TOPcast Episode #127
Community Wisdom: Students, Hybridity, and More!

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(*Musical transition*)

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

Kelvin Thompson: And I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to *TOPcast*, the Teaching Online Podcast. Happy holidays, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Ah, season's greetings there, Tom.

Tom: Yes, season's greetings. [Laughter] Although, there are lots of seasons.

Kelvin: There's lots of greetings. [Laughter]

Tom: And there are lots of greetings. I guess there are many holidays, right? But everybody knows what we're talking about. It's that special time of year.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right. We wrap up one calendar year and you kick off the other. Maybe your institution is fortunate enough to close for a little brief period of time.

Tom: [Laughter] For a few hours. That famous Scrooge to Bob Cratchit, and…

Kelvin: All the more early the next day. [Laughter]

Tom: That's right. (*Using Scrooge-like voice*) Just an excuse for picking a man's pocket every December 25th. [Laughter] Yeah, all right. (*Clears throat*) So, even though it is that special time of year, and we are sharing a thematically selected cup of coffee…

Kelvin: Here's hoping.

Tom: If I know you, it is not pumpkin spice.

Kelvin: [Laughter] It's not. That's true. It is not pumpkin spice. This is not a flavored coffee, per se at all. Today's coffee, Tom, is a "House Blend" of several different countries/origins from River Walk Coffee Roasters in Oswego ("osweego"), or

Oswego (“oswaygo”), New York. Tomato, tomato (“tomaydoh, tomahdoh”). [Laughter] Oswego, being famous as the home of SUNY Oswego…

Tom: I've heard of it.

Kelvin: Oswego, being the podcasting home of our colleagues Rebecca Mushtare and John Kane over at the *Tea for Teaching Podcast*. This coffee was hand delivered by John and Rebecca.

Tom: Hand delivered?

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: At the OLC Accelerate Conference?

Kelvin: At the recent OLC Accelerate Conference.

Tom: That's awesome.

Kelvin: Wasn't that nice?

Tom: Yeah, I've had that experience of walking around a conference venue and having people randomly shove coffee beans at me. It's lovely. It's a pleasant experience. Well, thank you Rebecca and John.

Kelvin: Kind of depends on the coffee, but yes, generally speaking. [Laughter]

Tom: And the person. But in this case, we're glad, grateful. [Laughter]

Kelvin: Whether they engrave you with it or not, but yes, it was very nice in the case of Rebecca and John. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: This is one of those cases where maybe the connection is more about the who and the how than it is the what. Can you decipher a connection to today's topic in this cup of coffee? And what do you think of the cup of coffee?

Tom: I liked the coffee. It's good. As far as the connection goes, the closest I'm coming is that today is a podcast all about the online learning community and the people in it. “House Blend,” is that the name you said?

Kelvin: Mm-hmm.

Tom: So, “House Blend,” so everybody's in the house today. Something like that.

Kelvin: Yeah, that works. That's exactly the direction I was going. That is right on. So, this is the episode that we've been building up for a little while that we've been sort of colloquially referring to as our “call-in show,” although there were no telephones involved. [Laughter]

Tom: That's right.

Kelvin: You want to tell everybody about today's episode?

Tom: Yeah, we have kind of a tall order, I think, for today's episode. We're going to try in close to 30 minutes to put a button on 2022 and prepare for 2023 in our field of online education. As we were talking before we hit record, we are hoping for a COVID-free 2023.

Kelvin: Here's hoping.

Tom: Yeah, here's hoping.

Kelvin: Here's hoping.

Tom: Kelvin, you might recall not too long ago, we did ask for our listeners' thoughts on, “How to make sense of 2022 and prepare for next year 2023 in this field of online blended digital teaching and learning.” We said these might take the form of “aspirations, predictions, reflections, or even just observations.”

Kelvin: That's right. We would like to feature several of the submissions that we received. Glad to have any at all. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, we got a lot.

Kelvin: We're going to feature some. Some of these are audio recordings and a couple are written comments, which Tom will do in at least one funny voice, and I will do in my regular voice just for contrast. [Laughter]

Tom: Fortunately, my regular voice is funny.

