TOPcast Episode #124: Reliable "Buckets:" Toward Modality Clarity

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(Musical 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, the Teaching Online Podcast. Hello, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Hello, Tom. Here we are again.

Tom: Yeah, remote again due to exigent circumstances. So, for those in the listening audience wondering why you and I are remote, we are still closed. The university's still closed due to Hurricane Ian. We're getting back tomorrow, thankfully, as we are recording this, but devastating, devastating event for so many in Florida, from Southwest Florida all the way through Central up to the east coast. We've had so many students impacted, hundreds and hundreds of students. I know of at least 600 undergrads that have been displaced because apartments flooded. We have at least one staff member that I know of, at this point, who's lost everything: house, vehicles, all their possessions, and I imagine we're going to hear impacts from others. So yeah, for all of you around the country, and elsewhere where you listen, please just keep everybody in Florida in your thoughts.

Kelvin: Yeah. For the most part in our immediate Central Florida vicinity, for those who are concerned, for the most part, it is nothing like the Southwest Florida devastation. Much, much better. But within a couple of miles of my house, I personally know folks who... There were cars ruined, because on the street parking, they were completely flooded.

Tom: Yeah, yeah.

Kelvin: Fascinating.

Tom: I know several people whose homes got flooded. They may not have lost everything, but they lost their carpet, and possessions, and stuff. So, it was quite an event. I've never, in all my years living in Florida, seen a flood event like that in Central Florida where we were.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Certainly, what happened in Fort Myers, in Sanibel, and Captiva, yeah, it's just absolutely, absolutely heartbreaking. So, that's not what we're talking about today though.

Kelvin: No, it's not. It's not. But again, I know a lot of our listeners and colleagues have reached out, "Hope you guys are okay." So, a little update, and be thinking of Florida.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Thanks to... People have reached out to me too, and we appreciate your concern.

Kelvin: Yeah, for sure.

Tom: So, Kelvin, we cannot share from the same thermos today, so we're going to have to be a little separate. So, you want me to tell you what I'm drinking? And you can tell me what your thematically selected coffee is.

Kelvin: I would love to hear what you're drinking, Tom.

Tom: Yeah, mine's not thematically selected at all. Because we are here now in October, I chose something a little more autumnal.

Kelvin: Oh, I see where this is going.

Tom: I got a Starbucks. Not what you think, though.

Kelvin: Okay.

Tom: It's maple pecan.

Kelvin: Ooh. Is that... What do they do in hockey? Do they... What do they…

Tom: I feigned left and went right, or something.

Kelvin: That's right, that's right. I went, "Ooh."

Tom: So, you were thinking pumpkin spice was coming.

Kelvin: I was.

Tom: No, maple pecan. It's like drinking French toast. It's actually really good.

Kelvin: I might actually imbibe with that. I have a general opposition to drinking pumpkin. [Laughter] I think pumpkin should be chewed and not just liquified, swallowed. Pumpkin coffee, pumpkin beer, no, I try not to. But the maple pecan, that might be all right. I almost…

Tom: That's interesting. You said pecan (pee-KAN), and I said pecan (peh-KAHN).

Kelvin: I know. I was just about to comment. I do sometimes assimilate, in some settings, say pecan (peh-KAHN), like some people do.

Tom: Yeah, well, you're much more of a native southerner than I am.

