TOPcast Episode #165: Why Still Prepare Faculty for Online Teaching? #IYKYK

Narrator: When you realize what your future can be, you want to do it right. UCF Online offers more than 100 fully online programs, plus personalized support from success coaches, so you can get to the future that's right for you.

(*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'm Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. The podcast about all things teaching and learning online.

Kelvin: All things.

Tom: All things. I just added that new little tagline. You like that?

Kelvin: Yeah, that gives us room for expansion. [Using announcer voice] It's TOPcast, the expansion pack, brought to you in 2025.

Tom: Right, new and improved.

Kelvin: Doing new things. Yeah, new and improved, that's what they say.

Tom: Yeah, even with more scrubbing power. Yeah, that's us.

Kelvin: [Laughter] More scrubbing power. What do people use us to scrub?

Tom: [Chuckle] You don't want to know.

Kelvin: Okay. [Laughter] I think I saw you take a sip of something. What do you…

Tom: I did. I've got my…

Kelvin: ...Drinking? Drinking bleach, some kind of cleanser? [Chuckles] What are you…

Tom: No.

Kelvin: [Laughter] More scrubbing power?

Tom: I'm drinking some very special coffee, which I think I see you taking a sip as well. Maybe the same coffee that is in your mug. If I hazarded a guess, I think that might be a good bet there. [Sips coffee]

Kelvin: Yes, so maybe I'll say, this is kind of nice for a change. Today's coffee comes to us as a gift from friend of the podcast and recent guest, Russ Poulin from WCET. I don't know about you, but I thought this coffee in particular was appropriate for today's conversation because Russ framed it with an acknowledgement that the coffee might be a bit surprising, but then he unpacks the surprise with a story.

So, this coffee that we're both drinking is what the package says is a "New Orleans Style Coffee with Chicory," roasted and ground locally in the Boulder, Colorado area in association with a local Creole restaurant called Lucile's. And Russ tells us that the restaurateur named the place after his mother, who was from New Orleans, and it has become a local destination of sorts, including for Russ and his family. So, I thought all that was kind of appropriate. What do you think of the coffee, and could you find a connection to today's episode?

Tom: I like the coffee; I like a chicory coffee. It reminds me of many visits to New Orleans and sitting with a beignet. So yeah, I like it. Thank you, Russ and Cheryl, for being on the podcast and sending the coffee. He did say that Lucille's was a place that they take out-of-towners to who love it, and that during some recent tragic news event when there was a lot of reporters in the area, that it became a local hangout for all of the national press. And so, it became a little bit quasi-famous amongst the media. So having said all that, I'm struggling a little bit with the connection, so maybe you could help me out here.

Kelvin: So, I was thinking the coffee, Russ, now you're probably wondering, how do you get New Orleans style coffee in Colorado? So, it's kind of surprising, but then he unpacks it a little bit, he makes the connection. And so, I was thinking of surprise leading to understanding based upon unpacking, or to use an internet phraseology, hashtag IYKYK, "If you know, you know."

Tom: If you know, you know. Yeah, I've heard that before, okay.

Kelvin: So, I was thinking that kind of aligned in my head with today's topic.

Tom: All right.

Kelvin: Does that help any?

Tom: It helps a little. Boy, it's a little roundabout, but I'm with you now.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Tom: I think we can get there, so…

Kelvin: All right, you want to tell people what we're doing? [Chuckles]

Tom: Yeah, maybe I'll try and help them unpack and understand the connection. So today, we thought we'd kind of explore the question, at this point in our online learning history, why do we pursue faculty preparation for online course design and teaching? Why is that important?

And as a corollary, and this comes up a lot, why don't we require the same level of faculty development for face-to-face instruction? And they seem to get away with having no preparation. [Chuckles] But if you're going to teach online, there's this gauntlet you have to run through to make sure that you're prepared to do it. It's about more than just compliance, it's about quality, and so that's what we thought we'd unpack today. If you know, you know.

Kelvin: If you know, you know. And maybe it's good to, a shout out and put a little daylight between this episode and at least two other ones that we've done in the past. TOPcast Episode #59 was "Online Faculty Development," which looked at different approaches to preparing faculty for online design and teaching. So more, assuming that we're doing it, how might you do it? So, that was Episode #59. And also, differentiated with Episode #99, which was, you might remember, "The Importance of 'Faculty Voice and Faculty Valuing' in Online Education," which focused on how valuing the faculty perspective drives, or at least should drive, many aspects of our strategic online education work. But this is about, why do we, why should we pursue faculty preparation for online course design and teaching, in contrast, as you say, with general course design and teaching?

