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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 am 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's life?

Kelvin: It's good. I just like to vary the delivery of the name and just see what happens.

Tom: Yeah, okay. Keeping it fresh, keeping it real, keeping it 100, whatever all the kids say these days.

Kelvin: I don't even know what that means.

Tom: I'm probably using it wrong, but whatever. That's how hip I am. [Laughter]

Kelvin: Here's a shout-out to a pop culture reference, so a little slow to get there, but we've been enjoying “Only Murders in the Building,” of which there are now three complete seasons. And Selena Gomez's character is obviously a much younger person than either Martin Short or Steve Martin. And so, kind of a running gag is periodically their malapropisms, their misuses of hip youngster slang, and she just sort of shakes her head.


Kelvin: [Laughter] Yes.
Tom: Cool. All right, well we are not here to do our pop culture reviews or embarrass ourselves with our lack thereof. [Laughter] We are here to drink coffee and chat about stuff. And there you go, drinking coffee. I have my own as well.

Kelvin: Is that coffee?

Tom: It is coffee. It is my afternoon go-to, my Gorilla Decaf. And it has, I'm sorry to say for you, Kelvin, some pumpkin spice flavor in it. Yes, I know how you feel, but it is thematically tied for me.

Kelvin: Well, why don't you make a connection to today's episode topic, Dr. Cavanagh.

Tom: The only way I can make the connection is to give it away, so maybe I'll let you go first.

Kelvin: Okay. All right. Well, my coffee today, Tom is a single-origin Ethiopia Sidamo Nura Korate from Black Gold Coffee Roasters in Venice, Florida. And thinking back to even before you and I were baby podcaster and about the time that I started getting more serious about coffee brewing and I would start bringing the thermos of coffee into the office and sharing it around a little bit, I sourced from this roaster, Black Gold. So, I associate them with my stepping up my coffee game and a whole new boost to my personal brand as, I don't know, “The Coffee Guy.” So, I think the coffee is pretty tasty. I'm hoping you can find a connection to today's topic along with yours in your cup. What you got?

Tom: Yeah, I don't know. Yours is maybe a little bit more tenuous than mine maybe, something about boost and kind of taken to the next level. [Laughter]

Kelvin: Stepping up. That's right. That's right.

Tom: Yeah. There's something in there, I think.

Kelvin: That's right. That's right.

Tom: So, I'll give it away and then I'll talk about my connection.

Kelvin: Yeah, sure. You do that.

Tom: We are talking about innovation today, and how innovation is kind of manifested in our work, and how we kind of think about innovation, foster a culture of innovation, and all of that. So, it's a regular cup of coffee…

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: With pumpkin spice flavor in it that was added after the fact. You know what? I think back 10 years, maybe more. I don't remember much about pumpkin spice. It
seems like it's a relatively recent coffee innovation, maybe longer for those who've been paying attention. [Chuckle] But it's all the rage now. It's an innovation that has really impacted, I think, coffee consumption in a certain time of the year.

Kelvin: It's true. Shout out here. I can't resist. There is a podcast episode from a podcast I listened to periodically with three historians called the “Past Present Pod,” and I remember this probably five years ago now. They did a great episode about the rise of pumpkin spice, and it was a very thoughtful episode. It'll put things in the context of the Industrial Revolution, migration to cities away from rural settings, all the way to the dominance of Starbucks in your cup. So…

Tom: Well, there you go. There's my point.

Kelvin: We'll put a link in the show note. That's right.

Tom: Okay.

Kelvin: You were right there with them.

Tom: Cool. So, why are we talking about innovation today, Kelvin?

Kelvin: That's what I was going to ask you, Tom. Now I kind of know why we are. Because well, at least I'll start the story, and you can finish it. Tom, you recently interviewed Jared Stein, and for those listeners who are unfamiliar, Jared is co-author with Dr. Charles Graham, former TOPcast guest of the book Essentials for Blended Learning, A Standards-Based Guide now in its second edition. And after 13 years at higher education institutions, and 11 years as a VP at Instructure, the folks who bring us the Canvas LMS, Jared Stein is now the founder and principal consultant at Rarebird Ed Tech, a consultancy practice for educational technology startups. So, Jared is an innovative kind of guy with quite a pedigree in innovation, but why don't you take us on from there? What do you want to say about this before we cut to it?

