TOPcast Episode #160:
"Remember the Why:" Designing Meaningful Learning Assignments

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(*Musical Intro*)

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

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

Tom: I am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you, dear listener, are listening to TOPcast, The Teaching Online Podcast. Hi, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Hey, Tom.

Tom: How are things?

Kelvin: Yeah, can't complain. Talking to you; got coffee in front of me. How bad could it be?

Tom: Springtime in the South.

Kelvin: Yeah, kind of weird. Louisville, technically the South, "Gateway to the South," they say, but really weird, right on the edge of the Midwest.

Then not too far from other… Very interesting cultural conundrum this is here.

Tom: Well, Kentucky is the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). It is part of that region, so it's officially the South.

Kelvin: I'm going to tell you this.

Tom: I remember going to a SACSCOC meeting in Louisville one time in December, and I got snowed on. I was thinking, "It's pretty cold here."

There are a lot of the places we could have picked in this region at this time of year, yeah. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Here's what I say about that. People have all kinds of theories about the South, Midwest, all that. I'm like, "All right. Football or basketball?"

Football's a thing, don't get me wrong, but basketball, that is a thing. I think that pretty much speaks for itself.

Tom: That's true. That's fair, although there are exceptions, even in the South at Duke, which is much more of a basketball kind of place, but I get it.

Kelvin: That's maybe true. Maybe Duke's in the Midwest?

Tom: [Laughter] Yeah, may be a Raleigh-Durham area.

Kelvin: Yeah, could be.

Tom: Could be.

Kelvin: I mean… Maybe.

Tom: Kelvin, are you sure you're drinking coffee in that thermos of yours?

Kelvin: Yeah, no thermos today. I'll tell you why in a minute. But no, I'm not completely sure it's coffee.

Tom: It's confusing your geography, I think, in your mind, but that's okay.

Kelvin: [Laughter] Yeah.

Tom: That's okay.

Kelvin: Yeah, you have no idea. Are you drinking coffee there, Dr. Cavanagh?

Tom: It's gone because it's a little later that we're recording today, but it was, and I think this has been my go-to the last couple ones. It was a Tim Horton’s, so I enjoyed that. I've still got some of that left.

Kelvin: Yeah. Well, I said to a colleague earlier, "I've got a little science experiment in my cup today," [Lifts coffee mug] in my Oviedo Town House Restaurant vintage mug there.

Tom: Hey, a little Central Florida landmark there.

Kelvin: That's right. It's about this much coffee. If you see this, it's kind of like about halfway, maybe a little less than halfway up.

The coffee in my cup today, Tom, comes from a beloved former colleague of ours, Ian Turgeon, friend of the podcast. Been mentioned before, gave us coffee before, we drank together. He's in Sweden now working in the supercar industry.

Tom: He's actually on his way back.

Kelvin: Oh, yes. I knew he was hoping to be on his way back. Is he on his way back?

Tom: I think so. I don't know if he's back or on his way. He might actually be back.

Kelvin: Welcome back, Ian.

Tom: Yeah. Welcome back to the US of A.

Kelvin: But Ian sent me a pack of coffee and a story. I won't get into the whole story, but the highlights involve a friend and colleague there in Sweden, Axel, who is part Icelandic, part Swedish, and part Golden Retriever in personality, Ian said. Axel went to Indonesia on a trip, had adventures; I heard about some of them. One involved this primate flying at his head and all kinds of things.

He was quite taken with the coffee that they had in Indonesia. When he got back home to Sweden, he imported some, and he gave it to Ian, and Ian passed some along to me. He goes, "Oh, you got to have this." This coffee came with a sticker on it about a very unique preparation. So, two things about this coffee, single origin, Indonesia. We've talked about this a little bit before.

Generally, we know that good coffee, there's a lot of Arabica coffee. That's a species of coffee. There's Robusta coffee, that's a species of coffee. It may be more industrial. We don't talk, there's actually hundreds of coffee species, just most of them don't make it into commercial production. But I didn't really know this. I've learned something.

Kind of the third most prominent thing, accounting for like 2% of the world's coffee is Liberica. That's a species of coffee. This Liberica species was grown in Indonesia, got roasted, shipped to Sweden. Shipped back here to Kentucky to me, and it came with preparation instructions. Ian said, "Oh, this is really unique coffee. You got to have some of this coffee."

