TOPcast Episode #131

ChatGPT: Friend or Foe?

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(Musical intro)

Kelvin: From the University of Louisville's Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning.

Tom: And the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And I am Tom Cavanagh.

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

Tom: Hey, Kelvin. That sounds interesting. We've got a new intro.

Kelvin: There you go.

Tom: So, for those that are just listening, you don't see the video, but this is the first moment I'm actually seeing your new environs, and it looks like you still have yet to move in, although I do see…

Kelvin: If I was to pan around, you'd see the boxes. [Laughter]

Tom: I see some empty shelves, but I do see a cardinal red, which is cool. I assume that's your new office that you're sitting in?

Kelvin: Yep, yep. That's correct. I have two carloads of stuff that have been unloaded into the office, all the coffee mugs and the books and…

Tom: The important stuff, the coffee mugs and the books.

Kelvin: That's right. You know that's how I roll, Tom, and so I just got the shelves behind me. I just don't know if there's going to be enough shelves. So, we're trying to find some shelves from surplus, and then I will move them around and figure out where they're going to go, and then because I don't want to be unboxing stuff twice. You know how that is.

Tom: Yeah. So, I mean, it's really hard to ask you this question because you're less than a full five days in, you're four days in, but any impressions? How was the drive? Anything you want to share with the TOPcast audience?

Kelvin: Yeah. I mean, Louisville is a lovely city. We're getting to know the city, the institution. The campus is beautiful, people are kind. You've been teasing me about the weather for a while. It's really not bad. I looked just a few moments ago. It's 38 outside right now. What is it there in Orlando, Tom?

Tom: We're going to get to that.

Kelvin: [Laughter] But we're getting used to it. You find various moisturizing products to keep your skin from falling off, and there might have been the purchase of some additional outer wear and so forth, but we're getting settled in, and I've been meeting with oh so many people. I just make a general thing of saying, "I'm going to probably forget who you are and what you do, so please forgive me now," [Laughter] but yeah, everything so far, so good.

Tom: Good, good. Well, there's a little Kelvin shaped hole in the office at the moment, but yeah, we're persevering, and so wish you all the best, and this is actually the first time I've spoken to you since you've left. So, we get to do this live on air.

Kelvin: That's right. Hey, Tom, how are you doing?

Tom: [Laughter] Hey, how's it going? Good.

Kelvin: So, is it particularly cold there? You said you wanted to talk about the weather?

Tom: We can talk about that because it's related to my coffee connection.

Kelvin: Oh, okay.

Tom: Which has nothing to do with the subject of today's conversation. It was just more of weather, rubbing your nose in it. Sorry. But it's 78 degrees.

Kelvin: 78. That's a 40-degree difference.

Tom: Cloudless.

Kelvin: I was a music major, but even I can do that math.

Tom: [Laughter] It is pretty spectacular. In fact, it's hot and so I had to have a nice, iced coffee for this.

Kelvin: Iced coffee. [Laughter] Yeah, sure. Yeah. Well, I'll tell you this. On my first day at new employee orientation a few days ago, it's lovely outside, little breezy, sunny, and I learned a new, I think I've heard this term somewhere before, but I learned a new term. It was “false spring.”

Tom: [Laughter] False spring. Psych. It got warm for one day, and now you're back to the slush or whatever.

Kelvin: Yeah. And I ran into a colleague that I had met previously on campus that day and, “Hey, welcome and good to see you,” and we're talking about the weather, and she said, "Yeah, I remember when I came here for a site visit so many years ago,” and it was in, I think she said February, and it was a day like that, and she said the search committee said, "Oh yeah, this is how the weather is," [Laughter] and she came, and she said, "You're all liars." But it's really not bad. We're making the adjustment here.

Tom: Good, that's good.

Kelvin: Well, I am not drinking a refrigerated beverage. The ye old thermos of many a year is performing faithfully and is keeping said beverage warm, but would you like to know what's in my cup?

Tom: Yeah, absolutely. What is in the thermos today, Kelvin?

