TOPcast Episode #121:
"Surprisingly Awesome" In-Person Engagement

Narrator: When you realize what your future can be, you want to do it right. UCF Online offers more than 100 fully online programs, plus personalized support from success coaches, so you can get to the future that's right for you.

(Music transition)

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

Kelvin: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast, what we call the Teaching Online Podcast. It is a podcast about teaching online, thus, the name.

Kelvin: I can't argue with any of that.

Tom: I've stumped you.

Kelvin: No, it's all true. I'll just add to it that we do bill this show as a collegial conversation about online teaching and learning conducted over a shared cup of coffee. And maybe I'll just observe that today we are "sharing" virtually as we sometimes do. We're not in the same physical space drinking the same coffee poured from the same thermos, but we're still sharing in a bit of an intangible separated across the miles, virtual kind of way.

Tom: Yes, yes, we are. And I'm sure your coffee's better than mine, but that's okay.

Kelvin: I mean, do we have any evidence of that? Maybe your coffee tastes just as good to you as my coffee tastes to me.

Tom: True. Who's to say, right? Taste buds are subjective. I can't stand peas. I hate to say it, because I think my life would be a lot easier if I liked peas.

Kelvin: I like peas.

Tom: I wouldn't have to spend so much time in my pot pies with a spoon, but some people love peas. Taste buds are subjective. I'm sure there are things I like that other people don't.

Kelvin: I got to do this tangent. Shout out to one of my favorite podcast episodes ever anywhere, to the now defunct, may it rest in peace podcast, “Surprisingly Awesome,” formerly brought to us by Gimlet Media and the early episode, “Broccoli.” It is a thing of wonder filled indeed with surprisingly awesome insights. People should go look that up and listen to it.

Tom: I will. I like broccoli. Yeah. I do remember though, when the first President Bush was in office, he had made some offhand comment about how he didn't like broccoli. It's like, I'm 60 something years old, and I'm the President of the United States. I don't like broccoli, and I don't have to eat it. Something like that. And of course, the broccoli growers of America sent a semi-truck of broccoli to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. But yeah, nothing wrong with broccoli. I'm sure President Bush liked other things.

Kelvin: I will give you the teaser that from said episode, you will learn why some people empirically do not like broccoli.

Tom: Okay.

Kelvin: And it is surprisingly awesome.

Tom: Of course, but we're not drinking broccoli.

Kelvin: As far as you know. [Laughter]

Tom: As far as I… Well, I know I'm not, I don't know what you're drinking, but I have a cup of coffee, and I assume you have a cup of coffee as well. Since you probably have a thematically selected coffee, I'll go ahead and just share what I'm having.

Kelvin: Please do.

Tom: I've got my usual afternoon go-to when we're doing something like this, which is my San Francisco Bay decaf, French Roast. It's a very fine serviceable cup of coffee.

Kelvin: Serviceable. That's what I look for in a beverage, serviceable. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, does the job.

Kelvin: Well? Yeah, sure. That's by definition, I guess that's true. You probably want to know what's in mine other than not broccoli. My coffee cup today, Tom, holds a philosophical conundrum. Can you bottle lightning? Can you truly capture an elusive moment? Freeze it in time, we might say. Today, Tom, I am drinking a cup of coffee from people that purport to be doing just that. This particular coffee is a single origin from Bird Rock Coffee Roasters in San Diego, but it was originally brewed, already brewed, weeks ago more than a thousand miles away from me. Yet, here I am drinking it hot and fresh today. Using a proprietary method, the company, Cometeer, expertly brews a highly concentrated, allegedly perfect cup of coffee in partnership with some of the best coffee roasters in the US, then freezes that cup of coffee at more than negative 300 degrees Fahrenheit before shipping it out to people like me. So, one then brings the frozen coffee back to life in one's preferred coffee method. So, to be clear, this is not instant coffee. There are no coffee grounds whatsoever. It's just the coffee. It's just melted, and mixed, and enjoyed. And it's, get this, “Cometeer,” because like a comet, they are frozen, forward moving, and impactful.