Tom: Yeah. Well, I mean, there is the starting point that I often start with is that so many of us have gone through PhD or other doctoral programs, and we've been taught our discipline, or especially if you're in certain disciplines where you've taught research, and you've worked at a postdoc, or even a post doc, or worked your way up through the grant making, grant receiving process, and tenure may depend on your ability to get research grants, much more than teaching.

So, these faculty have been taught an awful lot about how to be a researcher and a scholar and not so much directly about how to teach. They may have taught a class or two as a grad student, or while they were pursuing their doctorate, but odds are they didn't get extensive development on how to be an effective designer and deliverer of instruction.

And that just seems to get exposed even more in an online environment where there's so much intentionality that has to be built into that, that maybe even more so than in a face-to-face class, where you can overcome some of that by force of

personality if you really need to. But online, all the warts are exposed in many ways, and so I think it's important to ensure that faculty are prepared to teach really, really well online. And that's one place to start, why we end up like that.

Kelvin: Yeah, and I mean, maybe about teaching for a second, right? Teaching can make a difference. I mean, teaching can be carried out more well or less well. I mean, not seeking to beat up on anybody, I'm just saying for the reasons you said. I mean, if you don't have a formal preparation in course design and teaching, you're probably starting by "Doing what was done to you," as some have said, and then learning.

I mean, if you're motivated, you want to try to do well, you talk to colleagues, you go to workshops, you go to a conference. And so, you trial and error your way through, but against a lot of key competing priorities and institutional emphasis on teaching vary.

But just to put this out there, in the words of a colleague of mine here, Dr. Caroline Boswell, I love this turn of phrase, "Teaching can be a student success intervention," or as I like to say, "There can be a connection between teaching and… learning."

Tom: [Chuckles] What a concept, that's radical.

Kelvin: What a concept.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: I mean, faculty can't take responsibility for all aspects of student learning. I mean, we're not suggesting that, but it can help. It can help.

Tom: Yeah. I think it's maybe in the center of the bull's eye. It may not be the only ring, but it's the center, probably, yeah.

Kelvin: I'm just saying, and then some of us, some of our institutions, we have these shops, especially online, where there's teams of professionals supporting course design and development, and absolutely, such teams have a role to play as well. But faculty actually adopting effective practices in course design and teaching is, I would argue, a more sustainable, and ultimately scalable, strategy than just a team doing for and then turning over an online course. So, that's a thing.

Tom: Well, the faculty is going to be the fulcrum of all of these efforts, right?

Kelvin: Correct.

Tom: It's actually the exception where some sort of a master course template is given to an army of adjuncts or something to teach it. And even that, somebody's got to

design that original course that gets turned into a template. So, I think that putting the faculty at the center of this process and making sure that they are adequately prepared is probably the most important ingredient.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree. And then maybe just to throw this in there too, just to say. Despite, like you talked about the research preparation for many terminally degreed faculty, but institutional metrics associated with student success and learning, learning assessment, design, all that, those things are not typically part of the research background of most faculty either. I mean, there are applications one could make, but so really a thoughtful grounding in course design and teaching probably also lines up with practices that are expected to pay off in demonstrable benefits to students.

Tom: Yeah, and let's face it, maybe less so now, but certainly at one point there was a lot of skepticism about online learning. And I mean, it still exists, let's not be too naive here, but the desire to mitigate concerns based on that skepticism of quality have been addressed by requiring extensive faculty development. And I reached a point a number of years ago where I stopped complaining about being treated differently, and just said, “Fine, we will be excellent. We'll show you.” [Chuckles] We'll lean into that, and that's fine. We'll make that work. We'll turn it to our advantage.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think all that's right. Although, if I want to be jaded a little bit, there is maybe some, what we might call some neo-skepticism about online efficacy even in the US federal government. [Chuckles]

Tom: Even, yes, that's true. Going on right now as we record this, especially post-COVID because of the being conflated with emergency remote instruction, which we've talked at length about, but yeah.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: It's been an issue. But…

Kelvin: But still.

Tom: But still, yeah, but it's also not to say that the training that we've put online faculty through is beneficial for any faculty regardless of your modality. And so one of the questions, I remember I had a provost, former provost here, asked me because he knew what the blended results were. They were our highest, we've talked about this, but here at UCF, the blended courses are the highest performing when it comes to student outcomes, and lowest withdrawal rates, and highest end of course evaluations. They outperform every other modality and have for 25 years. And he asked me, well then why aren't we doing more? It's only about, I don't know, at that time it was maybe 11 or 12% of our credit hours. It's more now, but

well, why aren't we doing a ton of that if we're having those outcomes? And it's an excellent question.

