling hybrid or HyFlex, maybe it's hyflex with a lowercase? Not exactly real baby-esque HyFlex. But they are not cohort experiences because they involve so much student choice, somebody could be completely not in the classroom, or be completely in the classroom. Now, the real Brian Beatty kind of thing, they are really well mapped out pathways. It's an elegant, intentionally designed thing. But it's not a cohort experience.

Tom: Yeah, I think that's an interesting observation. You mentioned that, as we were preparing, that some student, because of the agency they have in a HyFlex course could be a hundred percent online. Or they could be a hundred percent face to face, and neither one of those is a blended experience. So, is it then a blended course? But it could be. In fact, there are very few students who do either one of those that imagine that they would probably show up at least part of the time or be online part of the time. So, that's an interesting definition breaker. How does that fit? What if? It's almost like when we were talking about our adaptive learning initiative, there are some publisher tools that have adaptive functionality, but the faculty don't have to use it. They might just use it as a homework machine, or an eBook, or something. In that case, is it an adaptive platform? Well, technically it's an adaptive platform, but it's not being used in adaptive way.

Kelvin: Right. You're not having an adaptive experience.

Tom: Exactly, right. So, maybe you're not having a blended experience in a HyFlex course.

Kelvin: If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it...

Tom: Yeah, something like that.

Kelvin: The experience. I was trying to decide whether we should say anything about some of these key blended learning principles that we haven't already touched. I don't want to go over ground that we've already covered, but I do sometimes think we'd be remiss not to plug some points. I think maybe the one that I'll plug is, faculty and students need appropriate preparation to do blended well. We just talked about experience, to have a really good, blended experience you need good preparation.

Tom: Yeah, agreed. There's of course, a lot under that, whether it's the faculty development orientations, it all comes back to intentionality and quality. It's not just saying, "Okay, I'm going to put my lectures online and my discussions in the classroom, or vice versa." There's a lot more to it than that.

Kelvin: Yeah, we can't say this enough. Blended doesn't have, generally speaking, really good outcomes because you put a blended label on it. [Laughter] It's because of all the intentionality and the capturing, the affordances of that whole, that's greater than the sum of the parts.

Tom: Yeah, but yet there's still tremendous potential for blended learning for a lot of pedagogical, institutional reasons that even your residential focused liberal arts campus in the middle of countryside somewhere could benefit from blended learning. Even if they're not interested, particularly in an online strategy, blended learning can be a solution. I taught a blended class in the evenings. It started out as a face-to-face class, I probably talked about this before, but everybody was tired. It was like four hours once a week. Everybody had worked all day, including me, and you come in and you teach it, or you sit there trying to absorb it. It just, it was too much. So, we turned it into a blended class, not to maximize the room capacity issues or the utilization issues, but it was really just kind of a workload thing. Plus, it was a writing class, and you wanted them to actually write things, and that's not a good use of their time to sit in class writing.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, I think that's right. There are many benefits that accrue to a variety of stakeholders through blended learning. I think most students probably don't care about all those things. Again, I think they're probably just looking at the schedule, but clarity and intentionality will nevertheless benefit the students if we carry it out well, I think.

Tom: Yeah, all right. So, I'm looking at the bottom of my coffee mug and the timer sort of rolling down. You want to take a shot at kind of...

Kelvin: Trying to land the plane.

Tom: Trying to land the plane? Yeah.

Kelvin: Spill the coffee? Empty the cup? I don't know. We need a better metaphor, different metaphor. Maybe not better, different. How about this one? Cultivating widespread awareness of the tenets of “blendedness” can help students and faculty reap the benefits of this specialized dimension of online education. We claim blended within the online family, and as with other kinds of online courses though, getting it wrong will negatively impact students.

Tom: Amen. As with other kinds of online courses. Yeah, absolutely. All right. So, before we wrap up, I would like to try a plug.

Kelvin: Plug away, Tom.

Tom: I will plug away. So, we got a comment on Apple Podcasts from Jim Gepperth. I hope I'm pronouncing it...

Kelvin: I think so.

Tom: Jepperth, Gepperth, from Lakewood University. Forgive me, Jim, if I got that wrong. Jim said, "Thank you Tom & Kelvin for continuing the conversation of how best to deliver online education. I've shared this podcast with my colleagues, and we talk about topics frequently. It's good to know that our challenges and successes are similar to those of colleagues everywhere." It is good to know. Thank you, Jim. That's nice of you to say. We appreciate the feedback and to all of you who are listening, there's an opportunity for you to rate and review the podcast. It's helpful for new listeners to kind of find discovered TOPcast in the algorithms. So, if you don't mind, would you please just take a moment, click a star rating, or multiple star rating, and write a one sentence review, noting the value you find in TOPcast. We would certainly appreciate it. So, Kelvin, thank you for the Kenyan coffee. It was quite good. Thank you for the discussion of “blendedness”. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

(*Music fade in*)

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.