TOPcast Episode #140: Maturing the Core Work of Online Education

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(*Intro Music*)

Tom: From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning…

Kelvin: And the University of Louisville's Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning…

Tom: I'm Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: You, dear listener, are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Welcome to our lovely podcast. I hope you like it. Show yourself around. Make yourself at home. Put your feet up. Have a cup of coffee. Do you agree, Kelvin?

Kelvin: I agree with all that, especially the have a cup of coffee part.

Tom: Ah, yes. Now, wait a minute. I just saw you drinking before we hit record, out of a completely different mug than what you just usually... [Laughter]

Kelvin: Oh, please. [Laughter]

Tom: How many cups of coffee do you have going?

Kelvin: That was Tim's quick editing on the fly.

Tom: Oh, sure.

Kelvin: That was a jump cut. No, no. No, so this is my water mug, and this is my coffee mug, as far as you know.

Tom: Wow. As far as I know. Holy cow. So, you're not a water bottle kind of guy. You're a water mug guy.

Kelvin: That's right, that's right, because I get to walk around with my ginormous Batman mug. Always be yourself, unless you can be Batman, in which case, be Batman.

Tom: Yeah, I've got a shirt like that that's too small for me that says the same thing. [Chuckle]

Kelvin: Oh, see, the mug's too big for me, so there you go.

Tom: There you go. Yeah. [Laughter] Between the two of us, it's just right.

Kelvin: [Laughter] That's right.

Tom: That's funny. That's funny. All right. Well, we might as well just jump into it then since we started talking about mugs and coffee. I assume there's some sort of a coffee connection and not a water connection, but you tell me if I'm wrong, Kelvin. What's in the thermos today?

Kelvin: Well, my coffee today in the thermos and in the cup, Tom, was sent to me by a colleague from the UK, Neil Mosley. It is a single-origin Ethiopia from James Gourmet Coffee based in Herefordshire ("herfordshur"), England. I believe that's the correct pronunciation. I don't know. Maybe it's Herefordshire ("herfordshire"), but I don't think they do that. It is a particularly tasty cup of coffee, better than most Ethiopias, and I love a good single-origin Ethiopia. So, this is particularly good. So, I told you about the coffee. I wonder if you can find a connection in my mug to today's episode topic.

Tom: I think even I can find a connection to this one. [Laughter] So, we are going to be talking to somebody from overseas, and what a coincidence it happens to be Ethiopia. [Laughter] No, it's not Ethiopia. It is the UK, and we are talking to Neil Mosley himself, provider of the coffee. Thank you, Neil.

Kelvin: That's right. So, the takeaway for the listeners at home is if you send us coffee, we will interview you on... [Laughter] No, that's not true. We will be very appreciative, but we were going to interview Neil, anyway, and he was kind enough. We exchanged coffee. I sent him some from Louisville. He sent me some from the UK. So, it was appropriate to…

Tom: Herefordshire ("herfordshur").

Kelvin: I think. Yeah.

Tom: Okay.

Kelvin: Yeah, Neil's actually in Cardiff, in Wales. He's an Englishman, but he's in Wales. But the coffee actually comes from England, but he gets it somewhere in…

Tom: In Ethiopia.

Kelvin: ...Wales. Yeah. [Laughter] No, it came from Ethiopia originally. Be careful. I'm going to start telling you all about this coffee, why I think it is particularly good. There's some kind of fermentation process. They call it winey. I don't mean like, "Really?" There's something in the fermentation that they call it a winey process, but it's interesting.

Tom: As in like Vintner wine?

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right. That's right. That's right. Interesting. Yeah.

Tom: Cool. All right. So, as we said, Kelvin, you recently interviewed our UK colleague, Neil Mosley.

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: Neil is an education consultant and designer who specializes in digital, online, and distance learning. That sounds familiar. In addition to consulting with various institutions, Neil is also a popular writer and speaker. He holds the position of Fellow of the Centre for Online and Distance Education at the University of London. Prior to his consulting work, he held positions at Imperial College and Cardiff University, which you've already referenced. So, is there anything special you want to say about the interview or highlight before we listen to it?

Kelvin: I think it stands on its own. Neil's a good guy, very thoughtful, got good things to share. It's nice to get somebody from across the pond, as it were. I think as long as we're keeping track of international guests, I guess we did have an Australian on one time as well.

Tom: I was going to mention that. Yeah, from Charles Sturt University. That was an interesting adaptive learning conversation.

Kelvin: That's right. But we'll happily welcome other international expert guests as well if you send us a pound of coffee, and we'll be happy to have you on. [Laughter]

Tom: Right. All right. So, through the magic of podcast time travel, here is your interview with Neil Mosley.

