TOPcast Episode #151:
"What a Year [of Disruption] It Has Been! [...But] 2024 is Upon Us!"

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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. Happy holidays, Tom.

Tom: Happy holidays and season's greetings, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Yes. I was looking up, I never can remember what all the holidays are, and we've had a few already. By the time this episode releases, we've had Diwali, we've had Thanksgiving in the US; it's in Canada sometime in there, too. And we got St. Nicholas Eve, Hanukkah, Bodhi Day, Santa Lucia, Yule, Christmas, and Kwanza coming.

Tom: Don't forget Festivus.

Kelvin: For the rest of us.

Tom: Festivus for the rest of us. Yep, yep! [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Thank you.

Tom: I look forward to the airing of grievances every year.

Kelvin: I don't wait for that annually. [Laughter]

Tom: Just when the mood strikes. Yeah! [Laughter]

Kelvin: That's right. I just bestow them on those in earshot. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Yes. Well, it being the season and all, do you have a seasonal beverage with you?

Tom: I do. I've got iced coffee going today, but what I'm drinking is Starbucks Thanksgiving Blend.

Kelvin: Ooh, nice. That's a holiday.

Tom: It is a holiday.

Kelvin: Yes. That's a better match than I have. This is going to be a near miss connection, so I'll tell you what I got, and then I'll tell you what I was shooting for. [Chuckle] I have something that's a little special for me because I usually drink straight coffee, as you know, and I have here an Einstein's Brother's latte, but I was going to another coffee place. I had it all lined up because they had these seasonal dessert-in-a-cup kind of things there. I checked it out, I'm like, okay, I know what I'm going to do, and I'm going to come in, and I'm going to say, "Hey, Tom, I've got this gingerbread latte in my cup, and it's a seasonal treat," and you're going to be like, "Oh, that's nice." And I went down to get it, and who knew they close early… on today! [Laughter]

Tom: On Fridays or something?

Kelvin: On Fridays, that's right. And so, I'm like, well, what else you got? So, this is almost a seasonal treat because it does have stuff in it other than coffee. It's a latte.

Tom: Okay. Sounds like my kind of drink. So, it's a latte.

Kelvin: It's a latte. Latte da. Yeah. So, can you hear the intention of a connection? [Chuckles]

Tom: I think so.

Kelvin: Seasonal treat in…

Tom: I got lost in there somewhere.

Kelvin: Me, too. [Chuckles]

Tom: [Chuckles] Me, too. So yeah, season, holiday season, something that's a bit of a treat, something that you don't do all the time, maybe.

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

Tom: Yeah, all of that. And then mine, do you have a…

Kelvin: Yes. Holiday theme?

Tom: Yep, yep. And thankfulness.

Kelvin: Thankfulness, all of that. So, why don't you tell folks what we're actually doing today, Tom?

Tom: So, Kelvin, speaking of your coffee cup right there, we have a tall order for today's episode.

Kelvin: Ooh, tall order. [Chuckles]

Tom: And what we hope will be approximately 30 minutes, we're going to try to put a button on 2023 and prepare for 2024 in the field of online education. So, we did kind of a special holiday episode last year, and it worked so well, we thought we would try it again.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah, that's right. This year we reached out to our 2023 TOPcast guests, and we asked them how they are making sense of 2023 here as we're nearing the end, and how they are planning for 2024 in our field of online blended digital teaching and learning. And we said to them, this could take the form of aspirations, or predictions, or reflections, or just observations.

Tom: Yeah. So, what we'd like to do is maybe revisit and feature several of these kinds of submissions we received from guests from throughout the year. So, in most cases, we can hear the voices of our guests. Many, if you listen to TOPcast, you will recognize and be happy to hear them again through audio recordings that they submitted. Or otherwise, if we don't have an audio recording, we will read in our best voices the written words that the guest has submitted to us as their contribution. So, we will read or play a submission, and then we're going to take a moment or two to kind of react to their thoughts and see if we have any particular comments on them.