Tom: Yeah, well that was the subject of our conversation. That was sort of the theme that I was asking Jared to comment on. And it was in the context of having Jared as our keynote speaker for our inaugural Digital Learning Day, which was a day where we kind of brought faculty from all across campus together to showcase some of their awesome work that they're doing in digital and online learning. We crowdsourced the selection of some grant funds that we have to give out to faculty who've made proposals to do innovative things in the space. And so, it just kind of was an innovative theme of a day, and Jared was a great person to kick us off as a keynote. He did a fantastic job. And then while we had him in person, I thought it would be great to kind of just go a little deeper into those thoughts with him.

If you are watching this online on video as opposed to listening to it, you'll see that the background looks a little different compared to what you usually see
when we record our interviews, which are often in virtual Zoom sessions. This was one that where we went and sat in the little library space off of our conference space on campus. And so, it's a little bit of a different look, and maybe sounds a little bit different, but it was nice to sort of be in person across the chairs from each other as we talked, and I really enjoyed the conversation.

Kelvin: Well, that's great. Well, through the modern technological marvel that is podcast time travel here, Tom, is your interview with Jared Stein.

(Musical transition)

Tom: Well, Jared, thank you so much for being on TOPcast.

Jared: It's my pleasure. Thank you, Tom.

Tom: So, you're here today at the University of Central Florida. You gave a keynote to our inaugural Digital Learning Day, which we were very grateful for, and it sort of put me in mind of innovation and especially tech-powered innovation. You gave some really interesting examples in your talk, and I thought you might be kind of a unique person to ask because you've had this sort of perch looking at higher ed in general from your background, and I thought you might be able to kind of share some wisdom with us on what you think is innovative, how you've seen that expressed in different institutions, and maybe any other sort of observations you might have when it comes to particularly digital innovation in higher ed.

Jared: Yeah. Well, I'll give it a shot, Tom. It's a big topic, and it's not one that I would say I'm going to teach a master class on, but you're right. Having worked in higher ed and then having worked in the tech industry, I do see innovation happening in higher education in a number of different ways. And there are definitely ways that are worth noticing, and discussing, and sort of thinking about. Certainly, we see a lot of sustaining innovation, as Jeffrey Moore would call it, and that's the sort of incremental innovation where we're continuously trying to improve. And then we do see breakthrough innovation as well where we know about this problem, we've been working on it for a long time, and suddenly there's some release. I think what people tend to think about when they think about innovation or more of those disruptive innovations, especially in regards to technology where a breakthrough happens for a problem that maybe we didn't understand well before, and the solution causes us to really rethink our worldview, and maybe even our understanding of the world.

Tom: So, it's sort of the kind of the difference between the revolutionary and the evolutionary.

Jared: Evolutionary. Yeah.
Tom: And in my just kind of limited anecdotal experience, it seems that the revolutionary can be, as you said, very disruptive, but maybe harder to scale, doesn't get the kind of adoption. The evolutionary takes longer, but maybe sticks. Does that resonate with you?

Jared: Absolutely, and in fact, in the first half of my career when I was working in university, was working with faculty and technology, it was very easy as a young idealistic instructional technologist to gravitate toward the professors and the faculty who were eager, who were cutting edge, who were pushing the envelope, who were looking for ways to take advantage of disruptive technology. But those were few and far between. And I quickly came to understand that if we wanted to see the kind of improvements to education across campus, we really did also need to focus on those sustaining innovations, and find ways to tap into what faculty instructors do already, but then nudge them to level up, nudge them to make some incremental improvements, nudge them to make those small changes that might over time have a larger impact.

Tom: So, it seems that it's not just about the technology, right? It's also kind of a wraparound change management process because you can introduce a technology, but if you can't get people to adopt it, or effectively use it, or interact with the other systems that it has to connect to, or whatever the case might be. Wonder if you could talk about the kind of the change management aspect of innovation.

Jared: Yeah, I think one of the powerful things about technology that we shouldn't take for granted is that it can excite people, it can inspire people, it can prompt people to try something different, but at the same time, as we often say, “Technology is just a tool.” And when it comes to teaching and learning, the technology is only as good as your design or implementation of it. So, as powerful as technology is, I still like to focus first on what we know about how people learn, and how we can leverage the technology to either accelerate that learning, or to save us time. So, when it does come to things like change management or how do you drive the adoption of technology, certainly some level of focus on proving that it's practical, connecting the dots between where you want to go, and what you need to change today. But then also evangelizing, especially based on any successes that you might see, and socializing those successes across the institution or throughout the organization.

