TOPcast Episode #171:
The “North Star” of Online Learners’ Needs

Narrator: The University of Louisville empowers students with over 50 fully online degrees and certificates in areas like business, public health, social work, engineering, and more. Flexible coursework allows time to focus on all of life's priorities. Learn more at louisville.edu/online.

Kelvin: Before we start the show, would you please help us shape the topics we address in an upcoming special TOPcast Live event at the 2024 OLC Accelerate Conference as part of OLC's 30th anniversary? If you haven't already, would you please respond to the following short URL and share it with colleagues. That URL, using the Dub shortening service, is dub.sh/topcast2024, dub.sh/topcast2024, all lower case, no spaces. Please take a moment right now and respond to the topic poll. It would help us a lot. Thanks. Here's the show.

(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'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And I am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And you are listening, or watching, or reading, or watching the smoke signals, to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Hey, Tom.

Tom: Hey, Kelvin. I actually enjoy consuming this podcast via semaphore flag signals. Yeah.

Kelvin: It seems to be your preferred medium.

Tom: It is, it is.

Kelvin: Hurts my wrist too much to try to do that little...

Tom: [Chuckles]

Kelvin: I can't get it down really well.

Tom: The other way is I like to listen is in Morse code. That's usually pretty fun. It's a little longer.

Kelvin: It's longer that way, yeah. It hurts your ears after a while. [Laughter] That's right. What is this foolishness that people have tuned into, Tom? Tell us what this is.

Tom: [Laughter] You actually could do this podcast in both of those if you really, really wanted to, but I don't recommend it. Yeah.

Kelvin: [Laughter]

Tom: What is this, Kelvin? This is, as you know, and maybe our steady, long-time listeners know, is a collegial coffee conversation between compatible colleagues.

Kelvin: [Chuckles]

Tom: We'll be conversational today hopefully, and at least one of us will have coffee. I have an unidentified clear liquid.

Kelvin: Vodka?

Tom: I'm not identifying it, but…

Kelvin: Oh, I see. Okay. We used to have a colleague in common that I tried to start a rumor that big water bottle wasn't water.

Tom: Yeah, yeah.

Kelvin: Some people believed me, I'm pretty sure.

Tom: Well, there are places where that happens. I did a job, just before I was in higher ed, and I was doing a contract, I won't say for what government agency, and there were some long-time people there, civil servants, and I was told, "That ain't just coffee in his coffee." Yeah.

Kelvin: [Laughter] Well, it is just coffee in mine, but it's not just any coffee. You want to know what's in my cup, Tom?

Tom: I do want to know what's in your coffee, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Today's coffee in my cup, Tom, is called, it's got a fancy title, “Equinox: A Fall Blend” from Sunergos Coffee here in Louisville, Kentucky. One of the things I appreciate about this roaster is they have these... It took me a while to recognize this. I thought they were just, I don't know, diversifying their labeling, but if you look at their shelving, there's three different colored labels, and so they have color-coded coffees. Some roasters, as you may know, just give you all the same stuff all the time. Other roasters just keep changing it up. Whatever single origin they get in, they just roast that. But Sunergos has these distinct categories of coffee. They have what they call “foundational,” I think is the term, coffees that

they have all the time, some single origins, and some blends. And then they have this more somewhat slowly rotating group of coffees that I think are primarily single origins that they get in at certain times.

And then, like the thing I'm drinking today, they get these short-term specialty seasonal coffees, so Equinox: A Fall Blend. And so, I appreciate that they don't view all coffee enthusiasts as all one group. They recognize the diverse audience. They offer something that caters across the spectrum. And I was just in the mood for something unique and special, and I'm only going to get it this once, and I thought, "Well, that's cool." It's really tasty. Could you find a connection either in your water bottle or in my cup to today's topic? [Sips coffee]

Tom: All right. I think maybe. You talked about foundational, dare I say, institutional coffee, and then you have these others that are maybe a little more bespoke and not institutional, that are more unique and individual. And maybe that's where we're going. We've got a conversation we're going to have around the institutional versus the individual a little bit.

Kelvin: Yeah. And knowing your audience, and not just being monolithic and homogeneous, but little recognizing diversity. I think all that, yeah, all that in there. You want to tell us what we're talking about today?

Tom: Sure. So, it may be true that you can't go wrong in our digital education work, if we stay focused on learner needs. I always say the student is our North Star. This is true in the work of every single instructor and every individual instructional designer. However, none of us should seek to, quote-unquote, reinvent the wheel or reinvent digital learning with each and every course. As a field, we've learned a few things over the past 30 or so years, and many of our institutions have guidelines to help ensure quality, a culture of quality, and everything associated with it.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, that's excellent. As you hinted, in this episode, we're going to try to tackle student-centered digital learning in a way that we might say balances institutional responsibility and faculty agency, centers on students, but balances the institutional responsibility and the faculty agency. And I guess, as a North Star for this episode, our focal question will be what do today's online or digital learners need?

