

TOPcast Episode #159:
“Adjusting Your Sails” in Online Ed Based on the Data

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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. That's like the jazz hands delivery of “podcast.”

Tom: If you say so. I'm picturing jazz hands in my mind. I even saw a little bit of it here on the Zoom, but I've never been a big jazz hands guy, personally. I can't say I've done a lot of jazz handing. I don't have a pair of white gloves to go, or top hat to go, or cane to go with the jazz hands.

Kelvin: That could be your homework. For the rest of the day, see how many times you can get jazz hands just fit into your relational exchanges.

Tom: Yeah, it'll be in the car. People think I'm waving at them.

Kelvin: [Laughter] That's right. Yeah. Hopefully they take it positively.

Tom: Well, this is Central Florida. You never know. All kinds of gestures come in one way or another in the car.

Kelvin: Yes, I recall. [Chuckle] I do recall. Tom, it occurs to me that we knew about this behind the scenes, but I don't think we ever mentioned it to people, so maybe we put a little public service announcement in here. We did a while back, hear from a few listeners who had some difficulty accessing the podcast on the platform of their choice. For instance, but not limited to, Spotify. We looked into it and there was an issue that we were able to tweak to get the feed to propagate. It was propagating on some platforms but not other platforms, and now all platforms should be up-to-date and functioning properly. So, if you were like, “Oh, I'm just

going to the website to get this stuff now,” you can go back to your platform of choice, and you can get the thing on your app. You'll like it.

Tom: Or if you thought we stopped doing this, sorry to disappoint you, we're still doing it. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: So, maybe because if you're not listening to it, you don't hear us say that. So, if you know somebody and you talk to them, “Are you still listening to that TOPcast?” Oh no, they stopped doing it. Oh, no, no, no. Please start listening again.

Tom: That's right, that's right. We're still here. We're talking into the void. We hope you like it. Yeah, sorry about the technical glitch, but it has been corrected.

So, Kelvin, I know we're recording kind of late in the afternoon, but I do see you sipping from your mug. I am out. [Shakes mug] I did the last thing that was in this mug was some Tim Horton's regular caffeinated coffee, but I'm done now.

Kelvin: Well, the more we sit and talk, the closer to done I'm getting too, but... And it's tasty, so I'm going to drink it all. So, shall I tell you what I'm drinking?

Tom: Yeah. What's in the, not the thermos but the mug?

Kelvin: The mug... This is a single-origin Honduras from a...I think the farm is called Las Flores from a producer named David Munoz, and this comes to us from Sight Glass Coffee in San Francisco, California, and I have to go back and look it up. I think I brought in something from Sight Glass before, and I like the name of Sight Glass. It sounds like some kind of an early 20th century industrial kind of reference. There's like a little window, and you can kind of see what the level of things are.

You can kind of see how you're doing, what your status is. Are you about out? Tap, tap, tap on the little glass. Oh, yep. We're halfway to empty, or oh, we've got plenty. We can do a few more rotations around the yard and the lawnmower... I don't know what sight glasses are in. I don't know really why they picked that name, but I liked it, and I thought that maybe, maybe, maybe, there's a little relationship between this coffee, that provider, and today's topic. Can you find a connection to today's topic?

Tom: The name Sight Glass might be the clue I think because it would give you visibility and insight perhaps, and you can see the shape of things, and that's I think what we're talking about today, maybe a little more metaphorically than literally.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. You and I were talking not too long ago about maybe the value of talking on mic a little bit about the data-informed decision making

that can emerge from regularly consulting and synthesizing the various data sources that shape our field, like national data, some of the governmental stuff, some of the survey things that national associations do, and maybe even some institutional data, or compilations of different institutional data, and so forth. And so, in a sense, that gives us a sense of how we're doing maybe, and what's coming.

Tom: Yeah. I think it's important. I think all of us in positions like these, and maybe even in any position in higher ed looks to the data, and you want to know what the trends are, where you fit in those trends, what the information is if you have to justify a course of action, or just want to hedge your bets a little. I think all of that is really, really useful. We have talked about the concept of data a couple of times in the course of this podcast, and so maybe I'll mention a couple of relevant episodes. But we have touched on it periodically throughout the years.