Kelvin: So, we'll invite you, dear listeners, to think along with us and our guest contributors about how we can end 2023 well, and how we can prepare to be even more effective in our work in 2024.

Tom: All right, cool. So, should we just jump right in?

Kelvin: Let's jump right in.

Tom: Let's jump right in. The first contribution we had is a written contribution, and it is from Dr. Bob Hansen, who is the Chief Executive Officer of UPCEA, the University Professional & Continuing Education Association. He was a guest on Episode 144. And so, what Bob said was, "As the base of residential students continues to erode at many institutions, campus leadership will increasingly turn to those who understand how to build and manage units that serve today's learners through a combination of online degree programs, undergraduate degree completion, professionally oriented graduate programs, as well as quality non-degree credentials."

And then Bob also said, which we thought was pretty good, "Campus leaders may have to choose between business model transformation and legacy structures that do not translate to the complex marketplace of serving today's learners." I thought both of those were really, really good.

Kelvin: Yeah, I thought that last little bit there about business model transformation and legacy structures that don't translate to the complex marketplace of today's learners, I thought, wow, yeah, that's good. That's good. I'm thinking that through.

Tom: Yeah, and frankly, it's a conversation we're sort of having here, like, “what has got us here may not get us there” kind of conversation. So, the whole business model transformation, I think is one that a lot of institutions are probably wrestling with right now, especially as they look at... We've talked a lot about online, kind of in a post-COVID world, this imperative that a lot of schools have to maybe have an online strategy, but I think it goes beyond that. AI, and microcredentials, and serving non-traditional workers in non-credit programs. There's a whole ecosystem of stuff that I think is disrupting us at the moment, and I think we're going to have to look at new internal structures to serve those new business models.

Kelvin: And how shall I put this? Higher education institutions, and innovation, and flexibility, and creating new things; they don't always align as tightly as they might.

Tom: You're just going to leave that laying there, aren't you? [Laughter]

Kelvin: I'm just saying. I mean, you can disagree if you'd like. I'm just, hey, your results may vary, is all I'm going to say.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Well, yeah. I mean, it's funny, it's universities, especially research universities, are dichotomous places where they're developing

sort of cutting-edge research, and tech transfer, and the next medical device that's going to save your life, and there's nothing more innovative than that. At the same time, it takes four committees and six years to get a modality change of a course. [Chuckles] So, on the one hand, they're very innovative, and on the other hand they're risk averse. So yeah, that's an interesting observation.

Kelvin: Yeah. You ready for our next contributor?

Tom: I am ready.

Kelvin: This is Dr. Kathy Gosser, who is Yum! Assistant Professor of Franchise Management and Director of the Yum! Center for Global Franchise Excellence right here at the University of Louisville. And she was a guest this year back on Episode #142.

Dr. Kathy Gosser: (*Recording plays*) Instead of looking at the student enrollment cup as half empty due to the demographic cliff, I suggest we think about how we can repurpose our academic content for all adult learners in the professional sector, essentially overflowing our cup. Online learning opens up new opportunities due to the scalability and accessibility of learning. Many CEOs champion lifelong learning as the key to success. What an incredible future we have with the power of online and our content.

Kelvin: She too, looking at the, what many call the demographic enrollment cliff, but I kind of liked she kind of reframed that, turned it on his head a little bit.

Tom: Yeah. And she talked again, as she did on the episode, about reusing content. And I love the intentionality behind that because you can really, I think, reach new audiences without having to reinvent the wheel. I mean, the idea of having a video in a course that serves a graduate student also be used in an undergraduate course, also be used in a non-credit certificate, or something. It's the same content, but put into different contexts can serve different audiences in different ways with different objectives, I think is really smart and benefits all of those audiences.

Kelvin: Yeah. Tell us about our next contributor, Tom.

Tom: Sure. Our next contributor is Neil Mosley, education consultant and designer who specializes in digital online and distance learning. He joins us from across the pond. He was a guest on Episode 140.