I'm like, "All right." So, I've held off because I was really scared of making it. I've made it for you today, and I really wish you could be sharing it with me.

Tom: Yeah, me, too.

Kelvin: It'd be interesting. You grind the coffee just a little bit, like less than I normally make in coffee. You put it in the receptacle. You heat up your water, less than I normally make in a cup of coffee, and you pour it on the grounds. Then apparently you walk away. It says you stir it, and you walk away until it gets lukewarm, it says. I'm like, "Okay."

Then it says the grounds will settle, and I'm like, "Okay." So, notice you've not seen me take a sip this entire time. [Chuckles] Because I keep looking into the cup, and I'm like, "Well, it's looking a little better in there." I did a test run of this earlier, and I couldn't master, I must be doing something wrong. I couldn't master sipping without ending up with grounds in my mouth, but I appreciated the process.

I appreciated the different coffee. I like something unique, so I thought this would be suitable for today's episode, Tom. It's been nice having you here. However, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin. It's like that, right? [Laughter] My story took all day. [Sips coffee]

Tom: It was a lot in there. The one thing that you emphasized was this process that's pretty extensive. I'm thinking that's the hook I'm going to hang my connection on, is that the process here.

Kelvin: That's right, something different. There's process and product involved, but the process is arguably more important than the product. That is exactly what I was going for. Tom, why don't you tell me what we're talking about today, other than coffee? [Sips coffee]

Tom: [Chuckles] Well, other than coffee, Kelvin, a while ago, as you know, you interviewed Dr. Jean Mandernach, Professor and Executive Director of the Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching at Grand Canyon University. Dr. Mandernach is also editor of the *Journal of Educators Online*, and serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of Scholarly Engagement*.

She is a prolific researcher and notably co-authored the book, *Evaluating Online Teaching: Implementing Best Practices*, with friend-of-the-podcast, Dr. Tom Tobin. It was an interesting conversation that you had with Jean. Anything you want to say about it before we roll it?

Kelvin: No, I think she had a lot of good things to say. I think we let her say them.

Tom: Awesome. All right. Through the magic of podcast time travel, here's your interview with Dr. Jean Mandernach.

(*Musical transition*)

Kelvin: Hi, Jean. So good having you on TOPcast today.

Jean Mandernach: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Kelvin: Well, we're glad to have you. We had a chance to interact not too long ago after your solar presentation, which had to do with innovative assignments in the online classroom. I think it was such an interesting topic.

We were able to talk about the importance of innovative assignments, authentic assessments, creativity in learning activities, whatever you want to call it. I'm just

going to jump right in and ask you why is that, to you, an important topic generally? Why is it particularly important now?

Jean: Well, yeah, you actually hinted at something I was going to hit at. It's been an important topic for a few years for a number of reasons. But I think primarily, because post-pandemic, our students are not interested in jumping hoops. They are absolutely interested in coming to college and getting an education and interacting.

But when it comes to producing and showing that knowledge, they really want to do something a little more meaningful. Will they jump the hoop and take a test and turn in a term paper? Absolutely. They will do what they need to do to earn the grades, but are they invested and are they truly engaged? I think that's the question.

There's a difference between, “I did it because it's an assignment,” and “I did it because I care.” This was interesting and this was a way to really dive into the content. I think when we start thinking of alternative assignments, that's really the key. Assignments serve a couple purposes. One, they let us assess their level of learning.

But I think equally important, and the one we often forget about, is it allows students a meaningful way to dive in deeper to the content, and to engage in ways that they maybe can document that knowledge or skill set for future employees, or graduate schools, or whatever it might be. But students are motivated by grades.

If we can give them something to do that's a little bit more meaningful to earn that grade, we can really start to invest them in that learning process. That's always been important. Then now post-AI, oh my goodness, that has intensified probably 1,000 fold. Right now, AI, at the push of a button, can do most of our traditional assessment tasks.

If all we're going to ask students to do is write us a paper, write us a reflection, write us a journal, write us whatever, fill in the blank, why wouldn't they go to AI, and have AI do that for them? Even though that presentation originally started before the AI movement was fully underway, I think it's only intensified the importance.

Kelvin: Well, well said. My head goes several different directions. Maybe first, I'll play devil's advocate for a second. I certainly know colleagues and you probably know colleagues who are maybe we could characterize as, "Yeah, but." What about, there's so many what-abouts. What about the rigor and consistency of time-honored tradition?