Kelvin: *(Using robotic voice)* Just as Foxtail Coffee Roasters’ single-origin Mexico Chiapas coffee highlights the unique characteristics and flavors of a specific region, ChatGPT's role in digital teaching and learning emphasizes the importance of individualized and personalized education. *(Resumes normal voice)* And I think the coffee's pretty good, but how's the connection? [Laughter]

Tom: You may have just given it away, and I'm going to say, Kelvin, I've heard some auto speech gen, or auto-generated speech that's better than what you just did. [Laughter] So, yeah, I assume either you put a prompt into ChatGPT to generate the connection… Yeah. So, that's what we're talking about today.

Kelvin: Yes. Here's what, I wrote it... I pasted it just in case you were curious. I said to Chat GPT, I said, “Write a statement making a thematic connection between Foxtail Coffee roaster's single-origin Mexico Chiapas coffee and the consideration of ChatGPT's role in digital teaching and learning,” and the result is what you got.

Tom: Yeah, well, it ain't bad, actually.

Kelvin: Wait a second. I don't want to be replaced in my coffee making connection…

Tom: Coffee connection making duties. Yeah.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Yeah. So, that's what we're going to talk about today. OpenAI's chatbot, their generative chat... What's it called? Pre-trained transformer, GPT, ChatGPT. It was released just recently, like November 30th of 2022. So, at the very end of the year, and oh my gosh, over the holiday break, it blew up. Everybody started paying attention to it. So, we've talked about chatbots in previous episodes, but not like this. We were talking about much more specific use cases for them with tech support, and we did touch on the idea of chatbots as virtual TAs, and this is the first thing I've seen that gets us a step towards that,

that I think is actually, I can see how that could potentially work. So, I don't know. Anything you want to add to that?

Kelvin: No, all of that, and we sometimes talk about, I don't know, all kinds of different synonyms, disruptive innovations, or ripple effect technologies, or sudden entries into the marketplace, or into the field, and I haven't seen anything this sudden in a while, and this big of a splash, and I don't know. I don't necessarily want to offend anybody, and you're less offensive than I am, but I'll say this. I was thinking about this, how would I gauge this? 75 to 80% of educators have lost their minds over ChatGPT. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah. It's been crazy, and we'll get to this I'm sure, but it seems to fall on two ends of a spectrum, either, hey, embrace it, use it, or this is the worst thing ever. We have to stamp this out, and I've actually…

Kelvin: The world is ending. [Laughter]

Tom: I've had conversations at your going away party, I was talking to some faculty, and I talked to, covered both ends of that spectrum. People on campus who really feel strongly both ways, and my gosh, just get on Twitter for five minutes and start searching about ChatGPT in higher ed, and it's been banned in some places. I think New York City Public Schools has banned ChatGPT, and there are others as well. So, there's different schools of thought on what to do with it. This feels bigger to me than even the whole MOOC craze of 2012.

Kelvin: It's hard to gauge magnitude because at the time of this recording, when you were given that date, I was thinking, I did the math three times. At the time of this recording, it's been less than two months, [Laughter] and it feels like it's been out for six months to a year the way there's been so much activity and talk, and so I do wonder whether there will be the same kind of sustaining effort, power, but yes. Right now, if you were to gauge the beginning of the MOOC craze, and yeah, this feels bigger. I agree. I don't know if it'll sustain. This probably gets ahead of things a little bit, but I imagine that some difference would be made when, if, and how the owners of ChatGPT start charging for it. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, it feels like that's inevitable. I read somewhere, I forget the number, I should have looked it up, but it was multi-billions that it's been capitalized at as far as…

Kelvin: I saw that.

Tom: Investment. Yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah, I saw that. I think I looked yesterday at something in preparation for this, and this may not be right, but it was something like $290 billion valuation of the company.

Tom: It's something crazy like that. Yeah. So, yeah, this is going to be monetized at some point.