Tom: Yeah, what do they need?

Kelvin: What do they need?

Tom: That's a good question, yeah, and I'm sure it varies. We're drawing inspiration, once again, from the book you edited, *The SAGE Handbook of Online Higher Education*, specifically a chapter called, “Online Learners' Needs, Characteristics, and Rights” by Darrin Thomas and Robert Osei-Bonsu. Hope, Robert, I'm

pronouncing that right, which is actually chapter five in *The SAGE Handbook*. And so, we'll include a link to that in the show notes and everything. But there's so much goodness packed into that giant, thick tome that we thought we would dive back in and pull some inspiration to have this conversation today.

Kelvin: And we might mention a few other sources as well, and if we do, we'll throw those in the show notes also. I'm thinking, Tom, one of the things that I just really can't remember where I read or heard this, I want to say it was maybe in the context of a conference, somebody said this and it stuck with me, "We should design for and teach the students we actually have rather than the students we think we have." [Chuckles]

Tom: Yeah. Yeah, that's actually interesting, and I know it's something you deal with there, and it's definitely something we deal with here, where you have these different student populations sitting side by side in the same online section. And my philosophy has always been that the course quality should be agnostic to the student type like that. It should be high quality. It should be engaging, it should have good pedagogy, good assessment. It should have all the ingredients of a high-quality online course, but the wraparound services need to be customized for the student that you're dealing with.

It's very different to have an eighteen-year-old high school graduate just recently, living in the dorm, taking some face-to-face and some online classes in an online class while they're on campus, versus the thirty-five-year-old single mom who works nights, and has kids, and schedules, and maybe is also taking care of an aging parent in the same section. That student needs very different sorts of things than the other student does. And maybe I'm going to talk out of both sides of my mouth, because maybe it does filter down into design in many ways. Just take synchronicity versus asynchronicity. A synchronous requirement in a course could just be the thing that prevents that single mom from ever taking that class, she just might not be able to do it, but the more traditional age student probably has a lot more flexibility to do something like that.

Kelvin: No, I think that's exactly right. And Thomas and Osei-Bonsu do, informed by recent times, and the literature and practice, they do outline some more general principles about learner needs and rights, and it's thoughtful. But, maybe before outlining those, I can't help but plug, in light of your comments, Tom, this book that I'm reading with a group of faculty right now this term written by George Veletsianos. It's called *Learning Online: The Student Experience*, and it was released in 2020. It'd be interesting to see to what extent it would've shifted if it was released a year or so later. But it's 17 distinct profiles of different kinds of online learners.

We did that podcast episode a few years ago, the three students you might meet in your online course, and Veletsianos does, "Here's 17 distinct…" [Chuckles]

Tom: Oh, my gosh.

Kelvin: …And they're all either based on interviews that he conducted personally, or a profile that he pulled together from other published sources. But he keeps driving home the point that this isn't one-size-fits-all, and you've got to be attuned, right, attuned.

Tom: Yeah. Wow, 17's a lot.

Kelvin: 17's a lot.

Tom: Yeah. I don't doubt him, and I'm sure there's some real thought and intentionality that went into those different categories, but, wow, it's a lot. [Chuckles] Yeah. I don't know, do you want to walk us through the characteristics…

Kelvin: Yeah, sure. Sure, sure, sure.

Tom: ...from that chapter five.

Kelvin: Maybe, I'll just hit a couple across the top milestones, and we might go back and touch base on a couple of these. One, the authors of chapter five of *The SAGE Handbook*, they talk about pre-pandemic online learner characteristics versus post-pandemic learner characteristics. That's an interesting... They don't spend a lot of time there, but they call that out. They talk about more what they consider, I think, more stable traits of successful online learners. They talk about categories of necessary student support. And it seems to me that they tilt towards student support at the instructor level, but then with maybe a little bit of an extension into the work of other professionals as well. The faculty member is the front line and then it's extended into somebody else. And then they include this... I wasn't familiar with it, but I guess ProctorU published what they proposed as a seven-point student bill of rights, and so they unpacked that a little bit. Do you want to comment on any of those things that sound interesting to you?

Tom: It all rings true, without knowing the details of the bill of rights. But I do agree that students have certain rights and expectations that they are probably inherent or inferred when they sign up for an online class, like you're going to actually be able to do it online.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] That's a key.