Kelvin:	That's right. I grew up saying pecan (pee-KAN). [Laughter] That's right, that's right. that's right. Yeah, don't even get me started. We can get deep into my roots, and you can hear about how I was corrected by the proper people when I was growing up. And I'll tell you, off mic, what young Kelvin was corrected, when the more up upper crust people were like, "Oh yes, we have to say pecan (peh-KAHN), now." Okay. All right.
Tom:	Yeah, shows what I know. All right, but I'm sure you're not drinking that.
Kelvin:	No, no. No maple, no pecan, no. Today, in my cup, Tom, is a single-origin Colombia from Black & White Coffee Roasters in Wake Forest, North Carolina. This specific coffee is called La Muralla Gesha from the Huila region of Columbia. Huila, very generally, is where your best Columbian coffees come from. And while the logo of this roaster is a panda, exemplifying the high contrast "black and white" colors in their name, interestingly, the roasters have a rather nuanced color-coding system for the labels of their various coffees. It's more complicated than I can figure out. I couldn't find a real good description, but they have all these colorful labels, even though there's this black and white panda. And their motto, fittingly, is "Exceptional Coffee Kept Simple." Exceptional coffee kept simple. So, I thought that this particular roaster story was appropriate for today's episode topic. I'm going to tell you the coffee's good. I hope your dessert coffee there is good. What do you think of my attempt at a connection?
Tom:	Yeah. Exceptional coffee kept simple. I'm going to guess that it's the crux of it is there somewhere, because we're talking about trying to have common definitions that capture complexity but are captured simply, so something in there.
Kelvin:	Yes. So, I think that, their motto, and the black and white, that high contrast, simplicity versus color, nuance, and elegance is what you're shooting for always, I think, the easy categorization versus nuance. Yeah, absolutely. Good one.
Tom:	All right, so cool. Maybe I should tell the audience how this fits into our theme. So Kelvin, you recently interviewed Dr. Nicole Johnson about work she has conducted in better understanding our higher ed course and program modalities, thus the complexity simplicity. So, Dr. Nicole Johnson is the executive director of the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association. Nicole holds a Ph.D. in e-learning from the Open University of Catalonia in Barcelona, Spain, and a Master of Educational Technology degree from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. With over 10 years working in the ed tech field, she has a diverse background that includes experience in health and fitness, K through 12 education, post-secondary, entrepreneurship, and social media influencer marketing. Her background's even more diverse than mine. I thought mine was crazy. [Laughter] So Kelvin, is there anything you want to say about the interview with Dr. Johnson before we cut to it?
Kelvin:	I won't say much. I think it stands on its own, although we'd jump right into this modalities thing. But it would probably be appropriate just to note that the most recent research that Nicole comments on is funded by WCET. UCF is an institutional member of WCET, and I currently serve on the WCET steering committee, but we thought it was not just for that reason that we featured Dr. Johnson's work. We think it's really important for the field.

Tom: Great. So, through the magic of podcast time travel, here is your interview with Dr. Nicole Johnson.

(*Musical transition*)

Kelvin: Hi, Nicole. So good to have you on TOPcast today.

Nicole Johnson: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Kelvin: Well, I think... Let me think about this for a second. I think you might be only our second Canadian interviewee.

Nicole: Oh, interesting. Well, that's very exciting then.

Kelvin: Norm Vaughn was here previously.

Nicole: Oh, yes, I know Norm. He's wonderful.

Kelvin: Yes, yes. Yes, he is. Yes, he is. So, that's the stick, that everyone's going to be measuring your performance against today. Let's see how energetic and how fast you can possibly talk to measure up against the great Norm Vaughn. [Laughter]

Nicole: Those are big shoes to fill. We'll see how I do. [Laughter]

Kelvin: No, I'm just kidding about that. We won't. Not all Canadians have the exact same expectation. It's all good. But speaking of Canada, we wanted to talk about a couple of different pieces that have come out of your shop up in Canada. I guess maybe to set this up there was... I know when I saw it, there was a report that came out of your center that was Canadian focused in 2021. Then if I understand correctly, that has been sort of spring-boarded into a companion US focused report. Is that right? You want to tell us a little bit about how we got there, and what it is?

