TOPcast Episode #155: High-Quality Online Discussions: Here’s How

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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 are things?

Kelvin: [Sips coffee] Got a cup of coffee. Got a hot off the presses print book; got The SAGE Handbook of Online Education, came in the mail last night. How bad could things be?

Tom: That is an impressive tome you just held up. For those who don't see that on video, trust me, you could sit on that and see stuff, it's so big.

Kelvin: You could kill a bunch of flies. [Chuckles] I mean, I don't know. You could do something with it. I mean, prop up a really badly wobbly table. [Laughter]

Yeah, it's beautiful, though. It's good to see the thing come to fruition. And I've seen the e-text, but getting the print book in hand, it's like it feels substantial.

Tom: Yeah, it's a real thing. Congratulations.

Kelvin: Yeah, thank you. And to you. I mean, you got a chapter in there, and a lot of people around the world, so yeah, it's good.

Actually, maybe this is not a bad time to do a shameless plug. If you're listening to this episode when it comes out, we will be within a short time period of a free
online summit/book launch. So, tune in for free. It's going to be a whole day thing with speakers from around the world, keynotes, and panels, and it's going to be great. We'll put a link in the show notes. I don't have the link for you today, but it'll be in the show notes for this episode scheduled for February 19th, 2024, and it'll go in three different global time zones. There'll be stuff going for a long time.

Tom: Yeah, that's cool. Kind of a real nice overview of the book and some of the topics that are in there, which should be relevant to anybody listening to this podcast.

Kelvin: Would hope so. Would hope so. Speaking of relevance, you got any relevant coffee in a beverage container nearby?

Tom: I have a beverage, but it's not coffee, but it is brown. I got a protein shake going this afternoon, keeping me pumped up and awake. So, it's a little bit of a different choice. Not really thematic, but hopefully it will improve my podcast performance.

Kelvin: Okay, yeah, sure. That sounds healthy, maybe. My coffee today, Tom, is what we might call an old standby. You and I have shared it together before in the past, and it's been featured on the podcast multiple times. I don't think we've talked about it since before the pandemic, though. It is my go-to blend, Storyville Coffee. We've had Storyville Coffee before, so as always, it's tasty, solid, dependable. Can you find a connection between my coffee and the topic du jour? [Laughter]

Tom: Okay, standby. Reliable. I would say maybe it's a topic that you and I have talked about many, many times on and off-air, something that it never hurts to return to once in a while because it is sort of foundational to good online learning. So, I don't know, am I in the ballpark?

Kelvin: Yeah, absolutely. And I don't know if everybody would agree with this, but maybe because of the emergency remote ad hoc instruction stuff during the height of the pandemic and attention shifts since then, maybe we don't do enough talking about this topic. So, return to the before times and emphasizing this important topic. Do you want to tell people what it is we're talking about?

Tom: Do I ever, Dr. Thompson. [Laughter]

So, as you sort of are implying we're spending time today with a bread-and-butter aspect of online teaching: the good old student interactions, specifically everyone's favorite part of the course, online discussion. Typically, when you say that you think sort of threaded asynchronous discussion, but not always. Not always.

And so, today's conversation is influenced by Chapter 27 of that very book you just held up, The SAGE Handbook of Online Higher Education, and the chapter's
title is “Facilitating Online Discussions,” by two of our friends and colleagues, Dr. Susan Wegmann, who has been on this podcast more than once, and our colleague Dr. Aimee deNoyelles. So, they co-opted that…

Kelvin: Who we should probably have on the podcast. [Chuckles]

Tom: We probably should, yeah. On the list, right? We've got a long list of “Wanna Gets.” Yeah.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] That's right. That's right. Yeah. As I was saying to you before we hit record, obviously I got up close and personal with a number of the chapters in the handbook, but the ones that I wasn't directly overseeing or co-writing, I just have sort of left alone until the book debuted. And so, once I actually opened up Chapter 27, I'm like, oh man, not surprisingly, this is good. There's some good stuff in here.

Tom: Yeah, it's full of really good stuff.

Kelvin: And also, for our listeners, look, we're not seeking to summarize the chapter or substitute for your reading of the chapter. There's much more in that chapter. We were talking about before, there's a lot in that chapter, a lot of good stuff that we'll be just skimming the surface of, drawing upon.

But here's another selfish plug. If you haven't already done so, go ask your library right now to purchase a copy of The SAGE Handbook of Online Higher Education, so then you can read Chapter 27 and all the other chapters as well.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. So, it's definitely worthwhile. And so, we want to definitely give Susan and Aimee credit for their great work in this chapter, and it sort of inspired us to revisit online discussions, which we haven't talked in about in a long time, have we?

Kelvin: No. Which as you say, it is bread-and-butter. It's foundational. But I mean, real talk for a second? A lot of people are over online discussions, and you hear things like, "Oh yeah, I did X, Y, or Z thing, not online discussions," or “Please spare me, from the original post, and two replies… I can't... di, di, di… Oh, students don't like that.”