Tom: Oh, wow. All right.

Kelvin: So, I thought this particular coffee story was relevant for today, Tom. So, I'll say it was surprisingly awesome, I have to say. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, sure beats broccoli. [Laughter]

Kelvin: But could you find a connection to today's topic?

Tom: I don't think so. [Laughter] I don't know. Now, you did talk about, it's brought to you by people who purport to do something, catch lightning in a bottle, I think you said, and I know we're talking about people.

Kelvin: As we often do. [Laughter]

Tom: As we do in some generic abstract sense, people. But we don't freeze them to minus 300 degrees Fahrenheit.

Kelvin: Although some, maybe that wouldn't be a bad idea. [Laughter]

Tom: Maybe, yes. Cryogenic save me for the future kind of thing.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: I don't know. Kelvin, can you inform me what you had in mind?

Kelvin: Sure. Here's what was working for me and my little quivering synapses. So, the idea of the elusiveness of capturing a moment, that bottling of lightning, the qualitative essence of an experience that's hard to grasp, even though these coffee people claim to have done so, and it is a beyond serviceable cup of tasty coffee. There is something. We've talked before in a number of episodes, sometimes you grasp at the qualitative trying to capture the essence of a thing. Especially, I might add, in these post-COVID era times, since 2020, we sometimes find ourselves trying to grasp what is it that makes an in-person experience salient? What is it about that? So, we've talked about blended learning many times, and hybrid work several times, and then we've pointed out in each of those episodes that a key issue is the value of the in-person. So, today, we're going to discuss the in-person affordances of faculty engagement, professional development, and support in online teaching.

Tom: I got it, and I got your connection now. I see. Because that's often what people complain about in the online environment, especially in online instruction. "Oh yeah, but there's just not that magical moment, that human connection, those nonverbal cues." Look, I'm the online guy, but I don't disagree with that. As you said towards the idea of faculty development, I have been a proponent of ensuring there's a face-to-face component to that, if it can be done. It can't always be done depending upon the kind of institution you work at and the geographic distribution of your faculty. At a previous institution where I was responsible for that, our faculty were all over the world. It was not really feasible to get together, but I really wanted to. So, it's something that here I've really appreciated that's been a core component of our flagship faculty development program.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's true. I remember probably very late '90s, very early 2000s, I remember exactly where we were in a conference room that I could name, and you could picture it. We were talking even back then about the potential of moving that flagship faculty development program to a fully online thing. There were certainly demand for it. People were like, "Oh, why in the world do you have in-person? We could just do that online." I was a real big advocate for keeping the in-person as well. For us, one of the reasons that we have emphasized that is while that is our flagship program for preparing faculty to design and teach online, we also credential blended design and teaching through that program, and so seems a little hinky if you don't have any in-person experience in it. Seems like you could talk about the online if it's a primarily online course with some in-person, but there are other reasons as well. So, let me ask you, why have you been an advocate for the in-person in that context?

Tom: I think there's a value to faculty, especially from different disciplines, getting across the table from each other and sharing ideas, and engineering talking to education, talking to humanities. I think that that has its own inherent cross-pollination benefits. There are ideas that you might not have had otherwise that can be hard to share in a threaded discussion, which can feel perfunctory in many cases, even with faculty or maybe especially with faculty as students. There's also as a component of our program here, this peer review aspect that I think is just really valuable to be done in-person. Maybe, I'm giving you probably more answers than you wanted, but getting them in our building, and meeting with our staff, and making a connection with the Graphics Team, and the Video Team, and the people that they're going to work with, and to start to establish that rapport. They understand the kind of services that are available to them. I think it impacts course design because they're like, “Oh, well now I know I can do this, or I can do that. I can do this particular assignment in a way I hadn't even thought of before I knew that capability existed.”