Neil Mosley: (*Recording plays*) At my reflection on this year, and I guess my aspiration for the year ahead, is that we'll see a much stronger focus on online education as a really good means of serving a new audience, or a

previously underserved audience, and not just a means of diversifying income or mitigating risk. And as a result, we'll start to innovate more on how we can serve those audiences in terms of formats and how we approach learning design.

Tom: Yeah, I think Neil's touching on a really important point because in the early days of online learning, it seemed to be, at least at some institutions, motivated by financial windfall. Right? "We're going to stand up an online program and it's going to generate revenue that we can put into the institution, the real institution, the campus-based infrastructure." And it feels very utilitarian, almost like you were using the online students to serve the on-campus students. And I think we've evolved past that. I'm not saying every school did this, but some did. And there's a genuine recognition now, I think much more universally, that there are so many students out there, particularly non-traditional students, who need the flexibility of online learning to get the education that they want; that it's more about a societal imperative than it is about trying to make money. And as we have always said, if you do it right for the right reasons, and you execute well, the money will take care of itself.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think that's right. And I think he and Bob Hansen make similar points, but just expressed in different words. They're both about recognizing the need to serve a diverse and differentiated population of potential learners. It's just that I think Neil was very, very clear in his framing of serving learners, he said. I thought that's very human, serving learners. [Chuckling] We don't always speak that way, but we do need to Bob's point about we need business models that enable us to do that well, not because we're money-grubbing, but we need the models have to support the intention.

Tom: Right, right. Yeah. That's a really good observation that they're kind of coming at the same goal from two different lenses and two different accents for what it's worth.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] And two different accents. And then of course, Kathy also touching on that but from very much a faculty perspective about, "Hey, how can I work to repurpose in order to meet these diverse needs? So, it all kind of ties up in a little package. It's lovely.

Tom: It's of a theme. Yes. And speaking of a theme, do you want to introduce our next contribution, which is maybe the first in a couple that are of a theme?

Kelvin: In another theme. Yes. So, our next contributor is Dr. Rohan Jowallah from right near you down the hallway. Rohan is a Senior Instructional

Designer at the University of Central Florida, and he was a guest this year back in Episode #146.

Dr. Rohan Jowallah: (*Recording plays*) What a year it has been. It seems as if we're given engines for a plane without the frame. The arrival of OpenAI and other AI tools sent shockwaves through our education system. In my view, 2024 promises even more surprises. As we journey along, let us consider prioritizing quality and humanity in all our processes. Season greetings to everyone.

Kelvin: Season's greetings to you, Rohan. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, thank you, Rohan.

Kelvin: Could you just hear the humor? [Laughter]

Tom: I mean, I can picture like he's sitting in my office saying that to me. Yeah, yeah, it's great. Yeah. It's interesting, too, because Rohan has become something of, I think, an expert here on our team in AI, but yet what he was really emphasizing was the humanity of it.

Kelvin: Yes, yes. Absolute quality and humanity, he said. Yeah, I think that's so important. But I do, I appreciate Rohan. Rohan, it's one thing to talk about things and you don't really know the depth, but Rohan's really been zoomed in on the whole AI thing. And you just hear the bemusement, if not amusement, of like, "Yep, here's your engine. You got no frame for that plane, and it's going to be even more surprises ahead," he's saying. [Laughter] Buckle up.

Tom: I sort of feel like he's saying, "Welcome. I've been here a while, but welcome, yeah, to the fun." Yeah.

Kelvin: [Laughs] That's hilarious.

Tom: Cool.

Kelvin: But he's probably right. [Chuckles]

Tom: Yeah, I'm sure he is. I mean, it seems like we can't go 12 hours without AI changing, new tools, new... I heard about one today that can take quizzes. It's a plugin and a browser that can take quizzes in the LMS and do well. Yeah. So, great.

Kelvin: Fabulous. [Chuckles]

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Fabulous.