Kelvin: I would think so, yeah. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, at some point. So, I think one reason why maybe it's bigger than MOOCs is because MOOCs was very much kind of, it was the online world encroaching into the face-to-face traditional world, but it was still the online world. This thing cuts across the whole institution.

Kelvin: Everything.

Tom: And it's not just higher ed, it's like life it's instituting.

Kelvin: That's right. That's right. Now, I know this from, not super recent, but past conversations, you've enjoyed playing with ChatGPT a bit.

Tom: I have, yes.

Kelvin: So why don't you tell us some of how your new hobby of ChatGPT-ing has played out?

Tom: Yeah. So, I mean, in addition to the usual things of I'm just putting in prompts that I think an academic might put it in a course to see what you get, and I've been kind of remarkably surprised. I've been shocked that just I thought how coherent and decent these essays were. They're not going to be winning any dissertation awards, [Laughter] but for regular undergraduate essay writing, it's pretty good. But yeah, some people know I have a sideline hobby of fiction writing. I've written a couple novels, and a short story or two, and so I've been prompting it to write short stories, and what it comes back with. Now, I've been intentionally being a little campy in what I've asked for. So, it's not like I'm getting, I think any great literature back, but it does it.

So, I write mystery novels, and one of the ones I put in was like, write a mystery short story in the style of Raymond Chandler where the cat is the killer. I think that's exactly what I wrote, and it did. It comes back with several hundred words with clues, and red herrings, and Mr. Whiskers, which is the name it made up all on its own for the cat who did it, and you kind of didn't quite see it coming, and I was kind of surprised, and another one that I've done, for those who are fans of “The Office” and “Parks and Rec,” there are these characters within characters in the show. Michael Scarn is the secret agent for “The Office,” played by Steve Carell's character. So, it's a character playing a character, and then Chris Pratt's character in “Parks and Rec” has this alter ego, Burt Macklin, FBI.

And I always wanted to write a fan fiction where Burt Macklin, FBI special agent teams up with Michael Scarn, secret agent, two completely clueless characters acting ridiculous in the most hackneyed, campy, spy, secret agent thing. So, I had ChatGPT write me a short story about the team up of those two characters, and then I tuned it to get it even better. I had it add dialogue, add more clichés, it came up with a crime organization. I said, name the crime organization, “The Syndicate.” So, it did that, and it was hilarious. There was even a point, so language warning folks, there was a point where the Michael Scarn character turns to the Burt Macklin character and says, "They won't be able to reach us because of our sheer badassery." Badassery is what the ChatGPT came up with. I thought that was pretty good.

Kelvin: Yeah. Now for those who haven't played with, experimented with ChatGPT yet, when you say tuned, I assume you mean you put your initial prompt in, you got the response, which is… can we just talk about that for a second, amazingly fast.

Tom: Yeah. Like seconds.

Kelvin: I mean, maybe not even, and it kind of goes, just spits it out, just processing power, and then when you say tune, you mean, okay, there's that. Now I'm going to add this, call it this, add this. So, you just revise your prompt and then you see what kind of a…

Tom: That's right. Yeah. And in a more academic context, I was meeting with somebody, one of our potential vendors, and he was showing me some things about it. He's got a product that is, you can detect if somebody's used it to write essays, but it was interesting because as he was demonstrating it to me, it was one of the first times I had actually seen it, first week of December or something, and he was tuning it, too. So, he put in a prompt about something academic, and then after the essay was written, he said, "Well, use metaphors or make it more appropriate for a middle school audience or something," and then it changes it.

And it changed the types of metaphors it used to explain this concept to... It was comparing and contrasting two different things that had the same name, but were very different, and I was really impressed because it did use metaphors. Then he had it include two citations, scholarly citations, and it did. Now, that is one of the criticisms I've heard that sometimes the citations it finds are not real. [Laughter] I actually had somebody at this going away party tell me that they've been playing with it, and the citation that it saw was from somebody that they know. So, they actually know the person who was cited, and he knows that that person never wrote that thing.

Kelvin: Wow.