And what I love about Susan and Aimee's chapter is that they really lean into what we know about assuring quality, and expertly facilitating, and designing, and having a good outcome. They talk about other interactions as well, like you said, but they lean into, "Here's how you do it well." It isn't just fall off a turnip truck easy.
Tom: No, it's intentional. And in fact, they sort of frame it with, "Here's the stuff you have to do before, here's the stuff you have to do during, and kind of after to ensure that you're going to have a good outcome."

And I do think the online discussion gets a bit of a bad rap because it is not always done in the best way. I'm trying to be kind. [Chuckles] It becomes perfunctory. I've seen it even in my own family with courses that people have taken, or have heard stories. Never at UCF, of course, [Chuckles] but stories elsewhere of faculty that they turn it into an alternative essay writing thing, which is not necessarily the best use of that format. Or it just becomes a kind of, like I said, this perfunctory thing that you're just checking a box, and it isn't really facilitating the kind of... And I get why people don't like it. And it's also why that chapter I think is so practical, so useful, because it actually gives you some real tools, some real strategies that you can employ to make it better.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think this is a great contribution. So, maybe we will talk a little bit about it. So, as a backdrop, maybe it's helpful to note, without spending too much time here. Like a lot of online teaching scholars, Wegmann and deNoyelles lean into the Community of Inquiry framework, which has, gosh, been around for many a year now, and has continued to be updated, and has provided a bit of a backbone in online teaching research. So, they use that as a backdrop, and connect student interaction, and online discussions into that.

But by doing so, they really set a bit of a high bar for the nature of interaction, I would say, which not everyone shares that high bar for interaction. You said perfunctory, is that just a nice to have student interaction? Is it a coat of paint? Is it a little sizzle, or is it substance? And I'm in the substance camp. It's a must have, not a nice to have, in my opinion.

Tom: Yeah. Well, it needs to serve a purpose, and if it's not accomplishing some course objective, then I get why maybe you don't need it. I've heard the argument over the years, "I'm teaching algebra, I don't need an online discussion." And maybe that's true, maybe you don't. There's not a lot of controversy about algebra. But if you wanted to turn it into a peer support like, "Hey, I have a question on the homework assignment, who can help me?" There are uses for the online discussion that you can make that do accomplish the goals of the course, even if it's not kind of a discussion-based topic, or discipline, or subject.

So yeah, I think there's a role to have, but it goes back to that word intentionality. What are you trying to accomplish through the discussion, and how do you get there in the best way? Another example is, I know we have some large classes here, and some faculty have struggled with how to manage just the logistics of a large class with a discussion.

Kelvin: Right. Just a couple years ago, we were talking about discussion enhancement platforms as one way of dealing with those really large online classes.
Tom: Right, because there's only so much a human, or a group of humans, including TAs or whoever, that they can do. Plus, it's really hard to make those large classes, when you have a discussion, meaningful. It's easy to lapse into the perfunctory when you've got a large number of students. But I think some of those tools allow you to, through AI, and through peer review, and upvoting, and all the other kinds of social media functions that are part of it, can make it a much more meaningful experience. Again, tied to what are the outcomes, what are the objectives that you have associated with that activity?

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah. All that's right.

So, a couple other things in the Wegmann and deNoyelles chapter. You mentioned they do kind of a before, during, and after thing with good stuff in that. They talk about something that I think gets overlooked a lot, which is the importance of crafting discussion prompts. For instance, they talk about and then elaborate, with substance. For instance, you want a prompt that is not too open-ended, and not too close-ended. You want to have something that gives a little bit of structure but doesn't define things so much that all you're going to get is rote responses. I used to call those cul-de-sac questions because they lead nowhere. [Laughter]

Tom: This was a long time ago, but sort of back in the early days, I would see faculty that would ask yes or no questions as a prompt in their discussion, and that's the worst thing you can do. What is a student supposed to do with that? It doesn't facilitate discussion. Yeah, there's a real art to prompt engineering, so to speak...

Kelvin: [Laughter] So, to speak.

Tom: ...within online discussions.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right. One of the things that I kind of really loved about the Wegmann/deNoyelles chapter in this book is they have a whole section in this chapter on what can go wrong. They call it issues in facilitation, kind of generously, and "Here's an issue, and then here's what you as the instructor facilitator can do about it." Just as one little example, what if you get a student or students who have a just verbose, wordy response? Not adding value, just too much. And they talk about ways of doing a private follow-up as the instructor and how you might go about that. I mean, that's great stuff, but that's just one of many things they talk about.

Tom: Yeah. I mean, just again, not to sort of take all of them, but just to give you an example of some of the issues that they touch on. If a student gives a completely incorrect response, if it's combative, if the students are resistant, if they're non-participatory, what do you do about that? If it's too wordy, as you said, and if they use language or images that are inappropriate, or upsetting to other students in the class, or students who maybe dominate the conversation.
That's always been the thing about online, especially asynchronous discussions, that has been an advantage. It's the great equalizer, right? We've always said it's the shy kid in the back of the room who can never get a chance to raise his or her hand, or get in on the conversation that's being dominated by the people in the front of the room, or whatever. It completely democratizes it online. Everybody's got an equal voice. Everybody has equal time. But there are still students that can dominate, even in that space; it's a little different. And as an instructor, you need to be able to know how to manage that and ensure everybody's got an equal time and contribution.