Nicole: Sure, yeah. So, what we've done, you're absolutely right. So, in Canada, in 2021 we released a report on definitions. What drove that is we were working on tracking online enrollments at Canadian post-secondary institutions. One of the biggest challenges we found, because we were getting a lot of inconsistencies in the data, both within institutions and among institutions. As we dug deeper on that, we found that there weren't consistent definitions being used for online learning, for digital learning terms, remote learning. It was kind of hybrid learning, blended learning. So, what we did in 2021 with our survey is we actually took a step back, and we asked institutions to just to tell us in qualitative open-ended question going – What is your definition of hybrid learning? What is your definition of online learning? What is your definition of remote learning? It came back with a whole variety and a whole range of definitions. We took those definitions, and we created a modes of learning spectrum, where we had... Basically, it's a gradient that moves from in-person learning to distance learning off... At the two extremes, you would have in-person learning with no technology, which would be incredibly rare in this day and age. And at the other extreme, you would have distance education that's completely remote, and it would also not use the internet. So, it might be mailed correspondence, which would also be very rare in this day and age. The messy middle between in-person technology supported and fully online courses, with hybrid learning in

the middle there, is where most things are happening, and that's where there was confusion. So, we took those definitions, and we created our report. Then we used that report and the definitions we put forth to test... We wanted to test those in Canada, and we had the opportunity to test them in the US. And that was the foundation for this current study.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's cool. I love a compelling visual, especially if it's in color, and the moods of learning spectrum is sort of the standout gradient, as you say, in that earlier report. So, spoiler alert, in the US-focused work, are we going to see the modes of learning spectrum again, or is there going to be a daughter of modes of learning spectrum or second cousin twice removed of modes of learning spectrum? What are we going to get? [Laughter]

Nicole: You're absolutely going to see it again, and actually we have the original one in the report, and we have the second iteration of it. One of the second things we've done in the second iteration is we've put each of the modes of learning, so in-person learning – no technology, in-person learning – technology supported, hybrid learning, online learning, and then offline distanced education, we put those all as "big buckets." Then in the revised version, we've put different variations in each of those buckets. Because when we did our survey, we found great agreement with, actually a surprising level of agreement with these big bucket terms, which is one of the key findings of our study. But we found that a lot of the variation and contention actually comes with different variations or different institutional versions of this. So, we go by location and characteristics of the learning experience. So, we would say that something like asynchronous online learning and synchronous online learning, or a mix of synchronous and asynchronous all online learning, those would all be variations within the big bucket of online learning.

Kelvin: Yeah, that makes complete sense to me, and I think that is probably a very good addition. I think about your construct, this modes of learning spectrum, and I'm reminded of a quote from our UCF colleague, Dr. Chuck Dziuban, who for years, in his evaluation work, has said that, in some of his categorization of evaluation work, that what you lose in specificity, you gain in reliability. You zoom out a little bit to get some buckets. So, what you lose in specificity, you gain in reliability, and yet people want to be able to hang their hat on something. So, those examples that sort of color and give of traction to the buckets make complete sense to me.

Nicole: Yeah. We found that a lot of the feedback... So, we've presented in advance of doing this survey, this work has been presented to multiple groups, from government stakeholders to registrars, mostly in Canada, but in the US as well, to get people's feedback on it, to make sure we weren't completely off base in what we were doing. One of the positive pieces of feedback that we had was that anything that people were doing at their institutions still fit within this. So, they didn't have to change their branded courses or the way they were calling things at their institution. For us, at the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association, when we are tracking and measuring things, it also allows us to say, "Okay, well, tell us what you're doing. Call it what you're going to call it, but now we can at least sort it on our end, but we don't expect you to change it."

One of the things too, I found is a lot of contention would be with blended hybrid learning, and there... [Laughter] You're laughing, I can see, because we have people who will absolutely fight to the death that blended learning and hybrid learning are two very different things. And we have an equal number of people who will fight to the death that

they are exactly the same thing. So, we say in our spectrum that they are... It's the characteristic. Does it have some sort of mix of online and in-person component? If the answer to that is yes, then it's hybrid. You can call it blended, you can call it whatever, but we are going to put it in this big bucket over here to classify it.