Tom: Yeah. Well, I don't know. It comes up periodically where…

Kelvin: It does.

Tom: ...that's not true in every case, and of course we have to intervene and say, "Hey, do you realize who you actually have in your class?" Back to your original point

versus the students you think you have or want. [Exhales] Yeah, it still happens. It's rare, but it still happens. But this other concept of the traits of successful online learners, what makes them successful: time management, autonomy, problem solving. I think all of that is true. And it goes into what we call Knights Online to help students prepare for being successful in an online class. But you could also apply those same tactics, strategies, characteristics, I think, to any modality, and they're going to help you probably. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Yeah. Although I imagine you, like I through the years, you hear various versions, either directly from students, or synthesized, and recounted secondhand, that students say, "Well, I just learn better when somebody's... I have to be in that room, and somebody is looking right at me." And so, no matter your time management, and your assertiveness, and your problem solving, your autonomy, some people, they seem to hang their hat on that, and they feel less of that, I don't know, immediacy maybe, to use a word from some of the teaching practice literature, than they do when you've got a computer screen mediating, I guess.

Tom: No, it's true. I was sitting on an airplane next to a guy this week, and we were just chatting as we were coming through the bumpy clouds into the storms of Orlando. And, yeah, tell him what I do for a living, and "Yeah, I don't learn so good online. I'm much better face-to-face. That's how I did my college." Look, that may be true. It is just better for some people versus other people.

But all right, so maybe I can turn the page into the other part of this conversation. There's a certain level of faculty autonomy in building courses, supporting students of various kinds, but then there's also an institutional responsibility, and how does an institution and a faculty negotiate that between them, like what do I do versus what the institution does? And that's going to vary, obviously, from school to school. I wonder if you've given any thought to guidelines, rubrics, or just general practice on navigating that relationship between the individual and the institutional?

Kelvin: Yeah, I'm living it every day. [Chuckles] Yeah, it was interesting. I was in a meeting recently where some faculty leaders, it was clear to me that they really, at least the folks that I was speaking with at that time, you could tell, based on what was said, they really felt the weight of responsibility solely on their own shoulders, which was fascinating because we had, in view, support resources that were available. And whether that's preparation, practices, professionals that you can turn to, like instructional designers and media producers, they still felt that.

And then, in that same conversation, it was a privileging of discipline-based online teaching preparation over anything that we might centrally offer as an institution based on codified decades of research and practice, like, "Yeah, don't bother me with that. I'm going to go to my source over here and learn how to teach biomolecular nuclear physics or something." Yes, that was just recently.

And so, we're in the process of structuring some more broad written guidance to try to get everybody around on the same page, and it's a work in progress.

Tom: Yeah, I think it's hard. If I could be reductive, and just throw out something that you're going to be able to find a lot of exceptions to, but I think maybe, in general, something that is provided to and expected of all faculty feels more like an institutional responsibility to LMS, tech support, even accreditation support, whatever it is. And then things that are a little more unique to the course that you are building feels more where the faculty needs to take the lead in that. It's the general versus the specific; the broad versus the idiosyncratic. Now, obviously there's going to be exceptions to all of those, but in general, I think that's one way of thinking about it.

I'll give one anecdote. It drives me crazy when I see, on Facebook, faculty who I'm friends with on Facebook, complaining about the LMS or like, "Hey, is your gradebook not working right now?" or something like that. And I'm like, "Why are you on Facebook asking that question? Because we've got a whole team of people staffed here that can, on chat, or email, or phone, help you answer whatever problem you have." But they'll go on Facebook, and then sometimes I'll even get tagged, "Hey, Thomas Cavanagh, what's going on with Webcourses?" I'm like…

Kelvin: [Chuckles] Wow.

Tom: "...Okay." Yeah. And I always respond, "Hey, it's great you all are helping each other out here, but if you spend 15 minutes, and you haven't solved your problem yet, call us. That's why we're here. We want to help you. It's an institutional service that we provide to you is the maintenance, running, and support of the LMS infrastructure. And you shouldn't be, as an individual faculty member, trying to figure that out."

Kelvin: Yeah, I'm pondering all that. I agree with what you said about that framing, but then I think about... Here's three categories that Thomas and Osei-Bonsu use in their chapter. And like I said, they talk about frontline directly faculty, but then the implication is that there could be other folks behind them. There are three categories, like administrative, which is really like course logistics, grading clarity, and rubrics, and all that.