I've already got all of my, I'm sure, very excellent multiple-choice quizzes and assignments. I've noticed that students don't necessarily even score as well now as they did before, so it's up to me. It's me against the barbarian hoards, I tell you. [Chuckles] What do you say to colleagues who come from that kind of position?

Jean: Well, and unfortunately, it's all too common. Like you said, people hold onto what they know. As faculty, that's not only what we have done for years, but it's probably what we were doing as students, too. When we think about, "What does it mean for us to teach and learn?" It has historically meant there's going to be a professor somewhere who's going to give me content, and there's a student who's receiving that content. Then the student's going to give it back to let us know they've learned. [Chuckles]That really, probably worked well 100 years ago.

The reality is I don't know that it's worked well even in the last 30 or 40 years. We just have not necessarily been fully motivated to dig deep and ask ourselves in the modern society, when we now live in a world that the internet for at least 30 years has been readily available to give us content. Now, AI is there readily available for us to produce content.

It's now finally forcing us to really think about questions, I think, we probably should have asked ourselves 40, 50 years ago, but we were just a little too comfortable. To this society, what does it truly mean to teach? Is that just giving content? Because let's face it, they all carry around more content in their back pocket, than I know with my PhD. What does it mean to learn? Because if it's just them memorizing things, again, we have to ask ourselves, "Do we live in a world, in a society, that that's now important?"

Sure, it was important when textbooks weren't readily available, and when we didn't have content in our pocket, but the world has changed. If we're not willing to change with it, I think we have to really look deep and ask ourselves, "Are we actually providing the kind of learning experience that is going to prepare ourselves and our students for today's society?" It has changed.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah, I'm with you. I am with you. I don't know that everybody's with us, Jean. [Chuckles].

Jean: No. No, they are not. They are definitely not. I think maybe that's part of this AI fight right now. As we all know, everyone is losing their minds. In higher ed, when we say AI right now, they immediately go to, "Are there good AI detectors, and do you have good AI cheating policies, and academic integrity?" While those are important questions, I think they're only important questions if we refuse to ask other questions like, "Does AI now change what it means to assess their learning?"

Maybe now I can use AI to actually see the process of learning and not simply evaluate the product. That was something that historically we couldn't do because education's a collective. There's one of me and there's 30, 40, 50, 60 of them, and it simply wasn't possible one-on-one to say, "What questions do you have? Can you answer these questions? How do you think about the nuances and the levels of gray? Let's let that conversation evolve and see what you can do with your disciplinary knowledge."

Well, we evolved that and said, "We're going to make education just hit the middle. We're going to do assignments that everybody can do, and we're just going to keep it right in the middle. If you're not quite with us, you're just going

to struggle and we're going to score you poorly. If you're way, way, way ahead of us, hope you don't get too bored, because we're still going to hit the middle." AI is now saying, "What if we don't have to hit the middle?"

What if rather than just using creative assignments, which I was promoting even before we had the possibilities to do what we can do today, just one year later. What if we now start saying, "You know what? That end paper wasn't important." What if we just assume everybody's end product looks amazing because AI can make it look amazing. But what if we can now go back and see the steps, see their bullet points, see their thoughts, and everything that went into that, and the number of revisions and how they revised it, and what they focused on to get to that point.

Because if we want to go back long, long, long ago before any of us were around, that's really more what education looked like. That's where that whole phrase Socratic method came from. What did we call education? We're going to sit down and we're going to talk, and we're going to interact, and we're going to engage. When you can answer questions and you can ask questions, I'm going to know you got it.

Well, then the collectiveness of education eliminated that as a viable way for us to assess students, and so we started moving to the things we could do as humans. We can give them tests. Then we even got excited when those tests could be graded by a computer because that made it even faster and easier to give them tests. [Lightly chuckles] Then we had papers because that was the way we could take one of us being able to talk to lots of them.

Now we're saying, "Well, you know what? That's not really going to work in our current world, so what's next? How do we really tap into what we care about?" Which forces a question most of us haven't thought about in a long time, which is what do we really care about? Did I ever really care if they could memorize it and pick out an answer on a test and spit it back? I probably never did, but that was the best I could do with what was available in the collective educational experience.