Kelvin: Yeah, I was smirking knowingly, and nodding my head knowingly, because I was contemplating whether I was going to pop the lid off of that can of worms and talk about it or not. But since you did, yeah, to me, yes, I think it's fascinating. The less ambiguity is on the peripheral, the one end or the other of the spectrum. The closer you get to the middle, the messier it gets. [Laughter] So, that's fascinating. I appreciate some symmetry. But with the hybrid learning, and in parenthesis, blended learning, one, kudos. I think you made the right call personally in saying online plus in-person. So, I think that's the right call. I think that there's people that would argue that point as well, online, synchronous, plus online asynchronous, Some would like to see that as a form of blended learning. I see that as a form of online learning. I think you've justified that correctly.

The thing that I trip over a little bit, but I've worked really hard, Nicole, to get over is the inclusion of the kind of dual mode. Like you're in the classroom and meeting with a group of students and simultaneously video casting out to students who are watching in real time or via recording. If I'm not mistaken, in your early report at least, that would fall into that hybrid learning bucket. I understand why, because it's in-person and online. I would just say it's a little qualitatively different than some of the online happens whenever that happens, and then in-person happens whenever that happens, but I'll get over it.

Nicole: [Laughter] Well, and you know what, that was one thing too, that came up, as well as, how do we address high flex? We have it, and there's different terms. There is a difference between what is called multi-access learning, which Valerie Irvine coined that term, and then high flex learning, coined by Brian Beatty. The two terms... It's a very nuanced difference, but Beatty's definition of high flex tends to be that it must... And if I'm incorrect, please, I invite anyone to correct me on this, but that it must contain the elements of an in-person option and a synchronous online option, and an asynchronous online option. So, those three elements must be there, and it must be at student-directed, not instructor prescribed, how they go about that, whereas Valerie Irvine's multi-access allows for what you had referred to before, which would be multi-access online, where you could actually have the choice between synchronous and asynchronous online, or you could have multi-access hybrid, which high flex would technically fall into as a variation of that.

So, we've addressed that in those variations, but one of the things we did address is that hybrid actually could include variations that are instructor prescribed, where the instructor says, "Monday and Wednesday you are showing up in the classroom, and then Thursday, we are meeting online synchronously on Zoom," or you have these components that might need to be done in advance online. There's some requirement for both. Or it could be student led, in which the student has the option to flip between with a high flex situation or a multi-access situation, where they can just wake up in the morning and say, "Well, actually, I'm going to go down to campus today, and I'm going to sit in the classroom," or "You know what? No. I'm going to be live streaming from my house, but it's student led." Both do have that hybrid, but they're different variations of hybrid. The one caution, and we found this in the disagreement, the analysis of different

disagreement with the high flex, is that there still seems to be a misconception out there. We do see some institutions thinking that, well, the student can have the option of picking an online section or an in-person section of the same course, but then they have to stick with that section. And we would say no, then that is not hybrid or high flex. That's just having an online section of a course and an in-person section of a course. [Laughter]

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right. No, that makes sense. It occurs to me that we've both been zoomed in and geeking out a little bit about these modality definitional buckets, and I think this is really important work, but I should probably zoom way out and just ask you, from where you sit, why is this so important? I have my opinions, and I think we've talked about it on the podcast before. Some people are probably tired of hearing me talk about it. So, why do you think clarifying modalities is important at this point?

Nicole: Yeah, I think that's a really good question, because we do hear the disputes in the scholarly community going, "Well, learning is learning no matter where we are." Then we've got some philosophical opinions, is like, "You are always learning in-person because you are always within your own body wherever you are." And we're going, "Okay." But when we actually take it down to a practical level, and that's what makes this study unique, in the fact that this is actually asking frontline faculty administrators. This isn't asking the ed tech community for philosophical or scholarly opinions on this. This is asking, how do you define what's going on the ground? We know that having these clear common definitions, as frustrating as it may be to have to pin it down, is really important for communicating to students what they can expect, especially now that students want to know what they're signing up for. What is the expectation of them? Do they have to be driving out to campus, or can they live two hours from campus and do all their stuff remotely through choice?

It's also really important on the research side. For us to be able to collaborate as researchers, we need to have a shared understanding. When I speak to you and I say, "I've found this with online learning," and you, in your mind, are holding a completely different definition of online learning than me. You're thinking, well, online learning can only be asynchronous learning, and in my head, I'm thinking it's something completely different. Or if one person's holding, well, online can have an in-person component, if it's a percentage of it. We've got different... We need that, so that we can all be sure that we're talking about the same thing.