**Kelvin:** Speaking of managing, I love that they also talk a little bit about logistical parameters. We talked, I think, earlier about there's a real artfulness to doing online asynchronous discussions well, and part of that is being attentive to all the stuff that goes behind it. You talked about before, during, and after as broad framing, but the why. Not just, what's the learning objective here? What's the aspect, like you talked about, but also what would you say to a student about what's the point of you doing this thing? How do you say that in student friendly language?

And if this particular online discussion needs prep work, like it's content based, like if you need to watch a thing or read a thing or experience a thing before you do this, you got to lay that out for people. And due dates, and assessment approach, they unpack all of that, which is really wonderful because you don't have to have lived it, and done it wrong, and been beaten up by it. You can read their chapter. [Chuckles]

**Tom:** Yeah, I've heard some faculty talk about… [Light sigh] You want to have a light touch, but you can't be absent in the discussion. You want to make sure that you allow the conversation to happen, but don't let it go off the rails. That's not always easy to do, especially if you've got a really energetic group of students that kind of want to run with, I don't know, a current event, or some topic that's politically controversial, or something like that. You can run into some areas that are hard to manage. But one of the ways to help with that is with, and they mentioned this in the chapters, using a rubric to evaluate how it's going. And that becomes a nice objective way to remind students of what's expected of them.

**Kelvin:** Yeah. In fact, they have this whole section on gauging the effectiveness of discussion. And that little section by itself, if you didn't read anything else, it would be worthwhile. So many I would say overlooked and wise principles wrapped up in that, including... You know me, I love a good rubric, and they do talk about rubrics, but that's not all they talk about engaging effectiveness.

**Tom:** Yeah, and they even sort of end it by talking about synchronous discussion, which I'll admit, it's not something that I have a lot of experience with, at least online. All the online courses I've taught have been asynchronous, I will confess. I've taught synchronous in person, but not online. [Chuckles]
So, I know that's an experience that a lot of people had during the pandemic, and it's sort of carried over now that we're no longer all remote. Being able to facilitate effective, fair, synchronous discussion online I think is a new area for us. And I love the fact that they've got some guidelines based on research that can be helpful to people. I think there's so many people that are doing that now, and we haven't had, frankly, a lot of professional development to the extent we've had with asynchronous instruction.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right. And you used the word research. It's worth saying, we talked about experience and practice and all that. But this chapter, like all the other ones in this SAGE handbook, balances practical advice, but a scholarly literature base. So, as brilliant as Aimee and Susan are, they didn't just make all this stuff up. [Chuckles] I mean, they're drawing on a lot of scholarly literature and synthesizing that and packaging up for the benefit of the readers.

So, scholarship, I mean, maybe that's new for people too, not a new field. We've been close to 30 years learning stuff about all of this. [Chuckles]

Tom: Yeah. Yeah, well, I want to thank them for that chapter. I think it's a real good contribution to the discourse and to people who are practitioners. So, I think it will improve a lot of students' lives.

Kelvin: Yeah, agreed. And maybe, I don't know, maybe we'll do this as an occasional miniseries, occasional theme. Maybe we'll pick another chapter out of there and springboard into a topic, because there is so much, as Safary Wa-Mbaleka said when he was a guest on here. The idea was to have a global 360 view of online education, and there's stuff in here that we can springboard off of. So, maybe we'll do that again with another chapter.

But for right now, you want to try to put this plane on the runway?

Tom: Sure. So, I think we all agree. Effective online teaching is a craft that requires practice, but there is so much scholarship to draw upon. Facilitating online discussions effectively is one of those areas of online teaching that needs both scholarly input and careful practice. And I think Chapter 27 of The SAGE Handbook by Aimee DeNoyelles and Susan Wegmann is a real strong contribution in that.

Kelvin: Well said. Yeah, I agree. Great colleagues. Read everything they write three times.

Tom: [Chuckles] Cool.

Kelvin: All right, well it's been lovely being with you, Tom, as always. Look forward to a time that we'll be sharing a cup of coffee out of the same thermos at some point again, but it's good to do this virtually meanwhile, and thanks for Susan and
Aimee for sharing, as you said, and producer Tim in the background. You wouldn't know it, but we've had our share of little technical things, and I appreciate Tim all the more on those days.

Tom: I blame the snowstorm.

Kelvin: Yes, that's right. [Chuckles] You got snow down there in Florida, do you, Tom?

Tom: No, but somewhere between us and you, there probably is.

Kelvin: [Laughter] That's probably true. Lots of places in the country.

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

(Musical Outro)

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.