Kelvin: Yeah, that's good. I do sometimes think of that as Velcro. There are multiple points of connection between, let's say, the faculty client and our organization, just like those little hooks and loops, the more of those little points of connection, the firmer the overall connection. It's not just one tenuous connection, but it's across and with more of those information channels at play through the in-person. Yeah, I think that makes sense. In the early days, one of the reasons that we did offer the in-person opportunities in the context of that flagship faculty preparation program was, it was still early, online was still kind of a new thing. So, starting in true blended fashion, starting in-person, fostering those kind of connections, and then trying to bring that connectivity online was a deliberate strategy, rather than starting in this greater transactional distance sort of sense, and then trying to build it from there. Today, I think we probably could pull off more of this. Gosh, we've actually done that faculty flagship program the last year or so in a completely remote sense and yet, in a very few weeks we are resuming a redesigned version of it, which will include in-person sessions. Some of that is for the credentialing, and some of that is for we really believe that we need to draw a sharp focus on the affordances of the in-person.

Tom: Maybe it's worthwhile just to recap how that program works because we just jumped right into it. We've talked about this in previous episodes, but I'm sure people haven't listened to every single episode…

Kelvin: But they should.

Tom: But they should, absolutely. Get started on that right now. [Laughter] But we're talking about our flagship faculty development program, something we call IDL6543, and it's framed as something of equivalent to a graduate-level workshop. It's taught in a blended format over 10 weeks. Faculty do receive a stipend for the successful completion of this. We pay them for their time to complete it. The format is sort of a three-legged stool. There's an online component, there's a face-to-face component, so it's taught in a blended format. There aren't that many face-to-face meetings anymore, but there are a few. Then the third leg of the stool are these intentional structured periodic consultations with their assigned instructional designer, which in the past happened face-to-face and are now probably more likely happening synchronously over Teams or Zoom, which is sort of a face-to-face-ish kind of experience. It's still much more personal than some sort of asynchronous experience. Those three elements are designed to work in tandem to try to prepare a faculty member to teach online or blended. Just pulling out one element of that, the face-to-face component, and there are things that we do that I think are done best face-to-face in those few moments when they do come and meet face-to-face. In fact, during the pandemic, when we had to design an alternative version of this for volume, and we had to pull out some of those, not just the face-to-face meetings, but also some of the instructional design consultation, at least the depth that they typically happen with, I don't think it was the same experience. I mean, it did the job. We put hundreds and hundreds of faculty through training when we had to, but…

Kelvin: It was serviceable. [Laughter]

Tom: It was serviceable, yeah, and hopefully good. But I think it's nice to get back to what we think is excellent.

Kelvin: Yeah, I know. I think that's right. And shout out, we'll put it in the show notes. We did do an entire episode about faculty development. Ironically, I might be mistaken on this, and I'm not looking it up right now, but I think that was early 2020 – January or February of 2020, I think we released that episode ironically, before it all changed. But yeah, so people interested can learn more about that. No, I think that's a good description. I think arguably even institutions that are not like ours, Tom, either the entire institution is serving exclusively or primarily an online student body, and therefore, their faculty are very online or in institutions, unlike ours where the faculty themselves in online programs are online exclusively, I think there's arguably a place for periodic in-person faculty, professional development. You see 100% remote employers of all sorts who have periodic in-person experiences. There's a reason they do that other than just being micromanaging control freaks. [Laughter] I mean, there actually is a human value to gathering and connecting for certain kinds of experiences. I think that's probably true for online, exclusively faculty, as well.

Tom: Yeah, and I mean, we could probably both name programs that we know of at other institutions where, especially in doctoral programs, where it might be a distance program, but there are regional meetups where as part of the program you're expected maybe when you do your proposal, and when you do your defense, or whatever it is, there are moments where you come to a hotel for a week, and you meet with people, and you have this in-person experience, you meet with your major professor, or whatever it might be. I'm thinking even in my previous experience, as I mentioned, we did this fully online faculty development program because we had to, given the geographically dispersed faculty, but the institution itself, every other year, would bring literally everybody in for a

conference. And I mean, it wasn't just focused on professional development, but that was a big component of it, but it was just to get everybody together. So, it was a virtual organization that brought everybody together periodically because they valued the things that could only be done in-person.