Kelvin: Yeah, no, that's great. I might add one additional example there. Just even from a leadership and institutional data standpoint, it's hard to know how you're doing if you can't count and track and compare intervention A versus intervention B. Okay, what's the efficacy of this? What's the efficacy of that? The more heterogeneous the bucket, the harder it's going to be to pin down those specifics.

Nicole: Yeah. I think it's Drucker who said that you can't manage what you can't measure. I hope I'm quoting the right person on that, but I think that that's a key thing. That's where this really did start for us in Canada, was being able to track growth in online enrollments over time and the challenges with not having common definitions, both amongst institutions, but within institutions. In Canada, we have an extra layer of complexity because we don't have our higher education system, and our education system in general

is provincially mandated. So, we don't actually have a federal governing bar body that keeps it together, so different provinces also do things differently.

Kelvin: Yeah, I mean that's challenging. [Laughter] That is challenging. Well, as we begin to wrap up, I wonder... I was intrigued. I don't want to take you too far down a rabbit trail, but you painted a picture for us of being in these presentations and these spinoff, contentious discussions that have resulted. So, in the midst of all of that dialogue with passionate colleagues, as you're being listened to right now by a wide range of faculty, and instructional designers, and administrative leaders, if you had one little piece of advice related to this whole modality topic? You could say anything you want to, like, if you would just do this, I'd be happy. Whatever it is, any piece of parting advice that you would give?

Nicole: Yeah, I guess I would say two things. One, I think that opinions are fantastic because it means everybody cares. People really do care about this, and this matters, which tells us a wonderful thing. But then I would say the other piece would be keep it simple. [Laughter] When we are talking to people on the ground, we're talking to people, especially... Then I come from... As someone who has been in the ed tech community for over a decade, sometimes it's easy to get overly philosophical about these things and almost, how many angels can fit on a head of a pin discussions when trying to say, "Well, this should be like this, and it should be like that. And we should, because of these philosophical and theoretical underpinnings." I would say... I'm not saying that those aren't important, and I think in our early days, they were, but we are moving to a stage where we need to be able to have practical, on the ground, easy to understand strategy that can be widely understood, not just by faculty, but actually by students who may not even be familiar with our big bucket terms. So, we kind of do have to scale it down. The more simple we can keep it, I think, will actually be very advantageous in the long term.

Kelvin: Well, that is helpful rudder-like chastening advice. I know I can certainly veer into the philosophical and into the fine grain, but I think that's really good advice. So, I just want to say thanks on behalf of Tom who will join us in the wraparound, and myself. It's been great having, as US people here at UCF, having one of our neighbors to the north on. We need to up our quota of Canadians featured on TOPcast. So, we'll have to have you back. There's at least two or three more Canadians probably in your country, so we could have them on, too.

Nicole: [Laughter] Absolutely. I think I can speak on behalf of a number of Canadian colleagues and myself that I would love to be back, and I know that many of them would love to be on here as well.

Kelvin: [Laughter] Thanks.

Nicole: Thank you.

            (*Musical transition*)

Tom: So, Kelvin, that was your interview with Dr. Nicole Johnson, who was, I thought a really interesting conversation.

Kelvin: Yeah, Nicole's great. I mean, I think she has a lot to offer in our field, and I think this is really good work and look forward to additional work that follows up from this.