We have new options now, and it's forcing us to really think about beyond just creative assignments, non-traditional assignments, but what are we even assessing? What is important in our disciplines? Then from there, what now can we do to more authentically, actually look at that and see if students are mastering those skills and knowledge?

Kelvin: When you're speaking with colleagues who, again, maybe are a little traditional or neo-traditional in their approach to assignments and assessments of learning.

Maybe they're a little persuaded by a conversation like this, and they say, "I'm not quite sure what you mean by a creative assignment, or authentic, or assessment, or whatever."

How do you think about… What are the criteria or the hallmarks or the signs that you are designing something a little bit more meaningful, as you said, rather than this industrialized approach to assessments and assignments?

Jean: Well, I think the first thing I always tell them is we do have to start with that self-reflective process because we want to just dive into what's the assignment? What are we going to do? What are students going to produce? How do I assess it? Can I make a rubric? How are they going to turn it in? We want to immediately jump to all the practical implementation questions, which we do have to get to eventually.

But sometimes we fail to start with why am I even having them do this? What do I hope they can gain from this experience? What am I looking for? Am I really wanting to see a nuanced knowledge? Do I want to see a process? Do I want to see a skill? Am I looking at memorization? Because as I'm saying all this, there's this assumption that we would never memorize, but we do sometimes want them to memorize.

Sometimes we're saying, "You need to memorize because it makes you fluent in conversation in the discipline." You have to be able to talk the talk. You have to be able to at least understand the theories, and when somebody brings it up, know what to look up and know. There are times we absolutely want them to memorize, but I don't know that we ever truly take that time to step back and think, "What is it I want from this?"

Am I wanting content knowledge, and they're showing me the mastery of terms, theories, concepts? Am I wanting a process? Am I wanting critical thinking? Only after we can identify that what is it I'm even trying to produce? Then we can start moving into, "Well, what would that look like in an ideal world?" That's what I always say, "In an ideal world, what would that look like?"

I'll give you an example. I was talking with a faculty member the other day. They said, "You know what? In an ideal world, I would literally sit down with each student, and I would pose a situation. I would just give them a hypothetical scenario, and I'd see where the conversation went." Because if they can ask the right questions and when somebody answers, do they know when to dig deeper? Do they know when to back off? Do they know when it's sufficient? They're like, "That's what I want. I want them to think and use that knowledge."

Well, once they could identify that, then I could say, "Okay. Let's start thinking about what that practical implementation steps are. What's available today that would let you see that and do that, in a way that is feasible when there's one of us and 45 of them? Then we can start getting into the creative." I think that's only when our conversations about technology should come up. It shouldn't be, "How do I use AI?"

I think that's the wrong question. The question is, "What do I want to assess? What do I want to do? How do I want to see it? Then what technologies, tools, or AI is available that lets me implement that?" But it has to be pedagogy first, or I think we're forever going to get wrapped up into the next bell and whistle, and

fun, new thing that emerged. We will forever be dissatisfied with what we're having our students do.

Kelvin: That's great. That's wonderful, very thoughtful. As we begin to wrap up, in realizing that we have an audience that maybe generally is made up of three interwoven groups.

One, faculty who teach online and/or other things, administrative leaders, and folks with a title like, "We're a function like instructional designer or something similar." As they're listening to this, what's maybe one takeaway?

Like, "Hey, if you don't hear anything else, hear this." Or here's one step you could take, or here's one goal that you should pursue in carrying this work forward, what would you say?

Jean: I think I would say ask yourself the why question. Why would a student want to do this assignment beyond just the grade? Because that's the thing that's drove us nuts as educators, since probably the first time we've taught a class. Is when you're teaching a class, and a student raises their hand and says, "Well, will this be on the test?"

You just roll your eyes because you're like, "Oh, I want you to learn because you care, because it means something, because you're interested, because it's engaging." But that puts the onus on the student to know that why, and to know why in our discipline they would need or want this skill set, and I think that's unrealistic.

Students don't necessarily know why. But even if we take the traditional assignments that we have, let's pretend where you're like, "No, I'm keeping that test. I love my multiple choice test." You can even make it a more authentic test by telling students, "Here's why I'm leaving it as a multiple choice test. Why? I want you to memorize this terminology, not so that you can take this test. I want you to memorize it because here are the conversations you're going to have in the profession, and here's when this knowledge is going to come up."