Kelvin: Okay, there we go. We will read or play a submission, whatever's appropriate, and then we'll take a moment or two to react to the thoughts expressed. We'd encourage you to reflect as dear listeners on what is said as well. See if you agree with us, see if you have other thoughts, and think along with us and see how we can make sense of 2022 and prepare to be even more effective in our field in 2023. And along the way, we might even have some guest voices that we've collected. Little season’s greetings from our colleagues might just pop up here and there too.

Tom: A little holiday surprise for all of our *TOPcast* listeners, a little gift from the community.

Liz Ciabocchi: (*Recording plays*) Hello, *TOPcast* audience. This is Liz Ciabocchi. I'm here at the OLC Accelerate Conference 2022, representing Adelphi University in Garden City, New York. I'm also bringing you greetings from the Board of Directors of OLC. Happy holidays, everybody.

Tom: All right, so with no further ado, our first guest is Dr. Nicole Johnson. You may recall her. She was a fairly recent guest, Episode 124. She had this to offer.

Dr. Nicole Johnson: (*Recording plays*) Well, it's been another strange year. I think we're starting to see the dust settling from the pandemic. It's been interesting because the pandemic has exposed people to new types of learning. I anticipate a large shift towards hybrid learning, which is a mix of in-person and online instruction. My hope as well is that there's a greater focus on pedagogy and effective teaching practices in all modalities.

Tom: Boy, do I hope that too, Nicole. [Laughter]

Kelvin: No kidding.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: No kidding. No, I think that's good. That dovetails right from her episode.

Tom: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So, where would you like to start on her comments?

Kelvin: Well, maybe let's start in reverse. I think what she said at the end about effective teaching practices and pedagogy, that kind of aligns with what we've been saying for a while about quality, kind of reinforcing quality. There are effective teaching practices; there are research-based teaching practices. There's an overt emphasis on intentional design, thoughtful teaching pedagogy, and I think that's really good. Then we could talk about hybrid as well, if you want.

Tom: Yeah, so that's kind of where I was going to go, is to talk about hybrid. It's consistent with what you and I have been saying for a long time, and I always kind of quote you where, "The future is blended." I think you were even saying that before the pandemic, but I think it's even more true since the pandemic, since everybody got a taste of online and remote teaching technologies.

A lot of people want to keep using them even when they come back into the classroom. I think we're going to see these new kinds of experiments and the flexible modalities, whether it's an asynchronous or synchronous. I think it's going to continue to evolve, but I think Nicole's right about that hybrid learning.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's exactly right. If listeners haven't heard our episode on the CHLOE 7 Report, that's a theme, at least a theme we picked up, in the CHLOE 7 Report as well. Lots of things we're hearing that way. I totally agree.

Clark Shah-Nelson: (*Recording plays*) Hey, it's Clark Shah-Nelson with the University of Maryland School of Social Work wishing you and yours a fantastic 2023 full of high-

quality online learning, online teaching, and everything good for you and your family and community.

Kelvin: Shall we try another piece of input from another colleague?

Tom: Let's try. This one's written, right?

Kelvin: This is a written one. This is written from our colleague, Dr. Steven C. Ehrmann, who is the retired Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning from George Washington University. Steve was a guest back on Episode 116. Some insights from his *Threefold Gains* book was featured on that. Steve was brief. He said... I don't know. I don't know if I can pull off the funny voice thing, so I'm just going to read.

I'm going to use my funny voice, the natural one. He said that we should all use increased student demand for online as a spur to improvement, not retreat. That is a succinct statement there. Student demand for online as a spur improvement, not retreat. I thought that…

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: ...That's insightful.

Tom: That's interesting because I mean, honestly, we've seen increased demand. My instinctive reaction is to lean into that, not to retreat from it.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right.

Tom: But I imagine there are some schools that maybe didn't have online as a core part of their strategic plan who probably need to reassess that now.

Kelvin: You certainly hear things, the sort of pendulum swing metaphor. I suspect that you're right, it's probably in context where there was not existing thoughtful implementation of online infrastructure, and so forth. There's a student demand, and it's kind of like these students want easy or they want something... They're being unrealistic in their demands for online.

What we really need is quality, not online. [Laughter] I think I hear that sometimes, and I think that's what I hear a little bit in Steve's comment, that if you retreat from online in the face of this demand, well one, I'm not sure I agree with that unless you're really leaning into some value proposition of the in-person small liberal arts school or something maybe.