Well, an individual instructor for an individual course determines that, but if there are conventions in place, or practices, or other people to consult with, or, "Here's what we found most useful, you decide," that helps. And there's the pedagogical, like your presence as a trusted facilitator in a course and all that. But similarly, if you've got folks to lean on to, "I've got this challenge," whether that's a colleague down the hall, or whether it's an instructional designer, or whatever. And then, of course, the obvious one that you've already cited is technical. And the classic example is tech troubleshooting, student has a problem, and they reach out to the

instructor first, and that's like the instructor reaching out to you on Facebook. [Guffaws] You're like, "Here's somebody who could really help you."

Tom: And, again, I don't mind them trying to solve their own problem, and it's often faster for them to do that, or solve the problem for the student, but 15 minutes is my arbitrary threshold. It's like, if you've reached that much time, and you haven't solved the problem, call us, because that's why we're here, and it'll be faster for us to do it than for you to figure it out.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think, to your earlier point, to me, it's that institutional responsibility versus faculty agency. I think the way I think about it is scale, which is maybe just a different angle on what you said. There are things that might be in the purview of individual instructor and individual course, but then, if you're going to carry that out to scale, then I think we start transitioning into institutional responsibility. We can say things like clear communication of expectations to students. Well, in the individual faculty, individual course perspective, that looks one way, but that shouldn't be in opposition to or out of alignment with what we do institution wide. There should be things that are conventions in the schedule of classes, and there should be common understanding of modality, labels, definitions, those kind of things.

Tom: Yeah, that makes sense. I agree. I think that is consistent. I think we're saying the same thing in different ways, yeah. Yeah, but overall, I think the institution and the faculty member have a shared common interest in having high-quality online courses for students that are well-designed, and those students are properly supported, and they each play a slightly different role in that mission.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, I think that's right. It's maybe a division of labor thing. And I like your little heuristic thereof, if you've spent 15 minutes on this yourself, you ought to be phoning a friend asking for help, which isn't pinging Tom on Facebook. Actually, go to the dedicated professionals who focus on this, right, and they could add your problem to whatever else is coming in. They're like, "Oh, we've got five of these things now. It must be a thing. It's a known thing." That's a part of it, I think, but it's structures, and the way we do things to assure quality at scale, I think, it's sort of us all being pointed in the same direction. It's not oppositional, faculty and institutional arm wrestling. You want to be pointed in the same direction.

Tom: Yeah. And it's actually a point I wanted to make too, which is, I think, related to that. I think that the institution has to explicitly respect the faculty. I think that you got to find the balance of guidance and support, so that it doesn't cross over into mistrust and overbearing, because you can overdo it with guidelines, and guidance, and requirements, and stuff. You can also be too lax, which probably is a disservice to the students if there's too much variability, and lack of consistency, and all of that. You'd have to find that sweet spot in the middle. And I think, on the institution's part, it is also recognizing and respecting the faculty's role, their

expertise, and giving them what they need to be successful, as opposed to saying a lot of thou shalts.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. And I suppose, conversely then, it's individual instructors understanding that there are going to be some conventions." We're going to have X number of modalities, and they're going to have certain bounds between them," as opposed to, "I want to make it a very exotic combination of digital experiences and asynchronous and synchronous meetings," and you're like, "How in the world are you going to communicate that and support that?" [Guffaws]

Tom: Yeah. I remember back when we had a former LMS that no longer exists as a company, and there was a lot of flexibility, and the faculty could create the most atrocious, from an aesthetic standpoint, courses. They might've been well-designed. I don't remember. I just remember the orange text on red background stuff that was going on.

Kelvin: [Chuckles]

Tom: It was terrible for accessibility. We could have stopped it just for that purpose, and I think we did intervene periodically. But just seeing that, faculty doing it because they could, and they were exercising their creativity in a way that was not in the best interest of students. Having an LMS that actually doesn't permit that level of just open freedom is actually a good thing in some ways. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Yeah. There is a balance, but it's a partnership balance between institutional responsibility and faculty agency, and a respectful partnership at that, and it goes both ways, I think. I think that's what I'm hearing in our conversation here. Would you agree?

Tom: I would agree. And I think, to circle back around, it's all about the students. Shall I try to land the plane for us as we see the runway approaching?

Kelvin: Please do.

Tom: Centering on the needs of today's students will guide us all toward a more successful implementation of digital education, regardless of our scope, role, or duties, institutional or individual. We're all in this together, and it's all for the students.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, that's right. How'd you put it at the beginning? Keeping the students as our North Star. We're all pointed in the same direction if we're all aimed at the same thing. That's exactly right.

Well, Tom, it's been enjoyable, as always, conversing with you, even if not sharing coffee, because I don't know what that stuff is you're drinking. [Chuckles]

(Musical Outro)

Tom: I'll never tell.

Kelvin: A beverage, a beverage anyway, a beverage together. Until next time for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.