Going in order, #96, Episode #96 was “25 years of ‘Conscientious Methodical Research’” with guest, our colleague here at UCF, Dr. Patsy Moskal. Episode #130 “Data, DETA, – D-E-T-A –, Design and More” with guest Dr. Tanya Joosten from Milwaukee. And Episode #156, which is a recent one, “Reframing the Data That Tell the Stories About Online Students” with guest Dr. Carmin Chan, now with Northern Arizona University.

Kelvin: And Tom, you said, well, in positions like ours and maybe other positions, and I've been watching some of our listener poll data come in, and someone said, “I like it when you all are addressing the kind of on the ground perspective of practitioners like me rather than all the administrative stuff.” And I respect that. We say we've got these three intertwined audience sectors of online teaching, faculty, instructional designer, technologist kind of folks, and then administrative leader type folks. So, I get that, and we really do try to offer something to everyone every couple of episodes, but we try to hit each topic in a way that is relevant. But I might just riff on your point a second and say that I think I saw this painted on a school wall somewhere years ago. It's very cliché. “You can't control the direction the wind blows, but you can adjust your sails.”

It is very, very cliché metaphor-ish. And I guess, as we talk about these data trends, and themes, and all that, no matter what your role is, you have some agency. You have some level of decision making no matter what you do, whether you're designing a course, or teaching a course, or leading a program, or leading an initiative, or whatever. You may not be able to control which way the wind is blowing, but you could certainly make wiser or less wise decisions based on the readings that we have in our data. So, I would invite all of our listeners to view this conversation in that context. What do you think?

Tom: Yeah, totally agree. I always think when the concept of data, the subject of data comes up, I'm always sort of reminded of what our former colleague Joel Hartman used to say, which is that many ways, anecdote drives online learning policy and practice, and data can trump anecdote. Because it's so powerful, and

it's one of the things that I've inherited here at UCF that I really value is this kind of robust culture of data collection and usage. And when you've got a faculty member who is an influential, perhaps, faculty member who has had an individual bad experience online learning, suddenly that becomes the narrative. "Well, I had a bad experience teaching online," ergo online is bad. And when you have a bunch of data, you can go to that person and say, "Well, I'm very sorry you had a bad experience. We can explore why that was and what we can do to fix it next time."

But online learning is not bad because look at this corpus of data that says everybody else is doing pretty well. It's just you that seemed to have problems. Well, let's fix you. [Chuckle] I had a conversation, just today, with a colleague at another institution who leads an online learning shop who told me that he was talking to a faculty member who thinks online learning is a fad. [Chuckle] And I think data can speak to those kinds of objections because you can show them, well, it's not really a fad. I hate to break it to you. It's only gone up every year.

When we look at national survey sets like the CHLOE survey or others that were before that, the old Babson surveys that predated the CHLOE, all of it has shown the same trajectory of the growth of online learning, the wider adoption, the acceptance, the understanding of quality. All of that has increased steadily year, over year, over year. And if somebody really is of the opinion that it's a fad, I think you need to start breaking out the data and sharing it with them.

Kelvin: I think that's such a great perspective, not to take anything away from anybody, but it reminds me of some other conversations which I'm not going to relate in detail from some folks who were sharing concerns with me from their very, very, very zoomed in perspective. And yes, from their very zoomed in perspective things, some changes that we were undergoing were affecting that individual, if not negatively, then at least disrupting them a little bit. But if you zoom out, and you look at even a slightly larger picture, or a really larger picture, there was so much more to be gained.

And so, we care about individuals and so forth, and we try to see things from individual's perspectives, but to your point, data sources and a wider view helps us see our work in a greater bigger context. You started mentioning some data sources. Maybe it's not a bad idea just to mention a few trustworthy different kind of data sources that are go-to that are... I don't know, not to break our metaphor of the sight glass, but are maybe weathervanes, or what are the little spinny things with the little whatever, the velocity meters, and whatever, see which way the wind's blowing and how fast? [Chuckle]

Tom: Yeah, so I did mention the CHLOE survey, which I'm a big fan of, and in full disclosure, I was on their advisory board this year, big fan of the CHLOE survey for years. I think it does awesome work and is a great benchmark every year where we can kind of compare it to previous years. So, it's becoming longitudinal.

