TOPcast Episode #175:
"Let's Stay Focused on What We Can Control" in Online Ed

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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 are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Or watching. We do have a handful of watchers as well. We are interesting to look at as well.

Kelvin: Speak for yourself.

Tom: [Chuckles] I'm trying.

Kelvin: Speak for yourself.

Tom: Yeah, I do what I can.

Kelvin: Yeah. Well, I hear you. I hear you. We did talk about semaphore a few times and Morse code.

We did throw out a Morse code message in show notes for an episode a while back just for fun.

Tom: Just for fun. Well, happy December, Kelvin. Happy December.

Kelvin: Happy December. Yeah! [Raising mug to cheers]

Tom: Yeah. I actually have a thematically selected coffee today.

Kelvin: I cannot wait to hear what's in your cup.

Tom: Yeah, but I don't know if you want to start, or shall I start?

Kelvin: No, you go ahead. I want to hear now. Yeah.

Tom: It is Green Mountain; I had to look for a second. It is Green Mountain Half-Caff, and of course I usually drink a Keurig, but that's not relevant. But the half caff is the relevant part.

Kelvin: Half caff. Okay, I'm pondering that one. I'll tell you that I am drinking a single origin Guatemala Miramundo from Sunergos Coffee here in Louisville, Kentucky, and my selection of that is intended to relate in some fashion to today's episode topic.

Tom: In some fashion, yes.

Kelvin: In some fashion. I'm pondering yours, half caff. So, Green Mountain, is it because we have one foot in one thing and one foot in another thing? Is that why?

Tom: Sort of. It's more like half the episode is us, and half the episode is other people. [Chuckles] It's a half caff of TOPcast.

Kelvin: I see.

Tom: It's a half cast.

Kelvin: Yeah. Yes, the half cast. [Chuckles] See, you don't get me started, now I'm going to start riffing on other... Nope, shouldn't do that. Okay. I like that one. That's one of your better and only connections.

Tom: [Chuckles] Yeah, the bar is low for me, so yeah.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] So, single origin Guatemala, I said. Can you find some relevance to today's episode?

Tom: I'm going to guess the Guatemala piece of that, because one of the other half of our half caff happens to hail from that part of the globe.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's part of it. I had a Guatemala coffee not too long ago recently as my attempt to connect to the topic du jour at that time, and yet here we are again bringing this coffee back. Or a version of, it's not the exact same coffee, but it is from the same country of origin.

Tom: Gotcha, yeah.

Kelvin: So, it's a repeat, and yet it's not. So, you want to tell people what we're doing today?

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. All right, so that's a good one. A repeat, but it's not. So, those of you who've been listening to us for a little while know that we try to do something…

Kelvin: What's wrong with you? What's wrong with you? [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah. Okay, really. Get a life, will you?

Kelvin: [Chuckles]

Tom: But we've tried to establish a tradition of sorts for a special top-of-December episode, and part of that tradition for the third year running, in close to 30 minutes, we're going to try to put a button on 2024 and prepare for the upcoming 2025 in the glorious field of online education. We've tried other formats, too. You can check them all out in the list linked from the show notes on the episode page online. So, you want to tell everybody how we are going to structure this one?

Kelvin: Sure. We reached out to guests from the past year of TOPcast episodes and we asked how those guests are making sense of 2024 and planning for 2025 in our field of online blended digital teaching and learning. And we said to those guests that their contributions might take the form of aspirations, predictions, reflections, or just observations.

Tom: Yeah. So, we're going to feature several of the submissions that we received. In most cases, we can actually hear the voices of our guests again, through the audio recordings that they sent to us. Otherwise, we're going to go ahead and read aloud to all of you the written words that they sent to us. We'll read or play some sort of thematic group of submissions, so we're going to do a couple at a time, and then we'll take a moment or two on the back end to react and give some reflections on the thoughts expressed in that cluster of contributions. And of course, the episodes featuring all of these guests, and they're all within the past 12 months, are all linked from the show notes page for this episode.