Tom: How important is that, that sort of assessment? Because sometimes we get enamored with a solution, with a technology that seems like, “Oh, that's what I've been looking for.” And then we try it, and it may not have the impact that we thought. There's really only one way to know, and that's to measure it against some baseline or some outcome. And I guess there's maybe two risks on that. One would be to continue using something, even if the efficacy data doesn't actually support the continued use of that. But the other is to maybe not give it a chance, to not iterate and maybe, “Oh, we tried this, it didn't work, but it's because of this. We have to make some adjustment over here…” I wonder if you could talk about
sort of the assessment side of that, and when you should face that sort of go, no go kind of decision, which can be really unclear sometimes.

Jared: Yeah. I think it's important that we always look for evidence, especially when we're implementing changes in our practice. When we're implementing technology, it's often coming to the cost of change, the cost of adoption, the cost of continuance. I think it's actually less about the efficacy unless that technology is actually constituting some change in our practice. But I think it is important to look for that evidence and to trust in the results of research done well.

At the same time, I don't want to discount what people feel and understand is working. If you see something working in your classroom, that might be sufficient evidence for you to continue that practice. But to your other point, especially when it does come to any change in practice, or adoption of a new technology, there is that hurdle, whether that's psychological, or a physical hurdle to implement that change, to implement that technology. And that comes with a cost. So, I think setting some expectations with faculty, or instructors, or people who are adopting the technology that yes, this might be one step back, but it's ultimately for two-step forward, and we're actually going to do our best to measure to see that it is two steps forward, and that's what we will base future decisions on.

Tom: Yeah, it's funny you say that because we will often tell faculty that we are working with on some new initiative that you may actually see a decrease in outcomes the first semester that you try this because maybe we're not awesome at it, yet. We had this conversation with our adaptive learning faculties that maybe we should plan a three-semester kind of timeline before we start to see real positive impacts. And in some cases, it was faster than that depending on the faculty member. But you want to prepare them for maybe to not solve all the world's problems the first time out. Nobody's going to be able run when they're just learning to kind of crawl.

Jared: Yeah. And I think we certainly know that from any of our own experiences, learning a skill, adopting some change into our lives, it's rough going forward. And you have to learn every single day. You have to adjust and improve. And I have kids who are taking music classes and art classes. I'm not going to let them give up just because they're frustrated after a month. You got to stick it through. And that's part of the power of learning, is to know that change is possible if you stick with it. And improvements are possible if you sort of trust in the power of that change.

Tom: Yeah, great example. Sort of learning an instrument, or maybe a new language, or something like that. Are there some innovations that we just shouldn't pursue? Are there bad innovations?

Jared: Yeah. It's interesting. I was listening to a podcast with a, I believe a professor of psychology, who was talking about creativity, and the history of creativity, and
how creativity hasn't always been viewed as a de facto good thing. In fact, creativity at one point in time was actually viewed with a lot of skepticism and some level of fear. And you can look at, for example, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein as an example of where creativity or innovation actually introduced something horrific, and that ultimately haunted its creator. And I think looking back over the history of innovation and technology, there's often, if not always a dark side to technology, and technology itself sort of generates opportunities that may take us in different directions.

So, I definitely think that there are good reasons to look critically at any innovation or technology before jumping in. But at the same time, we have to acknowledge that some of these innovations, some of these technologies like artificial intelligence are probably inevitable. And so, we need to make the best of them. We need to come up with some level of collective focus to use them in ways that we believe are most beneficial to humanity and the people we serve.

Tom: Yeah, AI was sort of the one I had in the back of my mind.

Jared: Yeah, I'm sure you did.

Tom: But the other one I was thinking about was sort of data analytics around student data. And there's been a lot of concern about kind of profiling certain kinds of students. Even if the intentions are good, the actual way it gets implemented could be detrimental, or could be not fair to students based on certain kind of demographics, or whatever the case might be, that you want to just kind of judge students on their actual performance. And maybe that's the most fair thing to do.

Jared: Yeah.

Tom: So, I wonder if you could maybe as one of our, maybe kind of looking towards wrapping up our conversation, what can be done to foster innovation on campuses? How can we encourage it, support it, nurture it? Because in some contexts, some cultures, some people are like, they don't feel safe kind of sticking their neck out and trying something that has a risk of failure. How can we encourage people to take those risks and to try some things?

