TOPcast Episode #132:
Lessons from Leading a Remote Online Learning Team

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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. How are you, this fine Friday?

Kelvin: [Laughter] Well, intermittently frustrated with all the technology SNAFUs we've been experiencing.

Tom: The listening and watching audience will have no clue of all of the technical ridiculousness that happened prior to us hitting record. So, yeah.

Kelvin: Here's hoping that proves to be true.

Tom: [Laughter] So, I did mention Friday, we don't often talk about the actual days that we record because those are not the days they get released, but it is a Friday, and Friday afternoon that we're recording this. So, we often talk about weather. What's the weather in Kentucky today?

Kelvin: It's sunny and blue sky out there. And let's... [Makes news report-like sounds] Oh, weather's unavailable because I'm in Airplane Mode. [Laughter] I think it's about 29 or 30 I think outside.

Tom: Well, here in lovely Central Florida, it's been a bit gloomy today. It's been a rainy day.

Kelvin: Gloomy.

Tom: Yeah. And cool for us, it's probably 60 degrees out.

Kelvin: Oh, yeah. It's rough for you. We're looking to be up 60, 61 as a high mid next week and rainy.

Tom: Yeah, that's like today for us.

Kelvin: Warm and rainy, and you think of it as cold and rainy.

Tom: It's cold and rainy. Yeah, absolutely.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: [Laughter] Well, cool. I thought I saw your mug. Yeah, your Spider-Man mug. Kelvin, what's in your thermos today?

Kelvin: Well, in the thermos, Tom, is a coffee, not unlike a lot that I bring. As I think maybe you and our listeners know I often purchase coffees from roasters throughout the US, from places in which I have never set foot, I have this online coffee service, and they curate, and they come up with really some excellent coffees. Unless I'm traveling for a conference and stumble into a coffee shop, I wouldn't run across otherwise. So, this coffee is one of those, it is a single-origin Ethiopia from Brandywine Coffee Roasters in Wilmington, Delaware. My coffee is tasty, I wish I could be sharing it with you. I can't wait to see if you can find a connection to my coffee. But what are you drinking?

Tom: So, I'm drinking nothing too special, San Francisco Bay Hazelnut Cream. So, nice afternoon, desserty coffee, but it's tasty, and I am enjoying it. Mine might have the same theme as yours.

Kelvin: Oh.

Tom: Because we ordered ours through our friends at Amazon. That was online, and it got delivered here to the house. So, it was sort of hybrid. [Laughter] It's online and personal.

Kelvin: So, you didn't get it from San Francisco, yourself?

Tom: No, I did not. No, in fact, we didn't even go across the street to the grocery store and get this. So yeah, that's my guess at the connection, that it was something that you purchased online and there was a certain amount of convenience in that.

Kelvin: [Laughter] Yeah, and I guess pulling that thread a little bit, we were talking about this on another related topic before we hit record as well, but there can sometimes be affordances of online only experiences. So, I wouldn't have run across all these diverse coffees from around the country if I didn't have this service saying, "Hey, here's a great one. Do you want to buy it?" I'm like, "Oh, that sounds great, I would." And you wouldn't be able to have your San Francisco Bay stuff. So yeah, I think there's something to be said for that.

Tom: I think that's true. So, with Amazon where I got this coffee, it feels like it's got an infinite warehouse of everything that I want. I could not go down the street to Publix, which is our grocery store here in Florida, we love Publix, and buy this because they just don't stock it. But I can go online and find anything I want in any amount that I want. And I'll say this in a very self-serving way, as a mystery novelist, my books are not always stocked in your local Barnes and Noble, but anybody can go out, and buy it online. As they should.

Kelvin: And go ahead and pause the recording now, and do that.

Tom: It's a shameless plug.

Kelvin: Thomasbcavanagh.com.

Tom: That's right.

Kelvin: [Laughter] That's right. Well, to make the transition away from the e-commerce portion of the podcast. Tom, you recently interviewed our colleague Joseph Riquelme about his experience leading a completely remote online learning team. You want to tell us about Joseph and that interview?

Tom: Yeah, happy to. It was a really good discussion. Joseph is an old friend who has moved to this new position out of state, but it was nice to catch up. So, Joseph Riquelme is Vice Provost and Chief Online Officer at American University in Washington, DC. Previously, when we knew him, he served as Assistant Vice President of Online Education at Florida International University. So yeah, I really enjoyed the conversation, and as you said, we talked about the challenges, but also the benefits of leading a remote workforce.