It's harder to scale because we would have to train so many more faculty and of course, the blended courses are harder to scale because they do still require coordination with physical facilities, and you can't just create a new online section and grow that way. But his point I think, is well taken. There are real advantages to having training for all faculty at that level regardless of modality. Why doesn't every face-to-face instructor have an instructional designer? Pretty much every online faculty does to some degree.

Kelvin: No, I think that's right, and I think that's part of that intro framing question that you asked, at this point in our history, why do we pursue faculty preparation for online? We don't do it, or not as much anyway, for in-person and everything else. And I think what you said about blended, just goes by extension to in-person as well. The sheer scale of the challenge, it may be desirable, there may be benefits, probably are, but the scale of the challenge and the sheer range of variability.

You start thinking about when you introduce in-person, all the different classrooms, spaces, and types, and sizes, and affordances or constraints, and the disciplinary effects, and the teaching styles, and philosophies; there's a lot more. So, by focusing on a defined subset of the whole, e.g. online and/or blended, you can really focus in a little bit, and actually affect some change with an eye toward dissemination, as you said, as long as you're invoking provost.

According to lore from UCF legend, there was once upon a time a vice provost at UCF, I'm told, who said behind closed doors in the early days of UCF's online initiative that, “Don't tell anybody, but I don't really care if the faculty participating in this online prep program ever teach online because I believe they will be more effective teachers afterwards, regardless of the modality.”

Tom: Interesting.

Kelvin: And there's some wisdom in that.

Tom: I could guess who said that. Yeah, and there is. We've seen that, and not just here at UCF, but across the country, I've talked to colleagues. Maybe you see that there at Louisville, that faculty who go through preparation to teach online end up bringing a lot of those practices to their face-to-face classroom. And it's not just technologies. It's like, oh, well now I better understand how to align my objectives with my activities and assessments, and it's just good instructional design that ends up filtering back into everything that they do.

We've seen this interesting correlation. I don't know if I could claim causation, but correlation between the faculty that go through those training, our training, and receive institutional teaching awards. It may be that good teachers are drawn to

the kinds of things we offer, but it also, maybe we had some role to play in that. It'd probably be hard to tease out those variables, but I think to that vice provost's point, they're related.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think so, and I do think that there are some particular characteristics, affordances, recommendations of the online course modality, and other derivations blended, and so forth of digital learning. For instance, I think, well, if you were going to focus on a subset of the whole. A, if you accept the premise that we really can't do this kind of preparation for course design and teaching for every single thing, if you're going to focus on some sort of systematic whole.

Online course sections, focusing there combines the affordances of access and/or at least schedule flexibility, with positive outcomes that are associated with heightened quality assurance measures. So, even if the courses were less than, access gets you somewhere, and schedule flexibility gets you somewhere. But imagine if the course design and the teaching practices were as good as they possibly could be for every single online course section. That's a force enabler of kinds, I think. If you're going to focus your efforts somewhere, you could do worse than focusing on online.

Tom: Well, I think that's probably true, and I think at the risk of being provocative, maybe, I think there's a cultural aspect to this, too, about academic higher education culture. So, it's easy to impose a training requirement on a new thing, which online in the last quarter century has been a new thing. Some schools, it's still a new thing, they haven't implemented it yet.

So, I get questions all the time about, how do you do this required faculty development stuff? But if you wanted to impose now, some sort of faculty development to teach face-to-face on faculty that have been doing it for 40 years, or writ more largely in an industry that's been doing it like this for 1,000 years, it's a lot harder to say, “Well, what problem are you fixing? I'm good at this, I've been doing it for my whole career, and I'm not taking your training, I don't need that.” I think it might be harder to do it for, even though it might have real benefits, to the more traditional face-to-face classes. But for online, its newness, its novelty is almost a door into these kinds of training opportunities.

Kelvin: I think that's right, and I don't know how this sounds in your ear, but it seems like to me, most institutions with which I'm familiar, the great majority, it's more or less the same faculty who are teaching in person, who are teaching online or blended. I mean, there's certainly examples where the faculties are firewalled off, and you've got a separate virtual campus faculty, and then a campus faculty, but most of the situations I'm aware of, it's just the same faculty. It's just, who's doing it, what programs are they employed in?