Jared: Yeah, I think institutions, especially higher ed institutions, are pretty well-equipped to foster sustaining innovation, those sort of incremental improvements. And they certainly shouldn't stop doing that. But at the same time, to your point, if institutions really want to find those breakthrough innovations, or embrace disruptive innovations, they do need to create a culture that both enables innovation by not making people afraid, by not creating an environment where failure is seen as a bad thing necessarily. But in fact, have an environment where I think, as Eric Schmidt says from Google, chaos can be managed, where ideas, or people with ideas, or energy can be unleashed, and in fact encouraged to pursue those to their natural end, and then have the community be in a situation where
they can either embrace positive change, or learn from the failure, and move forward in a different way.

Tom: Great. Well, I think that's maybe a great place to sort of wrap up. Jared, thank you so much for being on TOPcast.

Jared: Alright. Thank you, Tom.

(Musical transition)

Kelvin: Well, Tom, that was your interview with Jared Stein.

Tom: Indeed, it was. I always enjoy talking to Jared. I find him super thoughtful, and as I kind of described it from his perch, sitting in a company that works with a lot of schools, not just across the country but across the world. I think he had kind of an interesting perspective of kind of the state of things right now. And now with his consulting business, he's doing something very similar.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's good. I like that. Perch, rare bird. I like it. That was…

Tom: Oh yeah, he might like that, too. [Chuckle]

Kelvin: That was nice. That was nice. Yeah, I think highly of Jared, and he's got legit strong background, multifaceted background to speak on this topic and anything else related to educational technology. So, no offense to Jared, no offense to you, but can I start off snarky?

Tom: Oh, I would expect nothing less.

Kelvin: Thank you. I appreciate that. On brand. So, you all were way into the innovation thing, and I remember thinking, what is innovation? What do we mean by that? Right. And I don't mind saying, and I don't think she would mind me borrowing a little bit of her edginess. Our colleague Alex Pickett, from the State University system of New York, been on the podcast before. There's a little place in my brain where there's a picture of Alex anytime the word innovation comes up, because I have heard her on multiple occasions go off about innovation, and we throw it around like we all kind of know what we mean by it. And there was a whole Twitter thread some years ago where she said, we use it in place of this concept, we use it in place of that concept, and not real specific, and so forth. And so, I thought maybe it wouldn't be a bad thing and it might keep Alex liking us for five minutes longer if we could actually say what we mean by it. [Chuckle]

Tom: Yeah. Well, that's a good question. I mean, there's whole disciplines around it. So, I don't want to venture too deep. And I will admit I'm not necessarily as familiar with the scholarship of it as maybe some others. I've read all probably the same books that any sort of normal popular audience might've read. But for me, it's
very much like my definition of creativity. And this is again, Tom's definition. It's one I've sort of made up and used, but it helps me frame it. It's solving problems with constraints. So, you have to be creative, you have to innovate if you're going to solve some problem with limited resources, limited time, whatever the constraints are. If you had no constraints, you wouldn't need to be innovative or creative. You could be wildly inefficient and solve the same problem.

Kelvin: I mean, I think that's helpful. I went and I looked up a book chapter that you and I wrote together once. It had innovation in the title, and…

Tom: I remember that. [Laughter]

Kelvin: That's right. It was in the before times. So much of that time is just but a distant memory in my brain. But we said there kind of a loose work and definition, we said, "The implementation of new ideas," and we were talking particularly about online teaching and learning, "In order to bring about better outcomes." And we framed it further, and we talked about a vision of the future, that that vision was informed by monitoring trends, and noting applicability in the local context, and that kind of thing. But that's just a fancier way of saying what you just did, I think.

Tom: Yeah, I was going to say, I think those two things are completely aligned with each other.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think so. But as long as I'm snarky, I do think that these are good questions to ask as we go to, in general. Better for whom, better based on what measures, better at what cost or what losses, who loses while somebody else is getting something better. Hopefully, it's better across the board, but not everything is, right? So, I mean, those are good questions. I don't know if you have good answers or not. [Chuckle]

Tom: No, but I think they're all part of the equation. I mean, I even asked Jared in the interview, is there some bad innovation, right?

Kelvin: Yeah. That's right.