Kelvin: Yeah. Well, through the modern technological marvel that is podcast time travel, here is your interview with Joseph Riquelme.

(Musical transition)

Tom: So, Joseph, thank you for being on TOPcast.

Joseph Riquelme: Thank you. Great to be speaking here with you today, Tom.

Tom: Yeah, it's nice to see you again, we miss you in Florida. As a longtime colleague within the state university system, I think American University's gain was Florida's loss. So, it's nice to chat.

Joseph: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Tom: So…

Joseph: We had a lot of good times in the Florida System talking about online education as a system, and how to improve it.

Tom: Absolutely. Yeah. Well, believe it or not, we're still talking about it. [Laughter] But that's not what we're talking about today. So, what I'd like to do is chat about a theme that Kelvin and I have been revisiting periodically since the pandemic started, which is about remote work. The pandemic really has shaken up how our workdays and work weeks are structured, not just in higher ed, but across, I guess, all industries. You have been maybe a little more aggressive or forward-thinking in your remote work strategy than maybe even we have here where we have a hybrid schedule. So, I wonder if maybe you could just start by describing the kind of remote work structure that you have at American U.

Joseph: Sure. Yeah, I think what's unique is that we were born in the pandemic, almost. Our team and I started two weeks before the pandemic. So, when we were scrambling to build a team, we recognized we wanted to bring on great talent at a pretty quick pace, and so, we decided that location wasn't a factor. We were going to build this team remote. So, we put together a team. We have about 10 employees, instructional designers, spread across different locations. We have someone in Arizona, someone in New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Florida. I mean, they are very well spread out. And it's worked great. I mean, we've built a great culture and team, and we're going to continue to have this model where we have some remote, couple of folks that are local, but really, we don't make it a requirement when we're doing our searches. We're really just focused on the skillsets and the personalities.

Tom: Do the local people come in periodically or does it really still... I mean, I know what commuting is in the DC area. [Laughter]

Joseph: Yeah. So, we have some that come in once a week. Well, in particular, we have a media person who comes to campus a little bit more often because they do physical recordings. Although, even if you think about, and Tom, we've been in this industry a long time, 10 years ago you were using much more office equipment to do recordings. Now webcams, microphones, so many households have nice setups, or you could lend them equipment that they're doing a lot of recordings at home. So, even that is not something that happens as much as it used to. But we do have a couple folks that come in once a week, or if there's a department meeting, or an event or something like that, then we'll have folks come in.

Tom: Yeah, that's actually another question I had, which was how often do you get everybody together in person, or do you? And what do you try to do to maximize that face-to-face time?

Joseph: Yeah. So, we do bring the whole entire team together once a term, really just fall and spring. So, we fly everyone in two or three days, and really do a mix of things. We have a couple of sessions where it's just general talking about the future, talking about what's going on. But we're really focused more of that time on team building and campus events. The first time, giving them campus tours; this time, actually at the end of October, we're bringing the team in. There's an idea center on campus that a faculty runs that we're going to go and spend two hours there with that faculty, go over some research, and some of the cool work that they're doing in VR. So, really trying to think about how do we engage them

with American University and the campus life and the community. That's the focus in team building when we come in. The instructional design training, we could do that over Zoom, so we try not to spend too much time on that type of work, but really just more the interactions in person.

Tom: What do you do in the meantime? I think that that's probably a great way to establish some relationships, but to nurture and develop that culture over time, I imagine you probably have some more intentional things that you do remotely.

Joseph: Yeah. It's interesting, when we started off, we were talking about collaboration and different things. Now I think folks that run and work in online shops, I think we're a little bit more advanced in online collaborations because oftentimes faculty don't like to come into the office that much. And so, in our case, we were already doing a good job of editing documents or working on documents together on either Drive or Office360. But the communications, email's a little bit too formal. Microsoft Teams, it works, but it didn't give us some of the flexibility that we wanted in the way that it's currently controlled. So, we use Slack as a team, and it's great because we have the random channel, the projects channels, and you have a bunch of different channels that really help the team communicate, joke around, share things when it's Friday or different topics.