Tom: But ChatGPT was smart enough to know that that was a guy that should be cited for this, but it wasn't a real article. So, it's interesting.

Kelvin: That is interesting. Those are great. I think I've told you my two favorite examples. One is semi-education related, and the other is just sheer survival. Let's do the latter first. Before I moved, we're not big gastronomic geniuses at my house, although we're really good at ordering out. So, who knows what's in the refrigerator any given week. And I ran across, there's all kinds of stuff on Twitter, and I'd run across one that said, here's my favorite thing, try this, and I'm like, okay, I'll try that, and it was give ChatGPT the ingredients of your refrigerator, and ask it to create recipes. So, this will give you very vulnerable on my part insight into the refrigerator at our house…

Tom: It's ketchup and expired ranch dressing. What can you do with that? [Laughter]

Kelvin: Well, it's a step above that, but it was indeed chicken tenders, spinach and artichoke dip, naan bread, and beer, and darn, if it didn't spit out something like three or four little recipes, and it was creative in its... One of them I remember was, I mean, I could imagine doing it. You make some kind of little quesadilla out of the, use the naan bread and you put the stuff together and quick little heated up in the saucepan or something, and there was some other kind of spinach and artichoke dip coated tenders. [Laughter] I don't know, but it was like, huh. I mean, there was… Call that creativity, or don't call that creativity, but it got me out of my own rut in thinking as a starting point.

And the other that was interesting, we've heard a lot of criticism about how learners could take advantage of this. Call that good, call that bad, but on the flip side, I think I mentioned this to you. I stole this idea from somebody else on Twitter, but the prompt went something like, teach me subject X in 52 weekly lessons, create a syllabus, a list of readings and supporting resources, and start with day X, and I did that changing out, kind of your tuning thing, changing out the subject matter and changing out the day.

So a hypothetical 52 lessons, and I would get whatever the topic, Day 37, it's this, and I'm not saying that what resulted is going to replace any faculty necessarily, but there was a reading, there was an additional, usually a video that you might watch or something in addition, and there was a topic that was addressed, and then it would also include a 10 question quiz, which you'd have to come up with yourself, but I would hope that nobody would just take that and use it as is, but as, again, as starter dough, it wasn't a bad thing, and I can even say things, you might appreciate this, as I was tuning, I said, use only open licensed content, and it did.

Tom: Yep. I actually see an awful lot of utility in this tool, and I was saying to somebody that if I were a junior associate attorney in a firm who was responsible for doing research and writing briefs, I'd be a little nervous right now. I'd be trying to find some other value I could provide, and I'm not even thinking... The courses that I teach at UCF, the main one that I've taught the last couple years has been a writing for the business professional. It's basically a business writing course, and I have the students write adjustment letters, and instructions, and memos, and all kinds of stuff.

Good grief, this thing could do that in a matter of seconds probably just as well as what they did, and I'm kind of thinking, well, if they have access to this, why do I need to teach it because I'd rather focus on more higher-level concepts and writing responsive proposals for something, as opposed to just an adjustment letter to a client that you've wronged in some way. I think that this could actually help us elevate the level of what we're teaching in many ways. So, I don't know. Maybe we should talk about how students are reacting to it, and how we should potentially respond, although recognizing that it's still very early days.

Kelvin: Well, maybe the latter first because I think your example put me in mind of, we talked about this a little bit before, our friend and colleague, Dr. Kevin Yee at UCF's Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning, put up a webpage in your webspace that we'll put in the show notes where he classified three different kinds of approaches that one might take. He was trying to be value neutral, I think, but three different kinds of approaches one might take as a faculty member toward GPT, ChatGPT.

And then categorized resources related to all three of those, and the last one makes me think of what you were talking about with your attorney situation, which is, and what we've leaned into in this conversation, which is lean into the software's abilities. Don't see this as a threat. See this as something to harness and something to build upon. I'm going to go out on a limb and say, I think that's the, based on my observations, that's the minority perspective right now.

Tom: I agree.

Kelvin: I don't see as many people doing that.