Tom: I think there's something else implicit in there too, which is something that I totally agree with. It's that in every challenge there is an opportunity.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: We're facing a challenge with increased demand, maybe without adequate resources, but within that is opportunity. I'm not talking about even opportunity to make money because sometimes that tends to crowd out other advantages to online learning, but I'm talking about opportunity to better serve students, to better accomplish the mission of your institution, to provide more access. I think that's what he's kind of hinting at a little bit, although he is sort of talking a little bit more about maybe quality with his word "improvement."

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. This is our take on Steve's comments. Steve, if we got it wrong, please do reach out and tell us.

Tom: The point of these contributions was to just spur discussion.

Kelvin: That's right. Yes, exactly. And improvement.

Tom: And improvement, that's right. [Laughter] Goodness knows, we could use some improvement here.

Kelvin: That's right. Every day. Mm-hmm.

Bettyjo Bouchey: (*Recording plays*) Hi everyone. Bettyjo Bouchey from National Louis University wishing you the best of the holiday season and Happy New Year.

Tom: All right. So, maybe I'll do the next one.

Kelvin: Please.

Tom: This one is also written. This is from our friend and colleague, Dr. Susan Wegmann, who is Executive Director of SIU Global at Southern Illinois University. You may remember Susan. She was a guest twice officially on the show, Episodes 55 and 79, and once unofficially where she was a mystery woo.

Kelvin: A mystery woo. Are you requesting to bring back the mystery woo feature, Tom?

Tom: I am categorically not requesting that.

Kelvin: [Laughter] Because it could happen. You could speak it out into the universe, and it could happen.

Tom: She kind of gives it some context of coming out of the lockdown in 2020, the rebound reactions of 2021, the bounce back of 2022 and '23. She says she's considering questions about online learning like how can our LMS flex to accommodate face-to-face, hybrid, blended, and asynchronous online courses in what is best for our students? And who are our students? There's a lot packed in those three sentences.

Kelvin: There really is. I agree.

Tom: Maybe the first thing I'll say is that she also touches on this blended hybrid thing that Nicole talked about.

Kelvin: Yes, I agree.

Tom: But then she ends with this very existential sort of…

Kelvin: No kidding.

Tom: ...button of who are our students? Why are we here? What's it all about?

Kelvin: Yeah, I like that. Healthy. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. I don't know that we sufficiently commented on this in our response to Nicole's segment, but you could hear what Nicole said and what we said as just hybrid as a particular course modality. We've certainly spoken previously, and so let's go on record here as well.

It's not just about that. It's about a blended or hybrid experience across multiple modalities. A student experience is made up of combinations of online experiences, and hybrid experiences, and in-person experiences, whether those are courses, student services, and so forth. I think we hear that resonated with here in Susan's comments.

Tom: Yeah, I think that's right, too. She also anchors it back into, "And what is best for our students?" Which is kind of what we just talked about with Steve's comment.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right.

Tom: The opportunity is…

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: ...What's best for the students.

Kelvin: That's right. Maybe to unpack that last one, that existential question a little bit more, we've certainly talked about this recently, even as recently as couple episodes back from this one when we discussed the alternative credentialing, non-credit, especially non-credit-to-credit pathways, that it's not just your go to college one time, and then leave college, and that's it.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: But maybe…

Tom: The 60-year curriculum thing.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: That's right. Who are our students? Maybe we need to think differently about who our learners are. That's worth pondering.

Tom: It is. It is. I've talked about this before on the podcast and also in public, but the idea of thinking of the university like an elephant with the three blind men that touch the elephant. The three blind men are maybe students, but they each get a different impression of what the university is because of the way they access it.

So whether you're an 18 year old traditional high school student living in a dorm, or you're a continuing education adult taking non-credit courses, or you're four states away taking an online program as a single mom or something, you're all very different students, to Susan's point, about who are our students. They're all interacting with the same university.

Then the university needs to be, if that's part of that mission, flexible enough to meet each of the students where they are and offer programming and academic programs that meet that demand.

Kelvin: Yeah. Well said. That's exactly right. If we're to remain relevant. That's exactly right.

Mary Niemiec: (*Recording plays*) Hey, *TOPcast*, this is Mary Niemiec. I am with the OLC Board of Directors and happily retired now. So, everybody enjoy the holidays as I regenerate into my retired self.