Tom: Yeah, I related really hard to that conversation because of how often I am confronted here with having to, not on my own, but sort of lead the modality updates and definitions and deal with state reporting for our state university system, board of governors, data tracking, and all of that stuff. We just did go through... We talked about this on the podcast. We did just go through a round of that post-pandemic kind of coming out of emergency remote and trying to capture some of those practices within our existing definitions without over complicating it, without having a separate definition for every possible little nuance. So, we went with this idea of broad definitions and attributes that further define them, which has added its own level of complexity as we have found.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah. No, that's true. And shout out to the show notes. We don't always make a big deal of it, but in the show notes for this episode, we will have the original study from 2021 that we referenced in the interview, as well as the new 2022 American focus study, and this series of infographics that WCET has put out that kind of captures these salient points. And on that note, Tom, one of the nuances in Florida that you kind of reference obliquely is the fact that technically, to be considered a distance course in Florida by statute, it's 80% or more online. And that was some of the nuance that Nicole obliquely referred to. That's definitely in both research reports that sometimes there's some disagreement, folks generally get what online is, but some people get real precise, and they're like, "Well, it could be 80% or more," as opposed to the definitional kind of offering is, it's completely online. Well… [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, well, it's like when I get asked how many online student do you have? It's like, "Well, what do you mean by that?" [Laughter] Yeah. Students who take one online class or all, or…

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: ... student credit hours, FTE, head count. What is it?

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: So, yeah, I think you're right, but the 80% definition is really around the distance learning fee here in Florida.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: What would justify actually charging that fee? One thing she said that made me go, "Hmm," was her spectrum, which I thought was useful. We've talked about things like that before. Joel Hartman had first introduced me to the idea of this spectrum. But on the far end of distance, she had basically correspondence school.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah.

Tom: I don't ever think about that. I thought, "Oh, she's probably right. It's still out there, I guess in some forms and fashion." I know in some cases the military will still sometimes

do some of that, where you get a packet, and you submerge for three months, and you work on stuff. Then when you surface, you sync it all up.

Kelvin: No, that's right. I think for clarity purposes, for illustration and for contrast, I think it is important to consider both end points on the spectrum. I think probably, if I remember correctly, my distance learning graduate work, I think Canada probably has a bit more of a rich traditional distance education history than even the US does. I would imagine… as much as Nicole said that it's rare, I imagine if it's anywhere, it's probably in some of the historic practices in some of the Canadian provinces. I wouldn't be surprised.

Tom: Well, I mean, Athabasca's got a long history of distance learning, and the first MOOC came out of Canada.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right.

Tom: Yeah, that's right. So, I don't know, anything else you want to touch on before we land the plane?

Kelvin: Maybe just this, because as much as I'm going to try to get over it, I really... We'll just make this one comment. As much as I think there's great clarity to be found in the spectrum and getting on the same page, I think innovations, in blended or hybrid learning, are still going to require more precisely zoomed in definitions and framing on the nature of blended or hybrid course designs and their efficacy. And shout out to Dr. Chuck Dzuiban, Dr. Charles Graham, Dr. Tony Picciano, and Dr. Patsy Moskal for their work in blended running research. They got three volumes, or at least the first three have three volumes, and Patsy joined on the third volume of books on this very topic.

Tom: It's a Tolkien kind of trilogy, epic, but very, very useful. [Laughter] Yeah, it's funny, I'll make a comment to too, that this idea of blended in hybrid most often is where I encounter assumptions about, well, everybody knows hybrid is you can come and go however you want. Really? Or everybody knows blended is putting your lectures online and coming to class to do your discussions. No, I thought that was flipped. So, there's an awful lot of people who are just positive they know what these things mean, and they're all using the same terms, which... It makes, I think Nicole's work that much more valuable to try to put some universal definitions on this.

Kelvin: Yes. Yeah. No, agreed. Well, you want to try to wrap us up there, Dr. Cavanagh?

Tom: Sure. So, clarity, is important, and especially clarity around modality definitions has particular practical utility in our field. This clarity helps students know what to expect in the courses for which they are registering. I'm always been advocating for students in this. And this clarity also helps administrative leaders and instructional designers and researchers move the field forward. I'll also add faculty, so that they know what the expectations are for them as they are teaching these courses. So, clarity is in all ways a good thing.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah. Agreed. Absolutely.

Tom: Cool. So, thank you, Kelvin, for the coffee connection, even though I didn't get a chance to drink it today. [Laughter] Thank you to Dr. Nicole Johnson for joining us. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.