Tom: Although I think within our community, I'm not sure it's a minority perspective. A lot of the people I follow and interact with, I think kind of are on that side of the spectrum.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: I think the rank-and-file faculty are much more on the, this is "the worst thing that's ever happened" end of the spectrum.

Kelvin: The end of days, which gets us to a lot of folks who are concerned with Kevin's Category #1 was "Neutralize the Software." So, all kinds of approaches and tricks and whatnot to work against, around the affordances of ChatGPT. I guess what you talked about, a company that was making a tool, I've seen certainly a lot of detection approaches. Homegrown, commercial…

Tom: I'm aware of at least three right now, two from companies and one from some kid at Columbia that just did it.

Kelvin: Exactly. [Laughter]

Tom: I think, and faculty have started adopting it, and I'm sure there's more.

Kelvin: The second category, I do find interesting as well though, and I don't think that all of these are necessarily mutually exclusive, but Kevin's Category 2 is "Teach Ethics, Integrity, and Career-Related Skills." That could go hand in hand with lean into the software's abilities.

Tom: Yeah, I agree. Although just teaching ethics I think is hard.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Because you either believe in that or you don't.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: And there are an awful lot of instances of academic misconduct that happen on every campus everywhere.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: That even at service academies where there's really strong honor codes, it still happens. So, I like the idea though of the career-related skills. It's like, all right, so you want to be this thing, you want to be an accountant or something. Well, if you use ChatGPT, it's going to actually prevent you from learning what you need to know to be an accountant, or a nurse, or a doctor, or whatever it is you need to be. So, you're actually working against your professional ambitions if you do this in this way. I think that might resonate with students maybe a little bit more.

Kelvin: But on the flip side, I mean, back to your however you phrased it, your junior paralegal, or attorney, or whatever, it's okay, you need to be able to perform this skill, but if you use

this tool, you can do that more efficiently. You take the output, and you tweak it, and I keep thinking…

Tom: I wonder how different... I understand it's qualitatively further down this spectrum, but I feel like it's on the same spectrum as tools like Grammarly or spell-check.

Kelvin: Spell-check.

Tom: Or grammar check. As I type, I get things suggested to me that finish my sentences for me, and I either, I can just press Enter, or Tab, or whatever and Word finishes my sentences for me.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: So, this seems like it's just taking that a little further.

Kelvin: Yeah. PowerPoint, what do they call it, Design Ideas?

Tom: Yeah, I love that.

Kelvin: I do too. And it's like, I would've never thought to zoom in on this little area and add this little chart…

Tom: Nor would I have been able to. I would not have dedicated the time to change my PowerPoint template to resize the image, and put the border on it, and everything else that it does. It just makes it better.

Kelvin: So, is that unethical? Is that Kelvin or Tom taking credit for some machine creative idea? Nobody talks that way.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Nobody talks that way about that.

Tom: Well, and this is probably, we don't have time to really explore this in the couple of minutes we have left, but within the fiction writing community, I've seen some stuff about the ethics of using ChatGPT or other generative chat-based kinds of writing producers, and not just the ethics of selling that as fiction if it's decent or not, but if it's been taught based on the writings of others. So, say Kelvin Thompson has written a series of romance novels for Harlequin.

Kelvin: How did you know?

Tom: Yeah. And this chat tool has been tuned and taught based on instantly analyzing the entire library of Kelvin Thompson, and then you've been successful, and you say, write a romance novel in the style of Kelvin Thompson, and it does. Well, is that a copyright violation on you and your work? It's not something that you wrote, but it's stealing your style, and there's a lot of gray areas that are going to be explored in the courts, I think in the years to come.

Kelvin: Yeah. And not even just legality, but just, again, back to ethics, back to propriety, back to social norms, what is it to do... I keep thinking about, like you said, we don't have time, but I think of "Star Trek" was so innovative in so many ways, and there's a famous book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck,* and so forth, but so many times where technology is modeled as doing a lot of scaffolding, like "Computer, devise a typical mid-20th century house environment, swap out the couches, change the color… add three characters of…" and then convey a scenario, and then you add your own little creative elements to it, but you didn't hand code all those things, Ensign Paris, or whatever, Lieutenant Paris, whatever. So, this is really stretching our thinking about what the value-add of the truly human really is.