Kelvin: I think there's something to it. I mean, maybe we won't dwell here too long, but maybe it's because it's recent, coming up, impending. Maybe we'll talk for a moment or two about some of the near term plans we have just this term that we're starting here at UCF's Center for Distributed Learning to do a whole semester-long in-person faculty engagement effort. So, when this episode launches, we'll be kicking it off two days later. So, we haven't even started it yet, but it's all in the works. But we think that there's something worth chasing here. There's some lightning in a bottle.

Tom: Yeah. I mean, I'm really looking forward to seeing how that goes. I'm going to give you credit or blame. [Laughter]

Kelvin: That's right. Hard to say which one.

Tom: It's been really your brain child. And I mean, I'll give you credit for all the planning that's gone into it because I think it's really ambitious. But if it works, I think it's going to be fantastic. Do you want to maybe describe what the vision is for it?

Kelvin: Sure. So, realizing, maybe it's two pieces of context are helpful. One, of course, pandemic, in case you didn't know, hadn't been paying attention, was a thing. [Laughter]

Tom: Surprise.

Kelvin: Everybody locked down, very remote, long time, blah, blah, blah. This term that we're starting right now, Fall of 2022, there's a noticeable renewed emphasis on the in-person in all manner of campus life. We can align with and engage with that or not, so that's a thing. But two, during the pandemic era, July 2020, we moved from our historic vintage center of campus location adjacent to campus, off campus. I'm positive there are faculty who have not realized this, yet. I am positive. [Laughter]

Tom: I agree. They think we're still in the first floor basement of the library.

Kelvin: I think that's right. So, given all that, just the idea of reinvigorating, renewing, refreshing our organizational relationships with those client faculty. Again, it's the Velcro thing, right? More and more points of hook and loop contact. We can show off our nice new digs, and hopefully stimulate future collaborations, and all that, but I'll give some highlights. So, right after Labor Day 2022, we're going to have a brief one-hour coffee drop-in mixer with our Center for Distributed Learning Leadership Team in kind of a little bit of a small exhibit hall fashion where we just do a little reminder update refreshers on the various services, value-add for faculty that we offer. Coffee, light refreshments, some very modest swag, things like a coffee mug that within arm's reach, you can remember who your instructional designer is using this little lookup feature, and remember our LMS help desk phone number. It's right there with our name, which honestly, some of our faculty clients forget from time to time, but we'll try to put it up right there. So, that'll be the start. Then we'll do a tour of the facility and so forth, but it's kicking off 10 successive weeks of hopefully value-add programming from across our

various teams within the Center for Distributed Learning. Video producers, and graphic artists, and technologists, and instructional designers, and developer programmers, all manner of folks who have something to offer our faculty in these little up to one-hour sessions, so we're calling those "10 Wednesdays." There's at least one of those sessions beginning of the day, end of the day, faculty can, coming on the campus or coming back off the campus, it'll be easy to drop in, no parking fee in our facility, and we're gamifying all those activities. We have our version of a bingo style loyalty card, where if you take the tour in the building, you can QR code, check off some activities and of the 25 possible activities, take the tour, you're done with five of them, already. And if you complete 15 of the 25, we'll call it done, and you'll get a little prize, and you'll be entered into a drawing for a much nicer prize. A little branded flash drive for everybody who completes the card, and you're in a drawing for a ninth generation iPad and an Apple pencil. So, all those technologies are very useful in the teaching sense, so it's not just frivolous, but there's a little enticement there. But we're hoping along the way in the small moments that there's value. And then there's value in that whole thing of just reestablishing rapport and relationships. So, we'll evaluate that when we're done and see whether we're successful in our goals or not. We're going to swing for the fences, and hopefully, there'll be some value demonstrated. I hope so.