You don't look like an adequate professional if every time it comes up, you're like, "Just a minute. Let me look that up." We need to give our students a why, and we need to get them to buy in. If we, as a faculty member or an instructional designer, can't answer that why and say, "I'm having you write a term paper because you need to practice written communication. Because I need to know that you know the terms." The why is really the most important part.

Then we even start to take it one step further and tell students, "And when you do this assignment and meet this why, here's why we're doing the assignment. Here's how you're going to showcase the knowledge and skills that you gained. These are the kinds of things you start putting into a personal portfolio or professional portfolio, to really document the knowledge and skills you're gaining as you go through college." It's not, "Get creative, be flexible." It's know your why, and if you can't say why, now it's time to get creative.

Because you are not measuring what you really cared about in the first place. Now you're just having students jump a hoop because it's what you've done, and it's what you've always done. It's what they've always done, and that's not engaging, and that's not authentic. That's when they're most likely to cheat because they cannot see a purpose and a reason.

Kelvin: Excellent. That's well said, Jean. Such a pleasure having you on the podcast talking about this important trajectory, especially now. We ought to have you back and talk further.

I feel your energy and your passion, and we need more of that to catch fire across higher education generally. But for Tom, who will catch us on the wraparound, myself, thanks so much for being with us today.

Jean: Thank you very much. I enjoyed chatting with you.

(*Musical transition*)

Tom: So, Kelvin, that was your interview. I think it was a really interesting discussion and you guys covered a lot of ground.

Kelvin: Yeah. I really appreciated her perspective. I was talking to some other folks recently, and a couple of different conversations I drew upon some of the ideas that Dr. Mandernach had to say there.

I think they're good ones about meaningfulness, and relevance, and that human connection, which we've been talking about, against the backsplash of the generative AI era.

Tom: Yeah, she seemed to really lean into the concept of engagement. To me, that seemed to be a bit of a theme.

Good grief, as you all touched on, in this era of AI, how do we make sure that students stay engaged in really meaningful and relevant ways?

Kelvin: Yeah. No, I think that's exactly right. I think that reminder that increasingly students don't have a lot of tolerance for things that they consider irrelevant or hoop jumping perfunctory, we might say, especially writing assignments.

Then we've talked before about academic misconduct and all. But with that being perhaps a temptation to subvert assignment parameters these days using generative AI. If the more irrelevant it seems, the more the temptation, right? Not to excuse it, just to say, "Hey, why don't we lean into the meaningfulness?"

Tom: Yeah. The question of the why question that was brought up. Like why would a student want to complete this assignment beyond just getting some grade for it? Resonated for me and reminded me of this pedagogical theory of Teach Naked. You may recall that. The idea is to be transparent with your students.

To let them know the rationale behind why you're teaching them something, so that you make it relevant, you make it meaningful. This is why you're going to need to learn algebra, so you can do this in your actual life, not just because you need to take a test of algebra. There's a relevance for this beyond just the grade.

I feel like sometimes in education in general, but certainly in higher ed, we don't explain that rationale well enough to students. I think that's a real strong key to engagement.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think all of that, Tom. I guess it just resonates for me with what Jean said, that deceptively simple question she asked, "What does it truly mean to teach?"

I think that ties all of this together. If we're too quick to answer that question, we're probably not thinking deeply enough about it. It's challenging. But no, good stuff. We ought to have Jean back another time probably.

Tom: Yeah, absolutely. This whole idea of what does it mean to teach, that's probably another discussion.

I remember during the pandemic when I would get angry emails from parents saying, "My student is teaching themselves, and I want a faculty member talking at them in a classroom."

The whole idea of a constructivist pedagogy was kind of foreign and yeah, maybe we explore that further.

Kelvin: Yeah. Well, shall, for the moment, I try to get our plane on the runway?

Tom: Go for it.

Kelvin: Perhaps by way of wrap up at this point in the conversation today, we might say the stuff of teaching and learning to a great extent, is driven by the design of learning assignments.

How we view learning drives how we design assignments, and how we engage students in the learning process, online or anywhere. How's that?

Tom: Yeah, true. Yeah. Sometimes we forget about the everywhere else part, but that's true too. Cool. Well, thank you, Kelvin. Thank you, Jean. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

(*Musical outro*)

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.