So, to your point, if you imagine dropping a little drop of food coloring in a glass of water, it is going to disseminate. And if you bring about some positive model

change, it's not just going to carry on to even that one faculty member's teaching experience, but you socialize and talk about practices from one faculty member to another, even apart from the formal stuff. Whatever, the yeast works through the dough, whatever metaphor you want. I suppose if you had that firewalled faculty, you'd need a different strategy.

Tom: Yeah, and even in context where they use a templated course approach, that quality that you focus on in the design gets baked into what gets delivered at scale, because that's much more of a scale model. So, I think it can still work.

And I think maybe another aspect, maybe this is more cultural or maybe it's just practical, that for face-to-face instructors, they are often directed towards a faculty center for teaching and learning, or something to help, but that tends to be a little more bespoke, voluntary. You come in and you tend to probably get the same customers, so to speak, faculty that come in to engage with that, and they're great, but they don't often have a really scaled impact across institution because oftentimes what the program they offer is not mandatory. It's not required.

However, for online, it often is required and some of that is because of accreditation, interpretation of accreditation requirements, and sometimes it's just this skepticism, it's distrust of quality online that requires that. And it's forced online operations to be much more systemic in how they approach this, as opposed to those serving the face-to-face faculty.

Kelvin: But your point's well taken. I mean, there are some lessons to be learned from those online efforts to other efforts, centers for teaching and learning. The way, do we, if we could approach much more systematically with much more scale in mind, with much more dissemination in mind, just because things have been in a club, bespoke kind of a way, doesn't mean it has to stay that way.

Tom: Yeah, no, I mean that's true. And to the former provost's point, why aren't we doing more of this if we have the data that this works? It would require maybe a different approach in a faculty center service model, but those things are all doable. It just takes institutional will, and some leadership, and always funding, right?

Kelvin: Yeah, no, that is exactly right. I think about this, I want to try out this Kelvin-ism. When I think about sometimes, what does online do? You started off talking about this, if you didn't put it in these words, but online is kind of like an amplifier, for better or for worse.

And what I've said sometimes that online, really all it does is it makes the invisible, visible and the implicit, explicit. That's really all it really does. But if we focus on faculty preparation for effective practices, research based, evidence based, effective practices in course design and teaching, doing that online, we concretize the work more than we do in person. It's all artifact driven, you can see

the outgrowth of your planning, and you've got documents, and web pages, and graphics, and videos, and you can see whether there is alignment or isn't alignment from goal statement objectives through assessment and content. You can see how it lines up. And so, you can correct the imperfections in a lab setting much more so, I think, than in the in-person context. But I don't know if you agree with that or not. I've been thinking about that for a while.

Tom: I do, I've heard you say that, online makes the invisible, visible; the implicit, explicit, and I couldn't agree more. It's because so much has to be captured in an asynchronous web-based course that it's all right there. You can tell if you've got enough content to address your learning objectives, and if your assessment properly assess, which the objectives you're trying to determine.

It's not like it's ephemeral, and it only happens in a classroom, and you only know if you're sitting in that classroom, it's all on the page, so to speak. So, I agree completely, and that's one reason why I think I've leaned into the skepticism a little bit. Like, okay, well, I'll prove to you that this is good. We've got mechanisms to ensure we've got training; we've got rubrics, and everything else that will ensure that this is high quality. Bring it on.

Kelvin: [Laughter] Bring it on.

Tom: [Chuckle] Yeah. You want to try and maybe put a bow on this faculty development conversation?

Kelvin: Yep, I will give that a shot. Perhaps by way of wrap up, we might say that preparing faculty to successfully support student learning, benefits the faculty, the students, and the institution. Focusing efforts on online course design and teaching may be an effective strategy for dissemination and institutions where one faculty body teaches courses across all modalities. How does that sound?

Tom: That sounds good, agreed. Yeah, and maybe in the few seconds we have left, I'll put in a slight plug for any listener who, if you like this content, please feel free to go give us a rating and a review on your favorite podcast app. It helps the algorithm make this content discoverable for people who like it. And feel free to share it with colleagues and friends, if you think that this would be of use to them, other online learning, and faculty, and folks of that kind because we are the podcast for all things online teaching and learning. I'll keep saying it.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] Yeah. Well, hey, maybe it'll be true.

Tom: Maybe.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree with that. Please, please, we really, this is your invitation. We really would appreciate it if you would rate and review and/or send to a friend. We want

to expand the circle of listeners. We've got a very devoted listener base; we'd love to extend that to some new ears.

Tom: That's right. Awesome, all right, well thank you Russ for the coffee. We really enjoyed it. We both brewed it on separate states. [Chuckles] And until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

(*Musical Outro*)

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.