Another one that I really like is looking at IPED's data, and I think somebody who has done maybe the best job of analyzing it in the context of online learning... Because it hasn't always included distance learning data in IPEDS, but within the last couple of years it has, is Phil Hill, and Phil every so often will kind of do a deep dive into the trends that are showing for fully online students, students who take some online, and then no online. And he does these comparisons, and he looks at it in a couple different ways.

One is he looks at sectors like community college, for-profit, not for profit-four year. So, he looks at how these big segments are doing, and it's like where you can see that the for-profit sector has really shrunk over the last few years. And the nonprofit, especially four-year publics, has really grown in the online space. It's been fascinating to watch, where in the past some of the big for-profit schools were the juggernauts, and that's not the case anymore. You have schools like ASU, and Southern New Hampshire, or Western Governors that are really sort of driving some of that. And some of those are private, but they're still nonprofit.

And then, he also sometimes will look at the actual institutions. And so often UCF ends up on this list because we have a lot of online students, or particularly for us, students who take part of their coursework online, given our size and our integration of online learning into the campus experience, that usually puts us on the list. And it's really fascinating to see those lists, and I appreciate Phil's insights and analysis whenever he does that.

Kelvin: Yeah, some other things that come to mind are, I think Wiley, the publishing company, they've had the Voice of the Learner survey that's come out in recent years. I've found some good insights from there a few times in recent years. We have professional associations that do various kinds of research publications and reports. Gosh, WCET has worked to release research around modalities and student engagement with them. EDUCAUSE has those various kinds of quick polls and other, and of course, the ECAR from EDUCAUSE and EDUCAUSE Review, they published stuff. OLC, lots of research reports as well as the publications of the Online Learning Journal. So, lots of stuff. But as you were talking, Tom, I was thinking it's so important to go to these disparate sources and form a more holistic picture, compared to say, watch this, the "easy button" approach of what's the US News and World Reports ranking?

Tom: Yeah, yeah. I was actually wondering if we were going to talk about that one.

Kelvin: I hadn't thought to. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah. I agree. I'll mention just one other that comes out of EDUCAUSE, which is the Horizon Report, which is more of a qualitative analysis, but has always been really useful, being a bit of a finger in the wind of what's coming. And sometimes they are, I think, a little early on their predictions on when something will, but they're usually pretty right on what is eventually going to show up, or at least

they're pretty good at capturing the current conversation about what we're all thinking of.

But to your point about US News, yeah, we all have our opinions of that particular ranking, and its value or lack thereof, as an actual indicator of anything quality or anything. I think it's at least the online rankings. I'll speak to that because there's a lot to be said about the general rankings, and people like Malcolm Gladwell and others have said plenty about them, but the online rankings I think have gotten better in the last few years.

I'm not going to say I think they're great or even useful. And we rank high, so I'm kind of criticizing ourselves. [Chuckle] It's just, I've got issues with some of the methodology. It relies still too much on peer review. It really doesn't take any account for the size and scale of your program. So, a small program can rank really high, and it's not being nearly as taxed or ambitious as a large-scale program. And it doesn't really address, I think, the intent behind a lot of online learning, which is to not be selective, to be as open and accessible as possible to serve students on the margins who are risky, and who are doing something that is inherently hard. And I think it's still kind of just a beauty pageant.

Kelvin: Michael Crow's quote, "We want to be known for who we include rather than who we exclude as an institution."

Tom: Exactly, yeah. How do we lift people up as opposed to keep people out?

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's good. And again, another plug to that Carmin Chan interview recently that we had, she talked about some of the limitations of some of these data sources that you need complimentary data sometimes again, to that point of the holistic. I know we're moving along in our chronometer readings here. Speaking of instrumentation, do you think it would be helpful just to pull on some maybe held consistent over time themes from these big data sources, and/or some micro themes versus things that are maybe shifting more recently? I mean, what are examples of those that come to your mind from these big data sources?

Tom: Well, there is one that... I touched on it a little bit when I talked about Phil's analysis, where typically when people talk about online learning, they're talking about 100% online, often distant students. And while that's still true, there's plenty of them, I think that the bigger trend is the hybridization of the student body, where especially post-COVID, more and more students are showing up on a physical campus expecting digital options. And that's a trend that I think we're going to have to continue to watch.