Kelvin: So, we would like to invite you to think along with us and our contributors about how we can end 2024 well, and how we can prepare to be even more effective in our work in 2025.

Tom: All right, so we'll go ahead and get started with the first group. The theme that you have, I think, curated very insightfully is “The Human.”

Kelvin: [Chuckles]

Tom: So, these are all clustered around some aspect of the humanity and online learning.

Kelvin: And our first contributor is Dr. Anna Porcaro, Senior Director of Monitoring and Evaluation for the Kansas Leadership Center. And Dr. Porcaro was a guest on Episode #154.

Anna Porcaro: “Happy New Year, TOPcast audience. As we end this year in the frenzy of attention on AI, let's all try to remember that at the heart of the work that we do together is a human who is trying to learn and better themselves. May you be successful this year, building positive learning communities for them regardless of whatever technology is used to do so.”

Tom: Okay, the second contribution in this grouping is Dr. Justin Shaffer, Teaching Professor in Chemical and Biological Engineering, and more at Colorado School of Mines. And he was a guest on Episode #166.

Justin Shaffer: “Hey, everyone. Here in 2024, we've been hearing a lot about AI, and rightfully so, it's really upended our world of higher ed. But I want us to keep in mind another kind of AI as we're looking ahead to 2025 and beyond. And that kind of AI is authentic instruction. Really, really think about how to bring the human element to the classroom that the robots cannot replace. Think about intentionally designing your class. Think about having an amazing in-class experience, all of which is going to help improve our student outcomes.”

Kelvin: And rounding out this first set of thematic contributions is a recent guest, Angie Rocha, Director of Educational Innovation and Technology at the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala from recent Episode #172. Now, Angie sent her contribution in via written message. Tom, you want to do the honors?

Tom: Sure. So, in the voice of Angie Rocha, "In 2025, while facing unique challenges, Central America will experience considerable growth in online learning driven by a young population eager for accessible education and economic opportunities. There is also a growing acceptance of digital education in the region. Young working adults are demanding flexibility in post-secondary programs focused on employability. By addressing the digital divide and embracing innovation, we can harness the power of online learning to create a brighter future for our citizens."

All right, so those are the three that we've grouped into the human category. And just because recency bias, Angie's was the last one that we heard, I'm just struck by how, while she's framed it in terms of Central America, that could apply to central Missouri. I think it's very applicable

to any country or any sector, and why online learning is really relevant today.

Kelvin: Yeah, it's the human at scale, I guess. What are we trying to accomplish? Reminds me of our recent episode about the North Star of online learner needs. And I think it's interesting, this first contribution in this set of three from Anna Porcaro, she says, "Remember that there's a human at the heart of what we're doing." So, she's zoomed in, the individual human, and then Angie's zoomed out at, there's all these humans, and we're trying to do something valuable to them at scale.

Tom: Yeah. Well, and Justin talks about the other AI, "Authentic Instruction," which I thought that's great.

Kelvin: [Chuckles]

Tom: And that's how he's talking about bringing the human element into the classroom. And every time we've talked about AI, that just seems to be a recurring theme that we're trying to stay focused on, that it's not a replacement for the human, but a collaborator so that the human can be at the center.

Kelvin: Yeah, no, that's exactly right. I've heard that emerge in our conversations, I've heard it emerge in conversations other people have had, and I think it's the right chord to strike, right tone, the right message just to keep the main thing the main thing, personally.

Trey Martindale: "Hello, friends, this is Trey Martindale. I'm the Associate Vice Provost for Online Learning at Middle Tennessee State University. I'm a long time TOPcast listener, really appreciate the podcast. And I just want to encourage you this new year to be curious, to look for innovation, and to support those online learners and their student success. Thanks so much and have a great year."

Carmin Chan: "This is Carmin Chan at Northern Arizona University, wishing TOPcast listeners happy holidays from beautiful, snowy Flagstaff, Arizona."