(*Musical Transition*)

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

Neil Mosley: It's good to be here, Kelvin. Yeah, looking forward to the conversation.

Kelvin: So, I don't mind saying, I think I told you this off microphone before. I think you're our first guest from the UK. We've had two Canadians, but now you've got UK on the leaderboard.

Neil: Fantastic. So, no pressure. I'm basically holding up the end of the country, so I'll do my best to represent. [Laughter]

Kelvin: I have complete confidence in you. [Laughter]

Neil: Good. Good, good, good.

Kelvin: So, we were talking a little bit in recent months about the similarities and differences of online learning in the UK, in the US, and I know in particular, you've been working on a maturity model for online education in the UK. But I wonder just for level-setting for our listeners if you might make just a quick observation or two about how you see similarities and differences, since most of our listeners are in the US, between the two countries, and then how that leads into the maturity model. Is that a fair setup?

Neil: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah, I guess one of the big differences that I've observed is I suppose a different level of maturity in relation to online education, irrespective of the learning design side of things. So, I guess my impression really, looking across to the US, is that perhaps US institutions and universities are a little bit further along in terms of online programs and perhaps being invested in online education a little bit more and particularly that manifesting in things like private partnerships around that side of things.

So, I've always looked at the US and thought that there seems to be more universities more strategically invested in online education in the US than there is in the UK. But I think that's one element where I think things are changing and evolving in the UK, and that's manifested in universities now looking to more strategically grow portfolios of online education. We're starting to see the kind of senior roles, the kind of directors of online education, and provosts of online education coming through, as well as universities setting up distinct online arms, so University of X Online. So, I suppose I've perceived a difference in terms of how strategically invested universities are over here in comparison to the US, but I think that's changing.

So, I think that's probably the main difference I observe, and I think just going on to, yeah, I guess what we're going to be talking about a little bit today in terms of learning design maturity, I think one of the reasons why I developed a learning design maturity model or framework is partly in response to that development, because I think that's one of the drivers for learning design, an interest in learning design growing in the UK. So, we've seen a growth in a number of learning design roles being recruited for in universities, seen a growth in learning design interventions within the design of programs.

But I think one of the big things that's generated interest and helped to develop things around that is around modality. So, to my earlier point, the greatest strategic interest in growing online distance learning portfolios, and the need of learning designers, and learning design in that endeavor, but I guess also then coming out of the pandemic, and blended learning being much more known, and adopted, and talked about, and the necessity of design around that. So, that's something on the differences, and I guess how they relate to the kind of model that I've developed for learning design.

Kelvin: Wonderful. Well, maybe it'd be helpful if you could walk us through in broad brushstrokes your model. As I recall, there are several levels, three levels, and then there are three dimensions of that. Would maybe you talk us through why those dimensions, and why those levels, and what they are?

Neil: Yeah, of course. Yeah. So, like you said, there's three dimensions. So, there's level of collaboration, design representation, and then the third one is what I've called evidence and underpinning of decisions and actions. Against all of those dimensions, there's three levels of maturity. So, my intention really behind this model is to try to keep it relatively simple, like all models and frameworks. I think they're not always perfect or all-encompassing, but I think this encapsulated really the challenges that I see institutions facing around achieving a greater level of learning design maturity, around making really good use of learning design professionals in institutions, and those having the most impact.

I think these are the three areas of particular challenge that not just universities, actually, but all organizations face when they're looking to really embed learning design and more intentional and thoughtful design of courses, and also creating the space, I suppose, and the conditions for thoughtful and the intentional design of courses, really. So, I can pick up each of those in turn, really. I think collaboration is a really important aspect because I think it's fair to say that in universities and in other organization, I suppose there's been maybe a legacy power differential between those who teach and those who are in other professional roles that

support that in some way. One byproduct of that is that I think learning design professionals can't always bring to bear the full array of their abilities. I think that can be a real shame and a real waste. So, I think collaboration is really, really important in order to leverage those skills that people have.

I think, I guess allied to that, certainly in the UK, there's a real growing number of responsibilities on those who teach. It's not simply just the balancing of teaching and research, but there's a whole range of different other responsibilities that come with being an academic in a university. There's much greater complexity. We've just seen in the last few months all of the talk about generative AI and what that might mean for educational experiences. But that's just one example of, I guess, technology driving a greater level of complexity.