Tom: And we touched you briefly on that. Maybe this would be a good moment to sort of share this anecdote I heard last week.

Kelvin: Please.

Tom: I was at a conference, and there was a guy on stage, and he was talking about if you went to New York City in 1910 and looked around, you would see all the transportation was horse-drawn or horses. Everybody would be pulling their wagons, and goods, and things with horses. He said with the introduction of the combustion engine within 20 years, which is a remarkably short period of time, if
you went back in 1930, the horses would be gone. It would be all cars for the most part. And that is, I think an example of, and he was sort of talking about in the context of AI, and kind of what's coming, and be ready. And he said, if you fight it, and try to pass legislation that says we can only use hay as fuel or whatever it is… [Laughter] That's just not going to be realistic because the wheels of innovation are going to continue to grind forward, and we need to recognize. And I think that's an example of a revolutionary innovation, kind of to tie it back to what Jared was saying.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: I thought it was a really thoughtful analogy, and it kind of made it real concrete for me, sort of feel like we're in the middle of such a thing like right now.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, he had that phrase, I agree with that, he had this phrase in your conversation, “Causes you to reconsider your worldview.”

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Causes you to reconsider your worldview. And you know where my head went the moment that I heard that was like, well, that's this moment that we're living through with the rise of generative AI, and other forms of AI, and everybody kind of looking at everything through kind of a new lens.

Tom: Yeah, absolutely. And I don't think that's going away. I mean, how many times have we already talked about AI? And I don't think we're done, right?

Kelvin: [Laughter] No, I don't think so, either.

Tom: There's more to come.

Kelvin: I don't think so, either.

Tom: Yeah, and so that's an example of the kind of innovation that I think Jared was touching on in some of his comments.

Kelvin: Yeah, you talked about some of the popular literature and constructs, and we'll throw some stuff in the show notes around this episode, but in the moment, I can't remember you or Jared mentioning this, but I think there is some foundational work here from Everett Rogers Diffusion of Innovation, kind of the bell curve kind of thing. Innovators, early adopters all the way through the laggards, that kind of thing. It shows up in our work a lot. And then there's… You all talk about disruptive, and sustaining, and breakthrough innovations, and to that some might add basic research, and what are the relationship between those four constructs? So, there's some literature on that. We'll throw that in the show notes, but I'll be honest with you, I think a lot about sustaining versus disruptive. I really don't
think as much about breakthrough innovations. And that's kind of shameful to say because I completed that program and breakthrough models from EDUCAUSE. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, yeah.

Kelvin: But that's an interesting concept, breakthrough versus disruptive. I don't know if you have anything wise you want to say about that.

Tom: I don't know. That's an interesting connection because I was involved with two of those myself once upon a time…

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And I liked the concept because it was trying to bring in design thinking, and trying to kind of get out of your typical silos, and think differently, and bring in other perspectives, and point them at a problem that you might have on campus. I like the practicality of that. But you're right, I'm not sure how much it's continued. I think it was Gates money that was funding it, and I think maybe they stopped it too soon. Maybe they should have kind of kept it going a little bit longer to kind of seed some more of that kind of innovation. Cross institutional collaboration also was really a big piece of that, too. Yeah, I was a fan of that. I enjoyed it.

Kelvin: Yeah, but as you and Jared spoke about, that is a way of fostering perhaps more…

Tom: Culture of innovation.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah, that's probably a good way to put it. In that case, across institutions and throughout our entire sector of higher education. But yeah, good stuff. Anything, I know we need to probably start looking at wrapping up, but anything you want to say before we get out of here?

Tom: Just thank Jared for both coming and speaking at our event and also taking the time to sit down and be interviewed for TOPcast. I appreciate that, and I appreciate his perspective.

Kelvin: Well, you want to put our plane on the ground safely?

Tom: I will be happy to. So, Kelvin, we all aspire to do our work well for the benefit of our learners. Doing our work well also involves pursuing better results for those who need them the most when those results are hard to come by. The literature and the models of innovation can always help us move forward. So, we need to keep doing that.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, that's good.
Tom: I think for many of us, innovation is included in our job descriptions, if not explicitly then implicitly. I think for so many people in this space, innovation is a core component of their expectations. So, I think it's a topic we may revisit in the future.

(Musical Outro)

Kelvin: Yeah, I will look forward to that and I'll look forward to pouring a cup of coffee and having a collegial conversation. But until that next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.