Tom: Well, can I end with a really dystopian thought? [Laughter]

Kelvin: Oh, why not?

Tom: So, let's project 20 years in the future in our profession of online learning. So, we've got AI that can write content that is organized, researched, and a course's worth of content. I don't think we're that far from it today, but let's project 20 years in the future. I think it's probably completely realistic to expect that could be. I want a course on business writing, go build that. It could probably do it. We've got AI art now that is producing full, gorgeous comic books completely developed by computers.

There was some stuff that made the rounds on Twitter of a guy who used ChatGPT and a voice emulator, and had no human interaction, and got a $12 refund from Wells Fargo on his bank account just by using the voice prompts, which is terrifying, and that just happened. Then we've got these deep fake, you can't tell it's not a human being, AI persons. You combine all that together, you could just put a prompt, build an online course. I want a female African American professor in her forties. I want the art in the style of art deco 1940s, and then it'll spit out an online course that's probably good. So, where are we and the faculty we support adding value in this? I think we're going to have to really pay attention to that.

Kelvin: I think that's great, and humorously, I'll say, and then if you had about half of the enrolled students, if they were just phoning it in and having their own AI responding to them, you could have one AI teaching half a class full of other AIs.

Tom: [Laughter] Well, it's like the Wells Fargo thing. So, it was like an AI voice prompt system was talking to this guy's AI voice ChatGPT, and real money was moving around. It was no humans talking to each other.

Kelvin: Very strange.

Tom: It's like something right out of some sort of cyberpunk novel.

Kelvin: Now with that in mind, I cannot not, not, invoke what I seem to recall as Cathy Davidson from HASTAC's famous quote from a few years back. I want to say it was in an *Inside Higher Ed* piece or something. Seems like I've seen it quoted before, and I hope I've got the citation correct, but speaking of herself and others, because people have always gotten bent out of shape about technologies usurping faculty roles, and she said, "Look, if we can be replaced by a computer in this role, perhaps we should be. If all we're adding is

something that could be easily emulated by a computer, what are we really doing?" So, always be looking for the affordances of the truly human, I think.

Tom: Yeah. And I think that maybe is a way to close this up. You and I are both on the end of the spectrum, I think where it's, “Lean into it.” It's a losing battle to try and…

Kelvin: Absolutely.

Tom: Hold back this tide. So, let's surf it the best we possibly can.

Kelvin: Yep. Well said.

Tom: So, would you like me to try and land the plane here?

Kelvin: Please do.

Tom: All right. So, technological innovations like ChatGPT are tools that we can harness to benefit student learning – or not, as the case may be, and it's up to us as digital learning professionals to lead the way in being adaptable and innovative in all of our approaches.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right. That's right. Well said. We'll monitor this, and we'll see how it plays out. Would love to hear from folks who have differing opinions. We'd love to bring a counter perspective to bear in here, but we've got to be paying attention. I think that's right. Do you think we squeeze in a plug before the plane takes off again?

Tom: Yeah. We're already over time. Let's squeeze it in.

Kelvin: [Laughter] Well, dear listeners, if you like what you get out of these TOPcast episodes, would you please be kind enough to tell a trusted colleague and invite them to listen, and then maybe you discuss the topics together? Word of mouth recommendations are a slow, but steady way to increase our listenership.

Tom: Especially with your topics like this.

Kelvin: That's right. That's right. Have a beverage, and those guys are idiots. I'm not having any ChatGPT in my class. [Laughter] Well, Tom, I'm sad that I was not able to share the cup of coffee with you, pour it out into your cup, but I'm glad we were able to get together and have this collegial conversation over our individually poured cups of coffee.

(Musical outro)

Tom: There you go.

Kelvin: And until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.