I feel in order to build a good culture, good team, you always need different types of personality on your team. You have some folks that are more introverted, some that are not. So, hopefully you build a team that you have someone that's like the team energizer, that's constantly posting, constantly engaging and drawing that interaction. We have that on our team, and I think because of that, there's a lot of neat things that happen, and that you learn about people's personal through Slack. We also have monthly meetings with the full team, and there's pockets of managers that have their own regular standing meetings. But as a group, we have once a month standing meetings as well that we use a little bit of time to talk personal stuff, and then another time to talk business.

There's other cool things that we've done in some of those Teams, Zoom meetings. I remember early on when we didn't have the opportunity to bring our team onto campus because of the pandemic, we did a virtual escape room on Zoom, and it was much cooler than I ever would've imagined it to be. I really didn't comprehend how you could do it, but it was pretty neat because it was a place that pivoted, and essentially, they had someone in the escape room where your team told them what to do, and they did it. And the team loved that. Another time we bought them Uber lunch passes, and everyone had lunch together. So, it's a mix of things that we've got going on.

Tom: Yeah, it sounds like you just have to be creative, and do what you have to do. You mentioned faculty, and something that we have found, it's been an evolution here, is that when instructional designers are meeting with faculty, in 2019 that would've happened in person, either in the faculty's office or in one of our consultation rooms. Now, that seems to all be happening virtually like this. Have you found it pretty seamless to just continue working with faculty virtually as opposed to what maybe might have been a more traditional expectation at a school like AU?

Joseph: Yeah, the way I think about it, let's say you had a group of managers in a company, they get together in a conference room, and they're usually discussing things, brainstorming, but the work with an instructional designer and faculty often revolves around looking at materials in the course. So, I remember back in the days in Florida being in the office, and you'll see the instructional designer and a faculty member on their computer, pointing out things. That's where I think Zoom lends itself great, because you're still getting that same kind of screen sharing and working on stuff together with the faculty. So, we haven't seen any issues. In fact, we had a school who really wanted us to hold office hours, and asked us to, and we said, "All right, how about this? We'll set up a Calendly invite, so that if faculty want to meet in person, they could sign up, and then we'll have an instructional designer come on campus." And so, like that, we have an option for those that want to meet in person.

Guess what? Over the whole semester, not one faculty member signed up for that meeting. So, we recognized it wasn't worth having a person sit in an office by themselves, so that's where we did all that. Granted, there are times now that we're getting a little bit more back to normal business, that a department chair will say, "Hey, we're going to do a department meeting, can you come in? Can you provide some training?" Or something like that. Then we'll make sure, and we'll accommodate, and we'll bring someone on campus.

Tom: Yeah, we found the same thing. I agree, I've heard that from our instructional designers, that the screen sharing aspect of Zoom, or Teams, or whatever you're using is actually qualitatively better than huddling over a laptop.

Joseph: And a question for you, Tom, what are you seeing on the recording side as well, like media creation? Are you finding less people coming into the studio versus just doing recordings at home on Zoom or on Kaltura?

Tom: I think it depends on the kind of media that needs to be produced. So, if it's something like weekly announcements, it's way easier for faculty to do those now than it was a couple of years ago. But we still have plenty of demand for our instructional video team to do more produced video, more enduring course content that will have a longer shelf life, that requires a higher production value. So, I think we have both going on, but maybe what we're seeing is more of the just spontaneous video that doesn't have a long shelf life.

Joseph: Yeah, like welcome videos. Yeah, correct. Yeah, that's true though, the more interactive media type production, those are still in high demand.

Tom: Yeah, and we want them to be good, like everybody. What about with students? Do you have direct interaction with students, and have you found that the remote experience has helped with that?

Joseph: Yeah, our team doesn't so much interface with students. We're leveraging Canvas 24/7 technical support, and so we really don't have interactions with students. If you think about where we are today compared to 10, 15 years ago, even technical support, students rarely need technical support. At least with Canvas, the learning management system, they've grown so accustomed to it, whether it's in their high

schools, or because of the pandemic, that it's quite low. Most of the technical support questions that we would get are related to perhaps a content issue in a course, something that went wrong, like a setting, and then it gets escalated, and we've got to troubleshoot it.