Tom: So, do you want to move on to the next grouping? You want to set up our theme that our listeners can listen for?

Kelvin: Sure. So, with what we just said in mind, the next theme, interestingly enough, tilts into the affordances of technology, specifically the "Technology of Artificial Intelligence." So, we just have a couple of contributions in this section. Tom, you want to introduce our first contributor?

Tom: Sure. And that is our mutual friend, Dr. Jenny Sumner, Assistant Vice President for Academic Success Coaching at the University of Central Florida. And Jenny was a guest on Episode #164.

Jenny Sumner: "Wow, 2024 was quite the year. We saw a tremendous interest in student coaching as an enhanced way to support students. Looking ahead to 2025, I anticipate two things. The first is an even greater interest in student coaching, as institutions are looking to create their deeper affinities with their students. The second is AI. It's going to be interesting for me to see how these seemingly opposing forces of coaching and AI intersect, and how institutions can balance the human side of student success with the technological aspects of AI. And that's going to get really fun to explore."

Kelvin: So, that's our contribution from Dr. Sumner. And next up, our next contributor is Dr. Jean Mandernach, Professor and Executive Director of the Center for Innovation and Research and Teaching at Grand Canyon University. And Dr. Mandernach was guest on Episode #160.

Jean Mandernach: "We can't talk about higher education in 2024 without talking about AI. And while we've all been actively exploring AI's potential to make the things we do more effective and efficient, what I'm most excited about is to look to the future of AI. A deeper shift where AI is really driving new models of personalized and adaptive learning; things that cause us to completely rethink our definitions of teaching and learning."

Kelvin: So, those were our two contributions in this little mini segment, but I think they flowed out of the first one and then added something. What do you think?

Tom: Yeah, I agree. AI will be potentially a theme throughout. It is a topic du jour, but in this case, I think they both touched on something that's really important. Jean talked about adaptive and personalized learning, and that is certainly a great aspiration that I have for AI. How do we make the scaled personal, all of us who work at large institutions? I think that should be in the front of our minds as we try to help our students.

Kelvin: Yeah. And Jenny bridges the gap between the human and these technology affordances. She talks about the twinned things that she's looking for in 2025, of something very close to her, this very human connection of academic coaching and the way that AI can provide a compliment to that real human touch kind of thing. And I think more and more, we need to all be asking that question. We've talked before about how do you partner successfully between the human and the AI, right?

Tom: Yeah. One thing I appreciated what Jenny said was she didn't have this sky is falling dystopian view of it. She talks about how this is going to be fun, looking forward to it. So, I appreciate the attitude.

Unnamed Speaker: “Feliz Año Nuevo, TOPcast listeners, all the best for 2025.”

Jason Johnston: “Hey, guys. Happy holidays from Jason Johnston at University of Tennessee. Love the podcast, and I hope you have a great season.”

Bettyjo Bouchey: “Hello, TOPcast listeners. This is Bettyjo Bouchey from the University of Vermont, wishing you a Happy New Year. And as you step foot over that first day of the next year, just remain hopeful.”

Tom: All right, our third area. My favorite.

Kelvin: Then you should introduce it.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. I don't know. I don't know if it's my favorite, but it is one I care about and watch carefully. [Laughter] “Regulation.” Everyone's favorite topic. As we know, there've been a lot of developments in that space over the past 12 months, and we've got a change in federal administration, and who knows what impact that will have on federal regulation. So, we're all going to be watching, and trying to be ready to pivot, or jump, or do what we need to do to make sure that we stay in compliance. And so, we have a couple of folks who commented on that.

Kelvin: So, as a combo, we'll hear from these two colleagues who've guested together previously, so we'll introduce them together now. And they are Russ Poulin, who is finishing his time, sadly, bittersweetly as Executive Director of WCET, which is the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies. And he's also Vice President for Technology Enhanced Education at WICHE, which if you need reminding, is the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education. And with Russ is Cheryl Dowd, who currently serves as WCET's Senior Director for Policy Innovations. And she directs the overall activities of WCET's State Authorization Network, or SAN. The two of them, Russ and Cheryl, have been guests together multiple times on TOPcast, but most recently this year back in Episode #162.