Kelvin: I think that's excellent. I think Carmin Chan, when she was on, she talked about the phrase "post-traditional" students. It's really not fair really to say non-traditional anymore because maybe the predominant characteristic is that it's not the traditional, but yes, flexibility, access, all of that.

I think another thing that we've seen emerging in recent years is things are still a little murky around modalities. And I don't know, for lack of a better phrase, quality differentiators. Goodness, we've certainly beat this drum to death on this podcast about the difference between the COVID era emergency ad hoc remote instruction versus intentionally high quality designed online courses and programs. But still, I run into people all the time who, I think just today I was talking to somebody who gave an example of a particular course, and a particular discipline that there's lots of video lecture capture recordings and not much else. And... Okay.

So, I think all that is still a little bit murky. I think Nicole Johnson and others, some of that WCET work and trying to bring some clarity to the modality thing, but the quality differentiators, when it's all lumped into the same bucket, it's a little challenging.

Tom: Yeah, that's a great point. I was talking to somebody the other day, I was talking about hybrid learning, and I realized what they were saying was they had a camera in the classroom, and it was like HyFlex, and people could come or not come. And to them, that's just hybrid learning. And I was like, wow, that's not how everybody defines it. There's different terms or one term for different things. And you're right. It is sort of being lumped together. And I do think we've talked about this at great length, especially during COVID, but that emergency remote instruction, the conflation of that with online learning, and what I think, was primarily a pretty terrible experience for the K-12 community painting higher ed with the same brush, even though the context was very different.

I think we've all kind of got this hole in some ways to kind of dig out of as far as public perception of online learning, yet we see the numbers continue to go up by the students who show up at our institutions. It's this weird tension.

Kelvin: Yeah, for sure. I remember we had high school guidance counselor Ryan Rogers on a couple of years ago, and he quoted a high school student saying, "I never want to do online again." And I'm like, whoa, whoa, whoa! But the online that student was talking about was maybe a bit different than what many of us would be looking for.

Tom: Yeah. Absolutely. I think you and I had this conversation off camera, but I was mentioning to you that I was hearing from the folks running our orientations that they're getting questions from parents, "Is my student going to have to take online courses?" "What? What do you mean? Well, no, but maybe." And they've got that mental model of what they experienced during COVID, which was probably less than good in many cases.

And that's not how we do online learning here with our asynchronous intentionally designed courses. It's a very different paradigm. And so, I can't be in every orientation. I didn't even know this question was coming up, so I'm trying to

tell the people who run those, well, if that question comes up, here's what to say. And it is not the same thing. It's good, I promise. And it's interesting too, that if that's the perception of the parents, when the students show up here, we know from their registration behavior data that they're choosing online options despite what their parents may ask for in many cases. So, there's this weird tension going on there, too.

Kelvin: Maybe this is a good jumping off point, because UCF has been doing this high quality intentional, well-supported, scaffolded, strategic work for a long time... Speaking of differential quality, there are some things that you know at UCF about high quality online learning. You've got data that speak to some of that. And I know we've talked about this in other episodes, but do you mind mentioning what you see when online learning is done well versus what some people might be thinking?

Tom: Yeah. Well, I'll reference you back to that episode with Patsy Moskal because that's really the crux of her work, and Chuck Dziuban's work here, kind of this longitudinal study that they've done since the mid-nineties of modality efficacy. And they look at a lot of different data, including things such as grades, by modality breakdowns, and withdrawal rates, end of course evaluation data, all of these kinds of indicators. And when you break them down by modality, just what we have found, and then this has been found in other studies, I'm thinking of the SRI meta study on blended learning.

Blended learning tends to do the best, if it's done well, and it's done right. Online and face-to-face, really the whole phenomenon of no significant difference, they're basically the same. And withdrawal rates are maybe a little bit higher for us in online. And that's been attributed mostly to the reasons why somebody would choose an online modality, not the online modality itself, the life pressures, and things that they have. And so, we track those data all the time, along with lots of others, but those are some real important indicator ones that I look at on a very regular basis.