So, we haven't had any issues there. One of the things that we're looking at, as I'm sure all of higher education, is all those student services, making sure that we have the option of the online modality for all the different student services, whether it's advising, whether it's the registrar, how do we offer more of that? Because we're seeing students want to continue to have that type of experience that they have with Amazon or with any other modern day retail type environment.

Tom: Yeah, I've heard that Amazon comparison, and I think it's a great goal. It's hard though to measure up against the user experience and investment that's behind Amazon for us to try and mimic that.

Joseph: That is true. And the hours of service and all that is something that's challenging for universities.

Tom: So, if somebody in a position like yours or mine would be considering moving to a 100% remote workforce to support online development and delivery, what advice would you give them? What would you say to do or not do?

Joseph: It's a good question. I feel, and it might be my opinion, is that if you have a team that is able to build a great culture on campus, they're going to be able to do that online. Yes, the water cooler conversations don't happen as easily, you just have to be more intentional about it. So, I don't think the lift to building a good team culture is extremely high in a virtual world. I just think you have to be more intentional; you have to implement the right technology to support it. You've got to have the Slack, you've got to have the Zoom, you've got to have the collaboration tools.

It's interesting when you interact with different departments or different folks on campus, you'll see some people are emailing files and trying to collaborate via emailing files. And that's versus using the online. So, I think part of it is the training, setting the standards of how you want to operate, having the technology infrastructure to support it, and the right leadership. I mean, I think it all really starts with the leadership. I think if you could do it on campus, you could do it virtually, and it gives you a lot of opportunities to retain great employees, some flexibility. I don't advocate for every single position at a university to be remote, I think there's unique fields. I think instructional design, building online programs, digital education, just supporting faculty with their web-assisted courses. I think that lends itself great to an online workforce.

Tom: Yeah, that's cool. Maybe at some point you and some others, I know that Karen Pedersen at Kansas State is doing the same thing, and there may be a consulting businesspeople who've been through it can hang a shingle out and help others as they move forward. Well, I really appreciate you taking time to talk to us about this. Maybe we'll check in at some point in the future and see if there's additional

things that you've learned along the way. So, on behalf of Kelvin, Joseph, thank you so much for being on TOPcast.

Joseph: All right. I appreciate it, Tom. Have a good one. Thank you.

(Musical transition)

Kelvin: Well, Tom, that was your interview with Joseph Riquelme.

Tom: Indeed, it was. It was a good conversation; I think that he is a thoughtful guy. And man, imagine starting your job, I don't know, what was it? Just literally weeks…

Kelvin: Couple weeks or something like that. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, two weeks or something, right before the pandemic started. That was a crazy time, and a crazy time to be making a transition like that. I've known several people who've taken jobs during the pandemic, including our president, but to start it, and then have the whole thing turned upside down on you, that must have been a big challenge. But it sounds like they've improvised and overcome, as they say.

Kelvin: Yeah. Improvise, adapt, overcome. Yeah, so anything that stands out to you from that conversation that you want to explore a little bit?

Tom: Well, there was one thing in particular, I know that you and I spent a lot of time talking about it when you were here, that notion of being intentional about culture. Because you don't want people to get atomized, and disconnected, and just not to really know each other because of just you're interacting with them at a distance, through a screen. And so, doing those kinds of things that humanizes it for people and makes it a fun place to work because I think we all do better work when we enjoy the work and the people we work with.

But even at a deeper level, and you've heard me talk about this, that I think the kind of work that we do in online education requires you to be innovative and think outside the box. There's risk inherent in that kind of an approach with innovation, and risk, and thinking outside the box. So, there's risk with that. And in order to take those kinds of risks, you have to have trust, and you have to trust the people you're with. I just think that it's harder if you never are in the same room with somebody to build that kind of trust. If you, just because of circumstance, can't be in the same room with somebody, I think you have to do some of the things that Joseph was talking about in order to build that kind of trust, those kinds of relationships.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's good. The things that I recall him saying when you asked him about giving advice for leading a remote team, you mentioned that he said intentionality. I think intentionality is true regardless, frankly, of whatever modality. You should bring your intention, whatever you're going to do, do it, whether it's a hybrid team, or a fully in-person, or fully remote, whatever. But fair point. Earlier before that, he talked about how the technology tools have

matured, and bandwidth, and all that stuff. But he said, "Ensure the appropriate technology tools that will support what you're doing." I think he gave the example of, "Hey, this old school institutional tech, not as facile as we young hip team members use with our Slack." I make fun because I'm not hip enough to use Slack personally. [Laughter]

And he talked about the nature of the team member roles that maybe not every role lends itself, some do more than others. Then I thought it was interesting, he didn't elaborate a lot on this, but you've got to bring leadership. Which I think it reinforces the intentionality thing, but I think it's more than that. I think probably he means modeling, and being willing to make adjustments, and carry things out, and keep the main thing, the main thing. I assume all those things. But even as I recount those, I don't know that those are all exclusively remote things other than maybe the technology tools.