Tom: So, shall I read Russ's contribution, and then you read Cheryl's?

Kelvin: Sure, that sounds great.

Tom: All right. So, they sent us in written comments, and Russ had to say, "The Department of Education had this odd notion of defining a virtual location. With more than half of students taking at least one distance class, and the

increased popularity of hybrid courses, it begs the question, aren't almost all colleges and universities already virtual locations? We just need leadership to act that way."

Kelvin: Yeah, great Russ-ism there. [Chuckles] And Cheryl says, "The 2024 election created a slamming of the brakes on the regulatory road for oversight of distance education. Consumer protection remains important, but with a change of administration, we hope future discussions also consider increased access for learners and the wide use benefits and quality of the distance education modality. Additionally, SAN and WCET wish to express our appreciation for the years of leadership in this policy space from our executive director, Russ Poulin. We wish him well in retirement. His successor, Van Davis, will be an excellent leader to take us into the next phase of distance education policy." Hear, hear.

Tom: Hear, hear. Yeah, maybe just to comment on that before we maybe touch on the policy, but Russ Poulin's retirement is a milestone of sorts. Russ has been a giant in this online learning policy world, and Van's great, big fan of Van Davis, and I know he'll do a great job, but big shoes to fill with Russ's departure. And I know Van knows that. So yeah, we wish Russ well. And I find it interesting that the comment he sent us throws one last little grenade at our friends in DC on his way out the door. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: [Laughs] "We just need leadership to act that way." That's right, that's right. No, that's good. Yeah, I think especially Cheryl's comments are right on that there's a bit of a slamming on of the brakes as we're trying to... There's all this stuff that's been stirred up, and then now we're all sort of, "Okay, and now what?" And we know that all the “stuff,” all the component elements are still component elements, they're still relevant, but what shape they're going to take in terms of regulation, that's anybody's guess, in my opinion. What do you think?

Tom: Yeah, obviously it's way too early to tell. The election just happened, but there is a lot of rumors about the cutting of regulations, and it is something that happened the last time that this administration was there, so who knows? We'll just have to see. But I think just because the stuff that was looming didn't happen, doesn't mean we don't have to pay attention to this space. I think it's definitely going to be worth watching, and I think we're all going to have to make sure that we're paying attention.

Kelvin: Yeah. Although, maybe I'll say this, that I worry a little bit. I think of messages that I've sent. We try to engage our institutional senior leadership and say, "This is a big deal," and we composed a formal written comment during the public comment period and all that. Just don't want to be the, I don't know, the COLO who cried wolf or something. [Chuckles]

If something else bubbles up and then like, "Well, nothing happened last time." Just don't want to be like that. [Laughs]

Tom: Yeah, I don't know if we need to worry that much about that. I take the point, but there are other much actually larger policy and regulation issues, things around FAFSA, and graduate employability, and all that stuff, that I think are much bigger rocks in the stream than we are that also are up for grabs in many ways. So, we'll see. But yeah, that doesn't mean you shouldn't keep crying, even if it's perceived as crying wolf.

Gloria Niles: "Hello, this is Gloria Niles from the University of Hawaii. Happy New Year to all. Aloha!"

Eric Fredericksen: "Hey, everyone, this is Eric Fredericksen from the University of Rochester. Thanks for listening to TOPcast, and I hope you have a happy New Year."

Melody Buckner: "Hello, this is Melody Buckner from the University of Arizona. Happy New Year. I hope you are someplace where you are warm and happy with your family, and you're getting all your energy to be ready to come back and enjoy the new year."

Kelvin: I like all the themes, but I think this last one, I feel like Dorothy waking up from her Ozian slumber, I think this one's my favorite of all. What we might refer to this last set of three contributors as presenting a bit of a "Holistic and Slightly Optimistic Vision for the Future."