Tom: I hope so too. I think it's great. I'm going to do what I can to help. There's been a challenge because our location wasn't exclusively in the library in the past. We did, and still do, have a location in the Research Park in the building we were previously occupying. We've kept some space there. Now, we've moved across the street with the bulk of the staff and getting faculty to come out to the Research Park has been a challenge historically for us, for various things. I used to joke. It was like Afghanistan, seemed like it was so far away, and it's literally just a drive over, but nobody wants to lose their parking spot. So, you got to time it at the right part of the day. And as you said, I think we've got some incentives to draw them over, and we're going to give it a shot. And even if it's only a few faculty that show up, we'll be re-engaging with those few faculty. I know that you've talked to some of our Faculty Advisory Board, and they were very positive about it, and enthusiastic, and encouraging, and so that's good. Let's hope it's a harbinger of things to come.

Kelvin: Yeah. I've been delighted. So far, every one of the members of the teaching faculty I've spoken to about this have been encouraging about it, which bodes well. We'll see. People say all kinds of things, they vote with their feet. We'll see if they come in. [Laughter] And so we hope, but maybe just even unpacking from there a little bit, some of the, I think things that we keep talking about in all of our work, whether it's hybrid work or blended learning, or even these faculty facing events like we just described, what is that bottled lighting? What is that effusive or that elusive? Yeah, it's not effusive. This elusive hard to capture qualitative distinctive of the in-person? When we're doing these 10 Wednesday events, one of the things I've been telling people is don't design presentations, the immediate reaction's going to be this... There's all these memes about that could have been an email. This could have been a Zoom meeting presentation. No, what are you going to do? Things that you have to touch, the tactile kinesthetic haptic hands-on, that's a thing. Non-verbal and interpersonal immediacy, you talked about that a little bit. You hear the intake of breath. You have this something that is hard to exactly capture that when you're right next to a person or sharing space, that's hard. And then sometimes there's just affordances of this unique space with its smells, and sounds, and textures.

Tom: Well, I mean know one of the activities that you have on your agenda is ice cream with the IDs, right?

Kelvin: Yes, that's right. [Laughter]

Tom: Well, it's much more fun to eat that ice cream in-person with somebody and have a conversation than it is to just stare at them through Zoom while you both eat.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: I know a lot of people love those Zoom happy hours and all of that. I've just never been able to really connect to that.

Kelvin: The power of the gastronomic experience.

Tom: Yeah, it's really true. Yeah, an army runs on its stomach, right?

Kelvin: Mm-hmm.

Tom: Yeah, all right. Well that's awesome. You want to try and kind of wrap it up with a succinct bottom line?

Kelvin: I don't know about succinct, but I will try to wrap it up with a bottom line. I will try that. So, maybe we can say that there is, Virginia, there is a place for an in-person faculty engagement, support, and professional development in this world of online teaching. It can underscore the human touch and keep us grounded in humanizing our online learning experiences. How about that?

Tom: How about that? Yes, totally agree. As you mentioned, humanizing, maybe in the show notes we'll list prior episodes where we've touched on that theme because we have a number of times.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Do you think we have time for a plug?

Kelvin: Plug away.

Tom: All right. So, Kelvin, we haven't mentioned this in a while, but we do, as you probably know, offer a free email newsletter alongside each new episode. If you, dear listener, have a colleague who isn't into this whole podcast listening thing, this might be a good option to share because they can link right from the email to listening or watching. Because we are doing this on video, the episode, plus all the show notes, and the exclusive bonus content are right there in the email as well. So, register for free as a "TOPcast Insider" to get the newsletter and advance notice of interaction opportunities because we've done some live sessions and more. The URL is bit.ly/topcastinsider. That's B-I-T dot L-Y slash topcastinsider, all one word. That's bit.ly/topcastinsider. No spaces. Sound good?

Kelvin: All lowercase. Yeah, that sounds great. We'd love to have you sign up. We don't spam you. We don't sell your stuff. It's safe. It's protected. If you don't like it there, you can leave. It's okay. It's easy. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, it's really just part of building a community. That's all.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: So, cool. Thank you for the discussion, and for the planning for our 10 Wednesdays, and I would thank you for the coffee, but I brought my own. Thank you for that.

Kelvin: That's right. Thank you for bringing your own coffee, Tom.

(Music outro)

Tom: Sure. Until next time for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.