Kelvin: Shall I introduce the next one?

Tom: Please.

Kelvin: So, another not-too-long-ago guest wrote in, or called in, or recorded in…

Tom: Sent in.

Kelvin: Sent in a recording. That was Katrina Wehr, who is a Senior Learning Experience Designer at WGU Labs. She was a guest you might remember on Episode 122. Here's Katrina.

Katrina Wehr: (*Recording plays*) As the year winds down, it seems to me like higher ed is still trying to figure out where online learning fits into its long-term strategy in the wake of COVID-19. In 2023, I hope higher ed figures out how to lift up student voices around this and other institutional questions, and responds with timely, meaningful change to meet those students' needs to become a more inclusive environment.

Kelvin: Timely, meaningful change.

Tom: A more inclusive change.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Again, it centers back on the students, which I'm really pleased to hear that as a theme emerging in these comments because I think it's the right place for us to anchor on, is the students. That's what Katrina's getting at there.

Kelvin: I think that's right. I do think, though, we even saw this I think even as we're recording this at the fairly recent OLC Accelerate 2022 Conference, but I think we've been seeing it in conferences and in other aspects of our community for a while, this call for more student voices. We even had a featured student speaker on stage, which is great.

There's some logistical challenges to pulling that off sometimes. But in our work, student advisory groups, student voices, and conferences, finding ways to keep anchoring down and not just kind of "theming" the students is so important.

Tom: Yeah. We know what's best for them, right?

Kelvin: Mm-hmm, that's right.

Tom: I think we've tried to do that here, I think with varying levels of success. Sometimes successfully, where we bring in panels to speak to faculty or to our own staff to talk about the student experience. I think the more we can do that, the better. I always like it when a conference includes the voice of a student. I've seen WCET has done some panels like that, that I think have been really effective in the past too.

Joseph Riquelme: (*Recording plays*) This is Joseph Riquelme from American University. Happy holidays, and I hope everyone has a good 2023.

Tom: All right. Shall I take the next one?

Kelvin: Please.

Tom: This is from Dr. Thomas J. Tobin, a founding member of the Center for Teaching, Learning, & Mentoring at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a popular speaker and author. Tom's not been a guest on *TOPcast* previously, but maybe in the future.

Kelvin: We should include him. Tom's a good guy. We've interacted a number of times through the years, and read some of his stuff, and he's a really engaging colleague.

Tom: Absolutely. Let's hear what Tom has to say.

Dr. Thomas J. Tobin: (*Recording plays*) A significant amount of learning takes place outside of the formal times and spaces of class meetings. In 2023, we'll be paying more and

more attention to how we structure, support, and style things like homework, study sessions, practice experiences, and spaces for informal interaction and inquiry. Watch for intentional ways that demystify the hidden skill tree of being a technology mediated learner. I hope that all of you *TOPcast* listeners will enjoy an engaging and meaningful new year. Be safe and well. Thanks.

Kelvin: That's awesome.

Tom: Yeah. Thank you, Tom. Again, back onto the students.

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: I think he makes a really interesting point because you hear all these, I don't know, surveys or comments, or different things I've heard over the years that say when you ask students what their most meaningful educational experience was in college, it was never something in the classroom.

It was always something that happened in the student union, or in the dorm, or whatever, some other thing, some internship, or field trip, or whatever. I think that's what he's getting at, that there's so much opportunity in the 360 degree world to engage students. I think online learning is uniquely positioned to do that because we have the entire internet and the entire world for us to explore with our students.

Kelvin: No, that's good. As he was talking, it's interesting, I kind of flashed on the hybrid theme again. Initially, I was picturing campus physical spaces like re-imagined libraries, re-imagined student centers, and various gathering points and all. Then I was thinking exactly what you said, too, about the online virtual spaces and how we really do need a blend of that.

I was thinking about even some institutions have done a good job of even harnessing some of the co-curricular experiences online. Northern Virginia Community College a few years ago, I remember they had this virtual student union thing. I remember we looked at that and saw some presentations on that. How do we that best and allow students to flow in and out in a hybrid experience in a way that's meaningful for them.