Tom: Excellent. Yep. So, should I introduce the next contributor?

Kelvin: Please do. Please do.

Tom: So, the next contributor is Dr. Dylan Barth, the Assistant Vice President of Learning at the Online Learning Consortium, and Dylan was a guest on Episode #134.

Dr. Dylan Barth: (*Recording plays*) Happy Holidays, TOPcast listeners. I have two predictions for the coming year, neither of which are surprising. One, I'm guessing that Kelvin and Tom will still talk coffee on the show. And two, I imagine that generative AI will suck up more oxygen in the room. But I do look forward to seeing how the innovators and early adopters continue to creatively incorporate AI into teaching and learning context, and I see more of the early majority coming around.

Tom: Yeah, that's great. I think both of those predictions are likely to come true. [Laughter] I don't see us at this point in our 10th year or whatever it is, changing the coffee shtick…

Kelvin: Probably not.

Tom: So, you all are stuck with it, like it or not. [Chuckles] And I think Dylan's right, AI is certainly going to remain on the agenda for a while going forward.

Kelvin: I appreciate he, too, a different kind of humorous take, but he, too, was bemused and amused by the whole thing. [Laughter] But I appreciated his invocation of Everett Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Curve. We spoke about that not too long ago, I think when we had Jared Stein on the show, but I think Dylan makes good points that he reminds us that it's early yet, and it's the early adopters and innovators arguably who are the most engaged with all of this generative AI assistance within our various higher ed roles, but there's more to come. So, he hints that maybe even we get the early majority, but that still leaves the late majority and the whatever we're using as a nicer word than laggard these days.

Tom: Late adopters, something.

Kelvin: There you go. There you go. That's nice. That's more pleasant anyway. [Chuckles] Yeah. But he may be right because I mean, I think sometimes you can be in this all the time and you kind of think, well, we're getting a big chunk of people. Right? And, well, I mean he's probably right. It's probably early yet.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. But little by little we're getting there.

Kelvin: That's right. Shall I introduce contributor number six?

Tom: Please.

Kelvin: Speaking of Jared Stein, Jared Stein, founder and principal consultant at Rarebird Edtech is our next contributor, and he was a guest back on Episode #148.

Jared Stein: (*Recording plays*) Hi everyone. One of my favorite things about TOPcast is how you and your guests consistently evangelize a high standard of quality in online education. So, in the coming year, I think we'll see a debate emerge about whether an online course with low instructor interaction, but high AI interaction, can be considered high quality. And I expect this will be informed by research that starts to ask the question, does human to human interaction have a particular value? A je ne sais quoi that AI interaction can never have? I know what I hope the answer is anyway.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Yeah. Wow. [Laughter] Thank you, Jared. Wow. Je ne sais quoi. Yeah. He's throwing out the French at us.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: He thinks we're far more sophisticated than we are. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: I had to look it up. No. Yeah, one, I just appreciate that he has something favorite about TOPcast. [Chuckles] And that he associates it with we hold a high bar for quality. So yeah, I hope so. Right? I hope that's the message. But what an interesting angle.

Tom: Very provocative question. And I think it's really thought-provoking. Can we remove the human as long as the system is providing an equal or better level of interaction and instruction? Wow. My knee-jerk reaction is of course we cannot remove the human, but it's an interesting question.

Kelvin: It is. And I think we've had this theme in... Producer Tim recently joked with me that we should change our intro to TOPcast: The AI Podcast because we've been talking about it so much. [Chuckles]

Tom: We'd probably get a lot more downloads if we did.

Kelvin: Maybe so. But we've certainly been on this theme of the human element, and so I think we've been very pro-human, and let the AI do what it does well, let the humans do it does well, but to your point, riffing on Jared, I think we're going to continue to evolve in our discrimination of what is that je ne sais quoi? What is that uniquely human affordance? What we thought yesterday could only be human, tomorrow we might say, "Well, that's okay," but then where's the truly human part of that? And I am intrigued also by this, how did he phrase it, the AI interactive? How would you... you know, the quality thing. Okay, high degree of human interaction, high degree of AI interaction. Are we going to start thinking that way? Dividing learning experiences? Is that a modality? Oh, my gosh. [Chuckles]

Tom: Are there two different kinds of interaction or is it just interaction?