So, I think where collaboration is important is in utilizing the skills of learning designers and those who support those who teach in higher education, but also, I think it's going to be necessary because things are more complicated, and there's greater burdens on those who teach. So, it's arguably self-preservation and sustainability, that actually, there's good levels of collaboration and shared trust and parity of esteem between people, such that learning design can really have fertile conditions for its use in universities. So, that's levels of collaborations. That's a big organizational culture change, probably aspect.

Then there's design representation, and I just talked to that really briefly, but this spans from really no main way of representing the designs of a course. You might just infer the intentions behind a course based on the materials that have been created around that. That's more the Level One aspect. But in terms of Level Three, we're looking at well-defined means of representing course designs that might take different formats, they might be more succinct that just maps out, maybe learning outcomes. They might be more of a journey map as students progress through courses.

So, those are well-defined means of representing design, and Level Three is that suite, that really solid means of communicating the intention behind courses. That also relates, I think, to the collaboration as well because that gives a means of everyone being involved in that experience, everyone partaking in communicating intent behind that, and involving themselves in that. So, that also relates to the collaborative aspect.

If I just briefly just talk about the last point, which is potentially a bit more nebulous, so this is evidence and underpinning of decisions and actions. I think how I'd describe that; the levels really go from limited to some to solid. I guess how I'd describe that is now I think we're pretty blessed with

a lot of evidence, and research, and information around learning, and around student experience. So, we have a lot of things to draw upon in designing educational experiences, and I think sometimes those things aren't really brought to bear in that work.

So, this is really a nod to that, to say, "Are those discussions being had? Are people grappling with those things and what it means for their courses? Are different perspectives being brought in in terms of the team that might be working on a course?" I listened to a podcast recently that was talking about a golden age of learning science and saying, "We're really blessed with all this information and research on how we learn, but the challenge is to get that information, and to translate that into educational experiences, and have us understand, and be able to grapple with that." So, that's the kind of model in essence, really, and probably some of the reasoning behind it.

Kelvin: No, that's very helpful, Neil. Thank you for walking us through that. Well, one, I think a lot of that rings true to me, the collaboration relationship between, as you put it, those who teach and those other professionals who are in complementary roles of various sorts. The design representation I find fascinating. I don't know if this rings true with you, but I've said for many, many years that what I find is online "tends to make the invisible visible, the formerly implicit explicit."

So, as design and intentionality in teaching becomes more evident, then you're able to step back and look at it, and look for improvements, look for gaps, and so forth. So, that rings true. Then that evidence and underpinning of decisions and actions, I think it's easy to talk about data, and data, certainly that's a part of the story. There's a quantitative and a qualitative dimension to all of that, and a story-ness to it in an anecdotal sense, and all that. It reminds me of a conversation Tom and I had recently in an episode about institutional context. There's quantitative and qualitative dimensions of context. Context has a lot to do not so much with what of this work, but certainly the how for sure. So, I think there's a lot of wisdom in your model. I assume that you find this useful in, to put it bluntly, a gap analysis. Where are you now as an institution, and where are there opportunities to mature, and to refine and to grow? Is that accurate?

Neil: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely, and I think that's some of the work that I do with organizations. I think my work spans the actual learning design work through to supporting organizations and universities in developing processes and developing maturity around these kinds of things. So, that certainly does help. I think this is born out of that work, really, and I suppose maybe years of thinking about this when you are going into institutions. This is probably the outworking of my mental model of the common challenges that I face, so certainly as a gap analysis.

I think the other way in which I find it useful is I think ultimately, you alluded to this, Kelvin, in terms of institutional context, because every institutional context is different. If you are going into an institution, there are certain constraints and parameters that you are ultimately going to work within. That limits impact, and it limits where you might get to in the short-term, in the medium-term, and long-term. So, this model can be a useful lens for you to evaluate the context that you're in, and I guess have realistic expectations and aims around what you can achieve, how far you can turn the dial. So, I think that's where I see its value. That might be a value for a learning designer or an instructional designer in their current context to say, "Where do I think we're at, and where should I invest my energies?" So, it has that dual purpose, I think.

Kelvin: I think that's excellent. I was just about to ask what kind of a takeaway, as we begin to wrap up, might you suggest for our listeners, but I think you just did that, right? This gives us a lens, or a set of lenses, to look at our own work through anew. I had a qualitative research instructor once in my grad program who said, "We always seek to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar." That's what we seek to do in qualitative research, and I think there's a certain amount of that here as well. I can't tell you how excited I've been to have you join us, Neil. I'm looking forward to staying in touch and maybe having you back on again on this topic and on others.

Neil: Yeah, that would be great. Yeah, that'd be great, Kelvin. Thank you.

(*Musical Transition*)

Tom: So, Kelvin, that was your interview with Neil Mosley.