Tom: I will continue to watch maybe the most extreme example of this, which is Minerva. If you're not familiar with Minerva, I probably won't do it justice because it's really interesting, but they take cohorts of students to various metropolitan cities around the world, and they spend a semester, I think, in each space. They take online classes from faculty that are all over the world, but then they have these co-curricular experiences in Situ, wherever. So, you're in Hong Kong one semester, and you're in London the next, you're in Madrid after that, or whatever. It sounds really interesting.

Kelvin: No doubt. No doubt! Yeah. More of that.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah.

Jason Johnston: (*Recording plays*) Hey, this is Jason Johnston at the University of Tennessee. This one kind of goes up to Kelvin, but all of you, Happy Life Day!

Tom: All right, Kelvin, we have one more.

Kelvin: One more, and it's a good one. This is a submission from our colleague, Dr. Bonni Stachowiak, who is Dean of Teaching and Learning at Vanguard University, and perhaps more famously, the host of the *Teaching in Higher Ed Podcast*. Bonni, we've been fortunate to have featured on three episodes of *TOPcast* through the years.

Tom: Is that a record?

Kelvin: I don't think anybody's been on more than three. I don't think so.

Tom: Except you and me. [Laughter]

Kelvin: Wow. We hold the record?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Good for us. [Laughter]

Tom: Maybe Tim, maybe.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's true. But Bonni was on Episode 20, 27 and 79. Here's what Bonni had to say.

Bonni Stachowiak: (*Recording plays*) Going into 2023, I hope we continue to expand our collective imaginations. Part of that is to stop thinking in terms of binaries. Learning is a part of life and a way of being. Learning happens online. Learning happens in person. Learning happens when we're driving down the road. Learning happens in the quiet still spaces. Learning happens in the ruckus. Learning happens when we're vulnerable. Learning happens when we're confused. Learning happens when we're together. Learning happens when we are alone. Learning is a part of life and a way of being.

Kelvin: That's awesome.

Tom: Deep thoughts by Jack Handy. Yeah, that's awesome, Bonnie. Learning is a way of being. I'll tell you, learning happens for me a lot on YouTube.

Kelvin: And certainly driving down the road listening to podcasts, or driving down the road in a quiet car, just thinking, reflecting on other experiences. I'm just aghast honestly at how there has been flow in our responses to these little segments, right?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Look, we ordered the segments, but just the flow in the conversational themes we've had. I think what Bonnie said just picks up and summarizes the theme that we've been talking about of hybridity, and expands our thinking broadly. It echoes a little bit of what Tom Tobin said about the informal learning and stuff. Really good thought.

Tom: It goes back on the students again.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: All of that, you know how to best learn.

Kelvin: And support learning.

Tom: And support learning. That's really cool.

Kelvin: Yeah. So, I mean, I guess that if there's any one theme in all this, we keep saying the word "student." If there was a word count, it would be the most prominent word I think in this episode.

Tom: As we sort of look at this, this is the second to last episode of the year, closing out the year, if there's any better way to end the year than thinking about what's best for the students, I don't know it.

Kelvin: No, that's right. I totally agree with that. This has been wonderful. It's great to hear from our colleagues and representing our broad community. Good to have all those together. Would love to hear from our listeners if they disagree or really resonate with something that was said. Gosh, if you sent that into us at topcast@ucf.edu, we'd comment, and we'd share that back out.

Tom: Absolutely.

Kelvin: If you want, that would be great.

Tom: Yeah. Maybe the other subtext of this one is about community.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: We've said this in a recent episode about, look, if you're new to this community, jump in because it's a great community, it's very welcoming. People want to help and offer advice and support. I've gotten that reinforced today through kind of hearing all of this input from various folks. So yeah, we're very grateful for everybody who contributed and everybody out there who's doing what you're doing for students.

Kelvin: Well, why don't I take a stab at putting us on the runway and hopefully not hitting a patch of ice?

Tom: Let's hope. [Laughter]

Kelvin: Yes. As we prepare to wrap up one calendar year and start a new one, we are reminded that in online teaching and learning, as with so many other areas, we are better together. As we share experiences and insights with each other, our entire community benefits from the collective wisdom.

Tom: That is true. I certainly benefited from it today. So, great. We have one more to go before we kind of wrap up 2022. Until next time, for *TOPcast*, I'm Tom.

(*Musical transition*)

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.