Tom: Yeah, I think you're right. But that leadership question, I think that's a good one because, I mean, they make an investment, I think, what did he say? Once a term to bring everybody in.

Kelvin: That's money.

Tom: Yeah. They spend the money to bring everybody in, so they have a couple of days together and I think that makes a big difference. There's a certain amount of just, I don't know, what's the term that was used here? One of our faculty members used during the pandemic, a cultural momentum, that you can build and then that carries you through some of the more isolated, if you will, experience that you might have if you're fully remote.

Kelvin: No, I think that's good. Put your money where your modality is. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, I guess so. But I agree with him that not every role is appropriate for it. Even here, we've got roles in our department that are faculty-facing or student-facing, that are responsible for getting faculty into the Faculty Multimedia Center to record on the lightboard. You've got to just be there for that; you can't do that remotely. So, there's just certain things. The quintessential example is, well, the groundskeeper can't work remotely because they got to ride the mower across the quad or whatever.

Kelvin: Although with the right telepresence robot… [Laughter]

Tom: I'm waiting for those robot lawnmowers for my own yard.

Kelvin: [Laughter] I have nightmares about those. Yeah, I think that's right. It's interesting here, I'm still working to assimilate into the existing culture before seeking to do too much to shift any cultural elements. But it's fascinating, things are rather low-key at the University of Louisville with regard to remote positions and hybridity. It's really, if you need to do it, do it, policy is broad, and there are some existing folks who are working remotely, out of state, or near out of state, and so forth.

And so, we were having some conversations just today about a division-wide, all hands meeting that will come up later this term and then the subsequent terms. We were talking about those reframing a little bit, and like we were talking about here, I talked about intentionality. Some of us were talking about, we don't have the budget to fly folks in if they're out of state, but we would certainly welcome folks if they want to drive across state lines, or get here any other way, that'd be great. But if we can't, then we have to provide access, some degree of hybridity, so that we're not excluding people. Those are the challenges of not being all one thing or all another thing.

Tom: Right, yeah. Neither fish nor fowl. [Laughter]

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right.

Tom: Well, do you think I should try to wrap it up, put a bow on it?

Kelvin: Yes, put it in the mail, Tom. Put it in the mail.

Tom: So, the nature of many of our roles in online education, and maybe especially in online education, has led some job seekers, we've certainly seen it here, to pursue a variety of remote opportunities. Going forward, ensuring the success of partially or even fully remote teams is going to become increasingly important in our field.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. We've got to figure out how to do that well.

Tom: Yep.

Kelvin: You think as the coffee grounds circle around at the bottom of my mug that we have time for a little plug?

Tom: Let's plug it. I already did my plug; you could do a plug. [Laughter]

Kelvin: [Laughter] Yeah, that's right. Yeah, I don't have a book to sell right this moment. Well, dear listeners, if you usually listen to the audio version of this podcast, did you know you could also watch a video version? Now, I don't know why, but apparently some people apparently like that kind of thing. So, you could. Conversely, if you are watching us right now, you could just listen while you're on the go and away from your screen. And maybe you should take a little time away from your screen. So, for either option or both, check out each episode's webpage, which is available online at our website home of TOPcast.online.ucf.edu. TOPcast.online.ucf.edu. Try a different modality for this podcast.

Tom: Yeah, mix it up.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Yeah, be hybrid.

Kelvin: Be hybrid. Be ambidextrous, something, something. [Laughter] All right. Well, Tom, I wish I could be sharing the actual coffee with you, but it was nice having virtual coffee with you. Look at that, we wouldn't be able to have this podcast if it wasn't for, as Joseph said, the maturity of our telecommunications technologies.

Tom: That's very true. Absolutely.

(Musical outro)

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

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.