Kelvin: Yeah, good guy, that Neil Mosley. Very thoughtful, right?

Tom: Yeah, yeah. The whole idea of this framework is really interesting. As he was describing it, I was trying to picture it in my head and how we could potentially apply something like that in our own individual context.

Kelvin: Yeah, and I don't think we got into this, but we'll stick all this in the show notes. But Neil was telling me that because I asked him off-mic where this came from, and he had been doing some work with some institution where it crossed into building intersecting architecture, and construction, and so forth. There's this construct called building information modeling, especially popular in the UK. He started thinking, "Well, what would something like that look like around learning design, online education?" So, he's got an article about that that's public, we'll put in the show notes, and he's CC licensed his model framework. We'll stick that in the show

notes as well if people want to drill down into it further. But that's where it sources back to, which I thought was interesting.

Tom: Yeah, it reminded me at least as I was listening in my head to some of the EDUCAUSE digital learning and other kinds of benchmarking that they've done where you rate yourselves on a level of maturity, or adoption, or how implemented something is on campus. Then it ends up with this radar spider chart. You can see how you compare against benchmarks. That's probably more complex than what Neil was describing, which to Neil's credit, he even talked about trying to simplify it and keep it at a certain level that doesn't over-complicate it. I appreciate that.

Kelvin: Yeah, not perfect, I think he said, but still gives you... Yeah, and I think the other thing is I think I may have framed it up as online education, and then he very clearly framed it as learning design. But the implications are there for wider implementation. So, I think that he sees learning design, or we might say instructional design, as a lever toward more systematic and strategic online education, I think. But it is still an interesting, zoomed-in spot about how do we see the work of instructional design? We've certainly talked about that a lot over the last three years during the pandemic response and so forth, the rise of the instructional designer as it were. So, I think that's a really interesting zoom-in, the collaboration thing, the design representation, and then what evidence underpinning decision making is there, but it seems to all center around learning design or instructional design.

Tom: Yeah, yeah, that's what it seems to me. I like the fact that there was an element of evidence that... I think the word was underpinning it or something. I think it's important not to just talk in abstracts, but to also ground it in, "Here's an example." Cool.

Kelvin: Also, probably worth reiterating Neil's closing comment, just so it doesn't get lost, because I said, "I was going to ask you to wrap up, and you already did. See ya! Bye." I would hate for that to get lost in the shuffle, and I think that's the idea of instructional designers just individually using this framework in their current situations to guide them wisely in where to invest their energy for the most benefit in pushing our collective work forward. I think the implication of that is if your organization's already doing pretty well in one dimension, maybe that's not where you need to be expending your energy, I think is the way I would use that, I think.

Tom: Yeah, yeah, that makes sense. I think it's also probably consistent with how he said that maybe he felt like the state of online learning in the UK wasn't quite as mature as in the US, but that's changing. So, there might be areas where certain institutions are doing better than others, and to your

point, maybe focus on those areas that you really need to develop, if you had to prioritize.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. Shall I try to put the metaphorical plane on the metaphorical tarmac?

Tom: Let's see if we can bring this one in for a landing.

Kelvin: So, we might say that while institutional contexts vary greatly, we've been talking a lot about institutional context, common approaches to conceptualizing and classifying our online education work, such as Neil's framework, they're very helpful, engaging where we are now and how we can advance our work successfully. How's that?

Tom: That sounds good. Sounds like it is a nice bow on the plane, so to speak.

Kelvin: Happy birthday.

Tom: So, do you mind indulging me in a plug?

Kelvin: Plug away.

Tom: But here's what's different. It's not even a plug for us.

Kelvin: What?

Tom: It's a plug for somebody else. As we are prone to do sometimes, we like to make our listeners aware of other podcasts that we think are worth listening to on occasion or maybe even all the time. This one is one that I actually appeared on as it launched. I think I was the first guest, which was nice to be asked, and I think they're doing a good job. So, we're going to put a little spotlight on the *Teach & Learn* podcast. So, *Teach & Learn* is a podcast for curious educators, hosted by our friend Dr. Cristi Ford. The show features candid conversations with some of the sharpest minds in the K-20 education space. Join Cristi every two weeks as she discusses trending educational topics, teaching strategies, and delves into the issues plaguing schools and higher education institutions today. So, take a listen. Cristi's good people. Cristi has actually been a guest on this show in the past, so yeah, we're happy to give her a plug here.

Kelvin: Indeed.

(*Outro Music*)

Tom: Cool. All right. Well, Kelvin, thank you for the interview with Neil. Neil, thank you for being on and for sharing your coffee. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.