Kelvin: Right.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Thought provoking.

Tom: All right. Shall I have our last contributor? Introduce that person?

Kelvin: You betcha.

Tom: Let's hear from Dr. Betty Jo Bouchey, who is Vice Provost for Digital Strategy and Operations at National Louis University, and she was a guest on Episode 136.

Dr. Betty Jo Bouchey: (*Recording plays*) Greetings, TOPcast listeners. As you eat your way through the end of the year holidays, remember to retain your insatiable appetite for what comes next because 2024 is upon us. Happy New Year, everyone.

Kelvin: Love that.

Tom: Now I'm hungry. [Laughter] I got my Thanksgiving Blend, and I'm ready.

Kelvin: That's right. Eat your way. But I love that, appetite for what comes next. Ooh, don't we all need that?

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, don't be dreading AI or whatever, microcredentials, or whatever. These are fun times to be in this space. And things change so fast that if you don't like what you're doing now, wait a minute because it's going to change tomorrow. [Laughter]

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's a good point, really. I mean, I don't know, being reflective and nostalgic as befits this time of year, you invoked earlier the early days, and in the early days, many of us who were in this work in the '90s, there were quite a lot of comparisons to dot-com era, internet startup energy. It's all new, it's all fresh and zoomie, zoomie, zoomie. And then as we've personally, and as the field has matured a bit, sometimes we use phrases like academic innovation and we think about the mainstream, and to Bob Hansen's point there, we talk about institutional structures and business models and so forth, but you don't want to lose, to Betty Jo's point, the appetite for what comes, the excitement over the potential, the doing things better, the doing things new, not just being stodgy and stuck in our ways like somebody who's been doing this for 25, 30 years. [Chuckle]

Tom: Present company excluded. [Laughter]

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Yeah, that's cool. And that's a good one to sort of wrap up the contributions on because it's sort of Happy New Year, looking forward to what comes next; let's turn the page and jump into 2024 all excited.

Kelvin: Yeah. So, I guess we've heard two big overarching themes in all these contributors, right? We've heard the thing about the core teaching and learning, serving our diverse prospective student subpopulations, not just the folks we've always been doing business with, but thinking differently, and reaching out in that real human kind of way. And then, I mean, there were an equal number of people talking about this more emergent artificial intelligence impact on the field. And the two aren't necessarily completely separate things.

Tom: Now, if you drew the Venn diagram, there'd be an overlapping portion there, I think, so, yeah, it's kind of all of a piece. And then if we add in Betty Jo's appetite for what comes next, I think it's all in there.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, that's awesome. Well, because everybody's tired at this point in the calendar year, you want to try to put our plane on the ground and we can put a napkin around our necks, and we can get onto the smorgasbord? [Chuckle]

Tom: Wow.

Kelvin: That's a lot of metaphors. [Throws head back in laughter]

Tom: That's a mixed metaphor if I ever heard one. Yeah. Okay. I'm going to try and land this smorgasbord. Put a bow on our plane. All right. So, I think

we've learned a lot in our field that when the inevitable disruptions come, we can hold onto our timeless aspirations and rally as a community to come forward productively, and that I think we've heard a lot from the community today. As we transition from one year to the next, let's work together to keep our eyes on the horizon and keep that appetite for what comes next.

Kelvin: Love it. No, that's right. That's good stuff here. Welcome, 2024. We're open to what you bring.

Tom: There you go. There you go.

(*Musical Outro*)

Kelvin: There you go. Well, thank you, Tom, for the collegiality and for sharing in this feast of ideas with our colleagues and our community. And Happy Holidays and Happy New Year to all of our listeners! Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.