Tom: All right. Well, I'll go ahead and introduce our first contributor in this section, and that is Dr. Carmin Chan, who is Vice Provost for NAU Online at Northern Arizona University. And she was a guest on Episode #159.

Carmin Chan: "In 2025, I predict that digital learning will increasingly be woven into the very fabric of our college campuses. Learners of all ages are accustomed to having highly personalized digital experiences in other facets of life, and in the post-pandemic world where our college campuses serve increasingly diverse learners, we must work to modernize our systems and teaching in ways that offer our students the personalization they want and need."

Kelvin: Our next contributor in this section is Patty O'Sullivan, Manager of Content Development and Special Projects at Every Learner Everywhere. She was a guest back in Episode #152.

Patty O'Sullivan: "Greetings, TOPcast listeners. I know many of you feel anxious about potential changes to higher education in the coming years. Remember that our mission remains unchanged, to educate and support our students. So,

let's stay focused on what we can control, delivering quality instruction, and approach this coming year with determination, compassion, and a commitment to academic excellence. Thank you."

Tom: And last but not least, our last contributor is Melissa Loble, Chief Academic Officer at Instructure. And Melissa was a guest on Episode #168.

Melissa Loble: "Happy New Year, TOPcast listeners. As we step into the new year, I'm thinking a lot about how we teach differently today, given the influence of online technology and geographic reach, than we did 10, even maybe five years ago. Everything from how we create and leverage content to how we facilitate discussion, application, and assessment of learning experiences. What one thing are you doing differently in your teaching to improve student engagement and, ultimately, success?"

Kelvin: So, those are our final set of three contributors. Tom, I thought their comments fit together nicely.

Tom: Yeah, I agree. And I think that they leave us with a hopeful message, which is a good way to end it, I think.

Kelvin: Yeah, I appreciated a lot of what they said. I liked Carmin talking about digital learning being woven into the fabric of our institutions, writ large, broadly. I thought that was really good.

Tom: Well, Patty talked about our mission, how to stay focused on students, and what is that wisdom? Give me the strength to know what I can change and accept the things I can't. So, focus on what you can control and deliver quality, stay focused on the students. That's great advice.

Kelvin: Yeah, no, that's right. And I appreciate Melissa's vision/admonition, that where we are today is in some ways maybe potentially the best we've ever been. Like if we look back at five ago and 10 years ago, there's some ways that we're doing better as a field. But then she challenges us all to think, what one thing are you doing in your teaching to improve student engagement and ultimately student success. And I think, yeah, that's what we need to keep center every day.

Tom: Yeah. Cool. That was, I think, a very apropos wrap-up to another banner year. My half caff is running low. Hopefully, you, TOPcast listeners, have enjoyed hearing recap thoughts from some of our guests throughout the year. You want to try and put a bow on it for 2024, Kelvin?

Kelvin: Yeah, and maybe I'll put in this plug, if you are listening to this as 2024 wraps up, we hope we've packaged this up in a way that isn't just

something that you throw out with the gift wrapping of the seasonal holidays, but that you find something valuable in the new year as well. So, feel free to share this episode around with colleagues even if you're coming back into the office in January. It's still fresh, not past its expiration date, yet. But that being said, by way of wrap-up, maybe we'll say we draw a line in the sand, and we mark the end of one season and the start of another. Such moments invite us to note our progress and redouble our resolve toward carrying out our meaningful work of educational access, quality, and affordability for an increasingly diverse set of potential learners. How's that?

Tom: That is good. Yeah. Thanks for bringing it all together. Maybe one last comment before we go is that if you like the podcast, give us a rate and a review, as it's easy to do, as they say.

It really does help the algorithms and expose this to listeners who might be looking for this kind of content. And as we like to say, TOPcast is more than just a podcast, it's a community.

(*Musical Outro*)

And so, we want to make sure that people can find it when they're looking for it.

So great. I think that does it, almost, for 2024. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.