Kelvin: If I remember correctly, when you say a little bit different, we're talking like a percentage point.

Tom: Ours are pretty low compared to some others that I've seen at other institutions, and we're proud of that. But there is a couple of point difference sometimes between a blended and a fully online withdrawal rate in a section.

Kelvin: But I think sometimes you see reported in some of the historical literature, and people still talk about, "Ooh, withdrawal rates are going to be higher, like double-digit higher in an online course," or students are not going to perform as well, or it's all just easy, or something. And so, I think we have data that that's not necessarily the case. And then you all have done looking at amount of online course taking and time to graduation as well.

Tom: Yeah, we have, and although it differs a little bit how you filter the data, and the way you look at it, but the general story is that the more online, the faster you graduate.

Kelvin: Anything come to mind in terms of, we've talked about this a little tiny bit, after the advent of the COVID era, but as things are beginning to stabilize more now, I've certainly used the phrase, probably informed somewhat by Phil Hill's IPEDS analysis, like, "The waters have receded, but the water level is higher than it was pre-COVID." I've certainly used that phrase in regards to online enrollments and so forth. But any trends or indications that, "I feel a disturbance in the Force," anything that may be coming our way that is worthy of a note?

Tom: I think maybe the big one, and it's one that you and I have talked about even when you were still here, was I think the growth of synchronous online learning. And it hasn't gone away. It hasn't gone back to just asynchronous. So, these synchronous strategies have remained, and just getting our arms around how to do that at a high-quality level, like we have baked into our asynchronous and intentionally designed model, I think is something we're going to continue to lean into and try to do the best we can. But yeah, that's one that I think changed during COVID and hasn't completely gone back to the way it was before. How about you?

Kelvin: I've seen some reports that are signaling that in most of the institutions in the US, not like your super-duper online powerhouse institutions, that there might be declining online enrollments, which I hear some people going, "Oh, it's going the wrong direction." "Oh, the ship is sinking." And I don't think that's the right takeaway. I really don't. I think online still has quite a place to play. And if I'm not mistaken, I'm not looking at those data charts or anything right at the moment as we're speaking.

But again, I think even if there is a little bit of a decline, it's still quite a bit higher than pre-COVID levels. And gosh, queue here the numerous comments that so many colleagues across our field who said of the COVID era just accelerated a trend that was already going. And so, we've just been playing catch up, dust settling over the last couple of years now, I think.

Tom: Yeah, I don't know the details of the data that you're referencing there, but I would maybe ask a couple of questions. One would be, is that an aggregate number? Is that an institutional number? Because there's so many more institutions offering online programs that there's more competition, that the aggregate number could be going up, but the individual numbers could be going down, just because there's more options. And then I would wonder if some of it is also a lagging effect of just the general sort of lower college going rate by the general population. It seems like there's, for whatever reason, currently a climate of some growing skepticism of the value of a college education. And I think it's depressed enrollment, at least in traditional ways. And I wonder if some of that is spilling over into the online space.

Kelvin: Yeah. Which is another data point worth highlighting itself. That, gosh, I sat in another data summary from a consulting partner that talked about... This is in some ways, not a great phrase, but one little slice of that data were the number of the percentage of, we might say, college age students, like folks who graduated high school, who are not in college, not employed, and living with their parents. And the phrase was “failure to launch.” And you're like, “Aya, yay-ay-ay-ay.” And that's a thing that we all have to contend with. So, what do we do about that? And we can complain about it, or we can marshal our creative energies and talents, and we can try to do something different to meet the needs of those folks.

Tom: Yeah. Well, I assume your coffee is running low in your mug. Do you want me to try to land the plane here? So, it's important in our work, no matter what, our role to occasionally raise our gaze, and recognize where we are relative to our goals ,and what the expected headwinds are going to be to help or hinder us along the way, knowing the data and the trusted data sources in our field gives us insight to inform whatever our next steps will be.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, I think that's exactly right. I think that's exactly right. Well, I appreciated the conversation. I would've loved to have poured you a cup of this delightful single-origin Honduras, maybe another time. But thanks for gathering together to talk about data and telling me about your coffee as I told you about mine. And thank you listeners for joining us. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

(Musical Outro)

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.